# Impact of High School Transition and Accommodation Experience on Student Involvement in College

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### **Abstract**

This study aimed to explore the relationship between high school transition preparation and student involvement and integration in college among first-year college students with disabilities. One hundred fifty-eight freshmen with disabilities were recruited from a southeastern university in U.S. The findings reveal that high school transition preparation was highly associated with student involvement and social and academic integration efforts in the postsecondary setting. The results highlight the need for transition support services to foster transition preparation to make a smooth transition from secondary education to postsecondary education for students with disabilities.

Keywords: student involvement, social and academic integration, college students with disabilities, transition planning, accommodation

Postsecondary education plays an important role in sustaining higher paying employment, prosperity and overall quality of life for all individuals, especially for people with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2017; Gittell, 2015; Sannicandro, 2016; Smith et al., 2013). Despite the positive impact of postsecondary education, students with disabilities are still underrepresented on college campuses (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015; Zehner, 2018). In addition to low enrollment rates, the gap in graduation rates between students with disabilities and their counterparts without disabilities has remained relatively steady over the years, ranging from a low of 21.6% to a high of 23.8% (Institute on Disability, 2019). Knight et al. (2016) found that college students with disabilities took longer to graduate due to the complexity in transition issues in college. Wessel et al. (2009) validated research by Adler (1999), which found that drop-out rates were highest for college students with disabilities during the initial few weeks of the first fall semester. Tinto (1988) highlighted that the first six weeks of the first semester are a particularly vital part of the early transition experience, as

it is during this time that college students are most susceptible and sensitive to feelings of marginality.

Successful transition into postsecondary education and college readiness are regarded as important steps in persistence and success for college students with disabilities (College and Career Readiness and Success Center, 2013; Corcoran, 2010). Although not specifically tailored for college students with disabilities, Tinto's theoretical model highlighted the importance of social and academic integration in fostering transition and college persistence, as well as reducing dropout or departure for college students (Tinto, 1975, 1982). Academic integration is defined as a student's academic performance in the institution, such as completion of academic courses, grade point average, and individual intellectual development. Social integration is defined as the informal and formal relationships formed with peers, faculty, staff, as well as the extracurricular activities a student is involved in during college years. A balance between academic and social integration often leads to persistence.

Tinto (1993) also emphasized the key role of student involvement in positive learning outcomes and

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Various federal laws (e.g., Americans with Disabilities Act and its Amendments Act, and Section 504) protect students with disabilities. Students with disabilities in the secondary setting, covered under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), are often taken care of by educators and parents in terms of their accommodation needs. In contrast, college students with disabilities need to take initiative and self-advocate in the accommodation process (Connor, 2012). Thus, a college student with disabilities needs to self-identify as having a disability, learn about their disability in relation to needed services and necessary accommodations, recognize their strengths and

weaknesses, and advocate for themselves in various postsecondary educational settings (Izzo & Lamb, 2002; National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Educational Supports, 2000; Skinner & Lindstrom, 2003; Stodden, Jones, & Chang, 2002). Additionally, they should learn about disability services at the college-level in addition to their new rights and responsibilities as college students. According to Dong and Lucas (2016), students' familiarity with and utilization of the university's disability support services are considered key components of student involvement and are highly related to academic and social integration for students with disabilities in postsecondary institutions.

Transition preparation from secondary education to college is crucial to student involvement and social and academic integration. Tinto (1993) cited Attinasi (1989) in highlighting the point that the scope of transition relies in part "upon the degree to which individuals have already begun the process of transition prior to formal entry" (p.97). Siedman (1996) pointed out that an individual's pre-entry college attributes (e.g., skill, ability, and prior experiences) form an individual's goals and commitments, which then interact over time with institutional experiences (both formal and informal academic and social systems of the institution). Corcoran (2010) highlighted the significance of pre-college experience in influencing social and academic involvement for students with disabilities in a community college. Trainor (2008) proposed that networks with relevant professionals and facilities (e.g., counselors, transition staff, and psychological evaluation centers) as well as knowledge and skills related to transition planning and appropriate accommodations are vital elements to foster successful transition from high school to postsecondary education. Thus, it is important to examine associations between student involvement in college and transition preparation (i.e., use of accommodations and participation of transition planning in the high school).

