

# Development of a First Year Success Seminar for College Students with Disabilities

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## Abstract

Students with disabilities are enrolling in colleges and universities at increasing rates, but not completing degrees with comparable success as their peers. First Year Seminars (FYS) are commonly employed by colleges and universities to address retention, strengthen connections between the student and the institution, and enhance the likelihood for academic success. Descriptions of FYS programs that address the needs of students with disabilities are very limited in the higher education literature despite the expressed need to improve supports to students with disabilities. In the current study, we gathered qualitative data from students with disabilities attending a four-year university to determine what information would complement a more traditional FYS program to address needs and concerns of this population. Four themes emerged to inform program development: experiences with campus integration, disability experience, student strategies, and suggestions for FYS programs. Implications for program development and evaluation are presented.

*Keywords:* first year success, college transition, students with disabilities

Approximately 11% of college students report at least one disability (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2016). These data are likely underreported, since many students who have disabilities do not disclose for several reasons, most of which are associated with disability stigma (Newman et al., 2011). Longitudinal data shows a trend of increasing college attendance by students with disabilities (SWD), particularly following the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990. Despite an increasing presence, national data on SWD show lower college completion rates (34%) than for students without disabilities (mid-50% range; NCES, 2015). The economic advantages of completing a college degree are clear, in both lifetime earning potential as well as job stability (U.S. Department of Labor, 2013). College-educated SWD are twice as likely to find employment than those without a degree (Dutta, Kundu, & Schiro-Geist, 2009). For those without a college degree, there will be fewer job prospects and lower likelihood of economic self-sufficiency.

Prompted by a need to improve persistence and graduation rates of college students, First Year Success (FYS) programs have been introduced for spe-

cific populations including low income students (e.g., Anselmo, 1997), first generation students (Wilkie & Kuckuck, 1989), international students (Andrade, 2009), ethnic minorities (e.g., Starke, Harth, & Sirianni, 2001), and students at-risk (Colton, Connor, Schultz, & Easter, 1999; Potts & Schultz, 2008) but, to our knowledge, only one has been developed specifically for SWD. This program was a modified FYS course for students with Autism Spectrum Disorders, with additional information on social skills and adapting to the college environment (Wenzel & Rowley, 2010). The purpose of the present study was to provide a framework that could be used in the development of a FYS program specifically targeted for SWD, inclusive of students of all disability populations. We propose that targeted information based on the needs and experiences of SWD is a valuable addendum to more typical information presented in FYS designed to orient students and ease their college transition for our population of interest. The following literature review includes a background of FYS programs and highlights issues of retention, integration, and academic success specific to college SWD.

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## Literature Review

### First Year Success Programs

FYS programs were developed to address retention, strengthen connections between the student and the institution, engage students in skill building (e.g., health, academic, personal), and enhance academic success (Jamelske, 2009). These programs are argued to be the most studied innovation in higher education (Porter & Swing, 2006); and although results regarding their effectiveness are mixed, historically, they have shown positive impact in several ways including improvements with college persistence, academic achievement, self-management skills, knowledge of campus resources, and social integration (Porter & Swing; Starke et al., 2001). Despite this evidence, research supporting efficacy of FYS programs is fraught with methodological weaknesses (Institute of Education Sciences [IES], 2016; Jamelske, 2009). The IES found that many studies were limited to a single institution, failed to include a comparison or no-treatment group, or adequately describe pre-existing sample differences that may represent confounding variables. Despite limited empirical support for the effectiveness of FYS programs, their value and utility appears well accepted as their ubiquitous presence is evident on 95% of colleges and universities in the United States (IES). As these programs have grown, discussion has intensified regarding topics and methods used in developing effective FYS programs. In essence, the argument has shifted from whether FYS programs should be offered to what type should be offered (Henscheid, 2004).

### Integration, Retention, and Academic Success of College Students with Disabilities

Research on SWD indicates that in many ways, they share commonality with their peers without disabilities (Coduti, Hayes, Locke, & Youn, 2016; Fleming & Fairweather, 2012) but there are unique barriers and challenges impacting their satisfaction, performance, and retention. In broad terms, college SWD experience additional academic, personal, and social challenges in meeting postsecondary demands and, as a result, they are more likely to struggle in these areas (Hong, Ivy, Humberto, & Ehrensberger, 2007). Commonly reported barriers are disability-related challenges such as difficulty navigating academic accommodations and related environmental barriers (Kurth & Mellard, 2006; Marshak, Van Wieren, Ferrell, Swiss, & Dugan, 2010; Yssel, Pak, & Beilke, 2016). Perhaps even more problematic are societal attitudes toward SWD and, in particular, faculty perceptions as students have reported difficulty negotiat-

ing accommodations and being accused of academic dishonesty when trying to secure them (Hong, 2015; Marshak et al., 2010; Yssel et al., 2016). Students, especially those with hidden disabilities, express that faculty have a lack of awareness and understanding of disability law as it applies to postsecondary settings (Baker, Boland, & Nowik, 2012).

