Student Voices: A Qualitative Self-Awareness Study of College Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

Requesting accommodations in postsecondary settings requires students to understand their disabilities and needs and describe those needs to higher education faculty and staff. Young adults often have limited accurate knowledge and understanding of their abilities and disabilities. This qualitative study used in-depth semi-structured interviews to gain insight into the disability awareness process and development of six university students with disabilities. The six themes that emerged during this study include: (a) self-awareness, (b) disability awareness, (c) strengths and weaknesses, (d) identity and attitude, (e) differences and similarities, and (f) postsecondary experiences. Findings inform K-12 and higher education professionals about critical skills that might increase the abilities of students with disabilities to successfully advocate for accommodations in postsecondary settings.

Keywords: disability, advocacy, self-awareness, disability-awareness, accommodations, and college

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The number of college freshmen with documented disabilities attending higher education programs increased from 2.6% in 1978 to 9% in 1996 (Cameto, Newman, & Wagner, 2006). According to National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 (NLTS2, 2009) findings, this trend has continued with nearly 15% of secondary students with disabilities enrolling at a postsecondary institution upon high school graduation (NLTS2, 2009) and over 50% of students with disabilities attending a college or university within six years of leaving high school (Sanford, Newman, Wagner, Cameto, Knokey, & Shaver, 2011). Thirty-seven percent of the students with disabilities who enrolled at a college or university enrolled in 2-year community colleges, 15% enrolled in 4-year colleges and 28% enrolled in a vocational, business or technical school (Sanford, et al, 2011). Despite these increases, youth without disabilities are still four and one-half times more likely to attend a four-year college than youth with disabilities (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005). Research also indicates some difference in the completion rates of college programs for students with disabilities compared to the completion rates of students without disabilities. Thirty percent of students with disabilities completed 2-

year college programs within six years of leaving high school compared to 14% of students without disabilities. Thirty percent of students with disabilities completed 4-year college programs within six years of leaving high school, compared to 42% of students without disabilities (Sanford, et al, 2011).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) protects educational rights of students with disabilities in K-12 settings, while the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and Section 504 require colleges and universities to provide access to education for students with disabilities. Additionally, over the last two decades, increasing numbers of high school students with disabilities have enrolled in more demanding academic classes compared to previous years (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Levine & Marder, 2003). The combination of legislative mandates and increased academic rigor for students with disabilities has contributed to the increased pursuit of postsecondary education by students with disabilities in recent decades.

The IDEA, ADA and Section 504 have helped ensure that students with disabilities have access to education at all grade levels. However, there are fundamental differences between the ADA and Section 504 and IDEA. These differences often result in confusion for students and families during the transition from secondary to postsecondary education settings. Unlike elementary and secondary school, where students have little involvement in the accommodation and modification process, students in postsecondary schools are responsible for requesting and obtaining appropriate accommodations. IDEA places responsibility on the K-12 schools to identify and serve students with disabilities, while ADA and Section 504 place the responsibility on the student. Thus, college and university students must document and disclose disabilities before qualifying for accommodations (Hamblet, 2009). For example, students with learning disabilities typically need current evaluation data to document a disability and students with ADD or ADHD may need documentation from a physician to qualify for accommodations. Providing adequate disability documentation is necessary in the accommodation process for all types of disabilities.

Expecting college and university students to seek out services, provide disability documentation, and request necessary accommodations at postsecondary settings may result in only a few students seeking out necessary services. Data from the NLTS2 indicate that only 45% of students identified as having a disability during secondary school continued to identify themselves as having a disability while pursuing postsecondary education. Of the 45% that still identified themselves as having a disability, 37% disclosed their disability to their postsecondary school (Newman, Wagner, Cameto, & Knokey, 2009). Nearly 18% of students who did request accommodations reported that they did not receive the accommodations they requested (NLTS2, 2009).

