

# Faculty Mentorship and Transition Experiences of Students with Disabilities

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## Abstract

Students need to learn to navigate the transition from high school to college in order to be successful and stay in college. This process is especially challenging for many students with disabilities who may face additional difficulties due to their disability. The intent of this study was to gain a better understanding of the academic and social transition experiences of students with disabilities who had a faculty mentor in their first year of college. Although research has been conducted on the importance of student-faculty interaction, faculty mentoring, and the transition to college (Getzel, 2005; Halawah 2006; Madaus, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977, 1978, 1979; Tinto, 1987, 1993), more research is needed with respect to the unique challenges students with disabilities face as they transition to college. This study found that for many students with disabilities, having a faculty mentor was helpful support during their transition to college.

*Keywords: Students with disabilities, mentoring, transition, phenomenology*

Since 2003, the number of students with disabilities enrolled in postsecondary education has hovered around 11 percent; 2,154,000 students in 2003 and 2,266,000 in 2008 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009). Since many students with disabilities often enter college unprepared (Getzel, 2005), mentorship programs may increase their likelihood of success (Stumbo, Blegan, & Lindahl-Lewis, 2008). The intent of this study was to gain a better understanding of the academic and social transition experiences of students with disabilities who had a faculty mentor in their first year of college.

## Literature Review

The theoretical framework for this study rests with Tinto's theory of individual departure (1987, 1993) for students transitioning from high school to college. Tinto, using the rites of passage model created by Van Gennep (1960 [original work published in 1909]), maintained college students undergo three stages of transition as they adjust to and become assimilated into college life: separation, transition, and incorporation.

The degree of successful transition is directly related to the ability of a student to leave his or her former community and academically and socially integrate into the college community. During this transitional period, students depart from their families and high school communities and begin to make the transition to a new identity as a college student.

Colleges are made up of both academic and social systems, each with its own characteristic formal and informal structure and set of student, staff, and faculty communities. The former, the academic, concerns itself almost entirely with the formal education of students....The latter, the social system of the college, centers about the daily and personal needs of the various members of the institution, especially the students. (Tinto, 1993, p. 106)

Membership in one system does not inherently imply integration in the other. The absence of integration arises from a lack of institutional fit and isolation, happening when students do not fit into at least one of the multiple

communities within the university community. It is important for students to become integrated into both the academic and social university communities; departure may occur when they are not. Tinto indicated disadvantaged students, including those with physical disabilities, are more likely to experience difficulty during the transition stage. Several researchers have validated the utility of Tinto's model in predicting college student attrition (Christie & Dinham, 1991; Cotton & Wilson, 2006; Fusani, 1994; McKay & Estrella, 2008).

Tinto's theory has many implications for students with disabilities since they experience a dramatic educational transition from high school to college. Often, students with disabilities enter college "unprepared for the demands of postsecondary education" (Getzel, 2005, p. 70). The transitional issues are, in part, attributed to the change in how students are accommodated in high school due to the stark contrast in the laws governing secondary and postsecondary education for students with disabilities. "At the college level, significant changes occur in the legal rights of students, and there is a sharp reversal of parental and student responsibility" (Madaus, 2005 p. 32). In secondary education the onus is on the school to test students they assume may have a disability and provide the services needed free of charge (Individuals with Disability Act, 2004). At the postsecondary level students need to become self-advocates as nearly all of the responsibility for initiating services is transferred from the school and parent to the student. The emphasis is on equal access and reasonable accommodations rather than on modifying standards (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990).

Many students with disabilities in high school are accustomed to altered academic standards and are, as a result, less prepared when they come to college (Madaus, 2005). Specifically, students may struggle with academic content, organization, time management, and study skills (Aderon & Durocher, 2007). Educators can play an important role in helping students with learning disabilities have a more successful transition to college (Skinner & Lindstrom, 2003).

Interaction between faculty members and students are important both in and out of the classroom. "Involvement in the classroom leads students to seek out contact with faculty. In this fashion, colleges can be seen as consisting not merely of multiple communities, but of overlapping and sometimes nested academic and social communities" (Tinto, 1993, pp. 132-133).

Informal interaction between faculty members and students is beneficial. "Faculty should not discount the benefit of informal, social interactions with students; such contact appears to provide an important foundation for student effort from which students can begin to pursue more academically oriented interactions" (Cotton & Wilson, 2006, p. 515). When students have this type of contact they are more likely to persist at the institution and achieve academically (Fusani, 1994; Martin, Myers, & Mottet, 1999).

