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Experiences and perceptions of students with disabilities in higher education

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EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS

Experiences and Perceptions of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education

by

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Thesis

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Abstract

The following study includes the investigation of academic and social perspectives of students with disabilities (SWD) and their relationships with university faculty members as it pertains to the use of accommodations. Participants frequently talked about accommodations as being a large part of their experiences in their college career. Graduate students with disabilities use of accommodations leads to many different topics of negative and positive experiences, which can influence perceptions and behaviors of SWD. This study was designed to be qualitative by collecting the interviews of participants who identify as having a disability and attend a university in the Midwestern United States. Participant interviews were collected and analyzed for commonality and similar ideas across each participant's experience

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Problem Statement and Background Information

Higher education is an opportunity for people to advance their education and develop career skills. However, people with disabilities, which includes deafness, hard of hearing, visual impairments, specified learning disabilities, speech impairment, intellectual disabilities, mental illnesses, orthopedic, and other health impairments (Center for Disease Control, 2017), have often been denied this opportunity. In 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) passed, prohibiting discrimination against those with disabilities from being employed and offered equal opportunities, which included access to universities in the United States. Further, the Rehabilitation Act, section 504, requires postsecondary institutions to provide reasonable accommodation to students with disabilities (SWD). In the 2015-2016 year, 19.4% of undergraduate students enrolled at a 4-year university reported having a disability and 11.9% of students working toward a graduate degree indicated having a disability, (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). For many people with a disability, attending postsecondary education increases their likelihood of employment (Southward & Kyzer, 2017). A person with a disability who completed higher levels of education were more likely to be employed than those who completed less education. In 2018 only 4.5% of adults age 25 and older with a disability and with a bachelor's degree were unemployed. This can be compared to 15.5% of adults 25 and older with a disability, who are high school graduates with no college degree and were unemployed in the 2018 year (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). While access to higher education has increased for people with a disability, their experiences in a college setting varies greatly.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study is to seek insight into the experiences of SWD in higher education. This study specifically investigates the use of accommodations in higher education and the academic and social impact it has on the relationship between students and faculty members. Understanding the feelings and experience from different SWD helps provide an insight to the social and emotional effects the use of accommodations has. This information can be used by university faculty members to examine their practice and improve the academic and social experiences for SWD.

Research question. In this research project, my goal is to understand the experiences and perceptions of students with disabilities in higher education. One essential question guided my work: How does the use of accommodations affect SWD in higher education academically, socially, and emotionally?

Review of the Literature

Discrimination. Even with the ADA and the Rehabilitation Acts in place, SWD may still feel discriminated against in higher education. Hong (2015) found patterns that indicated students refrained from notifying faculty that they had a disability in fear that it would change the faculty's mind about their ability to complete a course. Yssel, Pak, and Beilke (2016) reported that students had expressed feelings of being treated differently by faculty because of their disability. For example, one participant felt their professors were uncomfortable in situations where their disability was mentioned. Another participant in this study noted feelings of embarrassment and shame as some faculty members would announce her accommodations in class (Yssel et al., 2016). Lyman, Beecher, Brooks, Call, and Jackson (2016) findings prove that

some students had put their academics at risk by not requesting arranged accommodations to avoid adverse social reactions or being viewed and treated differently. They reported that some students feel that they are a burden by using their accommodations in class. Denhart (2008) discovered the pattern of reluctance to use accommodations as SWD did not want to be perceived as lazy by their professors. A similar reason was given by a participant in Hong's (2015) study. The participant stated she was hesitant to notify faculty about her accommodations in fear she would be looked at as being less capable.

In higher education, SWD also felt discrimination from their peers. Yssel et al., (2016) found that participants felt negative peer attention drawn to them when a professor would announce out loud what he did to accommodate their needs to learn during class. Hong (2015), found that SWD felt pressured to fit in by their peers out of desire to be viewed and treated the same. One participant noted this feeling when discussing testing room accommodations. The participant stated that she would rather attempt to fit in with the rest of her peers in class than head down to a testing room and have attention drawn. Denhart (2008) found students with disabilities feel frustration as they must use more time and energy to work on assignments and study in comparison to their peers.

Interestingly, Yssel et al., (2016) inquired about participant's overall view or satisfaction with their academic experience in college. The researchers found that a majority of SWD facing difficulties with faculty at the university still reported feeling positive about their overall college experience. Fleming, Oertle, Plotner, and Hakun (2017) investigated the student satisfaction of social factors in college SWD. They measured students' feelings of belonging and their satisfaction with the college they chose. They discovered that a student's perception of belonging and self-advocacy abilities leads to higher satisfaction and retention.

Faculty Preparedness. Even though the rate of SWD enrolled in higher education is rising, faculty do not appear to be prepared to work effectively with SWD. This is supported from both viewpoints, SWD and faculty members. Although most faculty may feel that they are ADA compliant and have had some experience coordinating services for SWD, there are times when they are still unsure of how to accommodate SWD (Stevens, Schneider, & Bederma-Miller, 2018).

A study completed by Banks (2018) concluded that many faculty members feel that they understand the effects of certain disabilities on students' learning-and understand how student's accommodations work. Yet-these same faculty members are reluctant or will not provide major accommodations to students. Some SWD have said that their professors would not alter rules or parts of the course for their significant accommodations granted by their university (Hong, 2015). For example, two participants discussed that one of their accommodations was for flexible attendance. These participants had similar stories about how their professors told them missing class would hurt their grade and provided no alternatives.

Faculty advisors have also been reported to be a barrier to participant's success. Hong (2015)-reported that 62% of the SWD participants in the study have experienced poor faculty advising. These participants felt that their advisors had a lack of knowledge of disability and were unresponsive. This lack of expertise and attentiveness caused some students' schedules to be misguided by registering for the wrong classes, causing delay in graduation.

Justification and Significance

Based on the current literature reviewed, many studies focus on the academic experiences, perceptions, and social aspects of SWD in higher education from a wide-angle. A

surprising pattern found among the literature was students preferring to not use their available accommodations in fear of compromised relationships with faculty members. This study focuses on the investigation of academic and social perspectives of SWD and their relationships with university faculty members as it pertains to the use of accommodations. Sharing of the participants' experiences will give faculty members a better understanding of what their roles and responsibilities are to their SWD so that they are better able to support them both academically and socially.

Chapter 2: Methodology

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of SWD and their views of how the use of their accommodations affects their academic and social relationships with university faculty members. Qualitative research provides data that is often collected in the form of interviews and then uses direct quotes to support the conclusions made from said interviews (Nelson, 2017). Qualitative research was the most appropriate for this study, as it allowed participants to share their stories, giving them a voice. There is currently quantitative data available on the experiences of students in higher education with disabilities, but it does not show the true nature and emotions of the participants. A qualitative research design left room for the interpretation of participants' real emotions associated with their experiences and allows for specific events to be revealed.

Recruitment and Informed Consent

A recruitment letter was sent via email to the departmental resources staff, at four-year institutions found in the midwestern states of the U.S., which was forwarded on to SWD. Students who were interested in participating in this study had been encouraged to contact the researcher through email or phone call, depending on the needs of the participant.

