

Learning from Practices During COVID-19: Supporting Students Who Do Not Formally Disclose Disability Status in Higher Education (Practice Brief)

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Abstract

The numerous stressors and strains of the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to growing numbers of college students experiencing disabilities and needing support. This practice brief explores the challenges faced by disability resource professionals (DRPs) during the pandemic in reaching and supporting students potentially needing accommodations, but who had not formally disclosed a disability with the disability resource office (DRO). Findings highlight the challenges and areas for improvement to better engage students considered within the “pre-disclosure” status—students potentially needing accommodations and disability-based support who have yet to formally disclose to their institution’s DRO. Study participants echoed previous findings that there are more students experiencing a disability who have yet to disclose.

Keywords: students with disabilities, disability resource professionals, higher education, COVID-19

COVID-19’s impact on the higher education environment, including the rapid shift to remote coursework and student services, negatively altered the postsecondary experience for many students (Brown, 2021). While all students were affected by the pandemic-related changes, students with disabilities (SWDs) experienced significant disruptions accessing support services and disability-based accommodations (Madaus et al., 2021). During the first nine months of the pandemic, disability resource professionals (DRPs) reported an increase in information requests and student registration for disability services when compared to pre-pandemic numbers (Scott & Aquino, 2021). The changing instructional environment and widespread stressors on personal and academic life resulted in more students needing new or different accommodations during the COVID-19 lockdown (Scott & Aquino, 2020). For example, students with newly acquired or exacerbated mental health concerns experienced a need for disability services for the first time (Scott & Aquino, 2021). This practice brief discusses that, despite increasing student numbers and requests, DRPs

reported that one of their greatest concerns was reaching students not currently registered with the disability resource office (DRO).

Depiction of the Problem

At the college level, students are required to self-disclose their disability to receive support services. Yet the field has long recognized that many students opt for non-disclosure. National data indicate that nearly two-thirds of students who received special education in high school do not disclose their disability once they reach college (Newman & Madaus, 2015). There are numerous reasons why students choose not to formally disclose, including perceived stigma (Grimes et al., 2020), uncertainty with the self-disclosure process and available services (Abreu et al., 2017), and utilization of other supports such as the institution’s counseling center (Fleming et al., 2017). However, students choosing to forgo support services are at greater risk of underperforming in their coursework or dropping out (Kranke et al.,

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2013). With the intensified stressors of the pandemic and a cadre of students who were experiencing disability for the first time, the hazards associated with non-disclosure were likely more widespread than ever. This practice brief, informed by data collected from a large national study, discusses the challenges faced by DRPs during the COVID-19 pandemic in reaching and supporting students potentially needing accommodations but who had not formally disclosed a disability. We examine obstacles and opportunities for engaging students considered within this “pre-disclosure” status.

Setting and Participants

The data included in this practice brief were drawn from a larger national project investigating the perceptions and experiences of DRPs related to support for SWDs and accessibility initiatives throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. This phase of the project employed a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews of 11 DRPs recruited from the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) listserv. Criteria for project eligibility included individuals actively working at postsecondary institutions’ DROs. Participant information can be found in Table 1.

The larger study was guided by the concepts of Role Theory (Biddle & Thomas, 1966) from an organizational perspective (Biddle, 1986). Under this framework, individual performance or work behaviors are based on intra-role tasks (i.e., actions specified in the job description) and extra-role expectations or “all duties officially/unofficially expected to be done” (Shadbad & Biros, 2021, p. 572). Questions asked of the DRPs focused on the intra-role tasks and extra-role expectations of DRP responsibilities as they supported SWDs and engaged the postsecondary community to provide accessible and inclusive support.

A qualitative approach allowed for question development and interviewing strategies that centered around the exploration of how individuals experienced the world around them during the COVID-19 pandemic (Moustakas, 1994). Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and reviewed for accuracy. Member checking throughout the interview phase was utilized to ensure that the researchers’ interpretation of the data reflected the original perspective of the interview responses (Carlson, 2010). Qualitative codes were established for analysis in the Dedoose software. We identified and grouped significant statements and organized text descriptions to detail participants’ experiences (Miles et al., 2019). We then used an inductive coding strategy and organized the coded excerpts into themes common to all participants (Cre-

swell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative data were double coded to ensure consistency in the analysis phase.

