



# Perceptions of Learning Disabled College Students

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## INTRODUCTION

Learning disabilities are in fact prevalent among societal members, including many of which who pursue higher education. Hall, Spruill, and Webster (2002) reported that 14% of students with a learning disability enter college as opposed to 53% of students without a diagnosed learning disability. As with any behavior or characteristic that deviates from the societal norm, various attitudes and perceptions in relation to the individual difference come into play.

Meyer, Govier, Duke, and Advokat (2001) sought to determine whether social context had any bearing on the attitudes toward disabled students by those with no disability. It was hypothesized that individuals who were not disabled would view those with learning disabilities (LD) more favorably. Additionally, it was predicted that people without a disability would feel less comfortable when in the vicinity of a disabled student. Contradictory to what was predicted, results confirmed that those who were not impaired reported more positive attitudes of LD students when in the proximity of someone disabled.

McCaughy and Strohmmer (2005) specifically examined perceptions and attitudes of the nonlearning disabled population toward the LD student. Results indicated that learning disabled students were expected to need more assistance, slow down the progression of class, and distract the instructor. Furthermore, it was found that nonlearning disabled students felt that the LD student was ultimately defined by their disability. For example, many with Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) may be characterized as inattentive, poorly behaved, and lacking self-control. Likewise, dyslexics are often viewed as illiterate or seeing backwards according to these findings.

The current study will attempt to examine the perceptions and attitudes of college students toward learning disabled college students. It is hypothesized that female college students will perceive learning disabled college students more favorably than their male counterparts. Also, it is expected that a positive relationship will exist between the age of a student and favorability toward learning disabled students.

## METHOD

### Participants

A convenience sample of 150 participants was used for this study. The 33 men and 117 women were all college students with 28.2% being Caucasian, 34.9% Hispanic, 12.8% African American, 10.1% Bi/Multiracial, 6% Asian, 4.7% reporting Other as their ethnicity, and 3.4% declined to state their ethnicity. The mean age of the sample was 23.25 years ( $SD = 7.01$ ).

### Design and Measures

This is a cross-sectional, survey method design intended to examine how college students perceive college students with learning disabilities. The 4-page survey asked participants to respond to a) basic demographic questions and b) statements assessing perceptions of learning disabled college students.

The independent variables for this study are gender and age. Respondents were asked to indicate gender (male or female) and age (in years). The dependent variable of this study is level of favorability toward LD college students. The Opinions Relative to Mainstreaming (ORM; Larrivee & Cook, 1979) inventory is designed to measure peer perceptions of learning disabled students. Since this inventory intended to measure peer attitudes toward mainstreaming elementary school students, the wording of some items were changed in order to measure college students' perceptions of learning disabled college students.

Participants were asked to respond to 30 statements assessing attitudes using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly agree* to 5 = *strongly disagree*). Sample statements include "Many of the things professors do with regular students in a classroom are appropriate for learning disabled college students." and "The extra attention learning disabled college students require will be to the detriment of the other students." The following items were reversed so that favorable attitudes of learning disabled college students would be appropriately reflected: a1, a4, a6, a8, a10, a14, a16, a18, a19, a21, a26, a28, and a30. High scores indicate a more favorable attitude toward learning disabled college students.

### Procedure

Surveys were group-administered during regularly scheduled classes at a local university. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and all responses would remain confidential. To indicate agreement to participate, the attached consent form was signed and detached from the survey. Once completed, the surveys were returned to the researcher and participants were provided a short debriefing explaining the research project.

## RESULTS

A *t*-test for independent samples was performed to examine the differences in perceptions toward learning disabled college students between men and women (Table 1). As predicted, women report significantly higher levels of favorable attitudes when compared to men,  $t(147) = 2.74, p < .01$ .

Also, it was hypothesized that there would be a positive relationship between age of a student and favorability toward learning disabled students. A Pearson *r* correlation was performed indicating no significant relationship between age of the student ( $M = 23.25, SD = 7.01$ ) and favorability toward learning disabled students ( $M = 105.39, SD = 14.78$ ),  $r(147) = .12, p > .05$ . These results indicate that age of a student is not related to one's level of favorability toward learning disabled students.

Table 1

Means and standard deviations on perceptions of students with learning disabilities

	Participant Gender			
	Male <i>n</i> = 33		Female <i>n</i> = 117	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Perceptions	99.30	13.58	107.12	14.69

## DISCUSSION

The present study examined perceptions of learning disabled college students. It was expected for female students to perceive learning disabled college students more favorably than male students. Results did support the hypothesis that women were more accepting of learning disabled college students in comparison to their male counterparts. According to Rao (2004) women hold more positive attitudes toward the learning disabled population because they tend to be more overtly nurturing, sensitive, and empathetic than males.

Furthermore, it was expected for older college students to be more accepting of learning disabled students than younger college students. This was suggested because oftentimes those who are older, more mature, and possess more life experience tend to be more cognizant and understanding of individual difference. Findings did not support this hypothesis. Therefore, there were no differences in attitudes between the age groups.

Findings of this study could attempt to explain how certain types of individuals perceive the learning disabled population a certain way. Further, results could be used in determining or anticipating how widely the learning disabled individual will be accepted among a certain population of people. In addition, perhaps such findings could serve to make society aware of certain individual or group biases or preconceptions that interfere with perception formation.

The overall scope of this research could in fact be limited in that the study only examined students in relation to two variables, gender and age. It could be beneficial to look at various other factors that could have been attributable to how students perceive learning disabled individuals. Perhaps if the study incorporated more variables, the findings may have offered more.

Another limitation of this study was that one of the hypotheses had to be eliminated because of the sample lacking a necessary number of learning disabled college students. Initially, it was expected for those who actually had a diagnosed learning disability to perceive learning disabled college students more favorably. However, since the sample did not contain enough students with a diagnosed disability, this hypothesis could not be tested.

In addition, there were many more female participants recruited for this study than male participants. It would have been helpful to have less of a discrepancy between the number of male and female participants so that the sample would have been more representative.

Also, the fact that the sample was recruited from one university as opposed to various schools could have restricted the scope of the study. Perhaps if participants were selected from different schools including community colleges and state college/universities, results yielded may have been different. Recruiting participants from one school could ultimately compromise how representative the sample is of the college student population.

Future research may incorporate a more representative and diverse sample recruited from a variety of colleges. Further, the sample could include a more even distribution of males and females so that a more accurate comparison could be conducted. Moreover, future research could look at other potential contributors to the formation of these perceptions (i.e., amount of past exposure to LD students, personality, and upbringing). If future research examined how some of these variables impact the perceptions of college students, results may in fact suggest that there are a variety of factors that could be attributable to how one views the learning disabled student.