For college SWD, satisfaction and persistence have been linked to perceptual factors including having a sense of belonging, the capacity for self-advocacy, and a positive campus climate outlook towards disability (Belch, 2004; Fleming, Oertle, Plotner, & Hakun, 2017). Knowledge of one's own strengths and limitations, coupled with an understanding of what is available through university resources, such as disability services offices (DSO), are critical components to a successful college transition. Unfortunately, impediments associated with these services result because of stigma associated with using them, unawareness of their existence, or doubts regarding staff competence who provide services (O'Shea & Kaplan, 2017). These obstacles could be addressed through a purposeful intervention such as a FYS program designed to promote SWD awareness and self-advocacy to help students acclimate to a new environment.

### Theoretical Framework

Since our goal was to use findings to inform the development of a transition-oriented FYS program for SWD, we incorporated several models of college integration as our theoretical orientation for data collection and analysis. Tinto (1975), one of the main contributors to theory on college student persistence and early departure, proposed several concepts that informed our questions and analysis during this study. Of particular interest was his proposal that both academic and social integration impacted retention for students. Academic integration is defined as grade performance and intellectual development during the college experience (Tinto).

Social integration is thought of as formal and informal interactions with peers, faculty, and other university staff. Examples include joining extracurricular activities, making friends, and developing relationships with faculty and staff outside of class. Tinto acknowledged some strain between meeting both academic and social demands as each requires time and effort. Accordingly, for some students, social and extracurricular activities may have a negative impact on grade performance and involvement in social aspects of a college or university can strengthen one's attachment or commitment to a university, thus reducing the likelihood of dropout.

Observations that Tinto's theory was originally developed with middle- or upper-class, White, full-time students who enter directly from high school prompted revision to his views on integration. The importance of felt belonging was recognized in persistence of students, as well as the interactive relationship between the student and the environment in perceptions of whether a person would be accepted or welcomed in the university (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2011; Fischer, 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Leading scholars in higher education research have argued that belonging is an "especially necessary, but challenging, endeavor for students from historically marginalized self-identity groups" as there are some students at greater risk for feeling unwelcomed, lonely, or left out (Vaccaro, Daly-Cano, & Newman, 2015, p. 670). Preliminary studies of SWD have been mixed in belonging perceptions, with some authors finding no differences in social integration (Shepler & Woosley, 2012) and others finding higher incidence of not fitting in and thoughts of dropping out among SWD compared to their peers (Adams & Proctor, 2010).

Researchers have highlighted the role of individual student factors in retention, success, and satisfaction. Personal factors such as self-efficacy and self-rated ability are linked with college adjustment which contributes to grade point average (Brady-Amoon & Fuertes, 2011). Getzel and Thoma (2008) identified critical themes and activities related to student self-advocacy including: seeking disability services, forming relationships with faculty, developing a support system, and gaining awareness of their own needs. Self-advocacy is recognized as crucial to meeting one's needs, in educational pursuits and in adult life (Adams & Proctor, 2010). Students typically develop these skills throughout childhood and young-adult years, through intentional experiences provided by parents, family members, and teachers (Daly-Cano, Vaccaro, & Newman, 2015). Self-advocacy skills and approaches can also be introduced by college faculty and staff.

