

The Academic Experiences of College Students with Disabilities

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- Conducted the **National Postsecondary Student Aid Study** in 2003-04, 2007-08, and 2011-12
- 2003-04: **11.3%** of undergraduate respondents reported that they had a disability
- 2007-08: **10.9%** of undergraduate respondents and **7.6%** of postbaccalaureate respondents reported that they had a disability
- 2011-12: **11.1%** of undergraduate respondents reported that they had a disability



Statistics on Undergraduate Students with Disabilities 2011-12

- 11.1% of students reported a disability
- **Of those 11.1%:**
 - 30.8% reported mental illness/depression
 - 21.8% reported attention deficit disorder
 - 19% reported a disability other than those listed
 - 9.3% reported an orthopedic or mobility impairment
 - 7.0% reported a hearing impairment
 - 4.8% reported a specific learning disability
 - 3.6% reported blindness or visual impairment
 - 3.5% reported health impairments/problems
 - 0.2% reported a speech or language impairment

Learning Disabilities Among Undergraduate Students

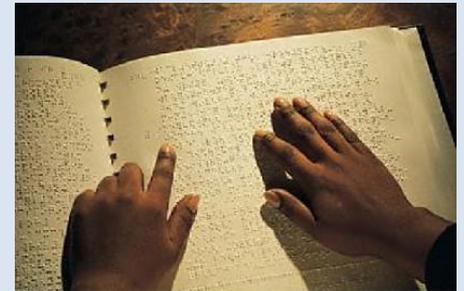
- One in 25 undergraduate students has a learning disability (LD)
- Some studies estimate that 40% of freshmen with disabilities have a LD
 - LDs are **invisible disabilities**, which means that students with LDs “bear a special burden of proof to establish their special needs” (Wolanin & Steele, 2004, p. ix)

Discrimination and Accommodations in Higher Education

- Colleges may not discriminate against SWD in admissions or programs
 - SWD must be able to meet the academic standards for admission, progress, and graduation with **reasonable accommodations**
 - “Accommodations which are a ‘fundamental alteration’ of a program or which would impose an ‘undue’ financial or administrative burden are not required” (Wolanin & Steele, 2004, p. viii).

Services and Accommodations Provided to SWD Enrolled at 2-year and 4-year Postsecondary Institutions

- Additional exam time (93%)
- Classroom notetakers or scribes (77%)
- Faculty-provided written course notes or assignments (72%)
- Help with learning strategies or study skills (72%)
- Alternative exam formats (71%)
- Adaptive equipment and technology (70%)
- Audio textbooks/digitally recorded texts (66%)
- Readers (62%)
- Physical adaptations to classrooms (58%)
- Tutors to assist with ongoing coursework (58%)
- Large print or Braille materials (51%)



Services and Accommodations Provided to SWD Enrolled at 2-year and 4-year Postsecondary Institutions

- Sign language interpreters/translators (48%)
- Moving classes to a more accessible location (46%)
- Counseling about vocational rehabilitation services (44%)
- Priority class registration (42%)
- Disability resource handbook (38%)
- Course substitution or waiver (35%)
- Career placement services targeted for SWD (26%)
- Paratransit for on-campus mobility (14%)
- Disability benefits counseling (11%)
- Personal attendants (7%)
- Independent living skills training (4%)

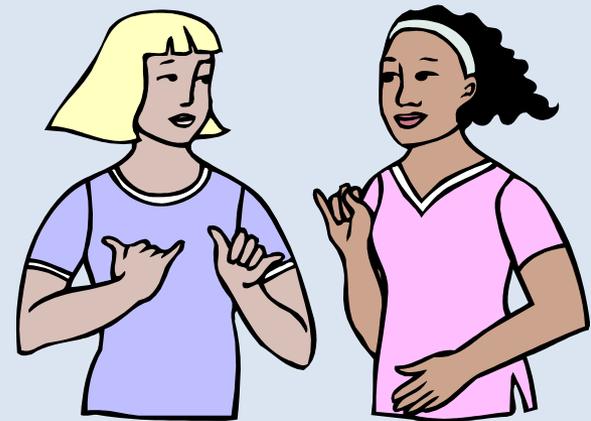
“Faculty attitudes and the academic culture are the major barriers to the successful implementation of accommodations for students with disabilities. Faculty are often ignorant about their responsibilities and about how to relate to students with disabilities. Faculty resent being told what to do by low-level administrators in the disability services offices and not being able to review or question the legitimacy of a student’s disability or the accommodation that is prescribed” (Wolanin & Steele, 2004).

