Working with students with learning differences
Anne Lamppa, Coordinator of Disability Services for Students, Fall 2009

Appreciating learning differences is the first step.

Celebrating the differences is the goal.

~ Dr. Mel Levine
What does Disabilities Services do for Students?

• The Office ensures that students who have disabilities, as the term is defined in federal legislation, have equal access to programs and services of the College.
What does Disabilities Services do for Students?

- The Office ensures that students have submitted proper documentation from licensed/certified testing professionals that identifies substantial limitations of the student.
The Office develops and implements reasonable and appropriate modifications to the academic environment that will offset the student’s substantial limitations. Reasonable and appropriate, in this case, are terms to describe adaptive measures that assist the student, but which do not alter essential components of the course or program.
What are the most prevalent disabilities at Carleton?

• We accommodate students academically in the areas of physical and psychological health, however the majority of academic accommodations that are granted at Carleton are because of learning disabilities.
A learning disability is a permanent disorder that interferes with integrating, acquiring, and/or demonstrating verbal or nonverbal abilities and skills. Frequently, there are some processing or memory deficits.

Carlson and Hertzfeld, *Teaching Students with Invisible Disabilities*
Facts about learning disabilities

• One out of every seven Americans has some form of a learning disability. (National Institutes of Health)

• Learning disabilities are considered “hidden” disabilities because we often are not aware that a person has one.

• A learning disability can affect one’s ability to speak, listen, read, write, spell, reason, recall, organize information, and do mathematics.
Characteristics of Learning Disabilities

Rarely would a person show all the characteristics listed below but they might have problems in one or more of these areas:

- **reading**: difficulty in remembering the printed word or symbol, figuring out words, reading with adequate speed, understanding what has been read

- **writing**: poor penmanship, spelling, written composition

- **speaking**: difficulty in making certain speech sounds, remembering names of things, organizing and sequencing ideas for verbal expression, speaking rhythmically
Characteristics of Learning Disabilities

- **Listening** - difficulty remembering directions, understanding rapid speech, interpreting what is heard.

- **Calculating** - problems remembering math facts such as multiplication tables, sequencing of steps, arithmetic processes, math signs (e.g. + - x < > ).
Characteristics of Learning Disabilities

- Difficulty telling right from left, reciting the alphabet, or memorizing the multiplication tables.
Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities.
**Facts about dyslexia**

- MRIs show evidence of different brain activation patterns in people with learning disabilities. An example of this is comparing the brain activity of dyslexic readers to those in a non-dyslexic brains.

- Non-dyslexic readers activate the back of the brain and to some extent the front of the brain.
Facts about dyslexia

• In contrast the dyslexic reader shows a fault in the system: under activation of neural pathways in the back of the brain.

• Consequently, dyslexic readers have initial trouble analyzing words and transforming letters into sounds, and as adults they may still be slow and not fluent readers.
The Dyslexic Brain

[Diagram of brain showing differences between nonimpaired and dyslexic brains]
An individual with dyslexia might process this sentence like this:

• Many adults with dyslexia have managed to function so well in spite of it that their employers and fellow workers are not aware that they are dyslexic.

Reading Center/Dyslexia Institute of Minnesota, Rochester, MN
They might spell it like this:

- Meny addults with disleksyu hav manajd to funkshun so will in spight of it that there emplyers And felow workers our not awer thay our bisledsick.

Reading Center/Dyslexia Institute of Minnesota, Rochester, MN
A Person with Dysgraphia...

• may have illegible printing and cursive writing (despite appropriate time and attention given the task)

• shows inconsistencies: mixtures of print and cursive, upper and lower case, or irregular sizes, shapes or slant of letters

• has unfinished words or letters, omitted words

• may have inconsistent spacing between words and letters

• exhibits unusual wrist, body or paper position
A Person with Dysgraphia...

• has difficulty pre-visualizing letter formation
• has slow or labored copying or writing
• shows poor spatial planning on paper
• has cramped or unusual grip/may complain of sore hand
• has great difficulty thinking and writing at the same time (taking notes, creative writing)
Dysgraphia

from Learning disabilities by Janet Lerner

Handwriting of Mike: 10 years old

Today is July 1st Thursday

It is a lot of fun

I will go tosyn
Handwriting of Allen: 10 years old

Said to be slow, confused, erratic, and illegible. 3 pg, 16 lines.

Writing is very small, illegible, and lacks organization.
Other Disorders That Affect Learning
“The best way to think of ADHD is not as a mental disorder but as a collection of traits and tendencies that define a way of being in the world. There is some positive to it and some negative, some glory and some pain. If the negative becomes disabling, then this way of being in the world can become a disorder.”

Dr. Hallowell, *Delivered from Distraction*
ADHD is diagnosed by a medical doctor or a licensed physiologist or psychiatrist.

There is no one test to determine ADHD.