To inform our framework for a FYS program for SWD, we gathered information from SWD on topics, resources, and skills they found most helpful during their college experience. These students provided direct input on a FYS course for students like themselves, and also shared strategies they used in absence of an existing program. We present these data to inform development of FYS programs inclusive of SWD so that instructors may integrate this information and augment typical transition-focused information with information that addresses specific needs of SWD.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were recruited from a large, public, research intensive university with an enrollment of 47,000 undergraduate and graduate students. During academic year 2016, when data were collected, the university offered over 100 FYS courses. Typically, courses are organized according to college or major study area and each undergraduate student is required to take at least one credit of FYS. Twenty-six students, recruited from the university disability office and an academic department listserv, volunteered to participate in this study. Most participants were female (18), and White (20), two were African-American, three were multi-racial, and one reported an international cultural identity. Five students were in their first year, four were sophomores, seven were juniors, seven were seniors, and three were graduate students. The mean age of the participants was 22.2 years. Students reported their disability type(s) as one or more of the following: mental health (10), learning disability (9), attention disorder (8), visual impairment (3), physical health (3), Autism Spectrum Disorder (2), and hearing impairment (1). Five students reported more than one type of disability. Students were represented by a variety of major areas of study: engineering (6), science-related fields (5), education-related fields (5), and health related fields (4). Students were asked to rate their satisfaction with the university and the majority (18 students) reported feeling satisfied or very satisfied.

### Procedures

Data were collected through a series of five focus groups. Groups were led by the authors, in pairs. Authors have previously received training in focus group methodology, and have led or co-led groups before. All group interviews were audio-recorded (with participant permission) and transcribed for analysis. Groups lasted for approximately 2 hours each, and followed a semi-structured protocol with questions about students' experiences at the university, consideration of their own strategies for success, services and individuals who were helpful to them, and suggestions for programs or a proposed course that would be useful to first-year SWD. Data collection stopped after the fifth group as authors agreed that saturation was reached.

### Researcher Biases and Expectations

Given the importance of recognizing experimenter bias when collecting (e.g., observer-expectancy effects) and analyzing data (e.g., confirmation bias;

Fischer, 2009), the authors recorded and shared their biases and expectations as they pertained to the study. The first author has worked in higher education for five years, and the disability and rehabilitation field for thirteen years. The second author has worked in higher education for eight years, and has seventeen years of experience in labor relations, human resources, higher education, and rehabilitation services. The third author has worked in higher education for thirty-one years, and prior to this experience, worked for thirteen years in mental health, medical rehabilitation, and research settings. None of the authors have worked directly in the student DSO but, as faculty members, worked in partnership with these offices at several universities. Authors reported the following biases and expectations based upon their professional backgrounds: students would report both positive and negative experiences addressing disability-related barriers, including DSO, faculty, and peers; students would discuss apprehension or negative experiences with approaching faculty to discuss accommodations. We anticipated that students would discuss challenges related to college integration that were both similar to and different from what has been reported by students without disabilities. We also expected that students would be candid with us given our lack of affiliation with DSO and any prior relationship with participants as well as our educational training and work experience with disability concerns.

### Analysis

We used an inductive process to analyze transcript data (Patton, 2002). Each author contributed to the analysis by working both independently and together using a five-step process: (1) extracting relevant data from transcripts (e.g., substantive participant statements pertaining to the goals of the study); (2) identifying and defining patterns and broad themes; (3) initial coding of data using themes; (4) rechecking themes for consistency and defining subcategories within broad themes; and (5) synthesizing coded data back into descriptions of themes and categories (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2002). During the coding process, differences or discrepancies with respect to themes were addressed during group meetings in order to reach consensus. The iterative process of developing and defining themes took place over the course of five meetings, lasting about 10 hours.

Once themes that adequately addressed the data emerged (step 2), the first author typed the summary and sent this narrative to the other two authors for further review. Researchers coded data independently using theme definitions and met weekly to review and address areas of disagreement (step 3). This process

took 13 meetings and approximately 26 hours. During these meetings, we often referred to the transcripts to check context and interpretations particularly to resolve discrepancies in coding decisions and built consensus. In an effort to quality check, we reviewed the data in each theme once all data were coded to ensure consistent coding decisions on similar data-reassignment to more appropriate themes as necessary (step 4). We also considered emerging categories from the themes during this review. Reviewing themes took approximately 18 additional hours of coding time. Finally, we created summaries of the themes and categories and selected representative data to illustrate meaning (step 5).

## Results

Four broad themes emerged from the data with respect to understanding student needs and developing appropriate content for a FYS program for our population of interest which are represented in Figure 1. Two themes provided rich data on relevant student experiences and highlighted needs to be addressed in an FYS program: *College Integration* and *Disability Experience*. These data provide context for understanding positive and negative experiences students have with integrating into a large university, as well as how their disability status adds an additional dimension to their student experiences. Two other themes emerged highlighting recommended content areas and suggestions for instruction as part of an FYS program: *Student Strategies* and *First-Year Seminar Recommendations*. A definition of each theme and specific examples of student generated data follows.

