

Student-Athletes with Learning Disabilities: Unique Problems, Unique Solutions

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the issues facing student-athletes with learning disabilities and their academic counselors. Understanding the nature of learning disabilities and their effects can enhance the counselor's ability to address the complex needs of the student-athlete with a learning disability. The increasing numbers of college student-athletes who have diagnosed learning disabilities demands notice. This paper provides an explanation of the problems of diagnosis and treatment. Suggestions for academic counselors are provided, as well.

STUDENT-ATHLETES WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES: UNIQUE PROBLEMS, UNIQUE SOLUTIONS

"Tim" is an 18-year old incoming freshman arriving at a Division I university on a football scholarship this fall. He has met the NCAA Division I requirements for his 13 core courses and he has the academic core GPA to meet eligibility requirements. However, his SAT composite score is below State of Florida's University System Minimum Freshman Eligibility Index required for admission to the university (his 2.4 high school academic GPA requires a corresponding composite score of 1030). Consequently, he (like any other incoming student at the university who has not met this index) is required to attend summer school immediately prior to his freshman year.

Because Tim has not met the minimum university quantitative subtest score requirements on the SAT, an individual learning plan will be developed to address his math deficiency. Tim's math performance in summer school and in the tutorial program remains extremely weak. Tim's academic counselor suspects that Tim has a learning disability and refers him for evaluation. When the evaluation confirms these suspicions, the academic counselor must provide or coordinate the supports necessary to promote Tim's academic success.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to provide academic counselors with information about learning disabilities (LDs) and their effects on student-athletes like "Tim." Understanding the nature of learning disabilities and their effects can enhance the counselor's ability to address the complex needs of the student-athlete with a learning disability.

Prevalence of Learning Disabilities

Learning disabilities are the fastest growing disability category on college campuses in the United States. This growth does not reflect an actual increase in the incidence of learning disability in the college-age population. Instead, the growing numbers of students identified with learning disabilities can probably be attributed to two primary factors: (a) the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, in addition to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, ensures that any student with a documented disability will receive reasonable accommodations to allow him or her equal access to a college education, thus making college an option for many students who had previously been denied access; and (b) a more accepting atmosphere on college campuses and access to accommodations has led more students, including many who had previously attempted to hide their disability, to disclose their disability to college personnel.

Current estimates of the incidence of LD range from 5% (Smith, 1998) to 15% (AACAP, 1997) of the general population. More than 100,000 students with learning disabilities graduate from high school each year, and between 160,000 and 300,000 students with learning disabilities were enrolled in college as of 1993 (Richard, 1997). The NCAA has also seen an increase in student-athletes with learning disabilities. Gerdy (1996) reported 1,200 requests for either nonstandard tests or nonstandard core course reviews were made by student-athletes with learning disabilities in 1995-96. This is a significant increase from the 300 requests in 1993-94.

In a 1998 Consent Decree (*United States of America v. NCAA*, 1998), the NCAA agreed to stop several practices that discriminated against student-athletes with learning disabilities. For example, the NCAA will no longer deny certification of core courses based entirely on references to special education in their titles. Since that time, well over 10,000 courses for students with learning disabilities have been certified as core courses by the NCAA or the Initial Eligibility Clearinghouse, compared with fewer than 900 before the agreement (Pullen, Lane, Rapport, & Sutherland, 2000). The changes that have resulted from the 1998 Consent Decree are likely to contribute to continued growth in the population of student-athletes with learning disabilities,

both because NCAA rules are more accommodating and because college athletic programs are developing programs to address their needs.

The number of student-athletes with learning disabilities making requests of the NCAA does not provide a complete picture of the prevalence of learning disabilities among college student-athletes. Many student-athletes go undiagnosed until after entering college or transfer from a community college. Unlike non-athletes with learning disabilities, whose entrance into four-year colleges despite their learning disabilities may be indicators of exceptional motivation and strong academic support systems, student-athletes may lack such advantages required to be successful at these more competitive college programs. Attending a community or smaller college directly out of high school seems to be common among college students with learning disabilities (Greenbaum, Graham, & Scales, 1995; Vogel, Leonard, Scales, Hayeslip, Hermansen, & Donnell, 1998). Exceptional athletic prowess may, however, propel many student-athletes with learning disabilities, diagnosed or undiagnosed, directly into larger four-year institutions.