Background

- The number of students with disabilities (SWD) at colleges and universities in the United States has increased significantly in recent years (Hall & Belch, 2000; Hitchings, Retish, & Horvath, 2005; Stodden, Whelley, Chang, & Harding, 2001).
- These students may encounter significant barriers that can have a profound impact on their college experience (Madaus & Shaw, 2004; Stodden et al., 2001).
- Faculty and staff knowledge of and attitudes toward disability and the provision of accommodations may be particularly salient in student success (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005; Dowrick, Anderson, Heyer, & Acosta, 2005; Rao, 2004).
- The existing literature further suggests that at least some faculty members feel that the provision of accommodations for these students may compromise the academic integrity of their courses/programs (Beilke, 1999; Jensen, McCrary, Krample, & Cooper, 2004) and/or the academic freedom of faculty (Jensen et al., 2004).

Method/Participants

- Qualitative Study
- In-Depth Interviews
- 12 undergraduate students
 - 8.3% Freshman (n=1)
 - 50% Juniors (n = 6)
 - 41.7% Seniors (n=5)
- Mean age = 24.75 years



Analysis Procedure

- Interview data was transcribed and analyzed as outlined by Seidman (2006)
- Transcripts were reviewed and passages of interest were marked
- Marked passages were reviewed and grouped under tentative categories based on thematic content
- Categories were reviewed and modified as necessary to reflect the themes that emerged from the interview data

Results

Seven themes emerged from analysis of the interview transcripts, related to:

- 1) Positive Experiences with Professors (n=11)
- 2) Negative Experiences with Professors (n=8)
- 3) Impact of Disability on Future Career/Career Preparedness (n=5)
- 4) Academic Relationships with Classmates (n=6)
- 5) Additional Time and Stress (n=7)
- 6) Interaction with the Disability Services office (n=6)
- 7) Impact of Disability on Academic Performance (n=6)

Positive Experiences with Professors (n = 11)

- All the professors have the mandatory blurb about it in their syllabus, but only a few professors that I've noticed will actually say something about it and make it a point to make it known that they're passionate about these things and they want to give those with disabilities all the help that they need. (Interview Three)
- I have incredible professors who really, really are trying their best, their all, everything to give me what I need to succeed. ... They're all very receptive to everything that I want. They're very understanding. They're also very kind. They just come across in a kind nature and I've never had that ever anywhere besides high school. College has been very, very difficult for me finding people who really, really truly get me. (Interview Five)
- I make it my point to get a relationship with all my professors and let them get to know me. I think that's very important, just in case something out of the ordinary does happen, they know you so they can have a little better understanding possibly of the situation and how they can help. I think it's very important to get to know your professors and get your professors to know you. (Interview Twelve)

Negative Experiences with Professors

Subtheme: Not Understanding the Student and/or the Accommodation (n=6)

- I mean, it depends on the professor and the class. Because some professors are, “No, because if any other student finds out that you’re getting this, they’re gonna get mad.” (Interview One)
- I've had problems with teachers and I can't tell if it was just me or if it was just them or if it was both of us or if it was the OCD or stress from them or me or what. I've had some bad encounters that have just left me bitter. (Interview Six)
- My other classes, I'm scared to talk to the professors 'cause, in previous days where I have, I've been talked down to or I don't understand them. I leave more frustrated than when I went just because I'm a different learner. I need visuals. It doesn't work of all these technicality words; I'm lost. I have no idea so I pretend like I know what I'm talking about but I really have no idea. So, it's just really frustrating. (Interview Seven)
- I had a professor ... Didn't understand at all. I was told that if I missed more than three classes, I was going to drop a full letter grade. That was even after I gave my disability statement, the letter from the disabilities office. I was saying, please, be more accommodating. I even had the professor at one point say ADHD isn't a real disability. There's problems like that that I've had. (Interview Nine)

