EVALUATING THE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES PROGRAM: SOME CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

Shannon Fenton
Jason Newberry
Kelly McManus
Karen Korabik
Mary Ann Evans
Department of Psychology, University of Guelph
Guelph, Ontario

Abstract: Recent research indicates that, with appropriate instruction, accommodation, and support, students with learning disabilities can successfully meet the academic and social challenges of university. In 1998, the Learning Opportunities Program was launched at the University of Guelph to promote the academic and workplace success and social-emotional adjustment of students with learning disabilities. This multi-faceted program, funded by the Learning Opportunities Task Force of the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, includes a comprehensive and thorough evaluation component. This article describes the program and presents the details of the planned evaluation. Also included is a discussion of some of the challenges faced by the evaluation team during the initial phase of the program.

According to Scott (1997), students with learning disabilities are the fastest growing disability group on college and university campuses. For these students, post-secondary education poses a number of problems that were not present in high school. The minimized student-teacher contact, the loss of a support network of family and friends for students who leave home, the increase in unstructured time, and the need to self-advocate all combine to create new challenges. The University of Guelph has a long-standing record of providing excellent services and support to students with learning disabilities. In 1998, the university began a comprehensive program designed to promote enhanced academic and workplace success and social-emotional adjustment among students with learning disabilities. This article describes the Learning Opportunities Program (LOP) and its planned evaluation. It also discusses some of the challenges faced by the evaluation team in both the planning and implementation phases.

THE CHALLENGE OF UNIVERSITY FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

Difficulties in academic skills and information processing create particular challenges for university students with learning disabilities (LD). For example, these students may have difficulty attending lectures and taking notes, writing exams within time constraints, submitting written assignments free of grammar mistakes, handling reading loads, and performing various other tasks that are key factors for success at university.

At the University of Guelph, students with learning disabilities can access academic accommodations through the Centre for Students with Disabilities (CSD), founded in 1990. The experience of the CSD has been that students with learning disabilities who are successful not only receive suitable accommodations and support, but they develop appropriate compensatory strategies, have a solid understanding of their learning disability, and are able to effectively advocate their needs with faculty.

THE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES PROGRAM

The LOP is a five-year pilot project, developed and implemented at the University of Guelph and funded by the Learning Opportuni-
ties Task Force (LOTF) of the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, which is responsible for colleges and universities. The LOP is based on a model of supported integration, a process of supporting students in the most enabling environment possible by addressing their individual strengths and weaknesses. This program of supported transition, structural and social support, and understanding of the students’ unique strengths and weaknesses seeks to enable students with learning disabilities to begin to develop the confidence, self-advocacy skills, and academic achievement needed to become successful university students. The multiple components of LOP are organized around outreach to students with learning disabilities, support in the transition to university, direct teaching of compensatory skills and strategies, ongoing support, work preparation, and support to staff and faculty.

While the first cohort of students to receive the various LOP services did not enter university until September 1999, the LOP developed and implemented the initial stages of a comprehensive evaluation program in September 1998. The mandate of the evaluation is to document the implementation of the program and its impact on participants, focusing on the main areas of student outcomes targeted by the LOP as its program goals.

The Program Logic Model

According to Rutman (1980), developing a logic model allows the evaluators to identify poorly developed program components and goals, as well as gaps in the chain of causal linkages. This exercise also makes potentially conflicting goals evident. In order to explain how all of the program components contribute to the goals of LOP, and the manner in which they do so, a program logic model was developed (see Figure 1). In a flow model format, linkages were drawn between each of the program components and various levels of goals. Desired outcomes were divided into intermediate and ultimate goals.

As identified in the program logic model, the ultimate goals of LOP are: 1) to enhance participants’ academic success and retention, 1a) to enhance participants’ social/emotional functioning, 1b) to enhance participants’ academic functioning and adjustment, and 2) to enhance participants’ work success. Each of the components of the program is designed to contribute to the achievement of at least one of these ultimate goals.
Figure 1: Learning Opportunities Program Logic Model

- Enhance social/emotional functioning UI
- Help nourish environments in which LD students can compete fairly
- Enhance sense of belongingness & normalcy & decrease stigma
- Help remove systemic barriers to successful participation
- Provide social support that extends outside classroom
- Promote integration with mainstream student population
- Improve understanding & acceptance of LD
- Enhance ability to evaluate situations & determine appropriate accommodations
- Decrease anxiety
- Strengthen development & transfer of strategies to compensate for LD
- Increase self-esteem & self-efficacy
- Enhance academic functioning & adjustment U1b
- Prepare to function in workplace
- Enhance workplace skills
- Improve knowledge of study skills & strategies
- Promote awareness & utilization of campus resources & services
- LD course, focus groups, ILPs
- START, Orientation
- LD course, ILPs, SLG
- CSD, TSS, Work

Note: Goals with double borders have been identified as particularly important to the success of LOP
In addition, logic models for each of the program components clarified the structures of the components and defined their specific immediate goals. These logic models indicated the particular activities designated to achieve each of the specified goals and how these goals relate to the more long-term goals identified in the overall logic model.