Sanders (1996) suggests that the "dumb jock" stereotype contributes to many students' lack of diagnosis and, thus, lack of academic preparedness. In addition, student-athletes may be recruited to attend college solely on the basis of their athletic prowess, with little regard for their academic needs or achievement records. These factors may leave student-athletes with learning disabilities feeling overwhelmed by and alone in the academic arena.

UNDERSTANDING LD

To address the needs of students with learning disabilities, an understanding of the nature of learning disabilities and their effects on student learning and achievement is essential. The definition of learning disabilities that is most widely accepted in the field includes two main components: a *discrepancy* component (i.e., a minimum discrepancy between a student's expected and actual level of achievement), and an *exclusion* component (i.e., evidence that the discrepancy does not have an external cause, such as cultural or economic disadvantage, visual or hearing impairment, or mental or emotional disability) (Hammill, 1990).

In 1977, the U. S. Office of Education (USOE) released regulations for defining and identifying students with learning disabilities:

"Specific learning disability" means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. The term does not include children who have learning problems, which are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, of mental retardation, or emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. (USOE, 1977, p. 65083)

This definition was originally part of Public Law 94-142 and published in the *Federal Register* in 1977, but it has since been incorporated into Public Law 101-476,

also called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1990). This definition is currently used in administering programs for individuals with learning disabilities in most states. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990) and Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act (Vocational Rehabilitation Act, 1979), which govern postsecondary programs, do not offer a definition of learning disabilities. Both acts simply refer to individuals with a documented disability allowing each state to determine qualification standards.

The initial indicator of a learning disability is a deficit in academic achievement resulting in poor or failing grades. As the student-athlete moves from high school to college, the increasing intensity of course work demands at the postsecondary level often exacerbates this deficit. For example, advanced levels of reading are required for most college classes. A student with a disability in reading—the most common type of learning disability—may be overwhelmed by the reading demands of college-level course work. Less time spent in class and in contact with the instructor, dropping from 20 to 25 hours a week in high school to 12 to 15 hours in college, requires students with learning disabilities to learn and master skills independently (Brinckerhoff, 1996; Brinckerhoff, Shaw, & Mc Guire, 1992). Unfortunately, independent self-management and skill development can be a weakness for many individuals with learning disabilities. Students may also exhibit difficulties in using spoken or written language as a result of a disability, which may affect their ability to successfully complete writing assignments (e.g., theme writing, thesis papers, reports, essay questions, or notetaking) or speaking assignments (e.g., class presentations or speeches).

Problems with visual and/or auditory perception or processing create problems for the postsecondary student in many aspects of college life. Perceptual deficits may affect how the student learns information presented in class lectures and activities. For example, a student with visual processing difficulties may have trouble decoding critical information from written information presented on the chalkboard or screen. Deficits in auditory processing may affect the student's ability to gain information from lectures, class activities, or in study groups. The student with a learning disability may also experience difficulties attending to information presented in class lectures. The student may appear to be listening, but may not be able to recall what he heard or saw. The time required for a student with a learning disability to process information often causes notes to be incomplete. Difficulties sorting out all the information being processed can lead to difficulties determining main ideas, supporting details, or notes with extraneous information. Gathering information from lectures can be hindered by any one of many possible processing problems.

