

## A Door Must Be Opened: Perceptions of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education

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### ABSTRACT

Support services and legislation have contributed to the steady increase of students with disabilities in higher education. The question is whether obstacles that impeded success have been removed, or are students with disabilities still a marginalised group, deprived of the benefits of higher education? In this study we interviewed college students about their perceptions of faculty–student relationships and other factors that might affect their postsecondary experience. Themes identified in the transcripts of the interviews corresponded with literature. In addition, the importance of telling their stories and the concept of voice were apparent, corroborating the 1997 research findings of Beilke and Yssel. In contrast with those findings, however, participants in our study reported a positive environment, and a willingness on the part of faculty to provide accommodations.

### KEYWORDS

College success; faculty–student relationships; higher education; persistence; postsecondary students; students with disabilities; self-determination; self-advocacy skills

## Introduction

In recent years the numbers of students with disabilities in higher education have steadily increased due to support programs and legislation (e.g. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990), and the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA, 2004). According to the US Government Accountability Office (2009), students with disabilities represent 11% of students enrolled in postsecondary institutions in the United States. In spite of a 2% increase in enrolment since 2000 (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011), students with disabilities, “the most recent marginalized group waiting to gain full access to the American dream” continue to be confronted with difficulties in higher education; specifically, legal, financial, academic, and institutional obstacles (Gordon, 2004, p. 1).

Researchers have identified various factors that have had an impact on both academic success and social experiences of students with disabilities in college (e.g. DaDeppo, 2009; Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011; Marshak, Van Wieren, Ferrell, Swiss, & Dugan, 2010; Murray, Wren, & Keys, 2008). These students have to adapt to a new set of challenges and responsibilities like all other students; however, students with disabilities also have to manage their accommodations along with academic course work (Getzel & Thoma, 2008). Other barriers include

reluctance on the part of students to disclose their disabilities and be labelled. In order to receive accommodations, student must self-disclose but some opt not to do that. Thus, Getzel and Thoma (2008) asserted that “these students may be anxious for a ‘new beginning’ in an educational setting by not having to deal with being labeled” (p. 77). Additionally, Trammel and Hathaway (2007) described students’ decision to seek help as complex, often correlating to campus climate as well as personal factors, including self-determination and the ability to engage in self-advocacy. After registering with the designated office on campus, students have to approach faculty regarding accommodations and advocate for themselves. Additionally, in order to advocate for themselves, students with disabilities need self-determination skills to successfully transition to, and be successful in college.

Retention and graduation rates have been influenced by students’ involvement in the academic and social life on campus, because this involvement significantly increases the likelihood to persist (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011). Subsequently, faculty/student mentor programmes, freshmen year seminar classes, cohorts and student learning communities have been identified as determining factors that promote integration and graduation (DaDeppo, 2009). While recognising this connectedness with the learning community, faculty, and student body that strengthens the impetus to persist, it is important to note that faculty members’ unwillingness to provide accommodations could present additional problems for students with disabilities (DaDeppo, 2009; Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011; Murray et al., 2008; Yuen & Shaughnessy, 2001).

Faculty certainly play a dominant role in creating the context for the delivery of instruction and in developing systems that support knowledge acquisition and understanding (Murray et al., 2008). Moreover, their role in establishing a caring, mentoring relationship within the context of the classroom is of utmost importance (Beilke & Yssel, 1998). In his study, Gordon (2004) cited faculty attitudes and entrenched academic culture in higher education as major barriers to implementing accommodations. The author reported that faculty might resent the perceived intrusion whereas some might be ignorant of their responsibilities.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of students with disabilities in higher education; specifically, their views of the relationship between student and faculty, and the possible effect of those relationships on the college experience for students with disabilities. This project was a replication of a 1997 study, *The Chilly Climate for Students with Disabilities in Higher Education* (Beilke & Yssel, 1999). Participants in that study perceived a stark contrast between an apparent willingness by faculty to provide accommodations, and yet a very negative classroom climate. It is important to determine how the climate in higher education has changed for students with disabilities since then, in order to identify current factors that promote or impede success.