Negative Experiences with Professors

Subtheme: Missing Class Time/Material (n=3)

- I went up to the teacher and I said, "Those of us who weren't in the room to take the test, we missed that instruction so we shouldn't be penalized just because we're out of the room." She did end up accommodating it, but it seems to me like there's a lot of those kind of things too where they'll tell the class something, just off the top of their head, and we won't get it because we're in a different room. (Interview Four)
- Normally, I try to stick it in with the other students so that I'm as normal as possible so I kind of fit in more so on test day, you don't disappear and you're always there and then people don't ask questions. (Interview Seven)
- Another one I can think of, academic-wise, is when I have to leave the classroom and it's not by choice. You'll always have students who just leave to go walk around, pretty much, and they'll miss something. That's by choice. The worse, though, is when I don't have the choice to miss something. Then you have a professor who doesn't understand and thinks you're just trying to skip out, so you miss the notes. (Interview Nine)

Negative Experiences with Professors

Subtheme: Difficulty Selecting a Major (n=2)

- They [the faculty] were basically, “Nope. You need to be able to write it. You need to be able to spell it.” That dictated what I could and could not do for jobs. ... I mean, it’s just dictated what I could and could not do in the ways of work. Socially, not so much. (Interview One)
- They were very, very, very offensive to me even though they probably didn't mean to be. It still came across as very, very mean and negative and judgmental. I decided to not pay attention to—people who were saying, "You can't do math, you can't do math." I finally started to listen to them because I just decided to give up. I didn't want to fight anymore. I didn't want to struggle. (Interview Five)



Negative Experiences with Professors

Subtheme: Disclosing about Accommodations (n=2)

- I would say one of the things that can be hard when asking for accommodations is that either you have to wait and try and find office hours that don't always mesh or you have to go right before a class or right after a class and there's everyone around. (Interview One)
- it's kinda almost segregating to be a student. This hasn't happened to me cuz I usually finish in the allotted amount of time, but for some of the other girls that take it, to walk into the classroom in the middle of the lecture to hand in their test. Everybody's watching you go down the stairs and go up to the teacher and hand it. Then people say—I've heard people say, "I think that girl takes her test somewhere else" and things like that. It is almost—I don't know if there's anything they can do to change it, cuz I mean they have to give the test back, but I do notice that. (Interview Four)

Impact of Disability on Future Career/Career Preparedness (n = 5)

- I mean, that, and definitely when I went to go and try to do the accounting stuff, they were basically, “Nope. You need to be able to write it. You need to be able to spell it.” That dictated what I could and could not do for jobs. ... I mean, it’s just dictated what I could and could not do in the ways of work. Socially, not so much. (Interview One)
- It's definitely given me a better understanding for other people who have disabilities. When I go into my psych clinical I think that's gonna kind of give me an advantage because I've kinda been there and I know what it's like. (Interview Four)
- Since school's very hard for me, I don't know if I wanna pursue a master's degree. (Interview Five)
- Well, I think of, in future aspects, I don't know how well I'll be able to do in a job. (Interview Seven)

Academic Relationships with Classmates (n = 6)

- I seek out a lot of people in classes that have the opposite strengths as me. I've gotten really good at reading people early in classes and checking out their notes, and checking out how they do in the class without them noticing that I'm doing it. (Interview One)
- I'd say it's a learning experience 'cause oftentimes, there are times that I won't know what's gonna bother people until I'm told or I don't realize I'm doing something until I'm told. ... (Interview Six)
- I already came into college knowing people, but meeting people within other classes who are outside of that circle, it isn't hard. That's not hard. The part that is hard is them, like I said, understanding that there is certain things that I can't do and there's certain places I can't go. Some of them are like, "Oh, let's do this." I can't necessarily do that. Stuff like that. (Interview Ten)

Additional Time and Stress (n = 7)

