Perceptions of College Students with Disabilities Regarding Institutional and Disability Services Offices' Response to Sustaining Education During COVID-19

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Abstract

Postsecondary institutions across the United States shifted to remote learning during the spring 2020 semester due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This study qualitatively explores responses to a subset of five open-ended questions that were part of a larger national survey of college students with disabilities (Madaus et al., 2021). Student perceptions of institutional and disability service offices' response to remote learning are examined, as well as remote practices students wish to continue when face-to-face instruction resumes. Results indicate communication and continued services from disability services offices were important to students, as well as remote learning preparation, regular communication, and flexible school policies from institutions. With regard to disability service offices, students expressed a desire for virtual meetings and an online accommodation portal when in-person learning resumed. Recommendations for practice and areas for future research are discussed.

Keywords: COVID-19, college students with disabilities, remote learning, disability services, postsecondary education, higher education

The COVID-19 pandemic had a rapid and significant impact on institutions of higher education in the spring of 2020. March 5, 2020, no schools had transitioned to or announced a transition to online learning, but by April 4, 2020, 1,388 schools had transitioned to online learning with an additional 25 having announced an imminent transition (College Crisis Initiative @ Davidson College, 2020). The total estimated number of students impacted ranged from 10 million to over 14 million (Johnson et al., 2020; Hess, 2020). The shift was so unprecedented, comprehensive, and rapid that it was described as "lurching" (McDaniel et al., 2020, p. 5) and required a triage approach to operations (Means et al., 2020).

Triage approaches were unquestionably necessary in order to continue delivery of services to students with disabilities (SWD). According to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (2019), SWD constituted 19.4% of all undergraduates nationwide during the 2015-2016 academic year. In May, 2020, the Office for Civil Rights directed that institutions must continue to provide services and supports for these students regardless of conditions created by the pandemic. The guidance was unequivocal, noting:

> Whether an institution serves students in a brick and mortar or an online environment, the institution must ensure that students with disabilities have an equal opportunity to access educational programs, consistent with protecting the health and safety of the student and those providing that education to the student (Office for Civil Rights, 2020, p. 2).

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Regarding the shift to remote learning during the spring 2020 semester, Behling (2020) described the resulting planning and effort required to ensure the accessibility needs of SWD at one institution in the northeast. These included, but were not limited to, moving all meetings with students to remote delivery as well as promptly and appropriately meeting the needs of students in crisis, checking to ensure student chronic health needs were met, working with faculty to ensure accessible remote instruction and ability to proctor online exams, and ensuring students had access to necessary technology including Wi-Fi . Behling also described the challenges students expressed, such as dealing with the impact of anxiety and other disability related issues, that impacted their ability to learn during the rapid transition.

Research is emerging documenting the perceptions of SWD regarding the rapid and complex college-wide changes in the spring 2020 semester. Zhang (2020) surveyed 147 students from one institution (n = 147) at the outset of the pandemic, 28 of whom reported a disability or health concerns. The SWDs expressed more concerns regarding whether they could meet requirements in an online course and the impact on their grades than their peers without disabilities. They also reported increased mental health concerns. Kunkes (2020) also surveyed SWD from a single institution (n = 119). These students reported the need to change the types of accommodations utilized in remote instruction, typically to allow for additional time and flexibility believed to be necessary to address novel distractions and shifting workloads.

Soria et al. (2020) presented the results of a survey of 30,099 students who were enrolled in nine public research universities during the pandemic transition, 1,788 of whom were students with physical, learning, or cognitive disabilities. The SWD were more likely to have experienced financial hardships due to the transition, in particular related to both technology and housing expenses. They were more likely than their peers without disabilities to report symptoms of depression and anxiety. Additionally, they were less likely to believe their institution supported them during the pandemic and shared a decreased sense of campus belonging.