## Method

### *Participants*

The study was conducted at a mid-sized university in the Midwest. Twelve students with disabilities were interviewed. Participants had to be at least 18 years old, full-time students at the university, and had to be registered with the university’s disabilities services office. This office assists students with disabilities by providing note takers, mentors, adaptive technology, and information packets for faculty. Support can also be obtained at an academic

support centre that assists all students on campus by providing tutoring. Students with disabilities may opt to take tests and exams at this centre where they are provided with appropriate accommodations, such as extended time on tests, tutoring, and a quiet, supportive environment for test taking.

We used purposeful sampling to recruit participants. Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that a researcher wants to discover and gain insight, and thus selects a sample from which the most can be learned (Merriam, 1998). In this particular study we were interested only in the opinions of students with disabilities, hence purposeful sampling seemed most appropriate.

An e-mail (see Appendix 1) explaining the study and asking for volunteers was sent to the director of the university's disabilities services, who forwarded it to the students who were registered with this office. Students were to contact the researchers if they were interested in participating in the project. They were informed via email that the study involved participation in an interview focusing on the importance of the relationship between faculty and students, and factors promoting or impeding academic success. Furthermore, students were assured that participation was voluntary, and no incentives were offered. The researchers made every attempt to use appropriate sampling techniques and build a trail of evidence (interview schedules, tapes with raw data) in order to enhance reliability and internal validity.

The Director of disabilities services advised the researchers about a possible reluctance on the part of especially undergraduate students to volunteer for any study, thus the decision was made to contact all registered students with the hope that at least 10 of them would indicate interest. A total number of approximately 600 students with disabilities were registered with the office of disabilities services at the university. We received responses from 17 students within the first week and 12 ultimately indicated interest in participating. Demographic data of the 12 eligible participants included age, disability, and area of study (see Appendix 2).

### ***Procedures and Interviews***

Individual interviews were conducted by one of the researchers in a conference room on campus. The participants signed a letter of consent before being interviewed and were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty. The researchers used a semi-structured script for the interview. Students were asked open-ended questions about the nature of their disabilities, their college experience in general, relationships with faculty, and their willingness to provide accommodations (see Appendix 3 for interview questions). The participants were advised not to identify faculty members by name. The interviews, which lasted approximately 1 h, were audiotaped, transcribed by one of the researchers, and then independently analysed for content by two of the researchers.

### ***Data Analysis***

In order to reduce the possibility of interpreter bias and to enhance internal validity, we used triangulation when analysing the data (Merriam, 1998). Field notes taken during the interview provided additional information. Two of the researchers independently read through the transcripts and identified themes, and then met to compare and discuss the findings. All comments and perceptions were identified by fictitious names assigned to participants.

## Results

An analysis of the transcribed interviews revealed recurring themes for most of the participants, but also similar observations by some of the participants, noteworthy due to their implications for practice and further research. The two over-arching themes identified were the importance of faculty–student relationships, and independence/self-determination and a desire to be like any other student.

### *Faculty–Student Relationships and Willingness to Provide Accommodations*

As in the 1997 study by Beilke and Yssel, our participants were eager to tell their stories during the interviews; however, their experiences with faculty were markedly different from participants in the 1997 study. Connie, a blind student, described her experiences with faculty and their willingness to provide accommodations as very positive, and singled out a particular instructor who was “phenomenal”. She explained how she provided her instructors with the information/accommodation sheet from disabilities services office on the first day of class, and “they’ve always said, ‘hey, you know, I’m not a mind reader; come talk to me if you need assistance.’ But they’ve definitely opened that door.” Connie was especially pleased that instructors who had had other blind students in the past did not assume that all blind students would need the same help.

Interestingly, a level of discomfort with regards to disabilities might still be present to a certain extent, although it could be interpreted as sensitivity to the issue of blindness. Connie perceived some instructors to be uncomfortable if a reference to blindness came up in a lecture: “Some of them kind of stray away from, they are kind of concerned about being politically correct ... you’re like, dude, I’m blind, it’s OK you can say the word blind and it will be OK.” Lisa, a graduate student with a visual impairment, also did not hesitate to explain her disability; she argued that her disability was apparent: “it’s just out there. So I might as well just start talking about it right off the bat.”

