Helping Students with Learning Disabilities

When we think of students with disabilities, we often think of physical challenges that hinder a student’s ability to perform and succeed in school. We are also familiar with the ADA laws that require our institutions to be more accommodating to these students. What may not readily come to mind, however, are those students with learning disabilities. These students often “fly under the radar” of our disability support services because there may be no obvious signs of a learning difference until the student falls behind in classes. Many students may not seek out the help of the disability services center because they may not feel that they can be accommodated because they have no physical impairment.

This begins a downward cycle of lower performance in the classroom, followed by decreased confidence, followed by even lower academic performance. Accommodations can be made for these students as easily as finding a tutor that may be able to help the student learn in a different way than the professor is teaching, or by allowing the student extended test taking time.

A study by UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute found that the number of students with learning disabilities enrolled in four-year colleges rose from 0.5% to 2.8% from 1983 to 2004.¹ This is seen not as an increase in the total number of people with learning disabilities, but an increase in the number that are enrolling in college. Students are getting more help and preparation at the high school level, boosting their chances of getting accepted into college.

As a higher percentage of students with learning disabilities enroll in college, it is even more important to help identify and accommodate them. The most obvious warning sign of a learning disability is falling grades. However, in many cases, this method identifies the issue too late in order to help the student succeed and prosper in higher education. According to LDOnline, there are several warning signs of a student with a learning disability²:

- Spells words incorrectly and spells the same word differently in the same document
- Avoids reading and writing tasks
- Has trouble summarizing
- Has trouble with open-ended questions on tests
- Weak memory skills
- Difficulty adjusting to new settings
- Works slowly
- Poor grasp of abstract concepts
- Either pays too little attention to details or focuses on them too much
- Misreads information

Students with learning disabilities may not understand that they have a different way of learning and can often become frustrated and confused that they are not learning the “normal” way. They may assume that they simply are not as smart as other students. This has a negative impact on motivation and confidence and may lead to Satisfactory Academic Progress issues while the student is enrolled. Being able to identify a learning disability and help students find and utilize the resources that we have on campus can greatly help these students succeed, and may even reduce your SAP list!