Madaus et al. (2021) conducted an electronic survey of 316 SWD from a range of postsecondary institutions across the United States. The students were asked to respond to a variety of yes/no, Likert scale, and open-ended questions. Results of the yes/no and Likert-scale items indicated over one-third of the respondents took courses in three formats: synchronous, asynchronous, and courses that were a combination of the two. Fifty-eight percent indicated needing new or different accommodations in the remote environment, and in general, the respondents reported feeling less connected to other students and their instructors and also lower levels of motivation in the remote environment. Nearly one-third of students converted courses to pass/fail. Notetaking and time management were noted as areas of difficulty, and the respondents also indicated family demands impacted their learning in ways that differed from prior semesters, while one-third of the sample also reported financial concerns. Overall, the results indicated students felt somewhat supported or better by their institution (3.6 out of a 6-point scale), their disability services office (3.8 out of a 6-point scale), and their faculty (4.0 out of a 6-point scale).

As noted, the survey conducted by Madaus et al. (2021) also included a set of open-ended responses that enabled respondents to expound upon their experiences during the 2020 spring semester. The present study focuses on qualitative analysis of SWDs' responses to five questions regarding their perspectives of what disability services offices and their institutions did well in response to transitioning to remote learning, and ways in which each could have improved. Students were also asked to identify any disability services or institutional policies used during remote learning that would be beneficial to continue upon the resumption of face-to-face instruction.

Methods

A description of the data collection instrument and the procedures used to distribute the survey and collect responses follows. Data analysis methods, including measures used to establish trustworthiness, are also discussed.

Data Collection Instrument

The *Survey of College Students with Disabilities during COVID-19*, an electronic survey, was designed to "measure the perceptions of college SWD about their experiences with instruction during the shift to online learning and services in the spring 2020 semester," (Madaus et al., 2021). Initially modeled after items on the AHEAD Ireland *Learning from Home During Covid-19* Survey (AHEAD, 2020, used with permission) and an open-source question set, the EDUCAUSE DIY Survey Kit: Evaluating the 2020 Spring Semester (EDUCAUSE, 2020), the *Survey of College Students with Disabilities during COVID-19* asked participants to provide demographic information, information regarding the format of remote classes (e.g., asynchronous), the types of instructional methods used (e.g., video lectures, uploaded read-

ings), and to respond to Likert-scale items related to how supported they felt during the shift to remote learning and their ease of learning in the remote environment. As noted, the survey included a total of eight open-ended questions. Five of these questions focused on students' perceptions of what their disability services and institutions did well, what could have been improved, and what practices should continue (see Appendix A for the specific wording of each of the five questions). This manuscript focuses on the analysis of these responses.

Before participants were able to access the survey, they were directed to read an informed consent statement. The statement explained the survey purpose, length, potential risks of participating, that consent was anonymous and voluntary, and who to contact with further questions. Before continuing onto the survey, participants were required to give consent to participate.

Survey Procedures for Data Collection

Institutional Research Board Exempt Approval was received at the institution of the lead authors. The electronic survey link was distributed to two disability services offices (one at a public institution and the other at a private institution), the email distribution list of a national postsecondary education and disability conference, and two moderators of national groups for college SWD. The link was accompanied by a request to share the survey with their respective students. Additionally, several recipients requested and received permission to distribute the survey to other networks related to postsecondary education and disability. Data were collected between early August and late September 2020.

Sample

A total of 316 students completed the full survey, and of these, 244 participants, or 73%, completed one or more of the open-ended questions included in this qualitative analysis. The remaining information in this study exclusively examines the findings from those 244 participants. Each of the five open-ended questions had between 166 and 202 complete responses, with an average of roughly 179 complete responses per question. When the response text field was left blank, these responses were not included in the analysis and, therefore, are not listed in the response number totals.

