

Learning Disabilities:

A Case Study Of A Grinnell College Student

by Judy Hunter

What do dyslexics, agnostics, and insomniacs have in common?
All three stay up all night contemplating the existence of dog.

Humor is one way students with learning disabilities cope. But despite such coping mechanisms, they often find the process of getting along at Grinnell difficult.

One first-year student with a learning disability finds people at Grinnell to be "sympathetic but ignorant." Each semester, she must approach her teachers and educate each one separately about what limitations she faces and what she needs. Like some other learning-disabled students, she plans to take a reduced load of courses each semester and graduate in five years. However, unlike other selective colleges, Grinnell does not pro-rate tuition to allow her to do this; she will end up paying full tuition for each year she is here.

She uses a few tools to help her get by. She tries to get her books on tape; however, she cannot just sit and listen to them; she must read along as the tape plays in order to process the information. Sometimes the tape goes too quickly and she has to back it up and play it over. She can't use a regular dictionary because she has difficulty with sequencing; instead, she uses an electronic spell checker which gives her some choices among various correctly spelled words when she enters her spelling of a word.

Although such external aids help some, most of her coping depends on her spending more time with her studies. Having learned to budget her time and to work extremely hard, she studies more for her three courses than most others do for four. Recently she spent 24 hours reading a book that many other students read in three. And before she attempts to write a paper, she tries to clear a whole day or at least a whole expanse of hours. Last semester, during which she had to write 12 papers, she once took 8 hours to write one paragraph: she rewrote several times before she could get the organization right; she spent time making sure the writing said what she meant; she checked carefully to make sure she hadn't mixed up any words (she sometimes mistakes words like allowed for aloud or underlaying for underlying).

It is easy to see why, like most other learning-disabled students, she experiences constant, inescapable frustration. Still, by dint of constant hard work, she earned an A and 2 B's last semester, so her struggle may not be evident to her professors.

What would she like most to change about the way Grinnell treats learning-disabled students? She would like to see more recognition of the problems they face. Specifically, she would like her professors to make allowances for the different way she learns. She would like to get a group together for support and lobbying, even though she knows that many learning-disabled students

do not want to be identified publicly. In fact, she herself does not like to be identified as "a learning-disabled student."

In general, she would like to see Grinnell become more accepting of learning-disabled students. She believes that these students should not have to be embarrassed about their disability, but she herself is embarrassed about her own.

In the next issue of Writing Forum, we will examine the way Grinnell and other selective colleges deal with learning disabled students.