Students with learning disabilities may exhibit **poor memory skills**. Memory skills may be compromised because students lack memory strategies (effective encoding, organization and retention of memory traces); language problems may also affect the student's ability to remember (Torgesen & Kail, 1980). If memory deficits are present, the student must devote more time studying to adequately store information in memory. **Deficits in metacognition (planning and organizing information) can affect a student with learning disabilities ability to organize class information, ability to budget time to work on assignments, and ability to complete assignments on time.**

The postsecondary setting provides a host of demands on student time and energy. College students with learning disabilities are especially vulnerable to academic and social situations that most students find challenging, including time management, organization of academic work, living independently without parental support and supervision, and making responsible choices about relationships and activities. Students with learning disabilities demonstrate less maturity and fewer skills than their same-age peers (Richard, 1997). These deficits, coupled with an inability to process quickly all the demands of an academic or social situation, may make students with learning disabilities more impulsive and more likely to make poor judgments. It is common for students with disabilities to require more time to process a situation, determine possible outcomes, and make a choice of what action to take. Students with learning disabilities also have fewer problem-solving strategies to choose from (Schumaker, Deshler, Alley, & Warner, 1983), which makes adjustment to college life even more difficult.

Social-emotional problems often accompany a learning disability and may have significant impact on the college student with learning disabilities ability to cope with the demands of the postsecondary setting. Rappaport (1975) asserts that individuals with learning disabilities often develop emotions in a different pattern than individuals without learning disabilities. Emotional difficulties in students with learning disabilities include poorly developed social skills, irritability, impatience, difficulty interpreting non-verbal messages, higher rates of substance abuse, lowered self-esteem and heightened levels of anxiety (Gregg, Hoy, King, Moreland & Jagota, 1992; Goldstein, 1997) A different pattern of development could certainly complicate the manner in which the student-athlete addresses college life on social and emotional levels.

STUDENT-ATHLETES WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

Life as a college freshman student-athlete with a learning disability poses unique and daunting challenges (see Table 1). Beginning college at a large university can be an overwhelming experience for any freshman. Beginning that experience in the glare of the media spotlight and with expectations for success in multiple endeavors can be even more difficult. Beginning that experience with a learning disability intensifies the overwhelming experience and feelings of anxiety about not being able to meet the high expectations of others. Learning disabilities at the college level may cause problems in the acquisition and demonstration of knowledge, in organization of time and materials, in the fulfillment of requirements, and in interpersonal relationships. This can be especially problematic for the student-athlete, whose schedule is already packed with courses, practice, training, and other responsibilities. The demands of these multiple roles are often oppositional and new and creative solutions must be found. One common example of oppositional role demands is needing more time to acquire and master new material while being provided less time (inflexible) to devote to studying and completing assignments. College student-athletes with learning disabilities need unique strategies, efficient service providers, and a complete understanding of their own learning needs in order to successfully manage the challenges in front of them.

TABLE 1.

Challenges of life as a college freshman student-athlete with a learning disability.

<p>The Typical College Freshman</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • faces the daily challenges of life as a student at a major research institution with thousands of students and living independently in a college town. 	<p>The College Freshman Student-Athlete</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • faces the daily challenges of life as a student at a major research institution with thousands of students and living independently in a college town; and • faces additional challenges of balancing school commitments and team commitments, balancing study time and practice time, being a celebrity on campus (or being unknown for the first time), dealing with the media, and the physical demands of sport at a new level.
<p>The College Freshman with a Learning Disability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • faces the daily challenges of life as a student at a major research institution with thousands of students and living independently in a college town; and • faces additional academic and social challenges of coping with a learning disability in a community of individuals who excel at academic endeavors. 	<p>The College Freshman Student-Athlete with a Learning Disability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • faces the daily challenges of life as a student at a major research institution with thousands of students and living independently in a college town; • faces additional academic and social challenges of coping with a learning disability in a community of individuals who excel at academic endeavors; and • faces additional challenges of balancing school commitments and team commitments, balancing study time and practice time, being a celebrity on campus (or being unknown for the first time), dealing with the media, and the physical demands of sport at a new level.