While interaction with faculty members provides an additional layer of academic integration for students, there is little research on faculty members mentoring college students (Brown, Takahashi, & Roberts, 2010; Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Jacobi, 1991). Nora and Crisp (2007), exploring the dimensions associated with mentoring that assisted students in adjusting to college life and becoming fully engaged in and out of the classroom, found three factors that contributed to adjustment and engagement: educational/career goal-setting and appraisal, emotional and psychological support, and academic subject knowledge aimed at advancing a student's knowledge relevant to their chosen field. Mentors can engage mentees in discussions to explore ideas they have not considered related to the student's goals, provide encouragement, act as a support system, and provide students with specific knowledge related to their field of interest.

Researchers have been able to identify specific benefits to mentoring college students. Campbell and Campbell (1997) found participation in faculty mentorship resulted in gains in academic performance and retention. Having a mentor may be even more important for students with disabilities, especially if the mentors have a disability themselves (Burgstahler & Crawford, 2007). Intentional mentoring programs for students with disabilities can help ensure these students are academically prepared because they help students become acclimated to college and provide them a personal connection on campus. "Mentorships are one example of an intervention aimed at decreasing risk factors and increasing the likelihood of success for persons with disabilities" (Stumbo et al., 2008, p. 45).

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the academic and social transition experiences of students with disabilities who had a faculty mentor in their first year of college. This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What were the experiences of students with disabilities who had a faculty mentor in their first year of college?
2. What transitional experiences did college students with disabilities have when transitioning to their first year of college?

## Method

### Faculty Mentorship Program

The Faculty Mentorship Program was developed by university faculty and staff in the summer of 2006 to address concerns about the transition to postsecondary education for students with disabilities. The purpose of the Faculty Mentorship Program is to connect new students with disabilities with a faculty member in the student's major or area of interest. The disability services (DS) office invites all newly admitted students who have disclosed a disability to participate in the program. Approximately half of the students invited to join participate each year. Professional educators in the DS office pair the mentor with the mentee. When possible, the mentor is from the department of the student's major. Students and mentors receive a message from the program directors at the beginning of the academic year introducing students and mentors to one another and explaining the expectations and benefits of the program. After the students and mentors have an introductory meeting, the frequency and continued contact is up to them.

The faculty members selected to participate in the program were identified as being "disability friendly" and having a positive history with the DS office by demonstrating academic and personal care for students with disabilities. At the time of the study, the 45 faculty members that volunteered to be mentors represented 36 academic departments. The faculty mentors represented all ranks and both genders, a few also had a disability, and received information on how to mentor students with disabilities when they first joined the program. Luncheon discussion meetings and seminars take place every six to eight weeks to provide opportunities to learn more about students with disabilities and give the mentors an opportunity to share their experiences and advice. Topics of discussion have included technology options to accommodate blind or visually disabled students, an overview of universal design for instruction, how to assist college students with an acquired brain injury, and support for students with autism.

### Design and Data Collection

This study was grounded in qualitative methodology because it "seeks to answer questions that stress *how* social experience is created and given meaning" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 10). This methodology was chosen because the researchers believed the issues faced by students with disabilities would be best understood through in-depth questioning and analysis of their individual experiences. Further, phenomenology was used to construct this study and analyze the data as it aims to understand the "lived experiences" of a group of people (Creswell, 1994, p. 12).

The study was conducted at a mid-size, doctoral, public institution in the Midwest that primarily serves undergraduate students. The population consisted of traditional-aged college students with disabilities who met with a faculty mentor for at least one semester during their first year in college. Purposive sampling was used to locate informants (Patton, 1990). The director of DS forwarded an email to the population seeking participants; participation had no influence on DS provided. Phenomenological saturation was reached when the sample consisted of 12 students, the first individuals who responded to the message from the director of DS. The identities of the participants and the institution were concealed by pseudonyms.

Data were collected through personal interviews after the study had been approved by the Institutional Review Board. Personal interviews were conducted to gain in-depth answers about participants' experiences. The research team consisted of two researchers, a professor of higher education and a student affairs educator, with multiple experiences working with students with disabilities and gathering data on this subpopulation of students. A semi-structured interview protocol was used; this allowed participants to share stories and experiences and the researcher to probe with follow up questions (Patton, 1990). The research questions provided the organizational framework for the structure for this protocol. The protocol focused on the experiences of having a faculty mentor and their transition/incorporation to college. Since the instrument used to collect data was designed for this project, the researchers took measures to ensure the trustworthiness of the instrument. A panel of experts (two DS educators, three faculty members skilled in research methodology, and two faculty members who had served as mentors for students with disabilities) reviewed a proposed interview guide. A revised draft

of the interview guide was prepared based on the suggestions of this panel. Following this revision, a pilot test was conducted in which the proposed interview guide was given to three students of the population who responded to the call for participants, but they were not involved in the study. Final revisions of the interview protocol were based on the recommendation of the pilot test.