Considering the legal mandates and expected role of college students in requesting accommodations, experiences using accommodations in high school may help students understand the process of transition into the postsecondary education. The federal government added transition planning as a mandated component of IDEA in 1990 with improvements in 1997 and 2004, while age of transition planning changed from at least 16 years old in 1990 to 14 years old in 1997 and back to 16 years old in 2004. The version of IDEA reauthorized in 2004 requires that, upon turning 16 years old, all students identified with disabilities must have a transition plan in place. This includes a summary of performance (SOP) document, which

helps generate sustainable postsecondary school options (e.g., employment and postsecondary education [IDEA, 2004; Newman et al., 2011]), though IDEA 2004 did not provide a standard template for what an SOP should entail. Although schools across the nation are required to provide transition plans that include goals regarding postsecondary life, students with disabilities often have vastly different experiences and preparation for life after high school. This is due, in part, to transition regulations being determined at the state level, which means that policies differ across states and school districts (Papay & Bambara, 2014; Simonsen & Neubert, 2013). The different levels of transition services offered during high school might impact students' knowledge of disability documentation requirements and disability services available in colleges as well as other student involvement activities (Banks, 2014).

Despite the importance of accommodation requests and participation in transition planning within high schools, limited research has been conducted to examine links of participation in transition support and use of accommodation in high school with students' involvement and integration on college campuses. Shepler and Woosley (2012) highlighted the need to examine early integration experiences of students with disabilities transitioning from secondary education to postsecondary education. Corcoran (2010) reported that pre-college experiences (e.g., academic performance and staff support in high school) impact college involvement for students with disabilities in a community college. In addition, Ressa (2016) and Burdge (2012) found that teachers' attitudes, parents' support and students' advocacy competency influence students' college transition experiences. Although these studies shed light, their findings are limited due to small sample sizes (e.g., ranging from 5 to 18) in qualitative studies. Thus, this study aimed to examine associations of high school transition preparation (i.e., participation in transition support and use of accommodation in high school) with student involvement and integration in college (e.g., familiarity with SDRC, planned engagement activities, and engagement activities prior to attending college) among first-year college students with disabilities through a quantitative approach. The two research questions were:

1. How do students' numbers of planned college engagement activities in the first semester and completed college engagement activities prior to attending college vary based upon high school transition preparation (i.e., whether requested and used of accommodation, and

- whether participated in transition training in high school)?
- 2. How is students' familiarity with the SDRC associated with high school transition preparation (i.e., whether requested and used of accommodation, and whether participated in transition training in high school)?

### Method

# **Participants**

A total of 158 freshmen with disabilities from a large public Research 1 university in the southeast U.S. participated in this study. Participants reported various types of primary disability. The top-three categories include: ADD/ADHD (68/43%); learning disability (32/20.4%); chronic/medical illness (22/13.9%). Participants also self-reported different types of accommodations requested and used such as 50% extended time for test (69.3%), reduced distraction testing environment (63%), and break time (36.2%). (See Table 1 for details).

### **Procedures**

Participants for the study were identified through the scheduling of initial appointments for accommodations and registration with the SDRC at the university. SDRC staff invited students who met the following criteria: a) first-year students entering the university, and b) registered with or going through the registration process for accommodations and services with the SDRC.

Staff explained the purpose and voluntary nature of the study to students. Students' decisions on whether to participate in the study or not would not impact their rights to receive accommodations and other eligible services. Staff asked participants to sign a consent form if they expressed interest in participating in the research project. The staff member would provide a participant with a paper copy of the survey (or large print formats) to fill out or an online Qualtrics survey link to complete the survey. The survey took about 10 minutes to complete. After the participant completed the questionnaire, the staff member filed the questionnaire and consent form in a locked file cabinet behind a locked office in the SDRC. Only staff and researchers in the study had access to these documents.

