



***EDUCATING COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH  
LEARNING DIFFERENCES - IT WORKS!***

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Good afternoon. My name is Ken Quigley. I am the President of Curry College in Milton Massachusetts and I am here to speak to you about educating college – able students with learning differences.

My message is simple. Educating students with learning differences works. It works for the students, it works for the colleges and universities that the students attend, and it works for society at large.

Before I move on to my remarks I want to first tell you how honored I am to be here. I have had an opportunity to learn about the Canadian Club and its members prior to this speech. It is humbling to stand before you. If the message that I am fortunate to bring to you was not so important, I don't think I would be standing before you.

I want to thank my host for inviting me today. I also want to tell you a little bit about how I come to be standing before you this afternoon. Specifically, I would like to thank:

- The Honorable Isabel Bassett,
- Veronica Lacey, the Deputy Minister of Education and Training;
- Dr. Bette Stephenson, and;
- Minister and Mrs. Ernie Eves.

I would also like to thank someone who is not here. That person is Dr. Gertrude Webb, Professor Emeritus at Curry College and the most important figure in learning disabilities in the United States for over the past 27 years. It was Dr. Webb who started the learning disabilities program at Curry College 27 years ago. As a result, the world is literally a different and better place for hundreds of thousands of people.

What would you say if I told you that 15% of our young people were precluded from achieving personal, academic and business success and contributing to society even though they had the ability to do so? What would you say if one or more of your children or loved ones were in that 15%? I hope that you would say that it wasn't fair, that you wouldn't stand for it, and that you were going to do something about it.

That's what Ernie and Vicki Eves said when they learned that their son Justin was in that 15%. In the strange and mysterious ways of the world that none of us can explain, Justin has been taken from us. However, the Eves' efforts on behalf of that 15% continue. That's what brings me before you today.

Justin Eves had dyslexia, probably the most common and well-known form of learning disability. Minister and Mrs. Eves determined that the post-secondary support Justin needed was not available in Canada and was best found in the United States. They also found that Curry College was the best college in the United States for educating bright college - able students with learning differences.

## II. What are learning differences / a typical story.

It is also important to understand what a learning difference is. This is important not only in academic settings but in the work place as well. A learning disability can best be defined as a neuropsychological disorder which manifests itself as difficulty in the acquisition and/or use of listening, speaking, reading, writing or mathematical abilities.

It is also important to understand that people with learning differences are not unintelligent or slow. As you might note, I will use the term *learning disabilities* and *learning differences* interchangeably throughout the course of my remarks. This is to illustrate the fact that people who are diagnosed with learning disabilities are not in fact disabled. Rather, they have differences in the way that they acquire and assimilate knowledge. In fact, exactly the contrary is the norm, and people must have at least an average IQ to be diagnosed with a learning difference in the first instance. What are called learning disabilities and how learning disabilities can be overcome is best illustrated in a story.

I'm going to tell you the story of Jared; a typical learning disabled student who graduated from Curry College in 1992 and is now licensed to practice law and is actively practicing law in both Massachusetts and Maryland.

Prior to becoming President of Curry I served on the faculty for eight years and taught courses in Business Law and Business Ethics.

Jared was student of mine when I was teaching. I served as his academic advisor and as his mentor for his Honors Program Thesis at Curry College. I know Jared well and his story is fascinating.

Jared grew up in Maryland and had one passion. A passion that I am sure many of you in this room may share. Jared's passion was ice hockey.

Jared wanted to play hockey at a major Division I hockey power in the U.S. He had the athletic ability to do so and applied to the University of New Hampshire.

There is a standardized test that all students in the United States take when applying to college. This test is called the SAT - The Scholastic Aptitude Test. Jared took the SAT's and did miserably.

His hockey skills and persistence, however, - the persistence of both Jared and his family - got Jared an Admission interview at the University of New Hampshire.