An attempt was made to create a relaxed atmosphere during each interview. The first few minutes consisted of informal conversation that established a rapport with the subject. Subjects were encouraged to share personal experiences and anecdotes. Examples of questions in the protocol included, How was your transition to college? What were the elements that made the transition easy and/or difficult? What were some of the new experiences you adjusted to during your first semester in college? Do you feel like your mentor helped you transition to college? What campus resources did your mentor refer you to? What kind of advice would you give other students with disabilities about having a faculty mentor? Interviews had no set time limit and continued until all questions from the interview protocol were exhausted. Participants knew in advance the interviews would be audio recorded.

### Data Analysis

Each interview was transcribed and verified (reviewing the transcripts against the audio tapes to ensure there were no errors) by one of the researchers. After the data were collected, thematic analysis was used to analyze the data (Van Manen, 1990). The research questions provided the broad categories for themes: faculty mentorship and transition to college. From the themes, codes were extrapolated to identify major categories that explained the experienced phenomenon. Subthemes were identified by repeated reviewing of the transcripts and listening to the audio recordings for unique or repetitive responses. The number of participants mentioning subthemes, as well as the qualitative information they shared, such as quotes or stories, were used to explain each subtheme. For example, all 12 participants mentioned receiving advice from their mentors, so information was shared about what advice was offered and how students perceived it. Finally, a narrative was constructed in relation to the original research questions. Memoing was used (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006) as it helped the researchers reflect on data, themes, and codes.

Once themes were identified, a variety of techniques were used for verification including member checking and thick rich descriptions (Creswell, 2007). Participants were sent a transcript of the interview and asked to verify for accuracy. This process helped to ensure participant's experiences were accurately recorded. Thick rich descriptions were used to provide detail and context to the experiences of participants. Van Manen (1990) maintained thick rich descriptions allow for a more concrete understanding of the implications of the phenomenon. Moreover, thick rich descriptions allow for increased transferability into a variety of contexts. Conclusions for the study were framed as a discussion of the findings related to the research questions.

### Findings

The participants consisted of 12 students, seven students with physical disabilities (i.e., five with mobility restrictions using a wheelchair, one with low vision using a service dog, and one with a non-apparent medical condition), and five students with cognitive disabilities (i.e., one with Attention Deficit Disorder [ADD], one with ADD and dyslexia, one with Asperger's and dyslexia, one with ADHD and a learning disability, and one with an undisclosed cognitive disorder). Two of the participants were male and 10 were female; most participants were Caucasian, one student was African American. The findings are organized into two broad categories: experiences with a faculty mentors, and transitional issues encountered by students with disabilities.

### Faculty Mentorship

The participants shared mainly positive characteristics regarding having faculty mentors as they transitioned to college. The topics students discussed with their mentors, from general advice and information about campus resources to how to approach faculty members, varied greatly based on the individual needs of the student and relationships between students and faculty mentors.

**Advice.** Faculty mentors gave advice that was helpful for students regarding the transition from high school to college and how to become familiar with college. While they did not always act on the advice, students felt it provided them with useful information on a variety of topics. Some of the faculty mentors took a holistic approach to their mentoring and tried to make sure students were successful in their transition to college. One student

explained, “He said I need to learn to balance myself. . . . He sat me down and told me there are three components to my life: school, friends, and self.” She came to college feeling prepared for the academic rigor of college, but needed some help with the social transition. The mentor also gave her advice about meeting people and gaining experience, “Work experience: he says that every time I see him! Now I am seeing why.” She had a campus job for two years and in that time she has met others in her residence hall and made friends. She, like many of the students, felt her mentor cared about her as an individual, not just a student.

Other students needed more help with the academic transition to college. One student came to college feeling ready to make friends and be independent, so the conversations she had with her mentor centered on academics. Her mentor encouraged her to be a self-advocate regarding her disability.

One of the most important things she said was, do not be afraid to contact your professor. If something is not working for you, go to your professor early. Do not wait until the last minute...Tell them what you need.

This conversation helped her to be confident in discussing her disability and accommodation needs with faculty members. At first this was new to her, but over time and with the support of her faculty mentor she became more comfortable having these types of conversations.

**Awareness of campus resources.** As participants adjusted to life at college, their mentors made sure they were aware of campus resources. The campus resources mentors identified depended on the needs of the student. While students did not always seek out the campus resources their mentor talked about, participants felt being aware of the campus resources was important and added another layer of comfort during their transition.

Students acknowledged a variety of campus resources existed to aid their transition to college. One student shared, “Knowing the resources and making those available to me; that was extremely helpful. If it was not for him . . . I would not have known where to get the help.” Faculty mentors also normalized using campus resources that may have a negative connotation, such as the academic support center and the counseling center. This student shared that when first

coming to campus she was nervous to go to the writing support center for help with papers.

In our first meeting, she wanted to let me know that not just disabled kids go to the Learning Center or Writing Center. I was not singled out because I went there. It was more than just kids like me that go there.

Having a faculty mentor to encourage the use of campus resources was helpful for many students.