In addition to challenges already mentioned, Parham (1993) listed some social/emotional challenges that face student-athletes, managing success or lack of success, satisfying multiple relationships (coaches, parents, friends, teachers, fans, & media), and obsessive bodily concern (i.e., weight, injuries). When a student-athlete has a learning disability that has affected social/emotional development, these challenges can become significant problems. The vulnerability facing the non-athlete with a learning disability increases significantly for an athlete with a learning disability. Choices, especially bad ones, made by student-athletes can end up as front-page news. Student-athletes with learning disabilities are aware of this problem, which adds stress to their already complex problems. These student-athletes with learning disabilities face significant stress trying to hide their disability due to fears that individuals (e.g.; coaches, future coaches, and teachers) who do not understand learning disabilities will think less of them. Students with learning disabilities who

hide their disability and attempt to function without the proper strategies and support systems have high levels of anxiety, and prolonged increased levels of anxiety and stress leads to hypersensitivity or insensitivity to one's environment (Gregg et al., 1992).

Clearly, student-athletes with learning disabilities face a unique set of challenges. In addition to making the transition from the relatively protective environment of high school and home to the more impersonal and demanding environment of a large university, student-athletes with learning disabilities must cope with the challenges their disabilities present along with the demands of college-level academics and intercollegiate athletics. The new role requires a great deal of independence, self-sufficiency, and self-advocacy, as well as tremendous organizational skills and perseverance. Despite increasing awareness among faculty about appropriate services and accommodations (Benham, 1997; Cullen, Shaw, & McGuire, 1996; Houck, Asselin, Troutman, & Arrington, 1992; Vogel, Leyser, Wyland, & Brulle, 1999), few colleges and universities provide adequate support for students with learning disabilities. Even fewer consider the unique needs of student-athletes with learning disabilities.

SUCCESSFUL ADULTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

Gerber, Ginsberg, and Reiff (1992) evaluated vocational outcomes of successful adults with learning disabilities and uncovered seven overarching themes that contributed to the vocational success of the individuals they studied. These themes revealed two categories of personal control: internal and external. Internal control themes comprise personal habits of success such as the development of persistence and determination, the ability to develop short and long term goals, and reframing—the understanding and acceptance of one's learning disability. External themes of control address the creation of supports that contribute to attainment: (a) creating environments that are 'friendly'; (b) identifying mentors who are role models and knowledgeable advisors; and (c) developing skills in manipulating the environmental system in which they find themselves. Researchers focusing on college students with learning disabilities found many of the same attributes contribute to the success of college students with learning disabilities (Aune & Kroeger, 1997; Brinckerhoff, Shaw & Mc Guire, 1992; Sanders & DuBois, 1996).

The student-athlete with learning disabilities possesses many of the attributes of the successful adult and college student with learning disabilities. Through persistence and hard work, he or she has risen to a very high level of achievement in sports. To rise to such a level demands not only raw talent but also an ability to set long- and short-term goals and to identify mentors to help them realize their potential. Student-athletes must be able to understand the limits of their talent, to compensate for weaknesses and to emphasize their strengths. Learning to apply compensatory skills to academics is a challenge, but to be successful, college students with learning disabilities must discover ways to understand and compensate for academic deficits.

Successful athletic performance often allows student-athletes with learning disabilities to compensate for or avoid the negative outcomes that are usually experienced by non-athletes with learning disabilities. Often celebrated and revered in high school because of their success on the playing field or in their individual sport, student-athletes with learning disabilities move into adulthood with little of the stigma and low overall self-concept that can characterize non-athletes with learning disabilities. In contrast, student-athletes with learning disabilities are more self-assured and self-determined than non-athletes with learning disabilities (Blatz, 2000).

It is true that student-athletes with learning disabilities may have poor grades and marginal scholastic outcomes that put them at high risk for academic failure in the college setting. Fortunately, however, they have developed other attributes that increase their likelihood for academic success in college, especially when supported and fostered by the professional support system provided to most college student-athletes. Recognition and Initial Referral Considerations for Academic Advisors of Student-Athletes with Learning Disabilities

Student-athletes with learning disabilities are uniquely suited to learn to adapt the successes they've had in athletics to the academic arena. Academic skill deficits notwithstanding, student-athletes may experience fewer negative consequences due to their learning disabilities and, consequently, may develop higher self-concepts than typical adults with this impairment.

Why, then, has the student-athlete with learning disabilities historically had so little success academically despite their undisputed abilities and success in sports? Retention of student-athletes continues to plague major collegiate athletic programs, and the student-athlete with learning disabilities has been particularly vulnerable. The answer lies partially in the difficulty of diagnosing a learning disability.

