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A Qualitative Study of Ableism on the Postsecondary Campus

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A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF ABLEISM
ON THE POSTSECONDARY CAMPUS

A Dissertation Presented
to
The Faculty of the School of Education
Learning and Instruction Department
Special Education Program

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the
Degree of Education

by
George Fuller
University of San Francisco
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Abstract

This study aimed to learn about the experiences and challenges of disabled students on college campuses. The qualitative research gave voice to the nine disabled students so we can hear, in their own words, their lives, successes, failures, most enjoyable aspects of campus life, and the least pleasant parts of the campus environment.

Zoom interviews took place with nine undergraduate disabled students, eight with nonvisible disabilities and one with visible disabilities, located on four different campuses within the United States. During the nVivo data analysis, three themes emerged. The three themes identified were: the disabled students' connections with the campus, relationships with professors, and accommodations coupled with the Disability Resource Center on campus. The findings revealed that ableism was present on each campus.

The participants agreed they needed more voice and recognition on their postsecondary campus. In the participants' perceptions, the study facilitated an opportunity to voice their concerns and be heard. Postsecondary students who are disabled frequently encounter a hostile, discriminatory college environment. All nine participants discussed, with emphasis, as to their connections with the campus they attended. Although the nine did not each report they had a strong relationship with the campus, all indicated their connection affected their academic performance in some manner. The disabled students sought out connections at the schools, and seeking out those connections was a priority for each participant.

Disability Cultural Centers were a strong positive connection for six participants. The six reported that the cultural centers were important in their lives. All participants in the interviews volunteered information regarding their relationships with the instructors on campus. Notably, no participants reported challenging encounters with the majority of their instructors. However, each participant did relate at least one situation that they considered adverse with instructors. The adversities ranged from failure to allow specific accommodations to a lack of support, leading to the disabled student either failing a course or withdrawing from a class.

Developing knowledge of how campus members contribute to ableism, even unintentionally, is the first step toward dismantling systems of oppression that harms disabled people.

This dissertation, written under the direction of the candidate's dissertation committee and approved by the committee members, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Education. The content and research methodologies present in this work represent the candidate's work alone.

George Fuller
Candidate

05/12/2023
Date

Dissertation Committee

Patricia Busk, PhD
Chairperson

05/12/2023
Date

Nicola McClung, PhD

05/12/2023
Date

Colette Cann, PhD

05/12/2023
Date

Acknowledgments

I dedicate this article to my youngest child, Daniel Jonathan Fuller, who drowned in the Willamette River in Portland, Oregon. Daniel's death occurred in large part because of his disability. His death was the impetus to return to school later in life. I want to honor Daniel's memory by creating a non-profit organization to assist disabled students in navigating the postsecondary campus.

I ask your prayers for my oldest daughter, Tanya Fuller Senofsky, who passed away on May 23, 2023, after struggling with pancreatic cancer. She was always there with support over the years as I completed my Doctor of Education Degree. I am grateful for the University of San Francisco arranging for the hooding ceremony to be live-streamed and the graduation ceremony, which allowed her to witness the event. May Tanya rest in peace.

My appreciation extends to Dr. Colette Cann. Dr. Cann demonstrated patience and forbearance as she revitalized a languishing dissertation. In doing so, she provided enlightenment on the concept of oppression of people and the need for social equity and social justice, combined with inclusion. Her efforts have brought me to this prosperous time, and I am very grateful. Dr. Cann's light has provided the way.

Dr. Patricia Busk demonstrated her expertise in motivating and guiding postsecondary students. In the process, Dr. Busk's extensive academic writing knowledge allowed for this article's completion. While doing so, she was patient with many of the frustrations I experienced with completing the writing. Dr. Busk has shown why her colleagues in the School of Education call her "the best."

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Postsecondary students who are disabled frequently encounter a hostile, discriminatory environment (Nario-Redmond, 2020). As a result, the extent of the effect of ableism on the college campus should be a paramount concern. Ableism in postsecondary schools marginalizes and erases disabled people (Nario-Redmond, 2020). Disabled people are marginalized when their experiences are considered insignificant and peripheral. The literature delineates the extent of the issues and their repercussions (Dolmage, 2017). Marginalization of disabled students cancels their identity and makes it difficult for the disabled student to determine their campus cultural position. Disability stigma creates fear and anxiety among disabled students on the college campus (Mirick & Davis, 2021). Discrimination denies disabled students access to educational institutions with equity. A study of ableism allows for developing a pathway to appropriately resolve those issues, improving the lives of disabled students on all college campuses.

Ableism is a social bias against people whose body-minds function differently from those considered normal (Goodley, 2017). Ableism in the postsecondary campus environment presents challenges for disabled students, manifesting itself in many ways, including (a) disability marginalization and erasure, (b) disability stigma, and (c) disability discrimination, which is discussed below in turn.

Developing knowledge of how campus members contribute to ableism, even unintentionally, is the first step toward dismantling systems of oppression that harm disabled people and create barriers for them in postsecondary education.

The purpose of this study was to learn about the experiences and challenges of

disabled students on college campuses. The qualitative study intends to give voice to disabled students so we can hear, in their own words, their lives, successes, failures, the most enjoyable aspects of campus life, and the least enjoyable aspects of the campus environment.

The following research questions served to guide not only the research investigation but also the interview questions.

1. What are the challenges to achieving academic success and social inclusion on college campuses that disabled students report? How do disabled students navigate the challenges they encounter?
2. What spaces exist for inclusion and belonging within higher education for disabled students? What are the spaces of exclusion in higher education that disabled students perceive to exist? How do disabled students discern spaces of belonging or spaces of inclusion within higher education?
3. What classroom, institutional, and social structures allow disabled students to feel seen and heard? What are the classroom, institutional, and social structures that disabled students report feeling silenced and invisibility?
4. How do disabled students report experiencing marginalization and stigmatization on the college campus, and what are their perceptions of those encounters? How do disabled students report navigating marginalization and stigmatization on the college campus, both as individuals and within a group of other students? How do the encounters of disabled students with stigmatization and marginalization differ with academic spaces on the college campus versus social spaces?

Literature Review

The literature review supports the research questions by focusing on marginalization and stigmatization, stigma, and discrimination on the college campus. This review provides a context for the research with information in the literature regarding these topics and how they inform the research investigation.

Marginalization and Erasure

Erasure is when the omission of disabled people from conversations about diversity occurs. Additionally, the perception of disability is through a medical-lens model; the medical model of disability defines disabled people as a medical disorder that needs correction (Pothier & Devlin, 2006). Furthermore, disabled people experience marginalization and erasure when others avoid using the word “disabled” and perceive disability as a medical problem rather than a sociocultural construct. Consequently, people exclude the term “disability” from conversations concerning diversity on the postsecondary campus. Several studies have elucidated disability marginalization and erasure on the postsecondary campus (Pothier & Devlin, 2006)

Bulk et al. (2017) described how marginalization is a significant barrier encountered by disabled students, disabled faculty, and disabled staff in the health and human services education environment. Thirteen participants from health and human services were involved in a qualitative study with the researchers. Twelve health and human services disabled students participated in the research, along with one disabled clinician. The researchers interviewed or assigned the thirteen individuals to a research assistant's focus group. The 13 participants were either from the university's urban campus or a campus of the same university located in a smaller city.

Bulk et al. (2017) discovered that disabled people were relegated to a lesser status on campus. Disabled people were perceived as an all-consuming problem and devalued as people, emphasizing that they were permanently substandard. Marginalization manifested itself in three ways: (a) dominant disabling discourses, (b) discriminatory design within programs and universities, and (c) oppressive interactions with peers, faculty, clinical supervisors, and other similar stakeholders. Health and Human Services disabled students reported that those with power within the educational setting were designated to exclude disabled people. The exclusion of disabled people was a part of the structured order on the campus.

Ehlinger and Ropers (2020) described how disabled students continue to encounter marginalizing situations and barriers on the college campus, notwithstanding multiple legislative acts intended to enhance the education of all disabled students. Ehlinger and Ropers' study used the lens of the transformative paradigm to describe where reality is shaped by and defined by environmental, political, and cultural factors (Mertens, 2007). Mertens (2007) emphasized that the transformative paradigm focused on the diversity and strength of disabled people by seeking to enhance social justice through cultural respect.

Ehlinger and Ropers (2020) selected 13 disabled students from a large Midwestern research university. The college, with 30,000 undergraduate and 16,000 graduate students, educated over 2,000 disabled students. Using a narrative methodological approach, the researchers had the disabled students tell their stories. The findings of the factors that enhanced learning for disabled students were (a) instructor messaging, (b) community in the classroom, and (c) validating disability identity and

bringing diverse perspectives. Disabled students, however, encountered barriers. Those barriers included instructor role and classroom dynamics. Ehlinger and Ropers learned that disabled students did encounter oppression, ableism, and stigma on the university campus.