The DSM-IV defines ADHD by a set of eighteen symptoms. To qualify for the diagnoses you need six. Although, most people will have these symptoms from time to time, it is the intensity and duration of symptoms that may determine if you have ADHD.
Advantageous Characteristics of ADHD

- Creative and original thinking
- Remarkable persistence and resilience, if not stubbornness
- Warm-hearted and generous behavior
- Intuitive personality
Disadvantageous Characteristics of ADHD

• Difficulty in turning ideas into significant actions
• Difficulty explaining themselves to other
• Chronic underachievement
• Mood is often angry or down in the dumps due to frustration
• Poor tolerance of frustration
Disadvantageous Characteristics of ADHD

- Trouble with organization
- Trouble with time management
- Trouble staying with one activity until its done
- Tendency to get lost in own thoughts, no matter what else might be going on
How Does It Feel To Have ADHD?

Excerpts from Delivered from Distraction by Dr. Edward Hallowell
How Does It Feel To Have ADHD?

• Having ADD is like driving in the rain with bad windshield wipers. The windshield gets smudged and blurred as you’re speeding along, but you don’t slow down. You keep driving, trying your best to see. Why don’t you slow down or, better yet, pull over? That is not the way with ADD. You keep going. Faster is better. It is in your blood (and in your brain).
Having ADD is also like listening to a ball game on a radio station that’s coming in with a lot of static. The harder you strain to hear what’s going on, the more frustrated you get. Once in a while a static free interval blesses the airwaves, and you can hear the ball game clear as a bell. A cat may meow in the background, but you know it is just a cat not more static, and the clear signal from the radio allows you to focus on the game. How good this feels! But then, like an unresolved feud, the static returns, and you become more then frustrated.
“In other ways having ADD is like being supercharged all the time. I tell kids it’s like having a race-car brain. Your brain goes faster than the average brain. Your trouble is putting on the brakes. You get one idea and you have to act on it, and then, what do you know, but you’ve got another idea before you’ve finished up with the first one, and you go for that one, but, of course a third idea intercepts the second, and you just have to follow that one, and pretty soon people are calling you disorganized and impulsive and disobedient and defiant and all sorts of impolite words that miss the point completely.”
“Plus, your brain is spilling over all the time. You’re drumming your fingers, tapping your feet, humming a song, whistling, looking here, looking there, scratching, stretching, doodling, which leads other people to think you’re not paying attention or you’re not interested, but you’re spilling over so that you can pay attention.”
How Does It Feel To Have ADHD?

• “Someone once said, ‘Time is the thing that keeps everything from happening all at once.’ Time parcels out moments into separate bits so that we can do one thing at a time. In ADD, time collapses, making life feel as if everything is happening at once. This creates panic. One loses perspective and the ability to select what need to be done first, what needs to be done second, and what can wait until another day.”
Asperger’s Syndrome

- Asperger’s Syndrome is a neurological disorder characterized by what psychiatrist Dr. Lorna Wing terms a “triad of impairments affecting: social interaction, communication, and imagination, accompanied by a narrow, rigid, repetitive pattern of activities.”
About Asperger’s Syndrome

- Asperger’s Syndrome is classified with several other disorders as Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD)
- There is not a specific test to determine Asperger’s Syndrome
- Using the DSM-IV, a licensed psychologist or psychiatrist use specific criteria to diagnose Asperger’s Syndrome
It is difficult and complex to diagnose people with Asperger syndrome because the severity of symptoms may vary and many people with Asperger’s Syndrome often have other co-existing conditions or disorders.
About Asperger’s Syndrome

- Children with Asperger’s Syndrome usually hit major developmental milestones on time or even early. (sitting, standing, walking etc.)

- However, their styles of social interaction are different from their peers.

- They may have unusual eye contact or other non-verbal language.
About People with Asperger’s Syndrome

- They may not show interest in others around them and therefore not develop appropriate peer relationships.
- May not appear to show interest or enjoyment in things that are of interest to other people.
- May show restrictive, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests and activities.
People with Asperger’s Syndrome...

- may use language in a very literal way and have trouble using it in a social context
- have normal IQs, and many individuals may exhibit exceptional skill or talent in a specific area
- may struggle with some degree of fine and gross motor skill deficits
People with Asperger’s Syndrome May...

• have an unusual gait and problems with spatial judgment

• experience sensory stimuli differently

• have a compromised executive function or a brain that gives them the ability to plan and carry out an order and sequence of tasks

Bashe and Kirby, *The Oasis Guide to Asperger Syndrome*
To qualify for academic accommodation, a student must have a comprehensive assessment by a licensed professional stating a specific diagnosis.

The documentation must be current, within the last five years.
Academic Accommodations at Carleton

- Based on this information, Disabilities Services for Students will provide in writing reasonable and appropriate academic accommodations for the student.
- All student records are confidential.
- Faculty are contacted for the term that the student is in their class.
- The nature of the disability is not disclosed to anyone, including the person’s instructor, unless the student chooses to do so.
Works Cited