### Measures

The questionnaire included demographic information such as primary disability types, campus program enrolled (e.g., honors, veteran affairs, Center for Academic Retention and Enhancement (CARE), not affiliated). The questionnaire consists of questions about whether participants utilized accommodations in high school (e.g., "Did you request or utilize accommodations at your high school?"). If they answered "Yes," they would report the types of accommodation they requested and used (see Table 1 for details on types of accommodation listed in the questionnaire). If they answered "No," they would self-report rationales for not using accommodation (e.g., "Did not need them," "Did not want others to know I had accommodations," "Worried about confidentiality, stigma," "Did not have appropriate supporting documentation," and "Parent/guardian did not want me to"). The questionnaire also includes items on if participants were provided information/training on transition to college (i.e., were you provided information/training on transition to college during high school?). If they answered yes, they would report sources of information/training provided to them (e.g., high school counselor, workshops at my high school, high school teachers, workshops at my previous college, talking with my parents, talking with my friends).

The questionnaire included items on activities participants engaged in prior to attending the university (e.g., "Which of these activities did you engage in PRIOR to arriving at the university?"). Participants could choose from the following options: "Attend orientation and preview days," "Speak with a faculty member," "Speak with an academic advisor," "Speak with a SDRC professional," "Attend an organizational fair, campus tour." Participants answered items related to activities they planned to engage in during their first semester (e.g., "Which of these activities do you plan to engage in during your first semester?"). Participants could choose from the following options: "Attending an intake meeting at SDRC," "Testing at SDRC," "Meeting with my faculty members to hand out my accommodation letters," "Join a student organization," "Utilize academic support services on campus," "Meeting with my faculty members when I have questions about my class"). Based upon participants' responses on these items, we created variables on the number of activities that participants were involved in prior to attending to university, and planned activities during the first semester at university. Participants were also asked about what they felt most confident and least confident about in the transition to college (e.g., "What are you most/least confident about in relation to your transition to the university?"). Participants reported if they were familiar with the disability support center or not (e.g., "Were you familiar with the disability support center or the services we provide to students with disabilities at the university?") If participants answered "Yes," they would provide sources of learning about SDRC (e.g., high school counselor, website, preview days, admission process, campus tour).

Survey items were developed in collaboration among the research team to determine what information would be most appropriate to ask participants. Disability-related attentional and processing difficulties were considered when developing the survey items.

# **Data Analysis**

To answer the first research question, we conducted independent t-tests to compare differences in total number of activities engaged prior to attending university and planned activities to engage during the first semester between those who used the accommodations in high school and those who did not; and those who participated in the transition training in high school and those who did not, respectively. To answer the second research question, we conducted chi-square tests to examine associations between participants' familiarity with student disability resource center in college and their use of accommodations and participation in the transition training during high school. In addition to the two research questions, we conducted frequency and descriptive analyses on key variables (e.g., use of accommodation and participation in transition training in high school, and familiarity with SDRC and types of involvement activities on college) and demographic variables.

### **Results**

# Descriptive Findings on Demographic and Key **Variables**

Among 158 participants, 31 (19.6%) did not request and utilize accommodations at their high school, while 127 (80.4%) did. Among those who requested and utilized accommodations in their high school, the top three requested accommodations included: test time extension by 50%, reduced distraction testing environment, and ability to take a break during testing or class. The least requested accommodations included assisted technology, alternative test format, and priority registration. See Table 1 for details.

Among 31 participants who did not utilize accommodations, 14 (45.2%) reported they did not need accommodations, 6 (20.0%) did not want others to know they need accommodations, 1 (3.0%) were worried about confidentiality, 1 (3.3%) had concerns about being stigmatized, 8 (26.7%) did not have appropriate supporting documentation, and 2 (6.7%) reported that their parents/guardians did not want them to use accommodations.

Among the participants, 51 (32.3%) reported not receiving information or training on transition to college, 105 (66.5%) reported receiving them, and 2 (1.3%) did not report. Participants reported on how this information or training related to transition to college was provided to them. Among 105 participants who self-reported receiving transition information, 20 individuals failed to provide source of information received. The top three channels where participants were provided the information/training related to transition include: talking with parents, 79 (75.2%); talking with friends, 76 (72.3%); high school counselor and high school teachers, 61 (58.1%).

Participants also reported the types of activities they engaged prior to attending university. The top three reported activities included: orientation (145/91.8%), campus tour (113/71.5%) and speaking with an academic advisor (98/62.0%). Participants self-reported the types of activities they plan to engage in during their first semester. The top three reported activities included: meeting with faculty members to hand out their accommodation letters (138/87.3%), utilizing academic support services on campus (131/82.9%), and meeting with faculty members when they have questions about their classes (130/82.3%).

