

# **GUIDELINES FOR DOCUMENTATION OF A SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITY AT THE POSTSECONDARY LEVEL**

## **NJ Association on Higher Education and Disability and NJ Special Needs Regional Centers for Students with Learning Disabilities**

Students with Learning Disabilities who are seeking support services from NJ colleges and universities on the basis of a diagnosed specific learning disability are required to submit documentation to verify eligibility under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Protection under civil rights statutes is based upon documentation of a disability that currently substantially limits some major life activity, which may include learning.

The following guidelines are provided in the interest of assuring that documentation is appropriate to verify eligibility and support requests for reasonable accommodations, academic adjustments, and/or auxiliary aids at the postsecondary level.

The Directors of the NJ Special Needs Regional Centers for Students with Learning Disabilities are available to consult with diagnosticians regarding further explanation of any of these guidelines.

### **Documentation Guidelines of a Specific Learning Disability**

#### *I. Qualifications of the Evaluator*

Professionals conducting assessments, rendering diagnoses of specific learning disabilities, and making recommendations for appropriate accommodations must be qualified to do so. Trained and certified and/or licensed psychologists, learning disabilities specialists (LDT-C's), and educational therapists are typically involved in the process of assessment. Experience in working with an adolescent or adult population is preferred. It is not considered appropriate for professionals to evaluate members of their families.

#### *II. Documentation*

**A.** Testing needs to be comprehensive. It is not acceptable to administer only one test for the purpose of diagnosis. Best practice suggests that the complete battery of every instrument to be used. Minimally, domains to be addressed should include (but are not limited to):

**1. Aptitude:** The Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale-III (WAIS-III) is the preferred instrument. The Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery-Revised: Tests of Cognitive Ability or the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale: Fourth Edition are also acceptable.

Note: The Slosson Intelligence Test and the Kaufman Brief Intelligence Test are not appropriate.

**2. Achievement:** Current levels of functioning in reading, mathematics, and written language are required. Acceptable instruments include the Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery-Revised: Tests of Achievement or the Wechsler Individual Achievement Test (WIAT) for age appropriate students.

Note: The Wide Range Achievement Test is **NOT** a comprehensive measure of achievement.

**3. Information Processing:** Specific areas of information processing (e.g., short- and long-term memory; sequential memory; auditory and visual perception/processing; processing speed) should be assessed. Information from subtests on the WAIS-III or the Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Cognitive Ability as well as other instruments relevant to the presenting learning problem(s) may be used to address these areas.

This is not intended to be an exhaustive list or to restrict assessment in other pertinent and helpful areas, such as vocational interests and aptitudes.

**B.** Testing should be **current**. Because the provision of all reasonable accommodations and services is based upon assessment of the current impact of the student's disabilities on his/her academic performance at the postsecondary level, it is in a student's best interest to provide recent and appropriate documentation.

In some instances, especially in settings with significant numbers of non-traditional students, documentation may be inadequate in scope or content. It may not address the student's current level of functioning or need for accommodations because observed changes may have occurred in the student's performance since the previous assessment was conducted. In such cases, an update will be necessary. Since the purpose of the update is to determine the student's current need for accommodations at the postsecondary level, the update, conducted by a qualified professional, should include a rationale for ongoing services and accommodations.

### **III. Substantiation of the Learning Disability**

**A.** Documentation should validate the need for services based on the individual's current level of functioning in a postsecondary educational setting. A comprehensive assessment battery and the resulting diagnostic report should include background information; a diagnostic interview; assessment of aptitude, academic achievement, and information processing; and a diagnosis.

**B.** There must be **clear and specific** evidence and identification of a learning disability. Individual "learning styles" and "learning differences" in and of themselves do **not** constitute a learning disability. The diagnostician is expected to use direct language in the diagnosis and documentation of a learning disability, avoiding the use of terms such as

"suggests" or "is indicative of."

If the data indicates that a learning disability is not present, the evaluator should state that conclusion in the report.

**C.** A well-written **clinical diagnostic summary** based on the comprehensive evaluation process as defined is a necessary component of the report. The clinical summary should include:

1. a written summary of or background information about the student's educational, medical, and family histories that relate to the learning disability;
2. demonstration that the evaluator has ruled out alternative explanations for academic problems as a result of poor education, poor motivation and/or study skills, emotional problems, attention problems, and cultural or language differences;
3. indication of how patterns in the student's cognitive ability, achievement, and information processing reflect the presence of a learning disability;
4. indication of the substantial limitation to learning or other major life activity presented by the learning disability and the degree to which it affects the individual at the postsecondary level in the learning context for which the accommodations are being requested;
5. indication as to why specific accommodations are needed and how the effects of the specific disability are accommodated; and
6. an addendum of scores.

The report should be printed on letterhead, signed, and dated; the signature of the evaluator should include his or her credentials.

#### **IV. Recommendation for Accommodations**

**A.** The diagnostic report should include specific recommendations for accommodations as well as explanation as to why each accommodation is recommended.

**B.** A description of any accommodation and/or auxiliary aid that has been used at the secondary or postsecondary level should be discussed. Include information about the specific conditions under which the accommodation was used (e.g., standardized testing, final exams) and whether or not it benefited the student. If no accommodations have been previously provided, a detailed explanation as to why none has been used and the rationale for the student's currently needing accommodation(s) should be provided.

**C.** Accommodation needs can change over time, and are not always identified through the initial diagnostic process. Conversely, a prior history of accommodation **does not, in**

**and of itself**, warrant the provision of a similar accommodation at the postsecondary level.

*REFERENCES*

Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD). (1997, July).  
*Guidelines for documentation of a learning disability in adolescents and adults.*  
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