Stigma

Disability stigma is the discrediting of a body-mind that manifests an impairment. Disability stigma focuses on the physical or mental factors that spoil a positive identity. It is a social construct that is negative and idiosyncratic (Nario-Redmond, 2020). Blockman (2015) completed a qualitative study on stigma involving disabled students attending a Belgian university. The research encouraged some of the students' concerns regarding disability disclosure. The researcher interviewed thirteen disabled students regarding disclosing their disability on campus. The findings revealed that disabled students disclosed their disabilities to others to do the following: (a) clarify their disability to counter unwanted responses to it, (b) gain access to practical assistance, (c) be taken seriously by others, and (e) bond with friends.

Disabled students, however, often did not disclose their disability for the following reasons: (a) for self-protection, (b) anticipation of negative implications for disclosure, and (c) in an attempt to appear nondisabled. By and large, disabled students reported feeling uncomfortable disclosing their disabilities to others unless they believed it would enhance their university experience. Consequently, disabled students said they experienced increased alienation from their peers because they felt they needed to hide a core aspect of their life experience to avoid being viewed negatively by others.

In another study, Giroux et al. (2020) researched students diagnosed with Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome using a Quality of Life instrument to measure the effect of ableism on disabled students. The researchers interviewed ten women and one man. The interviewees were Canadian disabled students with Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome enrolled in Ontario colleges. The findings of the qualitative study revealed that the students with Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome had emotional exchanges with peers and instructors that were an essential part of their lives. However, Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome stigma (a disease of connective tissue such as skin, muscles, or the vascular system) led to many negative experiences.

Also, the stigma of Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome negatively affected their academic performance (Giroux et al., 2020). Much of the negativism regarding academics was the belief that the Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome students' not fitting the academic mold. The researchers' findings revealed that while the disabled students were on their college campuses, they experienced stigmatization or judgment because of Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome. Consequently, they were reluctant to form relationships with others and reported encountering significant academic roadblocks.

Vaccaro et al. (2019) also studied disabled students who succeeded in their academic studies while encountering stigma difficulties within the campus environment. Utilizing Charmaz's (2014) constructivist grounded qualitative theory; the researchers initially did not presuppose that disabled students had a particular coping strategy. The researchers then interviewed 59 disabled students from three public colleges and one private college in the Northeastern part of the United States.

All 59 participants in the Vaccaro et al. (2019) study reported that they frequently

encountered disparaging events on their campuses. Many disparaging events resulted from nondisabled persons having a negative stigma toward disability. The disabled students reported their coping mechanisms as (a) talking openly about disability and articulating related needs, (b) utilizing available resources, (c) practicing good self-care, (d) working harder to succeed and challenge stereotypes, and (e) viewing disability as a positive aspect of self. Practicing these attributes allowed disabled students to remain calm when encountering adversity, enabling them to succeed academically.

Discrimination

Disability fosters deep fears and discomfort among nondisabled people, some of which may be undiscernible to nondisabled students and faculty at those schools. That fear and distress, coupled with ignorance, self-interest, or even indifference, can cause substantial discrimination among non-disabled people with their disabled counterparts.

Disabled students with multiple sclerosis (MS) reported discriminating experiences on campuses (Hoffman et al., 2019). Hoffman et al. (2019) conducted a qualitative research project dividing the study into two sections: one section involved interviewing 49 parents of children with MS who attended or had attended college and the second section of the study involved surveying 22 college students with MS who enrolled in a Midwestern college.

The Hoffman et al. (2019) study participants indicated that one of the most critical challenges students with MS encountered on the college campus was the faculty's lack of understanding of MS on campuses. The faculty discounted disabled students' claims of MS symptoms and the need for accommodations unless they were in a wheelchair.

Consequently, the instructors would deny the disabled students their academic accommodations, believing the MS students did not require those accommodations.

Thurston et al. (2017) conducted a mixed-method study to ascertain the college environment for disabled students majoring in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). The disabled students received financial support from the National Science Foundation (NSF) for their college enrollment. The researchers used reports from 97 principal investigators (PI) assigned to Research Disability Education (RDE) Synthesis projects incorporating disabled students on various campuses.

The researchers reviewed data gathered by the PIs and identified common themes among the PIs. Constructed surveys from the collected theme data and distributed them to the PIs. The presentation of the majority of questions was in a survey response format. The last few questions were qualitative and required an open-ended response.

The results of the Thurston et al. (2017) research project showed a surprisingly large amount of discrimination directed toward disabled students. The academic scientific community members did not comprehend that a disabled student with learning disabilities could complete scientific work. The researchers also discovered that the unavailability of adaptive aids, inaccessible buildings and grounds, and a lack of accommodations were the norm for disabled students majoring in STEM disciplines. Also, the knowledge of faculty regarding disabled students was minimal, as were their skills in working with disabled students.

Postsecondary students who are disabled encounter a hostile, discriminatory college environment frequently. As a result, the extent of the effect of ableism on the

campus should be a paramount concern. The literature delineates the scope of the issue and its repercussions.

Marginalization of the disabled students canceled their identity and made it difficult for the disabled student to determine their campus cultural position. Disability stigma creates fear and anxiety among disabled students on the college campus. Discrimination denies disabled student access to the educational institution with equity. A study of ableism would allow for developing a pathway to resolve those issues, improving the lives of disabled students on all college campuses.

Methodology

Participants

The participants for this research were nine disabled college undergraduate students 18 years of age to 25 years. I used a snowball sampling technique to obtain participants for this research study. I began by contacting a few disabled undergraduate students whom I knew personally. I informed them about the research study and invited disabled students to join. If an undergraduate disabled student was willing to participate in the interview, a consent form and the Participant's Rights were forwarded. The disabled student was asked to return both forms signed. A discussion ensued to determine a convenient time to meet via Zoom.

Following the interview, I asked each of the disabled students if they would recommend another disabled student to be interviewed. If the student provided a recommendation, they were asked if, when I contacted the disabled student, I could use the research participant's name as a referral. Also, I contacted student leaders of the disability cultural centers at four universities to learn if they knew any disabled students

who would like to participate in the study and perhaps provide the names of other disabled undergraduate students who may want to join the project.

Each participant received a \$50 Amazon Gift Card for participating.

Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

I discerned during the interviews that seven research participants attended public universities and two research participants attended private universities. From the information regarding the universities that the students attended, I classified those universities located in the Eastern part of the United States as East University, those found in the Midwest were classified as Midwest University, and those located in the Western part of the United States as West University (Table 1).

Two participants were in their second year, three in their third year, three in their fourth year, and one had completed a Bachelor of Arts Degree four months before the interviews. Eight participants had nonvisible disabilities, and one had a visible disability (Table 1).

Table 1

Demographic Information for Interviewees

Name	Gender	Year in School	Type of School	Location of School	Type of Disability
Ralph	Male	Junior	Public	Midwest	Nonvisible
Dan	Male	Senior	Public	Midwest	Nonvisible
Mary	Female	Senior	Public	East	Nonvisible
Wendy	Female	Sophomore	Public	Midwest	Nonvisible
Sally	Female	Recent Grad (06/22)	Private	West	Visible
Austin	Male	Junior	Public	Midwest	Nonvisible
Susan	Female	Sophomore	Public	West	Nonvisible
Frank	Male	Junior	Private	West	Nonvisible

A follow-up request was emailed to the participants asking for further demographic information. Two of the participants have yet to respond to that request. Of those who did reply, four indicated they had a gender identification of male, and three had a gender identification of female (Table 1). One-third of the students identified as BIPOC, a third reported not belonging to the BIPOC community, and one-third of the participants did not answer the question regarding BIPOC. Regarding belonging to the LGBTQIA community, one-third responded that they belonged to the LGBTQIA community, and one-third reported not belonging to the LGBTQI community. Three did not answer the question regarding LGBTQIA (Table 2).

Table 2

Responses to Follow-up Information Regarding Demographic Characteristics

Name	Pronouns	BIPOC	LGBTQI	International Student
Ralph	He or Him	No	No	No
Dan	He or Him	Yes	No	No
Mary	No response			
Wendy	She or Her	No	Yes	No
Sally	She, Her, Hers	No response	No response	No response
Chloe	She, Her, Hers	Yes	Yes	No
Susan	No response			
Frank	He or Him	No	Yes	No

During the Zoom interviews, three participants noted that their family resided in a country outside the United States. Two informed me that they had lived in a foreign country and entered the United States upon starting college. In replying to the follow-up none of the three participants claimed to be international students (Table 2).

A detailed description of each participant follows.

Ralph is a Black, Indigenous, Person of Color (BIPOC) Junior attending a Midwest University. Ralph is a cisgender, heterosexual male using the pronouns he and him and is attending his second university. He has a nonvisible disability and does not want to disclose it to peers or friends. Ralph believes that if others discover his disability, he will be shunned on campus and reports that he has difficulty making connections on campus because of his disabilities. Ralph said he majored in the academic discipline of Scientific Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). Ralph is over the age of 18 and under the age of 25.

Dan is a BIPOC Senior attending East University and is a business major. He is over the age of 18 and under the age of 25. Dan is a cisgender, heterosexual male using the pronouns he and him and has a nonvisible disability. Dan has frequent interchanges with fraternity brothers about his disability, but he does not deem the exchanges hostile. He reports that he has experienced unpleasant moments because people have seen evidence of his disability and accommodations.

