

Chapter 6

Hidden Disabilities: Nonverbal Learning Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

Students with disabilities are choosing post-secondary educational options at increasing rates. While students with learning disabilities are endeavoring to earn degrees, many have typically struggled to meet the academic requirements. Research findings suggest that appropriate academic support tailored to individual needs and provided throughout the course of study can be effective in assisting students to attain a bachelor's degree. Effective supports for college students with learning disabilities include strategies that allow for multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression. This chapter will explore the college journey of a young man with nonverbal learning disabilities. The characteristics of NVLD and how those characteristics were expressed in his life will be reviewed. The student and a professor from the university discuss specific supports that lessened the effects of deficient executive function and information processing. The author also shares how the ongoing supports provided in college facilitated the student's attainment of a bachelor's degree.

*Our chief want is someone who will inspire us to be what we know we could be.
-Ralph Waldo Emerson*

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INTRODUCTION

Geoff is an adult with nonverbal learning disabilities (NVLD). Some might call him, “quirky.” Geoff’s quirks manifest in unique ways of thinking and behaving. He has difficulty with executive function, information processing, arithmetic, social skills and communication. Most students with NVLD admitted to college have trouble meeting the increasingly complex demands of coursework (e.g., Heiman & Kariv, 2004; Heiman & Preceel, 2003; Skinner & Lindstrom, 2003; G. Vogel, Fresko, & Wertheim, 2007). His “quirks” may be described as deficits in “soft skills.” Practically, soft skills include social skills, effective communication skills, self-direction, drive (grit), adaptability and flexibility and creativity. With academic supports (including speech and occupational therapy), Geoff was able to experience success in school and perform to his academic potential.

Executive function enables individuals to use their strengths and weaknesses, to understand content and to plan ways to study and achieve goals such as completing homework assignments and passing a test. Geoff’s parents have worked closely with him to help him understand his strengths and weaknesses and to use this knowledge to his benefit. They have also facilitated the acquisition of occupational and speech therapy. His therapists have helped Geoff strengthen his executive function skills areas such as time management, planning the most beneficial ways to learn content and use it “real life,” with planning, setting and achieving goals, and demonstrating flexibility in thinking.

Although ACT/SAT test scores are typically required for admission to higher education, they are generally low predictors of college achievement (grade point average [GPA]) for students with learning disabilities (LD). Students with learning disabilities often struggle to meet the requirements in general education classes and few achieve the goal of graduating with a degree. The difficulties with meeting academic requirements have raised the awareness of the needs of students with LD for support services.

Students like Geoff, with NVLD, regardless of their previous GPA or ACT/SAT scores, who are provided with academic supports are more likely than their typically performing peers to achieve a bachelor’s degree. In college as an undergraduate, Geoff received many academic supports such as a separate room and increased time for tests. He met with an academic mentor who worked with him to set goals, manage his time, select appropriate roommates, manage his passion for video games and achieve enough sleep, for example. These supports, carried over from high school into the college arena, made it possible for him to graduate and eventually enter graduate school. Left on his own, Geoff found it difficult to complete and submit assignments, pass tests, select friends who shared his life goals, and most significant to Geoff, get enough sleep.

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