10-12-2015

Accommodations in the College Setting: The Perspectives of Students Living with Disabilities

Lorna C. Timmerman
Ball State University, lctimmerman@bsu.edu

Thalia M. Mulvihill
Ball State University, tmulvihi@bsu.edu

Accommodations in the College Setting: The Perspectives of Students Living with Disabilities

Abstract

Using a critical interpretive framework, the authors utilized semi-structured interviews to understand the experiences and perceptions of two college students living with disability concerning their use of accommodations, modifications, and adaptations in program requirements, classroom instruction, and testing. The central research questions were: "Are accommodations perceived as effective in supporting students with disabilities in their academic and social pursuits? Do students perceive that accommodations allow them maximum engagement and participation in their educational experiences?" and "To what extent are accommodations perceived by the participants as leveling the playing field for students with disabilities?" And, finally, "What do the participants perceive as the biggest obstacles to success for students with disabilities?" An understanding of the participants' perceptions will enhance the overall awareness and appreciation for the experiences of students living with disability and will have direct implications for faculty-student interactions, student-to-student interactions as well as larger interactions within society.

Keywords

College Students With Disabilities, Accommodations, Academic Success, Qualitative Research

Accommodations in the College Setting:
The Perspectives of Students Living with Disabilities

Lorna C. Timmerman and Thalia M. Mulvihill
Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana, USA

Using a critical interpretive framework, the authors utilized semi-structured interviews to understand the experiences and perceptions of two college students living with disability concerning their use of accommodations, modifications, and adaptations in program requirements, classroom instruction, and testing. The central research questions were: "Are accommodations perceived as effective in supporting students with disabilities in their academic and social pursuits? Do students perceive that accommodations allow them maximum engagement and participation in their educational experiences?" and "To what extent are accommodations perceived by the participants as leveling the playing field for students with disabilities?" And, finally, "What do the participants perceive as the biggest obstacles to success for students with disabilities?" An understanding of the participants' perceptions will enhance the overall awareness and appreciation for the experiences of students living with disability and will have direct implications for faculty-student interactions, student-to-student interactions as well as larger interactions within society. Keywords: College Students With Disabilities, Accommodations, Academic Success, Qualitative Research

"I have learned that success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome while trying to succeed."
-- Booker T. Washington

High school students with disabilities are attending institutions of postsecondary education in rapidly increasing numbers, with their rate of college attendance more than doubling in the past twenty years (Lovett & Lewandowski, 2006). Today, 10.8% of all students enrolled in postsecondary institutions are students with disabilities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). This number is an underestimate of the actual number of students with disabilities in attendance, however, as many college students choose not to disclose their disability (Cook, Rumrill, & Tankersley, 2009). Students with disabilities in the secondary educational system are protected by the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA), which mandates that high schools provide a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment by developing special education programs and services which strive to meet each individual student's special learning needs. It can be a real shock for students with disabilities to learn upon graduation from high school and admission to college that the rights and protections for special education services afforded to them under the auspices of IDEIA no longer apply in their postsecondary educations. In high school, IDEIA places "the burden on the school to find and serve the student with an IEP. In higher education the burden is on the student, not the school, to find the appropriate services and navigate through higher education" (Wolanin & Steele, 2004, p. 27).

Students with disabilities who pursue a college education are protected under the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 – both are civil rights laws that prohibit discrimination against a student whose "physical or

mental disability substantially limits one of more major life activities, such as. . . learning." Section 504 is designed to level the playing field for students with disabilities by barring discrimination and providing equal access to all students. Section 504 provides that "no otherwise qualified individual with a disability . . . shall, solely by reason of her or his disability, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance." Thus, Section 504 provides students with disabilities a means to receive accommodations such that they can have access to all school programs and activities.

This research project was undertaken to learn more about the perceptions of college students living with disability concerning their use of accommodations, modifications and adaptations in program requirements, classroom instruction, and assessment and how these accommodations support (or do not support) students living with disability in their college experiences. Participants were asked to discuss their perceptions of barriers and facilitators to disclosing their disability and seeking services from the disability office. The participants' perceptions of the usefulness of accommodations as well as their perceptions of faculty and peer attitudes regarding students with disability and the role of accommodations for students with disability were also elicited. The candidly expressed perceptions of the students with disabilities regarding their accommodation use can provide insight for disability support and other student services personnel, transition specialists, faculty, and other students with disabilities who are negotiating with themselves whether or not to disclose their disabling condition at the postsecondary level.

One of the beauties and unique purposes of qualitative research is that it can truly delve into the deepest thoughts and feelings and experiences of the people researchers wish to explore. I (the first author) have a personal interest in special education and the accommodations that students living with disabilities receive because I have a daughter with autism. She receives numerous accommodations, modifications and adaptations in her educational experiences. As diagnoses of autism spectrum disorders has greatly increased in the past fifteen years, and as many of these children with autism are entering their postsecondary years, college campuses are seeing an influx of students with autism spectrum disorders. While I am personally interested in autism and the experiences of those who are living with the diagnosis, I also have a professional interest as an educator in the higher education setting and in special education issues. I am strongly interested in learning more about students with disabilities, how their disabilities impact their learning and educational experiences, how accommodations can enhance their success in their postsecondary educations and how I, as a college instructor, can best facilitate the academic success of students with disabilities in my classes

My position as a researcher is two-fold. I am both a parent of a child with a disability and I am an educator in the higher education setting. I am interested on the level of the parent and advocate; I am interested on the level of the educator and advocate. I feel that it is my obligation to advocate for students with disabilities in all aspects of their lives, promote non-discriminatory practices and beliefs, and raise awareness of the way the non-disabled majority in society consciously or unconsciously discriminates against and devalues persons with disabilities. It is my belief that accommodations, adaptations, and modifications in postsecondary pursuits can improve the chances for college students with disabilities to live productive and quality lives. Qualitative research can provide a way to better understand peoples' perspectives and experiences and help generate awareness, acceptance, and understanding of complex phenomena. The second author is a qualitative research expert who also has a special interest in college students with disabilities and serves as a faculty mentor for students with disabilities on a residential four-year public university. She assisted with the creation of the study design, including the articulation of the theoretical perspective, revising

the Research Questions (RQs) to align with the purpose of the study in relation to the identified gap in the literature, and crafting the IRB protocol. She also assisted with the development of the semi-structured interview questions, examined the raw data to confirm accuracy of the interpreted results, contributed to the discussion section, and revised and edited the full manuscript where needed. The following piece is the result of our endeavor to better understand and make sense of the perceptions of college students living with disability and their use of accommodations in furthering their educational aspirations.

