

Enhancing Faculty Preparedness to Teach Students with Learning Disabilities, A Community College Insight



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Over the past decade, the number of students with learning disabilities enrolling in postsecondary education across the United States has steadily increased (Hansen & Dawson, 2020). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2017), approximately 14% of all students in public education received special education services during the 2019–2020 academic year, with 33% diagnosed with a learning disability. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education (NCES, 2017) reported that 32% of students with disabilities in 2-year or 4-year postsecondary institutions had a learning disability. Furthermore, in 2016, 19.4% of postsecondary students self-identified as having a learning disability (NCES, 2017). However, it is important to recognize that many students may choose not to self-identify, making it difficult to determine the number of students with learning disabilities in higher education settings (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2012).

Learning disabilities encompass a broad range of cognitive challenges that affect academic performance, and their definitions can vary based on different contexts. These classifications are often organized into specific categories to clarify their impact and necessary accommodations.

Community colleges play a crucial role in expanding access to education, yet students with learning disabilities (LD) continue to face significant academic and institutional barriers. Faculty preparedness to effectively support these students is vital in fostering equitable and inclusive learning environments. This article explores the findings of a qualitative study that examines faculty readiness and instructional strategies for teaching students with LD. Using the frameworks of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), the study identifies evidence-based approaches to enhance teaching effectiveness, improve student retention, and promote overall academic success.

The Challenge

Despite increasing enrollment, students with LD often face lower persistence and graduation rates than their peers. Research reveals that many faculty members lack formal training to support these students effectively, leading to inconsistent accommodations application and limited classroom inclusivity. For example, according to Hansen and Dawson (2020), only 3 out

of 12 faculty participants felt ready to teach students with learning disabilities. Three other faculty reported feeling somewhat prepared, and six reported feeling mainly unprepared to teach students with learning disabilities. Similar findings were evident in a more extensive study involving 123 faculty members, in which Sniatecki et al. (2019) indicated faculty members had limited knowledge about students with learning disabilities and their challenges (Sniatecki et al., 2019). Addressing this issue requires instructional leadership focused on professional development, inclusive strategies, and fostering an anti-ableism culture within community colleges. Lower persistence rates have led to lower graduation rates. Researchers have found that students with learning disabilities do not complete college at the same rate as their peers (Newman et al., 2011; Williams et al., 2020). Although the estimated completion rate for college students without disabilities was 52%, the completion rate for students with learning disabilities was 41% (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014; Williams et al., 2020). These numbers show a significant completion rate difference between college students with learning disabilities and their peers without learning disabilities.

Methodology

This study used an interpretive inquiry approach to explore how faculty knowledge and awareness of learning

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disabilities shape their preparedness to support students and create inclusive classrooms. Using the lens of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), I aimed to understand faculty members' personal experiences and teaching strategies in community colleges.

The foundational tenets of UDL center around providing multiple pathways for representation, engagement, and expression during the teaching and learning process. This adaptable approach addresses diverse learning needs and promotes an inclusive learning environment, instilling confidence in educators and policymakers about its effectiveness.

Regarding representation, UDL underscores the importance of incorporating diverse information formats (e.g., text, images, videos, audio) to accommodate varied learning styles. The cultivation of engagement occurs through the facilitation of student choices, igniting interest and motivation through a spectrum of projects, activities, or assessments tailored to individual preferences (Meyer et al., 2014). The multiple means of expression principle encouraged students to demonstrate their comprehension through diverse channels, encompassing written assignments, presentations, projects, or alternative methods.

The integration of UDL in the classroom yields numerous advantages. This integration encompasses heightened accessibility and the cultivation of an inclusive learning environment that accommodates students' diverse needs (Meyer, et al., 2014).

Furthermore, diversified content presentation enhances engagement, improving learning outcomes. The inherent flexibility in UDL approaches

caters to individual strengths, contributing to a more equitable education system that upholds every student's entitlement to equal opportunities for learning and success, irrespective of their background or abilities.

Findings

My first research question explored how faculty members' knowledge of learning disabilities impacted their preparedness to support diverse student needs in community college classrooms. All 15 participants agreed that traditional training is not sufficient. They turned to workshops, webinars, and self-study to bridge the gap, but many felt that institutional support was lacking. They called for hands-on, inclusive professional development. Faculty members emphasized that personal and professional experiences—such as working in K-12 education or overcoming personal challenges—have significantly impacted their teaching more than formal training. Key takeaways included the importance of recognizing disabilities early and creating inclusive spaces. They highlighted that faculty knowledge is not just about understanding disabilities but also about engaging students, making learning meaningful, and ensuring students can apply what they learn in real life.