The criteria that had to be met for students to participate in this study was that the individual must self-identify as having a disability and attend a four-year university in the midwestern part of the United States. Once it was determined an interested person met the criteria for participation in this study, she received an informed consent form in a format of their choosing.

The informed consent included a simple explanation of the purpose of this study, the duration of the study, description of all possible risks and benefits from participating in the study, how identifying information will be kept and maintained, and contact information of personnel that participant may contact with questions. The informed consent also stated that participation in this study is voluntary and participants may discontinue their participation at any time. The informed consent document was presented in a format of their choosing that was easily understood for the participant.

Participants

Three participants were recruited and interviewed about their experiences pertaining to the academic, social, and emotional aspect of accommodations for their disability in high education. All participants were students who possessed a bachelor's degree and were currently enrolled in graduate level/ bridge programs for allied health professions. Table 1 has organized participant data. Participants ranged from their early to late 20's. All three participants reported having accommodation plans in place for their disability, through their departmental resources for SWD.

Table 1.

Participant demographics

Participant's Name	Accommodation Access	Disability	Age	Degree
Patrick	-504 plan -University	-Cerebral Palsy	27	Graduate
Melanie	-University	-Dyslexia -ADHD	24	Graduate
Nathan	-University -Medication	-ADHD	25	Graduate

*ADHD: Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

Patrick. Patrick is a 27-year old male graduate student who hopes to become part of the service industry or health care field. He was born with cerebral palsy and has experienced physical disabilities that come with his condition. He described his school experience going to various public schools and completing his secondary education in a small alternative school for various reasons. Patrick was excited to share his story and has succeeded academically since grade school though he faced many challenges along the way including discrimination and poor accessibility: “I had an IEP and a 504 all the way through. But I just needed physical accommodations uhm, so I got like you know, a little bit of extra time on tests that required essays.”

Melanie. Melanie is a 24-year old female that was diagnosed with the learning disability dyslexia through her public school district. She also experiences ADHD and has noticed she requires more time and effort dedicated to her schooling for success. Her self-esteem played a large role in her academic experiences growing up:

In middle school decided I didn't want to be on caseload anymore so I was no longer placed in the independent study classes, that were provided for the students with disabilities. I think it was mainly an ego thing, like self-Esteem. Trying to like, feel like I fit in.

Often, Melanie found herself advocating for testing accommodations she needed with teachers:

And so I had to talk with uhm, teachers on my own and kind of explain to them my situation. And they, the teachers themselves were very helpful and accommodating, it was more of the higher up employees that weren't...

She is currently in a master's bridge program related to the medical field, which she hopes to use to get into medical school. Melanie elaborated on how much she enjoyed the disabilities resource center at her undergraduate university: "It was called Disability Resource Services. And they sent out like weekly newsletters, weekly opportunities, to collaborate with other students in the disability resource center, all the staff was so helpful..."

Nathan. Nathan is a 25-year old male graduate student. Unlike Patrick and Melanie, Nathan's disability was diagnosed later: "I wasn't diagnosed with ADHD until I was a senior in high school." He found himself having an easier time in grade school: "I pretty much just sailed through uhm you know grade school, uhm, didn't have to work really hard to get good grades." He completed his bachelor's degree at a Midwestern university and is now currently attending the same university for his master's in public health. Nathan is currently waiting to get into medical school at a university in the Midwestern United States. He was diagnosed with ADHD his senior year of high school and has noticed since starting college that he needs academic accommodations and takes a daily prescription.

Data Collection

Data was collected in the form of interviews after the informed consent was signed by the participant and researcher. Interviews with participants were held in mutually agreed upon spaces in person or over the phone. Interview questions were semi-structured based on the work of Seidman (2006). These semi-structured interview questions followed a format of asking about background in education, present experiences, and reflection of the information discussed by the participants. Examples of interview questions were as follows:

- Tell me about your educational background.

- Do you always disclose information about your disability to your professors? Peers?
- What are your experiences with professors or university faculty in the classroom?
- What higher education disability support services do you use?
- Are there any accommodations you are entitled to but choose not to use? Why?
- Does your disability have any effect on social opportunities in higher education?

The interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes long with follow-up interviews as needed and were audio recorded.

The researcher completed all transcriptions. To reduce the amount of risk, all participant's identifying information was removed from their recordings and all forms of data. Participants were assigned a pseudonym, and their de-identified transcripts will be maintained for three years. Transcriptions and identifying information of participants is stored on a USB drive placed in a safe with a key lock.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data using a modified version of Hycner's (1985) approach. Once all the interview transcriptions were complete, I read through each transcript to understand what the main idea, or general theme of each participant's story was. I broke down each transcript sentence by sentence looking at each quote, and what topics they relate to. After doing so, I looked to see where commonalities were between each participant to further develop patterns of the experiences each participant had.

Positionality

My interest in SWD attending higher education comes from my own experiences. At the age of 8, I was diagnosed with a learning disability in math, also known as dyscalculia. My

disability had adverse effects on the perception of my abilities throughout primary and secondary education. Even as a graduate student, I still face new challenges with my disability. By the completion of my undergraduate degree, I had met two fellow peers with disabilities in my program of study. Their negative experiences shared with me left me feeling shocked and surprised how much they differed from my own. Their experiences differed from mine and led me to wonder what higher education was like for other SWD.

Being able to conduct this thesis would be fulfilling and rewarding. Rewarding in that I will provide students the opportunity to tell their story and express their feelings. It is also a learning opportunity to see and understand how other students with disabilities have been able to work their way through college and provide information to those interested in this area of research.

Definitions

Accommodations: Services used to give students access to instruction and try to eliminate any barriers keeping the student from participating in a course. An example would be, allowing a student to type their test answers because they are unable to hold and manipulate a pencil (Bolt, & Thurlow, 2004).

Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: a neurodevelopmental disorder that is often diagnosed or first noticed in childhood and can continue into adulthood. Individuals with ADHD had difficulties in controlling impulses and paying attention. They may also experience being overly active (Center for Disease Control, 2020).

Bridge Program: A student who can take graduate level courses with other graduate students to develop skills and curricular experiences in professional development to prepare students to enter their doctoral programs confidently (University of Michigan, 2020).

Disability: An impairment that causes difficulty for an individual to carry out or participate in certain activities. A disability can be an impairment physically or mentally. A disability can be caused by conditions present at birth and create struggle for the individual as they age. An individual's disability may affect their behavior, ability to move and get around, sight, cognition, and hearing. Some examples of disabilities are vision impairments, impairments to movement, mental health, communication impairments, hearing impairments, and learning impairments (Center for Disease Control, 2017).

Chapter 3: Results

Theme: Accommodations

Accommodations refer to the use of support services for academic needs.

Accommodations provide access to instruction for students and help to eliminate barriers they may experience with their disability in school (Bolt & Thurlow, 2004). Patrick, Melanie, and Nathan discussed experiences relating to accommodations. They elaborated on the process of acquiring accommodations and when they chose to disclose this information. They expressed their needs for these accommodations and their understanding of when to use them.

