

Ben Kangas -- Nomination for Exemplary Writing in an Academic Genre

Learning Difference Stigma and the Use of Academic Supports: An Exploration of Students in DU's Learning Effectiveness Program

Abstract

Approximately 20% of students enrolled in US colleges and universities have a learning difference (LD). Thus, there are many college students that potentially could benefit from academic support and accommodations. Although higher education institutions are required by law to provide qualified students with reasonable accommodations, and some schools offer additional supports, research shows that many qualified students aren't using these resources. This raises questions about why some students may be foregoing available support. Drawing on studies that show a link between learning difference stigma and students' reluctance to disclose their LDs and advocate for help, this study explores whether neurodiverse students at the University of Denver (DU) are less inclined to use academic supports due to stigma. The study focuses on students who are enrolled in DU's nationally recognized Learning Effectiveness Program (LEP), which is dedicated to supporting neurodiverse students at DU. While anecdotal reports suggest that the LEP is impactful, studies on program utilization and reasons for possible underutilization are lacking. Using interview and survey data, this research project begins to fill this hole. Specifically, it addresses three questions: 1) Are DU students who are enrolled in LEP underutilizing LEP support services and accommodations; 2) If students are underutilizing the program, is LD stigma a contributing factor, and 3) What, if anything, is the LEP doing to try to

reduce LD stigma and to maximize program participation? Results suggest that while LD stigma impacts some students' use of academic supports at DU, many students are taking advantage of LEP services and do not report stigma as a limiting problem. Importantly, the LEP actively works to reduce stigma around LDs and this advocacy work may create a more accepting culture around neurodivergence compared to other institutions. Due to the substantial limitations of my study, additional research is needed to further explore this topic. If future research confirms that learning programs like the LEP can help reduce stigma and increase students' use of support services, which enhance academic outcomes, implementing such programs at other institutions will be crucial.

Introduction & Literature Review

In the US, increasing numbers of students with learning differences are entering college. In fact, recent estimates show that approximately 20% of today's college students have a diagnosed learning disability (Leftler et al., 2023) This means that US colleges and universities have large populations of students that could potentially benefit from academic support and accommodations. Higher education institutions are required by law to provide qualified students with reasonable accommodations and some institutions offer additional forms of academic support to help neurodiverse students succeed. Nonetheless, many qualified students are not utilizing academic supports and accommodations, raising important questions about why these resources are underutilized. Studies show that LD stigma and concerns about how others will perceive them causes some colleges students to forgo academic support (Grimes et al., 2020; Stamp et al., 2014) This project builds on this literature by exploring the influence of LD stigma on students' use of academic support services at DU, which has one of the oldest and most widely recognized learning support programs in the country. Specifically, using a combination of

interview and survey data, the study explores three questions: 1) Are DU students who are enrolled in LEP underutilizing LEP support services and accommodations; 2) If students are underutilizing the program, is LD stigma a contributing factor, and 3) What, if anything, is the LEP doing to try to reduce LD stigma and to maximize program participation?

Stigma, or “the devaluation of an attribute based on negative attitudes, stereotypes, or beliefs,” is a marker of exclusion signaling that an individual is in some way different from others (Haft et al., p. 194). Neurodivergence can be a source of stigma as professors, parents, and peers may see students with LDs as less able or hard-working than students who are neurotypical. Moreover, students with LDs may internalize these beliefs and judge themselves as being less capable than others, which is known as self-stigma. Research shows stigma associated with learning differences increases the risk for low self-esteem, negative psychological outcomes, and poorer learning outcomes (Haft et al.).

Recently, researchers have also begun exploring the relationship between LD stigma and utilization of academic supports and accommodations. A key study in this area was conducted by researchers at Australia’s University of New Castle (Grimes et al.) Using a sample of 111 Australian college students, this mixed methods study explored whether LD stigma impacts institutional disclosure, which is required for students to receive accommodations. The study found that nearly one-third of students with LDs cited stigma as a reason for not disclosing their neurodivergence. Students who had mental health diagnoses, in addition to LDs, were overrepresented in this group. Interview data provided additional detail, showing that students who didn’t disclose anticipated that disclosure would result in discrimination and prejudice. Non-disclosure was viewed as “necessary to protect them from being discredited [by professors and peers] in their learning environments” (Grimes et al., p. 23).