Mary did not respond to requests for gender identification or demographic identification of sexual orientation. Mary is between the age of 18 and 25 and is a senior attending East University and enrolled in a STEM major. Mary's disability was nonvisible, except for a brief period following surgery. She reported being very uncomfortable with her visible disability and believed she lost friends' and other people's confidence because of her visible disability. Mary stated that she is leaving school with fewer friends than she anticipated.

Wendy is a cisgender, White female who reported being a member of the LGBTQI community. She is in her second year at Midwest University. Wendy's

disability is nonvisible, which did create consternation with instructors who, at times, challenged her disabled status; she reported being comfortable discussing her disability with others. Wendy also is readily apparent in class as she has multiple tattoos and piercings; she reported often lacking the energy to negotiate with instructors if they did not honor her accommodations. Wendy identified her pronouns as she and her. Her major is a people-oriented academic discipline. She is over the age of 18 and under the age of 25.

Chloe is a BIPOC senior attending Midwest University. She is a cisgender female with the pronouns she, her, and hers; Chloe reported she is a member of the LGBTQI community. Her age is between 18 and 25. Her academic discipline choice is a people-oriented major. Chloe is quite open about her disability and discusses it frequently in class. Her disability is nonvisible. Chloe is active in the disability cultural center and is a disability advocate.

Sally graduated from West University, earning a bachelor's degree four months before the interview. She is a cisgender White female and uses the pronouns she, her, and hers. Sally reported being heterosexual. She used a mobility device to access the school campus and believed she constantly needed to prove herself capable of academic endeavors. Sally was an energetic disability advocate and served in the student government at West University. Sally reported that she was unintentionally left out of campus activities because of a lack of understanding of disability on different occasions. She was in a people-oriented major.

Austin is a BIPOC cisgender male with the pronouns he and him. He is a Junior attending Midwest University. He reported being a science major because he lacked

social skills and believed social skills were not necessary for a science major. Austin thought the Midwest staff did not have an understanding of individuals with a disability which resulted in him being described as strange. Austin often failed to make friends because of his disability. He firmly recommended that all staff at the Midwest University receive training concerning disability. Austin's disability was nonvisible.

Susan did not respond to an inquiry regarding pronouns, gender preference, or sexual orientation. She is a sophomore at West University. Susan's disability is nonvisible, and she is involved with a people-oriented major. Susan is active as a disability advocate and involved in student government. She is over the age of 18 and under the age of 25. Susan said she had difficulty accessing the campus because of her disability.

Frank is a White, cisgender male who reported being a member of the LGBTQI community because of his family members, but he is heterosexual. Frank is a Junior at West University and majoring in a people-oriented major. He had difficulties forming relationships on campus, resulting in disciplinary action by West University. Frank recommended that all disabled students seek academic accommodations, but he initially failed to do so. Frank joined a demographic-oriented club on campus but was not a member of that particular ethnic group.

Instrumentation

There are 12 interview questions for learning about the experiences and challenges of disabled students on college campuses (Appendix A). These questions were reviewed by four individuals who are familiar with the experiences of disabled students on college campuses. The reviewers comprised four professors in Learning and

Instruction, Special Education, and Qualitative Research at the University of San Francisco.

Procedures

The researcher began by emailing identified disabled college students who were to learn if they were willing to participate in the research. (See Appendix B for an email invitation.) If they agreed, they were sent the interview questions and the consent form to sign (Appendix C), and they emailed the signed document back to the researcher. Once the consent form had been returned, I emailed the student to set up a time for the interview session. Seven of the scheduled interviews lasted approximately one hour and were conducted on Zoom. Two of the interviews lasted about 40 minutes.

Before beginning the interview, I asked permission to video-record the session. After the student agreed to the interview, the recording was made to my computer. After the interview ended and before the college student was thanked for their participation, they were asked if they would be able to recommend another disabled college student who might be interested in participating in the interview. This process continued until there were nine participants.

The contact information of the student leaders of the cultural centers is found in the public domain of social media. I contacted the disabled student leaders via email and asked each to participate in the study. As I reached each leader, I asked the person if they could refer me to another undergraduate disabled student who might like to join the project. I then contacted that person in the same manner as the student leader.

Data Analysis

A transcription of the interview using either the Zoom transcription software or Panopto took place. I listened to the interview Zoom recording and edited the transcripts to correct errors. The completion of the editing occurred within 12 days of each interview. Each interviewee received a copy of the interview for review to determine the accuracy of the transcript. One interviewee responded with a correction on the pseudonym used for their name. I did not receive any further modification requests from the interviewees.

The qualitative study analysis of the transcripts utilized MAXQDA Analytics Pro Academia software. I installed each transcript into MAXQDA separately. I coded each installed transcript twice. The first coding transcript completed an analysis of the material created during the interview. I coded the transcripts a second time to ensure reliability. A close approximation of the number of codes for each pair of similar transcripts did occur, indicating the reliability of the coding. During the coding process, I divided the codes into similar topics. The topic divisions served as categories for the material coded.

MAXQDA software provides for the merging of two transcripts. I merged each pair of transcripts from the interviews. The combination included the existing and newly created codes for those dissimilar from the two separate transcripts combined. A review of the merged documents for themes and topics that emerge from a pattern of ideas in the coding took place. Multiple themes arose. I culled three themes, however, from the merged codes that were readily apparent: (a) relationships with professors, (b) accommodations and the Disability Resource Center (DRC), and (c) campus connections. I compiled the findings based on those three items.

Research Question One

1. What challenges do disabled students report to achieving success? How do disabled students navigate the challenges they encounter?

Instructors

The disabled students reported that conflict with instructors was a significant barrier to their academic success. The conflicts developed if an instructor failed to implement the disabled student's accommodations or questioned the disabled student's disability status. The conflict often manifested itself if an instructor questioned the use of accommodations by the disabled student. The denial would result in the loss of the ability to complete the class regimen successfully. The study participants encountered circumstances where the instructor stated the utilization of accommodations would hinder the disabled student from completing specific required tasks. Mary said,

It's another layer is I feel like because you can't see my disability. That they're like well, there can't be that much wrong with you, you know, because you can't see anything. And then I get to the point of where I shouldn't need to have to explain. And so that's like a weird are, too, that I get into when dealing with the unfavorable stuff where I'm like, well, here's why I really, really do need this right now.

The stress of the conflict deflated the disabled student, often resulting in a lower-than-expected grade at the end of a course. Often the student discontinued the course altogether. All nine students with disabilities reported encountering at least one conflict with an instructor regarding their disability and accommodations on campus. Most disabled students in the study reported multiple conflicts with instructors concerning their use of accommodations in the class regimen.

Participants in the study reported that, because of their disability, they often did not possess the energy to assert themselves to achieve a satisfactory resolution with an

instructor regarding using their accommodations in a class. Some of the disabled students indicated it was a challenging endeavor for them to attend class regularly. Also, their disabilities sapped them of the fortitude to step forward and complain of the lack of compliance with the accommodation requirements afforded them. Consequently, many dropped a course from their schedule or accepted a lower grade than they would have earned with acceptance of the accommodations.

Wendy said,

But sometimes teachers aren't gonna put in the effort for their disabled students, or they're gonna prioritize the education of able body students because it's a little easier. I was in a class this semester that just how the class structure does not, did not feel very accommodating. My disability incapacitates me quite consistently, and one of the policies of this is that you cannot make up any assigned class work or quizzes and this is not very accommodating for disabled students. Issues, cause sometimes we just miss things we cannot control. And to advocate for myself, and be like hey? You know I have accommodations I'm gonna miss things, and I had to bring it up from my TA to the professor, and that professor was like, okay, fine. You can make this up. I'll let you make this happen. I was like great. When can we schedule this and he never emailed me back. I follow-up and he never emailed me back. I followed it again, and I was basically ignored. My health issues got so bad and I end up with dropping the class, because I missed other exams. I wasn't even able to make up the first and the stress was too much for me to have to handle this myself, and I just dropped the class.

Sally reported, "So there were people constantly getting this pushback every time they asked for something (accommodations). It's the same fight, and they have to argue and advocate for themselves. It just gets tiring and it's you."

There were instances, however, where the instructor supported the student and was flexible with their disability needs. Many instructors accommodated the needs of disabled students and welcomed them into the classroom environment. The study participants felt comfortable providing the supportive instructors with their DRC accommodation letters and discussing their disabilities with them. The disabled students

reported the supportive instructors demonstrated flexibility in delivering curriculum to all students in a class, allowing a more inclusive experience for the study participants within the class environs. The disabled students frequently reported they were comfortable and at ease with those instructors who were accommodation oriented. Mary said,

Professors me trying to use these accommodations that are in place to help me out when I need it and then kind of giving me for it. Like I don't. They are so not. Not all of them. Because I have had a couple have been like just super nice and accommodating and understanding like. But then on the opposite spectrum, there's also been a few that just do not want to bend at all. And they're like, well, the rest of the class has to do it like this, so you have to. I can't do that. And I'm like, well, I have this accommodation. And also the rest of the class doesn't experience debilitating pain every day.

