Accommodating Students with Learning Disabilities in Post-Secondary Mathematics Courses

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Students who are learning disabled present unique challenges to mathematics educators. To better understand the types of accommodations that mathematics faculty members provide for these students, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 faculty members at 4 institutions of higher education in the Northeast. One learning disabilities service provider was also interviewed at each institution in order to better understand their faculty education programs. During these interviews, faculty participants discussed the assessment and instructional accommodations they have used as well as the accommodations they have refused to use. Faculty members were asked to explain why they use certain strategies but not others. The assessment accommodations that the participants self-report using are time, location, grading, writing, and memory accommodations in addition to the use of alternative assessment techniques.

Among the instructional accommodations mentioned are utilizing writing accommodations, modifying instructional techniques, room accommodations, using verbal, visual, and kinesthetic strategies, and using technology. The reasons given for providing accommodations include the following: easy to provide, provided for all students regardless of learning disabilities, are legally required, make it fair for students who are learning disabled, are well-suited to the instructors’ style, and appear on the faculty notification sheet. Reasons given as to why certain accommodations are not provided for students who are learning disabled include: questioning the usefulness of an accommodation, believing adequate time is already available for project completion, having students request accommodations near the end of the semester, the accommodation not being on the faculty notification sheet, and following the advice received. The accommodations provided did not seem to vary by institution even with the diverse faculty development programs initiated by the service providers at each institution.
This work has implications for service providers, mathematics faculty, and students who are learning disabled. Service providers are given insight into the rationale faculty have for being uncomfortable with certain accommodations while faculty members can learn from their colleagues about accommodations they make for students who are learning disabled. In addition, students who are learning disabled can learn more about the types of attitudes of their postsecondary instructors in providing certain accommodations so that they can adjust their advocacy efforts appropriately. As society becomes increasingly technologically advanced and computer oriented, mathematics becomes more of a prerequisite to the future career success of every student, including students with learning disabilities.