Theoretical Framework

Students with disabilities often face difficulties when transitioning to higher education despite laws designed to provide opportunities for educational success. Many of these students are leaving home for the first time and do not have the skills necessary to advocate for themselves. As a result, these students are likely to have difficulty when they begin college. Because these students' transition to college is affected by many different factors, Schlossberg's transition theory (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson 2006; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995) is

an effective framework for postsecondary professionals to use in examining the experiences of college students with disabilities. Schlossberg's transition theory, explained in Goodman et al., (2006), provides an examination of factors, the process and different forms of transition.

Goodman et al. (2006) stress the role of perception in transitions, noting that a transition exists only if the individual experiencing it identifies it as a transition. Coping with a transition is a process that extends over time (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). The time needed for a successful transition varies with the individual and the transition (Evans et al., 2010). Transitions can lead to growth; however, decline is also possible, and transitions may be viewed with ambivalence (Evans et al., 2010). According to Goodman et al. (2006), transitions can be characterized as a series of phases: "moving in," "moving through," and "moving out." Four major sets of factors, known as "the 4 S's," influence a person's ability to cope with a transition: situation, self, support, and strategies (Goodman et al., 2006). A person's effectiveness at managing transition depends on his assets and liabilities (Evans et al., 2010). The assets-to-liabilities ratio explains "why different individuals react differently to the same type of transition and why the same person reacts differently at different times" (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p. 57). A person's appraisal of a transition is an important determiner of the coping process (Goodman et al., 2006).

The 4 S's—*situation, self, support,* and *strategies*— (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg et al., 1995) provide a framework that can help professionals better understand the challenges facing college students with disabilities. When considering the different *situations* of college students with disabilities, it is important to determine the trigger (i.e., the cause of the transition, such as leaving home for the first time), the person's skills in self-advocacy and time management, and the issues raised by creating a new identity for one's self. The transition's timing must be viewed in terms of the individual's social clock and whether the timing is favorable for a transition. For instance, consider a student with a disability who is less socially adept than other 18-year-olds, because her parents and teachers were overprotective. The timing of her own social development might make it difficult for her to transition to college right out of high school. Control of a situation depends on the person's perception. Is he in control of his reaction to it, or is the situation controlling him? The college experience may be the first time that a student with disabilities has control over important decisions. Other important factors are role change, duration, and previous experience with a similar transition, concurrent stress, and assessment.

Personal and demographic characteristics and psychological resources are important in relation to *self* and one's ability to cope with transition (Evans et al., 2010). Students with disabilities, like the general student body, enter college from diverse backgrounds. It is important for student affairs professionals to consider these characteristics. Some students with disabilities may be facing unique challenges related to health, culture, gender, age, and socioeconomics. At the same time, these students may have psychological assets such as optimism, self-efficacy, resiliency, commitment, and spirituality that aid them in overcoming obstacles (Evans et al., 2010).

Support is critical to the transition process. In Schlossberg's model, "support" refers to social support, and four types of such support are cited: intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, and institutions and communities (Evans et al., 2010, p. 217). In transitioning to college, students with disabilities may be leaving family, friends, and significant others for the

first time. They may doubt their abilities to make new friends or to succeed in an unfamiliar environment. Student affairs professionals can assist students with disabilities by providing them with affirmation, aid, and honest feedback (Evans et al., 2010). Simply reassuring students with disabilities that they belong at the university may give them the confidence needed to pursue their goals, while others may need feedback to motivate them to achieve success (Evans et al., 2010).

Strategies for coping responses fall into three categories: "those that modify the situation, those that control the meaning of the problem, and those that aid in managing the stress in the aftermath" (Evans et al., 2010, p. 217). The individual may also employ four coping modes: information seeking, direct action, inhibition of action, and intrapsychic behavior (Evans et al., 2010). Postsecondary professionals may encounter students who have recently become disabled, such as a soldier returning from war. Other students may be experiencing health problems for the first time in their lives. In these situations, the students may not have the coping and/or self-advocacy skills needed for these transitions. Postsecondary professionals need to be prepared to provide information to students who are coping with various transition issues.

Literature Review

Accommodations

Teaching, learning, and assessment accommodations for students with disabilities in higher education settings have a significant impact on student success and perseverance. Access to effective services and accommodations, and the knowledge, support, and beliefs of university faculty, staff, and students each influence how students with disabilities perceive accommodation resources on college campuses. Their decisions to access those services and accommodations can be impacted by these issues.