Subtheme: Acquiring accommodations. Participants received accommodations throughout their entire educational career. In K-12, accommodations are often set up and given to students without their active participation. In college it is a different process. SWD who attend universities often must self-advocate for themselves to get accommodations. These students must locate the departmental resource for SWD where they organize and set up documentation for accommodations. The participants explained their accommodation process. While similarities existed, each participant's story was unique.

Throughout each participant's interview they wanted to provide clarification on what they must do to acquire their accommodations. At Nathan's university, the process was simple and straightforward: "They are really accessible. If you need to set up an appointment, all you have to do is email a person." Once accommodations are in place, they are sent to faculty "it automatically goes out and then it includes a statement and then a copy of [his] accommodations visa." Nathan went on to describe what needed to be done to keep his accommodations year to year: "I'm required to meet with basically the director of operations to review my

accommodations. Just to make sure that it's adequate." Patrick revealed that sometimes acquiring accommodations was a difficult multi-step process: "I went to the DRC (Disability Resource Center) and then had to have a meeting with our program directors and then one all together, us figuring it out." Nathan also expressed difficulty in getting accommodations at times: "I met with one guy when I needed accommodations... I walked away from that meeting like, what the heck did I just talk about? I got my accommodations letter, so I really didn't care."

All three participants had their accommodations memorized so well it was like they read from a bulleted list. Patrick began discussing his accommodations, which were mostly physical:

I went through them for my accommodations in my 504 that I already had and I registered in their disability office. And I initially asked for accommodations for the clinical portion of my program and asked for someone to help me clean up and set up my sessions. And then someone to help walk my client back to the clinic office I was in, to the therapy room.

While Patrick had accommodations previously set up, Nathan's accommodations did not come into place until he started college: "Time and a half on all exams, a separate testing place, as free as possible of all distractions." He continued, "A new one that was added, well this school year was all my exams have to be done by 5 p.m. to catch the working time of my medication."

Melanie said she uses "distraction free space, to take exams or quizzes." She explained, "So it just entails going into a separate room or taking the exam in my professor's office. And then I also utilize time and half for exams."

Subtheme: Disclosing accommodations. Disclosing accommodations is when an individual informs another about their disability and accommodations they may need. Disclosing

in higher education is done with peers or professors so that SWD may receive their accommodations required in class. Patrick, Nathan, and Melanie concluded that the need to disclose information about accommodations varies from student to student.

Due to the physical nature of Patrick's impairment, he does not feel the need to disclose his impairment because "that's the first thing people see." His attitudes and feelings are mixed, when peers ask him about his disability and accommodations: "Yeah, I mean you know people. People will ask me and I'm pretty open. So I'll tell people if they want to know." Melanie has a similar view about disclosing to peers. She described to me telling her peers about her invisible disability but often feels less comfortable about disclosing her accommodations:

I do share it with my peers that I have dyslexia and ADHD. But I don't always disclose to them that I get accommodations for those disabilities...But I do if they ask like if they were like 'where were you, I thought you were taking the exam with us?' I'm like 'Oh I just take it in a different room.

For Nathan, his take and approach to disclosing accommodations to peers is more open. He touches on how accepting and welcoming his peers are when he discloses. In noting this, he said, "Not in like a protective kind of way but I've found that my peers are super welcoming with my, you know, with my shearing." He then provided more insight on his views about disclosing to his peers: "I'd rather have somebody know something about me that you know, may be perceived as a weakness, and then use my own knowledge of my disability to you know, portray it as a strength." Touching on the security and confidence he has in disclosing, Nathan shared:

I mean, I can see why some people wouldn't want to be as open. And I'm sure that you know, coming from, I went to the number one research institution in the country. So, I

have like this socially, I guess a way to back up. To prop up my disabled status if that makes sense? Which you know, is very different from the majority of people who have ADHD.

Each participant was asked about when they disclose accommodations with professors. The participants cover the spectrum of how often they disclose information, ranging from hardly disclosing in class, to disclosing when they feel it is needed for the class, to always disclosing prior to the start of the semester. On the end of hardly disclosing to professors, is Patrick who says,

It just depends on what the situation calls for. You know if I'm in a class where I know I don't need the accommodations, or I know I just don't then I won't. But I do, I do if I feel the need to disclose. Like if a class is a lot of written tests, I will sometimes ask for extra time or disclose in that sense but no I usually don't honestly. People have their own qualities right. So, people know upon seeing me, so in that sense there's no like real disclosing to do. The only time, the only time I ever really felt that actual need to disclose was when I was doing the clinical stuff. I had to get accommodations there, so I really like went in on the first day with the intentions of telling them exactly what I needed to see if they'd follow it.

Fitting into the middle of the spectrum, is Melanie. She looks back to her undergraduate years and recalls, "Well I would say then, in undergrad I would say I disclosed it to every professor, and I would say that it was because I had a good support system behind me with a disability resource center." She went on to say, "The first time I was talking about being uncomfortable disclosing, that was definitely for grad school. I was definitely more comfortable for undergrad." Melanie explained:

So I don't. I only disclose my disability when I need, extra time on tests, like when the course has exams... So, I don't. And it may be my own preconceived notion that 'oh they're going to think I'm dumb if I tell them that I have a learning disability and that it may be very deeply rooted, like it's not my instant, like first thought. But I think about and think well do I want to have a conversation with them?

As she shared this information, there was disappointment, and she continued, "Like I have never talked to my professors in person about my disability here at [university]."

Nathan, whose views are on the opposite side of the spectrum, said, "I feel strongly about telling teachers right away." He felt disclosing was to his benefit in many ways. He provided an example to show how adamant he is disclose his information as soon as possible: "Even before a semester starts. I have gotten to the point where I can have an email scheduled to send out, like it automatically goes out. And then it includes a statement and then a copy of my accommodations visa."

Theme: Barriers

SWD face barriers on multiple levels in higher education. This theme focuses on the walls that come with being a SWD. Each participant has faced many barriers through their college careers including transitioning to college, accessibility while in college, extra time needed for coursework in higher education, and difficulty with faculty.

Subtheme: College transition. A role that most secondary educators play in a student's life is to prepare them for college. With any transition, preparing for it can help make things go more smoothly. For these participants, their disabilities made it more challenging to have a smooth transition and keep up with the pace of classes. Melanie started by saying, "It definitely

hit me harder that I had learning disabilities in undergrad than it did while I was in high school.” She continued how to express her feelings of standing out from her peers as she began college. For Melanie, reminiscing on this memory brought a lot of emotions back. With anxiety, in her voice, she shared:

In high school I felt more like everyone else but in college I realized how much longer it really does take me to do things, how I do process information a lot differently than other students. It was very evident in the classroom, which caused a lot of anxiety for me and made it even more difficult to pay attention in the classroom because I felt like I couldn’t keep up with reading the slides or writing down my notes or like simply looking towards the board.

As for Nathan, his transition challenges came when he switched majors in the first few year of his undergraduate degree. He said, “I didn’t have to really work really hard to grapple with my condition until I switched to like a pre-med, pre-clinical kind of you know field of study.” Unlike Melanie and Nathan, Patrick did not express any anxieties or barriers transitioning from high school to college. He felt this was primarily because his accommodations were mainly physical. Melanie and Nathan’s discussions conveyed stress in discussing a tough change realizing that college is more challenging and presenting more barriers because of their disability.