The interview presented the Admissions Counselor with a confounding problem. Jared was bright, articulate, thoughtful and motivated. In short, he was one of the more impressive interviews that the counselor had ever had. However, the counselor said that, based on his standardized test scores in the SAT, Jared could not be admitted to the University of New Hampshire.

The counselor told Jared that there was a real mismatch here between Jared's intellect, his presentation, and his motivation, all of which were outstanding, and his standardized SAT scores, which were terrible. She also told Jared and his family that they needed to investigate what was occurring and causing this mismatch.

Jared's family had Jared tested. Those tests resulted in a diagnosis of dyslexia. Jared was learning disabled.

Fortunately for Jared, his family was not without means. Like the Eves, Jared's family did a nationwide search for the best college to send their son to. Like the Eves, this search led to Curry College. A relatively small college currently of approximately 2,200 students located just outside of Boston.

Like Justin Eves and thousands of other students, Jared came to Curry, enrolled in our learning disabilities program, found success at Curry and established a foundation for life long success.

Jared received the support that all LD students need but, more importantly, learned about his academic strengths and weaknesses and learned how to build the strategies that, for him, lead to success.

Jared graduated from Curry in four years and immediately went on to law school. He graduated from law school and passed the Bar exam in two states. The Bar exam - like the SAT's that Jared did so poorly on when seeking to gain entrance to college - is an objective assessment or measurement. The Bar exam obviously being the far more difficult.

The question arises: What happened in the seven years that Jared was in college and law school between the SAT's and the Bar exam? What caused such a difference in his performance on those two objective measures? Did he become brighter or more intelligent? No. Did he apply himself more? Perhaps he did as he began to encounter academic success for the first time in his life, but that is not the answer either. What happened is that Jared attended a college that taught him how to deal with his learning differences. As a result he is a valued and contributing member of society – both economic and otherwise.

Ironically, Jared never played much hockey at Curry College. Yeats said that education is the lighting of a fire not, the filling of a pail. Like so many learning disabled students, when Jared was exposed to strategies that allowed him to succeed, that fire was lit. He became so impassioned by his studies that he quit hockey so that he could participate in our Honors Program and other academic pursuits at Curry.

Jared's story is not unique. In fact, it is fairly typical. In the '90's other graduates of our learning disabilities program have succeeded as the student speaker at the Suffolk University Law School Commencement, as successful broadcast personalities, and, in 1996 as the youngest winner of the Indianapolis 500. What they all have in common – together with thousands of less visible but just as important stories – is that they learned the strategies for success in overcoming their learning differences.

What are those strategies?

Those strategies are taught in what we call the PAL program. PAL is an acronym for the Program for the Advancement of Learning.

Let me tell you about the PAL Program.

You might wonder how such a revolutionary thing as discovering a strategy to successfully overcome learning differences and allow approximately 1/7 of the population to gain the strategies they need to succeed in society was born at a small, professionally - oriented liberal arts college just south of Boston. Like so many other major accomplishments over the course of time, the answer lies with a single visionary person. That person was Dr. Gertrude Webb.

Dr. Webb was a Professor of Education at Curry College who, in the early 1970's, was running an extension program in the Boston public schools. Dr. Webb possessed a love of education, a love of people, and a love of learning. She went to one of my predecessors as the President of Curry College and made a proposal. She told him that she was aware of many high school level students who were very bright – certainly bright enough to deal with the abstract principles of college – but who had

something getting in the way of their education. She further told my predecessor that she had ideas as to how to help unlock the vast potential in these students.

Someone once said that one of the greatest tragedies of the human condition is unreached potential. Dr. Webb saw a way to give the learning disabled population a strategy to achieve their potential.

Dr. Webb requested that she be allowed to bring in two to three students who would not otherwise be accepted to Curry College with the understanding that she would work with them in a one on one mentoring relationship. Dr. Boyle agreed.

It is interesting to note that at the time that Dr. Webb started this program the term "learning disabilities" didn't even exist. Believe it or not these young students, students like Jared and Justin Eves, were termed "brain injured."

We now know these students as what they truly are, students with learning disabilities or learning differences – not "brain injured" students.