Lee, Osborne, and Carpenter (2010) investigated the effects of academic testing performance, using computerized vs. paper-pencil testing formats and regular time vs. extended time for students with ADHD. The results indicated that most participants who requested accommodations understood their disabilities and clearly knew how to adjust or modify the environment, testing materials, and procedures to increase their academic performance. For example, participants believed that "extended time and a quiet environment were their primary concerns for managing their ADHD symptoms in a testing environment" (p.452). However, not all students request and receive accommodations successfully.

Moswela and Mukhopadhyay (2011) used in-depth interviews to examine challenges students with disabilities experienced in higher education. Participants in the study reported that the campus had failed to meet the diverse needs of the students who required accommodations. Some of the student reported barriers included difficulty obtaining accessible books, lack of flexible course plans, and access to necessary computer software. Participants also expressed concerns about the attitudes of lecturers, students, and counselors, toward disability and reported that such negative attitudes influenced their decision to request disability services, "people tend to judge disability...If you bring in the concept of disability it's like you have ruined everything" (Moswela & Mukhopadhyay, 2011, p. 313). Results for Maswela and Mukhopadhyay's (2011) study implied that students with disabilities require diverse accommodations and supports that

universities may not always provide. In addition to providing adequate equipment and services for students, some universities may need to address barriers created by the attitudes of non-disabled university faculty, staff, and students toward students with disabilities.

Zhang, Landmark, Reber, Hsu, Kwok, and Benz (2009) surveyed 206 faculty members about personal beliefs toward students with disabilities and education. Faculty members' legal knowledge and perceived institutional support were the two strongest predictors of faculty members' willingness to provide accommodations for students with disabilities. According to the results, faculty members typically rely on disability support offices for guidance and support during the accommodations process. This reliance on disability support offices emphasizes the need for disability support offices to provide effective services for students as well as faculty and staff. Zang et al. (2009) also found that faculty member attitudes directly influenced their willingness to provide reasonable accommodations and supports for college students with disabilities.

Self-Advocacy

According to Bersani, Hank, Gunnar, and Dybwad (1996), self-advocacy refers to: choice-making skills, the ability to speak out, and the act of controlling one's own life. It is crucial that students with disabilities have opportunities to learn and practice the knowledge and skills related to self-advocacy (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998; Gilmartin & Slevin, 2010; Lachapelle, Wehmeyer, Haelewyck, Courbois, & Keith, et al., 2005). Effective self-advocacy requires students to have a well-developed self-awareness that includes knowledge and understanding of personal disability. Students who lack such skills and knowledge upon arrival to postsecondary campuses face additional challenges when accessing and navigating the postsecondary accommodation process.

A study by Janiga and Costenbader (2002) found that the two most common suggestions for improving a student's transition from high school to postsecondary settings included increasing student's self-advocacy skills and increasing their level of understanding regarding their disabilities. Thoma and Getzel (2005) conducted a qualitative study to identify the skills and beliefs of college students regarding self-advocacy and found that effective advocacy skills could help students persevere during college. In a study, by Gilmartin and Slevin (2010), participants reported that they increased their disability-awareness by participating in a self-advocacy group, which provided them opportunities to gain insight into their personal strengths and weaknesses, including those related to their disabilities.

Research supports self-advocacy as a beneficial skill for students with disabilities during college. But, many students lack self-advocacy knowledge and skill when they arrive on college campuses. Gilson, Dymond, Chadsey and Hsu (2007) conducted a survey of college students with visual impairments from across the United States to provide an understanding of how college students with visual impairments advocate for and obtain accommodations. Results demonstrated a lack of self-advocacy among participants and emphasized the importance of students understanding their disabilities and having the ability to explain their disabilities to others. Self-advocacy was not specifically discussed in the study but one may assume that most or all participants possessed some degree of self-advocacy skills, because each participant disclosed their disabilities and requested services from the campus disability office. Other studies

(Mull, Sitlington, & Alper, 2001; Pierangelo & Crane, 1997; Sarver, 2000; Stodden & Dowrick, 2000) support these findings, illustrating a need to prepare students with disabilities to self-advocate for appropriate accommodations while pursuing postsecondary education.