The majority of participants in the final sample of focus for this study identified as female (n = 177, 72.5%) and were enrolled in bachelor's degree programs (n = 169, 69.3%). The most frequently reported disability categories were ADHD (n = 134, 40.1%), mental health disabilities (n = 125, 37.4%), and learning disabilities (n = 92, 27.5%). Additionally, about half of the sample reported having two or more disabilities (n = 168, 50.3%). The sample was predominantly comprised of participants who indicated attending a four-year college with 54.9% (n = 134) attending a public four-year college and 29.9% (n = 73) attending a private four-year college. Fifteen percent (n = 37) of participants reported attending a two-year college and 36 of those participants stated that it was a public college. Responses for institution size were mixed, with 57.0% (n = 139) of participants stating their institution had a student body of over 10,000, while 42.6% (n = 104) stated their institution had a student body less than 10,000. Roughly half of students indicated their institution was in the New England region (CT, ME, MA, NH, RI, VT) (n = 116, 47.5%).

Data Analysis

As one of the first studies to examine these questions for a national population of postsecondary SWD, manifest content analysis was used to explore this topic. Typically used when limited research exists, content analysis can be employed to identify meaning in a dataset by "isolating small pieces of the data that represent salient concepts" (and "organizing large amounts of text into categories that reflect a shared meaning" (Kleinheksel et al., 2020, p. 127-128). Manifest content analysis relies on "what the informants actually say, stays very close to the text, uses the words themselves, and describes the visible and obvious in the text" (Bengtsson, 2016, p. 10).

Four steps were carried out to conduct the manifest content analysis: decontextualization, recontextualization, categorization, and compilation. Decontextualization entailed the researchers familiarizing themselves with the data by performing several close reads of the text to learn "what is going on?" (Bengtsson, 2016, p. 11). Next, two members of the research team performed open coding, identifying each meaning unit with a word or phrase to encapsulate its meaning. Codes were developed inductively, relying on and using participants' words to name codes which is common in manifest content analysis. During this process, each researcher maintained a coding list which explained each of the codes, a method used to increase reliability. The researchers repeated the coding process multiple times, returning to different sections of the data to relate participants' words to codes.

During recontextualization, the researchers returned to the data to reread it and ensure the content was captured in the coding schema. Sections of text

that were unmarked were either labeled with pre-existing codes, developed into new codes, or if the text did not relate to the overall findings, were excluded from further analysis. Categorization involved reflecting on the codes and organizing them into larger categories and themes. Codes were examined in relation to each of the five specific questions and grouped together based on similarities among codes which were then encapsulated into larger categories. The researchers moved back and forth between codes and categories to develop the most accurate organization of the data. Finally, in the compilation phase, the researchers established their positionality to enable them to approach the analysis from a neutral perspective. The coding process was completed in Dedoose (Version 8.3.35). The process of data organization and analysis is summarized in Figures 1-5.

Trustworthiness Measures

Elo et al. (2014) suggested methods to establish the trustworthiness of qualitative content analysis during the planning stages of data analysis, during the analysis itself, and when the findings are reported. Establishing trustworthiness is also considered best practice in the guidelines for conducting research regarding postsecondary students with disabilities (Madaus et al., 2020). A description of how the research team applied this guidance follows.

Planning and Preparation

To achieve trustworthiness in the data collection method, the researchers considered what type of data collection would best answer the research question. As the primary research question involved uncovering college SWDs' experiences with remote instruction and services during the spring 2020 semester, the research team used an electronic survey featuring quantitative and qualitative questions. Not only was the virtual nature of the survey intended to maximize access, it was also strategically distributed to networks that would enable timely completion by a large, national sample of SWD. Additionally, the open-ended responses allowed students to explain their experiences in their own words, an important feature of inductive analysis. The researchers also decided that the "most suitable unit of analysis" would be any word or phrase that captures "relevant meaning," (Elo et al., 2014, p. 5) in the participants' descriptions.

Data Organization & Analysis

Several steps were taken to support the trustworthiness of the data organization and analysis processes. First, study participants as well as the researchers who performed the qualitative analysis are accurately identified and described; the researchers included statements of positionality to accomplish the latter. The first two authors independently carried out the analysis and then met to discuss their results and resolve divergent opinions. Once the agreed upon categories and themes were established, the researchers returned to the data to ensure that the interpretation of categories and themes were "true to the data," (Elo et al., 2014, p. 5) and accurately captured students' accounts.