Some students with learning disabilities manage to make it through elementary and high school without being diagnosed. Amazing as it may seem, many students reach college before their disability becomes evident. Often student-athletes' learning disabilities are not diagnosed until college, particularly if they come from academically marginal high school backgrounds. The support systems surrounding many student-athletes at the high school level can mask academic difficulties. In addition, a lack of knowledge in some school districts about appropriate assessment and treatment for learning disabilities persists more than 20 years after services for these students was federally mandated. Some students are identified in elementary school but are dismissed from special education programs by the time they reach high school. In addition, other students only begin to struggle when presented with the challenges of college-level work. The academic advisor's ability to detect the presence of a possible learning disability and to make an appropriate referral for assessment is essential. Because of his or her access to information from many sources related to the student-athlete (e.g., course progress, tutoring reports, contacts with professors, tutors, and coaches), the academic advisor should be the first professional at the postsecondary level to suspect the presence of a learning disability. The early detection of learning disabilities will result in higher retention rates and, ultimately, increased levels of "academic self-esteem" in student-athletes. Unfortunately, student-athletes are often referred by athletic department personnel for services

only after students have “gotten in trouble” academically with grades falling below the minimum standards for continued enrollment and athletic eligibility. A learning disability may be manifested in a variety of ways for the student-athlete in college. Areas of academic performance, language or verbal skills, visual and auditory perception or processing, attention, memory, metacognition, and social relationships may be affected. Academic advisors should be sensitive to signs of a possible learning disability among the student-athletes they advise. Some of the characteristics that an academic advisor might observe may be found in Table 2.

TABLE 2.

Examples of characteristics that an Academic Advisor may observe.

Academic performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrates significant difficulty with courses that rely heavily on one particular area of learning (e.g., <i>reading</i> for History or Literature courses, <i>math</i> for algebra or physical science courses) • Poor reading ability or poor comprehension • Problems with syntax or grammar in oral or written communication • Difficulty organizing thoughts in writing • Problems with sentence structure, writing mechanics, and organization • Difficulty with arithmetic, math language, and math concepts • Difficulty with time, sequencing, and problem solving
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Language or verbal skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty describing complex events or abstract concepts • Can explain things orally, but not in writing • Difficulty telling or understanding jokes or stories • Misinterprets or has poor comprehension of what is said • Responds in an inappropriate manner, unrelated to what is said, or only responds partially to what is said
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Visual and auditory perception or processing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty in attending to sounds that occur simultaneously • Difficulty understanding spatial relationships • Confuses directions from one location to another • Difficulty responding to multi-step directions
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Attention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short attention span or impulsively • Difficulty conforming to routines • Easily distracted • Stress on extended mental effort • Difficulty “tuning out” extraneous activity

Table 2 continued on next page

TABLE 2 (continued)

Memory	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Able to learn information presented in one way, but not in another• Difficulty memorizing information (e.g., phone numbers)• Unable to repeat what has just been said• Difficulty demonstrating knowledge in testing situations
Metacognition and Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Acquires new skills slowly• Unaware of or unable to explain own strategies for learning• Confuses time or sequence of events• Difficulty following a schedule or being on time• Difficulty organizing belongings• Lack of planning ahead for assignments or examinations
Social relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Difficulty with social interactions• Misinterprets or is unaware of nonverbal social cues• Experiences social isolation• Does not use appropriate eye contact• Difficulty controlling impulsive behaviors• Poor social judgment

In addition to recognizing the characteristics provided in Table 2 academic counselors have other opportunities to perceive that a student might have a learning disability. The academic counselor reviews a student's academic history by evaluating academic records. Although not a definitive indicator of a learning disability, repeated attempts at obtaining a qualifying score on college entrance exams (i.e., SAT or ACT) may serve as a warning signal. Academic counselors have first hand knowledge of students' struggling because many student-athletes consult with their academic counselor when they are having difficulty. When problems arise, counselors are able to use their professional judgment to examine possible underlying issues. For example, "Tim" may express confusion about why he is performing poorly when, in fact, he is attending class, studying regularly, motivated, and trying. The academic counselor may realize that there is a discrepancy between the student's perceived abilities and the student's achievement (i.e., the student has the ability but does not have the achievement). Furthermore, the academic counselor may follow up with the student's subject area tutors on a regular basis to evaluate the student's progress. When the tutor says, "I have reviewed content regularly with this student, he is well prepared for class and for the exams, but he is not performing adequately" the counselor's suspicions are further supported.