These findings are consistent with Stamp et al's study of self-advocacy among students with ADHD. This academic study was based on interviews with 12 students diagnosed with inattentive type ADHD. The study found that students were reluctant to ask for help or admit their challenges because they felt ashamed of their difficulties, believed their professors would judge them negatively and/or think they were not working hard enough, and believed others trivialized ADHD, seeing it as a "character flaw" and something "that isn't really provable," (Stamp et al, p. 149). These perceptions impacted students willingness to share their diagnosis and advocate for themselves, and in some cases even made students question their diagnosis.

Despite students' negative beliefs about how others are likely to perceive them and their LDs, a recent study using experimental vignettes found that professors and peers do not have a negative view of students with ADHD or SLD, or their use of academic accommodations (Lefler et al.). This suggests that students' concerns about other people's perceptions surrounding LDs may be misguided and creating an unnecessary barrier for students who could benefit from academic supports. Because the vignettes in the study were "not as rich as what occurs in a real college classroom," and they featured a student with a typically white male name, additional "real world" research with diverse students is needed to further explore this topic (Lefler et al, limitations section, para 1).

The University of Denver provides an ideal setting for further investigating LD stigma and students' use of academic support services. In 1982, DU founded the LEP, one of the country's first university fee-for-service programs dedicated to providing personalized guidance and support for neurodiverse learners (Learning Effectiveness Program, n.d.). The LEP has a staff of more than 20 trained professionals and offers services like weekly one-on-one academic counseling, tutoring, executive function coaching, social skills groups, and more. The nationally

recognized program serves over 350 students each year. To date, no academic studies have investigated whether neurodivergent students at DU experience LD stigma that impacts their use of LEP services. A decade's old video of LEP student testimonials, which highlights a student discussing his concerns about negative perceptions from professors, and another student expressing that she didn't take advantage of what the LEP had to offer during her time at DU, suggests that stigma and underutilization of LEP services at DU warrants investigation ("LEP Student Testimonials").

Using qualitative and quantitative data to explore LD stigma and the use of academic supports offered through the LEP, my study contributes to emerging research in this area by providing perspectives from both students and staff affiliated with the LEP, and by studying a learning program that goes well beyond academic accommodations. By studying an institutionally supported learning program, the study considers whether this format of providing services could increase students' use of academic support services, which could benefit them academically and more generally.

Methods

This study uses both survey and interview data. Survey data was collected from students who have LDs and are currently enrolled in the LEP at DU. The survey included demographic, open-ended, and closed questions (See Appendix A). Survey questions were designed to provide information about 1) students use of LEP services and accommodations; 2) prior and current experiences with professors and peers concerning LDs; 3) factors that impact if and how participants use support services and whether stigma plays a role. I sent the survey to [10] students in the LEP, who were personal contacts in my dorm. The response rate was [40%.] All

survey participants were male, first-year students. Because my sample was small, I was able to analyze the data using basic statistics and evaluation in excel.

I also conducted a 20-minute in-person interview with an LEP academic counselor (Mike), who has been working at the LEP for 20 years. The interview included mostly open-ended questions that I developed in advance (see Appendix B), but the interview was conversational and I modified questions based on Mike's responses and my study's objectives. The aim of the interview was to better understand 1) utilization of LEP services (whether students who are enrolled in the LEP take advantage of the offered services); 2) reasons why some students don't take advantage of LEP services; 3) whether LEP students experience LD stigma and whether this impacts utilization; and 4) how the LEP deals with LD stigma and underutilization. I transcribed the interview and coded it for patterns, themes, and relevant quotations, which helped me make connections to my secondary data.