Self-Awareness

Brown and Ryan (2003) suggested that self-awareness is "knowledge about the self" (p.823). Such knowledge includes an accurate understanding of personal strengths, weaknesses, likes, and dislikes. For people with disabilities, self-awareness includes developing an accurate understanding of personal disability and learning how to incorporate that understanding into one's life, without allowing it to dictate or consume his/her identity. Disability awareness development requires self-reflection and self-identification (Kling, 2000).

People typically identify themselves, to some extent, through social comparisons (Jenkins, 2004). As a result, most people identify themselves through social activities and their beliefs of how others perceive them. For individuals with disabilities, there is often social discrimination and social rejection, which may influence the development of self-awareness, self-identify and disability awareness. People with disabilities who have a well-developed self-awareness are more likely to attain success across the lifespan compared to people who lack self-awareness (Raskind, Goldberg, Higgins, & Herman, 1999; Goldberg, Higgins, Raskind, & Herman, 2003).

According to research, self-awareness and disability awareness development emerges from a young age (Kling, 2000) and is influenced by social comparisons and perceptions. Work by Cunningham and Glenn (2004) found that children as young as eight years old started making social comparisons and forming complex social categories about their own disabilities. Therefore, it is important for adults to guide students, from a young age, in the development of a healthy self-identity that is based on accurate self-awareness and disability awareness.

Some educators believe it is necessary for individuals with disabilities to discuss their own abilities and disabilities as a means to develop appropriate personal goals including career and education goals (Alley Deshler, Shumaker, & Warner, 1983; Linstrom, Johnson, Doren, Zane, Post, & Harley, 2008; Orzek, 1984; Tomlan, 1985). Despite this belief, some educators feel uncomfortable and/or unprepared to discuss disability with students. Educators frequently assume that the child's primary caregiver will discuss and explain disability related issues with the child. However, in a study involving 77 young people with Down syndrome and their families, Cunningham, Glenn, and Fitzpatrick (2000) investigated how parents discuss this type of disability with their child. The results indicated that 43% of parents had not attempted to discuss disability with their child, 53% of parents did not think their child would understand, and 32% of parents thought discussing disability would have no affect their child's life. Work by Davies and Jenkins (1997) also indicated that 42% of young people do not understand their personal disability or the impact the disability has on their lives.

As a field, we acknowledge the value of disability awareness and the impact it has on the self-awareness of a person with a disability. Despite evidence supporting a link between self-awareness and self-advocacy and success of individuals with disabilities, research indicates that the majority of individuals with disabilities have difficulties understanding their skills, strengths, and limitations (Carr, 1995; Davies & Jenkins, 1997; Cunningham & Glenn, 2004; Ryan, Nolan,

Keim, & Madsen, 1999). Perhaps much of this problem is related to disconnect regarding how students will obtain accurate disability information and who is responsible for guiding disability awareness development.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to describe the college experiences of six students with disabilities and examine of how self-awareness and self-advocacy knowledge and skills influenced each participant's college experiences. Ideally, this study will provide insight into how students with disabilities, service providers, educators and students without disabilities can learn ways to increase student self-awareness and self-advocacy knowledge and skills.

This study involved a qualitative approach, including phenomenological analysis of interview data. The specific research questions included: (a) How do postsecondary students with disabilities define self-awareness?, (b) What self-awareness knowledge and skills do postsecondary students possess?, (c) How does self-awareness influence the accommodation process of postsecondary students?, and (d) What perceptions and attitudes do students have toward requesting and accessing accommodations during college?

Method

Participant Selection

To recruit participants for the study, purposeful criterion sampling was used (Patton, 1990) to select six full-time college students with documented disabilities who were registered with the Disability Resource Office (DRO) on their college campus. The participants included four males and two females from three 4-year college campuses located in the south-central United States. We contacted the campus DRO and requested that the DRO inform registered students about the research and solicit student volunteers. The DROs recruited five participants meeting the study criteria. Participants who were willing to join this study returned the consent form to the DRO. An additional participant was identified and recruited by a colleague of the researchers.