Subtheme: Accessibility. Accessibility is a term used often when talking about the daily lives of individuals with disabilities. The term in this research project refers to the lack of access to accommodations or to curricular requirements due to disability. Accessibility can be an initial barrier faced by SWD during their college experience.

Back tracking, Melanie discussed how accessibility has been a barrier since high school. She shared, “It was very, very hard to get accommodations through the school and school district. And the faculty was, like, rude, very rude and hard to work with when trying to get accommodations.” Patrick also talked about how he had to change schools during K-12 due to accessibility issues. He said, “So I went there [new school] mostly for accessibility reasons because they had a much smaller school and an elevator there that I could use.”

K-12 is not the only time during these participants’ education where they faced accessibility barriers. Patrick, during his clinical experience in his graduate program, experienced an accessibility issue that was a daily occurrence. He sounded flustered as he said, “The table was too high in the file room for me to actually comfortably get files out.” Patrick came up with a solution, but it was turned down: “So I just asked them if I could have the GA [graduate assistant] put files in there for me. And they were like no, of course not.” Another barrier which prevented access to the curriculum for Patrick was in his search for an internship. Patrick described a placement lined up for him by his university coordinator and how the internship “pulled out.” Patrick described this placement with joy:

I got into an internship in an outpatient facility working with TBI [Traumatic Brain Injury] patients, and it was gonna be cool because it was gonna be me on one floor going from room to room to see clients and getting some clients brought to me but mostly going from room to room on the same floor which was no big deal. They placed me in my home city, so I was just going to be able to go roll out of bed and go to work.

Unfortunately, he found out shortly after that he was no longer assigned to that site. He described the situation as being “really difficult.” Patrick shared his opinion on why the internship site backed out:

At that time my supervisor had told these people about my disability and so that was reasonable, you know. There was a reasonable possibility that they pulled out because of what they heard. So, I'm not saying that's what happened but it's possible.

Melanie faced barriers in accessing her accommodations in college as well. When sharing, she talked about it as if it was normal and something she has come accustomed to. She shared:

I could have utilized an hour and half. I would still take the test in the classroom with my peers. Just because of the simple fact that it's easier to access. Like setting up a room and setting up a different time I can take the exam, imposes, like barriers. So sometimes it's just easier to go to the exam in the regular class, with the regular distractions, with the regular time in order to avoid those roadblocks, of having to make other arrangements.

For Patrick, physical needs and academics were not the only things inaccessible to him during his graduate program. Patrick describes his feelings of alienation and being left out by his cohort:

It was very hard for me to participate in classes, especially like the first couple months. Like no one at the school wanted to talk to me, like in my cohort, at all. And like there was one, one girl who kinda felt bad for me. And would do stuff with me because she felt bad...Nobody wanted to work with me because they had misconceptions and stuff like that.

It was not until the second half of his first semester where he met people from different cohorts who "were a lot cooler." Not being able to access things as those without disabilities can be distressing and upsetting for SWD, as both participants expressed.

Subtheme: Additional time and effort. When something is a challenge an individual will often spend more time on it to be successful. For SWD, sometimes having a disability can

mean spending more time outside of the classroom on schoolwork in comparison to peers. Each participant describes many times in their educational experience when extra effort was needed as barriers became brick walls to academic success.

Melanie put in extra time and effort to make sure she got the accommodations she needed “So I had to talk with teachers on my own and kind of explain to them my situation.” As previously discussed, the challenge of classes in her undergraduate years greatly differed from high school. She said, “I had really good resources and knew that I had to just dedicate more time outside of class to my studies.” She expanded on the time and effort she needs for classes. With frustration she spoke to how there are not accommodations made for additional time in college. Melanie shared, “Like the outside work, like the classwork, it just takes me forever to do, and I need that time no matter what on that course work because it takes me so long, just so fricken long.” Nathan compared the additional time he spends to how much time his peers spend: “College has become harder, it’s more difficult than for my peers. Because you know, I have to put in extra work than my peers work to you know, like, to get average, or to be average I mean for me has felt like as a student.” Nathan continued, “The fact that I have tutor, you know, it’s just a reminder that I do struggle more than the average person does to grasp these kinds of really difficult theoretical kinds of questions. You know, that’s just a reminder.” He continued to compare himself to his peers. Nathan shared, “During the week I set a more rigid schedule for like sleep right. So, whereas lots of people can just, like don’t need to have adequate sleep and still function more or less at baseline.” He gave an example discussing how extra time has limited his social time and opportunities: “There are lots of times where I would leave or go back to my room earlier than the rest of them would. Or even like if they were studying for an exam, we had the next day.”

For Patrick, other barriers have caused him to need to put in more effort and time.

Returning back to his story about losing his internship, he said:

I had to do it myself. Nobody really helped me and nobody really stood up for me so, I just made it happen myself. I pretty much contacted every person [professionals working in field of study] I knew in the city because I knew that with the internship the responsibility of getting a replacement internship was now on me. So, I got an internship with my friend who works at an elementary school.

Patrick returned to talk about his peers' reactions to his setbacks that he had to provide more effort for. Angrily, he expressed,

Everybody was trying to say like, "Oh man, no problem, you know, it's gonna work out. Because you'll get an extra year and you won't have to move as fast." People were already writing me off so you know. So, I got my internship through my friend and then I supplemented that with part-time in the clinic.

Patrick shared another time where he had to put in effort when he did not receive accommodations. He would wait to do certain tasks in a short period of time, when faculty members of the university clinic were not around. He said:

I just went to one of the people who worked in the clinic. Like, one of the student GA's and was like "hey this is what's going on, they won't help me, they're being crazy. Like can you just help me do this and this?" So what I just did was I just tried to do as much as I could do filing with the GA when faculty were out at lunch. For Patrick, this was distressing to discuss. Getting more upset, he continued, "I just did what I needed to do. It's extra work, nobody wants to do extra work."

Patrick was not the only participant frustrated with his peers' lack of understanding. Melanie found her need for additional time on schoolwork inhibited her ability to socialize. She shared, "Simply, I just do not have enough time. There's just not enough time in the day to accomplish all of my schoolwork and also make time to socialize." Being that socializing is a big part of life, Melanie will choose to socialize over schoolwork sometimes. She shared what that is like: "And sometimes, I do just end up going out to these events or group meetings, but then my grade would suffer. So it's really hard to manage the two." With great frustration Melanie said, "I do not think anyone understands what I mean when I say, 'oh it takes me longer' " She provided further insight by sharing,

They always ask me and I'm like "dude no, I don't know how you did this homework so fast, but like I'm still working on it." Like it takes me a substantial amount, like longer time than everyone else to get stuff done and that directly influences my opportunities to socialize.

She took a deep breath and looked at one positive: "My one friend that I do homework with in my cohort in our classes. No matter what we are doing together, it always takes me twice the amount of time." She added, "I think she is starting to understand how my brain processes information differently."