The authors have established some processes and procedures to increase the study's trustworthiness, credibility, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For example, a form of triangulation (Patton, 1999) was used as data was gathered from observations and interviews. Furthermore, the participants' stories were portrayed as accurately as possible   with attention to social context and meaning (Popay, Rogers, & Williams, 1998). Thick description added to transferability of the findings (Geertz, 1973). To enhance credibility, participants were provided the opportunity to review their responses before the final transcriptions were produced (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is hoped that when the participants read the final project, they will feel that their experiences were relayed in a meaningful way.

Purpose of the Study

The intent of the research project was to better understand the experiences and perceptions of college students living with disability concerning their use of accommodations, modifications, and adaptations in program requirements, classroom instruction, and testing and other measures of assessment. As "there is little research that gives voice to the experiences and perceptions of individuals with disabilities" (Dowrick, Anderson, Heyer, & Acosta, 2005, p. 41), we wanted to further explore and make sense of the role that academic accommodations play for college students living with disability and add to the existing body of research (Barnard-Brak, Lechtenberger, & Lan, 2010). Are accommodations perceived by students living with disability as effective in supporting their academic and social pursuits? Do accommodations afford them maximum engagement and participation in their educational experiences? Do students with disabilities perceive that their accommodations "level the playing field" by opening to them the full range of inclusion and participation in all campus activities? What are the perceptions of students with disabilities regarding their biggest obstacles to success? And, how do faculty and peer attitudes impact participants' disclosure of disability and their use of accommodations?

Literature Review

Especially in the wake of current economic downturn and our increasingly information-based economy, a postsecondary education is a critical component in gaining meaningful and productive employment. It is well documented that in the United States individuals with disabilities are considerably less likely than those without disabilities to earn a college degree (12% vs. 31%; Erickson, Lee, & von Schrader, 2010; Garrison-Wade, 2012; Quick, Lehmann, & Deniston, 2003). Students with disabilities tend to face challenges in accessing and completing programs of study and often have lower attendance and graduation rates than do students without disabilities (Hadley, 2006). Federal legislation in the form of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 have attempted to break down barriers faced by students with disabilities in their postsecondary experiences. These two pieces of national legislation require institutions of higher education to provide equal access and reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities (Marshak, Van Wieren,

Ferrell, Swiss, & Dugan, 2010). Unfortunately, many students with disabilities do not make use of the disability services and accommodations that are available to them. Only 37% of secondary students who received special education services while in high school identify their disability at the postsecondary level; and of those who do self-identify, only 24% actually receive support services or accommodations (Newman, Wagner, Cameto, & Knokey, 2009).

The greatest barriers reported by students as reasons they did not seek the services and accommodations available to them at the postsecondary level frequently had to do with issues related to identity as a student with a disability. These identity issues were related to a desire for self-sufficiency, a desire to shed the stigmatized identity they had held in high school, and a desire not to allow the presence of disability to infiltrate their identity as a college student. Other prominent barriers to making full use of the services available to them included a desire to avoid negative social reactions, insufficient knowledge and confusion regarding disability services, disappointment with the lack of quality, usefulness, and timeliness of services, and negative experiences with faculty and peers (Marshak et al., 2010).

Research into the attitudes of college students with disabilities toward requesting the accommodations to which they are entitled is in its infancy. Many students with disabilities, especially those with non-visible disabling conditions such as learning disabilities, feel uncomfortable in disclosing their disability or feel unable to adequately express how their disability affects their classroom participation and academic performance (Cowen, 1993). Subsequently, they often fail to request the legally mandated accommodations that could lead to their academic success (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). According to Barnard-Brak, Sulak, Tate, and Lechtenberger (2011), the number one reason cited by students for not using the accommodations that are available to them is that they want to prove that they can do college without accommodations. The next most cited reason was the belief that accommodations are unfair to other students, followed by not liking to talk about their disability and not liking to admit that they had a disability. Many students also indicated that they did not trust either the office of disability or their professors to keep their information confidential and that they felt that the cost of talking about their disability to get accommodations outweighed any benefits they might receive (Barnard-Brak et al., 2011). Disclosure of disability has been called a double-edged sword since any benefits to be gained are often offset by the negative effects of social distancing and stigmatization (Crawford, 2002).

Too often, college students with both visible and non-visible disabilities have to contend with societal "red-shirting" and a great deal of social stigmatization. Students who disclose their disabilities are forced to wear a red shirt when they request accommodations, leaving many students wondering whether their disclosure will create more problems than it solves (Trammell, 2009). One of the unintended effect of wearing a "red shirt" is that the very "policy that makes disability exceptions (as in the case of college and university disability support services) also separates disabled people from non-disabled people" (Scotch, 2001, p. 389). Colleges and universities play a role in creating stigma by requiring disclosure for disability support services and accommodations. While disclosure is mandated by the ADA and hence is a practical necessity for students with disabilities, it has the effect of producing an openly accepted form of alienation, stigmatization, marginalization and social oppression (Kearney, 2003). While disclosure leads to accommodation, it also leads to discrimination. A student who wishes to request accommodations must disclose; and disclosure requires putting on the red shirt (Trammell, 2009).

