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Journal of College Student Development, Volume 56, Number 3, April 2015, pp. 209-226 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: 10.1353/csd.2015.0032

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Qualitative Analysis of the Barriers College Students With Disabilities Experience in Higher Education

Barbara S. S. Hong

Students with disabilities are increasingly enrolling in colleges and universities. However, many institutions are still unprepared to support them beyond the basic federal mandate of equal access and reasonable accommodations. This qualitative study utilized a nontraditional media of reflective journaling to capture the anecdotal experiences of 16 college students with disabilities for a 10-week period. Four major themes emerged concerning barriers and frustrations these students encountered on a daily basis: (a) faculty perception, (b) fit of advisors, (c) college stressors, and (d) quality of support services. Recommendations for higher education administrators and disability personnel to become more vigilant in improving support for this population are discussed.

Students with disabilities are increasingly enrolling in higher education across the United States (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005; Lee, Oakland, Jackson, & Glutting, 2008). The Institute for Higher Education Policy attributed this increase to the success of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1990, 2004) for preparing students with disabilities for postsecondary opportunities (Wolanin & Steele, 2004). However, despite closing the gap for high school completion between students with and without disabilities, the postsecondary outcome for these two groups is still distinctively dichotomous (13% vs. 30%; Dowrick, Anderson, Heyer, & Acosta, 2005; Stodden, 2005; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005). Based on a report by the National Council on Disability (2003), there were three significant findings: (a) The number of students with disabilities attending college has more than tripled over the last 20 years, (b) the average time students with disabilities took to complete their college was twice as long as their nondisabled cohorts, and (c) more than 80% of students with disabilities in college need some type of assistance and related services in earning their degrees.

Transitioning from high school to college can be a challenging experience for many students but perhaps more so for those with a disability (Hong, Ivy, Gonzalez, & Ehrensberger, 2007). Often, different types and levels of support are necessary to help these students maneuver through the higher education system (Ferrell & Marshak, 2004). Even though federal legislation, such as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the recent ADA Amendments Act (2008), and the 2008 Higher Education Opportunity Act, have been enacted to ensure the provision of appropriate adjustments and equal access in terms of recruitment, treatment, academic, housing, financial, and employment assistance, students with disabilities continue to experience frustrations and face barriers that subsequently lead to their poor performance and premature departure.

According to the concepts of Tinto’s integration (1975, 1993) and Astin’s involvement (1985) theories, students who are
optimaly immersed in college from the onset are more likely to find overall affirmations in meeting their academic, social, and psychological needs. These models postulate three central themes: (a) the extent to which each student is integrated into the social and academic aspects within the university, (b) the degree to which the student is committed to obtaining a degree, and (c) how well the student is committed to the university. In a subsequent refinement of his model, Tinto (1993) posited that in order to persist in college, students must integrate into formal and informal academic systems and social systems.

The problem is that students with disabilities often lack the academic, personal, and social skills needed to integrate themselves into higher education (Brinkerhoff, McGuire, & Shaw, 2002). They are less likely to communicate their needs (lack self-advocacy); less likely to evaluate their own performance (lack self-regulation); less likely to develop a sense of empowerment (lack locus of control); and less likely to be aware of their own strengths, interests and limitations (lack self-knowledge; Hong et al., 2007; Wehmeyer, 1996). This lack of self-determination often results in passive integration into higher education, which leads to social awkwardness, academic challenges, and psychological stress as they struggle their way to assimilate into a new environment (Frieden, 2004; Hong et al., 2007; Rosenbaum, 2004).

Students with disabilities come to college with needs similar to when they were in high school, except now they have to be more self-directed in managing their own lives (Getzel & Thoma, 2008). The important question to ask is: “What are the barriers students with disabilities face as they try to maneuver the higher education environment in meeting their needs?” In one study of 28 colleges within the Florida College System, the most cited barriers by students with disabilities were the attitudes of faculty and staff who were not familiar with disability concerns, access to textbooks in alternative formats, and student advocacy skills (Florida College System, 2009). These perceptions corroborated earlier studies that found that faculty attitudes impact student success the most (Lynch & Gussel, 1996) and that faculty who were experienced in teaching students with disabilities were more receptive to implementing accommodations than were others (Johnson, 2006). In the Florida study, researchers indicated that students with disabilities are often intimidated when interacting with faculty “because they must disclose their accommodation needs with instructors in addition to addressing general questions about course material” (Florida College System, 2009, p. 13).

In practice, higher education institutions vary significantly in their implementation and delivery of related services, making it harder to compare and identify specific variables that contribute to the enhancement or frustration of students (Wolf, 2006). Even though studies have been conducted about the experiences of college students with disabilities mostly through questionnaires, focus groups, and structured interviews (e.g., Dowrick et al., 2005; Duquette, 2000; Getzel, & Thoma, 2008; Greenbaum, Graham, & Scales, 1995), none has considered a more personal, yet less intrusive, approach of understanding the disability phenomenon. This study was grounded in a self-determination framework to generate a richer understanding of how students with disabilities viewed their experiences in college so as to expand the knowledge base about transitional issues that affect their postsecondary outcomes.