- I kinda saw it as almost embarrassing like, “Oh, I need more help? Oh, great.” I’m seeing all these doctors and therapists. Sometimes that’s hard when you have to depend on so many people for help, and then you take on another one. Sure, people say, “Oh, you have so much to deal with. This is just one thing.” Again, it’s like you have a full bathtub and you just put a little extra and it just overflows. (Interview One)
- They’re saying that everyone is fighting some sort of battle so I guess if they don’t have disabilities, they have something else that they’re struggling with. So, I don’t know. Maybe it’s not different but maybe it is. If it is, then maybe we just have that extra difficulty level that they don’t have. So, on top of everything else, we have this. I qualify it as like a 30-hour a week job on top of everything else. (Interview Six)
- I feel it’s also been different, however, because a lot of students don’t have to overcome anything. A lot of students kind of have this—I don’t want to hate against them, because I have a lot of friends who are straight A students, but a lot of A students don’t have to work for what they have. (Interview Nine)
- I feel like my college experience is a little harder than everybody else’s. I feel like I’ve got to work a little harder than everybody else just because I need to be more prepared than they do. I can’t just come at the beginning of the semester and just move in and everything be honky dory ‘cause it just doesn’t work that way. (Interview Ten)

Interaction with the Disability Services Office (n = 6)

- Yeah. I'd looked at them and talked to them [local community college] and hadn't really gotten much of a good vibe from them. Because I had already been at [the college], and I had scoped out what we had and what was goin' on here, I had decided to come here. It was one of the factors of reasons why I came to [this college]. (Interview One)
- Then another thing I was thinking is, and this is maybe more something I should take up with the actual office for disabilities, but we're in this room to be distraction free and they've got people coming in at different times to take the tests. I'll be taking a test at 8:00 and somebody will come in for a test at 9:00. I have such focusing issues that I need silence and I need to just focus. Even for someone to open the door and talk to the girl, the proctor, things like that, can be distracting to me. I understand they're not gonna have one person for each test time, but that's distracting to me too. (Interview Four)
- The people at [the disability services office], they're just—all of them are so friendly and nice. They're all just such nice people. That's nice to see. (Interview Six)

Impact of Disability on Academic Performance (n = 6)

- The last three tests, I got 60s. I'm gonna get a 60 on it, yeah, if I study. It kinda defeats you. Also, with some other classes, I've gotten some Cs. Right now my average is like a 3.03, which is a 3.0. I'm happy, but it still stinks that I look around and I see everyone else with the honors and stuff. My parents don't know my GPA. They think it's higher. (Interview Two)
- I'm very happy and exuberant usually. It definitely hasn't completely made me depressed or anything, but there are days where I just don't wanna get out of bed because I don't wanna go to class. I don't wanna face something that I don't wanna learn about cuz I'm gonna fail anyway. I've been accustomed now to failing, which is not pleasant for me. (Interview Five)
- So, it's kind of a mental thing in a sense of, "Okay, I worked really hard. I took the test. I think I did okay." I got the test back and got a 40. You know so it's like all of that work, all of that effort is garbage, but maybe it's not garbage because maybe I'll remember something future in the line of—so it's just—it's still there. It's always gonna be there. (Interview Seven)
- When I have to get books and things [at the library], the shelves are too close together. I can't necessarily—I don't really fit in between the shelves. I can't come out at the end of the shelves because there's tables in the middle, so there's no space for me to come out in between. The books are too high or too low, so I have to come with a list to give them at the desk so that they can go get them for me. That is all too complicated for me to have to—it's not like I can go to the library. Okay. I'm going to look for my books. No, because I have to already come ready and prepared so that I don't waste a lot of time. (Interview Ten)

Implications for Faculty/Institutions

- Faculty need to more aware of legal obligations related to SWD
 - Vicarious liability of institution
- Faculty could benefit from workshops and other training opportunities for enhancing their work with SWD, particularly those with mental health disabilities



Implications for Career Counselors

- Explore why students desire to change major/career goals
- Future challenges in the workplace
- Academic issues can follow SWD into the workplace
 - “Not seen as a team player” when asking for accommodations
 - Seen for what they *can't* do instead of what they *can* do
 - Feel as if they don't fit in – others may have to work harder to make up for what they can't do



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