Jason, a 25-year old male student with a learning disability, was in his fifth and final year in the Fire Protection and Safety Technology Program. Anne, a 24-year old female graduate student who is legally blind, was majoring in human relations. Brian, a 23-year old male student with cerebral palsy was majoring in Journalism. Allie, a 29-year old female graduate student with ADHD, was an instructional psychology major. Aaron, a 23-year-old male undergraduate with dysgraphia and dyslexia, was majoring in finance. Jim, a 75-year old graduate student with a visual impairment, stood out from the other participants related to his age and the onset of his disability. Jim spent over half of his life without a disability, which allowed him to compare and contrast his experiences from the point of view from a person with a disability and a person without a disability.

Interview Procedures

Each student participated in a one-on-one recorded interview that lasted 45-60 minutes. We met participants on neutral grounds and kept an informal atmosphere during the interview process. One interview occurred in the home of the participant, three in the campus library, and two interviews at a campus multi-purpose building.

Phenomenological research involves an interactive process between the researcher and participants facilitated by open-ended questions (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, open-ended questions that included background information, disability experience, transition issues, and accommodations on campus guided the interviews. At the conclusion of each interview, we transcribed the interview recordings verbatim.

Researcher Subjectivity

Epoche, a crucial step in phenomenological data analysis, requires researchers to identify and consider preconceived ideas and beliefs pertaining to the phenomenon under investigation. By identifying our personal judgments, we attempted to examine the phenomenon at hand without bringing in our existing judgments and beliefs (Moustakas, 1994).

We continually considered our experiences and beliefs during the research process. Experience teaching secondary special education led the researchers to believe that young adults with disabilities frequently have low self-awareness. Many of the students we previously taught lacked knowledge about personal disability, which made it difficult or impossible for the students to understand the impact disability had on their daily lives. Many of our former students were unable to identify and explain the accommodations they needed in classes and were often unwilling to discuss their needs with teachers. Experience with families of students led us to believe that many families unintentionally, but frequently, facilitate low self-awareness in students for fear of hurting the student's feelings. In our experiences, parents would sometimes exclude students from IEP meetings or discussions about special education and/or disability. High school students who had received special education since elementary school often had little or no knowledge about special education or disability and many did not know they had a disability or received special education services. We attempted to put aside each of our identified preconceived assumptions during the interview and analysis process of this study. These issues were continually revisited throughout the research process to avoid creating biases or omitting important information in the data as a result of our existing beliefs and experiences.

Data Analysis

After transcribing and studying participant interviews, the process of horizonalization (Moustakas, 1994) was used to identify invariant horizons. After identifying the initial horizons, we identified categories that were confirmed or modified by frequently comparing the cases in sequence. In addition, we used the strategy of "bracketing the data" throughout the case comparison of the interview transcripts. The participant's experience was "bracketed" by taking it out of that person's world and treating it as an example of the research topic. Next, we grouped the bracketed data were grouped as meaningful clusters, which eliminated unconnected data.

The process also involved coding, which allowed us to break the data into segments. After the initial list of horizons was identified, overlapping and repetitive statements were removed from the original list. The remaining statements were clustered into six themes. After reflecting on the identified themes, a textural description emerged for each participant to describe his/her experience. This method provided an account of the dynamics of the experiences of each participant (Moustakas, 1994). We then compared and contrasted the textural descriptions of each individual participant to develop a group composite textural description regarding the

examined phenomena. The invariant meanings and themes from each participant enabled us to describe the experiences of the group (Moustakas, 1994).

Findings

Analyses of initial horizons resulted in six themes related to participants' self-awareness, self-advocacy, perceptions of the accommodation process, and postsecondary success: The six themes that emerged during this study included: (a) self-awareness, (b) disability awareness, (c) strengths and weaknesses, (d) identity and attitude, (e) differences and similarities, and (f) postsecondary experiences. Behaviors, experiences, beliefs, and perceptions across all but one of the participants were similar. Jim, the 75-year-old graduate student, often had opinions that differed from the other participants.