**METHOD**

Qualitative research has been widely utilized to understand student affairs and student
attributes within a given context (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Research journaling has a long and serious history as a reliable method for investigating phenomena because it engages participants in a heuristic way for disclosing and discovering about themselves (Diamond, 1993; Janesick, 1998). By putting down their personal thoughts, emotions, reactions, and affections on paper, participants become more open and comfortable at expressing how they feel and what they want to see happen, knowing that they will not be judged for telling their side of the story (Cooper, 1991). Unlike a confession, participants who journal do not need to feel confined to a structured or guarded perimeter in expressing their innermost thoughts (Borg, 2001).

Reflective journaling as a research method has been known for its therapeutic nature because participants coconstruct the meaning behind what they are attempting to reveal as they engage in an internalized dialogue during the writing process (Holly, 1989). This approach of ethnographic investigation provides participants the opportunity to “see” themselves in light of what is happening to them and, in a way, help them face their challenge instead of avoiding them (Diamond, 1993). Reflective journaling has been used to instigate self-empowerment in terms of helping participants develop a sense of self-efficacy and internal locus of control. Participants discover who they are, what they want, why they are going such emotions, and how to resolve conflicts that may jeopardize their prospects for success (Fritson, 2008). The fundamental idea is to allow the phenomenon to unveil itself through self-professed narration rather than by way of an outsider’s manipulation, such as in a focus group or interview (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Most importantly, journaling provides a rigorous and genuine anecdote of the phenomenon so as to guide a more careful interpretation within the authentic context (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

Participants

Approval for this study was granted by the review board to contact students through campus-wide e-mail. Students were solicited through self-disclosure on a voluntary basis. In the e-mail, students were asked if they had ever participated in the campus disability services. This question sought to exclude students who might have perceived themselves as having a "disability" when in fact they were not eligible under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 2008). If students responded that they had received campus disability services, the follow-up question was whether they would like to keep a personal journal of their experiences for a period of 10 weeks. Students who agreed to do so were compensated $10 per week for 10 weeks. Potential participants met with the research team on a one-to-one basis to discuss details of the study.

A total of 28 students, out of approximately 4,300 students on the campus, responded to the e-mail. Students who were transferring to the main campus the following semester, about 40 miles away from the study site campus, were excluded because the intent of this study was to examine students’ experiences on one campus and for the convenience of collecting the journals each week. Students could be at any point in their study and majoring in any subject. The purpose was not to have a homogeneous group but to allow students to identify themselves as persons who have a legitimate condition and who needed support services from the disability office. Because students were permitted to discontinue the study at any time, the final number of participants who completed all 10 weeks of journaling with contents that were analyzable totaled 16. Shown in Table 1 is the breakdown...
of the participants and their conditions with 75% (n = 12) being female and 25% (n = 4) being male students.

### Setting and Procedures

The study was conducted at an East Coast, small suburban college that is part of a larger state university system. This campus’s programs focus on primarily associate’s and undergraduate degrees. Students come mostly from working class families and are first-generation college goers.

Students were provided with journal booklets and asked to write about their positive and not-so-positive experiences that they would encounter for the next 10 weeks. Each Friday, they would drop off their journals in a secure box outside the research office. On the following Monday, students would pick up their journals with their respective payment inserted in a sealed envelope inside their journal and continue writing. In order not to manipulate what the students were writing, no written comments were made in any of the entries. Only a notation of acknowledgement was given in the last entry to indicate receipt of the journal.

Minimum guidelines were given for journaling because the goal was to encourage students to freely express themselves, as if it was their own personal diary. They were instructed to share only what they wanted and be as candid as they wished without fear of repercussions. They were also told that they would not be judged on their writing mechanics, grammar, or penmanship as long as the words were legible. Examples of topics suggested by the researchers included events, persons, offices, classes, faculty, administration, assignment, friends, families, and work. In short, students could write about anything that enhanced or frustrated their college experiences in relation to their disability, even if the event occurred outside the campus.

### Data Analysis

All entries started on the 3rd week of the fall semester and ended 2 weeks prior to the final exam. The rational for choosing the beginning period was to allow participants to settle into their semester and to get familiar with their classes and schedules. Likewise, the reason for ending the study 2 weeks before the end of the semester was so participants would not be distracted from their final exams. All journals were collected at the end of the 10 weeks.

Data analysis was conducted by first reading through each entry at a surface level to capture the overall picture of the student’s experience. Using editing analysis style, the entries were interpreted in search of meaningful fragments. These fragments were reviewed and developed into categorical themes as they emerged. Next, the themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Condition(s)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Tourette’s syndrome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Learning disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Clinical depression + fibromyalgia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Learning disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Attention deficit disorder</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Eating disorder</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Scoliosis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Bipolar depression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Crohn’s disease</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Learning disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Dyslexia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Cystic fibrosis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Seizure disorder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Attention deficit disorder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Heart condition (not specified)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Asthma; allergies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
were cross-tabulated and matched to derive codes for further analysis and merged into more transcending themes. The final coding schemes were used to sort themes into patterns that could be structured and interpreted. Independent readers were used to analyze random journals in order to triangulate the data and reduce biases. Consensus was arrived at before the final synthesis of the generalizable categorical themes. These were then compared to the existing literature on college students with disabilities and probed across common descriptions. Employing Hatch’s (2002) recommendations, the research team took into consideration inherent characteristics of human subjectivity, utilized emergent design, employed inductive data analysis processes, and embraced reflexivity to generate centrality of meaning in these themes without resorting to ambiguity and sorting through constraints of journal writing.