**Getting to know faculty.** The students also mentioned the positive effect that getting to know faculty had on their transition. Participants had a unique opportunity to form a close relationship with a faculty member, typically in their major, and learn what a faculty-student relationship was like. As a result, the mentors often helped them form relationships with other faculty members.

When first coming to college, one student was nervous about approaching her faculty members, but through forming a relationship with her faculty mentor this process became easier. She talked about how to approach teachers and discuss her need for accommodations. “I am not as nervous as I was before, so it is a lot easier to talk to my professors. Last semester was the first time I ever advocated for myself and that was not easy.” Another student shared a similar experience, “I feel like it has prepared me more to talk to my professors. I am not as scared as I would be if I were a normal student.” Students thought having a faculty mentor during their first year provided them with a unique vantage point and understanding of the role of faculty-student relationships.

One student’s mentor taught in his major and was able to answer department-specific information about the program and other faculty. “My mentor was on faculty in the communication studies department, so she helped me know that I could talk to her about stuff, but that I could also talk to my teachers about stuff.” Sometimes, as was the case with this student, students had their mentor as a teacher. “She helped me because I did not know any professors or anything and then second semester I had her as a teacher. It was nice because we were already friends.” Knowing someone in her major helped her with her academic transition not only to college, but also into her major.

**Individual support.** All of the participants cited individual support from their faculty mentor as a contrib-

uting factor to a positive transition to college. While students had support from other areas as well, they viewed the faculty mentor as someone who cared about their success and was familiar with campus. They provided a wide range of support to students, including social and academic issues. Students felt they had someone on campus who cared about their success. They also went to their faculty mentor when they encountered problems and did not know where else to turn. One student said it this way, "Even if I did not have a question, just the feeling of having someone that could help you was just awesome. It was like a worry I did not have to worry about anymore." He had a close relationship with his mentor and often looked to him for help and advice. "On a scale of one to 10, it would be a nine or 10, definitely. He always helps me when I need it and I know I can contact him at any time."

The transition to being self-advocates was difficult for some students and many appreciated the support their faculty mentor gave them. Prior to college, participants were used to family members and teachers advocating for their disability. This student felt her mentor taught her to stand up for herself.

He let me know that I might be different, but I am not less. The help I get is to even the playing field, not to put me above. He wanted me to know that being different is not a disability, it is an ability to see the world differently...One of my biggest fears was advocating for myself here but I am not by myself, especially with him. He is there whenever I need him.

Having a faculty mentor made her feel someone on campus was looking out for what was best for her. Through coaching conversations, this student learned how to disclose her disability to faculty members and ask for the accommodations she needed to be successful.

**Mentor relationship.** All of the students interviewed felt having a mentor relationship positively affected their transition. It was only through forming a close bond with their faculty mentor that students felt comfortable opening up to them. Additionally, students with a close relationship were likely to listen to the advice from their mentor and utilize the campus resources recommended.

Participants indicated getting to know their faculty mentor on a personal level was important to forming a close relationship. In speaking about her transition to

college, one student talked about how her faculty mentor was helpful. "I felt comfortable talking to him and did not feel like he was judging me while I was talking to him." Another student had a similar experience, but her mentor ended up being one of her teachers too, which strengthened their relationship. "I really liked having my professor as my mentor and knowing that I was always able to ask him questions, even if they were just life questions. It definitely helped with the transition." One student's mentor invited her and his other two mentees over to his house for Thanksgiving. The close relationship she formed with her mentor helped her far beyond the academic and social transition issues commonly faced by students coming to college.

While it is not necessary for mentors to have a disability, some participants indicated it helped them form a closer bond with their mentor, because they were able to share common experiences regarding having a disability. Students appreciated being able to share common experiences and stories related to having a disability. "She is blind and I am in a wheelchair, so we talked about funny things that happen to us that do not happen to other people. . . . We had a good time and could relate." The student felt this allowed them to relate on a deeper level as her mentor often talked to her about the challenges of having a physical disability, which enhanced their relationship.

On the other hand, mentor/mentee interactions did not last as long when students did not have close relationships to the faculty mentor. One student said she would recommend the program to other students with disabilities, but felt having a close relationship was crucial. "I actually did suggest the program to one of my friends and she did it, but she and her faculty mentor never really hit it off and it really was not a positive experience."

**Decreasing role of the mentor.** While having a faculty mentor was an important factor in the transition from high school to college, many students found the mentor less useful the longer they were in school. After their freshman year many students indicated they did not need a faculty mentor and as a result the interaction with the mentor decreased. One student indicated she met with her mentor six times her first year, three times her second year, and has not met with him during her third year. Another student shared a similar experience. "I have not met with her as much this semester, but I think she has prepared me." Faculty mentorship helps students with disabilities transition to college, but the

need for this type of relationship decreases as students become acclimated to the institution.

