

# Why Smart Students with Learning Disabilities Drop Out of College

Stephanie A. Knight

These days, presidential politicking bombards us with talk of American “exceptionalism.” Too often, it is trite political feel-good, something that whitewashes withered areas that need shoring up. Consider the appallingly low graduation rates of American students with learning disabilities.



Photo courtesy of the author.

A GradNation report recently released by Civic Enterprises and the Everyone Graduates Center at the Johns Hopkins University School of Education shamefully found that “... students with disabilities graduate at a rate nearly 20 points lower than the average [high school] graduation rate for all students.” Even for the 63.1 percent of high school graduates with disabilities, potholes pock their path to college completion.

What happens to smart students with diagnosed learning disabilities (LD)—so-called invisible disabilities—when they matriculate into college? The 2011 National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 sheds light: Only 27 percent of students who have disclosed their learning disabilities complete college within six years. That is dwarfed by the 2014 national average of 59 percent.

## Deck stacked against LD students

Clearly, current educational models and teaching styles remain stacked against this disenfranchised population. We must answer tough questions. Why do these students quit college and how can we remove obstacles from both institutional and policy-making landscapes?

Colleges have a clear incentive to ensure that students graduate. High undergraduate costs translate into high-stakes analysis of departures—every student retained is one less recruit in successive

classes.

A National Postsecondary Student Aid Study noted that between 7 and 11 percent of incoming students have diagnosed learning disabilities. Given that LD collegians graduate at much lower rates than their nondisabled counterparts do, it’s clear they’re underserved.

## Accommodations for LD students

Myriad factors explain these poor outcomes, including lower grade point averages, many missed days, and multiple disabilities or impairments. Studies document that LD collegians struggle with interacting with faculty and with social isolation, torpedoing their success.

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To receive necessary accommodations, students often must undergo a battery of clinical cognitive and psychological questionnaires. These assessments come at a high cost—often burdensome for students and families on fixed incomes—and expire before graduation.

Once administered, the accommodations also come at a cost for students with learning differences. For instance, the accommodations often arrive late, sometimes even after the course has concluded. Or they prove unusable, such as recorded texts that are inaudible or recorded at slower speech rates.

Some colleges are better at embracing these accommodations. For example,

my college, Beacon College in Leesburg, Florida, builds into attendance costs needed supports to supplement curriculum, such as learning specialists assigned to every student and assistive technology. Some colleges have programs in place to help students with learning disabilities, but many do not.

Still, colleges aren’t solely to blame for success-blocking policies. Public initiatives also torpedo perseverance. For instance, Florida State Bill 1720, which a recent *Inside Higher Ed* article dubbed the “Florida Experiment,” makes remedial college preparatory instruction optional. Colorado, Connecticut, North Carolina, and Texas joined Florida in recently passing similar bills. This policy change creates quandaries for colleges struggling not only to honor legislative mandates but also to provide courses that meet student needs.

## Improving LD students’ graduation rates

Empowering LD students to make wise choices about remedial education and course selection would boost graduation rates. Colleges and universities have or are responding to such policies by exploring ways to bolster academic counseling and student support services.

Still, institutions can improve efforts to whittle LD dropout rates. With SB 1720 in mind, faculty members should reevaluate their instruction methods and tailor instruction to student needs and demand. Yes, this increases faculty workload; yet embracing the new classroom reality may swell overall student success.

Financial hardship looms as another common reason LD collegians drop out. Tutoring and assistive technology typically add more cost in addition to fees that can top several thousand dollars extra each semester to defray structured

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academic programming. Policymakers controlling the student financial aid purse strings, as well as rehabilitation and campus-based financial-aid professionals, must educate themselves about the special situations some LD students face and move to diminish financial distress.

Research shows that standardized testing struggles often disqualify high school LD students for institutional and state merit scholarships. Lower high school GPAs are another handicap, as is sparse enrollment in Advanced Placement courses.

College LD students, too, must play a role in their success. Leveraging campus disability-related services proves the most important tool for perseverance, yet many LD students don't use them. Why? Often, how students see themselves or their learning differences influences whether they seek desperately needed services.

By striving to address college-completion rates for LD students, both students and colleges benefit. The blueprint is simple: Provide appropriate transitional support in high school, guide prospective collegians toward schools armed with programs and support that match their needs, and encourage students to develop and practice more self-advocacy and awareness.

It takes a village to graduate a student, and that applies even more when helping to ensure that bright students facing learning hurdles cross the academic finish line.

Stephanie A. Knight is director of admissions at Beacon College in Leesburg, Florida, the first accredited higher education institution to award bachelor's degrees exclusively to students with learning disabilities, ADHD, and high-functioning autism-spectrum disorders. ■

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