LIMITATIONS

Even though the approach of research journaling offers valuable insights into a phenomenon from a personal perspective, it has its own limitations as well. In particular, journal writing is a reflective tool for many individuals; therefore, participants may have different preferences on which incident they wish to reveal (e.g., more negative than positive; more social than academic), how much details they wish to reveal for each incident, and how expressive and candid they wish to be at that point of recording or recollecting the incident. Also, journaling is peculiar to each individual because there is no judgment on how truthful one needs to be. In short, journaling has its own built-in biases because it is based entirely on the receiver’s perceptions of the incident and no attempt is made to justify or clarify what actually happened. It would be ideal to use this study as a stepping stone to a larger follow-up study and compare students who received services with those who sought services but, for whatever reasons, did not receive them (ineligibility for ADA, lack of proper documentation, failure to follow up, etc.). Another limitation was the unequal number of female versus male participants. Different genders may prefer different modes of communication. Also, future studies should examine whether types of services received and personnel working at the disability office could instigate different experiences. Overall, despite these limitations, it was ascertained that the study of academic and nonacademic infrastructures in facilitating students with disabilities should be carefully examined in order to promote greater success for these students.

RESULTS

Four broad themes emerged as a result of coding each of these entries: (a) faculty perceptions, (b) fit of advisors, (c) stressors, and (d) quality of support services. A summary of these thematic barriers and accompanying subcategories is shown in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Barriers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faculty Perceptions</td>
<td>Lower expectations</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Past experiences</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fit of Advisors</td>
<td>Lack of knowledge</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Unresponsiveness</td>
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<td>Stressors</td>
<td>Physical demand</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mental and emotional struggle</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Social stigmatization</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quality of Support</td>
<td>Intimidations by personnel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services</td>
<td></td>
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TABLE 2. Summary of Barriers by Category
Faculty Perceptions

The most frequently cited barrier was related to how students think faculty would perceive them if they were to reveal that they needed accommodation. Many entries were written about specific cases in which students felt judged, humiliated, and embarrassed by instructors, either in private or in front of the class. Within this category, two subthemes emerged: lower expectations and past experiences.

Lower Expectations. Students avoided having to “confront” the instructor about needing any kind of academic adjustments because they did not want to be regarded as “less capable of making it through the class.” Students perceived the accommodation letter as “something’s wrong with me.” Consequently, they tried to avoid sharing this letter with the instructor for as long as possible, sometimes almost until the end of the semester or right before a major exam or quiz so they “wouldn’t need to confront anyone.” A majority of students felt that it was a waste of time to put forth any good effort because “no one believes” in them. They felt they “deserve to be treated better” even though they “didn’t know how to completely explain” their learning difficulties. One student shared how she regretted revealing information to her instructors:

My accommodation for that class was excused absence. I knew that missing class would make me fall behind, but I prepared for that, lining up a tutor and setting up “speaking dates” with my sister. But even after assuring the professor that I would only use the accommodation in the worst case scenario, she stared me straight in the eyes and coldly said that I would not succeed in her class if I miss it at all and that I shouldn’t have taken a course if I can’t attend. . . . I feel like I was treated differently, looked at differently. [In the] majority of the classes that the teacher did that, I ended up dropping or late dropping.

Past experiences. Even though some students had received accommodations in the past, they were still skeptical about new instructors every semester. Most students who had negative experiences described being humiliated in front of their professor and classmates by “pretending to be ‘normal’ and just smile even though I was in pain.” This included experiences from high school a question correctly. I vividly remember being treated like an INVALID. I know most normal people would have probably stayed in the class just to spite her and to prove her wrong. I wished I was like that. But I’m not. Now, instead of focusing on class, I would ruminate over ever giving her that dreaded slip of paper. I’m unsure if I would have aced the class had I stayed in and never given her the note. I do wonder though, had I been treated like a normal student.
as well. Many of them waited until several weeks into the semester, some almost toward the final exam period, to assess whether they really needed academic adjustments. In other words, students did not readily feel comfortable disclosing to instructors about their need for some form of adjustments. One participant shared a time when she handed in an accommodation letter to her astronomy instructor and did not know what to expect after that. The instructor’s response “mortified” her so much that she dared not bring up her request again:

I had used a disability certificate before but had no idea how to approach the teacher and talk about it without seeming like a fool. Finally, I worked up enough courage to approach him after class. He looked up expectantly so I chickened out. I pushed the piece of paper in his hands and forced myself to stay put. He glanced at the paper; said, “Okay”; and then continued to gather his stuff. It was a rush of relief. I was glad that was over. I attended class not knowing what to expect. Nothing happened. I sent an e-mail and he didn’t respond. He had forgotten. It is my responsibility to talk to him and get the accommodation. But for me, talking about it can be mortifying. Eventually, I weighed getting the accommodation versus the mortification of talking about my disability with a stranger. I ruled that it wasn’t worth possibly making waves, so I just threw the paper away and studied twice as hard. I know it was my own fault but the intimidation was too much for me. I’d had other courses that I’ve had to drop because of my disability.