### College Integration

This theme was defined by students' descriptions of their early experiences at the university, specifically those reflecting efforts to get involved in campus life, make friends, connect with faculty and staff, and engage in academic and social programs. Data coded in this theme reflected either satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the process of college integration. Within this broad theme, a number of topics were addressed by student responses. Four sub-themes emerged: orienting to campus, adjusting to higher academic demands, making friends and joining activities, and describing how disability impacted students' integration. With respect to getting oriented to a large campus with a large student body, students had varying perspectives. Some students found this feature exciting, and connected with other students easily. Several indicated an appreciation for "variety" and "diversity" of opportunities and people, and in meeting new

people, an opportunity to recreate one's identity, if desired. One student described the phenomena this way:

No one cares who you used to be, they don't know your past unless you tell them. I think it's amazing to see that you can just change as a person. I used to be kinda' quiet, wouldn't really voice my opinion, and then I came to college and you just speak out and say what you want to say.

Others described struggling with the "bureaucracy" associated with a large university, and feeling overwhelmed with choices and possibilities. Some students recalled early days on campus as confusing and daunting:

Coming here as a freshman you get fliers, you start classes, you don't know where [building name] is.... And you are like how do I get to [building name] and why is it [shaped like] a giant circle? All of these questions, everything is overwhelming.

Several students discussed difficulty transitioning to a higher academic standard associated with college level courses. Some lamented poor study skills and having to work hard to develop academic strategies. Others recalled a "honeymoon period" at the beginning of classes where the material is familiar and then experiencing a "shock" when deadlines all occur simultaneously or when more difficult material is introduced.

Participants who started their first year at this campus (non-transfer students) described a common social experience of being "new," where it was relatively easy for them to approach other students to make connections. Most people did not come with an existing large social network, and they found others to be relatively receptive to simple introductions. Students who transferred in to the university after the first year or changed majors described a different social dynamic – where students seemed to have more cohesive social groups and students felt less comfortable approaching their peers. A student described the perception this way:

I just try to join other things and stuff, but it seems like everyone already has their own groups and, I don't know, after freshman year, I guess freshman year it was not weird to just walk up to someone like hey, you wanna' be friends, and now if you do that people would be like go away, who are you?

At a large institution, there are many different kinds of activities and social groups to join. Students in our sample were by and large active in groups, ranging from more academically oriented (e.g., business or engineering clubs, cultural groups), special interest hobby groups (e.g., exercise, dance, photography) to philanthropic groups and Greek societies. Several students described a university event held at the beginning of each academic year to encourage students to get involved with campus activities. A few students expressed appreciation for this event because it brought all of the diverse activities together and made them aware, while others found it overwhelming and found that they wanted to join everything, but could not. Students who were involved in activities often referenced these organizations as a way to make friends, and students who were less involved often expressed some difficulty connecting with peers without these similar activities and interests. For example, "I feel like it was really hard. Not like I don't have friends, I just feel like it was difficult making friends not joining a sorority or anything."

Some students discussed their perception of the campus climate as it pertained to disability-specific concerns during their initial enrollment. In these instances, students felt relief when they became aware of others in their classes or major who also receive disability accommodations and a few noted that they became friends with these individuals because of their common experience. One student described it this way:

I am so relieved when I find out and, of course, it's not until the day of an exam when I sit down and see everybody, I look around the table and I am like you guys were all in my class and I know you. You are in my major and I am just figuring this out now, it would be nice to know the people who are in your class and have accommodations because it makes you feel less alienated, a little bit more part of the [University] community.

A few students discussed how their disability compounded other factors and impacted their engagement, for example a student who was a commuter, and another student who had to negotiate disability accommodations with peers in order to complete a group project. Other students discussed the campus climate related to disability, comparing the awareness of and investment in disability-related issues to attention to other student groups (e.g., LGBTQA, athletes) noting that disability does not seem to be as well recognized on campus.