Cathy, a student with a visual impairment, had very positive experiences with faculty members, except one. In contrast with the sensitivity that Connie described, Cathy felt that one of the instructors was “a little too open about it”, when referring to her disability. According to Cathy, this particular instructor made comments about her disability in class that she found “disappointing”:

He just says them couple of times in the class period and it’s just kind of frustrating, it’s like “you just please be quiet and not say anything. Can you just pass out the worksheet just like you would to anyone else.”

The remarks from this instructor would, for example, include “you have the bigger worksheet because you can’t see.” It seemed to the interviewers that the instructor might have been trying to be humorous, honest, and very “open” about the disability by making these kinds of comments, yet they were clearly not received in this vein by the student.

Annie, a non-traditional student, singled out an instructor whose businesslike attitude she appreciated. She felt he was listening to her and did not treat her differently in class. Dan, a blind student, explained that although some instructors did not really provide accommodations for him, they taught class “incorporating everything visual and audio so that anyone can really learn from those teachers.” Dan also identified group work as a potential difficulty for blind or visually impaired students. His experience as an undergraduate student was that

the rest of the group were not willing to explain what they were doing and completed group projects without involving him; “that doesn’t really help me because I want to learn it.” He felt instructors should be aware of this and monitor group work more effectively.

While talking about accommodations, Daniel, a student with dyslexia, made an interesting observation. According to him instructors would readily provide extra time once they received the letter about his disability from the disabilities services office:

... and that’s nice but for me it’s like, if I don’t know the answer putting on more time isn’t going to really help me. So, especially for Social Sciences it’s like, you know, if you don’t know the answer, looking at it for 20 minutes isn’t like it will just magically appear.

Finally, he stated that he was really happy at this university: “They’ve done me right a lot of the time here, so, I feel wanted by [name of university].”

Jack felt some of his instructors did not really understand dyslexia but they tried to understand and were accommodating. He appreciated the fact that they did not single him out, which was a problem for him in high school. Mike, a student with Brittle Bone Disease, found faculty very accommodating but argued that the initiative had to come from the student: “The student has to accept the fact that they need help.”

There were also faculty members who seemed to go overboard in their attempts to be helpful. Martin, a student with cerebral palsy, mentioned one instructor’s absence policy. Everyone was allowed “seven absences over the course of the semester, which I thought was a little crazy because it was a very interactive class and you kind of needed to be there.” This instructor privately told Martin, a wheelchair user, that if he could not be at class due to bad weather, such absence would not be counted as one of the seven absences. “So, basically he was telling me that in the event of bad weather I would have as many absences from the classes I wanted, which is a little ridiculous.” Martin was the only student that semester with perfect attendance, “everyone else was using their seven absences left and right, and I wanted to be there.” On the other hand, he appreciated accommodations when needed and provided the following illustration: his advisor substituted Dance History for the required dance class because he was completely non-ambulatory. This was an accommodation that made sense to Martin, because “it was still fundamentally dance education, which will benefit my theater major.”

### ***Independence, Self-determination, and a Desire to Be Like Everyone Else***

The desire for independence was apparent in every interview. Connie saw herself as a very self-driven person. She felt some students were coddled too much and that they should be more independent:

I feel like they need to learn they are in college and it’s time to grow up. I feel like people do more and accomplish more when they are pushed to do more, when you don’t give them a safety net.

Cathy expressed the same desire to be independent and she considered herself to have been successful. She explained, “for the most part I have done everything I wanted to do.”

Maria, a wheelchair user who described herself as fiercely independent, stated emphatically that she did not “like having things done for me or being put in positions when I feel helpless like I have to ask for someone to do something for me.” Martin credited his high school for preparing him very well, specifically, how to advocate for himself. Like Connie, Martin argued that some students with disabilities came to college, but because they had

been coddled by their teachers in high school, “they get here and they are not really sure of how to operate.” In Martin’s case, school was a positive experience that enabled him to make the transition to college successfully. This was echoed by Maria, who described her experience as, “it has just been an extremely easy transition from high school to this environment.” On the other hand, Daniel’s desire to be independent stemmed from negative school experiences that were still very much part of him: “I always was taught I was second class.” In school this 19-year old nursing major was placed in a classroom with students with severe mental disabilities:

and that’s fine, but I felt like ... this school saw me as a mentally retarded person and it really made me feel bad about myself, so that’s why while I’m here at [name of university], I kind of want to just not even tell teachers because I don’t want special treatment. I want to be on my own.