Subtheme: Faculty. For SWD sometimes faculty members at their university can be an unexpected barrier. The participants touched base on times where faculty have put them in inconvenient situations. For Patrick, this included being underestimated by teachers and faculty he has met along the way. Starting in grade school, his talents and intelligence was belittled:

When I was in I think 7th grade I uh did this paper or essay or whatever, and I did it all by myself, and my teacher contacted my parents saying, “this is way too good you had to of wrote this for him. There’s no way he could have done this.” But they like made a whole big deal out of it and really questioned me about it.

For Patrick this was only the beginning. He went on to say, “That kind of, that was the start of like, the whole like me having a chip on my shoulder and me realizing like that I need to speak very loudly and tell people exactly what I can do.” As he elaborated on how he advocates strongly for his abilities, another example of when he was doubted came to mind. Patrick faced many underestimations in college. He said, “One of my undergrad professors was like, ‘Hey you need these accommodations’ and I was like, ‘No I don’t’ and we went back and forth.” Patrick did not use accommodations and was successful in this professor’s class. He spoke to this and said, “Moments like that teach me to trust myself.”

Faculty members at times can say things that are hurtful and upsetting to students. Patrick experienced this firsthand with his department faculty and disability resource center representative. He shared what they had said to him “They kind of said ‘We don’t know what to do with you so can we get a list of accommodations from you that you think you need.’ And ‘We feel like the pace is too fast for you and this and that stuff.’ ” He then shared his disappointment in his coordinators:

But I felt like there was no need for it, I felt like they should have worked harder. There’s no reason for me to be or want to be on my own because when you get into the program they tell you, don’t get your own [internship].

Melanie speaks on how unwelcoming her faculty makes her feel sometimes. She started with:

Like in grad school I tell them and they're like, "Okay, you're still a student and I'm not going to treat you any differently," which has its pros and cons, because they still expect you to process information quickly and answer questions in class quickly.

As she continued to speak about how faculty portrays themselves, Melanie painted a picture of them being less caring. She shared:

Now here at [university], they're like "just send me an email of a copy of your report and accommodations." It's not like they're being rude about it at all. It's just they don't have time and they're like, "I have a thousand other students and things going on and I don't really care to talk to you about it."

Nathan and Patrick describe their experiences being denied their accommodations by faculty members. Nathan often struggled to find times to meet with his advisor. He elaborated, "She's never around, she's always in Thailand so that's why I picked up a second advisor." This was his most minor barrier created by faculty members at his university. Nathan discussed an experience at a university where he took summer classes. The professor denied accommodations for all students. Nathan gave her the benefit of the doubt and said, "It was probably a cultural thing, she had come from Jamaica. Like she made it pretty clear right off the bat that she didn't, she wasn't going to be like sensitive to people with like, you know, disabilities." Still in disbelief by the entire situation he described how this affected his performance. He shared:

It came to the point where, I think it was the final exam. It was take-home, but it was timed. So, she failed to give me enough time per my accommodations. She failed to give

me enough time to take the test and treated me like all of the other students. And it resulted in a lower grade because I like literally wasn't able to finish the test.

Even giving his best efforts to share his concern about his performance, he saw no improvements. Nathan explained what he did next: "She ignored all of my like emails. Like before and like during that time. And I took it to the university and it went all the way up to like whoever the vice president of student services was."

Patrick had a similar experience where faculty did not cooperate at all with his accommodations. Patrick first expresses his firm beliefs:

You're relying on people to be cool about things that are federally recognized and in a sense that can get tough. Because when I was in clinic they were not as cool about accommodating me at all. Because really even though its federally recognized, you're going on the word of someone else to give you things you are granted, but it's just how it goes.

He continues his story by comparing clinical faculty to his professors: "The professorial faculty was also pretty bad but like it wasn't nearly as bad as it was with the clinic." Patrick was denied his physical accommodation needs, "I need somebody to help me set up, somebody to walk back my clients back and stuff." He shared how he asked his clinical educators for his accommodations:

And she was like 'no.' And I already had them written in for me. You know so now I'm like what do I do? Like these people were supposed to help me out based on this federally recognized right and they did not.

Patrick strategically found ways to get assistance from peers and a graduate assistant. He described his perceived attitudes of his factors, "They were like, 'Oh shit!' They realized this is federally recognized and we can't really do anything about it. We can make it hard for him though." Emotional, he continued to share how he was treated:

They would literally make these snide comments and say all these terrible things to me because they knew they couldn't do anything about something they wanted to stop. And so, at every turn they would just make me feel like I was getting special treatment and they really were just treating me like shit, I'm sorry, they were treating me really badly.

As he talked more about finding people to help him with his needs so that he could be successful, he shared his feeling during this barrier. Patrick expressed:

I would say this, it was really scary, it was the scariest time because it was high stakes. Like this wasn't just some stupid public school whatever, it was like it was my grad program. You know, I thought that something better, you know, that this would be a more accommodating place, especially if you look at our field. Honestly, that's the point of the entire field is to help people with disabilities. That's why I myself got in it. So for me to come and ask them for seriously such simple accommodations and they were like "no" that was very disappointing.

Starting to feel less uncomfortable about sharing negative experiences, Nathan opened up about a time at his current university he goes to. Like Patrick, Nathan had a professor who made things hard for him. Though this professor accepted his accommodations, he still made it hard on Nathan. Starting the story, he shared, "One professor, one older guy, actually now he is retiring wasn't quite willing to you know, get to the level of understanding." He explained it plain and simple: "But, he really didn't want to try and meet me where I am." Nathan explained he felt that

this professor “doesn’t really care” due to being old and soon retiring. Nathan explained in what ways this professor would not meet with his needs:

Like he dropped the ball every exam, so I had to schedule the room for my exams. He would make me schedule my own exams, but he would also like make me go get the exam from him. Like where the other students are and then make me walk back like across campus. I had to go find him afterwards. He like was basically the reason why I got that extra accommodation on for testing time, cause he wanted, he was trying to get me to take my exams like later than everyone else.

Shocked by the stubbornness of a professor being respectful of his accommodations, Nathan called the whole situation “really inappropriate.” It became so inconvenient that he brought it to the attention of a third party. He said, “And so I ended up going to not only the services for students with disabilities but also the leadership for public health. They more or less like forced him to comply with, you know, like the requirements for accommodation.”

Patrick summarized his difficulties with faculty by saying:

Faculty or whatever have like, they have a specific vision how they want to teach their classes. They know they have to teach 30 some kids with different learning styles. So, they come up with this uniform plan, you know, upon how to teach the class and how to teach this type of learner and accommodate this kind of learner. And then they come across a disability and everything is thrown off because it’s easier for people to see and fall into their own misconceptions of what you can and can’t do.”

Theme: Success

Although SWD face many barriers or other challenges in higher education, they also experience success. For these students, successes are related to both academics and developing relationships with others. All three participants shared stories of success in higher education.

Subtheme: Academics. With the help of accommodations and faculty, SWD can be successful academically. In high school, Melanie was already finding ways to be successful in her academics with the help of teachers. She said, “The teachers themselves were very helpful and accommodating. Because my teachers were very supportive it was nice. I ended up with a good experience overall.” This support continued into her undergraduate years. Melanie shared how the departmental resource center for SWD made her transition from secondary school, to higher education at her undergraduate college. She shared:

All the staff was so helpful. And like if I was sick or a test was administered after hours they would still allow me to come take the test with them. It was so incredible that they did that because I was expecting college to be a really hard transition but they made it very peaceful and nice.