Findings

My survey data highlights several themes. First, use of LEP services and academic accommodations was higher than expected based on prior research. Specifically, when asked to rate the extent to which they took advantage of 1) LEP services and 2) academic accommodations on a scale of 1-7, the average scores were 5.5 and 5.0, respectively. In other words, while usage wasn't fully maximized, students reported that they are using the program and accommodations to a large extent. Second, all participants reported believing that professors and peers at DU were highly understanding and supportive of learning differences and academic supports (average rating was 6 out of 7 for perceived support from professors and from peers). In terms of actual support, 75% of participants reported having experiences in high school, but not at DU, where teachers/professors or peers have been unsupportive of their learning difference or

use of supports/accommodations. One student explained that in high school, “people didn’t understand [neurodiversity] very well but that isn’t the case at DU.” The fourth student did not experience lack of support in either high school or at DU. Finally, 75% reported that they don’t feel stigmatized because of their LD and 100% believe the LEP excels at reducing LD stigma and helping students reach their goals. Support for the program was strong and all participants reported plans to continue using the program in coming years.

Because my survey data was very limited, collecting information from Mike, who has personally worked with 25-26 students per year for the past 20 years, was important. Although Mike’s comments about the LEP were positive overall (i.e. many students take advantage of and benefit from the program), his view was a little less positive than the survey responses.

According to Mike, “there are absolutely students enrolled in the program who opt out or underutilize it. This is hard because a student’s experience of the program and how much they benefit from it is limited to how much they put into it...I’ve got students who, some are here every week or a couple of times a week and some I’m just trying to get to come in at all...”

When asked why he believes LEP services are underutilized by some, Mike explained that there are numerous reasons including structural barriers and lack of buy-in from students who never wanted to participate from the start. Although Mike believes neurodivergence is becoming more accepted overall, he explained, “we still see the impact of stigma...Not only can stigma cause students enrolled in the program not to use it, but it also causes some students not to enroll in the program at all...They may worry about other’s perceptions or they may not yet be at a comfort level themselves with their learning difference so the idea of affiliating with a learning support program may not feel right to them.” According to Mike, a student’s background can be related to stigma: “You may have come from a school that was really open

and accepting of neurodivergence and support, but there are students who aren't coming from an accepting school or may they have had negative experiences with teachers or peers surrounding their LDs. There are also some students who just recently found out that they have a learning difference and they are still grappling with that and trying to understand it." Students in the later 2 groups are "often worried about what other people think."

Mike reported that LEP is very invested in trying to reduce stigma and increase students' use of LEP services in order to help them succeed at DU. "We really try with faculty and staff to set an example and inform folks about students who learn differently. Education is an important part of reducing stigma so we put out a lot of information and hold trainings and workshops. We are trying to create a culture of acceptance around neurodiversity on our campus...I find that generally, people on campus are open to learning about this and once they have an understanding they're often times more than willing to be supportive."

Mike explained that the LEP also works on self-stigma, seeking to modify student's negative beliefs about themselves. Here, Mike believes empathy, personal relationships, and education are key: "Written materials and information can be helpful but personally connecting with students goes a long way. Through my relationship with students, I try to help them understand their learning difference and really encourage them to take risks and use supports they aren't sure about." Mike emphasized the need to "meet students where they are." Sometimes he talks through past experiences or beliefs students have about themselves in the context of understanding why they may be reluctant to seek help or use supports. Ultimately, the LEP tries to "help students overcome their doubts by encouraging them understand their learning needs and how the services can help them get where they want to be."

Conclusion, Limitations & Future Directions

The results of this study suggest that LD stigma is not irrelevant at DU, and that some students underutilize LEP services as a result of LD stigma. For these students, it is important to continue working to decrease stigma so that they can benefit from available services. This requires efforts to reduce both stigma from others and self-stigma as we know some students with LDs believe others judge them negatively, even when this isn't the case. At the same time, my research also shows that to a higher degree than expected, LEP students are not experiencing LD stigma, feel supported by DU professors and peers, and are using and benefitting from the program. Drawing conclusions about these findings must be done cautiously because my sample was extremely small and possibly biased (participants were recruited because they were in my personal network and only 40% completed the survey, which may have caused selection bias.) Still, the results suggest that while LD stigma may impact some student's use of academic support at DU, having a support program that offers one-on-one guidance and works to create a culture of acceptance on campus may help to reduce stigma and increase participation rates. Future studies are needed to further explore the impact of specific learning support programs on LD stigma and use of academic supports. With more time, I would like to further investigate this topic at DU and to compare schools like DU to institutions that don't have devoted learning support programs. Because learning supports can improve student's academic outcomes, it is critical to understand if learning programs like the LEP can reduce LD stigma and increase students' use of academic services. If that is the case, advocating for learning programs at other institutions will be critical. In the meantime, it appears that LEP is having a positive impact and as one student remarked it "should keep doing what it is doing because it is really helpful."

