Engaging University Students with Learning Disabilities in Targeting Individual and Institutional Level Change
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Introduction

Students with learning disabilities (LD) comprise between 46 to 61% of students who have a disability in postsecondary education, making LD the most widely diagnosed disability. Frequently misunderstood and overlooked by faculty and health practitioners, LD often has a significant negative impact for college students, both in their academic work and in social encounters. College satisfaction and academic success elude most of them; only 15% of college students with LD graduate with an academic degree, compared to 56% of those without disability.

Rationale or Purpose

We apply principles of Community Engaged Research (CEnR) to address participants’ personal and environmental concerns for the purpose of enabling individual action and institutional change. Participants’ personal knowledge, skills and surrounding environmental factors inform resultant intervention and activities targeting institutional level change.

Methods

Participants: Fifteen academically progressive undergraduates, 18-26 years (male = 8) with learning (LD) and/or attention disorders (ADD).

Design & Setting: Action-oriented CenR approach is used to place students LD and/or ADD at the center of the research while also providing a mechanism to voice and co-create strategies to address their concerns. Participants were treated as a cohort where they met monthly as a group and individually with a graduate student mentor twice monthly. On-campus group meetings consisted of trainings followed by discussion of related experiences and potential strategies addressing issues identified.

Data & Analysis: Preliminary qualitative analysis of first year discussions from group meetings (n=8) were reviewed and coded in order to determine recurring themes and inform facilitation of project activities (e.g. educational materials for campus dissemination). All group discussions were audio-recorded & transcribed.

Results

Participants desire to possess the skills and confidence to discuss their LD with their peers, professors and significant people in their lives. While many chose to publicly advocate (e.g. be video-recorded speaking about LD), they did express concerns about inadvertently becoming the “face” of LD on campus. Participants were motivated to seek-out and develop socially relevant (e.g. social media) mechanisms for advocacy.

Discussion

Principles of Community Engaged Research are useful in discovering and addressing personal and environmental level concerns of university students with LD/ADD for the purpose of facilitating individual action and targeting institutional changes most important to participants. Action-oriented Community Engaged Research is important for occupational therapy (OT) research because it strives to understand, develop and implement interventions most salient to the participants within real-life contexts of participants’ lives, which is consistent with OT theory and practice.

Conclusion

Postsecondary students with LD can be taught skills that can be used to create educational and social media materials for targeting cultural change and institutional level dialogue. Exploratory analysis limits generalizability.

Key Messages to be Conveyed

Who should educational efforts about LD target?
• Faculty
• Incoming Students to University
• Children / Elementary School Teachers

There can be positive aspects to having an LD:
• You learn techniques for getting through daily life – techniques that not everyone has.
• Can be more creative than others - able to think outside the box.

People with LD may be slower to process information, but are not “stupid”:
• Slow does NOT equal stupid, fast does NOT equal smart.
• People with LD may have a different way of learning, but are capable of learning information and succeeding in school

LD impacts all aspects of life:
• “I have it everywhere I go!”
• “Some people think only teachers need to know about LD.”
• “LD impacts everything – studying, driving, everything.”

Ideas for improving LD coping at University:
• Online Support Group / Community
• Improved Orientation for LD Students (incoming freshmen)

References


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