### Disability Experience

Living with a disability provides a unique experience as evidenced by positive and negative statements internalized by students. Although there were descriptions that reflected a continuum of personal reactions, they tended to be more negatively weighted as a result of social stigma often associated with having a disability that, for some students, represents a devaluation process. For example, students mentioned terms or feelings to describe their experiences such as “demeaning,” “not [being] understood,” “frightening,” or “self-conscious.” For students who spoke about their disability experiences, in succinct terms, life seems harder. For example, a student who requires medication to regulate mood indicated that one of the side effects from the medication is that it contributes to being tired and lethargic. Trying to explain this situation to their friends is difficult and, from the student’s perspective, contributed to further confusion. As the student explained, “I guess they just don’t understand. They would be like, ‘what do you mean your medicine makes you sick?’ I am like, I am sick. ... You can’t explain like how your medicines make you feel too numb to them.”

At the same time, other students report that as a result of lived disability experience, it impacted them in positive ways and enhanced their college experience in other unexpected ways. For these students, there is pride and value about having a disability and how it has influenced them in positive ways that may not have occurred had they not experienced life as a person with a disability. This reaction could perhaps be best expressed in this student’s experience:

My disability is I can only see out of one eye ... [and playing [sport] affects] my ability to play because you know visually it is much harder. I started to wear a [name of university] logo under the eye, my teammates loved it. I started wearing bright colors so that they can see me. I think having and holding a sense of pride in the fact that yeah, I am only having one eye but like I am doing what all you guys are doing. You know, even, it is good sometimes. They love that. They want to support that -- Yeah, we have a teammate that has disability but you know, he is doing well. ... I cannot speak for everyone, because it is an individual thing, but I think it is we held more pride in, what we did have, other people might support that.

As with most personal characteristics, disability is only one part that defines each student. While overcoming life challenges can be uplifting, in many cases, students reported that it is not necessarily more

important than any other aspect of their identity. For example, one student exemplified this belief with the following statement:

I don’t think it’s something that we should be screaming out to the top of our lungs but I feel like other people should realize what’s here and it’s not like something to be ashamed of. It’s something to be like oh, it’s ‘cause I am. It’s not my fault my brain has some weird functions happening that no one even figures out about; but it happened so we have to deal with it and we deal with it how we can. And I mean we’re here at college, meaning we’re just as credible as anyone else who got into [name of university].

The consequences of having a disability are also manifested within the context of social relationships. Depending upon these interactions, SWD sometimes resort to strategies that will mask the impact of disability given existing stigma. As a result, there is a conscious effort to contain the impact of disability and for students with more “invisible disabilities” such as having a learning disability or mental illness, the impact of disability can be even more challenging and, in order to avoid disclosing information about one’s disability, SWD have to resort to alternate explanations. This situation often occurs when academic accommodations are provided where, for example, when asked by another student why the student with a disability receives extra time given for examinations, the reason given was because of “class schedule conflicts” rather than disclosing the nature of one’s disability. Containing the impact of disability effects occurs in social situations outside of the classroom as well as another student noted:

I love to dance, I’m part of the (name of dance club) where I’m going to shows almost all the time, and while I know it’s not good for my ankle, I’ll still go. And like there are days where, if it’s raining my ankles a little swollen, so I won’t dance and everyone’s like why aren’t you dancing? I go, ‘just my ankle hurts’, I keep it very like, low-key or whatever.

Making the decision about what information to share, with whom, and in what situation is a personal choice for each student. To the degree each student wishes to disclose the effects of living with a disability ranges on a continuum from something that is devalued to something that should be celebrated just as any other unique aspect that defines each person.

## **Student Strategies**

This theme included students' descriptions of their own personal strategies for succeeding and detailed specific approaches for how they successfully navigated college as a SWD. In our discussions, students provided recommendations and advice they would offer to other SWD. These strategy descriptions and advice provide important material for FYS program development. Within this broad theme five sub-themes emerged, including: making connections, accommodations and self-advocacy, disability specific, education specific, and employment.

Strategies for making social connections were cited often by study participants. With respect to faculty, one student commented, "What people don't really see is having good relationships with at least one professor is key to getting a good job or key to getting into a good career." This relationship, as noted by other SWD, meant that students should visit professors during office hours and work on building relationships one-on-one. Connecting with others was seen as important on multiple levels including campus connections with academic advisors, tutors, office of disability specialists and career service personnel. Students also recommended connecting with advanced students who were second year and beyond, as a way to gain and share valuable information about student and college life.