Evaluation

The evaluation of LOP’s impact adopts a recurrent institutional cycle design, which is a combination of cross-sectional and longitudinal designs. The design essentially involves periodically assessing students with learning disabilities who are receiving existing services through the CSD, students who will be receiving the enhanced supports and services of the LOP, and non-LD students serving as matched controls.

Specifically, the evaluation design involves comparing students with and without learning disabilities to the LOP cohort in order to assess the impact of the LOP program. Data collection began during the fall semester of 1998 in order to establish baseline levels of the areas of students’ academic and personal lives targeted by the LOP. Groups of students with learning disabilities who were currently enrolled at the University of Guelph and had connected with the CSD in order to receive accommodations were recruited to participate in the evaluation component of the LOP. Both students with learning disabilities who had completed at least one year of university by fall 1998 and students with learning disabilities who had entered university in fall 1998 were included in the design as “bargain alternative” non-equivalent controls for the cohort of LOP participants who entered university in fall 1999.

Data will be collected throughout the program on all relevant variables from a sample of non-LD-identified students from the general university population. These non-LD-identified controls will be matched to the LOP and non-LOP learning disabled groups on the basis of age, sex, degree, program, specialization, semester, and grade 13 average. The non-LD students will serve as an additional comparison group, against whom the outcomes of the LOP participants can be compared.

The evaluation design incorporates measures to directly assess and document the achievement of the goals identified in the logic model.
The program logic models of the individual LOP components and the overall program logic model have identified six goals as particularly important to the success of the program. These are listed in Table 1 and are identified in Figure 1 by double borders.

To assess these goals, student questionnaires will be administered to all groups of LD and non-LD students at the beginning and end of each academic year that they are attending the University of Guelph. It is also planned that interviews with LOP students and a subgroup of control students with learning disabilities will be conducted in the spring of each academic year. Data provided by the surveys and interviews will be supplemented by information from students’ academic files, such as grades and retention rates.

Methods of Assessing Program Goals

The evaluation team ensured that the design and layout of the student questionnaire and the order of the interview questions would not be unnecessarily complicated for students with various learning disabilities to follow. These questionnaires and interviews contain measures selected for their usefulness in evaluating the six intermediate goals of the LOP program listed in Table 1. They were also selected for their brevity and ease of administration.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Important LOP Goals Identified in the Program Logic Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>to enhance the academic and workplace success of students with learning disabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>to enhance LD students’ independence and ability to advocate for their needs, including their ability to evaluate situations and determine appropriate accommodations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>to allow students with learning disabilities to develop an understanding and acceptance of their own learning disability and improve their knowledge and utilization of the cognitive and meta-cognitive skills necessary to cope with their learning disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>to decrease LD students’ anxiety and sense of stigma, and to increase their self-efficacy and feelings of normalcy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>to remove systemic barriers to successful participation in university and organizational environments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>to support and educate faculty, staff and employers in their interactions with students with learning disabilities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The first goal, the academic and workplace success of students is measured using archival information on grades and retention rates for all LD and non-LD groups collected every semester. In addition, students complete “My Vocational Situation” (Holland, Dager, & Power, 1980), a measure of workplace readiness. This measure contains three subscales: vocational identity, occupational information, and perceived barriers. Students also describe their employment history in the questionnaire. Attempts will be made to follow LOP students for two years after graduation.

The second goal, enhancing the ability to self-advocate, is assessed by a questionnaire to be completed only by students with learning disabilities. The questionnaire includes open-ended questions about situations in which students advocated for particular needs relating to their learning disability. They are also asked about their level of confidence in approaching employers or professors regarding their disability-related needs. Additionally, during interviews, students are asked to discuss some of these experiences of self-advocacy in more detail.

Evaluation of the third goal, enhancing students’ understanding and acceptance of their own learning disability, entails two measures. The “Accommodations Checklist” (Herriot, 1996) provides a description of students’ knowledge of their own LD by asking them about the accommodations they feel are appropriate to their LD and the accommodations they have accessed. Only LD students complete this measure. The “Learning Profile,” adapted from Herriot’s (1997) “Learning Profile Checklist,” provides a descriptive profile of individual students’ learning strengths and weaknesses. All students complete this measure. In addition, during the student interviews, students are asked about their own and others’ acceptance of their learning disability.