Another obstacle that students with disabilities face is that many campuses require the student to take the letter of accommodation to their professors on the first day of class. Thus, the already stigmatized student is forced to discuss an issue which he or she tries to minimize and does not like to talk about with a professor, the expert in the field, whom the student potentially perceives as holding the most power in the academic environment. There is clearly

a power imbalance here; and the student who has witnessed a personal experience of discrimination is asked to "enter into the social exchange by introducing himself with what has historically been perceived as a weakness, a flaw, or a request for an unfair advantage" (Trammell, 2009, p. 26). As society in general continues to perceive disability in a negative light, it is quite understandable that many students with disabilities are reluctant to begin important relationships by discussing their disability; and hence, they choose not to disclose their disability at all. This failure to disclose closes the door to the available disability support services and academic accommodations that might enhance their postsecondary success. Interestingly, one study found that faculty who are female, non-tenured, housed within the College of Education, and those who have had prior disability-focused training are the ones with the most positive attitudes toward providing accommodations (Lombardi, & Murray, 2011).

According to Barnard-Brak et al. (2010), students with disabilities who have been academically successful tend to use three common strategies in disclosing their disabilities to their office of disability and to their professors and in seeking accommodations, which can facilitate their learning experiences and meet their diverse needs. These effective accommodation-seeking strategies include: scripting, rehearsing, and mentally mapping out the disclosure of their disability and being self-accepting of their disability; negotiating accommodations with faculty who are reluctant or hesitant to provide accommodations; and not disclosing the full nature and effect of their disability or downplaying their disability status in order to pass as able-bodied. Trammell (2009) found that students who are the most successful are those who are able to answer the following questions: Who do I tell? How much do I tell? When do I tell? Successful students have learned the skills necessary to navigate the disclosure terrain to gain accommodations; it is unclear how students who have been less successful can learn those skills.

While many students with disabilities make the decision to not disclose their disability and thus do not receive accommodations, for those students who do disclose and request accommodation, most express satisfaction with the accommodations and services they receive. One study found that 69% of students using disability services were very satisfied with their accommodations and 85% reported that their accommodations were appropriate for their needs; but, another 35% of students indicated that they had been denied needed accommodations (Sharpe, Johnson, Izzo, & Murray, 2005). Similar results were reported by the National Center for Educational Statistics (2003), who found that 22% of college students with disabilities did not receive the services and accommodations necessary for their full participation and achievement.

This review of the literature helped to identify an important gap in the research. Previous studies have failed to give adequate voice to the perceptions of students living with disability regarding the barriers, facilitators and usefulness of accommodations. The genuine experiences of the students living with disability are best expressed when the participants are allowed to freely communicate their perceptions in an open-ended interview format without forced response categories.

Data Collection and Sampling Methods

To learn about more about how students with disabilities perceive the use of accommodations in enhancing their educational success, the first author observed and interviewed two undergraduate students at a medium-sized Midwestern university. The university these students attended is well-renowned for being a disability-friendly campus that goes above and beyond the mandates of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board

at the selected university and informed consent of the participants was obtained. Purposive sampling (Popay et al., 1998) was used to select two undergraduate, female students as participants.

Participants

One student is a sixth year senior. She is legally blind, has cerebral palsy, and has a learning disability in math. This participant will hereafter be named "Erin." She is 25 years old and is majoring in special education. She intends to further her education by attending graduate school with the hope of securing post-degree employment with vocational rehabilitation services.

The other student is a second year sophomore and has been diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, dyslexia, learning disabilities, and ADHD. She indicated that she has a fourth grade reading level. She will be referred to as "Jessica." She is 20 years old and is also an education student with a major in special education. Her goal is to become a licensed teacher of children with special needs. She believes that her personal struggles throughout her educational journey will help her to understand the needs and desires of other students with special needs.

For each participant, initial meetings were scheduled to get to know each of them a little bit and to explain the purpose of the research. The first author observed each participant in a university classroom on three occasions for one-hour intervals and collected approximately 10 pages of field notes (data) during these observation sessions. The observations helped to get a picture of how each student functioned within the classroom setting, how they interacted with both peers and faculty, and how they made use of accommodations and assistive devices in the classroom. The observations also helped to inform the way the semi-structured interview protocol was developed and arranged. Three in-depth, face-to-face interviews with each participant were conducted by the first author to learn about their perceptions regarding the accommodations that they receive. The interviews took place in mutually agreed upon public locations and were digitally recorded with each participant's permission. To guide the interview, a semi-structured interview guide (Patton, 1990) was developed which steered the direction of the questions. Each participant was asked to share her experiences on several phenomena related to accommodations and disability support services which were grouped into three main categories. The first subset of questions deals with their perceptions of the usefulness, helpfulness, and meaningfulness of accommodations. The second series of questions concern their transition from the K-12 environment to the college setting, including their current use of services from the office of disability services, their use of assistive devices, the role of their faculty mentor and how that relationship might assist them in achieving success in college. The final selection of questions concerns their perceptions of acceptance by faculty and peers regarding their use of accommodations for enhancing their educational experiences and opportunities for success (see Appendix for the semi-structured interview questions).

These questions provided a starting point for guiding the discussion and they informally steered the course of the conversation; however, once rapport was established, the interviews took on a more conversational tone and we found ourselves expanding on the experiences being shared and sharing insights not originally envisioned. The breaking down of the word "interview" leads to a deeper appreciation and understanding of this process. "Inter" meaning between and "view" meaning perspective. That is exactly how these interviews unfolded: they became an interaction between two people. Interviews ranged in length from 35 minutes to nearly two hours and resulted in approximately 40 double-spaced pages of transcript data. Transcript data, derived from the interviews, is cited as "personal communication" per the current APA Style Guide.

