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Some learning problems aren't biologically based, and college faculty are seeing more abuses of the diagnosis - a fraudulent academic crutch sought by students who have...



Phantom Disabilities

By HERBERT ROTFELD
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Diagnosis of a learning disability helps both student and teacher understand how to overcome an education problem. As with any other type of classroom disability, such as a vision impairment or hearing loss, knowing the learning disability guides the teacher in helping a student acquire an education.

Yet in the competitive environment of modern higher education with students fighting for course credit and grades, the diagnosis is sometimes a crutch, an excuse and a basis for claiming credit for work not done.

In some contexts, a diagnosis is seen as a competitive advantage, encouraging fakery and fraud.

Unfortunately, many college faculty see more abuse than use of the "disability" label, so hearing that another student in the class has a problem might evoke more anger than concern from the teacher.

For example, in Naperville, Ill., high school swimming star Chad Ganden found himself falling short of the National Collegiate Athletic Association policy for academic eligibility. By those rules, he could not compete during his first year of college.

His highly publicized response has been to assert that the rules should not apply to him because he is learning disabled.

At least in part, Chad is caught up in some problems of a changing system of requirements. But in other ways, he seems to be claiming credit for work he did not do, using his learning disability as an excuse to say the rules should not apply to him.

Every college admission decision reviews students' high school grades plus scores on standardized tests.

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Phantom

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the SAT or ACT. Over the years, many faculty members at almost every university across the country would point to athletes for whom the academic standards were irrelevant, and the NCAA's Proposition 48 attempted to put academic emphasis into college athletics.

Under Proposition 48, the association reviews the test scores and high school grades in a list of "core" academic courses, compiling an initial eligibility index for the graduating high school seniors.

Recruiting different

Students who fail to qualify under the index can't get financial aid or practice with a team during their first year of college. A student who partially qualifies can get financial aid and work out, but he can't compete during the freshman year.

While some schools recruit ineligible students, encouraging them to attend and pay their own way the first year, SEC rules dictate that schools such as Auburn can't recruit any prospective athletes unless they are eligible under NCAA guidelines.

Chad's parents were angry that he might not be allowed to compete his first year in college because of academic problems. Aided by an attorney with an intense publicity campaign, their fight with the NCAA has been very public. And, in part, he is caught by changes in Proposition 48 that had required incoming freshmen to have a 2.0 grade-point average in at least 13 core courses and score at least 17 on the ACT. In August, the minimum GPA jumps to 2.5, unless the student's ACT score is higher than 17. His 2.1 grade average is too low for a student with a 17, and there is a problem with a shortage of core courses that will not go away even if he

scores higher when he retakes the ACT.

Chad took some standard courses in high school, but some others were specifically for the learning disabled. A class tailored for the learning disabled counts as one of the NCAA's 13 core courses only if the high school principal certifies the content is the same as the regular class on the subject. Because learning disabled classes are taught at a slower rate, the principals often say, in all honesty, "No, the classes are not the same." The people closest to Chad's high school education could have certified that his courses met the core requirements for his education background, yet they did not do so.

And therein lies the problem with Chad's case against the NCAA. In response to the legal complaints and publicity generated by the Ganden family, the Justice Department investigated the NCAA for possibilities that Proposition 48 violated the Americans with Disabilities Act by discriminating against people with learning disabilities, eventually writing to the NCAA that the criteria "will have the effect of excluding students with disabilities from college athletics."

Means more work

The more basic issue is whether Chad (or any other learning-disabled student) is capable of doing both college course work and competitive swimming at the same time.

No disability is meant to be a basis for lowering academic standards or giving a student less work for the same credit. In fact, it often means there must be more work for the student to do what others in the class might complete with ease. The reading assignments take more time and term papers are more difficult to write. In Chad's publicity campaign, the frequently heard refrain has been that the rules should not apply to him because of his disability, and not that he can do the work as a col-

lege student.

Illinois state gymnastics champion Michelle Huston from Naperville High School possesses a personal interest in Chad's case. Her disability, according to news reports, "limits her long-term memory," which raises doubts as to whether she carries enough background from high school to do college work.

No faculty member disagrees with the basic intent of Proposition 48: A high school graduate with weak precollege credentials must first learn to be a student before becoming a student-athlete. This NCAA rule attempts to place academics before athletics for students who need the first year of breathing space.

As a former varsity swimmer at the University of Illinois, I readily understand how a loss of competition for a year could be destructive to an athletic career. A loss of training and conditioning could not be regained; a break from competition could mean losing a competitive edge. Yet early entry into athletics prevents many young men and women from developing the basic academic skills needed to succeed in higher education. And, first and foremost, colleges are to provide an education. The desire of fans notwithstanding, education is not to be a secondary activity to athletics.

Some can't make it

In general, there are three basic factors in a student's academic success in higher education: innate ability, the basic tools or background to handle the material and motivation. Sometimes weaknesses or limitations in one area can be compensated for by extra output from the other two.

Some people, however, just can't handle higher education. A one-legged person can't be an Olympic runner. My wife, no matter how motivated, could not play major league baseball.

It is totally acceptable to give learning disabled people help so they can learn the material. It may take an extra effort, but it is



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no different from a lecturer using a special microphone that directly feeds the near-deaf person's hearing aid or finding a textbook reader for a blind student. However, it is another matter completely to assert that because a person is learning or otherwise disabled, he should get credit for what he did not do.

What a relief

To the NCAA's credit, its proposed response to the Justice Department is *not* to waive Proposition 48 for learning disabled students. Instead, its Academic Requirements Committee recommends adding other qualitative considerations to assess whether

the student could complete college work. I am relieved. Many college faculty feared that dropping rules would result in many more football and basketball players with a diagnosis in hand. As an athletic department counselor once told me, many of her charges have the "disability" of being academically lazy.

The real problem

Therein lies the problem of learning disabilities. They are often not biologically based, and there does not exist a telepathic test to discern their existence. Students see it as an advantage, an edge, and faculty are starting to see students they personally

know are not disabled but are faking it to get a diagnosis to get a competitive edge "in case they need it."

No one wants to prevent a disabled person of any kind from acquiring an academic experience.

But the label should not be the basis for an advantage over other students. Course credit is a statement of learning, requiring the ability to read and write and express ideas.

In the end, the primary issue is whether the student is capable of learning and whether, after graduation, he has acquired an education.