Navigation

Navigating a path to reconcile conflicts with instructors was often tricky and fraught with angst for disabled students. The usual process involved the disabled encountering consternation with an instructor and then returning to the DRC for assistance. The aggrieved disabled student identified the naming of the instructor and the difficulties encountered with the person. The disabled student then opened a dialog with the DRC, explaining the conflict, knowing they would likely return to the same instructor for the remainder of the semester.

The solution often involved rewriting the accommodations for the disabled student or discussing the instructor's objections with the instructor. DRC staffing was insufficient to promptly meet the study participants' needs, and appointments to discuss difficulties with a counselor became delayed. While the reconciliation continued, the disabled student's requirement was to continue the class without accommodations or drop the course if academic progress became thwarted without implementing the necessary accommodations.

The lack of coordination of resources to resolve a conflict with an instructor, and the shortage of personnel to address the issues, the disabled student's concern with an instructor often would not be resolved. The consequence was similar to the one Wendy described. The student became exhausted in pursuing a resolution, and thus no solution to the complaint occurred. The complaint faded away into an administrative haze. Sally related,

West University has a lot of resources like this one lady, she's great, but she's the one person running a compliance office and either needs to probably deal with every single disability-related complaint coming in and the very attention that it sometimes deserves. And then also just this kind of lack of organizational structure like no one really knows, you know, if there's a problem like someone's responsibility it really is, and so, you see a lot of times complaints would just kind of fizzle out, I think, to some extent. And the school relies on that, you know, because if we just keep pushing people around and kind of really not taking responsibility, then eventually people give up because, you know, the nature of life with a disability. If you get tired and you have not the strength and the energy to kind of fight your own opponent and say why you need that support. So, you know, kind of convenient when, you know, eventually you just run out of the will to keep fighting.

One study participant, however, explained that he followed up with an instructor when he encountered one who resisted using his accommodations in class. The instructor and the concerned disabled student would collaborate on implementing the accommodations to both of their likings. Dan reported,

If not that, then just casual and transactional. Yeah, I would say so. And that seems pretty standard like I don't think that, I don't think dyslexia. I say, I think that plays that it's you know, it's what you get, what you put into most relationships and teachers. I feel like you're no different, if you develop the relationship with them.

Research Question Two

2. What spaces exist for inclusion and belonging within higher education for disabled students? What are the spaces of exclusion in higher education that

disabled students perceive to exist? How do disabled students discern spaces of belonging or spaces of inclusion within higher education?

The themes that resulted from the analysis of interviews are as follows: disability cultural centers, clubs, dorms, and dining halls, discerning places of inclusion, and exclusion. Results are presented for each theme.

Disability Cultural Center

A disability cultural center is an institutionally sanctioned organization on campus that recognizes disabled students as a marginalized culture within the school's environment. The disability cultural center has a designated gathering location on the campus. The center has a governing unit to address concerns and operations of the center. It is a place on campus where disabled students can gather formally or informally, offering support for other disabled students on campus. The college funds the center, and the school provides space for disabled students to meet one another (Saia, 2022).

Eight of the nine research participants attended a college with a disability cultural center. Seven of the eight reported the cultural center was integral to their lives within the college environment. The seven said the cultural center created a comfortable and nonjudgmental atmosphere to enjoy other disabled students' company and engage in activities in one form or another with their peers. The consensus of the seven was that the cultural center offered support for disabled students and allowed the disabled student a place of companionship, alleviating isolation. Wendy described the experience as,

Oh, like having that community available. Yes, I do say that is something because people often feel very isolated when they don't have people to relate to or people to support them. I do feel people need a community that can relate to their experience; it's nice to have to be like, yes, I support you. Having people that have that are also disabled, I feel like it hits deeper.

The disabled students said their disability cultural center gave them a sense of identity within the campus environment: the feeling of community with others in like situations. In the process, the disabled voice gained a voice of the campus that was heard and acknowledged. Sally exemplified the experience of a disabled cultural center for the disabled student when she said,

I'm kind of, you know, I found some really great disability communities on campus, so I'd never really been a part of until college. You know, I had been a part of non-profits and stuff, but like in school, I would just desperately try to pretend that I didn't have a disability. You know, there is no pride or joy in that. It was just the same. I hope people would see past what is there. It turned out, at West University, that was like one of my best forms of connecting with people through this shared experience. And so I think why universities can really improve is they can really build on that and support that because, you know, the need for that and the desire is they can really build on that and support that because, you know, the need for that and the desire for that is already within the student body. But, it needs to be supported by the university level too.

Clubs

Clubs were an integral part of the disabled students' lives on campus. Disabled students believed it was not best to isolate while attending school and sought out opportunities to join with other students, disabled and nondisabled, for social options. Clubs on campus allowed them to participate with all campus members. Disabled students reported they actively sought membership in campus clubs. Wendy told of her affinity for a club with the following,

I think that it is the most dominant community I'm part of, aside from the disability center and queer cultural center. I think those are the main three. It is a very open community for the most part you go in, and you're creating an environment for people to explore identities. Worlds of fantasy. It is just a really good community to be a part of, and I'd consider it one of the most welcoming environments to be in.

Wendy was asked how she became a member of the club. Her reply was

Well, so within the college, I went to during welcome week, I just found a stand that was talking about it, and I just went there. Their open house, their DM (?) fell for it, and then, I've just been a part of it since. There is a lot of good places on campus to meet. And then sometimes we'll meet in the lounges in different residents' halls, or we'll meet in reserve just on campus, or we'll meet in someone's dorms or apartment. Typically, there's a lot of good places to meet up.

There were research-group participants who reported difficulties in joining various clubs. The reason for given the difficulty was their disability characteristics presented difficulties in reading people's social cues and enjoying their company. Austin explained,

I guess like making friends is, I guess, a little bit of challenging but I feel like that's more stemmed from like the fact that like this like this gigantic division, one university. But yeah, I know, like, can I like, I guess like my disability is like an extra obstacle.

The disabled students who did have difficulty in joining clubs reported they did have a sense of loneliness and depression. Wendy explained,

I do say that it is something because people often feel very isolated when they don't have people to relate to or people to support them. People, people really, I do feel people need a community. That is that so they can relate to their experience; it's nice to have people to be like, yes, I support you, but having people that are also disabled.

Dorms and dining halls

The research participants indicated that dorm rooms and dining halls were the most used locations to meet informally with peers. Sally, who used a wheelchair for mobility, said, "Quite often if it was like a real hang out in a real whatever, it would be in my because that is most of the time I could not get to their room so that we would do that." Dining halls were a favored informal meeting location for disabled students because they facilitated an inclusive environment where disabled and nondisabled

students could join together for a meal in a casual atmosphere. The dining experience enhanced the fellowship that disabled students gained from the experience.

Discerning places of inclusion

Participants in the study reported they discerned they were in a place of inclusion when they could, as disabled people, speak freely among the group members. The disabled students believed they were in a nonjudgmental space on campus. Cloe said, discerning an inclusive environment meant to her,

I just like easier to link anticipate that you're probably not going to be judged, and luckily most of like the not disabled people and I run into. I've been like accommodating about my disability, but it's just like, you know. Other people haven't had so good of experiences. So it's nice to know that I get lucky on that regard.

Wendy explained,

What I would say is welcoming is being able to talk about your experiences so not feeling, intimidated to speak about yourself your health. Not being scared about what people are gonna to think about. Or hold against you for your experiences or not really believe you because that's something that people often think about when it comes to health. People often might not believe that, hey, that's, you know, I don't experience that myself; that's not a real thing, you know. But here, I feel pretty open about speaking about my health and my experiences because a lot of people have those same experiences.

Exclusion

All nine participants reported experiencing exclusion at least once during their Campus affiliation. The norm for each member of the research project was that they experienced ongoing exclusion events during their time in the school environment. A discernable pattern of exclusion did not appear in the data. Exclusion could be manifested in the classroom or within a social setting, but not limited to those two areas of concern. When exclusion did occur, the disabled students discerned the exclusion, and the event caused them anguish in one manner or another. The manner of exclusion varied with the

environment the disabled student was in at the time and who participated in excluding them. Mary explained,

I'll have to say no to social things sometimes because I'm dealing with my health. Then it gets to circumstances where I'm no longer extended the invite because it's just assumed that I'm dealing with health stuff and won't be able to go participate in whatever it is.

Research Question Three

3. What classroom, institutional, and social structures allow disabled students to feel seen and heard? What classroom, institutional, and social structures do disabled students report as leading to feeling silenced and invisible?

I experienced some difficulty with answering research question three. As I analyzed the data, it became apparent that classroom, institutional, and social structures facilitated students to be seen and heard. Those same classroom, institutional, and social structures, however, also led to the disabled student feeling silenced and becoming invisible. Whether the disabled student experienced being heard or felt silenced and invisible depended much on the attitude of those involved, especially faculty members.