School was also a very negative experience for Dan, a graduate student who is blind. He explained how he had very poor reading skills in school: “They stopped trying to teach me reading and writing after the third grade.” Special education teachers and general education teachers kept telling him through high school “you will be fine you have a disability it’s alright.” He felt what they were saying was: “you will make it through school because we won’t see that you fail but you might not know anything coming out.” He initiated getting help with his reading skills in graduate school and subsequently made tremendous progress. Dan referred to “the game to education; there’s the people that it’s easy for them to get a 3.5 because they know the system,” or the hidden curriculum that gave students who paid attention “to all those little details that boost your grade” an advantage.

Many of the participants were adamant about their independence but they also strongly expressed the need to be like everyone else (i.e. non-disabled college students). Maria, who had had 48 surgeries, stated unequivocally that she did not want too much attention on her disability, and that she wanted to be thought of as any other student. Similarly, Annie did not “want to be babied.” Whereas Maria wanted to be like everyone else, she was also keenly aware of a possible divide between college students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers. Maria had a leadership role in the organisation on campus for students with disabilities:

I want to be a voice on campus, you know. I feel like there is a great need for a bridge ... the bridge between the abled body and disabled community. Actually, there is a huge disconnect. I mean, people ask me, “Do you sleep in your chair? ... How do you shower?”

Maria emphasised the need to take initiative in order to be included in the college experience. When referring to group projects she explained that she always tried to be included and to find something she could do: “You can’t sit out in college. You sit out in college you get a zero. ... The college experiences really open my eyes to life as a contact sport.”

Not all participants demonstrated the self-determination and self-advocacy skills that Maria and Annie exuded. Carol, a non-traditional student, complained about a certain instructor who did not seem to be helpful, but then acknowledged that she had never asked for accommodations or help. An inability to advocate for herself, a lack of self-determination skills, seemed to have created learned helplessness. For Carol it was not the professor that was to be blamed, rather, her inability to advocate for herself. She complained about the office hours that were always during her own class time, thus making it impossible to meet with the professor. However, she later admitted: “I should have probably asked if there was another time for math, my math instructor, that I could have gone to her, and I’ve just never thought of asking her.” Walter, a student with a learning disability, experienced the same

problem. He explained that he did not really know how to approach faculty about his disability and regretted not knowing that in his freshman year.

Finally, Maria, for all her rejection of help and her desire to be independent, showed a glimpse of the self-doubt that plagued her at times. When asked to elaborate on her statement that "... one day out of the week where I feel like this is the wrong major, this is the wrong department, they are laughing at me, they don't think I can do it." She admitted that it was her personality rather than her disability that shaped this view: "I'm my own biggest critic"; according to Maria. Maria's awareness of her own role and her deliberate attempts to make her college experience a successful one were in stark contrast with those of Carol and Walter, who by own admission, did not demonstrate the same sense of self-determination.

## Discussion

In their 1997 study, Beilke and Yssel (1999) compared their findings to those by Hall and Sandler (1982), specifically, "three categories of behavior responsible for creating a chilly or unwelcome climate for women, namely, devaluation, evaluation, and doubt" (Beilke & Yssel, 1999, p. 368). Every participant in their study had experienced incidents corresponding to those three categories. Examples of these incidents included faculty encouraging students to switch to a less rigorous major and not establishing eye contact with students (devaluation), lowered expectations (evaluation), and students losing confidence in their own abilities (doubt). In contrast with the Beilke and Yssel study, our participants overwhelmingly reported a positive faculty-student relationship and a willingness on the part of faculty to provide accommodations. As Connie described, they (faculty members) "definitely opened that door. Now once they've opened the door, no one is going to be there to hold my hands." A chilly climate was not an obstacle; rather, intrinsic problems seemed to present the main challenge that participants in our study encountered in higher education. Students appeared to have become far more aware of their roles and responsibilities in order to be successful in higher education.