Appendix A: Survey Questions

1. What learning differences qualify you for the LEP? (Check all that apply)
 - ADHD
 - Dyslexia
 - Specific LEarning DIorder
 - Autism Spectrum Disorder
 - Other

2. Did you personally want to enroll in the LEP or were you influenced by others? (i.e. parents, high school teachers/counselors).
 - I thought it was a good idea to enroll/I personally believed participation would be helpful
 - I was influenced by others/others wanted me to enroll
 - I wanted to enroll AND others thought it was a good idea

3. Did the existence of the LEP influence your decision to attend DU?
 - Yes
 - No

4. What LEP services have you used this year? (Check all that apply)
 - Meets with an academic counselor
 - Tutoring
 - Executive function coaching
 - Social skills groups
 - Social events
 - Volunteering
 - Accommodations (DSP not LEP)
 - Other

5. To what extent have you taken advantage of what the LEP had to offer? (scale 1-7)

6. To what extent have you taken advantage of accommodations approved by DSP? (scale 1-7)

7. If you didn't take full advantage of your accommodations and the LEP services, please indicate why. (Check all that apply)
 - Didn't think they would help
 - Too much effort/too difficult to access these supports
 - Didn't know about the services
 - Embarrassed or worried about how others (professors/peers) would perceive this
 - Don't want to be associated with a learning difference group
 - Other

8. To what extent do you think professors at DU understand and support learning differences and the use of accommodations? (scale 1-7)

9. To what extent do you think your peers at DU understand and support learning differences and the use of accommodations? (scale 1-7)

10. If you used academic support or accommodations in high school was this a positive or negative experience? Why?

11. Have you had experiences at DU or in high school where teachers/professors or peers have been unsupportive of your learning difference or your use of accommodations?
 - Yes at DU but not in high school
 - Yes in high school but not at DU
 - Yes in both high school and DU
 - No (not at SU or high school)

12. If you feel embarrassed or stigmatized by your learning difference, where do you think this stems from? (check all that apply)
 - My family
 - Professors/teachers
 - Peers/friends
 - Society
 - Myself (i.e. - negative internal beliefs about yourself or your capabilities)
 - Other
 - I don't feel this way

13. What else could the LEP do to make learning differences and related supports better understood and accepted on campus?

14. Are you planning to use the LEP/accommodations to a greater, lesser, or the same extent next year compared to this year?
 - Plan to use the LEP/accommodations more next year
 - Plan to use the LEP/accommodations less next year
 - Plan to use the LEP/accommodations same amount next year

15. Why do you plan to use the LEP/accommodations more /less/the same next year?

Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. How long have you worked at the LEP?

2. How many students do you (personally) support through the LEP each year?

3. What do you feel are some of the strengths/weaknesses of the program?

4. Based on your experience, is program usage an issue? That is, are there students in the program who do use the program offerings?

5. What parts of the program are used most?

6. What parts that are the most underutilized?

7. Why do you think some students don't take advantage of what the program has to offer?

8. Do you think stigma around learning differences plays any role? (Explain)

9. Do students ever share concerns about the stigma around learning differences or worries about how others (including professors, peers) see them? (Explain)

10. Do you advise and help students who don't feel supported by their professors (in terms of their accommodations or learning needs)?

11. As an LEP staff member, do you know if there are students on campus with learning differences who didn't apply to or enroll in the LEP?

If so, do you know why they chose not to be part of the LEP?

12. What, if anything do you do to try to negate the stigma around learning differences, with the students you work with and on campus more generally?