### Transition to College

The participants in this study encountered many specific transitional experiences as a result of having a disability. The common experiences shared by the participants included academic transition, social transition, family, and accommodations. Additionally, students with a physical disability noted a sense of community, getting around campus, and attendants.

**Academic transition.** Eleven of the 12 participants indicated the academic transition from high school to college was difficult. While each student had a different disability and academic background, they were all able to share how their disability affected their academic integration. One student reported the transition from high school to college was not easy. Although her parents knew about her disability since elementary school, they never disclosed it to her teachers out of fear she would be treated differently. While she attended regular classes all through primary and secondary school, she was not ready for college-level academics. She said, “My high school did not really prepare me at all for college.” While some students indicated a general feeling of unpreparedness, other students specifically cited how their disability affected feeling ready for college academics. Some students reported they felt insulated in high school. A student explained how her ADD affected her academics, “The first semester was kind of rough. . . . I am really bad about doing big papers, because I cannot concentrate so I have trouble getting them done.”

Students with disabilities want to do well in school just like any other group of students. One student felt she had to overcome additional pressures to be successful due to the prejudice her teachers and fellow students had regarding individuals with disabilities.

I think it made me more driven, too. I know it made me more driven in high school because I was constantly having to prove myself to my teachers, and prove to all of the students of my class, that I was not dumb, and not stupid. I was in a chair, but I got there the same way they got there and was in their same classes they were because I am smart and can handle myself. I think it keeps me driven in a way.

She felt the accommodations received did not provide an academic advantage, but rather leveled the field.

Another student even expressed aversion to teachers providing different standards based on her disability. She did not want to be treated differently in any way because of her disability.

He is hard on everyone else; he pushes because he knows that we can do it. My biggest pet peeve is when a teacher sees my disability and cuts my work in half, or even more. That to me is a sign I cannot do it. I can do it, maybe just not as fast as everyone else.

These additional challenges made it difficult to adjust to the academic environment of college. While resources and support existed for these students, sometimes they were not aware of these resources or chose not to use them due to a perceived stigma

**Social transition.** In addition to academic challenges, students with disabilities may also struggle socially. Making friends and feeling socially accepted is important for students coming to college. However, participants felt they were stigmatized and marginalized due to their disability. As a result, some students with disabilities found the social transition from high school and home to college difficult. One student felt he overcame the hurdle his disability could have placed in front of him and got involved anyway.

Having a disability, sometimes you just do not want to go out and do stuff, but I just pull myself through it. I always think of people who are out there who are way worse than I am that are getting out there, so that helps me get out there more. I just think about people that have more stuff to deal with.

While most students have some challenges related to transitioning from high school and home to college, these students felt they experienced additional challenges. However, many of them were able to overcome these challenges. One student shared how her brother assisted her with the social transition to college, “He helped me more with my social skills. With Asperger’s, it is hard to have social skills. He helped me get started with the friends because I do not like being close to people.” Students with physical disabilities also face unique challenges related to getting around. One student explained, “You cannot do some things

with people that other people can do. You cannot go to someone's house off campus or just get in the car. It is harder." These challenges can sometimes cause students with disabilities to feel isolated.

On the other hand, when students found companionship with other students with disabilities, they felt they had a support system. This actually enhanced the social transition to college for many students, because they felt like a part of a group. One student said, "I think what made it easier was that I knew we had a really good disability program here. I knew there were people here I could go to for questions." Students with a physical disability feel an additional sense of community. Another student agreed by saying, "Having other students in wheelchairs, in the same position as me, I felt good about that. We connected . . . and having people understand that need was very good." Students living on campus found community in the residence hall. One student explained, "I did not have any friends on my floor at Williams. I was coming over to Baker [a hall with a large population of students with physical disabilities] to hang out with my friends there." In general, students with disabilities struggled socially while adjusting to college.

**Family.** Students with disabilities also had to get used to not having their families around. The participants had various levels of parental involvement both in high school and at college. At times, students had a close relationship with family members and relied on them for help while others had their parents advocate on their behalf.

The hardest part for many students about leaving family members was becoming independent and having to do things on their own. One student shared, "I was not homesick, I just missed my mom more and everything she does for me." Another student told a similar story, "The hardest thing was leaving my brother. He has been there for my entire life and he is the one that took care of me." It was important for these students to learn how to be independent and take care of themselves. This level of dependence was often deeply rooted from childhood. One student credited her mom for making sure she got the accommodations she needed.

My mom took care of the education part of it. She was my advocate and told my teachers what was going to happen. I do not look like a child with a disability so teachers would not believe me. So Mama Bear, that is what they called her, would come in.