Only one participant had a positive entry about a “nice teacher” who understood her and “actually wants to help out.” This instructor pointed out to the student that “teachers shouldn’t be judgmental. If I had the papers, that means that the university decided I had a disability. . . teachers have no right to judge if my disability was legitimate or not.” This student concluded the entry with this relief: “For once, I felt like the disability was not my fault.”

Students seem to have an “unseen” process for assessing whether or not requesting an accommodation was worth the risk. One student delineated what went through her mind:

I really break down to weigh and measure each of my classes and how I can make it through successfully. The initial assessment starts on syllabus day. I’m assuming that the university requires the teacher to include the whole “disability clause.” . . . I check to see if they added anything extra to the assumed provided statement about students with disabilities. If the teacher reads over their syllabus and they hit the statement with their speech, I observe how the teacher delivers the information. I look for posturing, expression, voice inflection, and any other indicators of how they feel about the topic. I’ve found majority of teachers seem pretty neutral to the whole thing.

The second step is my process in determining what exactly might help me in the class. Is attendance a sticky point? Do they post their notes online? Do they seem willing to sit down and talk or are they no nonsense? These questions, among many others, need to be answered in order to execute the last step. . . . I try to get a good feel for the teacher’s personality and styles, what I’ll need for the class, and how my disabilities might manifest within the classroom and how it would be coped with. The final step in the assessment process takes the data procured from the previous two steps and compares them to how comfortable I’m with the materials, my level of mortification of confrontation, and other aspects. I weigh the pros and cons of using the disability services and then finally make a decision.

Even though disability mandates exist for the instructors to comply if warranted, one can
never force empathy on another person. One student shared a profound thought:

Understanding is not something you can demand of someone with a piece of paper or even an explanation. The school may mandate to allow the students to be in their class and cater to their needs, but it is up to the individual teacher how it is interpreted. You can’t force someone to be okay with giving accommodations. They’ll still give them, but they may be snippy about it, look down on the student. This is the last thing I want. I’d rather deal with the repercussions of being a “lazy” pupil than if the other option is being resentfully given help.

Fit of Advisors

The second most cited barrier concerned student academic advisors. Ten out of 16 participants had concerns that pertained to their lack of knowledge and unresponsive mannerism.

Lack of Knowledge. Students felt their advisors lack basic understanding in guiding them about which courses to take in order to be on track, and some even messed up the schedule so badly that students had to delay their graduation date or be transferred to the main campus prematurely and felt unprepared for the large campus. A large number of entries concerned their advisors that they described were “of no help at all.” One student had to change her major three times in less than two years because her advisor “kept messing things up.”

Another three students who had substantially negative experiences with their advisors decided it was not worth seeking advice at all and decided to act independently. What happened next was when they did not get a good grade in their major-related courses, they started to panic, and either dropped the course or sought out an “easier” course to take. Unfortunately, due to their lack of knowledge, some of these “easier” courses were not counted toward their major. As it turned out, students fumbled through each semester and further delayed their graduation. Three students described their self-inflicted setbacks this way:

After meeting with my advisor twice, she’s not very helpful in answering any general questions. I figured it would be better if I tackled scheduling myself. I recognize now that I’m a bloody idiot for thinking that. Due to my amateur scheduling, I will probably have to stay in school at least another year.”

I have kind of been floundering with my schedule. My advisor doesn’t seem to know left from right. After meeting with him a couple of times and judging him incompetent, I figured that I’d be able to schedule by myself with no problems. BIG MISTAKE! I knew that I wasn’t doing it right, but I didn’t realize the consequences. This year, I’m realizing how big my screw up was. I wasn’t accepted into the major, and I had no idea why. I went to my advisor who, again, couldn’t help me at all.

Not having a “real advisor,” I’ve f__ed up my schedule pretty badly. I feel very disheartened but I still need to get my s__ done!”

Unresponsiveness. Students were dissatisfied about the advisor’s lack of response toward them as individuals or as advisees. Their complaints ranged from advisors telling them to take the wrong course to advisors missing appointments and not responding to their e-mails. Students deemed these dispositions as simply “uncaring” or “not car[ing] about our success.” One student recounted that she made an appointment but the advisor plainly told her, “I was hoping you wouldn’t show up.” The advisor told her that she wanted to attend a new staff function instead. Another student wrote that his advisor had such a low expectation of him that he was asked to take “dumb people classes” instead of the regularly scheduled classes for the major. He felt that his advisor did not care about him at
all and attributed his failure to his advisor’s lack of caring.

More often than not, students who did not seek out their advisors also had a harder time assessing the extent to which their disability might have an impact on their study load as well as scheduling plan. One student who has fibromyalgia scheduled herself for four classes, each lasting three hours, from 5:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. By the fifth week of class, she was barely attending class. She called herself a “bleeding idiot. . . . I never took into account how difficult it is for the average student to sit in a lecture for three hours, let alone when said student has joint and muscle pain. I’m a moron.”