As I previously mentioned, in order to be diagnosed with a learning disability a person must be of at least average intelligence. A person's intelligence, for diagnostic purposes, is measured by his or her IQ. The intelligence quotient. Intelligence is comprised of a number of components. These include raw thinking ability, language ability, memory ability and visual/spatial ability. All of these abilities go together to make up what we call intelligence.

Persons with learning disabilities typically have deficiencies in the language or memory ability components of intelligence. A key point, and I can not stress that you understand this enough, is that if you are of average intelligence and you have deficiencies in one or more of the components of intelligence, you must have superior abilities in other areas.

Deficits in the language or memory areas, however, are particularly daunting to overcome absent a well-reasoned and understood strategy. Deficits in these areas undermine reading and writing and are the primary reason for undermining traditional academic skills.

Most education, particularly education in the primary school years where students develop their academic self-image is based on a traditional method. If there is a mismatch between the student's structural deficits and the method of teaching, it is practically impossible for that student to succeed. The chain of failure is established as early as first and second grade.

One of my children, my 7-year-old son Brian, is currently in the second grade. Many of you have or know children of this age. Can you imagine how horrible it would be for your child to be a bright loving child who thinks that there is something wrong with him and that he is less than the other students because he can not learn to read or write well based on an incongruency between their learning preferences and the standard method of teaching in our schools.

Given a strategy to succeed this 15% of the population would be able to do as well as everyone else in the class. While obviously I would like to see learning disabled students receive appropriate acknowledgment and attention to their individual learning preferences and styles as early as first grade in order to make them productive as soon as possible and – frankly – to obviate the pain that many of them suffer, it is important to know that the strategies that Dr. Webb developed, which have been refined over the years at Curry College, strategies I will get to in a moment, can be taught to people at any stage of their lives. We at Curry have had tremendous success with college students of both traditional and adult learner ages, and are currently bringing these strategies into the workplace at the request of large and small employers and seeing tremendous gains in employee productivity as a result of the liberating effect of understanding your learning differences and how to respond to them.

### **THE PAL PROGRAM: HOW IT WORKS**

At the core of our PAL program is the concept of metacognition. METACOGNITION is the study of learning as a separate body of knowledge. To have metacognitive ability means to know about your own learning styles. There is a focus on the concept of learning styles and differences as distinct from general intellectual ability. At Curry College, that metacognition ability is achieved through a mentoring relationship. The three keystones of the PAL program at Curry are respect, empowerment and success.

In order to achieve true metacognition, a student must understand the following three things:

- First, what learning is;
- Second, the different ways that the learning process takes place in different people; and,
- Third, where do the strengths of that particular learner lie, and how can they be used to achieve specific goals.

The relational or mentoring aspect is key to this. The interactive nature of the process between the student and the mentor/teacher results in a process of reflection and self-realization by the student.

The mentor is an expert, knowing the right questions to ask to get the student engaged in the metacognitive process. The emotional liaisons between the student and the mentor – the respect portion of the trilogy of respect, empowerment and success – are necessary in order for students to drop long developed defense mechanisms and truly engage in the process.

Socrates said that an unexamined life is not worth living; however, self-examination for people who have not been able to succeed academically based on a system that did not match their learning styles and preferences is very difficult. Yet, once the student begins to engage in the process, they begin to discover their own strengths. This is the empowerment aspect of the trilogy.

Success comes when the student gains an understanding of his or her learning style and preferences, and establishes strategies designed to enable the student to master college level materials.

It is crucial to understand that the process here is not to provide excuses for poor academic performance. Rather, the process establishes a baseline of what to do. Students in our PAL Program are mainstreamed. That means that they take all the same courses that our non-PAL students take, and are not identified as PAL students in the classroom.

In theory, no more than 1/3 of our entering students at any time should be in the PAL Program. The mentoring relationship takes place with a PAL advisor in our Learning Center outside the classrooms. Students take what is called full PAL, meeting 3 hours per week in their first year and may elect to take supportive PAL thereafter. Supportive PAL generally involves an hour per week with the student's PAL instructor.

