Learning Disability Documentation Guidelines

Definition of a Learning Disability

- Learning disabilities is a general term which refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning or mathematical ability.

In addition, it relies on the **Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders IV-TR** (2000) to provide the standard framework for the diagnosis of a learning disability:

- Learning Disorders are diagnosed when the individuals achievement on an individually administered, standardized tests in reading, mathematics, or written expression is substantially below that expected for age, schooling and level of intelligence

- Learning problems significantly interfere with academic achievement or activities of daily living that require reading, mathematical or writing skills

- Substantially below is usually defined as a discrepancy of more than 2 standard deviations between achievement and IQ. In certain circumstances, a smaller discrepancy (i.e. between 1 and 2 standard deviations) is sometimes used

Alternative diagnostic determinants are also considered and may include discrepancies within specific achievement areas, an intra-cognitive pattern of discrepancy, and information processing discrepancies. **Identifying a discrepancy alone, however, is not sufficient to warrant the diagnosis of a learning disability. Data must clearly demonstrate that a student has one or more functional limitations in the academic setting AND that these limitations require accommodation in order for the student to achieve equal access.** In addition, documentation may guide the process of determining additional, appropriate services if requested by the student or recommended by the McBurney staff.

Components of Comprehensive Documentation of a Learning Disability

Three types of information are necessary when identifying a learning disability at the post-secondary level and must be clearly presented in the psycho educational assessment report:

1. Recent psychometric data **(within the last 3 years for a high school student, and the last 5 years for an adult)** that support the presence of impairment in one or more of the following areas: listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities

2. Evidence of a **history of learning difficulties** documented through collateral information, e.g. developmental and educational histories, background information from previous psycho educational assessments

3. **A current functional limitation** (i.e., the difficulty must significantly interfere with a students current academic performance)

Guidelines for a comprehensive assessment include:

1. **A qualified professional trained in the diagnosis of learning disabilities should conduct the assessment and prepare the documentation.** Typically, a licensed psychologist, neuro-psychologist, learning disability specialist trained in the assessment of learning disabilities and the differential diagnosis associated with learning disorders in general should conduct the assessment and prepare the report/documentation. Other professionals, such as speech pathologists and reading specialists, may contribute to the diagnostic process but are generally not considered appropriate clinicians for initial diagnosis of a learning disability.

2. **A clear diagnostic statement, a logically organized summary that describes how the diagnosis was achieved, and objective information regarding the current educational impact must be presented.** The report should answer the following questions:

- o What is the clients disability and how does it **currently** impact learning?

- o What historical information supports the clients record of academic difficulty?

- o How severe is the disability relative to the **average person standard applied by law**?

- o What other factors that may confound the diagnosis were considered and how were they ruled out? (e.g., anxiety, Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, low aptitude, depression, other medical conditions, etc)

- o What **objective** evidence is there of one or more of the following:

  - An aptitude/achievement discrepancy in one or more areas in the NJCLD definition of LD (listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning or mathematical abilities)?

  - An intra-cognitive discrepancy demonstrated by a pattern of significant strengths and weaknesses in cognitive skills?

  - A processing deficit in one or more areas of psychological processing?

  - An intra-achievement discrepancy evidenced by widely discrepant performance across one or more achievement areas?

  - Limited response to targeted intervention?

3. **Justification for how the requested accommodations minimize the current impact of the learning disability on the individuals academic life must be provided.** Key questions to cover include:

   - o How are the identified deficit areas related to the area of functional limitation?

   - o How do the results of the assessment support the recommended accommodations?

4. **Documentation of ability and achievement functioning through psychometric assessment must be provided**. Psycho-educational testing must be recent **(within the last 3 years for a high school student, and the last 5 years for an adult)** and relevant to the students current educational placement. Tests should use adult based norms, particularly for measures of aptitude, and cognitive intelligence. The university reserves the right to request a re-evaluation when documentation is not current or comprehensive enough to support the provision of accommodation. All testing costs are incurred by the student.

5. **Data interpretation and analysis must emphasize:**

   - o Accuracy and objectivity of the interpretation of the results

   - o Alternative explanations for lower than expected performance (e.g., motivation, lack of prior learning opportunities, ELL, or other disabilities) considered and ruled out when making the diagnosis of a learning disability

   - o Rationale for how patterns in cognitive ability, achievement, and information processing are used to determine the presence of a learning disability

   - o Objective evidence of a substantial limitation to learning

   - o **Diagnosis of a learning disability based on evidence from multiple methods of assessment, not a single score or cluster of scores**