For students with existing diagnoses, the academic advisor's role may begin even before the student-athlete begins college. Familiarity with the college's admissions policies for students with learning disabilities can be useful during the recruiting process. As a result of the 1998 Consent Decree and the more accepting climate for students with disabilities on most college campuses, the NCAA has begun to address the issues related to student-athletes with learning disabilities. The academic advisor must stay apprised of NCAA policies as they are developed.

When a student-athlete is finally diagnosed with a learning disability, few athletic programs have the specialized facilities or programs to address his or her unique needs. Once a student-athlete is diagnosed with a learning disability, the development of a strong support plan is necessary.

Support for Student-Athletes with Learning Disabilities

Many student-athletes with learning disabilities can be taught to adapt the skills for success they have learned within their sport; they understand success, they just need the tools and understanding to generalize from an athletic setting to an academic one. Programs and services can be created that build upon the themes of success (Gerber et al., 1992). Better services at an earlier point in their academic careers can provide a prevent failure in the college setting. It is much harder to dig out of an academic hole that has already been made than to never fall in the first place.

Service coordination and academic counseling. Academic counselors have a significant role in the academic progress of student-athletes with learning disabilities. A sound support program for student-athletes with learning disabilities requires a well-trained and highly qualified cadre of support personnel and carefully designed, individualized educational programs. The academic counselor is the person mostly likely to coordinate those services. The academic counselor is familiar with the many different facets of the student's life. The academic counselor is not expected to

provide the services directly, but student-athletes with learning disabilities will require guidance through the bureaucracy of professionals and services. Strong lines of communication must be maintained among the key players: the academic counselor, the diagnostician, course instructors, the tutor, and the student-athlete. Clear, honest, and frequent communication can significantly enhance the likelihood for the student's academic success. College students with learning disabilities have identified the coordination of services as essential in their successful adjustment to college (Aune & Kroeger, 1997; Sanders & DuBois, 1996).

The academic counselor must first ensure that a thorough evaluation is conducted by qualified diagnosticians, usually licensed clinical or school psychologists, who are familiar with the unique needs of student-athletes with learning disabilities. The diagnostician should develop individualized recommendations for services and accommodations, and the academic advisor can provide important information to assist the diagnostician in the development of recommendations. Documentation of the results of psychoeducational testing is required by most colleges' Student Disability Services offices before accommodations in course work and testing can be allowed.

Because the academic counselor works as an advisor to the student-athlete, it is essential for the counselor to be familiar with the needs of student-athletes with learning disabilities. Information about learning disabilities should be offered to all athletic academic counselors. College students with learning disabilities consider their counselors' knowledge about learning disabilities as very important (Sanders & DuBois, 1996).

A thorough understanding of learning disabilities in general and the specific learning disabilities of their advisees will affect every decision an academic advisor makes with or for a student-athlete with a learning disability. When doing academic advising, it is important to provide the student with a learning disability a balanced schedule that will emphasize strengths rather than weaknesses. Creating a schedule that balances highly demanding classes with less demanding classes, and limits the number of back-to-back classes is often beneficial to the success of student-athletes with learning disabilities. Recognizing when a student-athlete with learning disabilities is in need of a reduced course load and helping the student to initiate the course load waiver process can be critical. Reduced course loads are common among successful college students with learning disabilities (Vogel & Adelman, 1992). Although the NCAA allows for reduced course loads for student-athletes with learning disabilities, the waiver process can be complicated (Hishinuma, 1999), so a thorough understanding of learning disabilities will assist the academic advisor in making appropriate recommendations for waiver requests.