Lowered expectations and self-fulfilling prophecy at the college level were not cited as issues encountered by our participants, although Dan's experiences in school was one of the most blatant examples of evaluation, as identified by Hall and Sandler (1982): lowered expectations send the message that students with disabilities do not need to do much to get by (cited in Beilke & Yssel, 1999). Dan concluded that "the system" would allow him to be in school, but cared little about his readiness for employment. He was socially promoted in school and felt that his undergraduate experience was similar until he learned "to advocate for myself". This student's experiences in school highlighted a very troubling phenomenon. According to Gordon (2004), one of the obstacles that students with disabilities face is inadequate academic preparation in K-12 compared to their peers with no disabilities; specifically, lower academic expectations, inferior pedagogy, and a lack of full access to the core curriculum. Legislation guaranteeing students with disabilities full access to the general education curriculum clearly does not always translate into practice.

The reluctance of students with disabilities to request accommodations or to use academic support services has been well documented in literature (Denhart, 2008; Hartman-Hall & Haaga, 2002). This was also apparent with the students we interviewed. In most cases, this reluctance stemmed from a desire to be independent, to be like everyone else; Maria's comments suggested that she belonged to this group. Marshak et al. (2010) referred to this

as a desire for self-sufficiency. With some of our students, like Carol and Walter, a lack of self-determination skills was to blame for their reluctance to request accommodations. Getzel and Thoma (2008) described self-determination skills as the acceptance of the disability and how it affected learning, understanding which support services to access, the ability to describe one's disability and need for supports, and the determination to overcome all obstacles. Participants in their study identified the following self-determination skills as important to success in college: understanding one's disability, understanding strengths and limitations, learning to succeed despite the impact of a disability, setting goals and determining how others could assist in achieving those, problem-solving skills, and self-management skills (Getzel & Thoma 2008). Accessing support services, specifically, asking instructors for assistance, was a barrier for Carol and Walter by their own admission.

Another factor that is related to self-determination skills is school (K-12) preparation. In Daniel's case, very negative school experiences fuelled his desire to be independent in college. Students, like Martin and Maria, who were well prepared in school to be independent and advocate for themselves, negotiated the college environment with relative ease. And yet, according to Gordon (2004):

K-12 policies are based on a paternalistic model appropriate for minors, with strong parental involvement, but this model is not transferable to higher education ... But the burden is on the individual student to successfully navigate higher education. Higher education 'has no process aimed at achieving success for students with disabilities. (p. 1)

This was reflected in the statements of several of the students interviewed for this study—it is the student's responsibility to seek help.

And yet, whereas many of the participants emphasised the student's responsibility, there was an underlying message that there should be a reciprocal relationship between faculty member and student: self-determination on the part of the student, an ability to advocate for self, but also an intuitiveness on the part of the faculty member. Connie explained this reciprocity:

You know, if she [instructor] is writing something on the board, she said, 'Hey, ask me to explain what I'm doing.' I'm OK with that and you know, I also say, 'hey, can you say that equation again? Or, you know, I'm lost.'

### **Implications for Practice**

It is encouraging to note that very few of the students identified any barriers, physical or emotional, that impeded their success or general integration into campus life. However, accommodations and group work are issues that must be addressed in order for students with disabilities to be successful in college. Daniel's comment about accommodations ("if you don't know the answer, looking at it for 20 minutes isn't like it will just magically appear") and the perceived benefits were well heeded. Extended time is not necessarily effective for all students even if this was an accommodation in a student's Individualized Education Plan in school. In their study of test accommodations, Bolt and Thurlow (2004) found extended time to result in a slight differential advantage for students with disabilities. Some of the studies they reviewed also reported inconclusive results, as well as extended time resulting in lower scores for some students, possibly due to fatigue. Although the studies included in the Bolt and Thurlow study focused on K-12 education, the results should be considered in higher education. Offices or centres that provide support services to students with disabilities



in higher education, may need to assist students to determine which accommodations are most effective for them in college.