Data Analysis

As the data were collected, transcriptions were produced by the first author, paying close attention to interpretive reflective thinking to assist in making sense of the data. The second author reviewed the raw data in conjunction with the first author's interpretations and confirmed the trustworthiness of the claims. These transcriptions "re-presented" the events from my participants' stories and helped the authors to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' perceptions and experiences. According to Bird (2005), the act of "transcription is interpretive in that it is the process of formulating and producing a meaning unique to the situation of utterance" (p. 230). The process of analyzing and coding the raw data is an inductive approach. The field notes from the observations and the transcribed interviews comprised the data sources. The data were considered in combination with relevant literature. Previous literature written on the topic can serve as a building block on which to build a foundation (Metcalfe, 2003). The data suggested broad trends, many of which had been encountered in the review of the literature, which were explored in greater depth.

A content/thematic data analysis process was used to explore potential meanings of the data. Thematic analysis is the search for themes that help to best describe the way the participants make sense, or meaning, of their experiences. The process involved the identification of themes through a methodical and thorough reading and re-reading of the data and looking for patterns within the data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The open coding phase was initiated by assigning a code name to each fragment of text. Through the process of inductive coding, the data were sorted and considered through the lens of critical theory, which holds that equity and social justice must reflect the interests and voices of marginalized persons (Reeves, Albert, Kuper, & Hodges, 2008). From within this critical interpretive framework, units of meaning were identified, described, and arranged into thematic categories for analysis by the first author. These themes were then further analyzed by both authors and organized into a series of major findings characterized as narrative vignettes brimming with insights about the perceptions and experiences of the participants.

Findings

Several themes emerged from the analysis of the data. While one of the students had a physical/sensory disability and the other a non-apparent disability, the participants agreed on several points regarding the obstacles they encounter in their daily lives as students as well as the importance of a strong relationship with a faculty mentor who can help them navigate the complexities of college life as a student with a disability. One of the most significant obstacles the participants mentioned was time and a lack thereof. Both stated that they required more time to complete reading assignments, take tests, and obtain materials in accessible formats due to their disabilities. Cognizant of the additional time they need, they acted proactively with respect to assignments, projects, and tests, and worked ahead when possible. Another theme that ran throughout the discourse was the importance of maintaining a positive attitude despite daily hassles as well as having a robust sense of self-efficacy. Both participants acknowledged that the accommodations they used helped them to succeed but felt that some students and faculty did not understand their need for accommodations.

Time as a Major Obstacle

Through interviews and observations, it was apparent that the extra time it takes to do things is a huge issue for "Erin." She has to allow for more time to do things than what most of us would need to set aside, due to her disabilities. As a college student, she is required to

do a lot of reading. The act of simply opening up a book, or printing off an article to read, or reading an article posted on the course management system Blackboard -- something that most of us take for granted as a relatively simple act to do – can be a much more difficult and multi-step process for "Erin." As a blind student, she has to have text in a certain format that her screen reading software can decipher. Blackboard is not at all friendly to those with visual disabilities. Screen readers cannot read the script that Blackboard uses. Before she can read any information disseminated via Blackboard, it has to be converted to coded format that her screen reading software can decipher.

While she does use screen reading software, she prefers to read things herself, rather than having some computer-generated voice read the words for her, because she understands the material better and processes it more deeply. So she reads most things herself with a magnifying glass despite the fact that eyestrain and chronic dry eye (conditions that are a part of her disability) make reading this way difficult. It also takes considerably longer to read a passage with this assistive device. You can't "read ahead" as you can only see exactly what is under the glass. Those of us who read without an assistive device may not realize how much we "read ahead" as we read nor do we consider the many steps involved in reading a book or article for class.

As she mentioned:

Everything does take longer. I mean, that's why you just *build extra time into your life somehow,* and that's one of the reasons that I wish that there were eight days in a week, because one of those days would just be taken up by me doing things (personal communication, October 4, 2011).

"Erin" went on to say:

I start things ahead of time if I can, because I know it's going to take me longer to do it. So, I mean, I'm not going to sit here and go, 'Oh, I didn't know it was going to take me this long,' and then I just didn't do it and now it's not done and it's already due… Like, I already know this, and so I start things ahead (personal communication, October 4, 2011).

"Jessica," too, has to allot substantially more time for reading her assignments. Due to her dyslexia, she reads at a fourth-grade level. She has to have her books and reading assignments scanned and put onto a CD so that her scan/read software can read aloud the content to her. The time and effort involved in securing the read-aloud format is an everyday obstacle that she encounters. "Jessica" also indicated that she has "a very supportive roommate and she's my best friend; she's everything. She helps me with everything. If I need something read, she reads it to me." "Jessica" also has someone who takes notes for her in each of her lecture classes, and these note takers read things to her as well.

Both "Erin" and "Jessica" demonstrate a proactive manner of dealing with the obstacle of things taking longer. They realize that it takes them longer to do things, so they adjust and manage their time in order to get things done on time, or even early. While the issue of "everything taking longer to do" for Erin is something that she has had to deal with her entire life, time involved in doing everyday acts presents a huge obstacle for both students interviewed. One of the themes I developed through analyzing and coding my data was "Time as an Obstacle." "Erin" accepts the fact that things are going to take her longer to do than normal-sighted persons, but she still acknowledges that it "stinks." "Jessica" also talked about the embarrassment she felt when instructors asked students to read passages during class and she couldn't read fast enough and didn't "want to be pointed out. You don't want to be that

girl that's off to the side being read to." This time obstacle was a recurring theme throughout the interviews. Both participants mentioned time as an obstacle with respect to getting their notes from note takers, with respect to the additional time it takes them to read a passage, and with respect to getting their materials in an accessible format. Both students have to make a special trip to the Testing Center to take their tests, and then it takes them longer to take their tests as they each have the accommodation of extended time on tests. As "Erin" is legally blind, she cannot read the directional or closure signs that we all take for granted. In the winter, due to her cerebral palsy, she has to use both crutches and a cane to get around. This, too, makes every walk across campus take longer.