Of all the participants in this study, only one recounted a single positive relationship with her advisor because she felt respected and not judged, even though she did not perform well:

She was caring and wants to help me. She believes in me and most importantly, she helps me understand the difference between reality and dreams in a way that I can only respect myself. I ended that semester proud of myself even though my final GPA was 1.92.”

Stressors

Students frequently described their daily experiences as “stressful,” “stressed out,” “upsetting,” and “frustrated.” Some were due to events beyond their control, such as medications, whereas others were caused by physical demands, mental and emotional struggles, and social stigmatization.

Physical Demands. The surrounding physical environment can sometimes agitate students and be a source of tension as well. During one class, a student diagnosed with attention deficit found it extraordinarily difficult to concentrate because it was raining so hard outside. She wrote, “The thunder was more mesmerizing to my mind than the lecture . . . it was hard to sit still, not doing much of anything. This makes me feel anxious and restless.” She continued, “Why can’t class be more hands on and less talking.”

More often than not, instructors may not realize that little distractions can arouse students to a heightened sense of anxiety and sensitivity. One student commented:

While taking a test, the simplest things become a distraction; my mind starts to wander. The bright lights distract me. When someone leaves the room, it distracts me. When a student ruffles papers, it distracts me. If the cell phone went off, my mind couldn’t focus.

Another student with Tourette’s symptoms described herself as her worst enemy of distraction:

When I sense my tics coming on, I began to bite my nails and cannot concentrate at all. I am embarrassed to tell people what is it that I have. I feel bad for making noises, but the more I try to control it, the more my tics become. Sometimes, they come out as coughs or grunts, and people will look at me weirdly.

Even though this student was given the accommodation to take her test in a separate room to reduce her anxiety, she preferred to “hold in my tics and take the test with ‘normal’ students” rather than “feel ashamed” to have to go to another room.

Another common association with being diagnosed with a physical or mental condition is the need for medications to control symptoms. However, as with most medications, they come with side effects as well. Three participants revealed they had conditions that required them to be on medications regularly. For instance, one student had to “take over 12 pills a day—antidepressants, pain medications, pills to wake me up, pills to put me to sleep, hormonal pills, various vitamins, more, more, more.” A side effect, he pointed out, was that
“it’s hard to retain information and really takes a toll on me.” Consequently, the use of medications, though helpful in some ways, inevitably took a toll on students’ attention, strengths, and ability to cope.

Another common side effect with medications is the feeling of fatigue all the time. One student admitted, “I have a lot of pain, headaches, migraines, and full body aches . . . I started to sleep a lot with any free time I’ve got. When you sleep you don’t feel any pain, physical or mental.” Consequently, students have less time to complete their work, skip class more frequently, and are less likely to socialize and integrate themselves. For many of these students, the college experience was not always filled with energy and life, as one would expect. A student identified himself this way: “It’s like being a scholar trapped in an invalid body.”

Mental/Emotional Struggles. It was not unusual that each participant had a deep desire for independence and being self-reliant. These students felt that in order to establish their identity, they needed to prove themselves in all aspects of college life, among their peers as well as in the minds of their professors. One student admitted this was “a large character flaw—the stubborn illusion of needing to do everything myself.” In a positive way, participants strived to motivate themselves through self-affirmative statements such as, “I’m proud of myself,” “I’m going to do better the next time,” “I’m not going to let this pull me down,” “I can change my attitude,” “I don’t have to care what they think,” “I know I can do better,” and “I’m not stupid; I can get through this.”

More often than not, this effort to be self-sufficient conflicted with their sense of self-image and self-worth. One student professed that asking the instructor to make adjustments was “a burden on other people,” whereas another student perceived asking for help as being “everybody’s burden and that’s the last thing I want.” Students wrote about how they struggled with accepting their individuality, their limitations, and their own intellectual and physical weaknesses. They used terms like, “stupid,” “invalid,” “not normal,” “what’s wrong with me,” and “incapable of better judgment” to describe themselves.

On numerous occasions, students’ preference for expediency and self-sufficiency also overshadowed their need to seek help. They disclosed how they would rather take the “risk” in not asking for help than “to look weak” in front of the class. And, if the “risk” paid off, they felt an even greater desire to “attempt doing it again next semester without help.”

Students did not wish to be associated with the notion of a disability as part of their college identity and tried to blend in with their peer group in terms of intellectual equivalence. But at the same time, they became irritated and disheartened when they saw their classmates put in less effort and still make better grades than them while they struggled and sacrificed so much just to scrape by, as one student griped,

I get so frustrated because it often feels like I put in more effort than most and still struggling. There is definitely an intense feeling of isolation that goes along with it. A feeling that I’m not normal so I can’t relate to anyone. It’s disheartening.

Students appeared to be on constant alert regarding what to do with their life, which major to take, what kind of career path is ahead of them, and if they would ever make something out of themselves. They felt torn between studying what they like, what they are good at, or what will provide them with a stable income in the future. Two students described their dilemmas:

My current major is psychology, yet I still have no idea what I want to do. It is interesting to me and I am good at it, but I’m not sure I can turn it into a career. It is definitely one of the things
I lie awake worrying about.

I’m interested in science. I’ve known this, so why don’t I major in science? Because I’m terrified. I’m scared of taking the hard classes. I’m scared to be last place. I’ve never really, really struggled to get good grades. I know I’m smart and I realized quite heavily now that I am selling myself short.