Often the parent's active role made it difficult for students to take the lead in their own education. In high school, students were used to their parents and teachers making sure accommodations were in place, but once at college the students were completely responsible for this process. They not only had to be proactive about getting accommodations, but they also had to serve as an advocate for themselves. One student explained how her parents would help when teachers did not understand her illness, why she had to miss class more than other students, and how she is now responsible to be her own advocate. "You cannot call your mom and have her call a teacher to talk about the illness. In high school my parents would have called them and cleared things up, but here I have to handle everything on my own."

**Accommodations.** A common transitional issue for participants was becoming familiar with the accommodation process. The accommodation process was different from high school to college and the student now had to be responsible for requesting accommodations and disclosing their disability to faculty members. Many students felt unprepared for the change.

I did not realize how much effort my parents and my teacher of record put into an IEP...Now all of that has shifted on to my shoulders and I have to make sure that I am on top of being in communication with the students with disabilities office, but also with my professors.

This student realized she was the only person who could take the initiative to ask for accommodations and communicate to her teachers she had a disability. Another student said it this way:

You have to do more of it yourself, because if you do not then you are not going to receive help. In K-12, someone was always there for you, they know what you need and your parents are always there...it went from someone else handling it to you handling it.

Not only was he now responsible for getting accommodations, but the process was also different. A student explained, "There is no middle-man...Here, if I want something done, I go and talk to the director of disability services." Many students thought this change was completely foreign when they came to college. They

were used to others being involved in the process and in college everything was dependent on them.

While the accommodation process in college is different and the burden to request accommodations is on the student, they felt the college had resources and staff to assist them. One student shared a story about working with the director of DS.

The first time I visited here, I was with my parents and he came up to me and was asking questions. He was not really asking my parents questions, he was asking me questions and I had to answer them. I knew I was going to have to speak up for myself... He would not physically do it, but he would help me with the information so that I could do what I need to in order to succeed.

He went on to say, the director of DS was the most helpful person on campus during his transition.

The accommodation process forced students to self-advocate. If students needed accommodations they were responsible for providing documentation of their disability and making a request for services. This process empowered them to disclose their disability to faculty members. The process of disclosing a disability and asking for accommodations was not easy for students, especially when they were new to college and unfamiliar with how to approach faculty members. One student said, "Handing my professors the [accommodation] letter that I have a learning disability was a little intimidating, that I had to admit to a learning disability. To this day, it is still hard...because it is stigmatized."

**Sense of community.** Coming to college also provided many students with a new sense of community with other students with disabilities. In general, the large population of students with disabilities and services available to them at the university may play an important role in creating a sense of community. It was important for students to find others who could relate to them. One student expressed, "Usually when you have a disability, you hang out with people that have a disability, because they understand you. It is hard to break that cycle because those are the people you connect with." The sense of community at college helped some students feel welcome on campus, an important piece of their transition to college.

**Getting around campus.** A college campus can be difficult to navigate, especially for students with mobility and visual disabilities. In high school students

are used to being in one building, while at college they have to travel across campus. This sometimes involves architectural barriers and challenges with the weather. Several students mentioned that campus accessibility played a significant role in their decision to attend the institution and their overall success at college. For example, one student shared a story about how the adaptive technology coordinator, who is also blind and has a service dog, took the time to show her where the veterinarian was and how to get around campus.

For students living on campus, the accessibility features in the residence halls allowed for them to live independently. A student explained she had her "own accessible bathroom, which was nice and the prox cards [electronic access system] are nice to get inside places." She went on to talk about how this was a major change from her parents' house. "My house is not accessible. I cannot get a drink or food without help. I cannot shower or get off the couch without help. Coming here, I could sit on the furniture and had to get my own food." As a result, she enjoyed being on campus more than at her parents' house because she was able to live independently in the residence halls.

**Attendants.** Four of the five students in wheelchairs shared that using nursing staff (attendants) was a new experience when transitioning to college. The students were used to having a family member help them with daily living tasks (i.e., bathing, toileting, getting dressed) and when they came to college they had to rely on hired attendants to help them. This was often a foreign experience, having someone they did not know in situations that are normally private. All of the students who talked about using attendants expressed frustration and how it added to the difficulty of transitioning to college. One student revealed, "The attendants were the hardest part to get used to just because I am not used to having a set time to use the bathroom or . . . where I have to go and get in my bed."

## Discussion

The following conclusions were drawn from the study: students with disabilities find support through faculty mentorship and students with disabilities encounter transitional issues. Each conclusion is supplemented by literature, discussion, and suggestions.

### **Students with Disabilities Find Support Through Faculty Mentorship**

For students with disabilities, faculty mentorship provides an added layer of support, which is often needed, especially during the transition from high school to college. All participants in this study said their faculty mentor was crucial in their transition due to the individual support and help they provided.