Positive Attitude

A related theme that emerged from my data and supports how both participants deal with the issue of "Time as an Obstacle" was that of "Positive Attitude." Throughout all of the interviews, both of the students demonstrated a "get it done" attitude. Numerous times throughout the interviews "Erin" made the comment "you have to do it yourself. No one is going to do it for you." "Jessica," too, mentioned that "they tell you in college that it's all about your needing to ask for everything yourself." Both participants have learned that they must ask for what they need and their ability to self-advocate has developed as they have matured. "Erin's" statement that "I mean, that's really not even a setback; it's just what you have to get used to" shows her level of self-sufficiency and self-efficacy. She looks for the silver lining in the clouds and she finds them. She also stated in one of the interviews regarding her previous reluctance to request accommodations that:

> I don't anymore, I used to fight it, like I said, when I was younger, I would fight everything, and now it's like no – if you're going to give me something, to make it better, do it, because I want to be as successful as everyone else. There's no reason I can't be (personal communication, October 11, 2011).

"Jessica" reiterated this philosophy when she stated "Our disabilities don't stop us; they just give us little speed bumps." She went on to say:

> No one expected me to go to college. No one expected me to do any of this, and a lot of people ask why I'm doing it, but it's what I want to do. And it's what I know I can do (personal communication, February 9, 2012).

Both participants display a go-getter attitude and neither will allow anyone to hold them back. Both are aware that they have the same capabilities as anyone else. In another passage "Erin" said, "And, even if it's hard for me to get ahold of, I can still do it, because I'm not going to just not do something." I cannot put into words how much I respect these students' ability to be positive and maintain such a winning, I-can-do-this attitude when many people would simply crumble under the stress they endure on a daily basis.

Perception of Accommodations

The accommodations for learning my participants receive are much appreciated and assist them in managing their time obstacles. When asked how accommodations help her to be successful in her academic career, "Erin" stated, "Yeah, yeah. I mean, without them, I don't even want to think about where I'd be, but yeah, it wouldn't be as… nice. Right." "Jessica" indicated that she was "very thankful" for her accommodations "because without them I could

not do as well in school." The accommodation that "Erin" said was the most helpful to her was the extended time she gets on exams. This, again, hits on the issue of everyday things taking her longer to do. That things take extra time to do seems to be a big hindrance in both students' day-to-day living. "Jessica" said that having her tests read to her was the accommodation that was the most helpful for her academic success.

"Erin" believes that some of her peers perceive that she has it easier due to her accommodations. She said they believe "it must be really easy for you. But it's like, no, they don't realize that it's harder," and "But in the eyes of other people, it's like, "oh, man, that must be super easy…and it's like, no. It's really not." She mentioned that she believes that some of her peers do not understand why she still needs accommodations at the college level, and she supposes that they are thinking things like, "oh, she's leaving to take her test; she must be, you know, getting the answers or something." But she also stated that some of her peers have offered to help her, such as taking notes, without her even having to ask. They have just offered to help. Overall, regarding her use of academic accommodations, she has had positive experiences with most of her peers, especially once she has begun taking upper-level courses and has had many of the same classmates as in previous courses. Both students acknowledged that since they are special education majors, and thus most of their classmates are as well, their peers in this major may be more accepting and more understanding of their use of accommodations than might students from other majors. "Jessica" mentioned that "there's less understanding outside of education" and that "it's different in different fields." She indicated that she is hesitant to disclose her disability outside of the courses in her major. "If it's not an education class, I normally don't let it come out because I don't like the attention from it. Because it's normally not good attention you get from a disability," she stated. Later she indicated that peers "always notice when something's different. And I get a lot of eye-rolls from them."

Regarding their beliefs about faculty perceptions of their use of accommodations, for the most part, both participants have had good experiences at the college level. "Erin" acknowledged, however, that this university being renowned for its being disability-friendly was one thing that lured her to this campus. While most faculty have been respectful and helpful regarding her use of accommodations, some are less accepting. She stated,

> Other professors are skeptical of, that if we take the tests and go get PowerPoints or something ahead, that we'll go spread the word, but what do I have to spread? They're going to find it out anyway. They're all in this class (personal communication, October 4, 2011).

She went on to say,

> Yeah, once they understand that it's not you, you know, wanting the assignments ahead or whatever so you can go and cheat, it's to help yourself succeed, then yeah, most of them are pretty open (personal communication, October 4, 2011).

"Jessica" mentioned that "it's really hard to go to a teacher and tell them you have a disability." She went on to say:

> But now I have to go up on my own, to somebody I don't know, tell them I have a disability and explain it to them when I don't want people to remember me for my disability. So I don't like to tell people about it (personal communication, February 9, 2012).

"Erin" expressed that once a student with a disability goes through the Disabled Student Development Office and gets the letters of accommodation to take to their professors, "then it's easier because people understand. Maybe not always enjoy the fact that they understand, but they're willing to work with you." "Jessica" also expressed that "you can tell when teachers are a little bit aggravated by the little bit of extra work they have to do" and that "they just get annoyed by anything that's different or any kind of extra work . . . they make that into a big ordeal." Both participants maintained that while some professors may not initially be obliging and accepting of the accommodations, most will comply and consent to providing the requested accommodations. As "Jessica" said, "for the most part, they're pretty good about it." "Jessica" also mentioned the support she receives from some faculty who can personally relate to having a disability. "Jessica" asserted that that one such faculty member:

> Can understand. And some days, when you're having a bad day, and you're just sitting there crying, she just tells you, "you know what, it just sucks." And sometimes that's all you need to hear. Not that everything's going to be okay, not that this is what you need to do; just that it sucks (personal communication, February 9, 2012).

