



## **Best Practices for Working with Students Who Have a Learning Disability**

### **What is a learning disability?**

A learning disability affects the manner in which individuals take in information, organize it, retain it and express the knowledge and understanding which they possess. Although adults with learning disabilities have average to superior intelligence, they may have serious deficits in reading comprehension, spelling, mechanics of writing, math computation and/or problem solving.

### **College students with learning disabilities may exhibit the following characteristics:**

- Long term difficulty in reading, writing, spelling, foreign language, grammatical usage and/or using numerical concepts in contrast with average or superior skills in other areas.
- Distractibility by background noise or visual stimulation; has difficulty concentrating.
- Difficulty recalling common words; uses hands a lot and calls things: *"What-chama-call- it"* or *"Thing-a-ma-jig"*.
- Takes twice or three times longer to read than other people. Has to go back two or three times to understand what was read.
- Severe inability to spell or to recall irregularly spelled words.
- Difficulty with quantitative concepts including calculation, time and space.
- Difficulty taking notes and listening to a lecture at the same time.
- Slowed processing of information: needs "think time" to respond to questions, to retrieve information or to solve problems.
- Poor organizational skills, including organizing thoughts on a page and time managing skills.

### **Some intervention practices that produce large outcomes are:**



- direct instruction;
- learning strategy instruction; and
- using a sequential, simultaneous structured multi-sensory approach.

### **Teachers who apply those kinds of intervention:**

- break learning into small steps;
- administer probes;
- supply regular, quality feedback;
- use diagrams, graphics and pictures to augment what they say in words;
- provide ample independent, well-designed intensive practice;
- model instructional practices that they want students to follow;
- provide prompts of strategies to use; and
- engage students in process type questions like "How is the strategy working? Where else might you apply it?"

Scaffolding is also something that seems to make a real difference. Start out with the teacher using heavily mediated instruction, known as explicit instruction, then slowly begin to let the students acquire the skill, moving towards the goal of student mediated instruction.

Success for the student with learning disabilities requires a focus on individual achievement, individual progress, and individual learning. This requires specific, directed, individualized, intensive remedial instruction for students who are struggling.

Whether the student is in the general education classroom or learning in a special class setting, focus the activities on assessing individual students to monitor their progress through the curriculum. Concerns for the individual must take precedence over concerns for the group or the curriculum or for the organization and management of the general education classroom content.

### **Visual Aids**

*Outlining.* Outlining both required readings and class notes puts information into a form that is visually and logically organized.

*Color-coding.* Color-coding is another method that can be used to enhance comprehension and memory. For example:

- When highlighting a textbook or notes, yellow could be used for main ideas, pink for important facts, and blue for definitions.



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- For algebra students who occasionally drop negative signs or exponents, the negative signs could be done in red and the exponents in green.
- To illustrate how a topic sentence carries a common thread throughout a paragraph, the topic sentence could be colored dark red and the rest of the paragraph a softer red.

*Graphs, Charts, Diagrams.* Making graphs, charts, and diagrams helps explain difficult information. These aids are especially effective in courses with many quantitative concepts, such as economics and statistics.