A wide variety of topics was discussed during meetings between the mentor and mentee, depending on the needs of the student. Participants commonly offered that mentors should attempt to take a holistic approach to working with their mentee, ensuring a smooth academic and social transition to college. Students appreciated when mentors would not only inquire about classroom experiences, but also inquire about their personal life. As a source of knowledge and authority, faculty mentors should also encourage positive behaviors, such as attending class, building relationships with other faculty members, and self-advocating regarding their disability. Mentors may also serve as an academic resource, especially when students are matched with a faculty member in their major or a closely related field. Mentors can assist students in adjusting to college life and becoming fully engaged in and out of the classroom (Nora & Crisp, 2007). Mentors should also seek to draw direct connections and parallels to students' academics and personal interests. Faculty mentors often have a unique relationship with their mentees and as a result can offer advice regarding part-time jobs, joining a student organization, or being involved on campus. Students felt individually supported and often relied on their faculty mentor as a resource and campus expert.

Students shared the conversations they had with their faculty mentor that helped them become acclimated to college and comfortable talking with other faculty members. Students described a faculty mentor as someone who cared about their success and was familiar with campus resources, often normalizing campus resources that may have a negative connotation (e.g., learning centers and counseling) due to the perception by students. Mentors were able to use their intimate knowledge about students' specific needs to personally refer them to specific campus resources.

Developing a close and sometimes personal bond with faculty mentors was crucial to the success of mentor-student relationships. Students who indicated they had a positive experience were able to identify

some type of personal interest or bond, such as a similar research interest, or something as inconsequential as liking the same sports team or hobby. Such a bond was the foundation for a closer relationship. Once students developed a connection to their faculty mentor, discussions about academic and transition issues easily followed. Furthermore, when students were paired with faculty members in their same or related academic discipline, they could have in-depth conversations about personal and academic interests. Many students felt it was important for their faculty mentor to be able to navigate their academic program and have experience in the field they wanted to pursue. Students with close bonds often stayed in contact with their mentors beyond their first semester or freshman year. Deep-seated relationships taught students the benefits of student-faculty interaction. Having a mentor may be especially beneficial for students with disabilities if the mentors have a disability themselves. While it is not necessary for a faculty mentor to share a similar disability, or a disability at all, it does provide a unique bond between the faculty member and student. Regardless of the type of bond, it is important the mentor and mentee establish a bond; otherwise the relationship is not likely to be strong or long-lasting.

In order to navigate the complexities of a college or university, students should be encouraged by their faculty mentor to build formal relationships with other faculty members. This is especially important as students need to be able to have candid conversations about their disability and individual needs in the classroom. Once they learned how to interact with their faculty mentor, conversations with other faculty members were not as difficult for some students. It is important for students to continue to establish close bonds with faculty members, even after the first year and connection to their faculty mentor (Cotton & Wilson, 2006; Fusani, 1994).

Faculty, staff, and administrators should recognize the importance of providing individualized support to students with disabilities. Student's identities are malleable, especially during their first year of college, and faculty mentors have the ability to shape mentees during this time. Students with close relationships to faculty are more likely to persist at the institution and achieve academically (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977, 1978, 1979). Pascarella and Terenzini also found withdrawal was related to the frequency of informal (non-classroom) student-faculty contact and the frequency of

interactions with faculty to discuss intellectual matters. Developing intimate relationships between students and faculty members in the same academic discipline should be a top priority.

### **Students with Disabilities Encounter Transitional Issues**

The transition from high school to college can be profound for some students with disabilities. Despite legal protections and campus resources, students with disabilities may face challenges with their academics and the accommodation process, which can make the transition difficult during the first year. Additionally, faculty and staff members who engage with students with disabilities cannot assume that these students fully understand their own advocacy rights and responsibilities in postsecondary settings, which is different from the process in high school.

Students with disabilities have additional academic hurdles other students do not encounter. Some use this energy to be productive and prove to themselves and others they are capable of being successful in college. The change in academics from high school to college is significant for many, but this is especially true for students with disabilities. Students may not feel prepared for the academic rigor of college due to their disability as the workload and expectations differ from high school. Student participation in faculty mentorship can result in gains in academic performance and retention (Campbell & Campbell, 1997). Eleven of the 12 students in this study indicated that, as a result of their disability, they experienced a difficult academic transition to college. It is important for students with disabilities to recognize they may face academic challenges and be proactive to seek help from faculty members and utilize academic support resources.

Tinto (1988, 1993) indicated disadvantaged students, including those with physical disabilities, are more likely to experience difficulty during the transition to college. Educators need to be aware that students with disabilities come to college with unique backgrounds and are not always fully prepared for all aspects of the collegiate experience. Simply allowing students with disabilities in the classroom with their peers who do not have disabilities does not ensure equal access to the curriculum (Burgstahler & Crawford, 2007). Students with disabilities sometimes feel obligated to prove themselves as being equal to their faculty and fellow students. Unfortunately, a nega-

tive stigma exists for students with disabilities. This is, in part, due to society's cultural perceptions about individuals with disabilities. As a result, some of these students have negative attitudes about their disability because they felt others treated them differently. This often leads to a feeling that they have to overcome their disability, rather than acknowledge it as a part of who they are. It is important for faculty, staff, and students without disabilities to understand the unique challenges faced by students with disabilities.