The fourth goal, decreasing LD students’ anxiety and sense of stigma and increasing their self-efficacy, is assessed by the Self-Perception Profile for College Students (Neeman & Harter, 1986), a measure of self-concept. The student questionnaire includes seven subscales from this measure: job competence, self-worth, creativity, intellectual ability, scholastic competence, social acceptance, and close friendships. Also included in the student questionnaire is the anxiety subscale of the Multiple Affect Adjective Checklist - Revised (Zuckerman & Lubin, 1985), which has been adapted to measure levels of anxiety related to the experience of being a university stu-
dent. This measure has been modified from checklist format to a Likert-type scale. All students complete these measures. Additionally, the student interview includes questions regarding students’ sense of stigma or belongingness.

The fifth goal, relating to systemic barriers facing students with learning disabilities, is assessed with the student interviews. Students are asked to discuss the barriers they have encountered as a student with a learning disability at the University of Guelph and the degree of support they have received from the CSD, the library, and the university staff. Questions are asked in an open-ended format, and participants are encouraged to discuss their experiences as students with learning disabilities.

The support and education of faculty, staff, and employers will also be addressed by the student interview questions. Students are asked about the quality of their interactions with faculty and staff. In addition, in the winter semester of 1999, a survey was sent out to faculty members and teaching assistants to assess their understanding of and attitudes toward students with learning disabilities and their perception of the systemic barriers that are faced by these students. The results will be used to help construct a more detailed logic model of the teaching support component of LOP and to identify the primary areas of focus for the development of educational programs and interventions. This survey and the challenges involved in its development and administration are discussed in more detail in a later section.

Evaluating Individual Program Components

An evaluation plan should ideally include process and outcome evaluations for each of the individual program components, which may have more immediate goals that need to be attained in order to achieve the intermediate and ultimate goals. Various measures are being chosen and/or designed to evaluate the delivery of the different LOP program components and whether their goals are met. Process evaluations have been piloted with some existing initiatives that will officially be part of the LOP. Process and outcome evaluations of the program components will continue where possible, without taxing the students, throughout the course of the program.
A number of challenges have arisen in the initial phases of the evaluation component of the LOP. As is often the case with conducting research in the real world, the evaluation team has had to accommodate the needs of various stakeholder groups within the constraints of the resources available and the schedule of the program, while trying to maintain the integrity of the evaluation design. The evaluation team has also encountered a number of implementation and data collection obstacles for which solutions had to be developed. In particular, the poor response rate of non-LOP students to the student questionnaire distributed in the fall semester of 1998 required adjustments to the data-collection procedures. Moreover, both the evaluation of the Supported Learning Groups pilot program and the development of the Faculty/Teaching Assistant Support and Services component involved challenges of various sorts. These are discussed, along with the lessons learned, in the sections that follow.

Challenges in Collecting Baseline Data

As described above, data were collected in the fall semester of 1998 and the winter semester of 1999 in order to establish baseline levels of the areas of students' academic and personal lives targeted by the LOP. Both non-LD-identified and non-LOP LD students were targeted for participation in this phase of the evaluation. However, as administration of surveys via campus mail did not yield sufficient response rates in the fall, much more intensive participant recruitment strategies were developed.

Lessons Learned: Overcoming Reluctance to Participate

The initial evaluation plan was based on the assumption that participant recruitment would not be a difficult or challenging task. The reality, however, is that students are reluctant to volunteer their time for research from which they may not benefit directly. When these same students were contacted personally and offered remuneration for their time such as a research participation credit or token monetary award, they were more likely to agree to participate. This realization has prompted the evaluation team to devote more of its budget to personnel to assist with data collection. Investing resources in recruiting and collecting data from the LD and non-LD control groups has become a priority, as sufficiently high
response rates for these groups are critical to making meaningful comparisons to the LOP students and, eventually, drawing conclusions about the effectiveness of the LOP in achieving its goals.

Challenges in Evaluating the Supported Learning Groups Component

The evaluation of a program in its early stages of implementation is a luxury not always available to evaluators. The evaluation team welcomed the opportunity to consider the pilot year of one of the LOP components, the Supported Learning Groups (SLGs), which are a series of bi-weekly review sessions attached to specific, historically difficult courses.

This pilot evaluation was especially valuable in a number of ways. Obviously, it afforded staff the chance to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the SLGs in order to improve program delivery. In the broader LOP context, it was important to understand the operation of this program component prior to its expansion during LOP. At the same time, the pilot evaluation was an opportunity to explore the application of the SLG model to LD students, although the pilot year was not specifically directed to these students.

The initial comparisons between SLG participants, non-SLG participants, and a motivational control group on outcome measures such as final grades revealed that the performance of SLG participants was significantly higher. However, according to the SLG logic model, other outcomes beyond mere grades and drop rates are equally important indicators of program effectiveness. Specifically, helping students to gain insight into their personal learning styles and to develop cognitive strategies such as note taking and study skills that will transfer to students’ global learning and university success were key goals of the program. These are skills that must be nurtured and developed in the context of the long-term sessions.