Participants reported confidence in the following aspects about transition in the survey: ability to make friends, preparedness to attend class, supports from the university, navigation of the physical campus environment, being independent, and academic related issues. The top three most confident items included: academic related issues, 32 (20.3%); making friends, 22 (13.9%); and locating supports within the university, 17 (10.8%). Participants also reported a lack of confidence in the following aspects about transition: time management, testing, attending class, studying skills, adjustment to the change of environment, navigation of physical campus environment, advocacy skills, resource location, and socializing skills. The top three least confident items included: attending class, 38 (24.1%); time management, 24 (15.2%); and socializing skills, 21(13.3%).

Among 158 participants, 64 (40.5.2%) were not familiar with SDRC, 92 (58.2%) were familiar with SDRC, and 2 (1.3%) failed to answer the question. Among sources of learning about SDRC, participants reported the following as the top three sources: website, 54 (34.2%); high school counselor, 36 (22.8%); and campus tour, 24 (15.2%).

# Association of Transition Support and Use of Accommodation in High School on Student **Involvement in College**

The independent t-tests showed significant differences between those who requested and used accommodations and those who did not in high school with regard to their total number of activities engaged prior to attending university and planned activities to engage during the first semester. Participants who requested and used accommodations in high school or community colleges reported significantly higher levels of preparatory activities prior to attending university (t = -3.67, p < .01) and their planned activities for their first semester (t = -2.87, p < .01). See Table 2 for details.

The independent *t*-tests also showed significant differences between those who were provided information/training on transition to college and those who did not in high school with regard to their total number of activities engaged prior to attending university and planned activities to engage during the first semester. Participants who were provided information/ training on transition reported significantly higher levels of preparatory activities prior to attending university (t = -2.67, p < .01) and their planned activities for their first semester (t = -2.55, p < .05). See Table 2 for details.

The chi-square test showed a significant relationship between using accommodations during high school and familiarity with the disability support services at college,  $\chi^2(n = 156, df = 1) = 8.82, p < .01)$ . Participants who indicated that they did not request and use accommodations in high school were significantly overrepresented within the category of not familiarized with disability support services in college. No significant relationship was found between participation in transition training in high school and familiarity with disability support services,  $\chi^2(n = 156, df =$ 1) = 2.00, p = .17). See Table 3 for details.

### **Discussion**

This study examined the links between high school transition preparation (i.e., participation in transition support and use of accommodations in high school) with student involvement and integration on college campuses. The study found that around 20% of participants did not request and utilize accommodations in high school. This percentage could be an underestimate, as participants who requested and used accommodations might be more likely to participate in a survey study. Participants reported different reasons for not requesting and using accommodations at high school, including having no need for accommodations, concerns of being stigmatized, worries about confidentiality, not having appropriate supporting documentation, and parents' expression that they do not want their children to use accommodations. The lack of use of accommodation could also be attributed to the declassifying of students with learning disabilities in high schools in some states, making them ineligible for accommodation (Holden-Pitt, 2005). The results highlight the need for transition professionals to work with various stakeholders to create a facilitating environment in which high school students with disabilities may feel comfortable to request and use supports and accommodations when needed. Participants' inability to see the need for accommodations and parents' reservations against their children's request and use of accommodations could be attributed to a lack of knowledge of accommodation and the nature of disabilities. Corcoran (2010) highlighted that it is the responsibility of transitional professionals and higher education to provide necessary supports, such as a freshmen seminar, advising/counseling, academic skills training, and faculty-student interaction, as positive influences for retention of college students.

About one third of the participants reported that they did not receive information or training on transition to college. The high percentage of students not involved in transition planning was also similar to what Ramsdell (2014) found in that participants could not remember participating in transition planning. According to the National High School Center (2008), students' high school experiences too often fail to prepare students for postsecondary education or for the rigors of work in an information-based economy due to an inadequate training or information on transition. Considering the great variation in transition programs and services across states and school districts (Papay & Bambara, 2014), further work should be done to ensure that each and every student receives the necessary and adequate transition information and training prior to postsecondary education or work. According to the participants, the majority of transition information and training were provided to them through talking with parents, friends, high school counselors, and high school teachers. The results of the study seem to be consistent with the previous findings in the important role of parents in transition planning and education/career decisions (Arakelian, 2017; Whitaker, 2018).