The sense of uncertainty tends to generate a vicious cycle for students to ruminate over their workloads in class, their major selection, and their health and mental condition—a pattern of negativity that appears like an impossible escape:

I’ve self-handicapped myself to the extreme in my situation. My fear is that I will spend the rest of my life in a miserable job that I hate because I was too chicken-shit to pursue something that interests me. I feel so stuck and I can’t blame anyone but myself.

I hate my class but I still have to go because I don’t know what to do with my life.

Students further stressed out about their lack of time management skills. They debated about not having enough time to study or do their homework, yet they spent an inordinate amount of time “watching television and hanging out with friends,” not to mention several students had full- and parttime jobs, family commitments, and personal interests to attend to. When it came to handing in work on time, students also seemed to have a harder time managing consolidated deadlines when multiple assignments were due at the same time. When faced with such a predicament, students rationalized that it was better to skip class so they could complete their work and later “borrow the notes from someone.”

Waking up for classes was another stressor for many of these students. As mentioned before, some of them had a harder time waking up due to the medications they were taking whereas others blamed themselves for being “undisciplined” and “unmotivated.” Students who took medications also had to learn to manage their time with all the doctors’ appointments; as one student explained, “I juggled from primary care, neurologist, endocrinologist, and so on. I still kept up with schoolwork but did not do much else. Eat, sleep, homework, sleep. My life is pretty bland.” Others contended that they “stayed up all night stressing over bad grades” and that they decided it was better to sleep over it than to go to class. One student recounted, “I felt depressed about getting a ‘D’ so I didn’t go to class today. . . . I figured going today wouldn’t change my grade but sleeping longer would benefit more.” In the end, most students justified that as long as they promised themselves they would try harder the following week, it was justifiable to skip this week’s class: “I missed all my classes this week but I’m going to all my classes next week.” Interestingly, four participants said they de-stress themselves by going to the gym, running, playing basketball, or doing some kind of physical exercises.

Other time mismanagement issues that students dealt with included selecting a class time that they could manage. For example, two students registered for a course that only met once a week and started at 7:00 p.m. These students complained that they did not realize how challenging it was to sit through a long class period with only a few short breaks, and sometimes the instructor even forgot to give them one. Initially, they thought that meeting once a week would free up more time for other activities, including studying for other classes. What they did not anticipate was the challenge of attending late night classes and the demand of keeping up with assignments when there was less contact with the instructor.

Social Stigmatization. A major stressor that overlapped at multifaceted levels in different contexts was the social stigma that students with disabilities experience on a daily basis.
Students felt being resented by their peers for getting “special treatment” from the instructor. One student with learning and mental issues expressed her distress in this manner: “They think I’m finding excuses because they cannot ‘see’ my disability. You think I want to use accommodation!” Another female student who had attention issues wrote, “I try to hide everything, like putting on a fake smile so no one will notice I’m different.”

Students struggled with a heightened sense of self-consciousness. They felt burdened by this “deceptive” image of being a college student while carrying the label of a disabled person. Their fear of being ostracized by their friends if they were exposed of their condition far outweighed the importance of getting good grades. One student recounted, “I want to hang out with my friends—that’s why I came to college—but if they found out what I have, they would be embarrassed to hang out with me. . . . I do not want to be feared or singled out. I do not want disability services because my friends are more important to me.”

Quality of Support Services

In one way or another, all the participants had sought services at the campus office of disability known as the “Health and Wellness Center” (HWC). They liked the name because it did not have a “disability” connotation associated with it. A few students felt that the HWC was helpful because it taught them “how to manage stress and ways to cope.” Another student wrote, “I feel better knowing that someone on campus knows about my disability and what I’m going through.” At the same time, a large number of students said they avoided the HWC because they wanted to get away from “being a disabled student like in high school.” Accordingly, students gave themselves “permission for a fresh start” and tried to stay away from needing disability services at all costs:

When I thought of the word “disability,” all I could think of was people in wheelchairs, blind people, deaf people—people with visible servable handicaps. I still had an irrational fear of being sent away, of being told I was just being dramatic. For that reason, I try not to use the disability service on campus.

Many of the participants did not have a positive experience with the HWC because “it did not help at all.” Primarily, one subtheme consistently emerged: students generally felt intimidated by the personnel.

Intimidations by Personnel. Students expressed rather negative encounters in their interactions with the disability personnel who assessed their eligibility status. Fourteen out of 16 participants said they were intensely uncomfortable whenever they had to visit the HWC. One student recounted:

When I first met with [name deleted], she was cold and clinical. It was as if she was bored or annoyed with my presence. I understand people can have off days, so I tried not to get too ruffled about it. But it happened the next semester the same way. During the interview, she expected me to know the exact accommodations I needed. I had never used a service such as this one and had no idea how to answer her. I didn’t know what was available, and I wasn’t sure what would be effective for me. She refused to list the various options, and I was at a loss for most of the appointment. A lot of time seemed to pass with her watching me expectantly as I fidgeted in my chair awkwardly. I didn’t know what she wanted me to say, and she offered very little guidance. It left me feeling vulnerable, stupid, and embarrassed.