Faculty Mentorship

Both of my participants have a faculty mentor from their major area of special education. "Erin" and her faculty mentor have been developing this mentoring relationship for six years, since her freshman year. They have developed a fairly intimate relationship, and even her parents and the faculty mentor have established close friendships. She stated, "it's like he's just my second dad. Basically." She indicated that this didn't happen overnight, but that their relationship has evolved over the time they have spent together. She stated,

> I tell him things now before I tell my mother. For certain things. Because I'm pretty sure if I told my mother everything that every doctor down here's said to me, she'd have me wrapped up in bubble wrap. So, he's kind of the person I'll go to (personal communication, October 4, 2011).

"Jessica" stated that her biggest fear in coming to college was "not having someone to go to," and she indicated that her faculty mentor is "there to help me and not only give advice . . . but he's there to guide me in the right direction." She stated that what helps the most is the knowledge that her faculty mentor is someone who she knows is there for her and believes in her. She said:

> He's amazing. He's easy to relate to because we have a lot in common with disabilities and it helps show me that I can do it, because when everything's going rough it's sometimes hard to remember that I can push through everything, especially when everybody's going faster than me…He always tells me that he believes in me and I can do it (personal communication, February 9, 2012).

"Erin" talked about how her faculty mentor has helped her develop better self-advocacy skills. He has been someone for her to be accountable to and someone to help her navigate her way through college as a person living with a disability. He has helped her out in myriad ways, from taking her to doctor appointments to helping her buy a refrigerator when hers needed

replaced, to checking up on her grades, major assignments and tests. "Jessica" confirmed that her faculty mentor "helps me to do it on my own" and "he goes out of his way to make us feel like a family." Both participants affirmed that their faculty mentor played a large role in their maintaining a positive attitude in the face of obstacles.

Discussion

While students living with disability are attending college in much greater numbers, there have been few studies that attempted to delve deeply into the perceptions of students regarding their use of academic accommodations in enhancing their achievement and success. Students living with disability encounter many obstacles daily that students without disabilities rarely need to consider. Students with disability must inevitably portray high levels of self-efficacy in order to be successful in the postsecondary realm. They need to demonstrate strong self-advocacy skills, a willingness to disclose their disability, and a positive "can-do" attitude. They must learn to deal with negative and poorly-informed perceptions regarding the use of accommodations by both their professors and their peers. They must also learn to ignore disrespectful attitudes and behaviors of others towards them. A faculty mentoring relationship can be a key element in the success of a student living with disability.

Since many students with disabilities (and particularly those with visible, physical disabilities, such as "Erin") have suffered from the stigmatizing effects of disability since their infancy, there is a strong tendency for students with these types of disabilities to accept their secondary citizen status along with a certain level of oppression without question (Green, 2003).

Most students with disabilities appear to recognize that their impairment is a part of who they are and they try to keep it from interfering with their lives. Most have come to a place of adjustment where they realize that they can do most things that non-disabled people can do (Adams & Proctor, 2010). Both participants demonstrated positive attitudes, high levels of self-acceptance and both appeared well adjusted to their disabilities. Their high levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy were probably large contributory factors in their ability to attempt and succeed at college.

Students with disabilities have been found to take longer to complete their degree programs than do students without disabilities (Brinckerhoff, Shaw, & McQuire, 1992). This is true for "Erin," as well. Assuming she completes her student teaching in the coming semester, it will have taken her six and a half years to earn her bachelor's degree in education. When one considers how much more time it takes her to perform the daily tasks of being a student, such as reading a passage, this is not a surprising finding.

Each of the participants relayed experiences of both positive and negative responses to their use of accommodations by other students and by their professors. As both participants were education majors, their classroom peers and their teachers were likely to be more familiar and comfortable working with students with disabilities and hold more favorable attitudes towards the abilities of students with disabilities. The experiences of these participants may not mirror the experiences of students majoring in the hard sciences or other fields where disability is not an area of study. Overall, both participants indicated that when faculty understood the importance of accommodations for enhancing academic success, they were more comfortable in making the accommodations and were more willing to work with the student to make the learning experience valuable. The participants in this study felt that when their fellow students understood that the accommodations do not give an unfair advantage to the student with a disability, their peers, too, were more accepting of accommodations. These findings are supported by previous research on barriers to the use of accommodations by college students with disabilities (Marshak et al., 2010). Both students interviewed were

grateful for the accommodations they received and felt that they would not have been as successful without them.

The relationship that each participant had fostered with a faculty mentor facilitated enhanced self-advocacy skills in each student. Both participants indicated that having someone to talk to who understood their struggles was instrumental to their success and in their maintaining a positive attitude in the face of obstacles.

An unanticipated outcome of this research project was that through the reflection and thinking aloud processes inherent to the interview method, the students with disabilities interviewed appeared to become more aware of how they participate in creating and shaping what happens to them in the classroom and throughout campus. They came to the realization that their use of accommodations and disability support services can only be as successful as their ability to advocate for themselves and to request said accommodations. As "Erin" stated, "you have to do it yourself. No one is going to do it for you." Hence, the students became more fully conscious of their roles as both creators and products of their social realities. Their social realities are constructed as they go about living their daily lives, and they are active participants in shaping and changing their realities. Qualitative research seeks to describe and analyze complex experiences and can go far in the endeavor to help people live more satisfying and successful lives by realizing how they influence and mold their own reality.