Theme 1: Self-Awareness

When asked to describe self-awareness, all participants indicated disability knowledge and an understanding of their strengths and weaknesses as critical components of self-awareness. For example, Brian provided the following answer when asked to describe self-awareness.

> *I think it's being aware of what you're capable of and what you're not capable of and really realizing that the disability is not your fault. I have to make the best of my situation and not be afraid to try new things or afraid to experiment new things because my disability might limit me in some way… But, I think the biggest thing for somebody to become self-aware is the ability for them to experience new things. The more they experience new things the more they will learn about themselves.*

Aaron provided a similar response but emphasized the need to compensate for personal weaknesses and identifying situations to avoid based on an accurate understanding of one's strengths and weaknesses. Aaron provided the following answer when asked his point of view on disability self-awareness.

> *Disability self-awareness for me…would be…you know where, knowing what your overall strengths and weaknesses are, I guess weaknesses more so. And, knowing how to compensate for them. And, knowing what type of situations to try and avoid. And, how to work through those situations that you are trying to avoid once you're in them.*

Theme 2: Disability Awareness

Identifying and describing one's disability is a crucial initial step in the process of self-awareness and self-advocacy. The theme of disability identification and description required participants to use correct terminology to describe their disabilities such as dyslexia, cerebral palsy, blindness, or visual impairment. The depth and level that participants described and identified their disabilities appeared to evolve with life experiences and personal influences. While differences existed in the depth of descriptions, commonalities existed across the students' descriptions. All six participants used correct terminology to describe their disabilities and provided at least two key characteristics of their disabilities. For example, Jim described his level of visual impairment, the reason he had become blind and, the medications he took and the impact of those medications on his eyesight. Brian offered a concise yet accurate and clear description of

his disability. *"My disability is cerebral palsy, it affects my coordination and motor skills."* Anne described her albinism clearly, *" albinism is no pigment in the skin, so there is no color…. albinism affects your vision…. not everyone has severe vision [loss], I am in the worst category."*

Theme 3: Strengths and Weaknesses

Each participant described at least one weakness or limitation they experienced due to their disabilities. The participants also identified their strengths. For example, Aaron who was diagnosed with dyslexia and dysgraphia, identified reading and writing as his biggest weakness, but also stated that working with people, organizing tasks in his head, and working hard as personal strengths that had played a significant role in his education. "*My strengths are my ability to work hard…my ability to see the big picture. I can always know what needs to be done and work it together in my head."* Brian, who has cerebral palsy, clearly identified his strengths, weakness and interests.

> *I'm really good with people, I'm very verbal, social, and I want to be around people. I have very good oral and written skills, I love to write and I'm a very good communicator. My limitations are I'm not great at typing, I don't move very fast.*

Theme 4: Identity and Attitude

The participants in this study appeared to have incorporated personal disability into their lives by recognizing its impact but without allowing that impact to negatively dominate their identities. For example, Aaron stated:

> *I think for me it's been understanding from a young age that this is an issue and it's not going away. I can let it get the best of me or I can learn to cope with it. I know what I expect from myself, and I'm not going to let my disabilities get in my way.*

Jim, the oldest of the participants, discussed the importance of recognizing the positive.

> *Understanding how I function, both positive and negative, not just the focus on the negative. I don't think I would have gotten as far as I am today if I had focused on the negative. I would have probably been consumed with the identity of disability.*

Theme 5: Differences and Similarities

The fifth identified theme referred to the ability of the participants to compare themselves to individuals without disabilities and to identify similarities and differences while recognizing that such differences do not make them inferior to their peers without disabilities. Four students identified high school and college as the time they began to actively notice and compare differences in themselves to their peers. One participant, Anne, indicated that she began this process at an earlier age, but felt that the visibility of her disability forced her to deal with this theme at an earlier age than people with invisible disabilities. Jim, the oldest of the participants experienced identification and comparison at a much older age than the other five participants. However, Jim did not acquire his disability until he was an adult while the other five participants were born with their disabilities. Allie described fully recognizing differences between her and others around age 26.