She asked me what accommodations would help me with my disability. Quite frankly, I had no idea how to answer that question. A lot of my illness is how I cope with my symptoms, and that can change from day to day. I could not think of anything that
would lessen pain or clear up my confusion when I experienced mental fog. It was like pulling teeth trying to get her to help me think of things that would help. We finally settled on absentee leniency for the days I had breakthrough pain [and] note-taking help for when I had mental fog or my wrist/hand joints were too painful/slow to keep up with the lecture. It was all such an awful experience. I wished I never had to see her again but then I needed the accommodation letter each semester.

Many students felt conflicted about using disability support services on campus because they did not know how to be a self-advocate or what to advocate for. Students confessed they did not understand who were eligible for services and what kind of services they would obtain, thus making it even more bewildering. One student rationalized:

If I think I can handle the class with any absences, confusion, and other symptoms, I will lean towards skipping the disability services altogether. The process/confrontation generally makes me feel so vulnerable and uneasy that I am willing to put up with many consequences in order to bypass the whole thing. If I find that I need the service, I’ll make an appointment. However, this has backfired before. I have found that I will delude myself on complete accident just to avoid discomfort. This is not a good thing when I actually find that I need the accommodations. In past semesters I have waited until I was over my head before I admitted to needing the disability service. I’ve tried to convince myself otherwise, but it usually ends up with me figuring that I can tough it through, which, unfortunately, is not always the case. I’m still not exactly sure what [the HWC director] wants from me when I go in.

Participants did not always understand the impact their disability had on their academic demands. Because of students’ lack of self-awareness, many of them questioned their own judgment on whether they even needed accommodation in the first place. Students delayed asking for help because they wanted to “prove” that they could perform like any college students. Many also were confused about procedures and paperwork involved in obtaining services. Consequently, instead of utilizing the disability services to support their needs in a timely manner, students decided to go with their gut, usually by ignoring their struggles until the crucial minute when an assignment was due. One student evoked, “Toward the end of the semester, around 10th week, I finally went to get help . . . but it was too late.”

DISCUSSION

The manner in which students with disabilities maneuver their college experiences is a multilayered, multifaceted, and complex phenomenon. This exploratory study examined 16 college students with disabilities concerning their experiences through the use of reflective journaling. Findings exposed critical barriers students with disabilities encountered on one campus. An honest evaluation of these barriers and frustrations could hopefully help higher education administrators improve their service delivery and programmatic support for students with disabilities. The themes and subthemes found in this study reinforced previous findings concerning students’ lack of self-determination (self-advocacy, self-awareness, and self-regulation) and why some students seek disability support services while others do not (Duquette, 2000; Greenbaum et al., 1995; Marshak, Van Wieren, Raeke Ferrell, Swiss, & Dugan, 2010). As reiterated in the literature, students with disabilities, like those in this study, are often not aware of their functional limitations (lack self-awareness) and, hence, do not know how to advocate for specific accommodations that
will support their needs (lack self-advocacy). In addition, students in this study struggled with whether it was worthwhile to disclose their condition given the unpredictability of instructors’ responses and the uncertainty of the effectiveness of such support.

Another considerable barrier identified by participants was their negative encounters with faculty members. Despite the written instructions on the accommodation letter requesting that faculty be discreet about making adjustments, students did not feel professors were sensitive to keeping their disability confidential. They saw their professors as cynical and skeptical adults who did not trust them when they claimed they had a disability and needed academic adjustments. Some students perceived their professors as deliberately lowering expectations and embarrassing them in front of the class. Students yearned to be accepted as contributing members of the class or in team projects but, more often than not, they felt singled out by their own teachers and by peers once they revealed they have a disability. They felt conflicted between being a “disabled” student and wanting to be treated like a “normal” student.

Findings from this study demonstrated that many college students with disabilities struggle with the social threat of being judged or treated differently by their peers and their instructors. At the same time, these students had a strong inner drive to rely on themselves in demonstrating their academic competency and in resisting special treatment at all possible costs. Students deemed having a “clean start” in college as a high priority and a primary motivator for not disclosing their condition, especially after a trailing negative history of being labeled as “special.” For example, several students reminisced about having to take exams in a different room to being pulled out of class for special education services. Subsequently, being in college was the first opportunity they had to break out of their diagnostic cycle and establish a “new” identity for themselves and within their social circle.

Students also did not perceive the personnel who worked at the campus disability office as approachable or helpful. Students felt these personnel did not appreciate how difficult it was to make the transition from high school to college and how uncomfortable it was to describe one’s limitations and to ask for help. Students also felt that the disability personnel did not appreciate their effort in attempting to ask for help. Many students did not know what support services were available, what their legal rights were, or how to respond to the questions posed to them. Students with learning disabilities and attention deficits had the most difficulty explaining their limitations or selecting the accommodations they needed. None of the participants spoke about the academic adjustments made for them and whether or not they were helpful or effective.