The second research question was essential in understanding faculty attitudes' role in their preparedness to support students with learning disabilities in community college classrooms. Faculty participants agreed that their attitudes toward students with learning disabilities are crucial to success. They saw mindset as the first step in preparedness, driving curiosity and continuous learning.

Positive attitudes empower students, boosting engagement and fostering inclusivity. They emphasized fairness and equity, ensuring all students had equal opportunities. Key strategies included differentiated instruction, positive reinforcement, and a supportive classroom environment. Personal experiences with disabilities—through family or firsthand challenges—deepened their empathy and shaped their teaching. These insights reinforced their commitment to inclusive education and student success.

The third research question examined how faculty preparedness to teach students with learning disabilities fosters a more inclusive learning environment in community colleges. Participants stressed that inclusive learning is essential for student success, especially for those with learning disabilities. They shared personal struggles and called for systemic reforms, better training, and more substantial institutional support. Key challenges—social isolation, stigma, and resource gaps—highlighted the urgency for change. Clear communication, diverse teaching strategies, and ongoing professional development emerged as priorities. Faculty embraced Universal Design for Learning (UDL), recognizing its benefits for all students, not just those with disabilities.

All 15 participants saw UDL as a crucial tool for better preparing them to teach students who learn differently, pushing for more substantial training to deepen its impact. Their commitment to equity, innovation, and flexibility underscored their vision: a future where every student thrives in an inclusive classroom.

The fourth research question explored how faculty preparedness to teach

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students with learning disabilities directly influences student success in community college settings. All 15 participants agreed that classroom accommodations are essential for students with learning disabilities. They stressed balancing support with maintaining class integrity and sharing personal experiences and strategies that drive inclusivity and success. Faculty embraced Universal Design for Learning (UDL), using varied engagement, representation, and action strategies. They highlighted self-disclosure, flexible assignments, and student strengths as key to improving outcomes. Personalized learning, active participation, and open communication were game-changing tools.

One major challenge is identifying and supporting students who do not disclose their disabilities. Faculty pushed for adaptive, inclusive learning spaces and stronger institutional collaboration. They emphasized the need for real-time data, customized learning approaches, and better institutional support.

Recommendations

This study offers key takeaways for making education more inclusive and equitable. It advocates better faculty training, real action on inclusive teaching, and stronger faculty-student connections. A big focus is creating faculty champion teams to break down barriers and advocate for fairness. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is highlighted as innovative, making lessons more adaptable and accessible. The study also stresses the need for better accommodations and institutional support, especially for neurodiverse students, ensuring every learner has the tools to succeed.

Educational leaders can drive change by creating faculty champion teams—experienced educators who support peers, share best practices, and advocate for students with learning disabilities. Community colleges can also form professional groups to train faculty on inclusive teaching and disability awareness.

From a policy standpoint, peer-to-peer groups can offer faculty hands-on learning from those experienced with learning disabilities, fostering a more inclusive culture. Institutions should implement mandatory training covering inclusive teaching, effective communication, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to ensure all staff are prepared.

Ongoing professional development is key—faculty need continuous training and resources to apply UDL effectively and create inclusive classrooms. Investing in faculty growth leads to better student outcomes and promotes equity.

By prioritizing inclusion, institutions can build adaptable learning environments that empower neurodiverse students. A strong commitment to professional development, open communication, and diverse teaching strategies will foster academic success and create truly supportive classrooms.

Future Research

Future research should widen the participant pool across all states, giving a clearer picture of faculty preparedness to teach students with learning disabilities. Focusing on expert educators can provide valuable insights to help policymakers push for more

substantial professional development in inclusive teaching. Expanding the study to more institutions will also reveal how different environments impact faculty readiness.

Another key area is exploring why some faculty struggle with or resist using multiple means of expression—a core UDL principle crucial for student success. Future studies should examine barriers like gaps in training, resistance to change, or lack of institutional support. By identifying these obstacles, targeted strategies can improve faculty preparedness and adoption of UDL in classrooms.

Combining qualitative insights from faculty with quantitative analysis of professional development programs can highlight what works in training educators. These findings will help institutions create more inclusive classrooms, improving outcomes for students with learning disabilities. Imagine the impact—more engaged students, substantial faculty support, and a learning environment where everyone thrives.

Conclusion

As more students with learning disabilities enroll in college, faculty preparedness and the support institutions provide have become increasingly important. Despite some progress, a graduation gap still exists, highlighting the need for meaningful change. This study emphasizes that well-trained faculty are essential for creating inclusive classrooms. Educators can establish environments where all students can thrive by utilizing Universal Design for Learning (UDL), adaptable teaching methods, and fostering positive attitudes.

To help close this gap, institutions must invest in ongoing, research-based professional development. Mandatory training will equip faculty with the tools to support neurodiverse students effectively. By implementing these changes, higher education can truly level the playing field, giving every student an equal opportunity to succeed.

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