Although classroom and related accommodations are necessary elements that contribute to success, it was clear from narrative comments that students indicated that getting accommodations is something that they must initiate. For example, one student stated, "I didn't know any of those things about the [disability services office] unless I went and asked." This resource, as well as what students knew from prior learning experiences, generated a series of classroom accommodations students found useful such as "wearing earplugs during test," "video-taping class sessions," and "sitting in front" as a way not only to minimize distractions but also because the "professor sees you." In terms of note-taking, students suggested to "rewrite notes in your own words" and "get notes from other students to compare against your own notes." Other recommendations included getting a tutor and enrolling in the summer session rather than waiting until the usual fall semester to begin classes. By starting in the summer students enjoyed having classes with smaller enrollments and fewer students on campus, which they believed made it easier to get acclimated to college life. Students also expressed the importance of having an awareness of individual preferences for learning environment. For example, knowing which courses are better suited to

study with other students as well as knowing which students to study with are important accommodations that must be considered. For other students taking online courses is a better way to learn "because it helped me cope with my disability and manage my classes better." Other recommendations involved "getting a planner," setting "small goals every day," and using a color-coding calendar and email reminders of assignments that are due in order to "stay organized."

Another important accommodation necessitating self-initiated action was finding medical and pharmaceutical professionals at or near the college to manage medical concerns. The ability to receive monthly prescriptions seemed to be an issue students experienced and, as a result, identified strategies on multiple fronts. First, students discussed how to navigate prescriptions that allowed for only one month refill at a time which was problematic for both students who had to arrange a monthly trip home and for those who lived so far away that regular trips were not feasible. Solutions included finding local health care professionals (who would fill prescriptions), using university-based services (health and mental health) to monitor and fill prescriptions, and pursuing "vacation overrides" from insurance companies that would allow for refills for more than one month at a time. Students' strategies for discretion in medication use included having medications sent to a "post office box" off campus ("not dorm"), and using cotton balls in packing (to avoid "pill rattling") so medications would not get stolen by other students and so that other students would not see medications being delivered or picked up.

Employment strategies and recommendations were also presented during interviews. Students discussed the importance of focusing on professional development including going to conferences, joining university clubs and organizations that offered leadership opportunities relevant to career goals, and completing internships. Working with companies "outside the university" was also recommended as an important way to get information that internal university staff (e.g., advisors, faculty) may not have but would be important in the future workplace. Attending career fairs during their first year was another recommended strategy as students could "talk with recruiters," "have others look at your resume," and, by doing so, students may not be "as nervous the next go round" (i.e., attending next career fair). Information about the job seeking process and, specifically, whether and how to address questions regarding disability within an employment interview represent real concerns for students.

### First-year Seminar Recommendations

A major theme in the focus group protocol was to solicit suggestions for program development of a FYS course specifically related to disability issues. Students were very forthcoming in their suggestions for a possible course, and five sub-themes emerged from the data within this larger theme: academic, transportation and campus resources, employment, advocacy, and structure.

Students' recommendations for academic content in an FYS program included information on classroom success such as how to take lecture notes, how to identify individualized strategies for studying, and how to select compatible student groups for class assignments. Participants also suggested teaching FYS students the importance of establishing effective working relationships with professors. One student stated, "start talking to these advisers, these professors now because you can develop different relationships that can lead your career, your interests, your passions in different directions than you may not necessarily know." Participants also believed that connecting FYS students to peers with and without disabilities who have successfully negotiated the college transition could be an important resource as well.

Another content area students would like to see addressed in a FYS program was related to transportation and campus resources. Students suggested sharing information regarding transportation resources including apps that had campus maps, information on bus routes, and where different relevant businesses (e.g., mobility services, pharmacies, wheelchair repair) and resources were located in the community (off campus). Students also suggested various faculty present in the seminar not only to highlight aspects within a given academic majors but also to learn about educational and employment opportunities and resources available within these fields. Students felt these presentations would allow them to connect directly with faculty as a way to begin mentoring relationships. Specific to disability services, students said it was important to have someone from this office to present in the class and share resources they have available to students (e.g., accessible technology, alternate textbook formats, housing, note-taking, scholarship information). One student stated, "I mean if I knew some more of them, I would know there are more things that I can get 'cause I am sure there is more that could be done." Students also recommended offering information and strategies on how to work with disability services throughout the college experience, but especially as a first-year student.

Information about career planning and employment was another area students wanted included in

an FYS program. Students advocated for providing SWD strategies for working in "the real world." One student comment highlighted the lack of knowledge and confidence some SWD feel when navigating employment as a person with a disability. They stated, "I am terrified about disclosing to potential employers my issues." Several students wanted information on evidenced-based practices to assist them beyond graduation and recommended that perhaps alumni with disabilities come in to speak with students as part of the program.