Classroom

Disabled students reported positive experiences in their classrooms. Some respondents believed they had the opportunity to take part in class activities, including classroom discussions. Several disabled students said they were very active in discussions with their peers and instructors in the classroom. Those same students believed the class members welcomed them into the class environment. Dan said,

I think that it's two things. I think if the professor is good, they will accept the kids who ask questions, and then they will create an environment in the class where that is a good thing, and participation is a good thing, and I think in all my business operations classes teachers do a good job of like fostering almost to the level of like a Socratic roundtable of stuff of like that level of participation. So I

participate in all my classes I like, and I don't think that anyone really cares. I'd definitely do it more than others.

Some respondents, however, reported that the classroom experience failed to recognize or hear them. Sally explained,

Like you know, I'll say something. It's like evidently wrong, not the right answer which (is) no big deal. And I don't get that same kind of response that other students would get. Like oh no it is actually this instead. It is. So, yeah, okay. You know, things like that and then, you know, just, and then not being like called on in the classroom events when it is really happening to everyone else. It's stuff like that. Very, very micro. It's hard to pinpoint exactly when or why it happens, but over time, it just kind of builds up to the feeling that, you know, I've never taken it to, ever to heart. I guess I try not to be concerned about it because I know that I'll do the best job that I can do, and at the end of the day I'll get whatever degrees I need on my transcript.

Dormitories

Living in the dormitory environment could be advantageous and enjoyable for the disabled student. Many of the research participants found the dorm room a pleasant place to "hang out" with other students, both disabled and nondisabled. The dormitory environment was nonthreatening to the research participants. Liza shared,

It depends. There's a lot of good places on campus to meet, and then so sometimes we'll meet in the lounges in different residence halls, or we'll meet in reserve spaces just on campus, or we'll meet in someone dorm (room), or apartments. Typically there's a lot of good places on campus to meet up.

Not all research respondents shared the enthusiasm of others regarding dormitory life. At least one disabled student found the dorm-living experience threatening and humiliating. The reason provided by the respondent as the cause for the many awkward experiences he encountered was a lack of understanding of disability, both by peers and dormitory staff. Austin said,

I guess there's, like right now, like an ongoing situation with housing, and like part of that is because, ah, okay, I'll go into the situation. So, I think it was like a week ago I knocked on the door of my community adviser, RA. I know, like I

kind of like stayed there for a while, kind of like 10, 15 minutes stayed outside the door like I knew people were in there. I was like they didn't want to talk to me, and like, because of that, weird disconnect and communication, I kind of got like they called RAs on duty. Apparent(ly) and essentially like their role, the RAs that kind of roam around the hallways if there's any issue. And it kind of like, because, of that miscommunication, I was like, I guess, like labeled kind of an intruder, or kind of like, not an intruder in that way, I guess, I guess like, basically, I guess, like my mannerisms came off as like a stalker, or like, I guess, is what I'm trying to say and that resulted in authorities being called on me kind of like miscommunication in that way. Kind of like, where, if, I feel if the RAs on my floor had been educated on you know different mannerisms with neurodivergent people I feel that the situation would have been avoided.

Social structures

All nine research participants acknowledged that social structures on campus had the potential to enhance their lives. The social networks allowed students to bond together in friendships. They provided an opportunity to interact socially with other people. Many respondents commented positively on their relationships with social organizations on campus. Dan related,

I'm with my fraternity friends, and you know, just like people I know from like freshman year that you run into at the bars. I would say that, like, 90% percent of the time. The people that I spend my time with are my like fraternity. I live in the house, and I'm but I constantly surrounded by them. Yeah, so I would say, like, since my sophomore years, since rushed and met your friends through the rushing process and through like living in the house.

There were instances where the social structures failed to support the disabled student on campus. As mentioned earlier, much depended on the lens of the social network members and how those persons perceived disability. There were instances where the social structure manifested ableism in its organization. Mary reported,

One example in my social sorority that I was on the exec board for was one of the supervisors of our group had ended up with the work that would have been allotted to my position. This happened without even discussing it with me. They gave out the work to somebody else to do because they thought I would have too much going on with everything that I deal with.

Disability Cultural Center

Research question two addressed the importance of the disability cultural center for disabled students. The cultural center became the social structure that facilitated disabled students to be seen and heard. It was an area where the respondents felt most at ease, allowing them to share time with other disabled students. The respondents repeatedly reported that the center was a comfortable space for them. Sally summed up the feeling when she said, “I’ve always felt kind of the most confident to be myself with these spaces.”

Research Question Four

4. How do disabled students report experiencing marginalization and stigmatization on the college campus? How do disabled students say navigating marginalization and stigmatization on the college campus, both as individuals and with a group of other students? How do the encounters of disabled students with stigmatization and marginalization differ within academic space on the college campus versus social spaces?

Marginalization

All nine participants reported an encounter with marginalization at least once during their time on campus. Eight of the nine participants said they encountered several instances of marginalization within their campus environment. The data did not indicate any pattern or method of when or where such marginalization or stigmatization incidents might occur. The research data revealed both were present on campuses. The intensity of the marginalization ranged from disquieting to traumatic. The typical response to the marginalization was that it resulted from a lack of training of university

personnel and an overall lack of understanding of disability on campuses. Sally, who used a wheelchair for mobile access to the community, said,

And people want to do what's best for me. Generally, that's been my experience. Again, it's not for everyone, but for me, generally the best. But quite often, they just don't know what's required. So, I said the RAs are planning a ski trip, which is great. I'm going to go to the snow, and they do without appropriate resources and without allowing me to be a part of the process because I know what is necessary. We're all ready to go. The bus shows up, it's not accessible, and we don't go. Well, I don't go there. You go, stuff like that. And they're my biggest barrier, and it happened freshman year, and that happened in the senior formal I missed because of a transport issue. So those have been the biggest challenge to me is, you know, and it's something I've done to try to get disability training into like the RAs of the various student groups because they're just not supporting people, and they want to do what's right, but they just don't really know how.

Stigmatization

All nine participants reported encountering stigmatization at least once on their campus. Most of the nine said they had experienced stigmatization several times over their years on campus. The participants indicated that stigmatization was a direct consequence of ableism on the campus and that it was discrimination toward disabled students. The perpetrators of the stigmatization were ableists and did not believe that disabled students could perform specific tasks, be they academic or social. Again, as with marginalization, the data did not discern a recognizable pattern of stigmatization situations, only that such incidents did occur. Sally, again with a visible disability, had the following comment regarding the stigmatization she experienced,

A bit like others. I've never had anyone outright say that (you are unable do a task) or show that to me, and it's kind of been stated. I think it's more just like a feeling I get in certain environments or I'm like if I do well and somehow people are extra surprised, you know, like, oh, she founder (is disabled) who knew. Maybe if we're working on and group projects or something, I'll just really have to work a little bit harder to get my voice heard and get the parts of it that I want to do and that kind of thing. But no one ever says, ah, you can't do this, whatever. It's never like a bit like that. It's more of like a kind of the feeling I get from them and their actions not actually being said outright. It's hard to then kind of do

anything about it besides continually to try to prove yourself, which everyone at school was trying to do, and working hard and that kind of thing. But when you have a disability, there is this extra layer of, like, I have to prove myself because I don't want to reinforce the stereotypes that people already have about me.

The participants experienced stigmatization in an assortment of manners. Dan explained his experience with stigmatization when he said,

But, for instance, when it's exam time, so I get extra time on my finance exam. You know, it's math based. There's not much reading going on when I go up to a lecture hall. So when I'm at the like the top section of the lecture (hall), and they ask me, why are you up there? I just like smiled like you (expletive); you don't have as much time as me. I'm better than you. You know I'm in a better position than you. So, here's where a microaggression could come out. They could maybe feel jealous, or like, he's just taking advantage of the system. And I feel like I feel like it. Probably felt that before on campus. Yeah, so like that, people are jealous, and I get extra time, and they don't.

Navigation of Marginalization and Stigmatization

Student responses regarding navigation of marginalization and stigmatization were both accomplished individually and in groups. Both types of navigation are presented in the following subsections.

Individual

Disabled students, when navigating marginalization and stigmatization individually, found the task difficult, and some believed it was impossible to navigate. Those who deemed navigating marginalization impossible thought such ableism must be endured on campus. Ralph said, “Once I come to the belief that someone has perceived me as maybe you are not just as intelligent or capable for any matter. I do feel that there's been times where a person like that loses interest in getting to know me.”

There were six of the nine participants indicated their method of navigating marginalization and stigmatization in the classroom was to be extraordinarily participatory. The six found that they were perceived as class members with a valid voice

to be heard by their peers. The six disabled students' perception of the class participation was highly influential in minimizing marginalization and stigmatization. Chloe explained, “Well, honestly, it's like, I am also was really active in that in terms of, like participating in class. Like I'm very outspoken in terms of class participation. And so I feel like that probably was a saving grace in that regard.”

