

AGGIELIFE

THE BATTALION

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Learning to cope

Students deal with learning disabilities with the help of campus organizations

By Jimmy Hissong
THE BATTALION



PAUL WILSON • THE BATTALION

Taylor Gilley, a junior marketing major, gets up in the morning and proceeds with the daily juggle of professors, exams, work, bills, lectures, extracurricular activities, friends and family like any other college student. Every now and then, however, Taylor Gilley is forced to balance one more ball in the hectic collegiate circus equation: a learning disability.

Ninety-five percent of Aggies registered with Student Disability Services are affected by a learning disability. The exterior invisibility of Attention Deficit Disorder and other learning impairments increases the likelihood that students come into contact with students with disabilities regularly without any knowledge of having done so.

Gilley, who was diagnosed with ADD her freshman year at Texas A&M, said everyday classes can be a struggle.

"Sometimes I'll have trouble taking notes during lecture," she said. "In situations where there are no slides or outlines to follow, I may have difficulty determining what is important or writing things down while the professor is still talking."

Approximately 550 students register with SDS each semester, said David Sweeney, an adviser for students with disabilities and the program director for A&M's adaptive technology services. While this number accounts for only one percent of the student body, it is estimated that 8 percent of the general population is afflicted with a mental or physical impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities.

Students who register with Student Disability Services do so under their own discretion. Students are not sought out by SDS, and therefore an inconsistency arises between the percentage of students registered with SDS and the percentage of students who are eligible to register with SDS.

The reasons students do not register vary. Some students simply do not know about the services SDS provides. Others, however, fear unwanted attention from professors or classmates, Sweeney said.

"It is always difficult to ask the professor for another favor, or be the one missing student in a classroom of 20 on test day," said a student with a learning disability who asked not to be identified.

De-emphasizing the existence of an impairment is a common means of permitting a student to be identified by his personality rather than his disability.

"The goal of Student Disability Services is to make student disabilities as transparent as possible across campus," Sweeney said.

The labs that accommodate students with disabilities are open-access labs and are available for use by the entire student body. SDS and its advisers generally encourage students to work with

their professors to establish an accommodating environment in the classroom. Some students have developed the false notion that students who take advantage of the services SDS provides, specifically the test-taking services, receive excessive benefits not available to students, Sweeney said.

"There is no modification of the curriculum," Sweeney said. "Student Disability Services simply provide an opportunity to learn and level the playing field."

SDS testing facilities help provide recognized students with a less distracting environment and extended time. The exams are prepared by the professor, and are generally the same test administered

to the rest of the class. The disadvantage of this system is that these students lose the opportunity to test with the professor and ask questions during the exam. The exams given, though, are the same, as are the expectations of the professor.

"All my tests are exactly the same (as other student's tests)," Gilley said. "They have the same questions and the same answers. There is no gliding through. The testing services just give me the opportunity to think about an answer or a question a little longer. I may learn a little differently, but I am not any less smart."

Aggie Networks, an organization open to all students, seeks to correct any false stereotypes regarding students with disabilities and to educate the general public about them.

"Our goal is to provide disability awareness on campus and in the community," said Jessica Frasier, secretary of Aggie Networks and a senior special education major.

Aggie Networks organizes a series of discussion panels each semester for various classes that address topics about disabilities. One week might be concerned with sports and disabilities, and another week might focus on classroom education and disabilities.

The classroom discussion panels put on by Aggie Networks are the most personal means of connecting with students, said Tim Obenhaus, president of Aggie Networks and a senior psychology major.

"Many students are not aware of the organization, and these panels provide us with a unique opportunity to establish one-on-one contact. The panels are how I learned about Aggie Networks," Obenhaus said.

Aggie Networks also tries to increase disability awareness through hands-on activities on campus and in the Bryan-College Station community. Recently, the organization visited the Mosaic house, a local assisted-living home. Group members were able to interact with mentally challenged adults.

"Mosaics was a fun, firsthand experience. We got to do arts and crafts with them during the day and then wait with them until their parents came and picked them up in the afternoon," Frasier said. "Most of the people we visited with were 30 or 40 years old. I got a little emotional, but I was glad we were able to be there," Frasier said.

Opportunities such as Mosaics provide members with a chance for direct exposure to people with disabilities and the ability to gain knowledge from their interactions.

"We are all aware of disabilities, but we really don't understand them until we get the opportunity to get one-on-one with them," said Luis Elizondo, the intermediary for Student Disability Services and a junior biomedical science major.

"It's a great eye-opener," Elizondo said, "and just one more reason why A&M is the friendliest campus around."

For more information, students can contact Aggie Networks at networks@stuorg.tamu.edu or through the SDS office.

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