In terms of how the FYS should be structured, students offered mixed opinions as to whether it should be offered by specific major or semester status. Recognizing that student needs may be different according to academic standing (e.g., first-year v. fourth-year), students believed that programmatic offerings could be tailored accordingly. For example, students reflected the importance of knowing about resumes and job search strategies, which would be important information for students in their third or fourth year while first-year students may want to focus more on navigating the structure of the university as a SWD (e.g., accommodations, resources). Finally, students believed that the FYS class should foster a sense of pride regarding individual differences and cultivate empowerment for students.

### Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to inform development of a FYS program inclusive of issues pertinent to SWD. Although FYS programs are widespread and have been tailored to specific student groups, it does not appear that SWD have been routinely included in these efforts. Because of their lived experience, SWD are an important source of information to determine aspects (e.g., structure, content) of a useful model of FYS inclusive of disability issues. Students in our sample provided rich detailed accounts of their experiences of their college transition, lived experience of disability, strategies they have used to be successful, and suggestions for the FYS program. Themes drawn from our data will be used to propose a disability-focused model of FYS.

Students, based on their experiences, made several suggestions related to structural and procedural points for a potential FYS program. Although students expressed support for the idea of an initial FYS that included both typical college integration and disability-focused issues, they also recommended other times that supplemental instruction might be useful. Students noted that once the initial transition to college occurred, more advanced students have other needs



that could be addressed through a series of workshops or classes aimed at SWD. For example, topics such as the importance of internships, how and if one should disclose disability during a job search, financial management and student loans, and finding mentors were noted as desirable topics, but falling outside of the FYS model. Other student comments suggested the importance of identifying desirable instructor qualifications. Based on students' discussion of accommodations, self-advocacy, and classroom experiences, it seems important that the instructor possess a working knowledge of disability, universal design, and accessibility to ensure an inclusive learning environment (c.f., Zeff, 2007). The instructor should also be well informed of disability and general resources on campus for students. Peers and professionals with disabilities were also highlighted as individuals who could provide valuable contributions to a FYS class. It was clear that students seek out information from other students, and value perspectives of other individuals with disabilities who have successfully navigated the college and professional environment.

Recommended content ranged from information that all new students can benefit from to information that was more disability-specific. When students described their initial experiences on campus, they emphasized many similar themes to those found in traditional models of student integration. Orienting to campus, connecting with peers, finding both academic and non-academic activities to join and connecting with other students and faculty were all noted as prominent initial tasks by respondents. Students highlighted methods for getting involved, making friends, and connecting with faculty when they discussed strategies that helped them to be successful. These are important areas to cover in an FYS program to help new students understand the importance of these initial experiences, and how they might go about approaching these tasks. Disability issues were also present in student narratives of initial college experiences. Students described wanting to connect with other SWD in order to feel more connected to the campus community. Students also described several strategies related to accommodations and self-advocacy that they believed contributed to their success. Narratives suggest that FYS content should include disability related resources (campus and community), general student resources, and opportunities for students to develop a peer group to serve as a place to feel connected as well as a possible source of advice and information sharing.

A question remains on whether it would be more beneficial to offer this kind of course only to SWD or whether there is value to including students who do

not have disabilities as well. SWD narratives about the disability experience often concerned their relationships with other people; including feeling misunderstood and that at times, their greatest barriers came from the attitudes and behaviors of other people (e.g., friends, faculty). In terms of campus culture related to disability, some participants noted that they felt that disability as an issue was invisible, and did not receive the same attention as other student issues (e.g., issues relevant to the LGBTQA community, student-athletes). Discussing disability in an integrated course could be a valuable learning experience for all students, regardless of disability status. Additionally, SWD are often hesitant to disclose, and a more open enrollment policy might remove some of the potential stigma associated with taking the class. Providing this course only to students who have identified as having a disability may be limiting and, perhaps more problematic, inconsistent with federal mandates promoting inclusion. For these reasons, we suggest a course that targets disability issues, but is not exclusively for SWD.

Findings from our study share several common themes with other investigations related to FYS programs for other underrepresented groups and provide a useful context for professionals working in disability support or student affairs positions. Our participants discussed the value of finding community which is an earlier theme underscored in FYS groups for students from lower income backgrounds. For example, Anselmo (1997) found that greater benefit of FYS came with the opportunity to reconnect with classmates after the end of the course. Benefits were described as both social and academic. Starke et al. (2001) found an increase in retention success for students from minority backgrounds after FYS programs were introduced, particularly notable in a majority White institution. The program described content designed to orient students to the college environment, as well as addressing broader social issues in higher education related to gender and multicultural diversity. Including discussions of diversity and intersectionality (culture, sexuality, and ability) may be a way to find community across the study body.