Benefits of the Study

The primary benefit to be derived from this project lies in the increased understanding and awareness of the perceptions and experiences of college students living with disability that will come as a result of this study. This benefit will extend not only to faculty and student affairs personnel but also will benefit students who wish to better understand and appreciate the experiences of students living with disability, the obstacles they face in their daily lives, and the role that accommodations can play in leveling the playing field and opening to students with disabilities the same opportunities to participate in campus life. Teachers in institutions of higher education need to be aware of the experiences of students living with disability so that they can implement universally-designed teaching strategies that will meet all students' needs. Professional development educational opportunities need to be made available for faculty to increase their awareness of the experiences and obstacles faced by students with disability and to learn to adjust their teaching styles and instructional practices to better accommodate the needs of all students.

The insights gained through the telling of my participants' experiences can inform faculty and peers of the intricacies and complexities involved in the use of accommodations as well as can help other students with disabilities learn from the experiences of others how best to succeed in their postsecondary journeys. Bringing to light the perspectives of persons whose voices have all-too-often been silenced is imperative. Disability has long lagged behind other forms of stigmatized identity. Slavery was abolished in 1865 and women gained the right to vote in 1820, but it was not until the 1990 passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act that individuals with disabilities were totally liberated and accorded equal opportunity in the eye of the law (Trammell, 2009). The use of accommodations is one avenue to securing equal opportunity for students with disabilities as they navigate their college careers.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

A limitation of this study is that each of the participants attended the same university, one that is known for being a disability-friendly campus that provides exemplary support services to SWD as well as a welcoming campus environment for SWD. Due to the

university's commitment to embracing SWD and providing a campus that is both physically hospitable and emits a campus atmosphere that is warm and friendly towards the diverse learning needs of SWD, generalization to other campuses without the same level of services and acceptance for SWD may be hampered. Any time data are gathered from one singular institution, generalization of the findings should proceed with caution. Readers should understand that findings from this study may not apply to other colleges or universities.

A limitation of any research relying on self-reported attitudes and behaviors is that the participants may not answer truthfully and/or the participants may perceive their abilities to be greater or lesser than they really are (Northrup, 1997). However, Haeffel and Howard (2010) stated that the self-report is a valuable means for assessing plans, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. Even in cases where respondents misrepresent attitudes and behaviors, a person's inaccurate perception may be a more robust predictor of future outcomes than an objective reality.

An area that needs further exploration in this analysis is the impact of implicit attitudes held by college faculty toward students with disabilities. It would be interesting to interview faculty members regarding their views of the students living with disability in their classes. This study was one-sided in that only students were interviewed. To expand understanding, faculty should be interviewed regarding their perceptions of students with disability and how they perceive students' requests for accommodations. Another area of potential exploration would be that of faculty perceptions regarding how small adjustments to their teaching strategies and integration of technology into their instructional practices might facilitate the learning experiences of students with disability. The experiences of these authors have led them to believe that there are many harmful stereotypes and misperceptions of students with disabilities and their use of accommodations among instructors in institutions of higher. When students with disability perceive that some faculty are reluctant to make reasonable accommodations, this lessens the likelihood that these students will request the accommodations that could help them be successful in their academic careers and ultimately in their capacity to live purposeful, productive, and meaningful lives.

References

Adams, K. S., & Proctor, B. E. (2010). Adaptation to college for students with and without disabilities: Group differences and predictors. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability, 22*, 166-184.

Americans with Disabilities Act, 42 U.S.C. §§ 12101 et seq.

Barnard-Brak, L., Lechtenberger, D., & Lan, W. Y. (2010). Accommodation strategies of college students with disabilities. *The Qualitative Report, 15*, 411-429. Retrieved from http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol15/iss2/10/

Barnard-Brak, L., Sulak, T., Tate, A., & Lechtenberger, D. (2011). Measuring college students' attitudes toward requesting accommodations: A national multi-institutional study. *Assessment for Effective Interventions, 35*, 141-147.

Bird, C. M. (2005). How I stopped dreading and learned to love transcription. *Qualitative Inquiry, 11*(2), 226–248.

Brinckerhoff, L., Shaw, S., & McQuire, J. (1992). Promoting access, accommodations, and independence for college students with learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 25*, 417-429.

Cook, L., Rumrill, P. D., & Tankersley, M. (2009). Priorities and understanding of faculty members regarding college students with disabilities. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 21*(1), 84-96.

Cowen, S. (1993). Transition planning for LD college-bound students. In S. A. Vogel & P. B. Adelman (Eds.*), Success for college students with learning disabilities* (pp. 39-56). New York, NY: Springer-Verlag.

Crawford, V. (2002). *Embracing the monster: Overcoming the challenges of hidden disabilities.* Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brooks Publishing.

Dowrick, P. W., Anderson, J., Heyer, K., & Acosta, J. (2005). Postsecondary education across the USA: Experiences of adults with disabilities. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation, 22*(1), 41-47.

Erickson, W., Lee, C., & von Schrader, S. (2010, March 17). *Disability statistics from the 2008 American Community Survey (ACS).* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Disability Demographics and Statistics (StatsRRTC). Retrieved from www.disabilitystatistics.org

Fereday, J., & Muir-Cochrane, E. (2006). Demonstrating rigor using thematic analysis: A hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 5*, 1-11.

Garrison-Wade, D. F. (2012). Listening to their voices: Factors that inhibit or enhance postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities. *International Journal of Special Education, 27*, 113-125.

Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Green, S. E. (2003). "What do you mean what's wrong with her?": Stigma and the lives of families of children with disabilities. *Social Science and Medicine, 57*, 1361-1374.

Hadley, W. M. (2006). L. D. students' access to higher education: Self-advocacy and support. *Journal of Developmental Education, 30*(2), 10-16.

Haeffel, G., & Howard, G., (2010). Self-report: Psychology's four-letter word. *American Journal of Psychology, 123*, 181-189.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, 20 U.S.C. §1401 et seq.