Melanie also discussed her professors’ willingness and dedication to helping her. She said, “I feel like in the classroom they, my professors, really tried to assist me and help me in the classroom setting.” She went on to explain, “They would make eye contact with me to reassure me that they knew I was about to go out in the hallway to take a quiz. When passing out the exam they would whisper, ‘You can go into the hall.’” When elaborating more she started by saying, “Gosh, I just love [university], shoutout to them.” She then continued:

My professors would have me come into their office hours to discuss my disability and my accommodations that I desire. And they took time out of their day to get to know me and the reasons why these accommodations work for me and the reasons why and where I need help. Which made the experience at school, it motivated me a lot more and made me care a lot more about what I was doing because of, because someone else cared.

This proved to be greatly beneficial for her as she learned new content with instruction. With joy and gratefulness for her professors, she explained how this helped her academically, “And I think I really connected deeper to the content I was learning, due to that.”

Nathan also had faculty members who cared about his academic performance and have made sure to help him where they could. When discussing his experience with accommodations and professors, he said:

So my teachers have all been sure to lay out clear plans with me. You know, of what they can provide and what I can expect. And there have been a few times where we have had to compromise.

He also described his professors as being “willing” to arrange and uphold accommodations at his current university. He shared an example where his professor looked into outside assistance that would be covered by the university. Nathan stated, “I started to struggle in one of my classes ...I reached out to my teacher who said that because I have a documented disability, my department agreed to pay for tutoring.” He received a tutor and was able to pass his class with a high grade. Just like Melanie, he was excited to share how his university disability representative looked out for him. Nathan shared how he got a new accommodation: “There was a new accommodation that tests be given before the evening time and it’s very new.” The clinician that he was working

with informed him of this new accommodation. For Nathan, this was a positive and successful addition to his accommodations because his medication helps him in test taking and it usually wears off around five in the evening. He stated, “Here, even in graduate school, exams started at like six thirty or seven.”

Patrick’s academic successes came differently. He enjoyed trying to know and understand just how much he was capable of without using accommodations. When prompted about how often he used his accommodations, he said:

So I just, didn’t always need them. My visual perceptual difficulty really just comes in the form of depth perception. So like when you’re showing me a drawn diagram and asking me to either like label it or something that’s when it becomes difficult. But like even then honestly, I can work around it. I’ve got used to it honestly and this is really my big overarching feeling, if I can do it myself regardless whether if it take three times as much or twice as much time I will.

Patrick felt his successes often came from the barriers he had faced. He discussed how for him, one of the greatest successes is now knowing how to advocate for himself academically. With pride, he shared,

So it kinda pushed me to be upfront about things regarding my disability and abilities with every professor and every teacher. Even if it wasn’t like a formal “Hey I need these accommodations” but I definitely was pretty vocal about like saying I can do this, I can do this, I can do this.

Subtheme: Relationships. Needing to use accommodations requires SWD to reach out to faculty members. Sometimes this is more formal than other times and can lead to relationships

or connections that greatly benefit the students. SWD can also create great support systems with peers and develop peer relationships that benefit them in many ways.

Academic advisors formed beneficial relationships with the participants. Nathan discussed how often times his advisors checked in to “make sure you can go get a job because they have people they know in the field.” Nathan described the caring nature of his advisors:

Access to these advisors is like a completely different world because they actually care. They like not only want to hear how your interests are developing, but also want to hear how your mental health is, if you’re exercising, how your partner is, kind of stuff...

Melanie touched on her relationship with her advisors. She said, “They’re super great with tests and exams and allowing me to be in a separate place. They respect that and have no problem with that.”

Nathan discussed the successfully developing relationships with faculty. He said, “The relationship to graduate students and faculty and advisors and department leadership is just more intimate.” He began to tell a story:

The cool thing about my experience is that there have been situations in my college and graduate career where I have to take my exams in a different kind of setting or with professors alone, you know, in their office. I have been able to develop a different, more intimate relationship with teachers. In some cases, those have turned into letters of recommendation.

One of the last examples that Nathan shared was about his opportunity to write a publication with his professor. He said, “He’s kind of been my mentor on it. He’s not my academic advisor, but he kinda took me on. So that’s cool.”

Each participant transitioned from faculty and academic relationships to peer relationships. Socializing can be a big part for many college students. Patrick tells a story of how his friends at the university he went to for his bachelor's degree helped him in times of need, deepening their connections. He shared:

So, I had a lot of friends and honestly, I got locked in a bathroom once at [university].

And I couldn't push the door open. So, I called my friend just to see where he was at and it turns out he was like two feet away from where I was at. He came and got me out of the bathroom.

Melanie also discussed the relationships she made with peers while getting her Bachelor's degree. She described them as being "a much larger cohort," which she felt made it easier to meet people. She explained how she connected with students during faculty office hours: "Even though some had learning disabilities and some didn't, I tended to navigate towards those people and so it was kind of cool to see the way I formed friendships around similar processing and similar learning disabilities." Nathan briefly touched on relationships with peers. He discussed what he saw as a strength of his disability:

Not only do I notice places that I do struggle more so than my peers but also places that I have a sort of, I don't know, I guess you could call it an advantage of building relationships with people who are different from the norm. Including disabilities.

Chapter 4: Discussion

Accommodations

Acquiring Accommodations.

Participants opened up and shared their journey to getting accommodations set in place for their higher education career. With this, they discussed the process for requesting accommodations and the systems in place for their university's department of resources for SWD. Patrick, Nathan, and Melanie did not speak of difficulty or stress obtaining their accommodations from department resources. Opposite to the participant's experiences, other researchers had investigated the process of SWD acquiring accommodations and found difficulty. Lyman et al. (2016) described participant's frustrations of working with the university disability resource center to acquire a letter of accommodations. Participant's in these studies discussed how difficult it was to receive accommodations. They also commented on the fact that their disability service provider did not truly listen to their needs. Francis, Duke, Fujita, and Sutton (2019) found that, for some students, representatives at their disability departmental resources doubted students' diagnosis of a disability. Patrick, Nathan, and Melanie never discussed difficulties getting accommodations and explained their process in detail. As Nathan said, "They are really accessible. If you need to set up an appointment, all you have to do is email a person."

Researchers found that SWD often felt that the testing process for accommodations through their university resource department was an unpleasant experience that resulted in an overwhelming amount of negative emotions (Denhart, 2008; Francis et al., 2019; Ferri et al., 2005). This was not a topic discussed by Patrick, Nathan, and Melanie. These three participants

had been diagnosed and received academic accommodations prior to starting college. Although Nathan described what it is like to get his accommodations renewed each year, there was no talk of it being an unpleasant experience.

Disclosing accommodations.