Participants reported that orientation, a campus tour, and speaking with an academic advisor as popular activities they engaged prior to attending college, while handing out accommodation letters, utilizing academic support services on campus, and meeting with faculty members when they have questions about courses were the top activities they would like to engage in the first semester at college. Considering the popularity of these activities during the transition process, transition professionals need to integrate adequate disability related information on orientation and campus tours and make sure that academic advisors and faculty members are knowledgeable on disability issues, student needs, and policies/procedures and strategies in helping students with disabilities. Transition professionals may also need to assist students with disabilities to foster their abilities to connect and socialize with people, which was an area in which participants felt less confident. Furthermore, some participants self-reported that they felt less confident in class attendance and time management. This highlights the need for transition professionals in secondary education to better prepare students in these areas, and the need for staff in postsecondary education to provide assistance and training to students so they can gain skills in time management and socializing, and resolve difficulties in attending class such as transportation and personal care.

The positive association between the use of accommodations in high school and student involvement in college validates previous studies in that pre-college experiences influence academic involvement among college students with disabilities (Corcoran, 2010). Similarly, the positive association between participation in transition training in high school and student involvement (i.e., activities prior to attending college and planned activities for the first semester) resonate with Ramsdell's (2014) study in which transition planning was positively related to self-advocacy skills and involvement, and negatively related to feelings of stigma surrounding disability diagnosis. In addition, a significant relationship was found between transition programming that focused on these skills and students feeling more empowerment and hope once in college (Morningstar et al., 2010).

The results also showed a significant association between using accommodations in high school and familiarizing with SDRC in college. The results make sense as the experience of accessing accommodations in high school might help a student recognize the importance of accommodation on academic success. This recognition may motivate students to learn about the scope of services provided at SDRC and register with SDRC to request accommodation/supports when needed. All of the results highlight the importance of early request experiences and transition training in high school on early transition experiences and student involvement in college.

#### Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the sample of this study was collected from one large public university in the southeastern United States. The sample may not be representative of all college students with disabilities. Second, participants were asked to recall their student involvement at college and related activities in secondary education through a survey study. The results of the study might be subject to accuracy and objectivity of the participants' responses. Third, the planned activities during the first semester, though may be highly related to one's future behaviors, may not be a good indicator of students' social and academic involvement as students may not actually participate in those activities they planned to do. Fourth, limited demographic information was collected for the study. Demographic information such as gender, race, type of high school attended, and SES will be instrumental to future research.

# **Implications for Practice**

The findings of this study have several practical implications. First, transitional professionals need to identify assumptions of their expected roles in working with students with disabilities. Secondary education institutions should have regular training and workshops on issues related to college readiness, especially in areas of self-determination and self-advocacy, to ensure that students with disabilities are adequately prepared for transition to college or work.

Second, disability personnel in secondary and postsecondary education need to create a better liaison relationship with each other. Improved communication could foster college outreach to high schools by informing transition personnel and high school students with disabilities about postsecondary documentation guidelines, faculty interaction, academic workload in college, and support services. High school transition personnel could invite staff from disability support services and/or college students with disabilities to educate high school students with disabilities on transition experiences, benefits of connecting with disability support services and related student involvement in high school and college. Collaborative efforts between high schools and universities may foster mentoring programs or drop-in offices staffed by college students with disabilities or other community volunteers, which can be helpful in high schools with limited resources and high counselor caseloads (Schneider, 2006). Knight et al. (2016) also suggested proactively reaching out to secondary education by hosting conferences on the transition to

college, and guest speaking at high school transition fairs. Mentors and volunteers who work with students with disabilities should be trained to help identify postsecondary institutions that offer appropriate support services and develop documentation needed to receive necessary accommodations in college. This knowledge and skills obtained in the process would reduce transition shock and foster successful transition for students with disabilities.