Positionality Statement

The two researchers who carried out manifest content analysis clarified the positions from which they approached this analysis in order to minimize bias. Each has previously worked as a postsecondary disability services professional (DSP), currently identifies as a graduate SWD, and remains active with student groups for undergraduate SWD. The researchers' backgrounds and experiences enhanced their understanding of participants' descriptions of experiencing disability in postsecondary education. To ensure that the researchers stayed close to the participants' words and did not project bias onto their accounts, both researchers intentionally acknowledged their positionalities and applied researcher triangulation at multiple stages of analysis. This process enabled each researcher to independently analyze the data and then compare their individual analyses; analyses were also continually checked against individual codes and raw transcripts to remain close to the participants' words. These reflexive processes were performed to establish trustworthiness of findings.

Reporting

Throughout this paper, we have attempted to explain the research process as thoroughly and transparently as possible, "allowing readers to draw their own conclusions regarding the trustworthiness of the results" (Elo et al., 2014, p. 7). To complement this description, a table displaying examples of codes, categories, and themes is also included (see Table 1). We also include representative quotations throughout this article to "show a connection between the data and the results" and allow the findings to "reflect the participants' voices" (Elo et al., 2014, p. 6).

Results

Student perceptions of disability services' and institutional strengths and areas of concern are discussed as well as new practices they hope will continue when face-to-face instruction resumes. As mentioned above, 244 students provided at least one

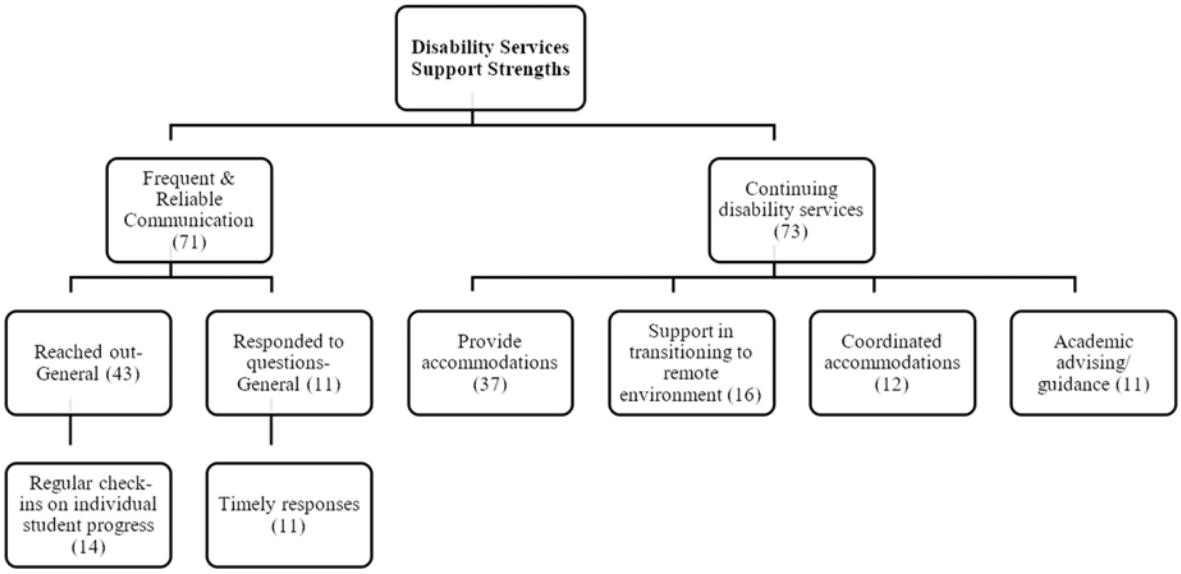
Table 1

Example of Coding, Categorization, and Theme Development

Excerpt	Code	Categories	Theme
"They regularly reached out to check in on me"	Regularly reached out	Consistent check-ins	
"Be in constant contact with students with disabilities"	Constant contact		Maintaining frequent and reliable communication
"They communicated often and responded quickly to my questions"	Frequent communication; quick responses	Frequent and timely communication	

Figure 1

Disability Services Support Strengths Coding Tree



Note. Numbers in overarching categories may not match as some items were double coded.

qualitative response and are therefore included in the analysis below. Figures 1 and 2 represent the qualitative coding trees for each of the broad result areas.