13. What does the LEP, as an organization do, to 1) reduce LD stigma and 2) increase use of the program for students who could benefit

14. What would you like to see done in the future to get more kids fully engaged and utilizing the program?

Annotated Bibliography

Grimes, S., Southgate, E., Scevak, J. & Buchanan, R. (2020, Spring). University student

experiences of disability and the influence of stigma on institutional non-disclosure and learning. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 33, 1, 23-37. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1273678.pdf>

Using a sample of 111 Australian college students, this research study explores whether the stigma associated with learning differences impacts institutional disclosure. The researchers are Professors of Education at Australia's University of New Castle who are interested in neurodiversity and equity in education, making them highly qualified to investigate this topic. The authors explain that institutional disclosure is important because without it, students cannot take advantages of accommodations or other forms of student support. They cite previous work showing that significant numbers of students who would qualify for supports do not disclose to their institution because they lack knowledge about the process or make a conscious decision not to disclose. Building on

this research, Grimes et al used quantitative and qualitative analysis and found that students with learning differences anticipated discrimination and prejudice if they were to disclose their neurodiversity. This was especially true of students who also have mental health diagnoses. Non-disclosure was deemed necessary to protect them from being discredited by professors, staff, and peers in their learning environments. This research has important implications for my study of the Learning Effectiveness Program at DU. While the LEP offers many components that could be very helpful for students, the program cannot make a difference if students don't disclose their learning differences, seek access to the program, and utilize the offerings. Thus, the research highlights the importance of understanding stigma and ways to help increase the number of students who are disclosing and using program offerings.

Haft, S. L., Greiner de Magalhaes, C., and Hoeft, F. (2022). A systemic review of the consequences of stigma and stereotype threat for individuals with specific learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 56, 3, 193-209. <https://doi-org.du.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/00222194221087383>.

This study, conducted by professors of psychology and psychiatry at US universities, summarizes existing research on stigma and stereotype threat associated with specific learning differences (SLD) and how they impact psychological and academic outcomes. The analysis is based on 16 studies and shows that SDL-related stigma and stereotype threat are related to worse psychological and academic outcomes. The authors conclude that interventions and support for students are needed to address these negative outcomes. The study is relevant for my research mainly because it provides background information

and definitions on stigma, including self-stigma, in the context of LDs, and highlights previous research showing a variety of ways that stigma can negatively impact college students who are diverse learners, including psychologically and academically. It does not directly address stigma's impact on use of academic supports or accommodations.

Lefler, E. K., Alacha, H. F., Weed, B. M., Reeble, C. J., & Garner, A. M. (2023). Professor and peer perceptions of requests for academic accommodations in college: An examination of ADHD and specific learning disorder. *Psychology Reports*, 1-28. <https://doi-org.du.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/00332941231156821>.

Lefler et al's study explores how professors and peers view requests by students with ADHD and/or Specific Learning Disorder to use academic accommodations in college. The study was conducted by researchers in the Department of Psychology at the University of Northern Iowa. The researchers highlight the importance of their study by providing data on the large and increasing numbers of students with learning differences who are now attending college. Previous research has shown that these students often choose not to disclose their disability or forgo support or accommodations. For example, one study showed that only 17% of students with SLD used academic accommodations. Moreover, existing research reveals that non-disclose often stems from students' perceptions that others will think less of them or that others will not take their disability seriously. Lefler et al. investigate whether these perceptions are true. That is, they explore if professors and peers have a negative view of students with ADHD or SLD and their use of academic accommodations. The researchers hypothesize that professors and peers will have more negative impressions of students needing accommodations because of ADHD and SLD compared to 3 other reasons (depression, a visual impairment, or