As it relates to our positionality, it is important to highlight our commitment to and advocacy of individuals with disabilities. Although we serve in different roles, one a faculty member in higher education and one a research director of a non-profit organization, we both actively engage in the exploration of disability in the higher education setting.

There are several limitations to this project. Data were collected in July 2021. As the COVID-19 pandemic impacted individuals differently at different times, we recognize participants’ responses could have varied if the data collection occurred at a different point within the pandemic. Additionally, 11 DRPs were interviewed for this study. Rather than increase the overall sample size, it was determined that saturation was achieved (Hennink & Kaiser, 2021). Lastly, as this practice brief discusses how DRPs experienced obstacles and opportunities for engaging the “pre-disclosure” student group, we understand the complication of who is included in this student group and the various reasons why formal self-disclosure does not occur.

Aiding the Unknown: Disability Resource Professionals’ Perceptions of Supporting Students Not Formally Disclosing with the Disability Resource Office

While national data showed an increase in students requesting disability support services during the COVID-19 pandemic (Scott & Aquino, 2020, 2021), DRPs expressed concern based on their interactions with students at their institution, as well as their professional role in their campus community that many students who potentially needed services were not formally self-disclosing with their institutions’ DRO. Kristen shared with frustration: “People don’t disclose... a lot of people don’t disclose” and, after realizing the number of students not formally disclosing, Thomas remarked, “So many students were suffering in silence.” Data from the qualitative interviews repeatedly highlighted the need to better support “pre-disclosure” students, as well as identify and establish student-based initiatives to increase awareness around available disability and mental health student resources. Specifically, two themes emerged from the DRP interviews: (1) creating greater awareness of available disability support services and (2) support for increased use of proactive approaches to accessibility.

Table 1

DRP and DRO Information

Pseudonym	DRO Role	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	DRO Experience	Institution Level	Institution Sector	Institution Location	DRO Enrollment
Amanda	Coordinator	Female	White	1-5 Yrs	Four-year	Public	Northeast	1000
Barbara	Coordinator	Female	Middle Eastern	1-5 Yrs	Two-year	Public	Southwest	300
Caroline	Counselor	Female	White	11-15 Yrs	Two-year	Public	Southeast	600
Claire	Director	Female	White	6-10 Yrs	Four-year	Private	Northeast	500
Helen	Counselor	Female	Hispanic	6-10 Yrs	Four-year	Public	West	850
Kristen	Director	Female	White	6-10 Yrs	Four-year	Private	Northeast	350
Melissa	Director	Female	White	1-5 Yrs	Four-year	Private	Northeast	300
Theresa	Director	Genderqueer	White	20+ Yrs	Four-year	Private	Northeast	125
Thomas	Director	Male	Black	1-5 Yrs	Four-year	Private	Southeast	70
Tim	Coordinator	Male	White	1-5 Yrs	Four-year	Private	Southwest	1400
Yvonne	Assistant Director	Female	Hispanic	11-15 Yrs	Two-year	Public	Northeast	1000

Increasing Office Awareness

One theme that emerged was the need for increased outreach and awareness initiatives about the DRO and available supports. DRPs often balance a delicate role of not formally recruiting students to receive disability accommodations but instead increasing student awareness of the resources. As Amanda shared, “I don’t know if we purposely seek out students who haven’t disclosed a disability... We’re a place where students come for help.” Awareness of DRO services became more complicated due to the rapid transition to fully remote services and emerging disability needs brought on by the pandemic. For Thomas, it was important to attempt to create proactive communication for students: “We’re just trying to do all of this outreach on different spectrums to just make sure that no one’s slipping through the cracks.” While it may take time to reach more students, DRPs noted strategies highlighting how proactive and ongoing communication with the campus community can assist in announcing helpful information related to accommodations and other DRO services.

Theresa, was committed to supporting students’ needs throughout the quarantine process, as many students in isolation struggled with mental health. She noted they were “using the technology and trying to be very proactive with the students, so we did that throughout the semesters.” The pandemic also led to new approaches for increasing awareness and outreach. Yvonne explained, “Obviously you can’t ask the students, ‘You have a disability?’ but instead, ‘Hey, have you ever passed by accessibility services? That’s a service that you may benefit from.’” This approach was also used to encourage students without disabilities to be more aware of the DRO, campus accessibility efforts, and how the DRO supports student success within the higher education environment.