Disability activism on campus offered a positive path to navigating marginalization and stigmatization. Becoming an advocate for disability rights allowed the disabled student a sense of identity on campus. The advocacy and activism generated pride regarding disability. They became a conduit for explaining disability to others and the importance of accepting disabled students on campus with social equity, social justice, diversity, and inclusion. Sally related,

How did that come about? I am certain my time at West University, I think I started off writing for the university newspaper. Kind of thinking about it now. And I started to write about living with disability, kind of as a writer. Write through that barrier and kind of eliminate that elephant in the room. I felt like by writing about it in the daily life; I know people will sometimes see it and kind of go through that first. Kind of breaking the ice. Yeah, I have a disability, and this is what it's about, and I wanted to give you this insight, but it's not necessarily—a talking down. I wanted to shout, and you want at you one-on-one, so I didn't know. It was my motivation to say at the very beginning for writing in the student newspaper about it. But then, you know, as I progressed through West University and I know I get involved in different student groups, student government, all that type of stuff, I think I came more towards using it as a tool of advocacy and less about, yeah, obviously informed by my own experiences, but less about that and more about the ways that West is or is not welcoming students with disabilities.

Groups

As previously mentioned, the value of disability cultural centers for disabled students was immense. Seven of the eight participants who attended an institution with a disability cultural center appreciated the support the center provided. Students found solace in the opportunity to discuss the challenges they endured on campus, including

marginalization and stigmatization. The cultural center gave a voice within the campus for disabled students and an opportunity for activism and advocacy for disability rights on the college campus. The cultural center allowed identity to develop for disabled students. Ralph said of the cultural center on his campus, "(It is) kind of like an advocacy group, more or less. I don't know if that's the right word, but, like kind of like, have that support mechanism like of the DRC. Like you have someone on your side." Chloe, discussing the connections with her campus said, "Honestly, aside from being a part of the cultural centers, I think that's most of my connection. I don't really go out of my way to attend like big university events."

The participants reported their preference for meeting and socializing with other disabled students. The disabled students felt most comfortable on campus with other disabled students and did seek out their company. Chole explained,

Most of the people I hang out with are disabled. I just like easier to like anticipate that you're probably not going to be judged, and luckily most of like the not disabled people I run into, I've been like accommodating about my disability, but it's just like, you know. Other people haven't had so good experiences. So it's nice to know that I get lucky on that regard.

Marginalization and Stigmatization in Academic Space

Marginalization and stigmatization in academic spaces are manifested primarily by a lack of implementation of accommodations by instructors. As mentioned previously, the lack of accommodations designed for the disabled student was a significant obstacle to academic success. Navigating a correction to the lack of accommodation implementation in the classroom was an arduous task for the disabled student to correct and often not successful.

Sally, with her visible disability, experienced a lack of recognition in her classes. The instructors would ignore her when conducting class, directing questions to other students. Students would not correct mistakes she made during a class discussion. Sally explained,

I think with me, I have always been kind of conscious of the fact that because of my disability. People kind of hold me to a different standard. In some cases, I notice like everyone getting called on in class. In class, they get called on I never get it again. Some people know I get kind of pissed, whatever. Like, if I do that. And then it became more apparent that happens to a certain extent, and they went on Zoom because, you know, professors can always tell that I have a disability and also that my peers in the classroom. But in the virtual classroom, they couldn't tell, and always my having a disability. And immediately I was able to kind of feel that difference in good ways and bad, I think. When we have discussion groups about certain topics or whatever, generally those conversations were a lot better on Zoom because that people didn't have that kind of openness and they had when they were speaking in person. I felt more like an equal experience. So, it's I've never been treated like negatively, and some people would say they are treating you right, or whatever, but I think, you know, there is an element of that. And I know it's hard to like to quantify it. It's more like a feeling that. Yeah.

Marginalization and Stigmatization in Social Settings

Marginalization and stigmatization manifested in disabled students being shunned or left out of social gatherings. Disabled students did not receive invitations to join people in outings or were excluded from positions because people did not believe they could perform a task. Mary said, “And then as far as, like, peers go, I've had instances where, you know, friends. I'll have to say no to social things sometimes because I'm dealing with my health. Then it gets to circumstances where I'm no longer extended the invite because it's just assumed that I'm dealing with health and stuff, and won't be able to go participate in whatever it is.”

Mary explained an incident with her social sorority when the members excluded

Her from a position because the members did not have confidence in her ability. Mary said,

One example in my social sorority is that I was on the exec board as one of the supervisors. Our group had ended work that would have been allotted to my position without even discussing it with me. They gave out work to somebody else to do because they thought I would have too much going on with everything I deal with. And so, you know, I would have at least liked the opportunity to say, I know this is what is expected of me, but like, can we regroup? Or maybe I could have done it. Maybe it was a day I could have done it myself, you know.

Discussion

Three themes evolved from the qualitative data I was able to gather. The themes were the disabled students' connections to campus, the disabled students' relationships with their instructors, and the disabled students' use of academic accommodations and how those accommodations related to the Disability Resource Center (DRC). I discuss each of the three themes in this section.

Connections to Campus

Interviewing the participants enlightened me that the foremost concern of the disabled students attending postsecondary schools was their connection with the campus. Ehlinger and Ropers (2020) discovered similar findings in their study. Ehlinger and Ropers reported that community within the campus was essential to a disabled student's life at college. The nine participants discussed, with emphasis, as to their connections to the campus they attended. Three disabled students indicated they had no strong relationship with the campus. All nine, however, reported that their campus connections somehow affected their academic performance. The disabled students sought possible links to connect them to the campus. The search for such campus links was a priority in each research participant's life as they were not interested in having an isolation

experience at the postsecondary level. They wanted a community. A campus connection gave the research participants a sense of belonging to the school environment.

Saia's (2022) research discovered that the identity development of disabled students on college campuses created an environment of success for disabled students on the campuses. My interviews with the research participants corroborated Saia's findings. All nine reported they desired to be accepted, with social equity, in a socially just manner, as full campus community members. Bulk et al. (2017) described how marginalization is a barrier to disabled students. The participant's comments concerning marginalization on campus were similar. Such marginalization hindered the disabled student's ability to form campus connections and robbed them of identity as disabled people, with equity on campus.

There were a majority of participants who reported they were successful in establishing connections within the campus environment because their disabilities were nonvisible. They said that disabled students on campus with visible disabilities experienced more difficulties establishing campus connections. The nonvisibility of their disabilities allowed them to pass as not disabled, and thus they were more likely to be accepted by the campus members as a whole.

I thought of the situation as horizontal ableism. I believe it demonstrated a lack of self-esteem by the disabled students with nonvisible disabilities. The indication was that disabled students with nonvisible disabilities thought that there was a medical deficiency associated with a disability; the consequence was difficulties establishing relationships with nondisabled campus members. Other nondisabled campus members discerned the nonvisible disabled students as not disabled and more readily accepted into the

postsecondary environment. One participant with a visible disability confirmed it was arduous for a person with a visible disability to become involved with the campus members who do not have a disability.

Again, I termed the finding as horizontal ableism. Those disabled students with a nondisabled disability sensed their disability as a medical deficit. The indication was those participants believed because they could pass as nondisabled, the medical deficit was less of a hindrance to them.

Disability Cultural Centers

Disability Cultural Centers (DCC) on the campuses were a strong positive connection for six of eight study participants (one disabled student attended a campus without a cultural center for disabled students). A student named Austin identified the disability cultural center as a beacon of support for disabled students: a refuge. The DCC was an advocacy group for disabled students in one participant's perception. Another strongly favored the DCC, saying she would not attend a school without a disability cultural center.

Saia (2022) spoke of the importance of a disability cultural center on campus. Saia wrote, "When describing the DCC, (study) participants shared their experiences with the DCC and how the DCC was a place that recognized and validated their disability experiences" (p. 24).

One participant found great comfort in membership with the DCC. The disabled student immensely was uncomfortable in large groups and crowds. The DCC offered a smaller group size experience with other disabled students. The DCC was her only connection to a large and foreboding campus.

The participants reported feeling much more at ease in the company of other disabled students. They were comfortable in such groups, and the DCC offered that form of sanctuary for them. The DCC became a place of solace for disabled students on campuses.

Counseling

Hong's (2015) research found that disabled students' academic endeavors were enhanced when they connected with advisors with whom they found a good fit. Hong (2015) established that disabled students welcomed the opportunity to work with ongoing counselors on their campuses. The research participants stated they valued access to a counselor on an ongoing basis. One key advantage of an ongoing counselor's availability was assisting the disabled student in resolving difficulties encountered on campus. The participants relished having a professional individual to help sort out their difficulties on campus.

Practice Recommendations

1. Design and Implement a Disability Cultural Center on Campus

Disability cultural centers were a significant asset for disabled students on campus. Such a center signified recognition of disability as a culturally relevant marginalized demographic of the postsecondary campus. A disability cultural center provided authenticity and identity for the disabled student. The disability center was a gathering point for disabled students. In the process, it offered advocacy for disabled, marginalized students. Therefore, if a college or university does not have a Disability Cultural Center, then the administration responsible for student services should consider

designing and implementing a center to support better to support students with disabilities students with disabilities.

2. Ensure Ongoing Counseling is Available for Disabled Students

Mental health is an important concern on the modern college campus. The mental-health needs of disabled students are more urgent than for nondisabled students. During the interview process, I discerned certain disabled students were assigned a counselor throughout their stay at a university and that this counselor was readily available to assist the given student. Those students tended to prosper more with their campus activities than those who did not have a counselor assigned.