Previous literature has highlighted the importance of postsecondary institutions developing support systems and resources in order for students with disabilities to be successful; these students commonly struggle with academic course content, organization, time management, and study skills (Aderon & Durocher, 2007). The goal of faculty mentorship, specifically for students with disabilities, is to bridge the gap between their needs and the opportunities provided to all students. The results of this study highlighted the important role faculty mentors played in helping participants overcome the academic hurdles associated with transitioning to college; this conclusion is consistent with the extant literature regarding faculty-student out-of-class communication. For several decades, researchers have found a positive relationship stemming from faculty-student contact (Endo & Harpel, 1982; Fusani, 1994; Martin et al., 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977, 1978, 1979). This study reified the positive effect of faculty-student contact. Students repeatedly praised their faculty mentor for preparing them for their collegiate experience. This idea was also supported by Halawah (2006) who found, "close personal relationships between staff and students plays a major part in fostering the intellectual development of students" (¶ 22).

University administrators and staff members should work to provide academic resources and support systems for students with disabilities. While administrators and staff members are not directly responsible for classroom instruction, as educators, they can provide individual support and inform students about campus resources. This type of support can come from the DS staff, but should not be limited to one office. All faculty and staff should be knowledgeable about the unique needs of students with disabilities and how to assist them. For further advancement, faculty mentors should receive proper training in assisting students with disabilities. This training needs to include information

about the postsecondary accommodation as well as campus resources.

Additionally, students with disabilities must adapt to the postsecondary accommodation process, which is often different than what they experienced in high school. This is due in part to the stark contrast in the laws governing postsecondary education for students with disabilities. "At the college level, significant changes occur in the legal rights of students, and there is a sharp reversal of parent and student responsibility" (Madaus, 2005, p. 32). At the postsecondary level, students need to understand their rights under the law as nearly all of the responsibility is transferred from the school and parent to the student (Simpson & Spencer, 2009). Faculty members should be aware of the accommodation process in case students who have not registered with the DS office disclose it to them. Faculty members should also be aware of how to provide necessary accommodations to students when they present documentation of their disability.

The accommodation process in college encourages students to self-advocate. If students need accommodations, they are responsible for providing documentation of their disability and making the formal request. This process also empowers students to be responsible to disclose their disability to teachers. As a result, while students with disabilities are going through typical transitional issues, they must additionally learn how accommodations unfold at the postsecondary level (Simpson & Spencer, 2009).

Most participants in this study were unaware when first coming to college how much responsibility was upon them in order to receive accommodation. In high school they were accustomed to parents and teachers taking the lead and in college students have to take the initiative. The staff in the disability services office and faculty members expect students to be responsible for their disability and negotiate for reasonable accommodations, rather than the other way around. In college, students must disclose their disability to the disability services office, ask for accommodations, and self-advocate.

Little research has been conducted related to the transition services leading to college enrollment for students with disabilities (Wilson, Hoffman, & McLaughlin, 2009). Most participants in this study were unaware when first coming to college how much responsibility was upon them in order to receive accommodation. Considering the drastic change in the accommodation process between high school and college, two specific

suggestions are offered regarding how to help students with this process. First, all faculty members and staff should become familiar with the accommodation process, sharing the responsibility of accommodation process with the disability services staff. Second, faculty members and staff should receive formalized training on the accommodation process. This would allow them to better understand the process and how to better assist these students, based on their individual needs.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study was limited to the experiences and issues discussed by 12 students with disabilities at a single institution. A majority of participants in this program had a physical disability. This resulted in a unique theme in the findings regarding physical accommodations and getting around the campus, a theme not discussed by students with learning and/or psychiatric disabilities. While the authors of this study acknowledge the disproportionate number of participants with physical disabilities, the mentoring program is open to all students with a disability. The university where this study took place has a distinguished history of providing access to students with physical/mobility disabilities, resulting in a higher percentage of students in the study. Due to the inclusion criteria of the study, students with negative experiences were not as likely to be included as they would not have continued with the program for a full semester. Additionally, since the experiences of these students were self-reported, data could not be triangulated. However, efforts were made to minimize this by member checking and providing thick rich descriptions.

This study found that for many students with disabilities, having a faculty mentor was helpful support during their transition to college. Tinto's (1987, 1993) theory of individual departure, specifically as it relates to academic and social integration, seems to apply to this population of students. Future studies could explore in more detail how other portions of Tinto's theory, such as how pre-entry characteristics, academic goals, and external commitments may have influenced academic and social integration. It may also be useful to have a longitudinal study to better understand how the experiences of students with disabilities change over time, comparing the experiences of first year students with those of seniors.

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