Most students are done with PAL Program by the end of their second year.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century is replete with illustrations of great thinkers who did miserably in school, but excelled when they were allowed to create their own environment based on their own strengths and preferences. These include Albert Einstein, Thomas Edison and Winston Churchill. All intellectual giants who excelled when they were allowed to create their own structure. This is a further example of metacognition. They understood what environment they could succeed in and created that environment.

This is further illustrated by the many successful, creative entrepreneurs who are quote – unquote learning disabled. These would include the great financial services entrepreneur Charles Schwab, the automobile racer and motor services entrepreneur Jackie Stewart and others. All of these men tell painful stories of their youth, and attempting to succeed in an educational environment using processes and approaches that they were not suited to deal with. However, when they were allowed to create the

structure of their own organization – a structure geared to their strengths – they encountered tremendous success.

## **THE EFFECT OF PAL ON CURRY COLLEGE**

In the final portion of my remarks, I would like to speak about the effect that the PAL Program has had on Curry College as an institution and as a community; and view that as a microcosm of society.

Curry College was founded in 1879 on the principle of realizing the unique gifts of each individual. The PAL Program has allowed Curry to bring that philosophy to its highest level.

In the 1990's two of our Valedictorians have been PAL students. Those are students who might not otherwise have graduated from college. Approximately one - half of our Honors Program is made up of PAL students, notwithstanding the fact that ideally not more than 1/3 of any entering class should consist of LD students in order to achieve the mainstream effect. Likewise, our Student Government tends to be over-represented by PAL students. This is something that is very important to understand. The metacognitive process creates problem solvers. There is a natural tendency in the student to assess a situation, see what can be done about the situation and proceed to resolve the situation. This is the strategy that they learn in the PAL Program to compensate for their learning differences, with their strengths, and is carried over into their work in the community. The College produces students that know themselves, know the expertise of their field and are able to apply the metacognitive process to life. This results in significant contributions to society. It results in problem solvers.

Since Dr. Webb founded the PAL Program 27 years ago it has passed into the able hands of Dr. Lisa Ijiri, assisted by Professor Susan Pennini. Recognition of the valuable contributions of the PAL Program has spread, so too has the scope of the Program. Currently, there is an Adult PAL Program, an English as a Second Language Program and a High School Student Program, all run out of our PAL Program housed in the Gertrude M. Webb Learning Center at Curry College.

The more we are able to deal with the 15% of the population that is learning disabled, the better a place the world will be. Think of the tremendous opportunity cost associated with not dealing with that one - seventh of the population. Suppose the counselor at the University of New Hampshire had never told Jared he required diagnostic testing. This is an area which can not be ignored. If we do ignore it, we do so at our own peril and at a tremendous human cost and a tremendous cost to society in general.

In closing, let me tell you what dealing with learning disabled students really does. It changes and saves people lives.

Prior to assuming the presidency at Curry College approximately two years ago I served on its faculty for eight years. During that period I acquired a very special favorite time of year. My favorite time of year every year is Commencement week when our students graduate. During that week, and especially on Commencement day when you stand on the podium, looking out into the faces of 300 graduating students and their families it confirms that this system works. You see those students walk across the stage as successes. Successes both academic and otherwise. Many of these students came to Curry College with no prior academic success. Many of them, while extremely bright, had never encountered prior academic success. Four years later they walk across the stage and receive their degrees as successes. They are educated people who have established a foundation for life long success and life long learning. They go on to become valuable and contributing members of society.

My message to you is simple. The metacognitive approach to dealing with learning disabled student works. I understand that the decision makers in this room have the opportunity to adopt this model for the college and university system in Ontario. I urge you in the strongest possible terms to do so. It is an investment that will pay dividends many, many times over.

Thank you very much for your time. It is appreciated. Please never hesitate to contact me directly if either Curry or I may ever be of any assistance to you or your families. Enjoy the rest of the day.