I, as an adult in my fourth year of my bachelors, had to figure it out for myself, saying 'oh my gosh it makes sense'. It all makes sense now, ok, how can I utilize this information? Now I understand how I function, I'm not going to stop here. How can I put this to my advantage?

Theme 6: Postsecondary Experiences

Anne provided an in-depth description of her experiences requesting and obtaining accommodations from professors at the university and from the community college she had previously attended. She reported that most professors typically reacted in an understanding way, but some professors' reactions created problems for her. For example, Anne described a situation where she requested the professor's PowerPoint file to enlarge the text since she is legally blind and could not see the presentation in class. When asked for the files, the professor's response included "*You are not legally blind…I don't want to take the extra time.*" The professor's reaction illustrates a lack of understanding and knowledge regarding disability and failure to meet a reasonable student request.

Jim also indicated that most of his professors had been willing to provide necessary accommodations. However, he also had experienced occasions that professors either lacked knowledge or were not willing to provide necessary accommodations for him. Jim indicated that such experiences created difficulties for him in class and resulted in a lack of engagement. Specifically, Jim stated "*If I get into a situation where the professor is not accommodating or is nervous about being accommodating, then I just won't, I just won't engage."*

Both Jim and Anne emphasized the importance of registering with the disability office as a means of support during challenging situations with professors. Anne indicated that most professors appear understanding with students who are registered with the DRO and have the necessary documentation for obtaining services. Participants also indicated a need for accurately identifying situations that require accommodations, as well as the appropriate time to ask for accommodations. For example, Anne provided the following response when asked about requesting accommodations. *"I will bring it up, but I don't think you have to tell them automatically 'hey, I have a disability.' I think you bring it up when it is appropriate and when it's necessary. If it is not necessary, don't bring it up at all."*

Self-awareness appears to have played a significant role in the postsecondary success of all participants interviewed during this study. Each participant indicated that he/she needed to understand his/her personal disability, strengths, weaknesses, and needs. Participants emphasized the importance of learning how to compensate for their weaknesses in order to be successful. Advocacy also played a role in the success of each of the participants. For example, participants described the need for self-knowledge in order to advocate for their needs. Anne stated *"If you want something, you have to know yourself, you have to advocate for yourself. You can't always depend on other people to advocate for you."* She also reported that, based on her personal observations, many students with disabilities lack the knowledge to effectively advocate for themselves and some appear ashamed of their disability and therefore do not want to ask for accommodations. *"A lot of students…who have a disability seem ashamed of it, and don't wanna*

tell others and don't wanna ask for help…They want to do without help, they keep everything very minimum, hush, hush, you know, a secret."

Allie described a similar experience regarding shame but on a more personal level. *"I had some problems and I didn't want to tell…It was personal embarrassment, not so much that they [professors] would have judged me…I was embarrassed and didn't want to talk about it so I accepted the low grade."* For Allie, the embarrassment of requesting accommodations resulted in low grades and ultimately academic probation. Threat of suspension eventually forced Allie to either ask for help or leave the university.

Question 1: How do postsecondary students with disabilities define self-awareness?
The definitions of self-awareness were similar across all participants. According to participant responses, self-awareness refers to one's ability to identify personal strengths and weaknesses and includes the ability to compensate for those weaknesses. According to one participant, opportunities for new experiences are an essential part of self-awareness development. He emphasized the need to understand personal disability without allowing the disability to dominate every aspect of one's life.

Question 2: What self-awareness knowledge and skills do postsecondary students possess?
During the interviews, all participants correctly identified and described his/her disability and described how the disability affected his/her life. Participants reported that the visibility or invisibility of a person's disability may influence self-awareness development. Having a visible disability may have forced some participants to recognize and understand personal disability earlier in life than people with an invisible disability or a disability that was acquired during adulthood. In this study, five of the six participants' self-awareness development occurred during late adolescence.

Question 3: How does self-awareness influence the accommodation process of postsecondary students?
Each participant identified knowledge about personal disability as a crucial part of understanding personal needs and strengths in educational settings. Participants reported that having a well-developed self-awareness helped them overcome challenges they faced, while requesting and obtaining accommodations during college. Some participants appeared to have developed a stronger self-awareness after experiencing academic challenges at college. Participants also reported the need to request accommodations when needed. According to Anne, students need to disclose their disabilities only when it is going to affect the need for accommodations for the class.