Disabled students experience angst on campus even under the best of conditions. When life becomes stressful for the disabled student, their life can become tumultuous quickly. If a disabled student does have a mental-health professional assigned who is familiar with their situation, one would surmise their lives to become productive and happier.

Staff in the SRC should be trained regarding the importance is addressing he mental-health needs of the students who they are supporting. Staff could work with the counselors regarding the needs of the disabled students and assist in acquainting the students and counselors to work together during their time on campus.

Relationships with Instructors

During the literature review for this qualitative study, I found many related research articles involving disabled students on the postsecondary campus. Repeatedly the studies revealed that disabled college students habitually encountered difficulties with their assigned instructors in their educational institutions. The research results in the

literature review indicated that marginalization and discrimination toward disabled students were found generally on the college campus and widespread among instructors.

The Thurston et al.'s (2017) study discovered that most instructors involved with STEM courses did not believe disabled students could complete STEM-related studies. Bulk et al. (2017) found that the instructional staff at a medical facility perceived that one of their duties was to remove disabled students from the medical-school regimen. Ehlinger and Ropers (2020) described in their study that even though there were multiple legislative acts to enhance education for disabled students, they continued to encounter marginalizing situations in their schools, especially with instructional staff. Other studies (e.g., Giroux, 2020; Herbert et al., 2020; Hong, 2015) came to the same conclusions regarding relationships between disabled students and their instructors on college campuses.

Consequently, I was not surprised when the participants in my study indicated they had experienced difficulties with their instructors at various times during their school enrollment. Disabled students reported that the most frequent problem with an instructor was the implementation of the disabled student's academic accommodations in the class. Instructors would question the need for the accommodations or whether it was a curriculum modification rather than an academic accommodation. Some instructors questioned the validity of the student's disability, especially if the disability was nonvisible.

A difficulty with an instructor created tremendous angst and consternation with the disabled student. Disabled students were frightened by the prospect of taking a course without the accommodations worked out with the DRC counselor. The disabled student

felt helpless because of the power differential between the instructor and the student. Many participants reported there needed to be a clear path to follow to reconcile differences with instructors. Some participants became so demoralized that they would drop a course rather than seek a remedy for the difficulty they may have encountered with an instructor.

Participants reported that difficulties with the instructional staff were the most significant impediment to academic achievement. They could not perform academic tasks in the classroom because of the denial of the accommodations that would have allowed them to do so. Most disconcerting to some participants was being challenged if they genuinely were disabled. The significance of this slight indicated that there would not be flexibility with the instructor to negotiate a solution allowing the disabled student some form of accommodations for the class.

Dilemma

The participants reported a dilemma when they encountered challenges with an instructor. None of the institutions involved in the study had a path designated to resolve differences with the instructor, especially when the challenges involved implementing accommodations in the classroom. Some of the students said they returned to the DRC for help. Reporting an instructor for failure to implement accommodations and working through the turmoil was emotionally exhaustive for some. Often disabled students would not step forward with concerns because of the angst. Generally, disabled students would remove the course from their schedule.

Other participants reported their complaints and concerns to the DRC with the hope that they could reconcile differences with instructors. What those disabled students

encountered, however, was a limited staff available to process their problems. Because of a lack of funding, which resulted in a lack of personnel to work with the disabled students for reconciliation with the instructor, the complaints often were not resolved prudently and would often fall by the wayside.

One disabled student stated he could reconcile differences with instructors personally should they arise. That participant, however, was the only disabled student successful in doing so. The other participants reported that they had difficulties privately resolving disputes with professors.

Understanding Disability

All nine participants said they had encountered a misunderstanding of disability by faculty members. Hoffman et al. (2019) research participants reported the same situation in the study in which they were involved. Consequently, the disabled students were uncomfortable talking with instructors concerning their disability and avoided doing so, if possible. The participants developed an intuition that many instructors approached disability from the medical model. The student had a disability, so they must be a deficit student.

The instructors' approaching disability with a medical model lens created difficulties for disabled students. They reported that the instructors overlooked them during class discussions. The disabled students often felt that the instructors thought them incapable of some assignments and excluded them from group activities. All nine participants believed the education and training of instructors regarding disability would benefit disabled students and the instructors.

Positive Development

In reading prior research concerning disabled students on the postsecondary campus, when disabled students faced challenges with instructors, it appeared as a significant universal situation within the campus environment. All nine participants in my study reported experiencing difficulty with an instructor. The participants, however, indicated that this challenge was an uncommon occurrence. All nine participants reported that most instructors they encountered on the postsecondary campus were genuinely interested in providing a positive experience in their classes for disabled students. Disability-challenging instructors commonly were referred to as outliers by participants. Instructors who challenged accommodations and failed to recognize the needs of disabled students, however, did exist and created havoc for those people. Shine and Stefanou (2022) discovered the same in their study of disabled students on campus.

Practice Recommendations

1. Train Instructors Staff on the Best Methodology to Work with Disabled Students

For Sally, it was the transportation incidents that were most depressing. She mentioned that certain incidents, such as storing items not intended to be in an elevator, were common. An ongoing concern with disabled students was the lack of training of staff members of the college that resulted in various incidents (unintentional) where the school failed to meet a disabled student's needs. Austin indicated he had trouble with staff (and others) misinterpreting his affect and actions because of his disability. He mentioned his life would improve dramatically if the team understood his disabilities and others. Orientation for staff regarding student disability needs and how to support students with

disabilities should be designed and implemented. Academic, Student Affairs, and Resident Advisors (RA) staff may need different orientations.

2. Conduct Education Sessions Regarding the Multiple Dimensions of Disabled Students on Campus

A common concern among all nine participants was their perception of a lack of understanding of disability and its effect on disabled students. The lack of understanding permeated throughout all members of the educational environment. Ongoing education sessions about disability and disabled students would help to alleviate much of the misunderstanding on college campuses. An ideal time for such an orientation is when students are beginning their tenure at the university and college. Colleges and universities required to educate students about drugs and alcohol have developed online modules that students must pass. Online modules might be employed to educate students about individuals with disabilities.

Accommodations and Disability Resource Center (DRC)

This section contains subsections addressing accommodations, the accommodation process, and the Disability Resource Center (DRC).

Accommodations

The nine participants valued the accommodations they had received from the DRC. The nine participants were comfortable with the accommodation development process, which was collaborative with the DRC counselor. They believed the accommodations benefited them if the instructor allowed accommodation implementation in the classroom.

The participants agreed it was beneficial to visit the DRC and discuss academic accommodations with a DRC counselor. They recommended that any student on campus with a disability visit the DRC; encouragement to obtain academic accommodations if disabled was not surprising to hear. The nine participants all identified as disabled, and the nine had received academic accommodations from the DRC.

I did discern that not all nine participants accepted academic accommodations every semester they were in school. Some institutions required that the disabled student activate their accommodations for use in the classroom every semester. Three participants reported that they did not renew the accommodations assigned to them for every semester. The common reason for not doing so was the disabled student did not see the need for accommodations for those particular semesters.

The accommodations varied among the participants. I was impressed with the commitment of some of the institutions to provide accommodations beyond the norm found in postsecondary schools. One school offered ongoing physical therapy for a disabled student while enrolled in the university. Another college provided a personal assistant for one disabled student.

Accommodation Process

The participants reported they were impressed with the accommodation process. The counselors were helpful and assisted the disabled student as much as possible in determining the qualification and need for academic accommodations. Again, I was impressed with the participants' support from the university during the disability qualification process. The institutions did require written documentation of a disability. The institution, however, would assist the student in obtaining the proper documents for

accommodations. In one situation, the student believed she had a neurodivergent disability but was from a culture where medical practitioners did not diagnose such disabilities. The school provided a complete neurodivergent examination at a private hospital, at university expense, for the student.

None of the participants reported any challenges with the DRC during the disability qualification process. All nine participants believed their accommodations were appropriate. I was mindful, however, that all the research participants informed me they were disabled and had interacted with the DRC, including receiving academic accommodations from the institution's DRC. The nine had a successful relationship prior to the interviews.

Disability Resource Center (DRC)

The participants reported that the staff at the DRC at their school was professional and friendly with the disabled students. The disabled students found the visits with the DRC to be cordial and productive. All nine participants spoke positively about the counselors' collaborative and supportive efforts to facilitate disabled students' positive academic achievement.

The participants said that the DRC was understaffed, which resulted in delays in appointments with the counselors and services from the DRC. The delays were particularly problematic when instructors would not implement accommodations, and the disabled student needed assistance reconciling the situation. Also, there were not adequate numbers of DRC staff available to resolve issues encountered with instructors or staff at the schools, and thus, those complaints would fall by the wayside because of a lack of action on the part of the DRC.

One of the most challenging aspects of the DRC for the disabled student was the lack of continuity of counseling staff. There was a high turnover rate among the DRC counselors. Consequently, the disabled student continually needed to establish a relationship with new counselors. The participants reported the continual influx of new counselors when former counselors left the school resulting in confusion and angst for the disabled student. The participants felt insecure and unattached with the DRC in the process.