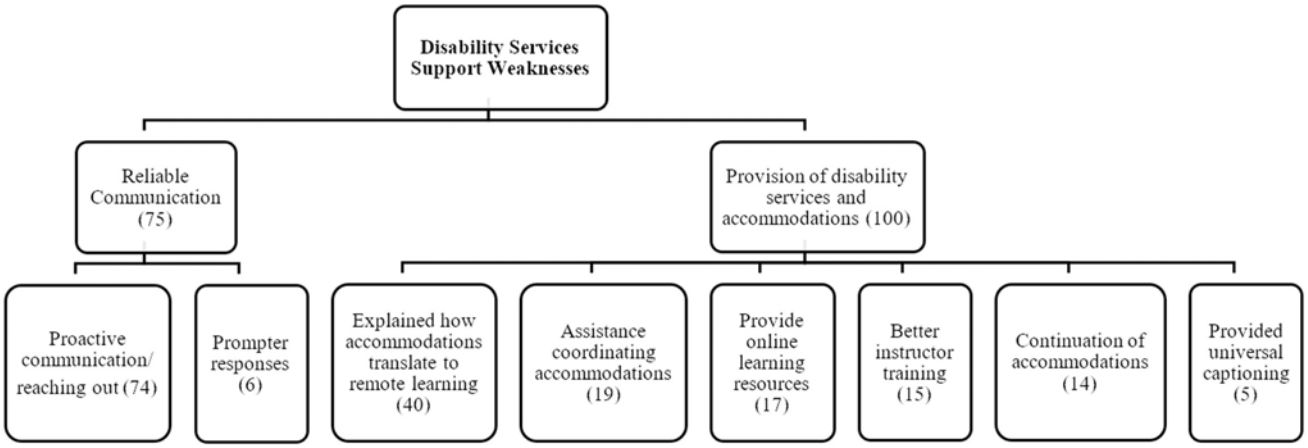
Evaluation of Disability Services Supports

Support Strengths

The analysis suggested that the two most frequently occurring ways disability services offices supported students during the transition to remote learning included (1) maintaining frequent and reliable communication and (2) continuing to provide disability services in the new learning environment. Seventy-one students shared that consistent and timely communication from the disability services office assisted with the shift to remote learning. Specifically, students described offices providing updates on services, DSPs "reaching out to check in" on individual student progress and quickly responding to questions as helpful practices. One student even noted that as all operations were online, it seemed easier to contact and receive responses from DSPs.