The Use and Buy-in of Proactive Approaches to Accessibility

A second theme was the increased importance of DRPs’ proactive role in promoting the use of accessible materials and strategies that reduced student needs for formal accommodations. As institutions rapidly transitioned to fully remote coursework and student services, DRPs were acutely aware of their institution’s continued obligation to assure accessible learning environments. This awareness was reinforced by a timely statement released by the United States Office for Civil Rights (OCR; 2020) clarifying that existing federal mandates for non-discrimination continued to apply during this time of crisis and included the emergency transitions to remote instruction. Many new practices emerged that out of

necessity expanded student learning options and allowed for greater flexibility and choice on the part of students. The proactive use of strategies that supported diverse learning needs (i.e., universal design [UD] approaches) took on greater urgency as a rapid response for including not only students with disabilities, but the entire student body.

Participants described varied responses to how the institutional community responded to this need. For Yvonne, it was a constant battle with faculty to remind them that simple changes, like recording and posting a lecture, proactively increase course accessibility. Such actions benefit students with disclosed disabilities as well as those with undisclosed disability or other diverse learning needs. Additionally, Kristen echoed the challenges with getting faculty buy-in for improving course accessibility during the COVID-19 pandemic. While she has found that some faculty members found the benefit of better adhering to accessible practices, due to her institution’s lack of support and clear policies around accessible practices, there was less of an incentive to adjust to a more universal design approach:

It’s been a really tough sell with our faculty for some reason...[but] I think some faculty have seen how effective being able to rewatch a lecture can be. So they all have that capacity to do it, but at this point, the university is really leaving it up to faculty, whether or not they use [accessible practices].

Conversely, Claire noted that her institution was committed to the use of accessible practices well before the COVID-19 pandemic started. She noted that when institutions commit to universal design practices, students who do not formally self-disclose their disability for potential accommodation use are still supported in their coursework because of the inclusive course design:

I think the answer to that is in part through universal design... So, I think a key to reaching that [pre-disclosure student] group, you need to decrease the stigma around receiving accommodations by just normalizing it by infusing yourself into the university, which is something that we’ve done.

While there were different approaches and levels of buy-in for accessibility of the remote course environment during the pandemic, findings highlight that DRPs recognized and embraced their role in supporting UD practices on campus.

Implications and Transferability

The stressors and strains of the pandemic led to growing numbers of college students experiencing disabilities and needing support. As it relates to Role Theory (Biddle & Edwin, 1966), this practice brief, informed by a larger study, identified how DRPs' intra-role tasks and extra-role expectations shifted and expanded within their organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic. DROs are tasked with supporting SWDs; however, with the influx of students encountering new or exacerbated disabilities, DRPs reported expanded work and expectations in student outreach as well as efforts to promote proactive approaches to access.

As DRPs explore new ways to reach out to students it will be important to provide DRO information and services in flexible and expanded ways. Virtual appointments, online office hours, chat functions on the DRO website, and instructional videos about campus services are among recommended practices for promoting student outreach. Campus communities can also support these efforts by including disability in broader campus diversity initiatives such as campus climate surveys and task forces. Embracing disability as an aspect of student diversity is needed to reframe and reduce the stigma of disability disclosure (Aquino, 2016). Lastly, the use of UD strategies, as reflected in the comments of participants, is an increasingly important approach to campus access. Administrative support for widespread training on barriers to students and the use of inclusive strategies for instruction and services is essential. Support through the campus teaching and learning center, and online resources, such as the repository of information provided by the University of Washington's Do-It program (n.d.), offer promising approaches to promoting a more inclusive learning environment for many diverse students, including those with undisclosed disabilities. Though the COVID-19 pandemic created the opportunity to better integrate accessible materials for student success, it is vital that institutions do not scale back on accessible resources in the transition from pandemic to endemic. While many institutions now integrate accessibility features within their learning management systems, the shift back to in-person learning revisited challenges for the accessibility of on-site coursework (Hope, 2021).

This practice brief examined DRPs experiences and perceptions of engaging students with a "pre-disclosure" status during the COVID-19 pandemic. While many strategies were implemented within higher education to create a more equitable and inclusive learning environment including the increased use

of UD-based student support services, the COVID-19 pandemic created additional complications and stressors that illuminated more need for accommodations and additional support services. With the transition from a pandemic to endemic, DRPs must not lose sight of maintaining UD-based strategies, but also continue to support students' diverse needs regardless of formal documentation or accommodation use within their institution's DRO.

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