An important consideration in this study should include the self-awareness of each participant. We may assume that all of the participants possessed appropriate levels of self-awareness because they each had registered with DRO and had requested accommodations during college.

Question 4: What perceptions and attitudes do students have toward requesting and accessing accommodations during college?
Participants in this study reported both positive and negative attitudes and perceptions toward the accommodation process at the DRO on their college campuses. Annie, Allie, and Jim

emphasized the importance of registering with the DRO as a means of support. Anne reported that, in her experience, most professors were more willing to provide accommodations to students who had registered with the DRO.

Aaron and Brian reported negative experiences with the DRO on their campuses. As a result, both young men chose not to utilize disability services, despite having registered with the office. Brian stated

> *I went there with my parents to register when I got to campus. We met with the person there and she was just rude and unprofessional. I was like wow…is this college or elementary school? I mean, I've got a disability that doesn't mean I'm stupid. That was my first and last time going to that office for help.*

Later, Brian expressed concerns that no one working in the disability services office actually had a disability. He doubted the abilities of many of the employees in the office to truly understand the challenges and experiences of students who have disabilities.

Aaron reported similar experiences and concerns with the office on his college campus. As a result, Aaron chose to rely on friends and family for support instead of the disability support office. He stated

> *I feel bad asking my friends for so much help but my mom was a special education teacher so she gets it and helps me a lot. The bad part is that my mom can't really come up here and make people do the right thing…I just kinda have to figure out that kind of problem as it happens.*

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of six college students with disabilities and examine the influence of self-awareness and self-advocacy on each student's college experience. Our research questions focused on student definitions of self-awareness, students' self-awareness levels, and student perceptions and attitudes toward the accommodation process. Additionally, six themes emerged during this study: (a) self-awareness, (b) disability awareness, (c) strengths and weaknesses, (d) identity and attitude, (e) differences and similarities, and (f) postsecondary experiences.

As the number of students with disabilities enrolling at colleges and universities increases, so does the need for colleges and universities to appropriately meet the needs of postsecondary students with disabilities. Postsecondary schools must model and expect positive attitudes toward students with disabilities, ensure that faculty have the knowledge and skills to provide appropriate accommodations, and develop seamless support systems within the offices of disability resources to ensure students with disabilities receive appropriate accommodations. However, students must also take an active role in the accommodation process. Taking an active role does require students to understand personal strengths, weaknesses, and disability and effectively practice self-advocacy.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Readers and researchers should consider several limitations of this study before generalizing the findings to other universities and/or other students with disabilities. First, the sample is small and represents the views of only six students. Second, participants completed only one interview and additional data resources to support information collected during the interviews were not used. Third, this study included students from only three institutions of higher education in one state. Additional research with larger sample sizes and additional campuses is needed to gain greater insight to the findings of this study.

Future research is needed to further examine the effectiveness of services provided by disability resource offices. Such research could help campuses develop new programs and investigate the effects of those programs on student success and faculty members' willingness and ability to provide accommodations to students with disabilities.

Findings from this study support self-awareness and self-advocacy knowledge and skills as an important part of successful postsecondary experiences for students with disabilities. However, effective approaches to these findings should focus on teaching students, from a young age, the skills and knowledge that help students develop self-awareness and self-advocacy before arriving to postsecondary settings. This suggestion requires families and K-12 schools to provide opportunities and instruction that help students acquire and develop accurate disability awareness and self-awareness.

We strongly believe that disability awareness and self-awareness both play a crucial role in the successful postsecondary transition of students with disabilities. Developing self-awareness includes providing students with instruction and opportunities to gain knowledge of personal abilities and disabilities, build positive self-images, and increase self-advocacy skills and knowledge. This research provides a starting point for the development of a self-awareness model that might help postsecondary education institutions develop programs that enhance the self-awareness and self-advocacy skills and knowledge of students. The model might also provide guidance for increasing disability-awareness of faculty, staff and students without disabilities.

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