college athletics.) Using a series of vignettes, the researchers ran experiments that showed professors and peers do not have negative perceptions of college students who request academic accommodations. However, contrary to their hypothesis, basketball players who asked for accommodations received the most negative ratings. This study is important for my research because it suggests that students' concerns about how others perceive their request for support may be misguided. This raises questions about how to educate students about potentially inaccurate perceptions so that they feel more comfortable accessing academic support in college. The authors also acknowledge that stigma is not the only reason that students don't utilize support. There are also structural barriers that making getting and utilizing support difficult, and these also warrant attention. This study has several important limitations. First, it focuses specifically on accommodations so it is difficult to know if the results generalize to other types of academic support or a learning program like DU's LEP. Moreover, the vignettes were simple and "not as rich as what occurs in a real college classroom," and they featured a student with a typically white male name. Future research that looks at students with different demographics, and that takes place in the "real world" will be useful. Finally, the sample of professors was relatively small and selection bias may have been a problem as professors with more positive views of learning differences and academic accommodations maybe have been more likely to complete the survey. Nonetheless, the survey points to the fact that student perceptions about academic support may be inaccurate. Additional research is needed to explore this further.

Stamp, L., Banerjee, M., and Brown, F. C. (2014). Self-advocacy and perceptions of college readiness among students with ADHD. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and*

Disability, 27, 2, 139-160. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1040529.pdf>.

This study was conducted by neuroscience and education researchers who specialize in neurodiversity at Landmark College and Yale University. The study is based on interviews with 12 students diagnosed with inattentive type ADHD. The students were unable to access appropriate support services and/or adjust to the demands of college at traditional postsecondary institutions, and subsequently transferred to a college program designed specifically for students with specific learning differences or ADHD. The authors provide background information about the increasing numbers of students with learning differences who are attending college, which makes their work timely and important. They define self-advocacy, which is the focus of their study, as “an individual's ability to communicate, convey, negotiate or assert his or her own interests, desires, needs, and rights.” Using semi-structured interview data, the study explores three primary issues: 1) the impact of ADHD on students' experiences interacting with others and advocating for themselves in educational settings; 2) how they believe other people in society view ADHD; and 3) interventions that had helped or hurt their efforts to adjust to college and successfully advocate for themselves. The study found that students were reluctant to ask for help or admit their challenges for several reasons. For one, some students felt ashamed and/or blamed themselves for their difficulties. Additionally, some said they felt their professors would judge them negatively and/or think they were lazy and not working hard enough. Students also reported that they believed others trivialized ADHD and didn't see it as a real disorder requiring support or accommodations. Instead, they believed others saw it as a “character flaw” and not something serious, like dyslexia or ASD. These perceptions impacted students' willingness to share their diagnosis and

advocate for themselves, and in some cases even made students question their own diagnosis. This study is relevant to my research as it focuses on issues of shame, stigma, disclosure, and self-advocacy among students with ADHD and suggests that negative beliefs about ADHD impacts students' willingness to disclose their learning differences. Because the study was limited to students with inattentive type ADHD, the results may not generalize to other forms of ADHD or other learning differences, which highlights the need for research with a broader sample. The sample was also unique because students had previously transferred to a special school based on challenges at their first college. It would be interesting to conduct a similar study with a sample of first-time college students and to explore how negative beliefs about LDs and disclosure impact not only use of support but college outcomes more generally.

University of Denver (2011, July 21). *LEP Student Testimonials* [Video]. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iGzcQlrvbKQ>.

This video, which was produced by the University and Denver, includes statements from 6 DU students, who were enrolled in the LEP at the time the video was made. The students share their perspectives on the program and how it benefited them. Students report that the LEP increased their confidence and made them more successful at DU. The video is relevant to my project because it highlights issues of stigma, worry, and program usage. For example, one student discussed worrying about how to talk to his professors about his learning differences and whether his professors would be supportive of his accommodations. Additionally, another student advised viewers to “take advantage of everything that is offered... These things make a big difference but I didn't figure that out until way later in my college career... looking back, I wish I had taken more

advantage of the program.” Because the video was made by DU, it is important to consider potential bias. For example, to serve its marketing purposes, DU likely chose students who were happy with the program and benefited from it. At the same time, students’ worries about professor perceptions or their realization that they underutilized the program seem likely to be authentic as there is no obvious reason why DU would want to present these particular experiences, which are also consistent with existing research. Finally, the video is 14 years old so things may have changed since the video was made.