One challenge to interpreting the impact of the program was that, while both semesters’ SLG participants performed significantly better than non-participants, the attendance and final grades of the second-semester SLG participants were substantially lower than those of the first-semester participants. Understanding this outcome required an examination of program process. In the second semester, for example, qualitative indicators from the SLG peer leaders revealed a significant change in mind-set among SLG participants. In contrast to the first pilot semester, leaders’ reports indicated that
the second-semester participants seemed less motivated and exhibited lower competency and increased aversion to or disinterest in the course material. This disinterest was coupled with what the leaders called the “repeater attitude” among SLG participants who were taking the course for a second time. Attendance among participants was irregular, creating a lack of continuity in material presentation and an absence of the participant rapport and interdependency that was present in the first semester. Students’ expectations of the program were also noticeably different, in that students wanted direct, specific answers from the leaders, as opposed to the interactive, participatory model endorsed by the program. These qualitative indicators became particularly useful in explaining the unexpected outcomes in SLG participants’ performance described above.

Lessons Learned: Considering Process Measures

Through the pilot evaluation, the importance of focussing on process became a key lesson learned for the future evaluation of SLGs in the context of LOP. Awareness of the qualitative differences between the two pilot semesters provided valuable insight in the interpretation of the impact of the program and the explanation of the unexpected differences in students’ performance. The continuing evaluation of SLGs within LOP will best include an emphasis on program process in interpreting the more objective program outcomes and satisfying the different evaluation and implementation concerns of its stakeholders.

Challenges in Evaluating the Faculty and Teaching Assistant Support and Services Component

As previously mentioned, a major component of the LOP is the provision of support and services to teaching personnel, with a focus on faculty and teaching assistants (TAs). Such support and services are designed to help remove systemic barriers to the successful participation of students with learning disabilities and to create more facilitative academic and social environments for these students.

The LOP staff and evaluation team continue to confront a number of difficult challenges in the development, design, implementation, and evaluation of the faculty and TA component. These challenges may be considered highly relevant to program evaluations that target a particular group of individuals but also rely, in part, on changes
within other groups in order to meet stated goals. To clarify, the majority of the LOP program components are explicitly focused on directly modifying and improving students’ knowledge and skill sets and increasing their opportunities for mutually supportive interactions and personal development. These students are active participants in the sense that they apply for and gain acceptance in a defined academic program and support network and have a vested interest in utilizing it. In contrast, the faculty and TA component targets crucial, yet passive, program stakeholder groups — faculty and teaching assistants. The characteristics of these two teaching personnel groups place a number of constraints on program development and implementation, in some cases adversely affecting the evaluation methodology and opportunities for broad-based change. As an initial step in the development of this component, a needs assessment was conducted.

Preliminary results of the survey administered indicate that a majority of faculty and teaching assistants are, in fact, sympathetic to the needs of students with learning disabilities, but a majority also felt that they were not knowledgeable about the nature of learning disabilities and teaching approaches. Thus, it is important for there to be continuing education for teaching personnel. In-depth analyses of the data will direct program planning in this area.

Lessons Learned: Reconciling Evaluation Constraints

Self-selection bias as it pertains to teaching personnel completing surveys and participating in workshops and intervention strategies is difficult to remedy. Ideal circumstances would have all teaching personnel involved, but such a mandate would be met with resistance. Creative and pragmatic solutions require prioritizing in the face of such constraints. With this in mind, the LOP has decided to focus its efforts on a number of pre-identified core courses, which are typically prerequisite introductory courses that experience the greatest influx of students with learning disabilities.

While the survey has been a valuable tool in gaining insight into the campus climate, as well as focusing the content of future interventions, it appears to be less useful in evaluating the teaching personnel component directly, largely due to its anonymity. This suggests the value of developing short-term outcome and process evaluations centering around knowledge acquisition, the reduction of academic barriers, and attitude change.
CONCLUSION

While no results can be presented at this stage in the evaluation of the LOP, a number of challenges and valuable lessons learned can be shared. Not surprisingly, all of the experiences of the LOP evaluation team to date point to the importance of being flexible, not only in adapting to unanticipated problems and considering the needs of various stakeholders, but in taking advantage of knowledge gained early in the evaluation process. This knowledge may be gained both in the context of methodological challenges such as poor response rates and in the face of unexpected preliminary findings that suggest a shift in the evaluation’s focus.

Such flexibility may, at times, jeopardize the integrity of evaluation initiatives. Nonetheless, a degree of flexibility is necessary for conducting evaluations in the real world. The importance of considering stakeholder’s views, the occurrence of unanticipated events, and the challenge of implementing effective data-collection methods and tools all necessitate that evaluators be able adjust their evaluation plans in a way that does not unduly compromise their ability to assess a program’s impact.

REFERENCES