Figure 2

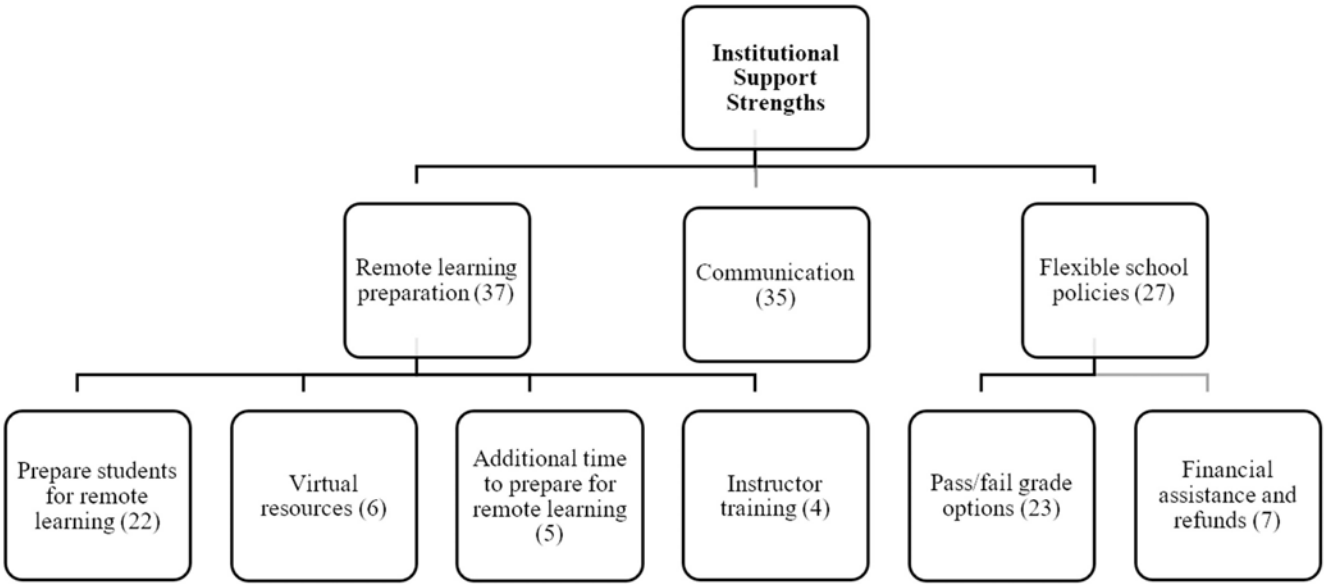
Disability Services Support Weaknesses Coding Tree



Note. Numbers in overarching categories may not match as some items were double coded.

Figure 3

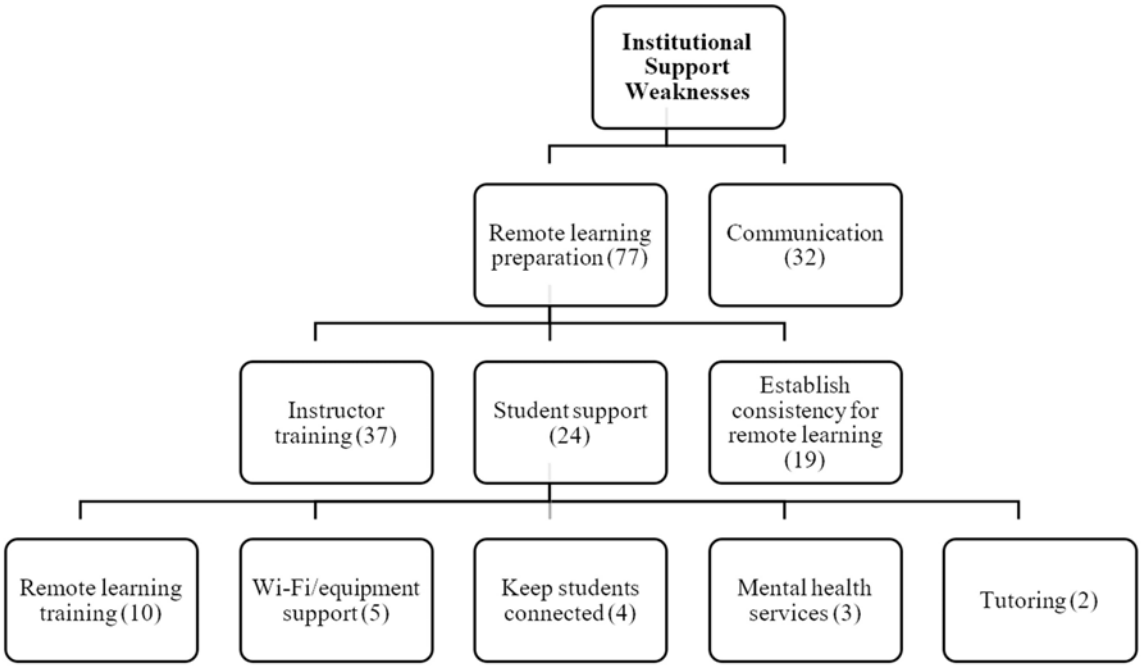
Institutional Support Strengths Coding Tree



Note. Numbers in overarching categories may not match as some items were double coded.