Practice Recommendation

1. Create a Procedure that Adequately Addresses Issues Between Instructors and Students Regarding Implementing Accommodations in Classes

If the disabled student encounters difficulty with a professor regarding accommodations, the student's recourse is to file a complaint at the DRC to reconcile the situation. Unfortunately, the arrangement forces a disabled student to grieve an instructor's actions and then return to the instructor for the remainder of the semester. A challenging situation results when the person holding the power over a student about grades has received a complaint from the student.

As mentioned earlier, many complaints languish in the DRC without sufficient personnel to address the issue. The lack sufficient numbers of personnel to resolve complaints may be connected to funding for positions. The resulting situation for many students becomes overwhelming as they are not receiving the benefits of their accommodations.

Therefore, the DRC needs to create a procedure that can adequately address any complaints in a timely manner. If the procedure involves personnel to mediate the

accommodations with the instructor, then the Student Services administration should seek the resources to fund the DRC to meet the needs of students with a disability.

Additionally, the director of the DRC could work with the academic deans to provide an orientation for faculty regarding accommodations.

Conclusion

Interviews of nine disabled students on four American university campuses took place for the completion of this qualitative study. Eight disabled students' disabilities were nonvisible, and one had a visible disability. The nine participants expressed enthusiasm for the study and appreciated the research on ableism on the postsecondary campus and its impact on disabled students attending college campuses. The consensus of the disabled students was that they lacked a voice on the campuses. The study would provide a conduit for those voices to resonate from the postsecondary campus.

All nine participants experienced encounters with marginalization or stigmatization while attending the campus. The encounters ranged from disciplinary actions directed at disabled students for behavior that manifested from their disabilities to having a lack of access to the campus because an elevator in a building became a storage location for books. The participants described accessibility on the campuses as compliant but demonstrated a genuine lack of support and concern for disabled students to navigate the campuses physically.

Eight of the nine disabled students believed their campus administrations attempted to create an inclusive environment for disabled students on campus. Inadequate funding and training, however, contributed to marginalization or stigmatization—the

most common example of inadequate financing related to accommodations and relationships with professors.

The participants agreed that a disabled student would benefit if the student sought academic accommodations with the DRC. If a student did seek such accommodations, the initial contact provided help for future classroom endeavors. The instructors, for the most part, accepted the accommodations and supported disabled students in their classes. However, when the disabled student encountered an instructor who was less than obliging, adequately funded mechanisms for the grievance of the instructor's refusal to accept the accommodations did not exist. Many of the complaints did not get resolved because of a lack of campus personnel or the student failed to make an original grievance due to a lack of energy.

A universal concern among the nine was insufficient staff training in the needs of disabled students on campus. The perception of the participants was that the staff wanted to be of assistance. Lack of training, however, became the impetus for unintended mishaps. An example was a disabled student being unable to participate in a scheduled school activity because of inadequate transportation arrangements. Others encountered friction with university staff because of a lack of understanding of their disability.

Those participants who established a path to be disability activists on campus reported the effort assisted in creating a positive environment for them. Becoming involved in disability support provided the participant to be active in helping other disabled students on campus and building a community of disabled community on campus. In the process, the participant became a positive voice for disability rights.

Also, I detected a lack of recognition of microaggressions reported by disabled students. Several disabled students reported hearing conversations that they said were made in jest or went unnoticed as a microaggression. The concerned disabled student would continue their conversation without acknowledging the discourse and rhetoric. From my perspective, I ascertained the statements as microaggressions and was concerned the disabled students did not. I believe further research into this phenomenon is appropriate.

In Closing

Throughout this research project, I heard the participants report incidents when their voices were unheard and went unnoticed or acknowledged. I listened to the participants' discourse and rhetoric, indicating they expected and accepted ableism due to being disabled, especially on a college campus. I am honored I was allowed to be their messenger. I hope this study provides further knowledge to facilitate and motivate colleges and universities to complete many needed campus enhancements in creating an inclusive school environment for disabled students on the postsecondary campus.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

1. Before we begin, tell me a little about yourself. What year are you in college? What's your home state? Why did you choose this college? What's your major? Things like that.
2. Please describe your perceptions of the friendliness (or unfriendliness) of your campus environment.
3. Please describe your feelings about inclusion, sense of belonging and feelings of being welcomed on campus.
4. Which activities do you enjoy most on campus
5. Where and how do your friends and you meet on campus?
6. What are your perceptions, as a disabled student, of your treatment within your campus environment? Can you give me an example of a time when you felt you were not treated well.
7. How comfortable are you discussing your disability with peers on your campus?
- 8.. Please describe any instances where your disability has interfered with your development of a relationship with a faculty member.
9. Please describe the academic supports that are available for you, as a disabled student?
10. What are your opinions on disabled students seeking university-sanctioned academic accommodations on your campus? Are your opinions shared by other disabled students?
11. Please describe any incident where you perceived someone has not believed you were capable of performing an academic task/participating in a social event because you are disabled.
12. Please describe an incident when you perceived that people in your campus community were not cognizant of your presence.

APPENDIX B

Invitation to Join Qualitative Study

Dear Disabled Student,

My name is George Fuller, and I am completing my Doctor of Education degree in Special Education at the University of San Francisco. The topic of my research study is ableism on the postsecondary campus. More pointedly, it involves determining whether ableism exists on the college campus and, if so, the impact of ableism on disabled students.

The definition of ableism in the study is social bias against people whose bodies function differently from those considered normal.

An invitation to join in the study is extended to you. If you elect to volunteer, you will contact me. I will make a selection to interview ten to fifteen disabled students from group of volunteers. Interviews will take place over Zoom and expected to last approximately forty-five minutes. There will be a short interview, and your name will be placed with other volunteers.

Your information, and the school's identity, will be held in the strictest confidentiality. The data obtained will be stored in a password-protected, firewall-protected computer storage unit. The data, once received, will be analyzed to provide the research findings of the study.

The study will facilitate a voice for disabled students on the postsecondary campus.

Interviewees will receive a \$50.00 gift card.

If you are interested, please get in touch with me at [.....](#).

George Fuller, MPA, MA

Appendix C

Consent Form

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Below is a description of the research procedures and an explanation of your rights as a research participant. You should read this information carefully. If you agree to participate, you will sign in the space provided to indicate that you have read and understand the information on this consent form. You are entitled to and will receive a copy of this form.

You have been asked to participate in a research study conducted by George Fuller, a doctoral student in the School of Education at the University of San Francisco.

WHAT THE STUDY IS ABOUT:

The purpose of the research study to learn of the experiences and challenges of disabled students on college campuses. The intent of the qualitative study is to give voice to the disabled student so we can hear, in their own words, their lives, successes, failures, most enjoyable aspects of campus life as well as the least enjoyable aspects of the campus environment.

WHAT WE WILL ASK YOU TO DO:

During this study, we will ask you to participate in an approximate hour-long interview, via Zoom, with the researcher. The Zoom session will be recorded to the researcher's computer. The researcher will ask 12 open-ended questions concerning your experiences as a disabled student at college. Follow up questions to the answers to the open-ended questions can be expected.

A transcript of the interview will be created. You will be asked to complete a review of the transcript, and if there are corrections, note them and contact the researcher for corrections. You will be asked for approval for the transcript material. Once the transcript has been created, the Zoom session will be deleted.

DURATION AND LOCATION OF THE STUDY:

Your participation in this study will involve one one-hour interview with the researcher. The study will take place via a Zoom connection.

Your participation will involve approximately one hour for the interview. Within 2 weeks of the interview, the researcher will email you a transcript of the interview for your review. It is anticipated that the study will require one year of time by the researcher, and the research will occur at the University of San Francisco.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS:

I should not anticipate any risks or discomforts to you from participating in this research. If you wish, you may choose to withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation at any time during the study without penalty.

BENEFITS:

You will receive no direct benefit from your participation in this study; however, the possible benefits to others include contributing to the understanding of disabled students' preparation for and participation on the postsecondary campus. The study results will be an asset for college personnel to deliver services for disabled students to increase their academic performance.

You will be assisting in providing a voice for disabled students on the postsecondary campus.

PRIVACY/CONFIDENTIALITY:

Any data you provide in this study will be kept confidential unless disclosure is required by law. In any report I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you or any individual participant. Specifically, I will maintain all records in a password protected computer storage file with only the researcher having access to that file. After transcriptions are completed (no identifying information will appear in the transcriptions) and data have been obtained from the transcriptions, all records of the interviews will be destroyed.

COMPENSATION/PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION:

You will receive a \$50.00 Amazon.com gift card for your participation in this study.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:

Your participation is voluntary, and you may refuse to participate without penalty or loss of benefits. Furthermore, you may skip any questions or tasks that make you uncomfortable and may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. In addition, the researcher has the right to withdraw you from participation in the study at any time.

OFFER TO ANSWER QUESTIONS:

Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you should contact George Fuller, at If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the University of San Francisco Institutional Review Board at IRBPHS@usfca.edu.

I HAVE READ THE ABOVE INFORMATION. ANY QUESTIONS I HAVE ASKED HAVE BEEN ANSWERED. I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT AND I WILL RECEIVE A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM.

PARTICIPANT'S SIGNATURE

DATE