Since the 1990s, many postsecondary faculty members have incorporated cooperative learning as instructional strategy and group projects are commonly used, successfully or unsuccessfully, in undergraduate and graduate classes. Mamiseishvili and Koch (2011) urged faculty members to incorporate cooperative learning in their classes in order to promote academic and social integration of students with disabilities. It is, however, of utmost importance for instructors to consider Dan's difficulties with group work. If group projects are not handled correctly or not monitored by the faculty, students with disabilities, especially those with visual impairments, could easily be excluded. It is therefore important for faculty to ensure that roles are assigned within groups to prevent certain group members from being excluded from group participation (intentionally or unintentionally).

## Conclusion

This study could contribute to improved faculty–student relationships and effective classroom strategies, for example, implementing cooperative learning or group work so that students with disabilities are participating fully. The study also highlights the importance of appropriate accommodations; the latter should be individualised and effective. Certain limitations must, however, be considered. Findings represent the perceptions of a small sample of students at one Midwest University. Further, we were able to interview volunteers only; thus, the voice of those who chose not to participate in studies of this kind was not heard.

Before recruiting participants for our study, we were cautioned that students would be unlikely to come forward to participate. We were surprised at the eagerness with which they volunteered. The question then is, why is the act of talking about one's experience as a student with disabilities important? As we examined the transcriptions, it became apparent that the role of language as a force for empowerment (Ashby, 2011) bears directly on this study and serves as a literal as well as metaphorical device. Individuals with disabilities use their voices to express the problems they have experienced as well as their potential for self-empowerment. It is also about changing perceptions. Maria mentioned that she was drawn to the students with disabilities advocacy group on campus because she wanted to be a voice on campus and to help bridge the gap between the able-bodied and disabled community on campus. It is thus of utmost importance that students with disabilities have a voice on campus to ensure that they are no longer a marginalised group (Gordon, 2004).

Finally, whereas K-12 preparation certainly shapes the academic and social experiences and perceptions of students with disabilities, as explained by some of our participants, the responsibilities of faculty in higher education are not diminished. Systematic disability training should be mandatory and faculty must be provided with evidence-based resources and instructional strategies. Lisa felt she was discriminated against because of her visual disability when she was an undergraduate student 20 years ago; however, she was adamant that attitudes had changed much since then. The climate for students with disabilities may have lost its chilliness, but faculty members still have to, as Connie explained, open the door.

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## Appendix 1

### Dear Student,

We are conducting a study investigating the relationship between faculty and students with disabilities in higher education and would like to interview you about your experiences. The interview, which will be audiotaped, should last about 30–45 min. Your views on factors that might have had an impact on your academic success will be an important contribution in our endeavour to provide students with the best educational experience possible.

If you are interested in participating in our study, please reply to this e-mail. XXXX (director of DSDO) will forward e-mails to the principal investigator, XXXX, who will contact you.

Thank you for your willingness to assist us.

XXXX

## Appendix 2

### Demographics

Name	Age	Disability	Major
Maria	20	Spina Bifida	Journalism
Carol	48	Learning disability in reading	Accounting
Connie	21	Blind	Psychology
Cathy	22	Visual impairment	Special Education
Annie	45	Stroke, fibromyalgia	Art
Daniel	19	Dyslexia	Nursing
Walter	20	Learning disability	Construction Management
Mike	20	Brittle bone disease/osteogenesis imperfecta	Telecommunications
Jack	21	Dyslexia, ADHD	Natural Resources
Martin	22	Cerebral palsy	Theatre
Lisa	48	Visual impairment	Adult and Community Education
Dan	25	Blind	Information & Communication Studies

## Appendix 3

### Interview Questions

Demographic data:

- How old are you?
- What is your major?
- Please explain the nature of your disability.
- Have you been at BSU since your freshman year or are you a transfer student?
- Please tell me about your college experience: Do you feel you are successful? Do you feel faculty members (please do not identify faculty members by name) have been accommodating? Can you describe successful accommodations? Can you describe barriers that prevent success?

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