Third, transitional professionals should encourage all students, especially those planning to attend college, to be an active part of their transition planning meetings. These meetings should educate students with disabilities on the nature of their disabilities and ways in which their disabilities may impact them academically and socially. The involvement in these meetings and training may assist students to enhance their awareness of social and academic supports instrumental for their success in postsecondary education. Transitional professionals need to teach high school students with disabilities self-advocacy skills so that students are prepared and able to independently advocate for their needs once they enter into postsecondary education,

Finally, staff at college disability support services should be aware of great variations in transition programming that incoming freshmen might have been exposed to. Having an individualized plan is crucial since students who may lack self-advocacy or other essential college skills need help to catch up and succeed in college level coursework (Ramsdell, 2014). In addition, disability staff may consider creating first-year seminars in which current students with disabilities and staff/faculty may serve as instructors or mentors to foster self-determination and social and academic integration. Considering the role of parents in the transition process, transition professionals should also include family involvement and training, as well as exploratory activities through proactive transition strategies, such as training and workshops for students with disabilities and their parents. Development of self-determination, self-advocacy, and other skills are key because students with disabilities are expected to play an increased role in identifying necessary supports and accommodations when they enter postsecondary education or employment.

### **Implications for Research**

The results of this study have several research implications. First, future research should examine the impact of students' early involvement and activities in college on their perception of the level to which students believe higher education institutions support

their social and academic involvement, and how this perception may further influence their continued efforts of involvement and engagement.

Second, future research could also examine potential impacts of students' level of involvement in transition planning and their perception of quality of transition service on their college involvement, especially during the early transition into college. Similarly, future research should also consider how experiences of requesting and utilizing accommodations in secondary education may influence their interactions with disability support services and instructors in terms of requesting and utilizing accommodations in college, and their social and academic integration in college.

Third, future studies need to examine family involvement during the transition process from high school to college may impact students' level of self-advocacy and requesting and utilizing social and academic supports on college campus.

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Table 1 Participant Demographics

Variables	n	%
Campus program involvement		
CARE	7	4.4
Honors program	6	3.8
Veterans affairs	3	1.9
Not affiliated	136	86.1
Missing	6	3.8
Used accommodation		
Yes	127	80.4
No	31	19.6
Accommodation request type		
Time (50%)	88	69.3
Time (100%)	27	21.3
Note taking assistance	38	29.9
RDTE	80	63.0
Break time	46	36.2
Recorded lecture	20	15.7
Calculator	25	19.7
Assistive technology	8	6.3
Priority registration	17	13.4
Alternative test format	14	11.0
Type of primary disability		
ADD/ADHD	68	43.0
Learning disability	32	20.4
Mobility	3	1.9
Blind/visual Impairment	4	2.5
Deaf/hard of hearing	3	1.9
Chronic/medical illness	22	13.9
Psychological disability	13	8.3
Traumatic brain injury	1	.6
Autism	4	2.5
Missing	8	5.0

*Note. n*= 158. For type of accommodations, participants were able to select more than one category, thus the added total percentage exceeds 100%. CARE: Center for Academic Retention and Enhancement; RDTE: Reduced distraction testing environment

T-Test Results on College Integration and Involvement

Variables	Hig	High school accommodation	modation		Hig	High school transition supports	n supports	
	Yes $(n=127)$ No $(n=31)$ M/SD $M/SD$	No ( <i>n</i> =31) <i>M/SD</i>	<i>t</i> -value	p	Yes $(n=105)$ No $(n=51)$ M/SD $M/SD$	No ( <i>n</i> =51) <i>M/SD</i>	<i>t</i> -value	p
Activities prior to attending college	4.65/2.23 3.35/1.43	3.35/1.43	-3.67 <.01	<.01	4.70/2.24	3/75/1.79	-2.67	<.01
Planned activities for the first semester at college	6.89/2.32	5.48/2.90	-2.87	<.01	6.99/2.31	5.92/2.74	-2.55	<.05

Chi Square Results on College Integration and Involvement

Table 3

			High sch	ool accon	High school accommodation			High school transition supports	ransition su	ıpports	
Variahles	,,	Y	Yes		No		Yes	S		No	
		N/%	Standard Residual	N/%	Standard Residual	þ	N/%	Standard Residual	N/%	Standard Residual	þ
Familiarity	Yes	Yes 81/64.8	.8	11/35.5	11/35.5 -1.7	× 01	66/62.9	.5	26/51.0	7	17
with SDRC	No	44/35.2	<b>-</b> 1 0	20/64 5	2.0	<.01	39/37.1	6	25/49.0	.9	.1/

Note. SDRC: Student Disability Resource Center