Patrick and Melanie revealed that they based disclosing accommodation information on the situation. For Patrick and Melanie, it strongly depended on the relationship with the instructor or peer before disclosing. There was worry for these participants that they would only be looked at as their disability and lacking intelligence. For Patrick, he often chose not to disclose as part of his disability is physical in nature and therefore can be seen by all. Hong (2015) stated that SWD also reported hesitation in disclosing or requesting accommodations from professors due to worry of being seen as incapable. Patrick and Melanie disclosed accommodations to professors only when they felt the course required the use of their accommodations. Stein (2013) found that students who have psychological disabilities disclosed accommodations only when they know it is integral to their grades. Participants felt fear of being thought of as less due to their psychological disability. Similarly, participants of the Hong (2015) study reported waiting until final exams or difficult assignments to show their accommodation letters to professors. Melanie noted she will only share if she “needs extra time on the tests.” Lyman et al. (2016) reported students expressed being treated differently because of their disability. Melanie did not discuss actually being treated differently because of her disability but hesitation in disclosing because of the worry or fear of it happening. Melanie stated, “So, I don’t. And it may be my own preconceive notion that oh they’re going to think I’m dumb if I tell them that I have a learning disability.”

When it comes to peers, participants' views on when and what to disclose varied. Nathan looked at it as an "advantage" to make connections and relate with others with or without disabilities. Melanie had a different view, disclosing only her disability, and not her accommodations. She even previously mentioned taking herself off of caseload in grade school to feel like she fit in with her peers. Lyman et al., (2016) reported that SWD were afraid of others thinking that they take advantage of the system using accommodations. Marshak et al., (2010) also found that the hesitation of disclosing accommodations was linked to judgement from peers in class or being singled out. SWD may fear being judged and have the desire to feel normal, fitting in with peers. The pressure to fit in with those peers determines what they do and do not share. Melanie, elected to not share about her accommodations to peers, but that she does have a disability. Stein (2013) discussed participants' hesitancy to disclose with friends and family, confirming the conclusions of this study that disclosing may depend on the situation or environment in which an individual is disclosing. Melanie, Patrick, and Nathan all explained they want to be seen as a person rather than a disability.

Barriers

College Transition.

Melanie and Nathan reflected on transitioning from secondary to postsecondary school as a SWD and discussed the challenges that came with it. As Melanie said, her disability became more noticeable in college. For many students, barriers begin before even entering the classroom. McCall (2015) found that SWD experienced a difficult transition because of a lack of assistance from higher education professionals. This lack of assistance from higher education professionals forced students to acquire accommodations on their own. Garrison-Wade (2012) found that students felt college courses being significantly more difficult than classes they took in high

school. The same students attributed some of this difficulty to a lack of education in areas of weakness. Nathan noted this increase in course difficulty when he switched majors early on in his higher education journey.

Accessibility.

Accessibility barriers were present for Patrick and Melanie. For Patrick, these barriers were physical, such as when “the file table was too high” or switching schools so that there was an elevator available. Garrison-Wade (2012) also had students discuss how there was not a handicap bathroom on a particular floor where a three-hour lecture was held. There was also a lack of public transportation that was accessible and accommodating to students.

For Melanie, accessibility barriers presented themselves when trying to set up accommodations. As she said, “Setting up a room and setting up a different time I can take the exam, imposes, like barriers.” Students who have accommodations that provide someone to come and take their notes during lectures also struggled to access their accommodations. The student-note-takers provided to the SWD often take poor notes or may not be available (Marshak et al., 2010; Stein, 2013). Participants in Stein’s (2013) study also discussed the barriers of using testing accommodations similar to Melanie’s. They reported a lack of access to asking their professor questions about the exam due to not being in the same room. The participants also discussed how taking the exam in a professor’s office is too distracting.

Additional time.

For SWD attending higher education may mean extra time or work needed for classes. Additional time and effort was a frustrating experience for Nathan, Patrick, and Melanie. Nathan described it as a “reminder” that school does not come as easy for him as it does his peers.

Damiani and Harbour (2015) and Marshak et al., (2010) confirm the notion of extra time and effort experienced by the participants as they found that students participants had to put in extra time and effort into school in order to achieve even average grades. The time effort they added is seen and predicted to be due to the social stigma behind using accommodations frequently and desires to be self-sufficient. In support to this study, Patrick discussed when barriers forced him to put in additional time and effort to complete tasks for his clinical practicum. Patrick ended his stories of self-sufficiency, putting a need for additional time on him, with “I did what I needed to do.”

Faculty.

Patrick and Nathan frequently experienced faculty members at their universities as barriers to academic success. Nathan described some experiences as being “inappropriate” and not having “needs met.” Patrick explained faculty reactions to accommodation rights: “They would just make me feel like I was getting special treatment.” SWD can frequently experience defending their disability, trying to prove needs, and encountering actions by faculty, which are all barriers to success in higher education (Francis et al., 2019; Lyman et al., 2016; Marshak et al., 2010; Stein, 2013). Patrick and Nathan concluded that being denied accommodations was because it meant extra work for faculty members. Patrick said, “It’s extra work, nobody wants to do extra work. Like they don’t want to do extra work and if they can slide away without doing it then they won’t do it.”, Confirming their assumptions is the work of McEldowney-Jensen, McCrary, Krampe, and Cooper (2004), who found that faculty feel hesitant to “drop everything” to accommodate one of many students.

Insensitive actions and comments have left harmful impacts on Patrick in particular. During his graduate program, he recalled his experiences as frightening and said, “They would

literally make these snide comments.” Hong (2015) found that insensitive actions such as announcing accommodations to the entire class to be a barrier. This later caused students to be hesitant to disclose accommodations and feel uncomfortable in class. Patrick also experienced his abilities being doubted by faculty, which caused him to go back and forth in disagreement with faculty. Dehart (2008) found that students discussed incorrect assumptions and views their professors had of them due to their disability. This behavior by faculty was associated with the likelihood that the professors did not entirely understand the student’s disability. Garrison-Wade (2012) found some students discussing faculty being over accommodating, which was also confirmed by department resource coordinators in the study.

Success

Academics.

The use of accommodations has significantly been associated with SWD success academically. The literature presents students’ reflection on using their accommodations as beneficial and necessary (Stein, 2013; Lovett & Leja, 2013). Nathan shared an example of this when he was eligible to receive a free tutor for a class he began to “struggle in.” Melanie also shared times when faculty played a significant role in her success, saying, “It motivated me a lot more and made me care a lot more about what I was doing because someone else cared.” For SWD, supportive staff and departmental resources specifically for disabled students improves academic success. Participants reported that departmental resources at their university were integral not only to their academic achievement but also retention (Stein, 2013). Earlier, Nathan shared how academic advising is supportive: “They like not only want to hear like how your interest are developing, but also want to hear how your mental health is...” Damiani, and Harbour (2015) found that graduate SWD heavily emphasized their needs for mentors in their graduate

program. They dedicate their successes in and outside of academia to their mentors who were faculty at their university.

Relationships.

