

# Being Learning Disabled in a Higher Education Setting



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I didn't realize that the tears I shed trying to understand my homework and the level of anxiety I felt during tests wasn't normal. It had always been that way and I had survived. Spelling tests were the worst; other students would get marks back of 18 or 19 out of 20, but mine were 2, 1 or even 0, and I simply didn't understand how my class mates did so well. In grade six I wasn't as capable of thoughtful personal reflection as I am now, so it didn't occur to me that I had a problem.

I was in grade eleven when I was officially diagnosed with learning disabilities and given personalized accommodations in all classes. I relied on book-on-tape readings and for my grade twelve provincials, I was one of only a few students in the province to have exams-on-tape. It wasn't until a few years later that I truly began to understand how I survived thirteen years of public school. I was outgoing and friendly, avoided science, and overcompensated with creativity. I was told by my high school's part-time psychologist that I "wasn't cut out for university", and the comment really haunted

me. Thankfully, I didn't listen to her and I completed a bachelor of science and am currently completing a master's degree in chemistry. It was a long road with a mixture of accomplishments and failures that have given me time to reflect on the challenges that are unique to students with learning disabilities in a higher education setting.

I encountered my first barrier during my transition from high school to university when I tried to implement my high school accommodations at university. In high school, students may have been given accommodation without a formal diagnosis of a learning disability, whereas in university students with learning disabilities are required to submit a current psycho-educational report from a registered psychologist. This encompasses 6-12 hours of testing to reach a diagnosis at a cost of \$1700-\$2400 to the student. The student can apply to get a partial reimbursement (up to 70%) if they qualify, but this is still a huge financial burden to most families, especially in addition to tuition. This may prevent some students from seeking and receiving accommodation.

Another barrier that students may encounter is the realization that the support system they had in high school is gone. In high school, students with learning disabilities can have individualized education plans and their teachers are typically aware of their disability and learning needs. In university, their professors are not automatically

informed of the diagnosis and as a result are not aware of the specific needs of a given student. The school no longer initiates accommodation for the student and parents are no longer automatically included. Learning disabled students must quickly become self-advocates. However, once a student has had accommodations approved by the Student Accommodation Office (formerly OSAA) instructors are informed of the accommodations and must participate in the facilitation of the stipulated accommodation.

All students coming to university find that the teaching and learning process is different from high school. In a university setting students are expected to develop their learning skills to allow them to learn on their own; this creates new challenges for all students. Academic accommodations are granted to students with learning disabilities to provide equal education opportunities, but with the varying lecture and testing structures between courses it can be difficult to determine what accommodations are appropriate. Students need to be able to assess how their learning disabilities may affect them from course to course and ensure they have the appropriate accommodations. For some students, the level of self-awareness and initiative required to ensure an equal opportunity to education will be an ongoing and challenging barrier to their success at university.

SAO provides a range of services for the implementation of an individual's approved accommodations. For exam

accommodations, these could include arrangements for extended time, writing in a room of their own, timed breaks, or using a word-processor. For classroom activities, these may include facilitation of note-takers, assistive technologies or minimized penalties for spelling and grammar.

Another barrier many students with learning disabilities may face in university is a social one. All students may struggle as they try to make new friends, develop new interests and mature. Learning disabilities may also present themselves as personality traits, which range from overly outgoing and hyper to especially removed and distant. Often students will be seen as 'different', a consequence that could be made worse by other students' lack of understanding. With that said, the ability to maintain confidentiality regarding a student's learning disability is important.

Although a high level of confidentiality is maintained to protect students' privacy, in some instances the procedure may also create a barrier for students. For some students, their accommodations and diagnoses are their secrets. They make the student feel different. Who they tell, and what they tell, is up to the individual student. Nevertheless, other students are still going to notice if they never write a test with the class or require a note-taker, and they will ask why. What do these students tell others? Unfortunately students will find that many of their peers and even some of their professors don't fully understand what being learning disabled means. They

## Student Accommodation Office (formerly OSAA)

Dalhousie University recognizes the diversity of its students and is committed to providing a learning environment and community in which students are able to participate without discrimination on grounds prohibited by the Nova Scotia Human Rights Act. In particular, the University is committed to facilitating students' access to the University's academic programs, activities, facilities and services. The SAO administers the Accommodation Policy for Students. All requests made for academic accommodation and non-academic accommodation made by registered students must be directed to SAO.

Find us on the *Web* at: <http://studentaccessibility.dal.ca/index.html>.  
Contact us at: *Tel* (902) 494-2826, *Fax* (902) 494-2042 or *Email* [access@dal.ca](mailto:access@dal.ca). Visit us at: Mark A. Hill Accessibility Centre, 6227 University Avenue, 9am-4:30pm Mon-Fri

draw misconceptions about the student's intelligence and ability, which creates negative connotations about learning disabilities. This in turn may cause students to think of their learning disability and accommodations as a negative personal secret.

Learning disabilities do not mean that you lack intelligence. During secondary school I was in the enriched program for gifted students when I was diagnosed with learning disabilities. Some of my teachers and family found this inconsistent due to their misconceptions. How could someone be 'gifted' and learning disabled? Now, my overall academic ability would likely be comparable to other students in graduate programs, but still I am sometimes met with uninformed surprise from peers and professionals when I tell them about my learning disabilities. I have unique aptitudes and deficits in my abilities. For example, my working memory and processing speed is quite slow and I cannot successfully

finish a test in the standard time; however, given extra time I can finish successfully.

Equality for students with learning disabilities starts in the classroom but should also include challenging the general misconception about learning disabilities. It is important for students with learning disabilities to understand the resources available at SAO and around campus, to be self-aware, and to self-advocate. For professors and instructors it is important to consider if course material is being delivered and tested in a manner that is inclusive to everyone. As peers, it is important to avoid prejudice. Although these considerations may seem obvious, people with learning disabilities belong to an invisible minority that at times are still misunderstood and misjudged at university.