Janiga, S. J., & Costenbader, V. (2002). The transition from high school to postsecondary education for students with learning disabilities: A survey of college service coordinators. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 35*, 462-468.

Kearney, R. (2003). *Strangers, gods and monsters: Interpreting otherness*. London, UK: Routledge.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Marshak, L., Van Wieran, T., Ferrel, D. R., Swiss, L., & Dugan, C. (2010). Exploring barriers to college student use of disability services and accommodations. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability, 21*, 151-165.

Metcalfe, M. (2003). Author(ity): The literature review as expert witnesses. *Qualitative Social Research, 4*(1), Art. 18. Retrieved from http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/1-03/1-03metcalfe-e.htm

Newman, L., Wagner, M., Cameto, R., & Knokey, A. M. (2009). *The post-high school outcomes of youth with disabilities up to 4 years after high school. A report of findings from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) (NCSER 2009-3017).* Menlo Park, CA: SRI International. Retrieved from www.nlts2.org/reports/2009_04/nlts2_report_2009_04_complete.pdf

Northrup, D. A. (1997). *The problem of the self-report in survey research*. York, PA: Institute for Social Research. Retrieved from http://www.math.yorku.ca/ISR/self.htm

Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Patton, M. Q. (1999). Enhancing the quality and credibility of qualitative analysis. *HSR: Health Services Research, 34*(5), 1189-1208.

Popay, J., Rogers, A., & Williams, G. (1998). Rationale and standards for the systematic review of qualitative literature in health services research. *Qualitative Health Research. 8*, 341-351.

Quick, D., Lehmann, J., & Deniston, T. (2003). Opening doors for students with disabilities on community college campuses: What have we learned? What do we still need to know? *Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 27*, 815-828.

Reeves, S., Albert, M., Kuper, A., & Hodges, B. D. (2008). Qualitative research: Why use theories in qualitative research? *British Medical Journal, 337*, 631-634. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/20510825

Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Section 504, 29 U.S.C. § 794 (1973).

Scotch, R. (2001). American disability policy in the twentieth century. In P. Longmore & L. Umansky (Eds.). *The new disability history: American perspectives* (pp. 375-392). New York, NY: New York University Press.

Sharpe, M. N., Johnson, D. R., Izzo, M., & Murray, A. (2005). An analysis of instructional accommodations and assistive technologies used by postsecondary graduates with disabilities. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation, 22*, 3-11.

Trammell, J. (2009). Red-shirting college students with disabilities. *The Learning Assistance Review, 14*(2), 21-31.

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2003). *The condition of education 2003*. NCES 2003-067, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2011). *Students with disabilities at degree-granting postsecondary institutions: First look*. NCES 2011-018, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

The first subset of questions deals with their perceptions of the usefulness, helpfulness, and meaningfulness of accommodations.

> • Which types of accommodations, modifications or adaptations does my participant use? What classroom accommodations does she receive? Adaptations in program requirements? Accommodations in assessment? What other adaptations, accommodations or modifications does she receive?
>
> • How does my participant view the use of the accommodations she receives? What is her perspective about having these accommodations? What is her view of the meaning or role of these accommodations as they relate to her academic success?
>
> • In what ways does the use of accommodations help her succeed and make academic progress?
>
> • Which accommodations does she feel are most necessary for her success? Does she perceive that she receives the accommodations that she needs/desires? What are her thoughts about how sufficient her accommodations are? How does she feel that they are or are not sufficient?
>
> • What accommodations does my participant wish she had but does not?
>
> The second series of questions concern the participant's transition from the K-12 environment to the college setting, including her current use of services from the office of disability services, her use of assistive devices, the role of her

faculty mentor and how that relationship might assist her in her successful completion of college.

• How well does she perceive that she has navigated the transition from K-12 federally mandated IDEA accommodations to Section 504 accommodations in higher education? In what areas has she transitioned successfully? In what areas might she have struggled?

• What useful services does she receive from the Office of Student Disabilities? Does she use assistive devices? If so, how do they help her succeed?

• What has been her experience in having a faculty mentor? How has the mentoring relationship been a factor in navigating her transition and ultimately her success? What benefits does she derive from this relationship? Would she please share her story concerning her faculty/student mentoring relationship?

The final selection of questions concerns the participant's perception of acceptance by faculty and peers regarding her use of accommodations for enhancing her educational experiences and opportunities for success.

• How does she feel about disclosing her disability to faculty and peers? In which situations is she the most comfortable disclosing? In which situations is she the most reluctant to disclose her disability? What are her thoughts about the "visibility" of her disability having any effect on her willingness to disclose?

• How does she feel faculty perceive of her use of accommodations?

• How does she feel her peers perceive of her use of accommodations? What is her perception regarding her peers' acceptance of her using accommodations? What is her view regarding any peers who might feel that her use of accommodations is unjustified and unfair?

Author Note

Lorna C. Timmerman, Ed.D., Adult, Higher and Community Education, Ball State University. Lorna's dissertation explored how self-determination among incoming college students affects behaviors related to retention and success. Research and teaching interests include self-determination, transition to adult life, teacher education and special education, best practices for teaching, and assessment of student learning and engagement. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: Lorna C. Timmerman, Department of Special Education, Ball State University; Email: lctimmerman@bsu.edu.

Thalia M. Mulvihill, Ph.D., Professor of Social Foundations and Higher Education at Ball State University. Her research and teaching interests include qualitative research methods, innovative pedagogies, and the history/sociology of higher education. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: Thalia M. Mulvihill at tmulvihi@bsu.edu.

Article Citation

Timmerman, L. C., & Mulvihill, T. M. (2015). Accommodations in the college setting: The perspectives of students living with disabilities. *The Qualitative Report, 20*(10), 1609-1625. Retrieved from http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol20/iss10/5