Overall, the two consistent findings in this study are students’ lack of self-awareness and self-advocacy skills. These two components of self-determination are deemed most critical in Tinto’s (1975) model of integration and eventual persistence through higher education. In each of the subthemes revealed above (faculty perceptions, fit of advisors, stressors, quality of support services), these students with disabilities struggled with identifying who they are, what they want, what their strengths and limitations are, and what they should or need to do to navigate the system and meet the demands of the faculty. Despite their disabilities, these students longed to be integrated like everyone else and to live up to the traditional expectations of a college student. It is therefore important to study each “barrier” assiduously and in alignment with one’s institutional infrastructure in order to alleviate the frustrations and anxieties these students experience.
IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This study attempted to give college students with disabilities a way to voice their concerns regarding barriers toward successful integration and involvement in higher education. Their journals thematically revealed that both academic and nonacademic factors impacted their college experiences, which inevitably translate into their academic prospects for success. These findings have clear implications for higher education administrators, faculty, and support personnel as they try to develop and implement integrative programs that aim at creating a socially inclusive, culturally supportive, and academic challenging environment for all students.

Currently, there is a need for a comprehensive model of service delivery to increase the persistence and graduation of college students with disabilities, but the evidence to evaluate a model is still very limited. Even more problematic is that, with regard to postsecondary outcomes of students with disabilities, there are very limited data on their rate of success as well as what fixed or malleable variables are associated with persistence and graduation. Based on Tinto’s (1975) integration model, if institutions do not find a way to help students with disabilities access key support services, such as counseling, priority registration, testing accommodations and self-advocacy interventions, these students are less likely to persist in college and more likely to resort to a premature departure.

Findings indicated that instructors and academic advisors are a major factor in enhancing or frustrating the outcomes of college students with disabilities. According to the National Academic Advising Association, one of the key factors impacting retention is the quality of interaction a student has with a concerned adult on campus (Habley & McClanahan, 2004). Unfortunately, many institutions fail to take advantage of the benefits of quality advising to establish a positive relationship with students (Habley & McClanahan, 2004). Programs on faculty development should seek to increase disability awareness, rights, and obligations instead of changing attitudes (Hong, Slekar, & Himmel, 2010). In addition, examples of instructional adaptations, campus support resources, and utilization of assistive technologies should be highly publicized and promoted. A formal, structured program, beyond the traditional faculty orientation, should be embedded in professional development on how to advise students who are at risk. Advising should include building on skills such as time management, learning strategies, organization, self-advocacy, communication, social interaction, peer mentoring, and so forth. Furthermore, mentoring programs that address mental and social challenges, such as alcohol and drug abuse, medication addiction, finance management, depression and stress coping skills, could provide faculty with additional avenues to send students for help (Trammel & Hathaway, 2007). Institutions should consider utilizing the “Program Standards and Performance Indicators” set forth by the Association for Higher Education and Disability to improve campus disability services and models of best practices.

Another critical implication is to enhance instructors’ discreetness in handling disability paperwork and in accepting students who are traditionally not college bound. The notion of students with legitimate need for accommodation should not be used as a gauge for whether or not they are going to be successful in college. Instead, such requests should be championed as acts of self-advocacy, self-determination, and equal opportunity.

Another issue students in this study faced was the limited number of hours they could sign up for assistance at the tutoring centers.
Students were permitted only a maximum of 2 hours of tutoring per week for each subject. Students conveyed that they preferred to go to the tutoring centers (writing, math, science) to get help rather than be identified as someone who has a disability and needs accommodations. Perhaps it would be helpful to investigate further how students with a disability can access tutoring centers on a more frequent basis or even be given priority to sign up for available times.

Finally, in order to help students with disabilities make better use of the campus support services, the office of disability could seek feedback from students who had participated in their programs through a campus-wide questionnaire and/or focus groups. A student profile could be created to assist other administrative offices to become more informed on how best to improve programmatic innovations for transition, access, and retention for students who are at risk.

CONCLUSIONS

This study illuminated valuable insights into how college students lived their day-to-day experience as a person with a disability. The majority of the barriers that students faced were either external or internal. External factors included faculty perceptions and dispositions toward them, peer image and social pressure, treatment by disability service personnel, and advisors’ knowledge on advising. The internal barriers involved their desire to be treated as “normal,” their need to be independent, and their struggle to challenge themselves to complete a higher education degree in a timely fashion like their peers.

Even though findings from this study were not entirely surprising, based on previous research, it is worthwhile to start paying careful attention on how to support and retain students with disabilities as they continue to be admitted into higher education and need support from faculty and student affairs. Finally, unless higher education become more vigilant in targeting new and effective ways for improving student services beyond the basic federal mandates, this group of students will continue to encounter frustrations and negativity, inevitably leading to premature departure, increased financial burden, and unfavorable employment outcomes.

Alas, one student wrapped up her college experience in these words:

She steps up to the edge
The edge of chances
She’s a stranger here
She’s about to take the plunge
But something holds her back
She’s trying hard not to fall
Her mind is filled with racing thoughts
She can’t give them up
Though her chance is there
She’s feeling like giving up
Giving into the world
Closing her eyes
She feels the weight
Not knowing where it came from
But it’s there
She falls to her knees
Her eyes shut tight
She sees a world
A world unknown
A place with no escape
No place to run to hide
Everyone is filled with lies and deceit
This isn’t a world she knows
How to change
How to make this different
Tears stream down her face
This is the world
We’re becoming.
REFERENCES