### **Limitations**

Study results, while informative, must be understood within the context of several limitations. Our sample was recruited through advertising to the DSO, and was composed of volunteers from one university. Participants received a token incentive for their time, and this may have impacted who self-identified. We also advertised to students within the academic home

college of the research team, and at least one participant who ultimately attended one of the focus groups was recruited this way. While participant comments were in many ways consistent with the current literature in this area, we cannot generalize responses to all SWD, particularly those not registered with the DSO, or those attending different colleges or universities. Although the research team pursued the analysis approach carefully, as with any qualitative study, alternative interpretations of the results may have been drawn by other researchers. We attempted to be transparent about our biases and expectations by sharing them with each other during coding, and as shared in this report but there may be others beyond our awareness. Future work with other participants and different research teams is needed to confirm our findings.

### Conclusions and Future Research

FYS programs have shown promise for addressing retention issues, strengthening connections between the student and the institution, promoting skill building (e.g., health, academic, personal), and enhancing academic success (Jamelske, 2009). FYS programs are commonly offered, and in some cases required for first year students. However, programs are not available to meet the needs of SWD, a growing population with well-defined barriers to educational success. Our study provides input from SWD on their experiences with college integration, strategies they have used to be successful, and their recommendations for content and structure of a useful FYS program for students like themselves. This information is important for educators and support professionals looking to build programming for students.

Building on this proposed model for a FYS program, the next logical step is to pilot the course and evaluate efficacy. Formative evaluation at initial stages should address topic and format selection, determining whether content and structure meet student needs. Pilot study should include seeking input on additional topics for inclusion and/or removal of unnecessary material. Additional study of participants' academic performance, well-being, campus integration, self-efficacy, and retention/graduation rates would provide more objective indicators of program efficacy. Comparison studies of this model with traditional FYS course would be useful to determine whether the additional disability-related content adds value for students. Assessment of differential impact on students who do not have a disability would also be interesting to note, particularly as programs make decisions about enrollment.

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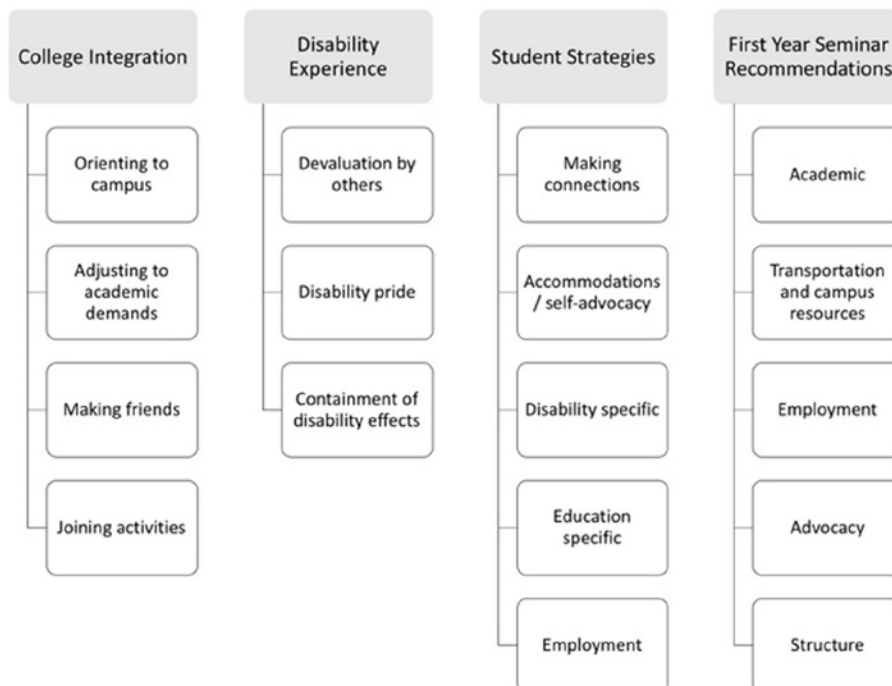


Figure 1. Themes to be represented in a First Year Seminar