For Nathan, Melanie, and Patrick, a successful highlight of their college career was developing relationships. Nathan, due to his disability and accommodations, said, “I have been able to develop a different, more intimate relationship with teachers.” The relationships described by the participants were not limited to faculty and staff but also with peers. Vaccaro, Daly-Cano, and Newman (2015) reported that the development of relationships with peers has been shown to be a part of the process of having a sense of belonging for college SWD; meaningful relationships with peers was a characteristic that made students feel successful. Lombardi, Murray, and Kowitt (2016) found that although social support through relationships with peers, partners, and family does not have a direct effect on successful academics, it improves SWD overall satisfaction. Nathan, Melanie, and Patrick all benefitted from their relationships during college which made for a better higher education experience.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

Summary of Results

This study shares the stories of SWD and their experiences in higher education, specifically, the social-emotional experiences related to academics and the use of accommodations in post-secondary education. The themes found within this study were accommodations, barriers, and success.

Two subthemes emerged in the accommodations theme: acquiring accommodations and disclosing accommodations. The participants shared what it was like to organize and receive their accommodations. This was depicted as a smooth and straightforward experience by the participants in this study. Patrick, Nathan, and Melanie were truly knowledgeable about their academic needs and accommodations granted. For SWD, it can be challenging to acquire accommodations. Often, students are left with their needs being challenged by departmental resource faculty about whether accommodations should be granted (Francis et al., 2019). Besides trying to prove to be worthy of accommodations, SWD describe the diagnosis and determination of accommodations as an overwhelming and frustrating experience (Lyman et al., 2016; Denhart, 2008; Francis et al., 2019; Ferri et al., 2005). Disclosing accommodations proved to be a significant, unique experience in Patrick, Nathan, and Melanie's academic career. Each participant had different ideas on when to disclose. For Patrick and Melanie, this meant disclosing accommodation was only done if necessary, for a course. For SWD, disclosing to peers and faculty comes with great hesitation. This hesitation is due to the worry of being treated, looked at, and judged differently (Hong, 2015; Marshak et al., 2010 and Stein, 2013). This indicates that the opinion of faculty and peers is of significant importance to SWD, as they wish to be seen the same way non-disabled peers are.

The barriers theme was organized into the following subthemes: college transition, accessibility, additional time, and faculty. Nathan and Melanie revealed how their disability became much more noticeable when transitioning into higher education. Often, SWD are not prepared for college courses. For some, this includes having paperwork organized for an accommodation letter (Garrison-Wade, 2012). Being unprepared for the more demanding workload required in higher education left Nathan and Melanie noticing their disability more. Participants also exposed what it is like to have accessibility barriers in college. Participants faced accessibility issues related to physical access to buildings and using accommodations. SWD often face barriers as they try to use their accommodations due to the process designed by their universities (Marshak et al., 2010; Stein, 2013). For students with physical disabilities, although there are federal regulations in place, they often still have difficulty accessing parts of buildings on university campuses (Garrison-Wade, 2012). Participants in the current study discussed how the more demanding college workload had made additional time and effort as part of their standard. Participants described their need for additional time on coursework as frustrating, especially in comparison to their peers. SWD often note how much more time they spend on course work because of the greater demand from college (Damiani & Harbour, 2015). All participants experienced challenges with faculty at their university. These experiences were made up of impersonal and unaccommodating professors. SWD often run into professors questioning the credibility of their accommodations. These same students often face being denied the use of accommodations (Francis et al., 2019; Lyman et al., 2016). Insensitive comments and actions made by faculty makes SWD feel that their professors do not understand their disability (Denhart, 2008).

Within the theme of success emerged the subthemes of academics and relationships. All participants in this study were found to have been successful in their academics. Some of those successful times were associated with the use of accommodations and the caring nature of professors. The literature states that SWD have found accommodations to be necessary and beneficial (Lovett & Leja, 2013). SWD have also associated their success to the supportive nature of faculty, such as departmental resources for disabilities (Stein 2013). Participants in this study discussed how they successfully built relationships with peers. Nathan described how his academic needs with his disability and the use of accommodations lead to relationships with faculty members. Social support and the creation of relationships with peers may not have a direct impact on academic success but it does improve SWD attitudes towards their academics (Lombardi, Murray, and Kowitt, 2016).

Implications

Listening to the experiences that SWD have in higher education can be a powerful tool for university faculty. SWD often face feelings of frustration and fear when enduring the barriers that come with using accommodations and having a disability in general. The opinions and reactions of faculty members are significant in the minds of SWD. Their experiences with professors, whether negative or positive, determine their future use of accommodations and comfortability levels. Negative experiences impact these students and changes their attitudes about using accommodations. Their beliefs can also change when they feel safe to be open about their disability. Higher education can make individuals with disabilities feel vulnerable about academics and well as building relationships with peers. A forum where space is dedicated to college faculty and staff listening to SWD may be beneficial as a way to create voice.

SWD need faculty members to be supportive and caring when they choose to disclose accommodations and seek help. Support and care helps students to be more motivated and be successful academically. Students need the use of their accommodations in order to be placed in the same running as their non-disabled peers. They also would benefit from a safe environment to disclose accommodations. University faculty can use the stories and experiences of SWD to improve their course designs, and how to approach SWD when they seek help. It is essential to keep in mind that these students take much longer to complete their assignments, tests, and notes in comparison to those who are not disabled. This concept can be upsetting to SWD and is constantly in front of them. To provide better instruction, faculty should take into consideration outside challenges and the feelings and attitudes of SWD. The support of SWD should be clearly stated in course syllabi and articulated in the beginning and throughout teaching.

Limitations/ Delimitations to this Study

This study focused on three students with disabilities in the same midwestern state. The small sample size and variety of disabilities of participants limits this study. For this study to have greater impact and clinical implications, a larger population sample should be selected. The selection of one type of disability, as well as a variety of geographical areas, would also prove beneficial for this topic of research.

Directions for Future Study

The narratives of participants in this study unveiled many topics within academics and a general view of their college experience. Aspects of academic and social lives emerged in the forms of barriers and successes. Students with disabilities desire to be treated fairly and feel comfortable, opening the door for more focused research on the topic of disclosing

accommodations. Students feel many emotions when experiencing the common barriers that come with being a student, with a disability, in higher education. Although college is an intense challenge for SWD, they are still able to succeed. The successes of SWD are something they take joy and pride in sharing. Those are the experiences that can improve a student with a disability's attitudes and feelings towards higher education.

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EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS

Appendix: Human Subjects Approval Letter

Jan 6, 2020 5:00 PM EST

Lauren O'Toole

Eastern Michigan University, Special Education

Re: Exempt - Initial - UHSRC-FY18-19-343 The Experiences and Perceptions of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education

Dear Lauren O'Toole:

The Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee has rendered the decision below for The Experiences and Perceptions of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education. You may begin your research.

Decision: Exempt

Selected Category: Category 2.(ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording). Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation.

Renewals: Exempt studies do not need to be renewed. When the project is completed, please contact human.subjects@emich.edu.

Modifications: Any plan to alter the study design or any study documents must be reviewed to determine if the Exempt decision changes. You must submit a modification request application in [Cayuse IRB](#) and await a decision prior to implementation.

Problems: Any deviations from the study protocol, unanticipated problems, adverse events, subject complaints, or other problems that may affect the risk to human subjects must be reported to the UHSRC. Complete an incident report in [Cayuse IRB](#).

Follow-up: Please contact the [UHSRC](#) when your project is complete.

Please contact human.subjects@emich.edu with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee