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Special Issue: Challenges and Opportunities for Assessing, Evaluating, and Researching Disability in Higher Education
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Congratulations to Dr. Melinda Burchard, Messiah University, 2020 recipient of the JPED Reviewer of the Year Award.
From the Special Issue Editors

Challenges and Opportunities for Assessing, Evaluating, and Researching Disability in Higher Education

A group of disability scholars gathered in Rhode Island in summer 2018 for a working conference titled, *Making Disability Visible in Higher Education Research: Addressing Quantitative, Qualitative, and Theoretical Limitations*. The workshop was made possible by a Spencer Foundation Conference Grant. The intensive three-day workshop was planned by three primary Spencer grant investigators (Annemarie Vaccaro, Ezekiel Kimball, Bradley Cox), two graduate students (Melanie Lee, Britt Locklin), and an expert facilitator (Susan Marine). One of the goals of the workshop was to document the issues (and potential solutions for) the measurement limitations (qualitative, quantitative, theoretical) related to the study of college students with disabilities. Another goal was to develop a research agenda for disability in higher education that could address these qualitative, quantitative, and theoretical methodological challenges.

During the conference, experts divided into three small working groups that focused on theoretical scholarship, quantitative research, and qualitative research. In the working groups, participants discussed a plethora of issues and solutions related to these three areas of higher education disability research. On day two of the conference, the working groups developed a list of the pressing issues related to theoretical, quantitative, or qualitative scholarship on disability in higher education. They also crafted a rough working agenda for disability research in higher education. These conversations were converted into two reports submitted to the Spencer Foundation (Vaccaro et al., 2018; Kimball et al., 2018). As a group of scholars committed to conducting disability scholarship that matters, we wanted to bridge the work done at the conference with the work done every day on college campuses. And so, the idea for this special issue was born.

This special issue contains 11 peer-reviewed practice briefs related to, and inspired by, many of the topics discussed at the *Making Disability Visible in Higher Education Research* conference. At least one author on each paper was a conference participant, but many other experts and emerging scholars were invited to work on this special issue as co-authors. Each manuscript relates to topics discussed at the conference. However, while the conference afforded an opportunity for scholars to talk about scholarship, this special issue focuses on translating disability measurement into practice. Each practice brief explores a topic related to research, assessment, and/or evaluation about disability in higher education and offers tangible suggestions for higher educators including disability service providers, student affairs educators, and faculty members.

The 11 practice briefs in this special issue cover a range of topics relevant to disability service providers and other campus leaders. The practice briefs draw upon a combination of research, practice, and personal experiences. Many also describe theories and/or summarize results of research. Despite this breadth of form and format, several threads connect these practice briefs together.

The goal of this special issue is to describe challenges and propose solutions related to research, assessment, and/or evaluation about disability in higher education. The authors took up this call by engaging with a range of disability theories and models, with an emphasis on applying these constructs to practice within higher education institutions. Authors explored the uses and limitations of constructs such as crip theory (Abes & Darkow), community-based participatory research (Pena et al.), disability critical race theory (Stapleton & James), and self-determination (Madaus et al.), to name only a few.

Many practice brief authors engaged with multiple ways to define and conceptualize disability and explored how a multiplicity of definitions can inform and complicate the work of disability service providers and other higher educators. Authors explored the uses and limitations of medical, social, interactionist, and social justice models of disability, specifically examining possibilities for conceptualizing disability as diagnosis, experience, and identity (Edelstein et al.), and engaging with issues of disclosure, self-identification, and self-report (Banerjee et al., Cox & Nachman, Lalor et al., Zilvinskis).

Practice brief authors stressed the importance of using theory and research with sensitivity to context, rather than applying solutions in a one-size-fits-all manner. Additionally, several authors suggested ways that practitioners can continue to develop and collab-
orotate on local, institution-driven forms of assessment and research. Practice briefs in this issue provide ideas for disaggregating and using survey data (Zilvinskis), assessing programs (Madaus et al.), and promoting changes to ableist environments rather than changing disabled people (Abes & Darkow, Broido).

The practice briefs provide ideas for higher education practitioners, with disability service providers at the center of these recommendations. However, authors recognize the realities of limited time and resources. Rather than suggesting disability service professionals lead all efforts for creating inclusive environments, authors reflect on the ways that providers can be strategic facilitators, conveners, and collaborators with other groups including students, faculty members, administrators, student affairs educators, and institutional researchers. Practice briefs provide practical implications for advocating for staff and resources (Brown et al.), assessing learning outcomes (Edelstein et al.), and considering how information is communicated online (Banerjee et al.), among other topics.

It is our hope that this special issue translates measurement limitations and solutions into useful recommendations and strategies that can be used by practitioners. In doing so, we can ensure that the future of disability and higher education research is connected to, contributes to, and informed by the work of practitioners in higher education institutions. Ultimately, we hope our collective work can fuel the creation of more accessible, inclusive, and anti-ableist higher education environments that center disabled people and perspectives.

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Not Another All White Study: 
Challenging Color-Evasiveness Ideology in Disability Scholarship 
(Practice Brief)

Lissa Stapleton¹ 
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Abstract

Color-evasive ideology within disability higher education research is a pressing issue. The lack of naming and critiquing Whiteness in higher education disability research is a frequent challenge that remains the status quo despite its deleterious effects on disability scholarship, practice, and education. Whitecentric disability research paints an unauthentic picture of who has access and who is thriving. There is a lack of understanding of racialized structural barriers, and in some cases, cultural deprivation that impacts disabled Students of Color from rising to their fullest potential. This scholarly paper uses Disability Critical Race Theory to interrogate color-evasiveness within disability research and practice. This paper provides a brief overview of the relevant literature, addresses the problems of the default centering of whiteness in disability research, and offers suggestions in creating inclusive solutions in disability practice and scholarship. The perpetual centering of Whiteness in higher education disability research and practice is an urgent matter requiring reform.

Keywords: race, DisCrit, intersectionality, disrupting whiteness

I really wanted more racial diversity in my study, but no People of Color volunteered.

I just live in a place where there aren’t many People of Color, so this was a limitation for my study.

A White hearing male researcher who focuses on Black Deaf communities was asked why he does this type of research, “If I don’t do it, who will?”

A pressing issue in disability higher education is the perpetual centering of Whiteness. The statements above are examples of comments we, two Black scholars with disabilities, have heard from colleagues at conferences, written in manuscripts we have reviewed, and questions we have seen disabled People of Color ask White researchers. The lack of naming, acknowledging and critiquing Whiteness in higher education disability research is a challenge that has been centered as normal and is either unchallenged in meaningful ways or critiques are ignored. “When it comes to disability, there is a tendency to isolate the identity and oppression, and not fully problematize or understand the complexities of an intersectional lived experience” (Peña, Stapleton, & Schaffer, 2016, p. 90). This type of research paints an unauthentic picture of who has access and who is thriving within higher education. There is a lack of understanding of racialized structural barriers that impact disabled Students of Color from rising to their fullest potential. Using Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit), we dive deeper into this issue with the guidance of the following questions: (a) What problems do color-evasiveness in higher education disability scholarship pose for students and practitioners? (b) How might, DisCrit assist us in finding solutions to those problems? Moving forward, this piece will summarize relevant literature, identify the problems and potential solutions, and end with implications for practice.

Summary of Relevant Literature

To critique Whiteness within disability research is to challenge the color-blind ideology or more appropriately the color-evasiveness ideology. We are trying to problematize the verbiage, color-blind, and the concept

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itself within disability research. Annamma, Jackson, and Morrison (2017) challenged us to rethink how we understand and name the lack of acknowledgment of race within disability research stating:

The racial ideology of denying the significance of race should not be equated with blindness because it is an inadequate descriptor. Color-blindness, as a racial ideology, conflates lack of eyesight with lack of knowing. By naming this racial ideology as color-evasiveness, we demonstrate the social construction of race and ability while simultaneously confronting the social and material consequences of racism and ableism. (p. 154)

Color-evasiveness “resists positioning [disabled people] as problematic as it does not partake in dis/ability as a metaphor for undesired,” unknowing, or disadvantaged (Annamma et al., 2017, p. 153). Thus, this language is more appropriate to addressing the real issue. We define color-evasiveness as a racist ideology rooted in White supremacy to avoid accountability, acknowledgment, and identifying historical and continuous race-based discrimination while instantaneously allowing race neutral justifications, laws, policies, and beliefs to persist as normal. To more fully understand our role in eradicating color-evasive ideologies in disability scholarship, educators and practitioners must be able to dis/ability and race both real and socially constructed at the same time (Annamma et al., 2016). The following are the DisCrit tenets used as tools to critique current societal structures (e.g., education, workplaces, and prison systems) as it relates to racialized people with disabilities:

• **Tenet One**—DisCrit “focuses on the ways racism and ableism circulate interdependently, often in neutralized and invisible ways, to uphold notions of normalcy.”

• **Tenet Two**—DisCrit “values multidimensional identities and troubles singular notions of identity such as race or dis/ability or class or gender or sexuality and so on.”

• **Tenet Three**—DisCrit “emphasizes the social constructions of race and ability and yet recognizes the material and psychological impacts of being labeled as raced or dis/abled, which sets one outside of the western cultural norms.”

• **Tenet Four**—DisCrit “privileges voices of marginalized populations, traditionally not acknowledged within research.”

• **Tenet Five**—DisCrit “considers legal and historical aspects of dis/ability and race and how both have been used separately and together to deny the rights of some citizens.”

• **Tenet Six**—DisCrit “recognizes Whiteness and Ability as Property and that gains for people labeled with dis/abilities have largely been made as the result of interest convergence of White, middle-class citizens.”

• **Tenet Seven**—DisCrit “requires activism and supports all forms of resistance.” (p. 19)

DisCrit is a lens to help scholars and practitioners to disrupt the deleterious effects of color–evasive ideologies, to question the accuracy of history, to unpack the compounding impact of racism, ableism, and other forms of oppression, and support the importance of real action for transformative change within higher education and disability scholarship (Annamma et al., 2016, 2017). This is the lens that guides our critique.

**What Do Others Think?**

We are not the first to push back against color–evasive ideologies in disability scholarship, education, rhetoric, and practice. In Gillborn’s (2015)
Color-evasiveness is complex and multifaceted. We have witnessed, researched, and published the implication of this harmful ideology. Although not perfect, DisCrit offers a framework to question color-evasiveness, unpack the challenges Whiteness raises, and support practitioners in creating more inclusive spaces. We will now highlight a few of the specific problems that manifest from the erasure of race in disability research.

Depiction of the Problem

Color-evasiveness within higher education disability research leads to several issues: (a) the negative impact of limited representation, (b) critiquing and disrupting interchangeably, and (c) challenging old ideology and behavior.

The Negative Impact of Limited Representation

White scholars often research about and with a mostly White disabled student population. This challenge does not mean other intersecting identities such as gender or sexual orientation have not been examined, but the participant sample tends to have few Students of Color within the pool. The lack of racial and ethnic diversity influences the types of questions asked, the stories and experiences we understand, as well as who and what is remembered. The limited racialized diversity within researchers and color-evasiveness within participants has led to an essentialized White understanding of disability. Frederick and Shifrer (2018) defined disability essentialism as “a monolithic experience that is divorced from other forms of oppression” (p. 4), in other words there is one way, one experience, and a single oppression that is experienced by people who are disabled. Research findings are unable to uncover true solutions or offer real recommendations for practitioners because research participant pools continuously underrepresent the racial diversity that exists within disabled communities. Annamma et al. (2017) stated, “In the context of white supremacy, actively avoiding talking about race is a form of power” (p. 155). Perpetuating a White essentialist understanding of disability consciously or subconsciously through passive behavior supports White supremacy ideology.
Critiquing and Disrupting Interchangeably

Color-evasiveness ideology permits racialized and disabled experiences to be used interchangeably without critiquing how each community has different historical lineages, different relationships to larger U.S. systems, and different civil right movements of resistance. People of Color can be ableist and disabled people can be racist. We can acknowledge the connections of how power and oppression play out within both marginalized communities, but we have to be careful to not make the struggles one in the same. Fredrick and Shifrer (2018) supported this by saying, “the 'minority model' framework of disability rights has been racialized in ways that center the experiences of white, middle-class disabled Americans, even as this framework leans heavily upon analogic work likening ableism to racial oppression” (p. 2). When you blend the identities, often researchers and consumers of research do not explore how the identities influence each other positively and negatively and how multiple identities can change one’s lived experiences as a disabled Person of Color (Annamma et al., 2016).

Challenging Old Ideology and Behavior

Lastly, color-evasiveness has made it okay to perpetually name inadequate racial and ethnic diversity within research as a limitation but ultimately not address the bigger issue. It is not an unavoidable constraint in which we must all tolerate. The goal is to use data and research-based findings, recommendations, and practices to improve the experiences and lives of people with disabilities across our campuses. When we do not disrupt Whiteness in higher education disability research, our scholarship creates a gap in the literature that misses important aspects of complexity and need (Peña et al., 2016). These gaps can drastically impact Students of Color with disabilities’ educational experiences, opportunities, struggles, and successes throughout the educational pipeline. In addition, these gaps also do not allow practitioners who work with Disabled Students of Color to have access to the latest data.

Solutions: Disrupting Whiteness in Disability Research

It is not enough to discuss the problem; we must get active. Although, “some activities traditionally thought of as activism (e.g., marches, sit-ins, and some forms of civil disobedience) may be based on ableist norms” (Annamma et al., 2016, p. 26); DisCrit encourages us to be creative when fighting for real change. Using DisCrit, we offer these suggestions of disruption as potential starting places to a process in which we hope to ignite conversations, new research approaches, and greater collaboration between scholars, practitioners, and students.

Let’s Get Uncomfortable and Curious

“We have to stretch ourselves in ways that can feel inconvenient and uncomfortable and ask ourselves hard questions about both our beliefs and our everyday actions, knowing that all of us harbor bias, prejudice, and racism,” (para. 21) said Shanell Matthews in her 2017 op-ed in Public Seminar where she argues for a spirit of curiosity in order to end anti-Blackness ideology, behavior, and policies. We must first ask questions about what is happening and how we as scholars and practitioners are participating in the problem of Whiteness within disability higher education research. Questions that we might start asking each other are: Where are the voices of Scholars of Color in disability work? Who gets valued as knowledge creators? When is it more ethical to pause a study that lacks diverse participants than to actively participate in color-evasiveness? What attracts or distracts Disabled Students and Communities of Colors from taking part in scholarly endeavors? How is this problem influenced by historical discrimination against Communities of Color and what will it take to heal and build new relationships? These questions must be addressed within community. A spirit of curiosity “allows us to identify where and how we’ve been misinformed about one another, who is responsible for that misinformation, and what their motives are” (Matthews, 2017, para. 4). DisCrit encourages us to look at our history for answers and to do the hard self-work to acknowledge that “traditional approaches,” which were/are often code for White ways of being are not working. It is time to recognize the role socialization of race and ethnicity has and how that socialization and bias impacts scholarly work, informs services and support, and ultimately impacts students.

Action: Interrupting Disability Scholarship as Usual

DisCrit requires that our questions be followed by activism. We must name and interrupt Whiteness within our scholarship. The act of interrupting means to break or stop the continuous progress of some type of action, speech, or behavior. Pema Chodron (2002) once said, "Remember that this [interrupting] is not something we do just once or twice. Interrupting our destructive habits and awakening our heart is the work of a lifetime" (p. 46). An act of interrupting is acknowledging how Whiteness plays out in disabled students lives including their experiences within the educational pipeline and the ways in which Students of Color are often over diagnosed, misdiagnosed, and
under diagnosed (Sommo & Chaskes, 2013). Naming when one’s disability research is only focusing on White participants is another way to disrupt Whiteness. This is essential because it allows the reader to not consciously overgeneralize and to expand on disability scholarship in new and important ways that might have been missed if Whiteness had not been normalized as the disabled experience.

It is important to intentionally apply theories and frameworks that challenge and disrupt Whiteness and refrain from using or ignoring problematic color-evasive theories. For example, Critical Deaf Theory (Deaf Crit) was created from Critical Race Theory (CRT), but the theory does not include a racialized lens or analysis. The concept of racism was replaced with audism and People of Colors’ experiences were replaced with Deaf experiences (Gertz, 2003). By swapping race with ability, we ignore Deaf Students of Color and the fact that they are racialized and a linguistic minority. However, DisCrit, centers race and ability from a systemic perspective. Our theories and frameworks can serve as tools for academic activism or in other words, theories and frameworks matter in the development and outcome of our research and in shifting inequitable scholarship and practice.

**Expand Networks and Seek New Collaborators**

In order to move beyond White-centered research, we must be intentional about where we solicit participants and collaborations (i.e., campus and community organizations and minority serving institutions). We can seek out and build reciprocal and intentional relationships outside of our normal collaborations, including the HBCU Disability Consortium (http://www.blackdisabledandproud.org/) and special interest groups within the Association of Higher Education and Disability (https://www.ahead.org/) such as the Racial and Ethnic Diversity and Disability group. Matthews (2017) said, “Curiosity requires a radical imagination” (para. 3), and we must think outside the confines of the academy and professional associations in order to build new and more racially diverse partnerships. We must start to build respectful and reciprocal relationships within disability communities organizations such as the National Coalition for Latinxs with Disabilities (http://www.latinxdisabilitycoalition.com/), Krip Hop Nation (https://kripphopnation.com), Los Angeles Spoonie Collective (https://www.facebook.com/LASpoonyCollective/), Ramp Your Voice (http://rampyourvoice.com/), Asian and Pacific Islanders with Disabilities of California (http://apidisabilities.net), and many other disability activists, artists, and virtual communities. Our relationships and connections to others becomes our accountability to do better, include more, and seek out diversity in our scholarship and offices.

**Implications for Higher Education Practitioners**

Interrogating Whiteness within disability work is not only of theoretical importance to scholars, but directly related to how service practitioners have been socialized to understand disability, how they engage with students, and how they begin to interrupt the ways in which they recreate and support Whiteness within their offices. The overarching implication is that DisCrit requires scholars and practitioners to adopt, embrace, and actively practice intersectional activism and resistance. However, we know many disability service offices were and continue to primarily focus on accommodation needs (e.g., facilitating testing centers and notifying faculty of students’ needs) and may not have the people power, budget, or time for other services such as programming. However, radical imagination may be the key to navigate these challenges.

DisCrit requires us to do something different, but this new thinking and approach does not need to happen alone. There are a number of professionals (i.e., students, staff, and faculty) on campus to help optimize time, resources, and capacity. Similar to earlier discussions, leveraging cross-departmental collaborations within student affairs and faculty are imperative. Below are several ways to start re-imaging disability services work, space, and community.

**Take Hold of Your Agency in Changing the System**

Practitioners should hold researchers accountable for more critical racialized scholarship. Research and practice are not separate islands; they inform each other. Practitioners must critically consume research with a racialized lens and build and contribute to a practitioner-scholar feedback loop that allows scholarship to be helpful and aligned in creativity and nimbleness needed to embody DisCrit. Ask researchers questions about who they are hoping to recruit and what their scholarship is about before passing out their flyer or rallying students for them. Encourage Students of Color with disabilities to participate in the research both as participants and future researchers.

*We must be mindful of what programs we present and how we present them at conferences and around campus.* If programs focus on best practices, we must be critical about contextualizing best practices and ensuring that they are not disability essentialism-laden. We must critique who best practices really serve, so that we actively problematize – and provide solutions, to the assumptions of Whiteness and essentialism in current disability programs. In terms of
challenging the system, often a lack of funds is the problem. Ensure that you use your data to support your decision-making and have an in-house method of evaluating what you share with key stakeholders when requesting additional financial resources. Also, you may have to rethink who is on your team and who has expertise that would not require additional funding to support your programming and training efforts that are non-color-evasive.

Rethink Who is on Your Team

When we leverage the power of multiple departments and stakeholders in student success, our work towards our goal is more focused and potent. Financial resources increase, integrated expertise that considers the totality of the co-curricular experiences of our students increase, and practitioner knowledge sharing that moves us toward a more intersectional understanding of the identities of racially minoritized students with disabilities also increases. Aligned with this thinking consider subject expert librarians as another resource to optimize support. Is there a librarian on your campus that focuses on disabilities? What about a librarian that focuses on cultural studies? You might ask for their help in creating a resource library for faculty, staff, and students at your institutions. They can act as informal archivists to help boost your institutional disability resource library and find material and resources that also represent People of Color with disabilities. In addition, we can leverage professional organizations like NASPA/ACPA to support the creation of a resource library for the development of Student Affairs professionals (in addition to our librarians on our campus). Sharing and co-creating between institutional student affairs departments is the big goal here; that can happen best if we leverage our professional organizations –made up of practitioners and scholars from diverse locales/institutions.

Lastly, creating a Faculty-in-Residence program is another way to think outside the box particularly working with marginalized fields (e.g., Disability Studies, Ethnic Studies, Queer Studies, Deaf Studies, and Women and Gender Studies). The University of California Irvine’s Cross-Culture Center is a great example of this practice. They have a faculty and archivist-in-residence who serve semester long terms, hold office hours in the space, and facilitate one-two workshops or chat sessions with students (M. Ramirez, personal communication, 2019). Utilizing partnerships with faculty who research inclusion, intersectionality, disability, and more can help bring the research to practice alive and ultimately support students with disabilities. These partnerships work to invest faculty in “doable” inclusion practices related to their role in student success and show how they might update their pedagogy and mindsets to be less color-evasive and ableist in the classroom. Faculty need pedagogical support, and this could be a win/win. These connections do not necessarily require additional financial resources, but they do require putting energy and effort into building and sustaining relationships across the institution.

Help Build a Diverse Pipeline

It is never too early to engage students in leadership and professional development while exposing them to the ends and outs of how a disability services office works. For example, if your institution has a student affairs program or a program at a nearby institution consider actively recruiting Student Affairs master’s student interns/practicum students to facilitate interdepartmental programming initiatives. This opportunity would allow them to become experts at adeptness in interdepartmental integration while also allowing them to become knowledgeable about the area of disability services. Their focus might be creating two interdepartmental programs for the year. Furthermore, integrating student interns/practicum Students of Color in these settings would only add greater value and not take away from the already robust capacities of disability services departments.

Second, build in the space for student leaders – that have the capacity, to support the efforts of disability services offices. It can be challenging to create student clubs or leadership groups within disability services offices because of the culture of confidentiality, society stigma, and no history or formal structures to socially gather students with disabilities (i.e., cultural centers), but some students really want these types of opportunities. They want to meet other students who are trying to navigate college with a disability. Some students want to be actively involved with the Disability Justice movements. For example, during the 2017 California State University Northridge student protest over the system-wide curriculum changes, students stood in the faculty senate meeting sharing personal narratives of why Ethnic studies courses were important and why the senate should vote to support their efforts. One student walked onto the stage, declared he was a student with autism and how he too supported Ethnic studies, but did not leave the stage before also holding Ethnic studies accountable for their lack of inclusion of disability within their curriculum. He was the only person to make such a statement, but more of our students with disabilities are fully capable of fighting for their education and curriculum that is inclusive be-
yond accommodations. Our students with disabilities particularly our Students of Color can contribute to the efforts of your services while gaining leadership training and opportunities.

Ask Your Students

Lastly, DisCrit illuminates the dilemma of how disability over time and space has been studied, understood, and remembered through the perspectives of White, abled-bodied, neurotypical hearing individuals. Practitioners have the opportunity to shift who creates knowledge and whose knowledge is respected and implemented for change. Leveraging students’ expertise with regards to campus climate, prior programmatic initiatives is important for transformative change. Build informal focus groups to gather feedback before programmatic initiatives happen and use student suggestions to shift programming, so it is aligned to serve more diverse students. It is also important to ask students to re-imagine how they might solve problems they frequently encounter. We realize that students have a lot on their plate, and putting the work on marginalized communities to solve their own oppression is sticky and if over used problematic. However, we gather a variety of other marginalized students (e.g., LGBT, Students of Color, Women, and Undocumented students) to create and hold space together and brainstorm solutions to campus challenges. Ultimately, students with disability and particularly those of color’s feedback is important AND they give practitioners the best insight about how to serve them before we make another misstep and they become jaded with “another new initiative.”

Conclusion

The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

The charge is eminent to infuse our work with the tenets of DisCrit and, without considering our already present institutional resources, this charge can feel overwhelming. When we leverage our resources and push past stagnation to educate ourselves on how to work smart—because our students deserve it, we have a fighting chance at truly serving the needs of ALL of our students (including those who have been pervasively marginalized). The tale of student success includes DisCrit operationalization in our work and mindset. Whiteness can no longer be the baseline measure of success concerning students with disabilities. Students’ intersectionality moves us away from the single story. The single story has continued to disparage. We can do better than the single story. We must do better.

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Using Crip Theory to Create Campus Cultures that Foster Students’ Disability Disclosure
(Practice Brief)

Elisa S. Abes¹
Daniel C. Darkow¹

Abstract

Ableism often prevents college students from disclosing their disabilities. This practice brief, co-authored by a non-disabled faculty member and a disabled disability services professional, explores implications of crip theory to create campus cultures that foster self-disclosure of disabilities. Using tenets of crip theory—compulsory able-bodiedness, cripistemology, and disability as a fluid identity—we explore three practice issues: (a) wrestling with the murkiness in disability services professionals’ decisions about who is disabled and meets accommodation eligibility requirements; (b) interrogating ableist practices of disability services offices that prevent disclosure (a reflection not on disability services but on the insidious nature of ableism); and (c) creating cultures in the classroom and co-curriculum that value disabled students’ insights rather than perceive them as tragic burdens. For each issue, we explore practical implications of crip theory to encourage disclosure and allow disabled students to bring more of their authentic selves to their college experience.

Keywords: disability, disclosure, crip theory

Rethinking disability disclosure on campus is critical as institutions of higher education experience growth in the number of disabled students (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). Campus cultures must foster disability disclosure in ways that provide a welcoming environment for disabled minds and bodies. Much of this work starts with disability services professionals. Disclosure to disability services professionals and other educators is necessary for students who require the use of accommodations to fully access programs and services (Madaus, 2011). However, as Knight (2017) stated: “when we disclose our disabilities, when we publicly acknowledge the particularities of our bodies, we make ourselves vulnerable to backlash” (p. 61). Mingus (2017) described the “forced intimacy” of disclosure: “People are allowed to ask me intrusive questions about my body, make me ‘prove’ my disability or expect me to share with them every aspect of my accessibility needs” (para. 3). Indeed, there is much at stake for students when they disclose their disability, and for multiple reasons connected to ableism and intersecting systems of oppression, students often do not disclose their disabilities (Kerschbaum, Eisenman, & Jones, 2017; Pearson & Boskovich, 2019). Fearing embarrassment, stigma, or negative reactions by authority figures (Miller, 2015; Samuels, 2017) and having internalized messages that disability should be overcome (Harbour et al., 2017), many disabled students hide their disability, if they are able to do so. Also, some students do not perceive their disability as part of their identity, often a result of ableism (Abes & Wallace, 2018). For all of these reasons, many students engage in passing, maintaining their more comfortable status in the non-disabled/disabled binary (Alshammari, 2017; Blockmans, 2015). Rather than feeling that disclosure is intrusive and not welcomed, necessary, or valued, students should feel comfortable bringing their whole self to college, including their disability.

Depiction of the Research Problem

Disability services professionals and other educators are not supporting effective disclosure if disabled students are met with burdensome processes that elicit feelings of interrogation and misguided judgment in order to receive accommodations. Regardless of whether or not a student views their disability as a part of their identity or has a clear sense of their disability, creating a streamlined process that meets students

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at their current understanding of their disability and welcomes them into an open conversation of access planning is critical. Students will resist disclosure if disability services providers and other educators engage with students using ableist narratives (Pearson & Boskovich, 2019). These narratives cause students to feel that their disability is terrifying, tragic, and will transform their life in negative ways (Holmes, 2010). In this brief, we explore how campuses can reframe their understanding of disability and disclosure to support disabled students.

This practice brief is a collaboration between Dan, a physically disabled practitioner in a disability services office, and Elisa, a non-disabled faculty member who studies college student identity using critical theories. Together, we urge that crip theory be considered to address the vexing issues surrounding disability disclosure. Although still infrequently applied, there is increased interest in using crip theory to conduct research on disability in higher education (Abes, 2019; Friedensen & Kimball, 2017; Miller, 2015). As a poststructural theory, however, concerns exist about crip theory’s utility for addressing the practical, lived experiences of disabled people (Bone, 2017). We understand that concern and also believe that crip theory can be used in a liberatory manner. Using tenets of crip theory, we explore what crip theory exposes about creating campus communities that foster disabled students’ self-disclosure to disability services offices, in classrooms, and with peers.

Specifically, we explore three practice issues connected to disclosure and accommodations: (1) wrestling with the murkiness in disability services’ determination of who is disabled and needs accommodation; (2) interrogating the ableist practices of disability services offices that prevent disclosure of disability; and (3) creating cultures in the classroom and co-curriculum that value disabled students’ insights rather than perceive them as tragic burdens. For each issue, we explore the practical implications of crip theory for disability services professionals. To do so, we review in the next section key concepts of crip theory. Following that review, we then explore the implications of a cripped analysis of these issues for practice.

**Finding Practice-Based Solutions Using Crip Theory**

Crip theory challenges the dominant social messages that define who and what are normal (Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006; Sandahl, 2003). A central idea of crip theory is compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness (Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006). Maintained by ableism, which is the privileging of able bodies and able minds that renders others less worthy (Linton, 1998), compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness push people toward an unattainable “normal.” Those who do not fit these norms are determined disabled and therefore less worthy (Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006). Crip theory critiques these messages and the disabled/non-disabled binary that deems disability abnormal (Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006). To “crip” is to expose compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness in all contexts (McRuer, 2006).

Crip theory describes disability as fluid, variable, and changing with contexts rather than a rigid category (Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006). It explores the tension between “claiming crip” as an identity and perpetuating oppressive narratives associated with categorizing disability. Claiming crip is “a way of acknowledging that we all have bodies and minds with shifting abilities” (Kafer, 2013, p. 13). But claiming crip also feeds into ableist messages that value the categories of disabled and non-disabled. Adding to the tension, crip theory destabilizes disability, but does not “dematerialize disability identity” (McRuer, 2006, p. 35). That is, crip theory contests disability identity because it is fluid and defined through ableist messages and also recognizes that identity politics are necessary to survive (Schalk, 2013). Crip theory exposes how compulsory able-bodiedness and mindedness are the root of these tensions.

Crip theory also speaks to the nature of knowledge. Johnson and McRuer (2014) described “cripistemology” as knowledge production from the perspectives of disabled people. Cripistemology embraces the multiple ways that minds produce and understand knowledge. Cripistemology embraces crip time. Crip time challenges the normalized and disabling pace of life (Kafer, 2013; Samuels, 2017). It is not an extension of time for disabled people, but rather “a challenge to normative expectations of pace and scheduling. Rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds” (Kafer, 2013, p. 27). Cripistemology, along with compulsory able-bodiedness/mindedness and disability fluidity, inform issues connected to disability disclosure.

**Implications and Portability for Higher Education Practice: Three Practice Issues**

Guided by crip theory, we discuss three practice issues that speak to challenges associated with disability disclosure. Crip theory does not provide specific strategies for dismantling dominant narratives.
It does, however, reveal the mindset shift necessary to create this cultural change.

Practice Issue One: Wrestling with the Murkiness in Disability Services Professionals’ Determination of Who is Disabled and Needs Accommodation

In order for disability service professionals to work with students to develop accommodation plans, it is necessary to determine disability status, a process that depends on disability disclosure. The process of reviewing student eligibility for accommodations is grounded in disability-related laws, in particular Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). Section 504 stated that an individual with a disability is someone “who (i) has a physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more of such person’s major life activities, (ii) has a record of such an impairment, or (iii) is regarded as having such an impairment” (Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, § 706(7)(B)). Additionally, Titles II and III of the ADA ensure disabled students non-discrimination and equal access to educational programs (Gil, 2007).

Understanding the guidance disability laws provide and applying them to individuals on a case-by-case basis poses challenges. To determine if accommodations are necessary, there are situations where disability services professionals need to further explore the impact of the students’ disability in order to understand how the disability “substantially limits” a “major life activity” (Section 504). This process takes into consideration the student, documentation, and the professional judgement of the disability services professional (Association on Higher Education and Disability, 2012). When individual barriers are not readily apparent, the impact of the disability and relevant accommodations are not easily understood (Magnus & Tøssebro, 2014). Understanding the impact of the disability is particularly challenging when it presents in a fluid way. For instance, the impact of the disability for students with mental health or chronic medical conditions may fluctuate due to various levels of disability-related flares and/or whether or not ongoing medical management is occurring. When the disability impact on the student is constantly changing, indefinite accommodation plans are necessary. When a student discloses their disability, they may not come to disability services knowing their access needs and may be seeking to engage in a dialogue where professionals validate their experience and work collaboratively in access planning.

Instances where formal disability documentation is lacking, out of date, or does not tell the complete story, self-report of students’ disability is critical. For some students, access to healthcare and disability documentation may not have been previously attainable. In these situations, professional judgment is key in determining accommodation eligibility along with the self-report. Disability services professionals can either provide a level playing field for a student who encounters disability-related barriers or give a student an unfair advantage. Wrestling with these decisions can be challenging when trying to support students through equal access while maintaining the integrity of the institution’s legal responsibility for providing access.

For students who experience their disability in varied forms and times, it is important to consider if processes (a) proactively accommodate this variability; and (b) acknowledge the physical and emotional labor students use to meet the eligibility requirements to be regarded as disabled. Doing so moves from a compliance-based disability services framework to a student-centered disability services framework that recognizes students’ individual stories. Recognizing the increased labor for disabled students is vital when developing procedures that meet the spirit of Section 504 and the ADA and effectively facilitate student access. This physical and emotional labor includes, for instance, having to go for doctor appointments, physically picking up documentation, visiting the disability services office, individual meetings with the disability services provider, and retelling stories. Students with a new and varied disability diagnosis who are uncertain of the impact of their diagnosis, unsure what they need from disability services professionals, and concerned about their changing needs should feel as equally welcomed into the process as do disabled students choosing to disclose with a well-established disability and defined disability-related needs. It is important that all students be met with reassurance and guidance based on a broad understanding and openness to the many ways that disability presents.

Crippling the determination of disability. Framing the work of disability services providers through a crip theory lens reshapes the mindset that is necessary to move toward a student-centered rather than compliance-centered disability services framework. Although it is important to comply with Section 504 and the ADA, these power-laden laws fairly rigidly define the meaning of disability. Crip theory invites professionals to flexibly interpret these laws to value individual experiences. A crip theory lens embraces the challenges faced by disability services providers by (a) portraying disability as fluid and defined through social expectations and therefore not something for which a label is necessarily appropriate; (b) recognizing that “claiming crip” does not always mean having a medical history documenting impair-
ment; and (c) acknowledging the political necessity of not abandoning the disability label. Recognizing disability as fluid and socially constructed supports the notion that the physical and emotional labor expended by students to meet legal guidelines contributes to the meaning of disability and needs to be considered when making eligibility decisions. Coming from a crip lens means that practitioners’ starting point for making eligibility decisions is that disability is fluid rather than confined by legal requirements. New and changing disabilities are therefore met with the same openness as established and fixed disabilities. Once the law is viewed as the minimum of what can be done to serve disabled students and not the ceiling, engaging with a larger crip community becomes attainable. Partnerships with campus or local medical providers who understand disability services’ openness to working with students in a fluid state of disability can support these students. Through these partnerships, medical providers can offer recommendations consistent with fluid disabilities. The use of temporary or provisional accommodations may also be effective while additional information is provided by the student. Recognizing the political realities of needing the crip label, a crip lens does not disregard legal requirements; it only changes assumptions about the meaning of disability.

Changing assumptions about the meaning of disability fosters an environment that encourages students’ disclosure. When disability services professionals embrace disability as fluid, disabled students will likely feel less shame, stigma, and uncertainty around disclosure. Also, when professionals perceive students’ physical and emotional labor associated with meeting legal requirements as part of the meaning of their disability, students will feel respected and understood, which also contributes to disclosure. Disability services professionals need to communicate this crippled mindset in, among other places, office websites, new student orientations, faculty trainings, and student meetings. Professionals also need to do their own continuous professional and personal development to shift their compliance assumptions into crippled student-centered assumptions.

Practice Issue Two: Interrogating the Ableist Practices of Disability Services Offices that Prevent Disability Disclosure

Disability services offices are intended to be the space on campus for disabled students to get connected and receive accommodations. The nature of their interactions with these offices contributes to their overall student experience, which ought to be comparable to that of non-disabled students. Students who self-disclose want a process that is not overly burdensome on their life as a college student. It is therefore necessary to analyze all disability services processes—from initial connection to ongoing access management—to determine which may be ableist.

The work of disability services historically has been grounded in a medical framework of disability (Devlin & Pothier, 2006), which risks being ableist. This framework leads to an individualized approach to address access needs, which may disregard other barriers, such as attitudinal barriers (Barragan & Nusbau, 2017). For instance, students who had a positive interaction with disability services professionals may be faced with additional disclosures to faculty and staff with unknown attitudes toward disability, leaving students uncertain about disclosing. Additionally, a medical framework leads to the assumption that disability has been medically documented and that documentation can be readily provided. Historic practices do not account for students with financial barriers to disability documentation; students whose family cultural practices may have inhibited the choice to seek disability documentation due to stigma (DeFreitas, Crone, & DeLeon, 2018); or students who have a disability that is in flux, such as an undiagnosed disability that is impacting a student academically and medical professionals have yet to reach a diagnosis (Devlin & Pothier, 2006). Disclosure will be inhibited if policies for students are not welcoming to students who do not have documentation.

Flexibility in accommodation processes encourages disclosure because it lessens students’ perception of the burden associated with disability. For instance, providing ways for students to engage remotely with disability services offices will reduce the number of in-person visits the student must make. Assuming the student can engage with disability services without remote/digital access is ableist. Once students have completed the connection process within disability services, it is important to recognize disability fluidity. Having avenues to disclose disability updates is validation that disability services professionals recognize that disability status and access needs change. Without this assumption of fluidity, student disclosure becomes not worth the effort and risk if their access needs are not accurately addressed.

Further, disability services professionals can lessen the ableist burden of students’ having to disclose their disability multiple times. Processes that require multiple instances of disclosure, whether to multiple faculty members or in other university areas such as residence life, are strenuous on disabled students. When disabilities are not readily apparent, such as with chronic medical or psychological disabilities,
disclosure to multiple faculty members can be challenging due to the uncertainty of the faculty reaction and power differences (Seelman, 2017). Moreover, when students have other historically oppressed identities, the potential exists to be subjected to additional discrimination. When disability services professionals lessen students’ disclosure burden to other university entities, the experience is more aligned with the non-disabled student experience. For example, active accommodation planning between disability services and faculty can better position the student for a seamless access plan without the burden of additional self-disclosures. This can also lead to faculty members understanding student access needs from the start of the semester, increasing overall student comfort in the classroom.

**Crippling disability services practices.** Crip theory reveals that disability services’ ableist practices are not a reflection of the professionals, but instead, a result of the insidious nature of ableism (McRuer, 2006). Crip theory reveals the ableism inherent in the broad requirement that students prove their disability and the specific requirement that medical documentation be part of that proof. Crip theory teaches that compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness, rooted in ableism, push people toward an impossible normal. With its rigorous expectations and pace, higher education is rooted in compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness (Dolmage, 2017). The need to prove disability is based on an assumption that college students are able-bodied and able-minded. This ablest assumption is so woven into the fabric of higher education that to deviate from it requires documented proof. More so, it requires proof to which not all students have access, sometimes a result of other intersecting systems of oppression, such as classism and racism.

Rather than proving one is not able-bodied and able-minded, what if instead, disability were considered part of the natural human condition and a valued form of diversity throughout the university and society? Perhaps then students’ narratives describing their experience would suffice, along with a professional’s judgment, to be eligible for accommodations using fluid and flexible interpretations of Section 504 and the ADA. Not only would this non-ableist mindset encourage disclosure, but would also encourage disclosure among students whose other social identities, such as social class, race, and culture, prevented the acquisition of documentation. The medical approach rooted in compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness also leads to inflexible processes for variable disabilities that do not have fixed accommodations. Again, valuing student stories above medical documentation creates an environment where students can disclose the variability in their disability without fear of unwelcoming and doubting reactions.

Further, flexibility in how disability services offices engage with disabled students challenges compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness, signaling disability as part of the typical student experience. When disability services offices’ processes are consistent with the varying needs of disabled students, they convey the message that disability is normal, which again, encourages disclosure. Likewise, relieving disabled students of the burden of multiple disclosures - by placing the onus on the university rather than the students - signals that disabled students are the norm and their experiences should be comparable to non-disabled students. Collaborating with learning center staff, live-in housing professionals, and others who may also engage with students when disability identity is in flux, may increase the disability services reach and provide open communication back to the disability services office. Although crippling processes requires more work, this mindset shift resists compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness, which is an area where disability services should provide leadership throughout the university - starting by looking inward.

**Practice Issue 3: Creating Cultures in the Classroom and Co-Curriculum that Value Disabled Students’ Insights Rather than Perceive them as Tragic Burden**

Disability services professionals need to take the lead on creating campus cultures that value disabled students, and by doing so, ease the risks of disclosure in the classroom and co-curriculum. Disability training for faculty and other campus constituents, such as student affairs educators, is vital for properly educating the campus community about disability. These trainings, however, generally revolve around legal obligations (Zhang et al., 2010). The opportunity to shift perceptions of disability, disrupting dominant ableist narratives, is critical. Instilling a consistent message regarding disability as a positive form of diversity and a valued identity can begin to shift perceptions (Kimball et al., 2016). Engaging with faculty and staff in these positive environments -- rather than when negotiating accommodations -- to shift views of disability can lessen the burden disabled students face with self-disclosure.

Because disabled students are subordinated by their disability status, in addition to their student identity and for some, other marginalized social identities, disclosing their disability to faculty for accommodations is risky (e.g., Miller, 2015). As such, disabled
students “employ various and complex measures to manage the identities they reveal to their instructors” (Wood, 2017, p. 85). Disabled students need to assess potential reactions by the faculty regarding their disclosure. In addition to including a syllabus statement regarding university accommodation procedures, demonstrating openness to providing access in multiple ways can ease student concerns related to disclosure. It is also helpful to make faculty aware of a student’s disability before the class begins so that faculty can invite the student to engage in dialogue regarding their accommodations. This dialogue demonstrates that faculty value the student in their learning environment. Offering opportunities for disabled students to discuss their access needs can validate a student whose needs may fluctuate and encourages disclosure.

Engagement on campus is beneficial to the academic success of college students (Brown & Brodoo, 2014). Disabled students should therefore have the same opportunity for these experiences. To show disabled students that their experience is valued on campus, proactive access planning for co-curricular events is necessary. Incorporating access statements and accommodation requests as standard components of co-curricular programming demonstrates that disabled students are welcomed. Likewise, educating programmers -- from student leaders to full-time campus event planners -- about universal design can change perceptions that access needs are not afterthoughts, but important to the quality of campus life. When disabled students perceive themselves as valued rather than burdens, they are more likely to self-disclose.

Crippling campus cultures. By revealing the ways in which compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness shape the campus culture, crip theory makes apparent how students who do not meet ableist student norms are viewed as tragic burdens. This negative and pitying attitude often prevents faculty and staff from taking proactive steps to create accessible courses and campus programming. Crippling the campus culture and shifting attitudes depend on a cripistemology framework for perceiving disabled students. Cripistemology is knowledge production from the perspectives of disabled people (Johnson & McRuer, 2014). It embraces the multiple ways that bodies and minds produce and understand knowledge. Disabled people are therefore valued for the contributions they make to campus life because of their disabilities rather than in spite of their disabilities. Embracing a cripistemological perspective means that the culture is not about only proactively providing accommodations but also creating accessible environments shaped around disabled people’s realities. For instance, offering courses and co-curricular opportunities from a crip time perspective means designing syllabi and programming that allow for flexibility in scheduling and deadlines, rest, and other atypical ideas. Faculty and staff who embrace a cripistemological perspective would be more inclined to create environments that encourage disclosure.

Conclusion

Table 1 summarizes our suggestions for criped practice. We hope this crip theory analysis encourages professionals to consider the ways in which ableism contributes to students’ decisions to disclose their disability. By looking inward and also educating and partnering across campus, disability services professionals can contribute to campus cultures that value disability as diversity. In doing so, disabled students can bring their authentic bodies and minds to their college experience. Indeed, when disclosure is facilitated in a manner that resists compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness it leads to a more liberatory notion of disclosure that embraces the fuller humanity of disabled students (Pearson & Boskovich, 2019).

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Table 1

*Practices that Facilitate Disability Disclosure*

| Crippling the Determination of Disability | Embrace disability as fluid rather than defined only by legal requirements  
|  | Recognize how the physical and mental labor associated with proving disability is in itself disabling  
|  | Communicate the cripped mindset throughout campus (e.g., orientation, residence life)  
| Crippling Disability Services Practices | Rely on students’ narratives and the professionals’ judgment to determine disability rather than a medical history documenting impairment  
|  | Provide flexible ways to engage with students, such as remote appointments, digital forms, and extended hours  
|  | Put the burden on the university rather than the student for multiple disclosures to faculty and staff  
| Crippling Campus Cultures | Value contributions disabled students make to campuses because of rather than in spite of their disabilities  
|  | Proactively design syllabi and programming that has flexible deadlines, paces, and expectations rather than relying only on accommodations  
|  | Stop perceiving disabled students as tragic burdens needing pity |
Autistic-Centered Program Development and Assessment Practices (Practice Brief)

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Abstract

The authors of this article invite disability and student affairs professionals to engage autistic college students and colleagues in program development and assessment efforts. Ten strategies to construct student support programs and assessment designs are provided that are inclusive of autistic students, staff, and faculty input and participation from start to finish. Recommendations by Dena, an autistic social scientist/co-author, are embedded within the strategies to provide a neurodivergent perspective. Together, these strategies are grounded in principles of community-based participatory research, neurodiversity, and autistic expertise.

Keywords: autism, disability, assessment, higher education, student affairs

Autistic students are increasingly participating in postsecondary education. While reasonable accommodations are legally mandated, autistic students may benefit from social and co-curricular supports that go beyond legally mandated accommodations (Sarrett, 2018). Disability and student affairs professionals are asked to cultivate “autism friendly” (p. 679) programs and engage in assessment to document the extent to which they effectively serve students. Here, we focus on student support programs, which are “often designed with the specific intention of ultimately improving student retention and graduation by facilitating a smoother academic and social transition” (Mayhew et al., 2016, p. 386).

Within academic organizational systems, Disability Resource Centers are responsible for providing services and programs “that promote access to the campus community” (Association on Higher Education and Disability, n.d., sec. 2.2). As such, disability and student affairs professionals serve critical roles as they create programs that promote students’ self-advocacy, cultivate transferable skills, and foster disabled pride (Evans et al., 2017). Further, practitioners are responsible for assessing these programs.

Program assessment plays an important role in data-driven decision making. The purpose of assessment is to provide metrics of improvement and accountability for internal and external stakeholders (Ewell, 2009). Practitioners utilize program assessments to make decisions about resource allocation, identify programs that benefit specific groups of students, and focus on developing specific competencies (Lombardi et al., 2018). For instance, program assessment results can help orientation staff create transition programing with decompression breaks, assist residence life staff as they develop programs to support positive roommate dynamics, or encourage student activities professionals to plan events in sensory-sensitive spaces.

Depiction of the Problem

The process of program assessment is influenced by social and political contexts (Wall et al., 2014). In particular, power in assessment practices reside within the individuals who get to decide “which experiences and activities add value to a student’s college experience” (Patton et al., 2015, p. 210). Abled practitioners may be unaware of phenomena that disabled students experience (e.g., crip time; Peña et al., 2018) or issues that are critical to disabled students’ engagement and success (e.g., consistent access to gluten-free food in campus dining; Wilke et al., 2019). Thus, abled practitioners may overlook important assessment topics (e.g., independent living; Brown & Broido, in press) or ask adverse assessment questions.

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There is little guidance on how to develop or assess programs that are accessible to, and valid for, disabled populations (Brown & Broido, in press). As professionals are asked to develop autism-specific programs, it is important to understand the extent to which the outcomes of these activities are valid, that is, they reflect the goals of autistic people themselves (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017). Without autistic involvement, programs are limited to neurotypical understandings of success and disability, and student affairs professionals may not recognize programmatic strengths or areas for improvement. For example, autistic students may perceive participating in an interest group as a successful activity if five other students with shared interests consistently attend the weekly meetings. However, neurotypical professionals may overlook the value of engaging with others who share interests, and simply see the group’s value in relation to low attendance.

The purpose of this practice brief is to address power differentials and validity limitations in program development and assessment. Given that traditional methods of programing exclude the input of autistic people, we marry principles of community-based participatory research (CBPR; Powers, 2017), neurodiversity (Robertson & Ne’eman, 2008), and autistic expertise to outline strategies professionals can employ to build and assess programs with autistic students and colleagues.

**Strategies for Autistic-Centered Program Development and Assessment**

The co-authors of this article represent one abled, one autistic, and one dyslexic educator. All of us are mothers, and two of us are parents of autistic sons. Drawing on autistic studies literature, collaboratively we created 10 strategies for centering autistic students and colleagues during program development and assessment design (see Table 1). We recognize that “academia powerfully mandates abledbodiedness and ablemindedness” (Dolmage, 2017, p. 7) and academic ableism systematically limits the contributions of autistic people. Building on the work of Prince-Hughes (2002) we intentionally model neurodiverse thinking via writing practices that diverge from academic writing traditions of “following one ‘logical’ train of thought to what amounts to forgone conclusions” (Prince-Hughes, 2002, p. xii). Neurodiverse thinking sees multiple, non-exclusive, and often non-linear possibilities. In our presentation of strategies that follow, we embed recommendations by Dena, our co-author who identifies as autistic. While Dena’s experiences as an autistic self-advocate are not meant to represent overarching views of the autistic community, her experiences and participation in the autistic self-advocacy community enables her to contribute a neurodivergent perspective. In addition, Dena’s input offers a counternarrative to traditional and ableist academic rhetoric typically found in journal articles. In making this choice we hope that neurotypical readers can begin to reimagine assessment practices to fit with autistic goals.

**Employ a Community-Based, Participatory Approach (CBPR)**

While there are a number of ways to design programs and improve assessment efforts, one area that is overlooked in the higher education literature is the lack of inclusion of autistic students, staff, faculty, allies, or community members in this process. We draw on principles of community-based participatory research (CBPR) to overturn the traditional power imbalance between individuals who develop programs or design assessments and the community being served or studied, by no longer regarding disabled individuals as “other” but as part of the community of decision makers (Foucault, 1990; Powers, 2017). CBPR involves “power sharing by academic and community researchers, full engagement of community partners across all study phases, and ongoing commitment to partnership and capacity building” (Powers, 2017, p. 42). Dena provides an autistic perspective by describing the importance of including autistic people within the program development and assessment process.
Develop Trusting and Respectful Relationships

Before collaborative program development or assessment design begins, disability and student affairs professionals “need to develop mutually supportive and respectful relationships with members of the autism community” (Pellicano et al., 2014, p. 1.). When developing relationships, professionals may need to initiate communication with autistic students, colleagues, and allies to build rapport by using a variety of communication formats. Trust is built within a relationship by engaging over multiple occasions. Building respectful relationships involves presuming competence and checking assumptions about autism or the ways in which autistic individuals may express themselves. Dena explains how assumptions about autistic expressions hinder relationships.

The varied and unique presentations of autism may lead to inaccurate presumptions of ability and areas of accommodations/support; challenges to competence, questioning, doubting, and/or confusion on the part of others. If the expression of autism is externalizing (obviously presenting possibly with stimming, social differences, language differences requiring technology or “translation” support) the autistic person’s capacities may be underestimated. If the person’s expression of autism is internalizing (less obviously presenting, minimal or use of more socially acceptable stims like foot bouncing or hair twirling, and good use of syntax even if communication is impacted) they may be subjected to proving that they are autistic over and over again (Gassner, in press). “They thus face a double bind: either they forgo the assistance or accommodation they need—thus suffer the consequences of attempting to do things they may not be able to do safely by themselves—or they endure the discomfort of subjecting themselves to strangers’ interrogations” (Davis, 2005, p. 154-155). These outcomes are burdensome for autistic persons and add another layer of effort.

Given these circumstances, we recommend prolonged engagement with autistic partners. Cultivating trusting relationships and partnerships may take many months and multiple encounters. Though this may feel time-consuming to the person or team in charge of program development and assessment, the benefits of establishing a strong foundation with autistic partners are worthwhile to developing trustworthy and actionable findings.

Value Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity or “neurological pluralism” stands for disability inclusion, tribe, family, self-acceptance, and a strong refusal to deny disability (Silverman, 2015). Neurodiversity, as a paradigm, works to reframe what normal means, recognizes and values neurological differences, and honors the contributions that neurodivergent individuals make to society. Neurodiversity is a shift away from deficit-driven understandings and a term used to describe “the neurological diversity of autistic people, dyslexic people, and people with other major differences in cognitive processing” (Robertson & Ne'eman, 2008, para. 8). This paradigm inherently honors variation and denies the social construction of disability as a negative status or unwanted identity. Neurodiversity is one way the autistic community has taken back their identity, including their disability identity, by choosing their language and in doing so, stated that living with autism is not something to repress. Dena explains,
Discuss Participants’ Confidentiality and Privacy

The process of coming out as disabled or acting as a representative for a minoritized group involves emotional labor (Miller, 2015); thus, some autistic students may not want to have their participation be public. Further, disabled people navigate stigma, microaggressions, and discrimination by making strategic and context-specific disclosure decisions. Disability and student affairs professionals should protect privacy by providing the option to confidentially participate in program design and assessment. If confidentiality is not possible, professionals must ensure autistic collaborators have control over their disclosure narratives.

Although disclosure narratives could involve medical language, environmental or behavior-based descriptions offer selective information that is relevant to the program context. Dena provides an example of how behavior-based descriptions can limit public disclosure, “offer the option to say, ‘student has trouble focusing in a busy room’ versus a shout out that the student is autistic.” Dena’s example demonstrates how to place emphasis on the environment and privacy as many individuals might have difficulty focusing in a busy room, including students with ADD, ADHD, learning disabilities, auditory processing disorders, or simply those who are distracted by loud noises. When using a behavior-based approach to limit disclosure, it is imperative that the autistic collaborator is in control of their public description.

Provide Accommodations

Reasonable accommodations are changes in the learning environment that afford students with disabilities equal educational access without decreasing program or academic standards (Evans et al., 2017). Accommodations are predictors of academic success for autistic students and should be individualized to fit each student’s functional needs within the learning context (Van Hees et al., 2015). Dena notes how absence of accommodations limits participation.

Disability and disability needs are not a competition, nor should these needs be used as gatekeeping tools to deny disabled persons. Not meaningfully understanding the dire nature of what may appear to be a minor accommodation can result in demeaning attitudes and anxiety for the student. Whether one requires relatively small supports or comparatively large ones, the issue remains the same. Without either, one cannot succeed to the best of their capabilities. For example, when taking my comprehensive exams, my accommodations were not in place. The jarring experience of arriving, emotionally charged, facing an all-or-nothing situation and then having to scramble to find separate testing in a building with air conditioning in July, and then having to get a loaner laptop cost me considerable time (navigating to a new building and emotionally regrouping in the bathroom). The second day, with all accommodations in place, I not only completed the task comfortably but within the standard time.

Thus, disability and student affairs professionals should provide accommodations to ensure that autistic students can fully participate in program development and assessment design.

Create Accessible Data Collection Methods and Instruments

Designing data collection methods and instruments that are accessible to autistic participants is imperative for autistic-centered program development and assessment design. Dena explains, “It isn’t only how the question is phrased but also the means by which the communication is exchanged. Some autistics may experience expressive language, processing speed, or speech initiation challenges that can result in shut down during assessment protocols.” Providing assessment questions in advance or using asynchronous forms of data collection, such as email interviews, discussion threads, or the ability to save responses and return at a later time, are communication techniques that can lessen the burden associated with assessment (Ison, 2009). Dena adds that different ways of asking (matching with a word bank, multiple choice or binary true/false responses) may create a less burdensome effort to participate. Another helpful strategy is to pilot-test the data collection instruments to identify and revise questions that are confusing or do not capture the experiences of autistic students (Brown & Broido, in press).

Develop Organizational Structures for Autistic-Feedback

Engagement of community stakeholders within program development and assessment design does not typically occur during the planning process, rather collaboration tends to occur during program implementation or dissemination of assessment results (Pellicano et al., 2014). However, autistic perspectives are imperative during all phases. Dena expounds:

Students with diverse disability needs must have a safe, proactive, and responsive space to disclose challenges that remain unmet and to foster creative opportunities for activities that help to ex-
pand campus awareness and individual leadership development. This is not optional—it is an essential component of effective program design and assessment.

Thus, professionals should develop organizational structures that foster the “space” for autistic-feedback. Forming autistic advisory boards and partnering with self-advocacy communities are a few prime avenues to collect autistic perspectives and input.

**Allocate Time and Resources to Teach Assessment Techniques**

Asking autistic students and community members to engage in CBPR needs to be mutually beneficial. In addition to engaging in opportunities to provide autistic expertise, the acquisition of transferable skills are one potential benefit that autistic students can gain from collaborating in the program development and assessment design process.

Disability and student affairs professionals should ask autistic students what program planning and assessment related skills they would like to learn (e.g., library search skills), allocate time to teach or support autistic students as they learn the new skill set, and offer clear and concrete instruction to support autistic individuals in the learning process (Burgstahler & Russo-Gleicher, 2015). Graduate programs that prepare student and academic affairs professionals should consider including these kinds of autistic-centered approaches to program development and assessment in their curriculum. Put another way, we encourage graduate programs to consider teaching individuals in the higher education field about CBPR strategies.

**Communicate Program Assessment Findings**

When communicating assessment findings, professionals should acknowledge and give credit to autistic collaborators (unless they prefer to remain confidential). Having autistic students communicate assessment findings to stakeholders provides participants with the benefits of presenting their work in professional settings. Dena reflects:

> When the research queries are completed and/or once the research is finalized, it demonstrates value and meaning to utilize the same accessible means to communicate back to the contributors what your findings are and more importantly, how these will foster change in how things are done on campus.

Program development and assessment findings should be communicated back to students in an effort to be transparent about the results and to be inclusive of individuals who want to take part in discussions about how to move forward. Findings should also be communicated as internal reports to key stakeholders on campus, such as admissions and retention program offices, to inform institutional practices and policies.

**Conclusion**

The 10 strategies described above do not fit neatly into program design workshops or assessment textbooks. Unlike typical assessment texts that begin with the identification of educational values, understanding organizational performance, and clearly stating goals (e.g., Schuh et al., 2016), many of the strategies in the autistic-centered model focus on human dignity. It is possible that the themes of inclusion and self-direction may seem simplistic to neurotypical readers; however, experiences of autistic individuals indicate that paternalism is pervasive (Hens et al., 2019).

**References**


About the Authors

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Dr. Kirsten Brown completed her Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration and Student Affairs at Bowling Green State University. She is a faculty member at Edgewood College and her prior administrative experience includes working in residence life and curriculum development. Dr. Brown’s publications include a coauthored book, *Disability in Higher Education: A Social Justice Approach*, and articles in the *Journal of College Student Development*, the *Journal of Community College Research and Practice*, and the *Journal of Higher Education*. She can be reached at kbrown@edgewood.edu.
Table 1

Ten Strategies for Autistic-Centered Program Development and Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employ a Community-Based, Participatory Action approach by including</td>
<td>Engage autistic alumni when developing career services programing (e.g., mock interviews) and designing program assessment.</td>
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<td>autistic students, staff, faculty, or community members as key decision</td>
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<td>makers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Develop mutually supportive, trusting, and respectful relationships with</td>
<td>Initiate communication, presume competence, and check assumptions or stereotypes.</td>
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<td>autistic people.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Use principals of neurodiversity to value and respect autistic differences</td>
<td>Foster autistic identity and culture by developing programing that honors autistic pride via media, books, and guest speakers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>and expertise.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Center the goals of the autistic students and community members by</td>
<td>If requested by autistic collaborators, include metrics for sensory stimuli (e.g., microphone noise) in assessment of social programing.</td>
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<td>soliciting input before program development or assessment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Protect confidentiality or privacy when desired and ensuring autistic</td>
<td>Limit public disclosure by offering the option to say, “student has trouble focusing in a busy room” instead of “the student is autistic.”</td>
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<td>collaborators have control over their disclosure narratives.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Provide accommodations so that autistic students can fully participate in</td>
<td>Communicate the process for requesting accommodations and work with Disability Resource professionals to ensure provision.</td>
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<tr>
<td>program development and assessment design.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Create accessible data collection methods and instruments.</td>
<td>Provide questions in advance or use asynchronous forms of data collection.</td>
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<td>Develop organizational structures that foster a dedicated “space” for</td>
<td>Build and utilize autistic advisory boards.</td>
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<td>autistic-feedback.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teach assessment techniques.</td>
<td>Allocate time and resources to teach data analysis so that autistic participants gain transferable skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicate program assessment findings and give credit to autistic</td>
<td>Support for autistic collaborators if they wish to present assessment findings to stakeholders.</td>
</tr>
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<td>collaborators (unless they prefer to remain confidential).</td>
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Five Principles to Improve Quantitative Research and Assessment About College Students with Disabilities (Practice Brief)

Bradley E. Cox¹
Brett Ranon Nachman²

Abstract

This paper provides practical guidance for scholars and practitioners looking to develop more rigorous, comprehensive, and inclusive research that could guide proactive efforts to improve access, experiences, and outcomes for college students with disabilities. To do so, we (a) identify critical challenges affecting research and assessment related to college students with disabilities and the programs that serve them; (b) describe five broad principles and a variety of specific suggestions that could help overcome those problems; and (c) highlight the manner in which implementation of these strategies can be facilitated by the development of collaborative relationships and proactive partnerships.

Keywords: disability, assessment, quantitative research, college students with disabilities

Simply put, studying college experiences and outcomes for students with disabilities, or assessing the programs that serve them, is difficult. Researchers conducting quantitative analyses, in particular, often face a variety of problems that have thus far limited the utility of such analyses. Therefore, we use this paper to provide practical guidance for scholars and practitioners looking to use quantitative data to guide proactive efforts that improve access, experiences, and outcomes for college students with disabilities. Accordingly, we (a) identify critical challenges affecting research and assessment related to college students with disabilities and associated programs; (b) describe five broad principles and a variety of specific suggestions that could help overcome those problems; and (c) highlight the manner in which implementation of these strategies can be facilitated by the development of collaborative relationships and proactive partnerships.

The topics presented in this paper derive from three sources. First, we gleaned some ideas from discussions held among 20 leading disability scholars at a Spencer Foundation-sponsored workshop. Second, we identified other issues while conducting a systematic review of 15 years’ worth of articles published in 16 leading journals (Cox et al., in press). Finally, we share insights from our research involving partnerships with two- and four-year institutions.

Keywords: disability, assessment, quantitative research, college students with disabilities

Common Problems Affecting Quantitative Analyses

In this section, we identify three overarching problems that currently limit the volume, quality, and utility of quantitative data analyses about students with disabilities.

Minimal Data and Small Samples

Effective quantitative analysis about students with disabilities depends on the data being analyzed. Unfortunately, work in this area often relies on limited data drawn from small, unrepresentative samples. Few large-scale data sets allow for the analysis of experiences and outcomes for students with disabilities. The only nationally representative dataset focused on students with disabilities (the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 [NLTS2]) identified its participants roughly 20 years ago, requires special permission to access most raw data, has limited information about postsecondary experiences, and has already been heavily mined for insights (e.g., Newman et al., 2011; Wagner et al., 2005).

Moreover, unlike several other basic demographic indicators (e.g., race, gender), questions about disability status are often overlooked on surveys college students are asked to complete. Although several prominent national student surveys (e.g., National
Survey of Student Engagement [NSSE], Cooperative Institutional Research Program [CIRP]) have begun including questions about disabilities in recent years, some include the questions only every-other year while others do not ask about one’s specific type of disability. Because scholars have long noted difficulties in gathering large-scale quantitative data about students with disabilities (McGrew et al., 1993), analysts must often turn to other sources.

The most common approach, for academic researchers and institutional administrators alike, is to collect data through institutions’ Disability Service Offices (DSOs; e.g., Brown & Coomes, 2016; Collins & Mowbray, 2005; Harbour, 2009). However, concerns about student privacy and legal responsibility (e.g., Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act [HIPAA] & Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act [FERPA]) make some DSO staff reluctant to share data outside their offices. Even then, because only 28% of students with disabilities disclose their disability to their postsecondary institutions (Newman et al., 2011), the resulting samples are often so small as to allow only basic quantitative analyses. Taking more creative approaches may increase sample sizes but is also likely to introduce new sources of problematic bias.

**Inconsistent Data of Uncertain Quality**

Inconsistencies in the clarity and quality of data related to college students with disabilities threatens to undermine the utility of any related analyses. Varied stakeholders define disability differently (e.g., consider the difference between the definitions employed in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990) statutes and those used by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders [American Psychiatric Association, 2013]), and minor variations in terminology can have vastly different meanings. Asking a student whether they have any “functional limitations” (ADA definition) will likely elicit a different response than a question that asks about whether the student receives “disability accommodations” (institutional service usage) than would a question that asks about a student’s “disability identity status” (individual self-perception). Moreover, standard quantitative data collection procedures may not be equally accessible to students with various physical, psychological, developmental, and/or learning disabilities.

Capturing information from the entire spectrum of students with disabilities might require widely varying adaptations of otherwise standardized assessment instruments. Imagine the time, expertise, and resources needed to simultaneously collect good data from a student with a hand tremor (no answer sheets using tiny bubbles), one with low vision (a large-print or screen-readable version), and another whose ADHD limits attention span (several short sessions to administer instrument).

**Limited Time and Mismatched Expertise**

Many of the postsecondary professionals who are best positioned to address the challenges identified above, and contribute to the development of a rigorous, robust, and inclusive body of evidence on the topic, lack the time, resources, expertise, and/or incentives to engage in such work. For example, staff who focus on the day-to-day provision of services likely have key insights to share and critical questions to ask, but must rely on Institutional Research (IR) offices or faculty researchers to collect data and generate statistics. In contrast, IR offices likely have analytic expertise, but are often so focused on satisfying federal, state, or institutional oversight requirements that they lack the time and resources to engage in unguided exploratory analyses (Cutting Edge Series, 2012). Scholars looking to conduct multi-institutional research struggle to justify the time it would take to navigate the complexities of campus politics, Institutional Review Boards (IRB), administrative requirements, and data management systems at several institutions. Collectively, these problems limit the volume, quality, and application of quantitative analyses to student disability data.

**Overcoming Problems Affecting Quantitative Analyses**

Although we differentiate among three types of challenges, each contributes to others, creating a cascading effect that undermines efforts to advance both scholarly research and institutional understanding about college students with disabilities. Efforts to address these problems, therefore, can only be addressed effectively through complementary changes made by many stakeholders. In this section, we present five principles to guide those changes, weaving examples from our experiences as disability scholars throughout. Table 1 provides recommendations on translating these principles to practice.

**Make Data Meaningful: Clarify Purpose to Align Efforts**

Data only matters if it means something to the people who are to use it. Postsecondary institutions may collect disability-related data for at least three reasons. First, efforts to satisfy external accountability requirements likely require the collection and analy-
obtain clear data: be intentional about definitions and labels

Developing clarity regarding the purpose of assessment activities may come first, but ensuring the clarity of the data collected during those activities reaches a close second. Although there are a wide variety of disabilities with a multitude of definitions, we advise IR researchers and administrators to employ a consistent set of language for describing “disability” on all platforms, both internally (e.g., student surveys, educational records/databases) and externally (e.g., websites, promotional brochures). Adopting a specific definition of disability allows for apples-to-apples comparisons over time and across various instruments; it also conveys a consistent message about the climate for students with disabilities on campus. Therefore, the choice about what specific language to use requires careful consideration of both the intent of the terminology and its impact on multiple stakeholders. For example, while the question “Do you have a disability?” implicitly minimizes student agency regarding their disability status, the question “Do you consider yourself to have a disability?” empowers students to define their disability status on their own terms.

While standardized terminology may appear to obscure the inherent complexity of disability, complementary data collection techniques can be used to unravel the complexities of students’ characteristics, behaviors, perceptions, and experiences. For example, in one recent study Brad asked students to provide a binary indicator of whether they were autistic while also embedding a 10-question version of the Autism Spectrum Quotient (AQ-10; Allison et al., 2012) to estimate the intensity of their autism-related characteristics. These indirect indicators (like the AQ-10) can be used in conjunction with survey items that unveil the effects of disability on students’ lived experiences. For example, the AQ-10 could be paired with items about students’ service usage, scales indicative of students’ challenges navigating daily activities on campus, and open-ended questions about students’ perceptions of campus climate.

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We recommend conducting a disability definition audit that could help create common understandings. As Brett discovered while studying how community college website content described autism (Nachman & Brown, 2020), inconsistent framing of the disability both within and across websites revealed how baseline comprehension of disabilities may translate to relaying deficit-based language. Through IT staff working alongside administrators to identify disability-related keywords on institutional websites, they possess the opportunity to employ a social justice approach in reframing disability (Evans et al., 2017). Engaging in this process will not only help shift the paradigm in how disability is described, but also enable institutional researchers to more precisely and positively draw on these definitions when developing campus surveys.

Gather Trustworthy Data: Improve Instrumentation by Employing Universal Design

To ensure students with disabilities can effectively engage in data collection processes, assessment
activities must embrace Universal Design principles (UD; Bednar, 1977; Izzo et al., 2008; Lombardi et al., 2018; Mace, 1985). UD tenets can easily be adapted to maximize the likelihood that all students have equitable access to fully participate in efforts involving the curation of disability-related data. For example, UD promotes students having options in how they express, engage with, and represent knowledge (e.g., writing, talking, drawing, presenting; Izzo et al., 2008). Survey designers should offer various opportunities for students to express how disability impacts their lives (e.g., rating factors on a scale, creating a visual, selecting keywords).

Following the UD principle of “flexible use,” Brett’s dissertation research on autistic community college students provided students with agency in how they communicated about their experiences. Additionally, at the study’s onset, Brett offered opportunities for students to obtain clarification on Qualtrics survey questions before filling them out, in order to ease their comfort and confidence in study participation. Qualtrics’ survey accessibility checks enabled Brett to ensure that items were framed clearly and would be compliant with respondents who use screen readers. Participants could also complete the survey on various devices, including their computers, tablets, and phones.

Survey designers should streamline instruments by removing extraneous items, thereby minimizing discomfort for students who may otherwise provide poor-quality data if they become tired, frustrated, or confused by long, complicated instruments. The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSEE) is eight pages long with over 115 bubbles to fill in; the National College Health Assessment’s assessment asks students to respond to over 400 individual items. Such long assessments are especially problematic when students increasingly experience “survey fatigue” (Porter et al., 2004, p. 63), the result of almost incessant requests for them to complete surveys. Adding a “pause” button for students to rest before continuing to the next page or offering text-to-speech software for students who might have difficulty reading digital text likewise would improve accessibility, allow data from all students to be included in analyses, and help ensure the quality of responses.

Knowing why you are collecting the data becomes critically important here. Without that clarity, it is easy to fall into the trap of just adding “one more question” because critical data were not gathered through previous efforts. Another way to avoid this phenomenon is to expand the sources from which we collect data that can inform assessments related to college students with disabilities.

**Expand Data Sources: Include Disability Indicators Among Demographic Questions**

Perhaps the easiest way to collect a greater volume of data related to students with disabilities is to insert questions about disability into a wider range of already-existing data collection activities. Can you imagine a student survey that did not ask about race or gender? Of course not. Questions about race and gender are effectively required for any study about college students. In contrast, questions about disability status are frequently omitted. Indeed, Brad and colleagues’ review of more than a dozen higher education assessment instruments from Educational Benchmarking Inc., Indiana University's Center for Postsecondary Research, UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), and Noel-Levitz revealed that barely more than half explicitly asked about disability in 2017/18; fewer still allowed disaggregation by type of disability. For example, NSSE’s publicly available data tables do not allow any breakdowns by disability status—despite enabling that function for race, sex, major, first-generation status, and participation in online coursework. Our experiences on several campuses suggest that questions about disability status are even more uncommon in home-grown or institution-specific student surveys.

Yet these campus-specific and home-grown surveys present unique opportunities to explore issues related to disability. For example, including a question about disability status on a feedback form following participation in some campus event (e.g., orientation, speaker series) could surface issues related to physical accessibility of an event space. A survey of campus climate could help administrators recognize how specific policies, practices, or environments cause students with disabilities to feel disconnected with or marginalized by the institution. What’s more, the very act of incorporating disability questions into multiple assessment initiatives demonstrates to students with disabilities that the institution is invested in their success. It also helps to bring a wider range of disability-related issues to the attention of stakeholders whose interests in the topic may have been largely restricted to the consideration of legal requirements.

**Integrate Data Sets: Combine Data from Multiple Sources**

Although each of these data sources may provide useful information when analyzed independently, their real power to generate actionable insights grows from their potential integration. Because varied as-
essment efforts target different student populations, combining data from multiple sources likely increases the size and diversity of the sample to be analyzed. This phenomenon is particularly likely to occur when data collected from students registered with a DSO are paired with data collected from the broader campus population, including the 60% of students with disabilities who do not formally disclose their disability to their postsecondary institutions (Wagner et al., 2005). One of Brad’s recent projects accomplished just that.

Through coordination with several campus stakeholders, Brad integrated students’ data from the CIRP Freshman Survey, transcripts, the DSO, and a survey of autism-related characteristics. As a result, he has been able to explore whether autism-related characteristics were linked to student performance in gateway STEM courses and whether those effects differed based on students’ demographics, expectations for college, and/or involvement with the DSO. The results of these analyses will help STEM instructors better understand their students, institutional leaders identify student populations to target for support, and the DSO to assess the effectiveness of its services.

Integrating datasets also increases the variety of experiences and outcomes that can be linked to students’ disability status. Imagine the types of insights that could be gained from analyses of student engagement (e.g., from NSSE), course evaluations, student grades, or perceptions of campus climate that compare responses from students with disabilities (or with specific types of disabilities) to those of other student populations. These types of comparative analyses can be particularly persuasive when senior administrators make decisions to allocate resources for initiatives targeting specific student populations.

Using Creative Collaborations to Put Principles into Practice

We opened this paper with a simple statement: Studying college experiences and outcomes for students with disabilities, or assessing the programs that serve them, is difficult. Implementing the suggestions we have offered in this paper could, likewise, prove challenging. We use the remainder of this section to highlight how creative collaborations might be leveraged to overcome some of the practical challenges you may encounter when trying to apply the five principles outlined in this paper or acting on any of the 13 specific suggestions outlined in Table 1.

Gaining access to student disability data is perhaps the most persistent challenge we have heard about—and experienced ourselves—while engaging in this work. While DSO staff likely have easy access to a variety of student disability information, the extent to which those data are shared with others (e.g., researchers, institutional researchers) can be affected by many legal and ethical considerations. Although indicators of students’ involvement with a DSO are considered “educational records” by the U.S. Department of Education (Rooker, 2004) that can be shared with other institutional personnel who have a “legitimate educational interest” (FERPA; §99.31, paragraph a, l,1, A), legal intricacies related to FERPA and HIPAA laws (Bower & Schwartz, 2010) may make people or institutions reluctant to disclose the information with other offices.

Such hesitation to share data is also reflective of the often-constraining influence of institutional inertia born from prior institutional policies, assessment practices, survey instruments, and personal perceptions. If members of the campus community believe the DSO has exclusive responsibility to support students with disabilities, they surely also believe assessment related to those students is likewise the DSO’s responsibility. Educational professionals with such an attitude likely will not be eager to add new disability-related questions to their student satisfaction surveys or end-of-course assessments. Moreover, limited time and mismatched assessments can curtail even proactive efforts by institutional stakeholders eager to conduct assessment about students with disabilities. Few practitioners who work directly with students have the time, inclination, or expertise required to conduct complex quantitative analyses. Educational researchers, on the other hand, likely feel far more comfortable running analyses than implementing disability programming.

Overcoming these challenges to implementation requires collaboration between a variety of stakeholders who have complementary expertise, access, and influence. Administrators must involve faculty, student services, and other campus personnel in determining what type of data to gather, who should collect and analyze the data, and how to leverage these findings to improve practice. Establishing institutional procedures that prioritize relationship-building among units and consensus-building about what matters on campus can help ensure that assessment related to students with disabilities does not turn into an extra burden or an empty promise.

Partnerships between disability services practitioners and faculty members or other researchers are particularly noteworthy (Scott et al., 2016). Individuals working with students with disabilities on a regular basis are uniquely positioned to identify student experiences or institutional activities that have the
potential to substantially influence student outcomes, precisely the topics worthy of further examination by scholars. Likewise, staff from DSOs or IR offices may be able to facilitate access to disability-related data that is often hard for researchers to procure. Such collaborations promote widespread distribution of findings and help ensure empirical findings get translated into actionable insights. DSO staff can use the results to shape their own practice and to build awareness among other units within the institution (e.g., housing, IR, admissions); researchers can share results with other faculty members to help colleagues develop instructional habits that support students with disabilities. These campus-specific collaborations close the assessment loop by linking students with services, resources, people, and tools that can help them succeed in college (Akkaraju et al., 2019).

Indeed, much of what is learned through local assessment activities can be quite valuable to the broader audiences of educational researchers, public policy-makers, on-the-ground practitioners, and students with disabilities themselves. Because outside researchers often have difficulty accessing confidential student records that might contain students’ disability indicators and academic outcomes (e.g., GPA, persistence, graduation), it is likely through the accumulation of institution specific analyses—rather than a single study using some multi-institutional data set—that we will begin to uncover patterns related to experiences and outcomes for students with disabilities. Dissemination of findings from these institutional analyses to policy-makers would encourage them to consider students with disabilities when evaluating the effects of potential legislation, rules, or requirements. Sharing with professional colleagues who work in similar roles at other institutions is particularly important, for these colleagues can simultaneously respond to the findings by tweaking their own practices and adapting the methods to promote more effective assessment at their home institution. Finally, sharing with the general public would help prospective students and their families make informed decisions about where to go to college, how to prepare ahead of time, and what to do once enrolled.

**Conclusion**

Despite the best efforts of well-intended scholars and practitioners, quantitative research and assessment on postsecondary students with disabilities remains limited in both quality and quantity. Such limitations are inevitable when professionals with limited time and mismatched expertise attempt to analyze inconsistent data of uncertain quality that are drawn from small, biased samples. Educational researchers, postsecondary staff, and institutional administrators can collaborate to overcome these challenges by making conscientious changes throughout the assessment process. By integrating clear, trustworthy, and meaningful data from multiple sources, perhaps we can all begin to leverage quantitative analyses to develop robust, inclusive, and actionable insights about college students with disabilities.

**References**


About the Authors

Dr. Bradley E. Cox received his Ph.D. in higher education from Pennsylvania State University. He is an Associate Professor of Higher Education at Florida State University (FSU), where he is also a Senior Research Associate with the Center for Postsecondary Success (CPS). Dr. Cox is also the Founder of the College Autism Network (CAN), a nonprofit organization linking varied stakeholders engaged in evidence-guided efforts to improve access, experiences, and outcomes for postsecondary students with autism. His most recent scholarship examines the systemic, institutional, and personal conditions that shape college success for students on the autism spectrum. He can be reached by email at: brad.cox@fsu.edu.

Brett Ranon Nachman is a doctoral candidate in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He also serves as a graduate student researcher with College Autism Network. His research interests center on several areas, including how community college students and autistic college students navigate higher education and how campuses can foster more welcoming and inclusive climates for students with LGBTQ+ and/or autistic identities. Brett can be reached by email at bnachman@wisc.edu.
## Table 1

**Immediate Actions to Begin Enacting the Five Principles**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Specific Steps</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Make Data Meaningful        | 1. Use your next meetings with various stakeholders to ask them what matters to them and why.  
2. Determine from the Institutional Research office what data they are required to report.  
3. Ask your supervisor(s) how they might determine whether your office is being successful.  
4. Find out from your staff what problems they are encountering, what they want to learn more about, what they consider the most important outcome of their work, and what informal measures they use to evaluate the effectiveness of your office’s services. |
| Obtain Clean Data           | 5. Conduct a disability definition audit. Begin by searching your institution’s website for the word “disability” to see how it is described and/or defined by various offices (e.g., admissions, orientation, human resources, housing, DSO).  
6. Review your own materials (e.g., policy statements, application materials, intake forms, accommodation letters, student surveys).  
7. Ask your institutional research office for copies of any surveys or assessment instruments students are asked to complete. Compare the different definitions/descriptions and talk with other administrators about how to consolidate them. |
| Gather Trustworthy Data     | 8. Locate the most recent reports generated by/about your office or students with disabilities at your institution.  
9. Map the information presented in those reports back to their original data sources (e.g., institutional record, student survey). Use the results to shorten the data collection instrument. If the data wasn’t important enough to be included in your reports, it probably is not worth asking about.  
10. Review the recruitment materials and data collection processes for any recent questionnaires students have been asked to complete. Check to see whether the email invitation or first page of the instrument provides one-click access to alternate forms. |
| Expand Data Sources         | 11. Count the number of times data collection instruments at your institution ask about disability. For those that mention disability, contact the survey’s owner/sponsor to request access to the data. For those that don’t, ask the owner/sponsor to add a disability question to the next administration. Simultaneously identify any current data collection efforts that appear to include student-specific identifiers (e.g., ID number, email address). |
| Integrate Data Sets         | 12. Develop a list of questions you think might be answerable if you were able to link data from your office with data from other sources (e.g., student academic records, results from national or local surveys). Start simple: Do students with disabilities have similar GPAs or persistence rates to their peers?  
13. Contact your IR office to see if they could merge data from multiple sources to answer those questions. |
Leveraging Campus Collaboration to Better Serve
All Students with Disabilities
(Practice Brief)

Adam R. Lalor¹
Joseph W. Madaus²
Lynn S. Newman³

Summary of Relevant Research

Student Self-Disclosure

Research based on the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) established that only 35% of postsecondary students chose to inform their institution of their disability (Newman & Madaus, 2015). In contrast to most studies conducted at the postsecondary level that are dependent on student self-disclosure of a disability, NLTS2 students’ disability status was identified by secondary school districts. This nationally representative study followed students from high school into postsecondary school and the extent to which these students chose to disclose their disability to a postsecondary school varied widely by type of disability. Students with more apparent disabilities frequently were more likely to self-disclose than were those with less visible disabilities; for example, 73% of postsecondary students with visual impairments disclosed their disability compared with 24% of students with learning disabilities (Newman et al., 2011). Therefore, colleges are unaware of the majority of students with disabilities on their campuses (Leake, 2015). More than half of these students are receiving services and supports from professionals who primarily are focused on the broader student body and have limited disability-related competence (Sniatecki et al., 2015). Newman et al. (2020) highlighted the importance of such universally available supports. According to Newman and colleagues, students with disabilities who had accessed universally available and/or disability-related supports were more likely to persist in their college programs. Furthermore, retention rates were higher for students with disabilities who accessed universally available supports only.

Faculty and Staff Disability-Related Competence

Even though the majority of students with disabilities do not self-disclose, roughly one in five undergraduates report a disability (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Therefore, all faculty and staff will work with students with disabilities at some point. Like other identity groups on campus for which faculty and staff receive training, students with disabilities are worthy of the same consideration...
and support in achieving their educational goals. As the number of undergraduate students with disabilities continues to increase (Newman et al., 2011), failure to adequately serve this growing population will likely result in greater attrition rates at both two- and four-year institutions. Already, data suggests that 66% of college students with disabilities fail to persist to graduation, an attrition rate 17% higher than students without disabilities (Newman et al., 2011). It is imperative that faculty and staff adequately serve students with disabilities, but are they prepared to do so?

Research suggests that many faculty and staff lack or have limited disability-related competence and are not presently prepared to serve students with disabilities (Evans et al., 2017; Lalor et al., in press; Sniatecki et al., 2015; Vogel et al., 2005). Interestingly, knowledge, dispositions, and skills have been shown to vary by institution type (Vogel et al., 2005) and factors including disability type, previous contact, and program affiliation (Rao, 2004). Nevertheless, faculty and staff recognize their need for disability-related competence and desire additional training on how to best serve students with disabilities (Kimball et al., 2016; Murray, Flannery, & Wren, 2008; Murray et al., 2011; Murray, Wren, & Keyes, 2008); and studies of faculty and staff who receive training and professional development show gains in disability-related competence (Lombardi et al., 2013; Murray et al., 2011; Rohland et al., 2003; Sowers & Smith, 2004). The importance of increasing faculty and staff knowledge has been exemplified by the National Association of Student Affairs Professionals addition of the College Autism Network as an initiative in January 2020 (Williams, 2019). An expectation of this initiative is that high-quality professional development on autism will be readily available to members of the professional association.

**Depiction of the Research Problem**

Students with disabilities need to disclose their disability to the disability services office before they can access accommodations. If students do not choose to self-disclose, they still are able to seek other postsecondary supports available to the general student body, such as writing and study centers. However, it is clear that most higher education faculty and staff are underprepared to serve individuals with disabilities on college campuses (Sniatecki et al., 2015; Vogel et al., 2005). One key group with disability-related expertise is disability services professionals. Disability services professionals use this expertise to provide direct service to a portion of students with disabilities on campus—those who self-disclose a disability and are eligible for accommodations—however, many more students with disabilities do not self-disclose to disability services. Fortunately, many disability services offices offer professional development programs, sometimes formal and sometimes informal, to their faculty and staff colleagues in order to better prepare them to serve students with disabilities. It is this programming and training that provides faculty and staff with disability-related knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to adequately serve all students with disabilities; those who disclose to disability services and those who do not. Work described above by the research team related to the positive impact of universally-available supports on the persistence of students with disabilities, both those who self-disclosed and those who did not, and related to the disability-associated competencies of student affairs professionals lead the to the present inquiry. Specifically, this research examines how disability services offices at diverse institutions leverage their campus relationships and collaborations to foster professional development and outreach programming that better meets the needs of all students with disabilities.

**Description of the Practice Related to the Research Problem**

Three postsecondary institutions were selected to learn more about how the disability service office works with the broader campus community to provide information about their services and about students with disabilities. The participants constituted a convenience sample. As students with disabilities attend both two- and four-year colleges (Newman et al., 2011), efforts were made to obtain representation from different types of higher education institutions. These institutions included a large, public university; a small, private college; and a public, two-year community college in rural, urban and suburban settings. See Table 1 for a description of each institution. The questions asked can be found in Table 2. Two of the institutions responded in writing, and one participated in a face-to-face interview with one of the authors, which was transcribed. Responses from each of the institutions featured the participation of two disability services professionals working with students with disabilities. The responses were reviewed and coded by the authors, and the following common themes emerged as ways to share information about program services: (a) developing strategic relationships with as many campus offices as possible; (b) serving on campus committees; (c) outreach to departments, divisions, and/or classes; (d) outreach to high school
Developing Strategic Relationships

Each of the respondents described a variety of relationships that they systematically and strategically developed with a range of campus offices. Although each campus features different organizational structures, there were commonalities in the focus of relationship building, including the campus center for teaching and learning; facilities (for renovations, new construction, and other physical issues); dining services; financial aid; and information technologies. Respondents at one institution noted that a benefit of developing and maintaining these relationships over time was that the disability services staff is “now on the cycle” for annual presentations and is invited to regularly speak to new faculty or residence life staff members. Because of personnel turnover, there is an importance to evaluating these relationships over time. As one respondent shared, “if you have individuals in an office who don’t know about your work or are not familiar with your work, it becomes our responsibility to make sure that they know of us.” Another respondent stated, “we have worked hard to build relationships with these offices and provided information about disability services so peers have the best information on [disability services].”

Serving on Campus Committees

Respondents from all three institutions commented on the importance of serving on campus-wide committees as a way to share information, learn information, and promote the visibility of the disability services office. A variety of committees were specifically noted, including Student Success, Diversity and Inclusion, Governance, and Enrollment Management. As one of the respondents noted “most colleges and universities are built on committees, so even being on a few strategic committees can be beneficial.”

Outreach to Departments, Divisions, or Classes

Each of the respondents described a variety of ways that they work with departments or divisions, both academic and non-academic, within the institution including Academic Affairs/Dean of Faculty, Admission, Academic Support Centers, Career Services, and Centers for Teaching and Learning. These include requested trainings and information sessions, faculty/staff retreats, and orientation sessions for new personnel. Each respondent described conducting workshops related to disability, and hosting movies and guest speakers. In particular, the small, private college, highlighted how they offered standalone, “one shot” workshops as well as ongoing, multi-day workshops on a variety of disability-related topics. Examples of “one shot” workshops include “What Is It Like to Have a Learning Disability?” and “Simple Strategies for Working with LD Students.” Ongoing and multi-day workshops focused on Universal Design for Instruction and supporting the development of a growth mindset for students with disabilities. The respondents also discussed going out to specific classes to discuss disability, or to discuss program services. The large, public university also noted the importance of “going to” certain populations of students, including student-athletes and veterans, rather than waiting or expecting them to come forward to seek out services. Collaborative relationships are established between the disability services and the staff of the offices supporting these students, and disability services staff hold meetings and offer different types of information and support to students in those offices.

Outreach to High School Students and Families

Representatives from the two public institutions discussed programs used to reach out to high school students with disabilities or high school professionals. One of the offices offers an annual “Agency and High School Breakfast,” with topics that change from year-to-year. Personnel from this office also host visits from multiple high schools each year, and serve on a local community transition team, with representatives from adult agencies and local high schools. Another institution described conducting orientations in the spring, for both rising seniors and for students who were accepted to the institution and were trying to decide if they would enroll. These sessions allow students to learn about disability services at whatever institution they eventually attend, but importantly, they also allow relationships to be developed between the student and the disability services personnel. For example, the respondents at this institution described how the nature of a student’s disability had changed between acceptance and enrollment, and the prior communication enabled the program to advocate for the student when an unforeseen financial issue arose. As they noted, “they’re just richer conversations for us to help students make better decisions, and not necessarily to choose (Institution Name), but to choose an institution that’s a good fit for them.”

Problem Solving with Faculty and/or Department Heads

Each respondent discussed the importance of working and consulting one-on-one with faculty to problem solve. As one of the respondents stated,
Disability services staff are available to problem-solve and listen to faculty when they come in perplexed by a student and are seeking guidance. These 1:1 conversations are valued by our staff and seen as a way to educate and support faculty, as well as the student.

One of the respondents described a liaison system in which the disability services staff has established relationships with academic departments (e.g., Psychology, Economics, Biology) that enables quick contacts in case of issues and two-way “updating.” They noted that these contacts also help to facilitate inclusion of the disability services staff in the annual orientation sessions provided to new staff and faculty described earlier.

**Implications and Portability for Higher Education Practice**

Disability services providers on all three campuses described collaborating with others to help support students with disabilities and to try to help ensure that students disclose their disability, for example, by providing early outreach to high school students and by reaching out to student groups that are unlikely to seek supports on their own, like student athletes and veterans. It is clear that disability services providers on these campuses invest considerable time and energy in forging relationships with key professionals and offices so that they have potential to impact access on campus. Likewise, these relationships may be parlayed into opportunities to participate in influential committees that have the power to facilitate or hinder access for individuals with disabilities on campus (e.g., Student Success, Diversity and Inclusion, and Enrollment Management). Through relationships and committee work, disability services professionals have the opportunity to influence and improve campus climate and access for individuals with disabilities, including, but not limited to, universally reaching out to all students — especially through orientation and first-year experience programs — first-year seminar courses, academic advising meetings, and residence hall meetings, to make sure students are aware of the availability of supports before they encounter difficulty in academics and/or in student life. Evans et al. (2017) provide useful resources related to both assessing and addressing campus climate related to students with disabilities, as well as how a variety of campus departments (e.g., advising, athletics and recreational sports, campus safety, dining services, health and counseling centers, student organizations, etc.) interact with students with disabilities. Readers are also referred to this source for suggestions on ways to implement universal design into these areas.

Disability services professionals also spoke of outreach to faculty and staff to raise awareness of disability-related issues and enhance professional competence in serving students with disabilities. Trainings, guest speakers, and literature are frequently provided to faculty and staff on these campuses in order to ensure that all campus professionals are prepared to promote and facilitate campus access and inclusion for students with disabilities. Given the high disability services professional-to-student ratio on these campuses and the large percentage of students on campus who have not disclosed their disability, it is no longer feasible or appropriate for disability services professionals to be the only professionals prepared to work with students with disabilities.

Interestingly, only the two public institutions noted engaging in outreach to high school students and families. Given the mission of these institutions to serve the residents of their respective states and communities this is not entirely surprising. With increasing number of students with disabilities desiring higher education in the United States, this type of outreach by disability services professionals at public institutions is likely to increase. As private institutions look to compete for students in an increasingly crowded college market, more disability services offices at private institutions may be called upon or elect to begin outreach initiatives to high school students and parents.

The provision of one-on-one consultation for faculty and staff is another key outreach activity engaged in by disability services professionals. As the resident experts in matters of disability and campus accessibility these consultations are opportunities for disability services professionals to provide specific technical support and guidance to faculty and staff. As noted in the introduction, most faculty and staff are unprepared to support the unique needs of students with disabilities, and these one-on-one consultation meetings offer opportunity for faculty and staff to obtain guidance from those professionals on campus with disability-related competence.

Only the large, public university described going out to populations of students they know may not come to them, but likely will include higher proportions of students with disabilities, such as athletes and veterans. Given that collaboration between disability services and faculty and staff seems to be occurring at each of the institutions, professional development workshops offered by disability services professionals can potentially be leveraged to ensure that all students with disabilities are being served. For example,
faculty and staff can be trained on how to implement universal design inside and outside of the classroom to ensure that all instruction, supervision, and learning environments are proactively accessible to diverse students.

Also of note is the suggestion made by disability services professionals at the small, private college related to the value of directly reaching out to and providing support and professional development to staff at other learning centers, such as writing, study, and math centers, where research has demonstrated that so many students with disabilities go for additional help, independent of their decision to disclose a disability. Ensuring that learning center staff are prepared to provide accessible service and support to students with disabilities is critical. Collaborations that ensure learning center staff are familiar with topics such as assistive technology, research-based learning strategies, and executive function support can enhance services provided to students with disabilities who may not pursue accommodations and services via disability services.

**Conclusion**

Campus collaboration is an essential element of disability services offices. The ability to work with colleagues from around campus can be leveraged to better serve all students with disabilities regardless of whether or not they formally disclose to disability services. Through consciousness-raising, advocacy, and providing professional development to faculty and staff colleagues, disability services can expand its reach and create a campus community marked by greater awareness and access for students of all abilities.

**References**


### About the Authors

Adam R. Lalor received his B.A. degree from Hamilton College, M.Ed degree from the College of William and Mary, and Ph.D. from the University of Connecticut. He has more than 15 years working in higher education. He is currently the Director of the Landmark College Institute for Research and Training. His research focuses on the transition of students with disabilities to, through, and from college. He can be reached by email at: adamlalor@landmark.edu.

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Lynn Newman received her B.A. degree in education and behavioral sciences from City University of New York and Ed.D. from Fielding Graduate University. She is currently a Principal Education Researcher in SRI International’s Center for Learning and Development. Dr. Newman is the Principal Investigator for the current large-scale national study focused on students with disabilities, the National Longitudinal Transition Study 2012 (NLTS 2012). Her research interests includes the high school and postsecondary experiences and outcomes of youth with disabilities. She can be reached by email at: lynn.newman@sri.com.
Table 1

Description of Participating Disability Services Offices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution Type</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Approximate Enrollment</th>
<th>Full-Time Disability Services Staff Size</th>
<th>Other Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Large, public university</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>27,000</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Flagship university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small, private college</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Highly selective, liberal arts college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public, two-year community college</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>7,000</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Open admissions college</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

Interview Questions

- Please describe any campus outreach activities that your office has initiated to provide professional development to faculty and staff regarding how they can best serve students with disabilities, including those who may not self-disclose.
- Please describe how you incorporate information about students with disabilities who may not self-disclose, but who may be accessing services or enrolled in courses.
- Please describe any other programs or initiatives that your office provides to the campus related to making campus services and environments more accessible and inclusive for students with disabilities, including those who do not self-disclose.
- Do you collaborate/coordinate with other on-campus offices to provide disability-focused professional development? If so, how?
- Please describe any activities that you engage in to encourage students to self-disclose.
Using Large Survey Data to Understand the Engagement of Students with Disabilities (Practice Brief)

John Zilvinskis¹

Abstract

Each year hundreds of institutions will administer national surveys to measure the engagement of their students. However, stakeholders on college campuses, such as educators (faculty, instructors, student affairs educators, and disability services administrators) and institutional research staff who work with this information are often unaware of how these extant data can be used to understand the engagement of college students with disabilities. The purpose of this practice brief is to inform stakeholders how they may consider using data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) or the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) by (a) describing the theoretical frameworks undergirding the survey items related to disability, (b) recommending how to analyze the data in anti-deficit ways while considering strategies of disaggregation, and (c) demonstrating how to use the data to understand disability as a construct of diversity, informing practice and policy when supporting these students.

Keywords: students with disabilities, student engagement, survey research

Stakeholders on college campuses, such as educators (faculty, instructors, student affairs educators, and disability services administrators) and institutional research staff who are charged with learning more about the students with disabilities on their campus may find the task daunting. Beyond conversations with their disability services office, it can be unclear where to learn more about this group. Fortunately, campuses may already have survey data measuring the engagement of these students captured by either the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) or the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE). The NSSE (2019a) is administered by four-year institutions to first-year and senior students, measuring behaviors related to Engagement Indicators such as Higher-Order Learning, Student-Faculty Interaction, and Supportive Environment. Meanwhile, the CCSSE (2019a) is administered by two-year institutions, measuring behaviors related to Engagement Benchmarks such as Active and Collaborative Learning, Student Effort, and Academic Challenge.

Although administered at different types of institutions, both instruments measure student engagement (McCormick et al., 2013; McCormick & McClennen, 2012). Kuh (2003) defined student engagement as, “the time and energy students devote to educationally sound activities inside and outside of the classroom, and the policies and practices that institutions use to induce students to take part in these activities” (p. 25). Researchers have used NSSE data to relate student engagement to persistence rates (Nelson Laird et al., 2008), development of future career plans (Gonyea & Kinzie, 2015), and increases in leadership skills and self-confidence (Kezar & Moriarty, 2000). Similarly, CCSSE data has been used to connect student engagement with participation in student success programs and learning communities (Hatch, 2017), increased interactional diversity (Jones, 2016), and academic engagement is linked to increased persistence (Museus et al., 2012; Saenz et al., 2011).

In both surveys, respondents are asked about disability; however, the questions are structured in different ways. On the NSSE (2019b), respondents are asked, “Have you been diagnosed with any disability or impairment?” and may select either: Yes, No, I prefer not to respond. If a student answers in the affirmative, they are provided an additional question, ¹ Binghamton University
“Which of the following has been diagnosed? (Select all that apply,)” and may select any of the following: A sensory impairment (vision or hearing); A mobility impairment; A learning disability (e.g., ADHD, dyslexia); A mental health disorder; and A disability or impairment not listed above. On the CCSSE (2019b), respondents are directed, “This section has three parts. Please answer all three parts, indicating (a) how often you have used the following services during the current academic year, (b) how satisfied you are with the services, and (c) how important the services are to you at this college.” One of the services respondents comment on is Services for Students with Disabilities.

Stakeholders may be unaware of the tradeoffs posed within these questions and unsure how to analyze these data in a way that is supportive of students with disabilities. The purpose of this research brief is to describe some of the assessment and research problems embedded within these fundamentally different survey questions, recommend some practices and solutions to these problems, and provide implications and portability for higher education practice. As a result of this practice brief, readers will be more informed and prepared to work with their extant data to measure the engagement of students with disabilities on their campus.

**Depiction of the Assessment and Research Problems**

Within scholarship on this topic, there exist different theoretical frameworks through which to consider disability, such as a medical model grounded in biology and diagnosis, and an interactionist model that relies on the relationship between the individual, their disability, and the environment. Problems arise when the survey instrument used to conduct research on populations with disabilities uses a different framework from how results are reported to stakeholders, posing tradeoffs. On the NSSE survey item, respondents are asked, “Have you been diagnosed with any disability or impairment?” Using Evans et al. (2017) description of disability models, this question is designed in line with the medical model of disability where, “categorization of disability is dependent on medical diagnosis and classification system” (p. 82).

In this chapter of the text, the authors describe this model of disability as dominant within higher education; however, the major drawback of this model is the emphasis on biological conditions associated with disabilities and placing responsibility on the individual, without acknowledging the social dynamics associated with this aspect of identity. Therefore, stakeholders should be cautious when presenting these data; are they maintaining the limitations of the medical model or are they analyzing these findings from a different perspective allowing for more responsibility among stakeholders to improve experiences for these students?

On the CCSSE, respondents are asked about their frequency, satisfaction, and importance of using services for students with disabilities. Since these items ask about three different aspects of this student service, using a single disability model to interpret these survey items is not appropriate. Most likely, researchers will want to assess students who use services for students with disabilities at least one time or more than one time over the current school year. This categorization lends itself to the interactionist model because the item measures students' environments (Evans et al., 2017). In the case of this survey item, the benefit of this model is that it measures student use of a service; however, this item does not measure the other two components of this model (a) the person nor (b) the person’s impairment which (as discussed in the next problem) will influence interaction with the environment. In both surveys, presenting data on these students without informing stakeholders of the nature of the survey item (e.g., simply labeling a group “students with disabilities”) presents a problem by not describing the tradeoffs of the models that aligned with the wording of the survey question.

A second research problem is that, in using these frameworks, trying to determine the degree to which the survey subpopulation is representative of your campus population is difficult and most likely impossible to know. A central dynamic of working with students with disabilities is the tension around a student’s choice to disclose a disability (Aune, 2000; Brown & Broido, 2015; Cole & Cawthon, 2015; Denhart, 2008; Eccles et al., 2018; Hartman-Hall & Haaga, 2002). Using state longitudinal data, researchers have shown that only 35% of students with disabilities in high school disclose their disability to their disability services office in college (Newman & Madaus, 2015). This finding is particularly important for the CCSSE, based in the interactionist model, because respondents are asked about the frequency, satisfaction, and importance of services for students with disabilities; therefore, it may be the case that there is a large portion of this campus population of students with disabilities who would select “Never” when asked about frequency of use of this office even though they identify as a student with one disability or many disabilities.

When approaching disability through a medical model, it is unclear if students with disabilities are likely to disclose their ability status on a survey,
compared with using a disability services office on campus. On the NSSE, students with disabilities may choose not to disclose by either leaving the question blank, answering in the negative, or selecting, “I prefer not to respond.” In both surveys, there is a problem in reducing these measures to a dichotomy (e.g., students with disabilities compared to students without disabilities) because this strategy does not adequately describe the second group – some of these respondents may have disabilities but have not disclosed on the survey.

**Depiction of the Practices and Solutions Related to the Assessment Problems**

For stakeholders who wish to examine the differences in engagement between students with disabilities compared with students who answered either survey item in the negative, naming this counterfactual group can be difficult. Although the label “students without disabilities” may be the easiest to grasp, as described in the previous section, this label does not accurately represent this group for either survey. An alternative term may be “general population” implying that students with disabilities may be in this group but are not accounted for. Other alternatives include the terms “students who disclosed disability” (SWDD) and “students who did not disclose disability” (SWODD) (K. Brown, personal communication, May 14, 2019). However, researchers who design studies comparing students with disabilities to the general population run the risk of creating a deficit narrative around these students, in other words establishing a dichotomy where underrepresented students are reported with lower levels of engagement, reinforcing a narrative that these students are less-than their peers (Harper, 2010).

For practitioners performing assessment or research studying the engagement of students with disabilities, a solution to this issue is to write research questions that are not deficit-oriented; consideration of the crafting of a research question in this way is a key principle in the type of methodology called critical quantitative research (Stage, 2007). In his research on students of color in STEM majors, Harper (2010) recommended writing research questions that highlight the pathways to success for marginalized students, also known as anti-deficit questions. In their chapter on adopting this methodology when studying students with disabilities, Vaccaro et al. (2015) recommended, “we invite scholars to employ a critical disability lens as they generate research questions and hypotheses that include students with disabilities in meaningful and nondeficit ways” (p. 27). In achieving this goal, stakeholders can examine students with disabilities data alone, rather than comparing this group to the general population. For some campuses with small enrollments or low survey response rates, the sample size will restrict the scope of statistical analysis. For other campuses with a sizable subpopulation, several descriptive even relational statistics studies may be possible.

First, it may be the case that stakeholders want to understand the relationship between educational outcomes for students with disabilities and participating in a specific program. For example, some practitioners working with NSSE data may want to consider the differences in levels of engagement between students with disabilities who do and do not participate in High-Impact Practices (HIPs), such as service-learning or undergraduate research. A research question guiding this study could be, “for students with disabilities, is there a mean difference in Engagement Indicator scores between those who participate in HIPs and those who do not?” Second, it may be the case that stakeholders want to understand the variability in engagement by demography for students with disabilities. For example, some stakeholders working with CCSSE data may want to measure the difference in engagement between first-generation students who frequently use services for students with disabilities and non-first-generation students who frequently use services for students with disabilities. The research question guiding this study would be, “is there a mean difference in Engagement Benchmark scores between first-generation students who frequently use services for students with disabilities and non-first-generation students who frequently use these services?”

Broadly, studies like these could be informative to campus educators who often lump students with disabilities into one homogeneous group, crafting broad policies, instead of understanding that there is quite a bit of variation between these students (Peña et al., 2016). In fact, this group is quite heterogeneous and often requires individualized attention among educators (Deacon et al., 2017). One of the benefits of the NSSE item is the follow-up question in which respondents who answered in the affirmative are asked to select all that apply among five different options for disabilities. Although this item has its limitations (e.g., one option is “A sensory impairment [vision or hearing]” however, the deaf and blind communities are distinct from each other), this follow up item does allow the researcher to learn more about the engagement of students with diverse, and multiple, disabilities. Each of these proposed studies would require research questions in which the researcher disaggre-
gates the responses of students with disabilities, instead of comparing this group to their counterfactual – running the risk of a deficit narrative.

Implications and Portability for Higher Education Practice

After reviewing the analysis suggestions above, my hope is that readers of this brief will be empowered to make the case on their own campuses that students with disabilities are not a homogenous group and this aspect of identity should be assessed in similar ways to other aspects of diversity. By using the two surveys to understand the engagement of this group, faculty, instructors, student affairs educators, and disability services administrators will be able to identify the ways engagement among students with disabilities leads to increases in desired outcomes (e.g., satisfaction, GPA, or retention), truly realizing the goals of an anti-deficit framework.

Recently, a research team I lead earned the NACADA—A Global Community for Academic Advising Research Grant and we have been analyzing the Academic Advising Topical Module data from the 2015 and 2016 administration of the NSSE. In this survey item set, which is available for NSSE institutions to administer, students are asked nine questions about the behaviors of their academic advisors and this study posed a couple of interesting challenges that may help guide practitioners in using data like these. First, in our study, we compared the mean differences of these survey items between students with disabilities and the general population. Although this may have posed a risk of reinforcing a deficit narrative, we were intentional to examine the survey items themselves, with the stem question, “during the current school year, to what extent have your academic advisors done the following?” Since this question asked about behavior of academic advisors instead of students, our conclusion was there was no risk of a deficit narrative when comparing these two groups and, in fact, we discovered a consistent trend of students with disabilities reporting significantly lower scores among these measures compared to the general population.

Second, this example highlights the need for researchers to emphasize practical significance over statistical significance. Each of these items were on a four-point scale and the mean differences were only enough to direct policy? In this descriptive analysis, the effect size was trivial in magnitude; therefore, readers should be cautious to lend our findings within the sample to broad understandings of academic advising. However, we argued in the manuscript that since the trend of students with disabilities being underserved compared to their peers was consistent among all measures, the results were worthy of dissemination and consideration.

Third, in our process of publishing this manuscript, one reviewer observed that, although respondents of the NSSE were answering in the affirmative that they had been diagnosed with a disability, it may be the case for some students that their disability was invisible (e.g., students with learning disabilities) and unless they disclosed to their disability services office or the advisor, then the disability may go unnoticed and educators may not know how to adjust their practices to support this group. This observation presents an interesting dynamic to consider within survey measurement of disability for both practitioners and researchers alike – visibility of disability may influence engagement. Understanding the ways this dynamic of disability is related to desired outcomes is currently understudied.

In conclusion, student engagement survey data may be a valuable resource for stakeholders to learn about the lived experiences of students with disabilities on their campuses. Stakeholders may want to use these data to measure if students with disabilities consistently report being underserved (as our research team has done above) or to understand the differences in engagement related to program participation or demography within this population. However, these data are not without their tradeoffs when considering theoretical framework and issues related to disclosure. What is needed is further research to understand the degree to which these issues of stigma may relate to students with disabilities choosing to disclose when completing a survey. This concern presents a legitimate threat to the utility of these data; however, limitations like this are common within secondary data analysis so stakeholders need to be appropriately intentional in presenting the tradeoffs of their findings.


About the Author

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Figure 1

The National Survey of Student Engagement Disability Items

Have you been diagnosed with any disability or impairment?
- Yes
- No
- I prefer not to respond

Which of the following has been diagnosed? (Select all that apply.)
- A sensory impairment (vision or hearing)
- A mobility impairment
- A learning disability (e.g., ADHD, dyslexia)
- A mental health disorder
- A disability or impairment not listed above


Figure 2

The Community College Survey of Student Engagement Disability Items

12. This section has three parts. Please answer all three parts, indicating (1) how often you have used the following services during the current academic year, (2) how satisfied you are with the services, and (3) how important the services are to you at this college. (Please respond to each item)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(1) Frequency of Use</th>
<th>(2) Satisfaction</th>
<th>(3) Importance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5 or more times</td>
<td>2–4 times</td>
<td>1 time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>Very</td>
<td>Somewhat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td>Very</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m. Services for active military and veterans</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Using the APP Tool to Promote Student Self-Determination Skills in Higher Education  (Practice Brief)

Joseph Madaus¹  
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Abstract

Greater levels of self-determination (SD) can positively impact the retention and college completion of students with disabilities (SWD). However, many SWD do not disclose and instead are likely accessing traditional campus supports. Disability/accessibility services professionals play an important role in helping all professionals working with college SWD to be knowledgeable of SD and its related components. This manuscript presents an overview of SD, and summarizes key research that highlights its importance for SWD. Next, an easily implementable tool called APP is provided that guides practitioners through a review of Activities, Programs, and Policies (APP) on their campus. Reflections regarding how institutional APP can be designed to reflect and promote SD skills in all students, including SWD, are presented.

Keywords: self-determination, college students, disabilities, postsecondary education

The concept of self-determination (SD) has a long history (Shogren et al., 2015), but was first addressed in the psychology literature by Deci and Ryan (1985), and is referred to as Self-Determination Theory (SDT). SDT differentiated between extrinsic (external) motivators and intrinsic (internal) motivators. Intrinsic motivation was found to be a more powerful source of motivation than extrinsic motivation, and was largely a result of self-determined goals to fulfill an individual’s needs related to autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

SD was subsequently researched in schools with children with disabilities in the early 1990s (Gelbar et al., 2019), in large part due to a set of model demonstration projects sponsored by the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (Ward, 2005). This applied research led to new conceptualizations and theories concerning the SD of individuals with disabilities in the secondary transition literature. One of the most commonly accepted definitions was developed by Field et al. (1998), who stated:

Self-determination is a combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior. An understanding of one’s strengths and limitations together with a belief in oneself as capable and effective, are essential. When acting on the basis of these skills and attitudes, individuals have greater ability to take control of their lives and assume the role of successful adults. (p. 2)

The conceptualizations of SD for individuals with disabilities in secondary education were subsequently applied to college students with disabilities (SWD; Gelbar et al., 2019). Research on college students and SD has examined specific disabilities such as learning disabilities (Garver, 2000) and Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD; Parker, 2004) and has also investigated disability as a whole in postsecondary education (Field et al., 2003; Shogren et al., 2017). A recent systematic literature review that examined publications during the years 1951 to 2015 concluded that although there is a limited amount of
empirical research related to SD and college SWD, an increase in SD resulted in improvement in other key areas, such as knowledge of accommodation rights and responsibilities, self-advocacy skills, skills in requesting accommodations, and growth in executive functioning skills (Gelbar et al., 2019).

Although more than 19% of college students report having one or more disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2019), research on a nationally representative sample of SWD who accessed higher education noted that over half choose not to self-disclose (Newman & Madaus, 2015). More recent research (Newman et al., 2019) demonstrated the importance of college SWD accessing more traditional campus supports that are available to all students. As a result, SWD who have not disclosed may be receiving support from student affairs professionals with limited training and knowledge of their needs (Lalor, 2017), a point that is reflected in the minimal reporting and research on the population in the student affairs professional literature (Evans et al., 2017; Gelbar et al., 2015; Madaus et al., 2018; Peña, 2014). Literature has also reported that greater SD leads one to be more connected with the campus environment (Faye & Sharpe, 2008; Guiffrida et al., 2013; Scholl & Schmitt, 2011). Moreover, Petcu et al., (2017) reported that SWD with higher levels of SD were not only more likely to enroll in postsecondary education programs, but students with higher levels of self-realization, a component of SD, were 2.41 times more likely to complete a 4-year university program. Ideally, both student affairs and disability service professionals should foster the SD of students with and without disabilities.

**Description of the Problem**

As noted, although some statistics indicate that SWD represent nearly one-fifth of all college students, the majority do not self-disclose their disability. SD skills play an important role in helping students to navigate available services and supports, and the Activities, Programs, or Policies (APP) Tool (described below) can offer support to both student affairs and disability service professionals in this regard. The APP Tool, developed by Faggella-Luby et al. (2019), evaluates the effectiveness of activities, programs, and/or policies in which a student may partake. Using a backwards design planning methodology (subsequently described), the form asks professionals to identify areas of challenge for students, to denote campus activities, programs, and/or policies, and to then link these to SD components, where possible.

**The APP Tool**

**A Practical Purpose**

Initially, the APP Tool was designed to permit student affairs professionals to specifically identify the SD challenges common to college students and link them to programmatic responses (i.e., activities, programs and/or policies). However, it became clear from the research on SD that the reverse could also be helpful, that is, the SD components could support the design and implementation of institutional APPs. Therefore, the APP Tool also includes an opportunity for the professional to tie specific SD components addressed by each activity, program, and/or policy (see Figure 1 for a copy of the APP Tool). Of significance, the process is not intended solely to address programming for SWD who have self-disclosed, but rather to allow the identification of programs for all students that may benefit from improved SD skills. By connecting challenges, programs, and components of SD the tool becomes both a planning and evaluation instrument.

**APP Tool Components and Suggested Procedures**

The APP Tool is intended for use by professionals to flexibly fit any planning or evaluative effort to address student SD outcomes using the following six steps.

**Step 1. Individual reflection.** Professionals begin by reflecting on the common challenges facing new students upon arrival at their institution. We first introduce the notion of “new” students to allow for a broader conversation beyond the typical first-year student, for example, consideration of transfer students. To ensure diversity of response, we recommend professionals first conduct this three- to five-minute brainstorm of student challenges individually recorded on the lines available in the Common Challenges section (though more can be listed on the back as necessary). After an initial period of reflection, professionals are asked to refine or add to their list any considerations for special or historically marginalized groups (e.g., commuter students, first generation, SWDs, minority, LGBTQIA+, economically challenged, sorority or fraternity affiliated, student athletes, etc.).

**Step 2. Small group sharing and validation.** Professionals are then encouraged to partner or form small groups to discuss the challenges noted. This is an important opportunity for cross-program collaboration and may surface common challenges across academic and student affairs professionals to more clearly understand and support the diverse array of matriculating students. This is a non-evaluative step
with open discourse and opportunity to provide general as well as specific examples to explain why a particular challenge is of concern.

**Step 3. Prioritizing and recording common challenges.** Noted challenges are synthesized in the small group by prioritizing and recording five to seven common challenges in the space provided in the column on the left-hand side of the APP form. Selected common challenges may be universal, something that the entire student body may experience, or particular to a smaller population of marginalized students (e.g., SWD). The common challenges noted are not meant to be exhaustive, but rather emphasize a priority list that is manageable to consider in the current academic year, for example. Alternative suggestions not included on the list may be helpful for future planning and, thus, might be subsequently addressed.

**Step 4. Listing current activities, programs, policies.** University activities, programs and/or policies are ubiquitous. In this step and in the second column (labeled Activities, Programs, Policies) professionals list five to ten of what they consider to be popular, favorite, or effective APPs. There is no requirement that the APPs recorded in this column align directly with the common challenges noted adjacent-ly, but some professionals will find alignment instructive (discussed more below in Step 6). This step may be completed in small groups or via a return to the individual brainstorming method before sharing.

**Step 5. Aligning SD outcomes.** When using the APP Tool, the first four steps rely heavily on prior knowledge of the students and university context specific to professionals. However, this step requires familiarity with the SD components noted in Table 1. Sufficient time should be provided to ensure that all professionals understand the definitions of each term before proceeding. Once terminology clarity has been addressed, professionals code each of the existing APPs using the SD components corresponding number (e.g., 1 = choice-making skills) in the Self-Determination Outcomes column along the right-hand side of the form and aligning to each of the specific Activities, Programs, and/or Policies. Many APPs may reflect more than one SD outcome and therefore multiple SD codes (see Figure 2), while some may not align with any SD components. Lack of alignment is common during the initial stages of this activity as most higher education practitioners may not be familiar with the construct or components.

**Step 6. Gap analysis and next steps planning.** The final step when using the APP Tool is to triangulate data recorded on the form. Ideally, the form will reflect that Common Challenges are addressed in a variety of APPs aligned to multiple Self-Determina
tion Outcomes. However, triangulation of data can be helpful in three important ways when alignment is incomplete or inconsistent. First, if the noted APPs do not address one or more of the Common Challenges, it is clear that a new activity, program, or policy is warranted to address this gap. Second, if an APP has few Self-Determination Outcomes or does not align to a Common Challenge it can be reevaluated, as it may not be serving a relevant purpose (i.e., is a dis-function). This kind of program evaluation is helpful when a glut of programming exists and professionals may feel spread too thin. Third, if Self-Determination Outcomes are not included in the existing APPs and this is desired, planning for new APPs is likely something that should be explored. See Figure 2 for an example of an in-progress APP Tool.

**Implications and Portability for Higher Education Practice**

The APP Tool was presented to three groups of higher education professionals who represented a range of offices and roles on college campuses. The participants completed the tool and then provided feedback about its potential use. A variety of options were presented for its use in higher education, including directly with students, but also at the program, departmental, or division level. For example, the participants noted that the APP Tool could be used:

- For assessment and evaluation of what current activities, programs, and policies lead to desired student outcomes, and which have gaps in achieving intended outcomes.
- For evaluation of the cost effectiveness of existing activities, programs, and policies in meeting desired student outcomes. In times of fiscal belt-tightening, consideration regarding whether campus APPs are affecting improved student outcomes and their associated cost become especially important.
- At a variety of times throughout the year. For example, at the beginning of the academic year to determine what activities, programs, and policies are fostering desired outcomes, and then again at the culmination of the year to identify successes and gaps.
- During ongoing data gathering processes to determine activity, program, or policy effectiveness.
- During professional development days or other professional development activities (including, but not limited to professional conferences, workshops, online learning op-
opportunities, campus brown bag gatherings) to learn more about SD and its alignment with current campus APPs.

**Implications for Practice**

As the focus groups revealed, use of the APP Tool need not be restricted to disability service professionals alone. In fact, professionals from a range of student affairs roles reported finding the tool useful, and it is likely that the most effective implementation of the APP Tool requires broad and flexible use of the tool across multiple stakeholders within the university community. For example, student affairs colleagues might use the tool to revise and build programs aligned to SD outcomes or move away from programs that are not effective. In collaboration with disability service personnel, use of the tool may help surface a more comprehensive understanding of the common challenges facing students, with subsequent action planning. Moreover, partnerships might be forged with university faculty whereby the APP Tool could infuse components of SD in instructional activities. By triangulating planning across professionals in disability services, student affairs, and faculty, it is far more likely to achieve desired outcomes for all students, not just SWD or students considered historically marginalized and/or under-served (e.g., first-generation college students). Finally, use of the tool by multiple stakeholders promotes a common language at the institution focusing on building a culture of self-determined students and is very likely central to the mission of institutions of higher learning.

**References**


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Ashley Taconet received her B.S. degree in psychology and M.A.T. in special education from The College of New Jersey. She is in the process of completing her Ph.D. in educational psychology at The University of Connecticut. Her experience includes an employment specialist at an adult service agency, a paraprofessional in a transition education classroom, and academic, vocational, and residential mentor for students with intellectual disabilities. Her research interests include transition and postsecondary education for students with intellectual disabilities and teaching independent living skills. She can be reached by email at: ashley.taconet@uconn.edu.
Table 1

Components and Explanations of Self-Determination

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-Determination Component</th>
<th>Brief Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Choice-making skills</td>
<td>The ability to identify and select a preferred activity or item from several options without coercion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision-making skills</td>
<td>The use of a process to determine a preferred solution based on a list of relevant action alternatives and with consideration of overall risk.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-solving skills</td>
<td>A process of identifying a solution to resolve a quandary in which response alternatives are identified, selected and verified often through self-instruction.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Goal-setting and attainment skills</td>
<td>Developing a plan to accomplish a targeted behavior or outcome (distal or proximal) through self-regulated behaviors and with regard to consequences of actions and contingencies of an environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence, risk-taking, and safety skills</td>
<td>Recognition of the individual, acting within an environment of consequences mitigated by assurances or boundaries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-observation, Self-awareness, or Self-monitoring skills</td>
<td>Involves the individual observing his or her own behavior toward identifying an inconsistency between what occurs and a target behavior. (A prerequisite to self-regulation.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-evaluation skills</td>
<td>The specific identification of an inconsistency between what occurs and a target behavior.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-reinforcement skills</td>
<td>Rewarding oneself for matching an observed behavior to a target behavior.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-instruction skills</td>
<td>Vocalized performance guidance by oneself to direct action toward a targeted behavior; Viewed as a critical step in problem solving.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-regulation skills</td>
<td>The ability of the individual to carry out the vocalized performance guidance to direct action toward a targeted behavior.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-advocacy and leadership skills</td>
<td>An individual's ability to effectively communicate or assert a desired outcome, often related to achieving specific goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive attributions of efficacy and outcome expectancy skills</td>
<td>Noting that an outcome or problem may be adequately addressed by response alternatives directed by the individual.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1

Model APP Form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The APP Tool</th>
<th>Common Challenges</th>
<th>Activities, Programs, Policies</th>
<th>SD Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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Self-Determination Components

1. Choice-making skills
2. Decision-making skills
3. Problem-solving skills
4. Goal-setting & attainment skills
5. Independence, risk-taking, and safety skills
6. Self-observation, self-awareness or self-monitoring skills
7. Self-evaluation skills
8. Self-reinforcement skills
9. Self-instruction skills
10. Self-regulation skills
11. Self- advocacy & leadership skills
12. Positive attributions of efficacy and outcome expectancy skills

### Figure 2

**Sample APP Tool in Progress**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The APP Tool</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Common Challenges</strong></td>
<td><strong>Activities, Programs, Policies</strong></td>
<td><strong>SD Outcomes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time management</td>
<td>New student orientation, first year seminars, residence hall, academic probation (e.g., time on task)</td>
<td>1, 2, 8, 10, 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding and using resources</td>
<td>Activities fair, online reminders, training academic advisors and faculty, new student orientation</td>
<td>3, 8, 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing a sense of belonging–making social connections</td>
<td>Student organizations fair, residential programs, fraternity/sorority recruitment, intentional conversations, traditional programs (e.g., homecoming)</td>
<td>1, 5, 6, 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confronted by other cultures/ideas</td>
<td>Policy statement supporting DEI initiatives, intentional conversations, campus speakers, campus concerts, art shows, study abroad</td>
<td>3, 5, 6, 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic achievement</td>
<td>First year seminars, early warning system, new student orientation, “nudges” through technology, upper-class student mentors</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning to share space–roommate adjustments</td>
<td>Residential programs (e.g. roommate games), roommate contracts, periodic check-ins by faculty/staff, counseling center</td>
<td>3, 6, 8, 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assuming responsibility</td>
<td>Student organization advising, financial literacy seminars, Code of Conduct (e.g., disciplinary conversations), checking class attendance</td>
<td>4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staying healthy - wellness</td>
<td>Intramurals, on-line wellness tips, healthy meals on campus, alcohol/drug programs, technology applications</td>
<td>1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Self-Determination Components**

1. Choice-making skills  
2. Decision-making skills  
3. Problem-solving skills  
4. Goal-setting & attainment skills  
5. Independence, risk-taking, and safety skills  
6. Self-observation, self-awareness or self-monitoring skills  
7. Self-evaluation skills  
8. Self-reinforcement skills  
9. Self-instruction skills  
10. Self-regulation skills  
11. Self-advocacy & leadership skills  
12. Positive attributions of efficacy and outcome expectancy skills

*Note.* © Mills, Faggella-Luby, Gelbar, Madaus & Dukes, 2019
Making Disability Research Useful
(Practice Brief)

Ellen M. Broido¹

Abstract

Scholarship on disability in higher education would be more useful to practitioners and make greater contributions to socially justice practice if authors made implications applicable to diverse audiences, focused on addressing ableist environments rather than changing disabled community members, promoted diverse ways of being and functioning, and was written in accessible language. Through examples, I show how implications can be written in ways accessible to and adapted for the work of multiple audiences, address barriers within campus environments, advocate for diverse ways of functioning, and use language and concepts applicable to broad audiences. Through these practices, disability scholarship in higher education can contribute to the development of campus environments that work for the broadest range of students, staff, and faculty.

Keywords: disability, research, practice, implications

The last decade has seen a marked increase in disabled students’ share of undergraduate students, from 11% in 2009 (Raue & Lewis, 2011) to 19.4% in 2015 (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). There similarly has been a rapid expansion of published research about disability in higher education (Gelbar et al., 2015; Madaus et al., 2018), although the literature is still quite limited. Both quantitative and qualitative studies have been released. There is an incipient literature within higher education that addresses the intersection of disability with other aspects of social identity (e.g., Abes & Wallace, 2018; Han & Pong, 2015; Miller, 2017, 2018; Stapleton, 2015). Authors now provide greater attention to disability-inclusive methodologies (e.g., Brown & Broido, 2020; Peña et al., 2018).

Despite the increase in the quantity of literature on disability in higher education, much current disability-related scholarship and assessment in higher education has multiple limitations that reduce its ability to enhance practice. Madaus et al. (2018) noted that “though the research base has great breadth, it lacks significant depth, has poor sample and setting descriptions, and lacks methodological rigor” (p. 133). These methodological concerns are substantial barriers and limit the trustworthiness, reliability, validity, and generalizability of research findings. However, the focus of this article is not about the methodology of disability research but rather addresses how implications are framed and shared.

In addition to legitimate and significant methodological concerns, research and assessment of disability in higher education also could be more useful and actionable. At a recent gathering of higher education disability scholars, the Making Disability Visible Workshop sponsored by the Spencer Foundation, there was consensus that the following four concerns are consistent problems in the reporting of disability research. First, the ways in which implications are constructed limit the utility and applicability of much disability-focused research and assessment. Specifically, journal articles, conference presentations, policy documents, and internal assessments about disability in higher education often are written for single audiences, ignoring their much broader readership (Priestley et al., 2010). Joss et al. (2016) explicitly argued for the involvement of “end-users” in disability research. Second, especially in research grounded in the medical model, authors often place the responsibility for change on people with disabilities rather than focusing on ways in which the environment can be made to function more effectively for all members of the community (Shakespeare, 2006). Third, authors often reinforce stereotypes related to disability and reify typical ways of functioning. Finally, much writing about disability, especially theory, is written in language inaccessible to scholars not immersed in the specific frameworks or models in question and is even less accessible to lay readers unfamiliar with academic jargon (Peña et al., 2018).

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These barriers reduce the probability practitioners will read and incorporate disability research into their practice. But disability practitioners’ work can be strengthened by grounding it in research. Practitioners can better advocate for resources if they can point to data-based empirical work demonstrating tools’ and programs’ effectiveness with the students they serve and they can gain more support for their initiatives by grounding their work in theory. In this article, I address each of these four concerns and describe ways in which authors can enhance the utility of their disability-focused inquiry by highlighting specific examples.

Make Implications Applicable to Diverse Audiences

Rather than writing solely for scholars or practitioners in specific functional areas, disability research should consider multiple possible audiences. This will require consultation outside authors’ areas of specialty and managing institutional expectations about valued publication outlets.

Problem

Literature related to disabled college students may be read by multiple audiences in part because there is so little of it, especially in high-prestige and widely read journals (Kimball & Thoma, 2019; Peña, 2014). Additionally, what is published is often in impairment-specific publications (Madaus et al., 2018), leading authors to craft narrowly focused implications. But because there is limited research on disabled college students (and even less on disabled faculty and staff), readers may problematically apply impairment-specific findings to other disabled groups on campus or to other functional areas.

The limited amount of disability research makes it important that what is published be made relevant to multiple areas of higher education. Unfortunately, authors rarely consider the breadth of possible readers and the implications of their findings for areas they know little about. And because the literature on disability in intersection with other social identities is even sparser within higher education research, it is exceptionally rare to find scholarship that addresses the multiple aspects of disabled people’s social identities.

Solutions

Authors should write implications relevant to the full range of potential readers, that might include, among others, disabled students, researchers, disability service providers, families of disabled students, funding agencies, K-12 educators, policy makers, faculty, and administrators (Pasque et al., 2012). Given that authors are unlikely to be knowledgeable about each of these perspectives, it is helpful to consult with practitioners and scholars in related areas to develop ideas about possible implications.

For example, I was recently part of a research group looking at the influence of residence hall living on disabled students’ success (Wilke et al., 2019). While all of us on the research team had at some point worked in residence life, for most of us it was in the distant past, so we asked a housing professional to go over our findings and provide input on the implications. While our first audience was housing professionals, as the research was funded by an Association of College and University Housing Officers-International grant, our findings suggest we should consider targeting future reports of the study to food services managers, architectural design firms, prospective students, small college vice presidents for student affairs, as well as disability resource office personnel.

As another example of writing implications for multiple audiences, Vaccaro et al. (2015) framed their discussion of a study about disabled students’ sense of belonging to diverse higher education professionals who interact with students, writing “Disability services professionals should partner with academic and student affairs colleagues in other functional areas (e.g., residence life, orientation, student activities) to design programs, policies, and services that promote self-advocacy, mastery, and social relationships for students with disabilities” (p. 683).

A good example of writing implications that have broad applicability can be found in Stapleton (2015), in her study of undergraduate d/Deaf women of color. Her recommendations included suggestions for data collection; sharing knowledge of identity development models; providing training on audism and hearing privilege to staff, faculty, and student leaders; supporting and publicizing programming and coursework on Deaf and Ethnic Studies; and creating inclusive campus cultures, policies, and opportunities…Make current student spaces more inclusive and considerate of intersecting identities. For example, provide resources for d/Deaf women in the women’s center, purchase books on minoritized d/Deaf people for the multicultural center library, highlight famous d/Deaf people within ethnic month celebrations, and invite a d/Deaf queer speaker for National Coming Out Week. (p. 585)

These implications are notable in that they address a wide range of offices and programs, personnel (fac-
ulty, staff, student leaders), and intersecting social identities.

Participants in a study are likely to have insight into its implications. While member checking is “standard” good practice in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018), it is rare in quantitative studies. Although certainly aligned with the goals of critical quantitative research (Stage, 2007), member checking has not yet been recommended as a research or assessment technique even in critical quantitative approaches. For multiple reasons, it can be challenging to enact member checking, especially when there is a gap between the time of data collection and submission for publication or when doing secondary data analysis. However, given the history of disability research misrepresenting the needs and desires of disabled individuals (Gere, 2005; Oliver, 1997; Shakespeare, 2014), it is critical both quantitative and qualitative findings are confirmed with the people from whom the data were solicited and that the implications have relevance for disabled participants’ lives.

Writing for diverse audiences will, of course, require authors to identify publication and presentation locations and formats that are accessed by these populations and to accept that many of these outlets will not “count” as traditional publications or be in venues valued for their selectivity or reach. For those who hold traditional faculty positions, this is an important consideration. However, if we hope to do research that contributes to more inclusive and just campuses, we must accept that some portion of our scholarly contribution may well be in formats and for audiences that are less valued by research-focused departments and universities (Pasque et al., 2012).

**Fix the Environment**

Except in the case of purely theoretical scholarship, useful research and assessment in higher education always should explicitly address ways of improving practice. In disability writing, too often those implications focus on changing the disabled person rather than on improving ableist campus contexts.

**Problem**

It is not unusual for research on disabled students to take a deficit perspective: looking for ways in which students with disabilities are failing, or reinforce stereotypes of disabled students as “less than,” rather than addressing inaccessible and ableist physical, organizational, attitudinal, and cultural environments (Evans et al., 2017). Authors may locate the cause of that failure in the students’ minds, bodies, attitudes, and/or behaviors, implying that disabled students are inadequate, stupid, lazy, or coddled (Delaney et al., 2015).

Drawing on the thinking of Gloria Ladson-Billings, Patel (2016) argued that research on marginalized people typically is conducted “through the lens of a presumed lack or underdevelopment leading to an achievement gap, rather than being grounded in the political, economic, and historical infrastructure of inequity” (p. 42). While Patel was writing specifically about decolonizing educational research, her argument applies equally to disability research. Patel made clear the need for researchers to address systemic and local environmental barriers to students’ success, asking “How might research progress differently if it searched for interventions to transform the interconnected structures that marginalize some populations while privileging others?” (pp. 22-23).

**Solution**

While acknowledging that impairment is real and can create limits, useful, actionable disability research will explicitly address ableist barriers in campus environments. For example, like all students, disabled students sometimes make less effective or adaptive choices, lack self-awareness, and may not be their own best advocates. However, authors should not have higher expectations for disabled students than for students without disabilities. While many students would benefit from, for example, better self-advocacy skills, greater value lies in addressing how the environment can function effectively for all students (Evans, et al., 2017), reducing the need for self-advocacy. Researchers should make clear that administrators and faculty have the greatest responsibility to create environments that function for the broadest array of students.

In another example, disability literature frequently references the fact that most students receiving academic accommodations in high school do not identify themselves to disability resource offices when entering college (Newman et al., 2011). Proposed solutions often focus on raising awareness of the need to self-identify or publicizing the services of disability resource offices to entering students. Both these strategies are attempts to change the behavior of disabled students. Neither of these strategies addresses the fact that the university environment is problematic for some students who used accommodations in high school, stigma remains a pervasive aspect of many higher education climate cultures (Evans et al., 2017), and that widespread implementation of universal design principles would mitigate many of the challenges these students face. Authors should iden-
tify ways in which the campus environment can be changed to support all members of the community, including those with disabilities.

A good example of implications focused on changing the environment can be found in the Stapleton (2015) article summarized earlier in this report. Note that all the implications she enumerated are ways to create a supportive campus environment for d/Deaf women of color, not to change them.

**Promote Diverse Ways of Being and Functioning**

Expanding on the precept of Universal Design that argues that good design can be used in multiple ways (“flexibility in use”; Center for Universal Design, 2008, para. 8), actionable, practical disability research in higher education should reinforce the idea that there are multiple “good” ways to function on college campuses.

**Problem**

Closely related to the problem of fixing the student (or disabled person) rather than the environment is the dynamic that writers of disability research often try to find ways to make disabled students “normal” or enable them to function in more “typical” ways, presuming “normal, typical” ways are inherently superior to other ways of being (Evans et al., 2010). It is rare to come across authors who suggest that non-normative timelines, ways of demonstrating competence or learning, or forms of involvement are as valid and appropriate as are typical ways.

**Solution**

An approach both more just and more practical is to advocate for campuses, systems, and processes that allow for and value multiple ways of learning, teaching, communicating, reading, writing, moving, and being, presuming that “expecting and encouraging all people to do things in ways most effective for them will create more inclusive, just campus environments” (Evans et al., 2017, p. 440). Additionally, environments that facilitate members functioning in ways most suited to them should increase their success during and beyond their experience on campus. Thus, implications sections of research and assessment projects need to suggest and encourage multiple responses and solutions, recognizing the diversity of ways that students, staff, and faculty can function most effectively.

While not grounded in empirical study, Price (2013), in her book *Mad at School*, pointed out that universities expect certain levels of academic production within specific timeframes. She made the powerful argument that equitable policy would allow for variability in the amount of scholarly work that can be expected in given timeframes and provide flexibility to accommodate the unpredictable productivity that may be a consequence of disability.

The emerging literature on culturally responsive assessment (e.g., Montenegro & Jankowski, 2019) makes related arguments in the context of ways students might demonstrate their learning. Authors might draw implications from their findings recommending institutions expand the ways students might demonstrate their learning. For example, authors might recommend instructors allow students to select between exams, papers, oral, or poster presentations, as suggested by Grove (2016) and Singer-Freeman and Bastone (2016) rather than suggesting strategies focused on enabling students to perform better on single ways of demonstrating learning. Authors should be intentional in thinking creatively about how their findings might validate, expand, and support the diverse ways disabled students, staff, and faculty work, learn, and contribute on campus.

**Use Accessible Language**

Too often, writers present useful ideas using vocabulary and concepts that are not understandable to anyone other than highly educated and specially trained readers. Authors should use clear, unambiguous language to explain theory and implication so all potential readers can understand their meaning.

**Problem**

Under the best of circumstances, academic language, especially the language of research and evaluation, tends to be obscure, idiosyncratic, coded, and generally hard to understand to non-academics. The areas of disability studies and critical disability theory (CDT) have tremendous practical implications to those who work to create campuses that support the success of disabled community members. These include the importance of understanding disability from the perspective of disabled people; considering disability as, in part, a group experience of oppression rather than an individual experience of physical/mental limitation; disability as “dynamic” (Dirth & Branscombe, 2018, p. 1302), in that its meaning and experience varies across time and context; the importance of intersectional perspectives; critique of binary constructs “such as disability/impairment or society/body” (Brown et al., 2019, p. 23); and a fundamental questioning of what constitutes disability (Brown et al., 2019; Peña et al., 2016).

Unfortunately, much of the writing in those fields (like most other critical and post-modern approaches)
uses vocabulary and phrasing indecipherable to lay readers and researchers from other disciplinary backgrounds; Brown, et al. (2019) noted that the discourse of CDT uses, “highly academic language, references to Western philosophers, and [a] verbose, dense writing style” (p. 25). Consequently, unless care is taken to clearly explain vocabulary and concepts, even readers who have access to research and assessment about disability in higher education may not understand the underlying conceptual frameworks or potential implications.

Solution

Theoretical sections in published empirical research tend to be brief, and it is challenging to explain succinctly the complexities of disability studies and critical disability studies frameworks. To make the ideas of these theories useful to diverse readers, authors need to translate the concepts into clear, unambiguous wording and define concepts that may invert or parody traditional definitions or concepts. For example, the concept of the narrative prosthesis is used within critical disability studies to understand how disabled people are represented and what they symbolize in (usually literary) contexts (Mitchell & Snyder, 2014). The narrative prosthesis is a term that if explained effectively may have value in analyzing how disabled people are considered within higher education. Without clarification, however, most readers will not understand the reference and not consider how disability can be problematically used to convey institutional messages.

Higher education researchers are just recently using CDT in their scholarship. Some effective explanations of CDT theory in the empirical higher education research literature can be found in Abes and Wallace (2018, p. 548) and Miller (2015, pp. 379-380). However, even these authors explicitly use CDT almost exclusively in the theoretical framework portion of their writing rather than in the implications.

Conclusion

To help create higher education environments where disabled student, staff, and faculty can fully benefit and contribute, higher education disability research must become relevant to a broader range of practitioners and policy makers, focus on changing campus environments, support diverse ways of functioning, and be understandable to all possible readers. If the authors of disability research and assessment can make these changes, their studies can be effective tools in addressing the ableism pervasive in higher education.

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**About the Author**

Dr. Ellen Broido (she/her/hers) is professor of higher education and student affairs at Bowling Green State University. Her research focuses on multiple diversity and social justice issues in higher education. Her publications include journal articles relating to disability, gender, LBG, and ally development, and the co-authored or co-edited books *Disability in Higher Education: A Social Justice Approach* (2017), *Developing Social Justice Allies* (2005), and *Voices from the Margins: Creating Inclusive Assessment for Marginalized Students in Higher Education* (2020).
Disabling Assessment Plans: Considering Disability Constructs and Implications in Learning Outcomes Assessment

Jeffrey Edelstein¹
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Ezekiel Kimball¹

Abstract

Disability-as-diagnosis, disability-as-identity, and disability-as-experience as pressing measurement issues in learning outcomes assessment are described in this paper. Disability represents a critically important latent variable in many learning outcomes assessment plans unless it is a formalized part of analytic plans. Noting the potential for disability to function as a confounding variable, we describe its potential inclusion as a control variable in all studies as well as specific scenarios in which it may make sense to treat disability as a mediating or moderating variable. We demonstrate that utilizing accessible instruments and thinking systematically about disability as part of assessment plans will produce more accurate results.

Keywords: assessment, evaluation, learning outcome, measure, disability

In their meta-analysis of research on student affairs competencies, Herdlein et al. (2013) concluded that “as institutions of higher education have become more diverse, complex, technologically sophisticated, and financially challenged, there has been a shift in focus from a counseling and interpersonal orientation to an administrative and managerial approach” (p. 266). They noted the profession’s long-running emphasis on diversity and linked the professionalization of student affairs administration to a growing emphasis on assessment as a necessary skill for practice. However, despite the profession’s commitment to both diversity and assessment, disability is rarely addressed as part of research or assessment design within student affairs (Ali, 2018; Vaccaro et al., 2015). Instead, support for students with disabilities is most often understood as the responsibility of a distinct disability services office, and assessment therein, limited primarily to measures of service delivery. This limited, perspectival attention is a particularly glaring issue, as postsecondary students with disabilities now represent one of the largest minoritized populations on many campuses, making up nearly 20% of the overall undergraduate population (U.S. Department of Education, 2018)—making disability particularly salient on identity on most college campuses.

As Peña and colleagues (2018) note, this gap in effective assessment practices stems from broader inattention to disability among higher education researchers and limited “discussions about the opportunities and challenges in disability research—including ableism...definitions of disability, representation of voice, the researcher’s agenda, participant access, and inclusion” (p. 2). They explain that this results in a lack of methodological guidance and models of inclusive designs for student affairs practitioners, which in turn can compromise both student learning outcomes assessment and reflexivity in student affairs practice (c.f., Liu, 2017; Ryder & Kimball, 2015). To create high quality learning outcomes assessment in student affairs and enhance reflexive practice, assessment instruments and plans must be accessible to students with disabilities, and disability must be considered as a variable affecting assessment results.

Since students with disabilities are part of the student population, inaccessible institutional research cannot be internally valid; without inclusive research designs, study results may fail to reflect the overall

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population whether or not the study has a disability focus (Peña et al., 2018). The scarcity of research and assessment that represents the learning experiences of students with disabilities may reflect and cause the reality that few higher education administrators have in-depth knowledge of the postsecondary experiences of students with disabilities (Kimball et al., 2016; Peña et al., 2018). Higher education professionals’ commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion necessitates confronting this knowledge gap, which in turn demands intentionality in assessment practice so that the required evidence can be generated to redirect current outcomes (Friedensen et al., 2017). The omission of students with disabilities from assessment and evaluation considerations necessarily creates circumstances—namely, a lack of valid data—under which the needs of students with disabilities are invisible during decision-making (Vaccaro et al., 2015). Without a sound research base representing the experiences of students with disabilities, the development of effective student affairs practices and interventions is less likely to occur.

**Depiction of the Assessment Problem**

Consideration of disability in learning outcomes assessment is lacking both because higher education institutions fail to recognize its relevance and because both disability and disabled experiences are distinctly difficult to measure. Among the challenges to representing students with disabilities in learning outcomes assessment is the fact that disability does not have a clear operational definition (see Vaccaro et al., 2015). Disability as a variable can refer to disability-as-diagnosis, disability-as-identity, or disability-as-experience. For example, “a student with a disability” can mean a student who has been given a medical or educational diagnosis (see Friedensen & Kimball, 2017) and can provide the documentation that verifies that diagnosis. This is typically required for a student to be registered with a disability services office, a common proxy for disability status in higher education research. “A student with a disability” can also mean a student who self-identifies as having a disability, whether or not they wish to or can produce corresponding documentation. In this case, a student who never registered with disability services may check “Yes” when asked in the demographic portion of a measure, “Do you have a disability.” Finally, “a student with a disability” can mean a student experiencing a disabling condition created by a particular feature of the educational environment, such as an inaccessible building or instructional practice (e.g., group discussion for a student with social anxiety), when that student would not otherwise be distinct from students not regarded as having a disability.

Without the intentional operationalization of disability within a study predicated on a carefully-constructed definition, analyses run a high risk of producing misleading results, jeopardizing the capability of student affairs professionals to deliver programs that liberate rather than oppress this excluded population (Vaccaro et al., 2015). In this paper, we present a framework for understanding what roles disability and disability-related variables can play in analytic plans for learning outcomes assessment. Although we present primarily quantitative examples, the design thinking we present is broadly transferable to a range of methodological scenarios. We also note how intentional, proactive design decisions can ensure that researchers are able to operationalize the potentially divergent experience of a student with a disability. By emphasizing the interdependent nature of considerations of variable role, disability definition, and sources of data regarding students with disabilities, we create a transferable framework that can be broadly applied in learning outcomes assessments of varying degrees of formality.

**Depiction of the Practices and Solutions Related to the Assessment Problems**

In this section, we describe a framework for thinking about disability as an intentional feature of assessment and research design. First, we describe the need to think inclusively about measurement. Second, we describe the need for clarity about the operational definition of disability. Finally, we present scenarios in which disability may function as a confound, control, moderator, or mediator within an assessment plan.

**Inclusive Measurement**

From a methodological perspective, assessment instruments should “be administered under uniform conditions and time constraints, but fairness dictates that test scores should not be affected by any limitations of the test-taker which are not relevant to the skills being assessed” (Zwick, 2018, p. 284). For a test to be fair, each student taking the test must have an equal opportunity to demonstrate their learning in the intended domains; without these conditions, inferences about the students and their learning are compromised (Dolan & Burling, 2018). When an assessment measures skills or knowledge other than the intended content, such as skills required to access or deliver a response to test items, this is referred to as construct irrelevant variance, which presents partic-
ular challenges for students with disabilities (Dolan et al., 2005). As Dolan and colleagues (2013) have noted, “For too many students academic achievement as measured by assessments is confounded with their ability to use the medium of assessment” (p. 6). When construct-irrelevant features of an assessment, such as the visibility of content on a page or the conditions for data collection, interact with student characteristics related to a disability, this can result in decreased demonstration of construct-relevant skills, affecting the validity of the assessment results (Almond et al., 2010). Many assessment plans fail to function inclusively at this level of research design by not systematically addressing variations in how students experience and respond to the world and to test stimuli. However, absent assessment data about the experiences of students with disabilities, those designing educational experiences may revert to problematic beliefs and assumptions about how best to address disability in a college learning environment.

Operationalizing Disability Constructs

Even inclusively designed assessment instruments do not necessarily guarantee an inclusive assessment plan. As noted above, a key tenet of meaningful assessment is that it must measure only that which it sets out to measure. However, disability is a contested term (Friedensen & Kimball, 2017). It means different things to different people and can vary in meaning across contexts. As a result, assessment plans can also fail in their obligation to function inclusively by neglecting to specify precisely how they operationalize disability—thereby undermining construct validity (Shadish et al., 2002). Within assessment and research focused on the experiences of students with disabilities, there are at least three separate ways that disability is routinely operationalized: Disability as a variable can refer to disability-as-diagnosis, disability-as-identity, or disability-as-experience.

Disability-as-Diagnosis. When thinking about disability-as-diagnosis, researchers often concern themselves with whether a student meets the formalized criteria necessary to receive a specific medical diagnosis or can provide documentation necessary to access disability accommodations in postsecondary learning environments (see Friedensen & Kimball, 2017 for discussion). Disability-as-diagnosis is an important way to organize thinking about resource allocation and can also provide a preliminary indication of the incidence of disability on a campus. It is the way that national incidence of disability is typically reported (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). However, it does not necessarily reflect how students with disabilities think about themselves (Vaccaro et al., 2018).

Disability-as-Identity. Within the framework of disability-as-identity, researchers begin to address these questions of meaning-making and might distinguish between people who have been diagnosed with a condition medically-labelled as a disability and people who identify as such with or without a formal diagnosis or documentation (Vaccaro et al., 2018). They might also note variations in why people may adopt or reject a disability label—finding, for example, that some students with disabilities eschew the label because they consider it to be an undesirable identity while others reject it because they find cultural and political meaning in identifying as d/Deaf or neurodiverse (c.f., Kimball et al., 2016; Newman et al., 2019). This framework can allow for broader inclusion of students with disabilities than relying solely on disability-as-diagnosis and allow for assessment of how different kinds of disability identities affect students’ learning outcomes.

Disability-as-Experience. In addressing disability-as-experience, researchers recognize the considerable variability in how two people with the same disability diagnosis might experience the world as well as how those experiences might vary based upon context (Jones, 1996). These approaches also typically reflect one of the primary technical definitions of disability, which focuses on how functional limitations, participation restrictions, and activity limitations shape a person’s experience of the world (Shakespeare, 2012). Under this framing, it becomes clear that some people without disability diagnoses may be situationally disabled—for example, a person without a formal diagnosis of an anxiety disorder who experiences stress in a testing environment—while some people with formal diagnoses might not feel disabled at all in certain contexts—for example, a person with a mobility restriction who can participate fully in an adaptive aquatics environment (e.g., Bettencourt et al., 2018; Vaccaro & Kimball, 2019; Vaccaro et al., 2019). Assessments which utilize this operationalization may be useful for elucidating the nuanced ways in which students’ environments can be shifted to affect their learning outcomes.

Disability Variables in Assessment Plans

Even when disability is otherwise addressed clearly in an assessment plan via carefully designed instruments and well-reasoned operational definitions, the way that researchers deploy disability-related variables in their analysis has a profound impact on resulting understandings. Although it is likely impossible to describe the full range of ways that disability might function in analytic plans, examples based on common types of analytic variables—con-
founds, controls, moderators, or mediators—will help to show why disability must be systematically addressed in assessment plans.

At the simplest level, since we know that nearly 20% of students in the undergraduate population have a disability (U.S. Department of Education, 2018), any assessment plan that proceeds with less than full inclusion for students with disabilities must also inherently regard disability as a potential confound on any findings. Methodologically, a confounding variable acts on both the dependent and independent variable such that it describes part or all of an observed association—even when not included in an analytic plan. In effect, it confounds, or mixes up the nature of the interaction between the variables in which one is interested. To understand why the idea of a confound is critical to understanding the experiences of students with disabilities, an example will prove helpful. Imagine a student with a disability that affects executive processing completing the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), which requires that students both synthesize visual information and make a written argument. Ostensibly, this assessment measures a student’s critical thinking skills. However, it may also inadvertently measure their comfort in a testing environment or their level of interest in completing an artificial exercise—both of which may be confounded by a student’s disability. As a result, an assessment plan that seeks to understand student learning outcomes on the basis of CLA results but which does so without also including key measures that acknowledge the influence of a student’s disability status risk producing radically misleading results.

We strongly encourage that all researchers include disability as a control variable in all their assessment plans. Higher education researchers have long recognized that a student’s demographic characteristics and prior experiences shape within-college outcomes. For example, existing studies of student engagement and retention will typically explore variations in student experience using variables measuring things such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, country of origin, socioeconomic status, and academic major. Disability is sometimes included among these control variables, but even when it is included, it may not be operationalized in a manner sufficient to allow inter- and intra-categorical analysis. For example, in many major national studies (e.g., Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002, Beginning Postsecondary Students dataset), only students with learning disabilities represent a large enough sample pool to analyze in intersection with other control variables and key student outcomes. However, prior research has well established not only that disability shapes student outcomes but that intersectional systems of oppression produce distinctly racialized, classed, and gendered experiences of disability (Annamma et al., 2013).

Finally, consideration of disability as moderating and mediating variables help bring disability to the center of analytic plans. The difference between these two types of variable can be a source of confusion for those investigating issues in the social sciences (Baron & Kenny, 1986), but it is important to clarify how disability works in each role. As either a moderating or mediating variable, disability acts as a third variable which sheds light on potential relationships between two other related variables. Within the context of moderation, disability affects the relationship between independent variable X and dependent variable Y; in mediation, disability explains the relationship (or lack thereof) between independent variable X and dependent variable Y (see Baron & Kenny, 1986 for further explanation). To some extent, this distinction depends on whether disability is framed in terms of disability-as-diagnosis or disability-as-experience, but examples may clarify how these differences play out in assessment.

Consider, for example, the argument made by universal design advocates that high-quality captioning benefits all students but would help students who are d/Deaf or hearing impaired most of all. An important distinction is that captioning does not affect the student’s core impairment; the student will be d/Deaf or hearing impaired regardless of the use of captions. However, the extent to which the student’s d/Deafness or hearing impairment is disabling in this context may vary depending on the use of captions. Returning to our discussion of operationalizations of disability, this relies heavily on the conceptualization disability-as-diagnosis (i.e., d/Deafness or hearing impairments). Consequently, a reasonable moderation analysis might seek to explore whether a student’s disability status influences how the presence or absence of high-quality captioning shapes academic performance.

To explain disability as a mediator, we reference the example provided earlier of a student with a disability affecting executive processing. In this scenario we might posit that the testing environment increases feelings of stress or cognitive load, which in turn impinges on executive function and thereby suppresses performance. In other words, the testing environment exacerbates the extent to which the student’s disability impedes their performance on an exam. In a proper mediation analysis, each aspect at play in this setting—the impact of the stressful testing environment on a student’s disability, the impact of the stressful testing environment on the student’s...
performance, and the impact of the student’s disability on performance—may be independently measured and then a series of analyses can measure their individual effects on a student’s performance. Within an intervention context, one may consider the individual effect of a student’s impairment, as made disabling by the testing environment—a form of disability-as-experience—and how that might be mitigated by an appropriate accommodation (e.g., alternative testing space).

**Collecting Data about Disability**

The way in which disability is operationalized as a construct and constructed as a variable within assessment will also affect and be affected by the way in which data about students with disabilities is collected. For many, the obvious option may be to merge assessment data associated with student learning outcomes with data collected from disability services. This approach, while useful, can fail to consider how students think about their disability status and how that conception affects their learning outcomes. Furthermore, this approach may fall short of accurately reflecting an institution’s situation regarding students with disabilities, as those who are not registered with their institution’s disability service office will be excluded. Such an assessment plan overlooks students with disabilities who are unaware of their disability, those who cannot afford or lack knowledge of how to obtain a diagnosis, and those who have documentation of their diagnosis but choose not to register. Therefore, researchers who utilize registration with disability services as the inclusion criterion in learning outcomes assessment of students with disabilities need to contextualize their findings as limited insofar as all students with disabilities at their institution are concerned.

Alternatively, individuals who aim to assess learning outcomes for all students with disabilities at their institution may choose to develop a localized instrument or use an alternative instrument that is not limited to students who choose to register with their disability services office. Those who take this route would be well-advised to consider earlier comments regarding the accessibility of instruments for measurement, to ensure that students are assessed for their learning and not for their ability to meet a predetermined form of presenting their knowledge. In crafting such an instrument then, assessors should consider, alongside accessibility, ways to measure for disability-as-identity and disability-as-experience. To this end, it is important to make questions that account for the variability in how students understand their own disability status and the way their environment disables them—questions that may be crafted more effectively with input from students with disabilities. Such an approach is similar to those undertaken recently to craft instruments that measure microaggressions experienced by individuals with disabilities (Conover et al., 2017; Kattari, 2019).

Whether designing a single instrument or incorporating relevant questions into multiple instruments, it can be helpful to think of the ways in which different understandings of disability status relate to types of assessment that are frequently carried out in higher education. A climate survey, for example, lends itself to measuring disability-as-experience, and is strengthened by efforts to include questions that capture the physical, social, and academic aspects of the environment students experience as disabling, regardless of their disability-as-diagnosis status. Assessment of services and programs, on the other hand, invites both a disability-as-identity and a disability-as-diagnosis conceptualization. Ultimately, though, the challenge for truly inclusive assessments is to incorporate all three ways of operationalizing disability.

This is challenging in learning outcomes assessment within disability services, as the office is unlikely to have opportunities to influence learning outcomes for students who are not registered. Collaboration becomes paramount. For an illustration of this point, consider Portland Community College: Disability Services updated their intake process to include measures of self-advocacy skills and understanding of the accommodation process (Portland Community College, 2015). Learning outcomes in these areas could then be assessed by comparing scores at intake to scores after students received interventions. Self-advocacy and understanding of the accommodations process are also crucial areas for students not registered with disability services but experiencing disabling conditions or carrying a disability identity. Increased learning in these areas could even lead students toward registration with disability services. If the disability services office is able to coordinate with other offices, these same measures could be administered to all students, and used to assess the effectiveness of information dissemination efforts and educational messaging regarding support options. For example, just as syllabi include accommodation statements, learning outcomes measures at the course or department level could include items asking students to rate their understanding of the accommodation process and their self-advocacy skills.
Implications and Portability for Higher Education Practice

At the most basic level, our paper makes a lengthy argument for the importance of understanding disability as both a student- and environment-level influence on learning outcomes. Simply put, the way that a student responds to their disability status via both thought and action powerfully influences their experiences during college. Just as higher education and student affairs professionals would seek to understand the nuanced experiences of other minoritized populations in colleges and universities, it is important to do so with students with disabilities. Doing so is particularly important given the abundant empirical and theoretical literature (summarized in Friedensen & Kimball, 2017) that shows that systems of ableism and disability are experienced intersectionally with other systems of oppression (e.g., racism, shadism, classism, gender essentialism, gender binarism). In other words, higher education institutions compromise their capacity to understand the influence of both disability and other minoritized identities by failing to systematically address disability.

As with the experience of students with all minoritized identities, while higher education institutions can learn a great deal by examining student-level experiences, they can learn even more by examining their learning environments. Students with disabilities do not experience their disability status in vacuums: they experience them on college and university campuses that are overwhelmingly normed to the experiences of the ablebodied and ableminded (Dolmage, 2017). Addressing disability intentionally within learning outcomes assessment can be a vital start toward the recognition that the existence of inequitable, exclusionary learning environments helps explain discrepancies in observed learning outcomes.

Although the strategies we presented in this paper were anchored by examples drawn from quantitative research, the design thinking that we explicated is broadly transferable. To do so, we suggest that higher education and student affairs practitioners engage three questions about all learning outcomes assessments: (a) To what data about disability do we or will we have access? (b) To what data about disability would we want to have access in an ideal world? And (c) What are the consequences of the inaccessible data? Thinking systematically about disability as part of assessment plans means asking these questions in the planning stages, and revisiting them as assessments are implemented and when data are analyzed. By asking these questions and confronting the answers in an honest way, higher education and student affairs professionals can reach greater clarity about what their learning assessment data actually means and what it does not. In turn, that honest confrontation with the extent to which assessment and research is able-normed can then be the catalyst for ongoing improvement.

References


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Caseload (student-to-staff ratio) is a metric commonly used by upper level administrators to inform budgetary allocations. Using a national, random sample we found that the average caseload is 133.0 students per disability practitioner. Institutions with one disability practitioner had a caseload of 154.9 students; institutions with two or three practitioners carried a caseload of 140.7 students. Practitioners working in offices with four or five full-time staff averaged 126.6 students and those with six or more full-time professionals carried a caseload of 135.2 students. Relying solely on caseload metrics to inform budgetary decisions is problematic because practitioners often have extensive workload responsibilities beyond student caseload, current caseloads may reflect overwork rather than socially-just staffing, and caseload metrics assume students use similar accommodations and these accommodations take comparable amounts of time to administer. Thus, we describe eight additional data-driven tools and illustrate how disability leaders can employ these tools for budgetary advocacy.

Keywords: student-to-staff ratio, caseload, socially-just staffing, budgetary support
Depiction of the Problem

The lack of caseload benchmarks is problematic because disability leaders are not able to use national data to support the acquisition of new positions or defend the loss of a current position against budget cuts. Further, using student-to-staff metrics as a sole rationale to justify budgetary decisions confuses caseload with workload. Disability service practitioners often have extensive responsibilities beyond student caseload and current staffing may reflect budget and overwork rather than appropriate or socially-just staffing. Scott (2017) found evidence of overwork; 61% of disability service professionals reported working “outside office hours on a regular basis to complete their work” (p. 21) and 52% did not have enough time to engage in campus outreach or training. Drawing on the work of Schur et al. (2009), we define socially-just staffing as employment models in which enough employees with the requisite skills and breadth of knowledge are hired to meet the needs of students, allow timely provision of services, and foster meaningful mentoring relationships, while paying living wages, providing benefits, and supporting employment accommodations. Finally, caseload metrics are problematic because different student populations use varying levels of support and caseload metrics reinforce the medical model of disability (Evans et al., 2017). Thus, caseload benchmarks are necessary, but not sufficient tools for engaging in strategic budgetary planning and educating campus constituents about the resources needed to ensure accessibility.

The purpose of this practice brief is to promote the use of more nuanced and varied metrics as a strategy to increase budgetary resources. First, we seek to build upon the limited caseload literature by disaggregating nationally representative data. Second, we use case study narratives to demonstrate how disability leaders (e.g., Directors and Deans) can combine caseload metrics with eight data-driven tools to advocate for socially-just staffing practices.

Survey Findings and Discussion of Outcomes

We use secondary data from a national survey of disability service practitioners to calculate caseload. A list of postsecondary institutions (n=2,629) was identified via the Carnegie Classifications Data File (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2011). A one-stage stratified (two-year public, four-year public, four-year private) random design was employed to sample one disability services professional per postsecondary institution (n=1,245). Manual internet searches were used to obtain contact information for the director or highest-ranking disability staff member. The response rate was 38.8% (n=483). The return rate, which considered only active email addresses (n=1,156) was 41.9%. The survey employed routing; respondents took between 35 and 47 demographic, service specific, and open-ended questions. Creswell and Creswell (2018) outlined validity and reliability as critical components when constructing a survey instrument. Content validity was addressed by reviewing other surveys that assessed interventions offered to college students with disabilities (e.g., Collins & Mowbray, 2008) and pilot testing. Forty-one participants were removed because their responses had irregular patterns or substantive missing data. The final data set had 442 participants.

In this sample, the average number of disabled students registered with the Disability Resource Center (DRC) ranged from 399.5 (SD=433.7) at two-year public institutions, to 416.5 (SD=333.8) at four-year public institutions, and 169.8 (SD=167.5) at four-year private institutions. Table 1 highlights the number of practitioners working in the DRC; the most common scenario is an office with one full-time staff member. AHEAD membership varied by institutional type; 66.6% (n=90) of public two-year institutions, 79.5% (n=120) of public four-year institutions, and 75.6% (n=118) of private four-year institutions were AHEAD members.

Overall, the average caseload was 133.0 students (SD=92.5; n=442) per practitioner. Practitioners working at institutions where disability duties are assigned as part of broader job responsibilities reported an average caseload of 72.4 students (SD=59.8; n=64). The average caseload for DRCs with one practitioner was 154.9 students (SD=110.9; n=144); DRCs with two or three practitioners averaged 140.7 students (SD=85.4 n=132), and DRCs with four or five practitioners averaged 126.6 students (SD=72.6; n=58). DRCs with six or more full-time professionals carried an average caseload of 135.2 students (SD=71.6; n=44). Table 2 depicts the average number of students per full-time staff by institutional characteristics.

Caseload data presented above are lower than the findings from a recent AHEAD survey (164 students; Scott, 2017). This difference could occur, in part, because institutions that are AHEAD members have significantly more registered students with disabilities (M=345.7, SD=321.5, n=328) than non-AHEAD members (M=262.6, SD=4395.2, n=114; t (442) = 2.2, p=.03, two-tailed). For example, the average caseload of an AHEAD member working at an institution with one disability professional is 162.3 (SD=103.6, n=107) students whereas a non-AHEAD member institution with the same staffing averages...
133.6 (SD=128.9, n=37) students. Further, as the majority of respondents work in an office with only one staff member, caseload is a fraction of their job responsibilities. In addition to their caseload, this individual must also perform all other aspects of their job description including community outreach, faculty education, supporting assistive technology, and meeting with prospective students.

Our analysis has several limitations. Similar to Scott (2017), these findings should be interpreted with a degree of caution because the standard deviations indicate that there is a wide range of scores around the mean. As noted in Table 2, the cell size for some institutional characteristics (e.g., multiple campus locations) is very small and should be interpreted with caution. Other limitations to this study, particularly those associated with secondary analysis, include survey question wording that did not ask about part-time employees or ancillary staff located in other departments (e.g., technology services) and the possibility of self-selection bias.

**Implications for Practice**

Effective disability leaders use benchmarking data to advocate for staffing that includes the varied aspects of practitioners’ roles. Leaders should tailor their use of data to consider mission, student populations, enrollment, topography, institutional politics, and funding models. To that end, we offer two case study narratives as examples of how to use caseload metrics, in combination with other data-driven tools, to engage in strategic conversations.

**Case Study Narratives**

Located in the Midwest, College A is a small highly selective liberal arts institution with approximately 1,600 full time degree seeking students. The campus spans four city blocks of relatively flat terrain; the oldest building was constructed in the 1880s and the newest in 2019. During the 2018-2019 academic year, 25% (n=391) of the student body was connected with the DRC and self-identified with one or more disabled communities. During this time, 18.8% (n=293) of students used academic, residential, and/or dining accommodations. The DRC is located in the Division of Academic Affairs, reports to the Provost, and is overseen by the Assistant Dean for Disability Resources who serves as the point of contact for disabled faculty and staff. The office also includes four Assistive Technology Specialists, one Coordinator, and one Access Support Specialist. Testing accommodations are located within the DRC and all alternate format materials are produced in-house.

Since its inception in the late 1950s, University B targeted its programs, services, and infrastructure to adapt to rapid enrollment growth and serve the States’ constituents. In Fall 2019, University B enrolled 31,171 students and the DRC served approximately 1,500 students, which represents a 139% increase over the past three years. The DRC facilitates and fulfills the obligations of the institution to provide academic adjustments and accommodations for students with disabilities and students with Title IX status. The DRC is located in the Division of Campus Life and is comprised of a Director, an Associate Director, five Disability Specialists, three Coordinators, and a part-time Administrative Assistant. The testing center is located within the DRC, the majority of alternate format materials are produced in-house, but Human Resources addresses accommodations for faculty and staff.

Below, the Assistant Dean at College A and the Associate Director at University B (who served in a leadership role at a community college for 25 years) outline how they use data-driven tools to secure funding, foster disability identity, and demonstrate evidence of need for space and staffing. We summarize these tools in Table 3.

**Track and Project Trends Over Time**

Disability leaders should track trends over time—current caseload is often not meaningful unless paired with historical data. This pairing can indicate what is shifting and allow for predictions of future growth. Shifts in caseload data can be used to redefine or highlight resource discrepancies. For example, in the introduction of the context for College A, it is indicated that approximately 18% of the student body receives accommodations. While this number is indicative of current caseload and could be used to make assumptions about resource needs, the number is even more powerful when combined with the fact that in the 2008-2009 academic year approximately 7% of the student body was receiving accommodations. The Assistant Dean argued that no other population on campus had grown 11% in 10 years, demonstrated that resource allocation (budgetary, personnel, space) had not increased over that same period, and highlighted how these discrepancies were harming institutional retention and could be perceived as discriminatory. Further, although trends in caseloads are important, disability leaders should also track trends related to operational space, including the number of testing accommodations administered and how much space students in private testing rooms require. Framed strategically, longitudinal data allows disability leaders to use growth in caseload, service hours, and operational space to advocate for additional resources.
Define the Current and Aspirational Scope of the DRC

It is imperative that disability leaders define the scope of the DRC’s work. A clearly defined scope is the foundation for contextual evidence that demonstrates the limitations of budgets driven solely by caseload data. Scope of work includes services provided and DRC operational hours. For example, at University B the Associate Director regularly reminds upper level administration that if other student services (e.g., athletic facilities, writing center) are available, the DRC needs to be open as well. Upper level administration may not understand the breadth of functions required for accommodation provision (e.g., notetaking, exam proctoring, assistive technology, education, etc.) and identifying gaps in services included in the scope of the office is crucial when advocating for additional resources. For offices where the institution has combined accommodation provision with other support services such as academic advising, testing centers, cultural centers, supporting students with Title IX status, or employee accommodations, defining the scope of the work is a vital step in making the case for additional resources, longer operational hours, or separation of office functions. A growing number of institutions have also embraced the role of DRC as an identity center crucial to the diversity efforts of the institution. Thus, centering the DRC’s scope of practice is a critical first step to ensuring that caseload ratios are not used in isolation from the programmatic and educational work of the office. DRCs that are under-resourced could engage in an external review to establish boundaries on their current scope and strategize how to achieve their aspirational scope.

Know and Connect with Your Institution’s Strategic Plan

Disability leaders should have a strong understanding of their institution’s strategic plan and mission. Data collected by the DRC, including caseload metrics, should be tied to, and evaluated through the lens of the strategic plan. For example, an institutional goal of College A was to increase the number of students participating in study abroad in order to enhance the mission of training a global workforce. The Assistant Dean examined data on the number of students who studied abroad and found lower participation of disabled students. Then, the Assistant Dean leveraged this data to make the case for additional DRC resources to achieve College A’s global workforce goal. Although study abroad participation might not be a priority at every institution, diversity and inclusion are common goals frequently found in strategic plans. Disability is an important aspect of human diversity; thus, DRCs can connect their work to support disability identity development and culture with the institution’s strategic plan.

Use Student Satisfaction Data to Support Budgetary Requests

Disability leaders can use data from their annual DRC student satisfaction survey to center the students’ voice and experience when communicating budgetary requests with upper level administration. For example, at University B survey results indicated that students were dissatisfied with the limited number of private testing rooms and the external noise that occurred in the hallway that was used for testing accommodations. In their proposal for an expanded testing center, the Assistant Director included student satisfaction data, in conjunction with data on the increase in testing accommodations over the past five years, to argue for additional space.

Track Service Hours per Accommodation

Disabled students use varying levels of DRC support and caseload metrics should take into consideration the complexity of accommodations and the robustness of existing institutional resources. For instance, a student who uses common accommodations that the institution already has structural supports to implement (e.g., extended exam time at an institution with a well-staffed testing center) will take significantly less DRC time than a student with more complex accommodations (e.g., Braille user taking advanced math courses) or when the institution does not have robust resources (e.g., Learning Management Systems with limited accessibility).

Upper level administration may view enrollment growth as increasing staff service hours additionally, that is, each additional disabled student will result in two more hours of DRC staff work per semester. However, at University B, the Assistant Director describes how enrollment growth increases service hours exponentially because each student requires individualized accommodations and some accommodations take more time to administer than others. Disability leaders can use more complex metrics by tracking the number of average service hours it takes to administer common accommodations at their institution. When using a more nuanced approach, it is imperative to highlight how institution specific resources influence DRC staff time and avoid discrimination by singling out specific disabilities as prohibitive or costly.
View the DRC Annual Report as a Grant Application

Viewing the DRC annual report as a grant application is a technique to demonstrate the need for space and staffing. Strong grant applications are clear, concise, and use data to tell a story. Unfortunately, upper level administration is unlikely to provide additional funding if existing staff are adequately performing all essential duties of the DRC. This is problematic because timely accommodations are legally required, leading many disability practitioners to work overtime hours and thereby create the appearance of adequate performance under working conditions that are chronically understaffed (see Scott, 2017) and unhealthy. In some cases (e.g., union contracts that prohibit overtime) understaffed DRCs may result in accommodations that are not provided in a timely manner. Disability leaders can narrate the story of understaffing by tracking overtime hours worked and the amount of time from accommodation request to accommodation implementation. Within the context of an annual report, caseload data is more powerful when combined with these additional service metrics to emphasize that failure to properly staff the DRC will create greater institutional costs via employee turnover and possible legal action brought by unaccommodated students, employees, alumni, or external constituents.

The reporting structure of each institution is unique; at College A the annual report is submitted to the Vice President for Academic Affairs and at University B it goes to the Associate Vice President for Student Wellness. If an annual report is not required, disability leaders should still produce this document as an accountability metric and method to foster fiscal conversations.

Finance the Unpredictable, as Predictable

Accommodations are a variable expense; the total amount an institution must spend changes in relation with the type and frequency of accommodations. It is difficult, if not impossible, to predict how many disabled students will enroll and what accommodations those students will need. Thus, disability leaders build budgets without knowing total expenditures of their office. The challenge for disability leaders is to convey to upper level administration fiscal stewardship, while simultaneously making the case for additional unexpected funding. That is, disability leaders are tasked with convincing upper level administration to finance the unpredictable, as predictable. To mitigate unpredictability, the Assistant Director at University B uses data to forecast trends, provides evidence of how DRC resources are spent, and engages in ongoing budgetary discussions to address unexpected, costly accommodations (See Table 4).

Constantly Educate Your Audience

Communication with strategic decision makers should not be limited to end of year reporting or when requesting additional resources. Rather, education and engagement of stakeholders is ongoing. Examples of consistent communication include: (1) inviting administrators to attend DRC sponsored events, (2) with permission, sharing student stories that highlight the way the DRC works to support institutional strategic priorities, (3) tailoring disability educational materials to match the specific campus constituent or group, and (4) sending quarterly updates on legal guidance to the directors of relevant areas. For example, at College A, the Assistant Dean shared the U.S. Department of Justice (2019) Rider University Settlement Agreement on accommodations for food allergies with Campus Dining Services.

Conclusion

Disability leaders will benefit from employing caseload benchmarks that are more nuanced and used in combination with additional data-driven tools. It may not be feasible or useful to deploy all the data-driven strategies outlined above; rather, disability leaders can select the tools that best fit their resources and institutional culture. The disability community benefits when we share information and it is our hope that these data-driven tools will assist others as they engage in strategic budgetary conversations and foster socially-just staffing practices.
References


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Table 1

Number of Full-Time Practitioners Working in the Disability Resource Center

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Full-Time Staff</th>
<th>n (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>64 (14.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>144 (32.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>93 (21.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>39 (8.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>35 (7.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>23 (5.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 or more</td>
<td>44 (10.0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* None = disability duties are assigned on a part-time basis as part of broader job responsibilities, $n = 442$. 
Table 2

Mean Number of Students per Full-Time Disability Staff Member by Institutional Characteristic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Institutions with No Full-Time Staff, n=64, Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Institutions with 1 Full-Time Staff, n=144, Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Institutions with 2-3 Staff, n=132, Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Institutions with 4-5 Staff, n=58, Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Institutions with 6 or More Staff, n=44, Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>72.4 (59.8)</td>
<td>154.9 (110.9)</td>
<td>140.7 (85.4)</td>
<td>126.6 (72.6)</td>
<td>135.2 (71.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AHEAD member</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>79.0 (64.6)</td>
<td>162.3 (103.6)</td>
<td>145.7 (86.5)</td>
<td>130.5 (72.7)</td>
<td>122.7 (59.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>66.6 (55.5)</td>
<td>133.6 (128.9)</td>
<td>119.4 (78.4)</td>
<td>109.9 (73.1)</td>
<td>200.9 (97.7) †</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrollment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 1,000</td>
<td>36.1 (25.1)</td>
<td>58.9 (51.1) †</td>
<td>52.1 (59.6) †</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,000 – 5,000</td>
<td>80.8 (60.7)</td>
<td>115.2 (73.1)</td>
<td>85.6 (61.6)</td>
<td>53.0 (30.2) †</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5,000 – 10,000</td>
<td>138.3 (62.1) †</td>
<td>234.1 (121.9)</td>
<td>124.0 (63.1)</td>
<td>66.7 (23.7) †</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10,000 – 20,000</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>240.6 (127.2)</td>
<td>192.4 (78.7)</td>
<td>137.4 (66.8)</td>
<td>109 (57.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20,000 – 30,000</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>223.7 (94.3)</td>
<td>177.5 (67.2)</td>
<td>123.0 (73.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 30,000</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>133.0 (103.2) †</td>
<td>154.0 (60.2) †</td>
<td>160.8 (73.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>79.6 (69.7)</td>
<td>168.0 (96.6)</td>
<td>154.0 (92.5)</td>
<td>147.5 (84.7)</td>
<td>130.5 (71.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>63.2 (43.8)</td>
<td>152.5 (108.0)</td>
<td>146.1 (77.3)</td>
<td>117.2 (53.1)</td>
<td>139.4 (78.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>74.0 (62.9)</td>
<td>143.4 (126.5)</td>
<td>114.5 (84.2)</td>
<td>106.7 (62.9)</td>
<td>153.3 (71.7) †</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple campus</td>
<td>45.0 (0.0) †</td>
<td>180.2 (82.3) †</td>
<td>143.0 (83.7) †</td>
<td>86.3 (33.6) †</td>
<td>114.3 (0.0) †</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution type</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-year public</td>
<td>80.8 (71.9)</td>
<td>185.4 (122.6)</td>
<td>158.8 (88.7)</td>
<td>136.3 (81.1)</td>
<td>174.8 (88.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-year public</td>
<td>76.9 (36.9)</td>
<td>177.9 (120.1)</td>
<td>155.7 (87.1)</td>
<td>134.1 (68.4)</td>
<td>115.7 (53.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-year private</td>
<td>65.9 (58.9)</td>
<td>122.9 (88.8)</td>
<td>110.3 (73.4)</td>
<td>80.4 (46.9) †</td>
<td>100.0 (30.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reporting structure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic affairs</td>
<td>59.9 (51.1)</td>
<td>162.6 (124.2)</td>
<td>130.6 (104.7)</td>
<td>81.4 (59.2) †</td>
<td>110.7 (40.6) †</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student affairs</td>
<td>79.5 (63.7)</td>
<td>149.7 (101.5)</td>
<td>144.2 (77.9)</td>
<td>134.9 (72.2)</td>
<td>137.6 (73.9)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. n = 442; † = data should be interpreted with caution because there are less than 10 institutions in this cell.
### Table 3

**Eight Data-Driven Tools**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tool</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Track and project trends over time</td>
<td>Track the number of tests administered and how much space students in private rooms require; report data as an annual trend.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Define the current and aspirational scope of the DRC</td>
<td>Identify all aspects of work performed by DRC staff, including operational hours, outreach, and diversity programing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Know and connect with your institution's strategic plan</td>
<td>Connect DRC work that supports disability identity development and disability culture with the strategic planning goals of diversity and inclusion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use student satisfaction data to support budgetary requests</td>
<td>Identify areas of student dissatisfaction with DRC service and use that data, to support requests for space or budgetary items.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Track service hours per accommodation</td>
<td>Consider the robustness of existing institutional resources, the complexity of the accommodation, and the average amount of time it takes to facilitate each type of accommodation a student uses when calculating service hours per accommodation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>View the DRC annual report as a grant application</td>
<td>Use data to narrate the story of understaffing by tracking overtime hours and the amount of time from accommodation request to accommodation implementation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance the unpredictable, as predictable</td>
<td>Provide evidence that budgeted DRC monies are directly spent on expenses service provision expenses and advocate for a safety net that funds unanticipated and costly accommodations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constantly education your audience</td>
<td>Foster ongoing communication with campus stakeholders by inviting administrators to DRC events, sending legal updates, and with permission, sharing student stories.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4

Techniques for Financing the Unpredictable, as Predictable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provide evidence that budgeted DRC monies are directly spent on expenses</td>
<td>Include an expenditure report in the DRC annual report.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>associated with service provision.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use national data to forecast the unpredictable.</td>
<td>Shattuck et al. (2012) estimated that 50,000 autistic students will graduate from high school annually in the United States, a steep increase from the previous decade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Track institutional trends over time.</td>
<td>In the past five years the number of autistic students at University B increased by 219%.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connect national data with institutional data, to make an argument that</td>
<td>University B should budge greater service hours for accommodations that support equal access for autistic students and anticipate hiring professionals with autistic expertise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the institution must support student retention and graduation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use the dual student affairs and academic affairs roles that the DRC</td>
<td>Create two DRC budgets—one for co-curricular programing and student affairs, the other for technology, accommodation provision, and academic affairs. Dual budgets protect co-curricular areas from unanticipated curricular overages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>holds as justification for additional staff with expertise in both</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>curricular and co-curricular areas.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argue for a budgetary safety net that funds unanticipated and costly</td>
<td>Discuss with accounting developing a reserve account for accommodations such as ASL interpretation, CART, or Braille (all of which can cost $100,000+ per student to outsource and are often not accounted for in the budgetary process).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>accommodations.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A Survey of Postsecondary Disability Service Websites  
Post ADA AA: Recommendations for Practitioners

Manju Banerjee¹  
Adam R. Lalor¹  
Joseph W. Madaus²  
Loring C. Brinckerhoff³

Abstract

Since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (2008) and elevation of self-reported information in determining disability status and eligibility for accommodations, a debate has been raging in the field about the importance of disability documentation, documentation guidelines, self-reported information, and protocols used by disability service practitioners. Some argue that self-report is the most authentic information for determining functional limitations in a real-life context; while others contend self-report by definition is biased and often inaccurate. Adding to the debate is research-based evidence that students often do not use requested accommodations, and do not connect with postsecondary disability services even with a history of special education and Individualized Education Programs or Section 504 plans. This study summarizes results from a survey of 118 disability services websites from four classifications of postsecondary institutions regarding self-report, interactive process, documentation guidelines, and the protocol for receiving accommodations.

Keywords: disability documentation, guidelines, postsecondary education, disability services

The 2011 final regulations which followed the ADA Amendments Act of 2008 (ADA AA, 2008) sought to make it easier for individuals with disabilities to seek protection under the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. The regulations noted that the definition of disability should be “broadly construed,” and that “substantial limits” should not be defined by the high bar previously applied by the courts (e.g., Sutton v. United Airlines, Inc., 1999). Of significance in the regulations was the statement that determining whether an impairment substantially limits a major life activity should not generally require extensive scientific, medical, or statistical evidence. As proponents have claimed, it is the most real information regarding their experience in living with a disability and stated request for specific accommodations should be sufficient validation for ADA compliance. However, not all colleges adopted this guidance, and the problem a decade later is the lack of uniformity and/or agreement among postsecondary disability service providers regarding self-reported information in making accommodation decisions.

Review of the Literature

Self-report is the lived experience of the individual as understood and described by that individual. It is a commentary on the ways in which the functional limitations of the disability actually affect the individual, as reported or perceived. Self-report is subjective and a rich source of information that is not typically identified within a standard neuropsychological or psychoeducational evaluation. As proponents have claimed, it is the most real information

¹ Landmark College; ² University of Connecticut; ³ Educational Testing Service
that one can get on challenges faced by the individual due to the disability (Phelan, 2016). Neuropsychological and psychoeducational evaluations on the other hand, provide standardized information which are independently verifiable. For instance, a score at the 23rd percentile on the Woodcock Johnson Battery IV is interpreted the same way by all who review such information, leaving no ambiguity.

Self-reported information and behavioral observations during a diagnostic evaluation have always been useful, but have been considered as supplemental to the information generated by the formal assessment. There are several reasons for this position. Self-report is often influenced by individual perceptions and may not be accurate. Individual perspectives on the severity of the condition can be highly variable. Some researchers also bring up the case of malingering (Booksh et al., 2010; Harrison et al., 2007, 2008; Musso et al., 2016), given the high stakes for receiving accommodations in some situations. Malingering is defined as the “intentional production of false or grossly exaggerated physical or psychological problems” (Bienefeld, 2017, ¶ 1).

On the other hand, there is strong support for considering self-reported evidence as significantly more relevant than any formal standardized test or subtest score. Early impetus for this thinking comes from the 2008 Amendments Act of the ADA. The Amendments Act underscores interpreting “disability” more broadly than in the past and without extensive testing (US Department of Justice, n.d.) with the rationale being that the bar for establishing eligibility for disability status under the ADA had become too high. It also put the burden of proof on institutions and organizations for refusing to approve an accommodation, instead of the responsibility being solely on the individual (Heyward, 2015).

As noted earlier, in 2012, AHEAD put forth a guidance document regarding disability information in postsecondary settings which specifically ranked three sources of information. The primary source being identified as student self-report. The guidance document noted that,

A student’s narrative of his or her experience of disability, barriers, and effective and ineffective accommodations is an important tool which, when structured by interview or questionnaire and interpreted, may be sufficient for establishing disability and a need for accommodation. (p. 2)

The secondary source of information was identified as impressions and observed interpretations of higher education disability professionals based on student intake, interview, and accommodation request conversations. The tertiary source of information was identified as documentation from external sources such as a neuropsychological evaluation report, an Individual Education Program (IEP) or Section 504 Plan, medical records from health care providers, school psychologists, and other formal reports from the educational system.

The proposal by AHEAD created a stir in the postsecondary education and disability community. Several professionals discussed the pros and cons of student self-report as the primary source of disability information (AHEAD, n.d.; Banerjee & Brinckerhoff, 2015). The Educational Testing Service (ETS) which has long been a leader among high-stakes testing agencies in formulating disability documentation guidelines acknowledged the value of self-report by inviting test-takers to submit a personal statement letter in support of their request. ETS also provides guidance to test-takers for writing a personal statement letter (see https://www.ets.org/s/disabilities/pdf/personal-statement.pdf).

An implication of the ADA Amendments Act was the emphasis on an interactive process for determining accommodations. In other words, accommodations were no longer to be decided unilaterally by one stake holder or another, but should be based on consideration of all relevant information through an iterative and engaged process between the individual seeking accommodations and the institution.

In the higher education community, the process by which students make requests for and are granted accommodations is fairly standard. Students must self-initiate a meeting or contact with the campus disability services office. Typically, they are asked to fill-out an accommodation request form during or before the initial meeting. Some institutions require students to participate in an intake interview. This is the start of the interactive process where initial self-reported information is collected. While an intake is useful information, there are no established protocols for what the intake should include, and how much self-report is provided in the intake. Not all institutions require students to participate in an intake.

Most institutions, however, ask for disability documentation from a qualified evaluator as validation of disability status and eligibility for accommodations. Many have specific guidelines for disability documentation, and some have different guidelines for different categories of disabilities. Documentation is reviewed by disability services personnel and an accommodation letter is crafted and either given to the students to provide to their faculty, or is sent to faculty on their behalf. The accommodation letter
states that the student has a disability and is entitled to the listed accommodations. In the majority of cases, the accommodation letter does not specify any particulars about the disability or the individual’s functional limitations.

In the traditional approach to accommodation determination, the interactive process is quite limited. The primary determinant of accommodations is disability documentation. The documentation must be signed by a qualified evaluator, be current, clearly indicate a diagnosis or diagnoses, report all the test and subtest scores used in the test battery which should be comprehensive, discuss the identified functional limitations and make recommendations for accommodations. Since the ADA AA and the AHEAD 2012 guidance on documentation practices, there has been a steady shift in the process by which institutions determine accommodations. Some institutions put more weight on a student’s past history of receiving accommodations, and self-report is now elevated in making accommodation determinations. For example, consider the following quotation from the University of Massachusetts Amherst’s website on accommodations: “Consumer’s self-report: We recognize that people with disabilities are experts of their own experiences and important sources of information. Accordingly, we welcome self-disclosures and personal histories as critical elements of the application screening process” (University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2019, ¶ 2).

Despite such examples, it is unclear as to the extent to which institutions have fully embraced the interactive process and use of self-reported information in determining accommodations. The situation is even more complex when one considers high-stakes testing agencies such as Educational Testing Service (ETS), the College Board, the Law School Admissions Council (LSAC), the ACT, and the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT). ETS and the College Board use a vetting process that relies in part on collateral evidence such as disability service providers and school guidance counselors to attest to accommodations used in the past and current need, for certain accommodations. Since January 2017, the College Board which administers the SAT and AP exams has been approving accommodations identified in the students’ IEP or 504 Plan if the student meets the criteria for the school verification policy. When a request is submitted by the student’s school which verifies that: (a) the requested accommodations are part of a qualified school plan (i.e., IEP, 504, or their qualified formal plan); and (b) that the student is consistently using the accommodation for classroom tests, in most cases the accommodation is automatically approved. This applies to most, but not all accommodation requests.

The perception among many education professionals is that the use of self-report by institutions of higher education in making accommodation decisions is unclear and highly varied. There is lack of clarity regarding disability documentation requirements and the importance of self-reported information about one’s disability.

**Depiction of Issue**

The issue that this study seeks to address is a better understanding of the current state of accommodation decision-making in light of the growing importance of self-report and personal statements by individuals with disabilities. Within this context, it is important to note that some disabilities are per se disabilities that by their very nature are obvious and do not require additional documentation or self-report to justify that they constitute a substantial limitation to a major life activity (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2011). However, the list of per se disabilities has been controversial, particularly the inclusion of psychiatric disorders. This list, as articulated by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, includes: deafness, blindness, intellectual disability, partially or completely missing limbs, mobility impairments requiring use of a wheelchair, autism, cancer, cerebral palsy, diabetes, epilepsy, HIV infection, multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, major depressive disorder, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and schizophrenia.

Information posted on postsecondary websites on accommodation protocol and documentation guidelines offers an indirect but effective way of gauging how the organization makes accommodation decisions, and the value they place on self-reported information. Self-reported information offers a less burdensome option for the student for demonstrating the need for accommodations; but not all are equally comfortable with the subjectivity of such a process. Disability services websites are a proxy for current state of acceptance of self-report and disability documentation.

**Assessment Undertaken**

A stratified random sample of 10% of four categories of colleges was identified from the Carnegie Classification of Colleges. The categories of colleges chosen were those with (a) doctoral programs (n = 27), (b) masters programs (n = 21), (c) baccalaureate programs (n = 34), and (d) associate programs (n = 36).
The study undertaken examined disability related websites of these institutions through a survey that sought to assess whether these institutions specifically mentioned student’s self-report and/or the interactive process. Data were collected on words indicative of an interactive process such as student intake interview, accommodation request form, student input, and personal statement. Use of the words such as “self-report,” “interactive process,” and/or “in collaboration with” were also recorded. The following section describes the results of the findings. Inter-rater reliability was established at 100% by selecting five sets of data from each institutional category which were then double coded by another researcher.

**Description of Outcomes**

The final sample consisted of 118 institutions of higher education. Several categories of website information were examined. Tables 1-3 describe the aggregate responses for all the questions in the survey across the different categories of colleges. Not unexpectedly, the majority of postsecondary institutions did not mention the actual words “self-report,” “interactive process,” and/or “collaboration with” in determining accommodations on their websites. However, as noted in Tables 1-3, a majority of institutions asked students to provide their own information by requesting students fill-out an accommodation request form which included self-report of the effect of their disability. Some websites noted in-person student intakes and/or interviews with disability services personnel. Student intakes and intake interviews are not a new practice, but this study identified the number of institutions that explicitly state the intake process on their website is large (n = 83, 70%). An intake form or interview can be expansive or limited, but it does provide self-reported information about the disability. One of the institutional websites noted:

We value a collaborative process as we work with students to establish services. Student Disability Services (SDS) staff will work with you on an individual basis to determine reasonable accommodations that facilitate access to learning, living, and other experiences. The information you provide is an essential component in the determination of reasonable accommodations and services.

(Doctoral Institution)

Pre-ADA AA it was common for disability services websites to mention the need for disability documentation, but in this survey (n = 20, 17%) did not mention it at all. Slightly less than a quarter of the institutions (n=26, 22%) required evaluators to fill in a documentation form in lieu of or in addition to the disability documentation. Mention of guidelines for disability documentation was split evenly between those who mentioned guidelines and those who did not.

The study also looked at the mention of IEP and 504 Plan information on disability services websites. As noted in Table 3, a majority of institutions (n = 82, 69%) did not mention IEP/504 plans at all; and among those that did, a few (n = 22, 19%) reported that such information was helpful, and (n = 6, 5%) said that IEP/504 Plan information was adequate in determining accommodations. There were statistically significant differences in documentation and accommodation information posted on websites across the different categories of colleges.

Table 4 illustrates these differences for three selected questions: (1) does the website mention "self-report," "interactive process," "collaboration with student" as part of accommodation determination; (2) does the website mention "disability documentation" for accommodations; and (3) does the website mention "disability documentation guidelines"? On a t-test of difference of proportions, there was a statistically significant difference on Question 1 between doctoral and associate degree colleges (p = 0.0004), doctoral and master’s degree colleges (p = 0.0140), and doctoral and baccalaureate degree colleges (p = 0.0003). On Question 2, there was a statistically significant difference between doctoral and master’s degree colleges (p = 0.0155) and doctoral and baccalaureate colleges (p = 0.0523). On Question 3, there was a statistically significant difference between doctoral and associate colleges (p = 0.0000), doctoral and masters colleges (p = 0.0006), and doctoral and baccalaureate colleges (p = 0.0003).

The findings highlight the variability in website information on disability services across institutions of higher education. The results suggest that colleges with doctoral programs are more inclined to mention accommodations as an interactive process compared to associate degree colleges, but they also mention the need for disability documentation and need to comply with documentation guidelines compared to masters and baccalaureate colleges.

Overall, this survey revealed that the language used in the disability services websites was confusing at times, and not always user-friendly. For example, some sites mentioned who to contact but nothing more. One institution simply asked students to identify themselves to a particular office; and another institution only mentioned accommodations for physical access. In most cases, even where importance of self-reported information was acknowledged, there
was a lack of clarity on how this information would be used. For instance, does a student’s self-reported inability to complete timed tests outweigh disability documentation data which indicates average processing speed, working memory, reading rate, and/or other indicators for extended time? Another interesting observation was that while overall more than \((n=83,70\%)\) of institutions did not mention "self-report," "interactive process," or "collaboration with student" as part of accommodation process on their website, an equal number \((n=83, 70\%)\) mentioned words that are suggestive of an interactive process such as “intake interview/form," "accommodation request form," "student input," and 'personal statement." The following section addresses implications of this survey and recommendations for disability services practitioners.

**Recommendations for Disability Services Practitioners**

The finding that there is significant variability in how information is presented on institutional websites of disability service is particularly important for students with disabilities. The website represents not only the policies and protocol for compliance and inclusion, but also the colleges’ mission and philosophy towards students with disabilities. A non-friendly or confusing website can be a turn-off to students. The *State of Learning Disabilities: Understanding the 1 in 5* report by the National Center for Learning Disabilities (2019) notes that 69% of students with learning disabilities do not inform their college’s DS office because they no longer considered themselves to have a learning disability (even though people do not “grow out” of learning disabilities). Reasons for not connecting with the disability services office include burdensome protocol and stigma associated with disabilities (Banerjee & Brinckerhoff, 2019). This study suggests lack of connection between disability services and students could also be due to information presented or lack thereof, on the website. The requirement that students provide disability documentation for accommodations and services is still observed by the vast majority of colleges, but insistence on documentation guidelines may be waning. This study found that only \((n=59, 50\%)\) of institutions required disability documentation to meet specific guidelines.

**Recommendations**

Disability services websites are the outward facing voice of the office. Clarity of processes used to determine accommodations and access is central to the website. Equally important is the opportunity to demonstrate how the office is responding to emerging research and trends in the field. Accommodations as an interactive process has gained significance since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (2008). Information on how a disability service office operationalizes the interactive process can help make the office more approachable to students. Recognizing that each student situation is different, the following recommendation are suggested:

- Consider describing how the office uses self-reported information in making accommodation decisions.
- Mention that accommodation determination is an interactive process between information shared by the student, technical standards as established by the program of study, course expectations identified in the syllabus by the faculty member, and information presented in the disability documentation (Banerjee, 2013).
- Note on the website that exceptions to the requirement of disability documentation and documentation guidelines may be considered on a case-by-case basis. This recommendation takes particular significance post COVID-19.
- Suggest ways students can develop a portfolio of information to establish their disability status and eligibility for accommodations in accordance with current trends, which notes that disability documentation may not be the sole determining criteria.
- Consider the profiles of the students attending the particular institution in describing the disability services office on the website. For example, an institution that primarily serves non-traditional age students should tailor their website information to be facilitative of the students’ circumstances and context.

For disability service practitioners, these results present a real opportunity to engage with students with disabilities who may have been disenfranchised with traditional approaches to accommodations and service delivery. Disability service websites need to address students’ self-reported information and accommodation determination as an interactive process more explicitly than in the past. Given the common mission of all disability services across all categories of postsecondary institutions, it is imperative that we have common practices for reporting of information that help students with disabilities connect with post-secondary disability offices.
References


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Manju Banerjee, Ph.D. is Vice President of Educational Research and Innovation at Landmark College, Putney, VT. She oversees the Landmark College Institute for Research and Training (LCIRT) and the Division of Educational Technology and Online Programs (ETOP). Dr. Banerjee has over 35 years of experience in the field of learning disabilities, ADHD, and postsecondary disability services. She is a certified diagnostician and teacher-consultant on learning disabilities. She has published and presented extensively, both nationally and internationally, on topics such as, disability documentation and accommodations, postsecondary transition, online learning, and universal design.

She has been and currently is PI/Co-PI on several federal, foundational, and NSF grants. Manju Banerjee is on the Executive Board of the Learning Disability Association of America and an editorial board member of the Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability; LD: A Multi-Disciplinary Journal, Professional Advisory Board member to the National Center on Learning Disabilities (NCLD), Learning Disability Association of America, and a consultant to Educational Testing Service, and Understood.org. She received her doctoral degree from the Neag School of Education, University of Connecticut, on the application of universal design to high stakes assessment. See Dr. Banerjee’s clip on UDL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_HHvRzemuHA.
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Joseph W. Madaus, Ph.D., is the Director of the Collaborative on Postsecondary Education and Disability, and a Professor in the Department of Educational Psychology in the Neag School of Education at the University of Connecticut. His research and publication interests include postsecondary education, transition, assessment and postschool outcomes of adults with disabilities. Address: Joseph W. Madaus, Neag School of Education, 249 Glenbrook Road, Unit 2064, Storrs, CT 06269; email joseph.madaus@uconn.edu.

Dr. Brinckerhoff is a nationally recognized authority on college students with learning disabilities (LD) and ADHD. He is the former Director of the Office of Disability Policy at Educational Testing Service (ETS) and a consultant to Harvard Medical School and Columbia University. He is co-author of one of the leading textbooks in the field, Postsecondary Education and Transition for Students with Learning Disabilities (PRO-ED). He has also written dozens of articles and book chapters for parents and professionals on high stakes testing, disability documentation, transition from high school to college, self-advocacy skills for adolescents and program planning for students with learning disabilities. Dr. Brinckerhoff is the past president of the Association on Higher Education & Disability (AHEAD) and recipient of its prestigious Ronald E. Blosser Dedicated Service Award.

Table 1

Language Describing Accommodation Process on Disability Services Websites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Does the website mention &quot;self-report,&quot; &quot;interactive process,&quot; or &quot;collaboration with student&quot; as part of accommodation determination?</th>
<th>Does the website mention words suggestive of an interactive process such as &quot;intake interview/form,&quot; &quot;accommodation request form,&quot; &quot;student input,&quot; or &quot;personal statement?&quot;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institution Type</td>
<td>Yes (%)</td>
<td>No (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Colleges</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n=118</td>
<td>(30)</td>
<td>(70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral</td>
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<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n=27</td>
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<td>(41)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n=21</td>
<td>(24)</td>
<td>(76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n=34</td>
<td>(24)</td>
<td>(76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associates</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n=36</td>
<td>(17)</td>
<td>(83)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution Type</th>
<th>Yes (%)</th>
<th>No (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Colleges</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral</td>
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<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Baccalaureate</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associates</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>No (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baccalaureate</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
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<td>Baccalaureate</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associates</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes (%)</th>
<th>No (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does the website mention disability documentation for accommodations?</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the website mention AHEAD or ETS documentation guidelines?</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the website mention disability documentation form required from the evaluator?</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the website mention &quot;disability documentation&quot; guidelines?</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the website identify disability documentation guidelines by disability categories?</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3

Information on IEP and 504 Plans on Disability Websites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution Type</th>
<th>Yes (%)</th>
<th>No (%)</th>
<th>Adequate (%)</th>
<th>Helpful (%)</th>
<th>Other (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Colleges</td>
<td>36 (31)</td>
<td>82 (69)</td>
<td>6 (17)</td>
<td>22 (61)</td>
<td>8 (22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n=118</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>15 (56)</td>
<td>12 (44)</td>
<td>3 (11)</td>
<td>8 (30)</td>
<td>4 (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n=27</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>4 (19)</td>
<td>17 (81)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>1 (5)</td>
<td>2* (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n=21</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baccalaureate</td>
<td>9 (26)</td>
<td>25 (74)</td>
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<td>7 (21)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n=34</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associates</td>
<td>8 (22)</td>
<td>28 (78)</td>
<td>1 (3)</td>
<td>5 (14)</td>
<td>2 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n=36</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *One site mentioned IEP but did not clarify further. Therefore, total does not add up to 4.
Table 4

**Difference of Proportions – t-test**

**Question:** Does the website mention “self-report” “interactive process” “collaboration with student” as part of accommodation determination?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>D</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>M</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>36</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion</td>
<td>0.3479</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.31</td>
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<tr>
<td>p-value</td>
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<td>0.0140*</td>
<td>0.0003**</td>
<td>0.9810</td>
<td>0.5098</td>
<td>0.5098</td>
<td>0.9810</td>
<td>0.5098</td>
<td>0.5098</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Question:** Does the website mention “disability documentation guidelines?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>D</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>M</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion</td>
<td>0.6733</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p-value</td>
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<td>0.0155*</td>
<td>0.0523</td>
<td>0.4984</td>
<td>0.2876</td>
<td>0.2876</td>
<td>0.4984</td>
<td>0.2876</td>
<td>0.2876</td>
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</table>

**Question:** Does the website mention “disability documentation for accommodations?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>D</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>M</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion</td>
<td>0.4731</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.79</td>
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<td>0.2405</td>
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<td>0.3479</td>
<td>0.6733</td>
<td>0.3479</td>
<td>0.3479</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. D=doctoral institutions, M=masters institutions, B=baccalaureate institutions, A=associates institutions.

**significant at 1%, **significant at 5%, *significant at 10%.

*Difference of Proportions – t-test*

**Table 4**
Manuscripts must be submitted electronically as attachments via email to jped@ahead.org.

Content

Manuscripts should demonstrate scholarly excellence in at least one of the following categories:

- Research: Reports original quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method research.
- Integration: Integrates research of others in a meaningful way; compares or contrasts theories; critiques results; and/or provides context for future exploration.
- Innovation: Proposes innovation of theory, approach, or process of service delivery based on reviews of the literature and research.
- Policy Analysis: Provides analysis, critique and implications of public policy, statutes, regulation, and litigation.

Format

All manuscripts must be prepared according to APA format as described in the current edition of The Publication Manual, American Psychological Association. For responses to frequently asked questions about APA style, consult the APA web site at http://apastyle.org/faqs.html

- All components of the manuscript (i.e., cover page, abstract, body, and appendices) should be submitted as ONE complete Word document (.doc or .docx).
- Provide a separate cover letter asking that the manuscript be reviewed for publication consideration and stating that it has not been published or is being reviewed for publication elsewhere.
- Manuscripts should be double-spaced and range in length between 25 and 35 pages including all figures, tables, and references. Exceptions may be made depending upon topic and content but, generally, a manuscript’s total length should not exceed 35 pages.
- Write sentences using active voice.
- Authors should use terminology that emphasizes the individual first and the disability second (see pages 71 - 76 of APA Manual). Authors should also avoid the use of sexist language and the generic masculine pronoun.
- Manuscripts should have a title page that provides the names and affiliations of all authors and the address of the principal author. Please include this in the ONE Word document (manuscript) that is submitted.
- Include an abstract that does not exceed 250 words. Abstracts must be double-spaced and located on page 2 (following the title page). Include three to five keywords below the abstract.
- Tables and figures must conform to APA standards and must be in black and white only. All tables and figures should be vertical and fit on the page; no landscape format. If Tables and/or Figures are submitted in image format (JPEG, PDF, etc.), an editable format must also be submitted along with a text description of the information depicted in the Table/Figure. This will be provided as alt format in the electronic version of JPED, making Tables/Figures accessible for screen readers.

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- Subject Line: JPED Manuscript Submission.
- Body of Email: Include a statement that you are submitting a manuscript for consideration for the JPED. Include the title of the manuscript and your full contact information.
- Attach to the email:
  - Your complete manuscript, prepared as directed above.
  - Cover letter as outlined above.

You will receive an email reply from Richard Allegra (Managing Editor of JPED) to confirm receipt of your submission within 5-7 business days.

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For manuscripts that are accepted for publication, Valerie Spears (JPED Editorial Assistant) will contact the lead author to request:

- A 40-50 word bibliographic description for each author, and a signed copyright transfer form (Valerie will send templates for both).
- Manuscript submissions by AHEAD members are especially welcome. The JPED reserves the right to edit all material for space and style. Authors will be notified of changes.
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JPED invites practitioners and/or researchers to submit Practice Briefs that can inform readers of innovative practices that could, in time, become the basis of an empirical study. Practice Briefs will describe new or expanded programs, services, or practices that support postsecondary students with disabilities. Practice Briefs are not research articles. Manuscripts that involve data analysis beyond the reporting of basic demographic data or evaluative feedback should be submitted as research articles. The overall length of a Practice Brief will be limited to 12 double-spaced pages, which includes separate title page, abstract, and references pages. Tables and/or figures may be submitted, too, above and beyond the 12 page limit.

Please submit all components of a Practice Brief (i.e., cover page, abstract, body, appendices) as a single Word document. These manuscripts should use the following headers/sections:

- **Title Page:** Title not to exceed 12 words. Identify each author and his/her campus or agency affiliation. State in your email cover note that the work has not been published elsewhere and that it is not currently under review by another publication.
- **Abstract:** The abstract needs to answer this question: “What is this paper about and why is it important?” The abstract should not exceed 150 words.
- **Summary of Relevant Literature:** Provide a succinct summary of the most relevant literature that provides a clear context for what is already known about your practice/program. If possible, describe similar practices on other campuses. Priority should be given to current literature published within the past 10 years unless an older, seminal source is still the best treatment of a particular topic/finding.
- **Depiction of the Problem:** In addition to a clear statement of the problem being addressed, consider the following questions when stating the purpose of the article: What outcome, trend, or problem might improve if your practice/program works? What gaps or problems or issues might persist or arise if this practice/program did not exist?
- **Participant Demographics and Institutional Partners/Resources:** Maintain the anonymity of the students, colleagues, and campus(es) discussed in the article but provide a clear demographic description of participants (e.g., number of students, disability type, gender, race and/or ethnicity whenever possible, age range if relevant) and the types of offices or agencies that were collaborative partners (if relevant).
- **Description of Practice:** Briefly and clearly describe your innovative practice/program and how it has been implemented to date. Tables and figures are encouraged to provide specific details you are comfortable sharing. They condense information and enhance replication of your practice/program on other campuses.
- **Evaluation of observed outcomes:** Whenever possible, summarize formative or summative data you have collected to evaluate the efficacy of your practice/program. This can be anecdotal, qualitative, and/or quantitative data. Support any claims or conclusions you state (e.g., “Our program greatly enhanced students’ ability to self-advocate during their transition to college”) with objective facts and/or behavioral observations to support these claims.
- **Implications and Portability:** Discuss what you have learned thus far and how you could further develop this practice/program in the future. Be honest about any challenges you may have encountered. This transparency enhances the rigor of your reporting. What would you do differently next time to achieve stronger outcomes? Provide a clear description of how and why disability service providers on other campuses should consider adapting your practice/program. Finally, how could your practice be studied by researchers? Identify possible research questions, hypotheses, or potential outcomes that could be studied if you and/or colleagues could expand the practice/program into a research investigation.
- **References:** Use the current APA guidelines to format and proofread your paper prior to submitting it. This includes the proper use of spelling, punctuation and grammar, appropriate use of headers, correct formatting in listing references, and formatting any tables or figures appropriately.

Upon Acceptance for Publication

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• Manuscript submissions by AHEAD members are especially welcome. The JPED reserves the right to edit all material for space and style. Authors will be notified of changes.

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JPED publishes one special issue per year (normally Issue 3, published in the fall). Special issues feature a series of articles on a particular topic. JPED welcomes ideas for special topical issues related to the field of postsecondary education and disability. The issue can be formatted as a collection of articles related to a particular topic or as a central position paper followed by a series of commentaries (a modified point/counter point). Authors who wish to prepare a special issue should first contact the JPED Executive Editor at jped@ahead.org.

The authors should describe the topic and proposed authors. If the series appears to be valuable to the readership of the JPED, the Executive Editor will share an Agreement Form to be completed and returned by the Guest Editor. The Executive Editor may provide suggestions for modification to content or format. The Guest Editor will inform authors of due dates and coordinate all communications with the contributing authors. Each special edition manuscript will be reviewed by members of the JPED editorial board members. The Guest Editor and the Executive Editor will be responsible for final editing decisions about accepted manuscripts.

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Please contact the JPED Executive Editor at jped@ahead.org to suggest books to be reviewed or to discuss completing a book review. Contact and discussion should be done before the book review is completed in order to expedite the procedures in the most efficient and fairest way possible.

Content and Format

In general, the book review should present:

• An overview of the book, providing the book’s stated purpose, the author’s viewpoint, and a general summary of the content.
• An evaluation of the book, elaborating on the author’s objectives and how well those objectives were achieved, the strengths and weaknesses of the book along with the criteria you used for making that assessment, and the organization and presentation of the book. Recommendations should specify to whom you would recommend the book, why, and how you would suggest the book be used, and address its potential contribution to our field.
• Citations within the book review should follow the current edition of the American Psychological Association (APA) style manual.

At the end of the review, please list your name and institutional affiliation.

Submission

The length of a book review can range from 800-1200 words. Please send in an email attachment in MS Word, double-spaced to jped@ahead.org per instructions above in “How to Submit Manuscripts.” After the review is submitted, the Executive Editor or designee will edit the manuscript and follow up with you about the publication process.

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