Academic advisors' knowledge of learning disabilities can be helpful in many other roles. For example, knowledge of learning disabilities and understanding of the college or university's programs and services can help the academic advisor to make appropriate referrals. Knowledge about learning disabilities is considered very important for advisors who provided academic counseling as well as other types of counseling (Sanders & DuBois, 1996). Academic advisors often do the referring for other types of counseling so consideration of this fact is important when referring

students to a counselor. Finding a mental health counselor with knowledge of learning disabilities can be critical to the success of the counseling experience.

The academic advisor may also be called upon to consult with coaches. Knowledge of learning disabilities can help the advisor suggest appropriate accommodations or modifications to coaching methods to promote enhanced athletic learning and performance. The learning difficulties that contribute to failure in the classroom can contribute to failure on the practice field. Some of the same instructional accommodations that promote academic success may promote athletic success.

Tutoring. Academic support programs for student-athletes must include tutors who are learning disabilities specialists and who are sensitive to the challenges facing their tutees. Tutors who are content specialists seldom have the teaching skills necessary to address the learning needs of students with learning disabilities. Learning disabilities specialists focus on the student's development of strategies that may be generalized across a variety of content areas. College students with learning disabilities have expressed extreme frustration with tutors who do not understand learning disabilities and have found this lack of knowledge to be a major barrier to their adjustment to and success in college (Aune & Kroeger, 1997; Sanders & DuBois, 1996). Knowledgeable tutors can provide student-athletes with learning disabilities with appropriate remedial instruction and strategy development.

Self-awareness development. Another essential component to the support program for student-athletes with learning disabilities is self-awareness development. Successful college students with learning disabilities are reported to be persistent, self-aware, and effective self-advocates. (Cullen, Shaw, & McGuire, 1996; Vogel, Hruby, & Adelman, 1993). College student-athletes with learning disabilities must have those characteristics to be successful and self-awareness training that includes disability awareness can promote their acquisition (Blatz, 2000). Because few high schools provide self-awareness training and because many student-athletes are not diagnosed until after entering college, it is imperative that training be offered at the postsecondary level. The academic counselor can collaborate with professionals who can assist the student in acquiring self-awareness. Fear of others discovering their disability—and the anxiety this fear produces—often hinders students from taking advantage of the services available (Adelman & Vogel, 1993; King et al., 1992). This fear and anxiety are significantly compounded when the individual with the learning disability is also a high-profile athlete. Combating the fear and anxiety can only be done through self-awareness training and effective counseling.

Interdisciplinary collaboration. At the University of Florida service providers have come together to form the Florida Interdisciplinary Effort for Learning Disabilities (FIELD) group to study, assess, and support student-athletes with learning disabilities. This FIELD group establishes a foundation of interdisciplinary communication. The FIELD group members represent the many disciplines that support the student-athlete with learning disabilities, including special education, psychology, athletic academic counseling, exercise and sport science. Other members of the group are statisticians, learning disabilities specialists, and graduate students. The FIELD group promotes a better understanding of student-athletes with learning disabilities, increases the effectiveness of communication, and allows for

interdisciplinary research into successful student-athletes with learning disabilities. Most importantly, members of the FIELD group have worked together to develop and implement a variety of effective services for student-athletes with learning disabilities. This type of interdisciplinary collaboration is possible at any college or university and it's perhaps the best way to ensure that the academic, social/emotional, and athletic needs of student-athletes with learning disabilities are being addressed.

CONCLUSION

Student-athletes with learning disabilities face unique challenges at the college level. They also present unique challenges for academic athletic advisors. Advisors must be alert for the problems that may be evidence of the presence of LD. They must recognize the issues that student-athletes with learning disabilities face. Finally, academic advisors must provide the supports required to promote academic success.

Future research must develop better screening criteria (i.e., particular patterns of high school grades and test scores that are associated with learning disabilities) that academic counselors may use with entering student-athletes. Research should also be the basis for the development of enhanced interventions for this unique population.

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