Figure 4

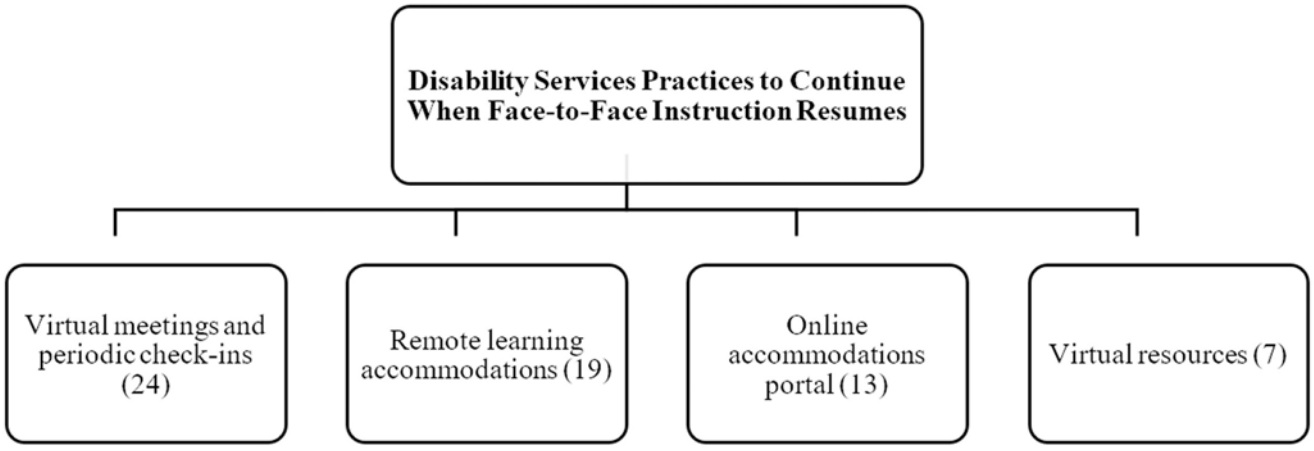
Institutional Support Weaknesses Coding Tree



Note. Numbers in overarching categories may not match as some items were double coded.

Figure 5

Disability Services Practices to Continue When Face-to-Face Instruction Resumes Coding Tree



Note. Numbers in overarching categories may not match as some items were double coded.

In addition to frequent and reliable communication, the next most frequent response code regarding effective transition of services to remote environments. Seventy-three students described that DSPs continued to provide the same services that were available for in-person learning, including academic accommodations such as extra time for exams and note-taking supports, and meeting remotely with DSPs. Moreover, of this group, sixteen students explained that they received specific support relating to transitioning to remote learning. One student clarified, "They helped me smoothly transition online by providing detailed instructions and plans for moving forward." Another area of transition involved coordinating accommodations with professors and ensuring accommodation plans were followed (n = 12). One female student from a 4-year public institution described the process used by the disability services office in this way:

> They provided an email with clearly laid out instructions on how to access the accommodations and how to relay important information to the professors if needed. They also notified the professors and gave them helpful tips on how to best handle the disability accommodations.

Concerns with Supports

While support strengths were identified, concerns with supports were more frequently represented in the data. For example, the two most frequently occurring concern themes suggest some students described disability services as not offering enough support in the same two areas: (1) reliable communication and (2) provision of disability services and accommodations. Seventy-five students expressed a preference for more proactive communication from disability services staff, including reaching out or checking in, from their DSPs. The second major concern, and highest frequency theme in the dataset noted by one hundred students, desired additional support regarding transitioning to remote learning. Moreover, forty of these individuals indicated they wanted disability services to explain how accommodations would translate to remote learning. For example, one student shared, "They could have made their services more clear and the ways in which they were planning to adapt their services for students when learning remotely."

Identified areas of concern included confusion about how to access extra time or find distraction-free locations for online exams and how to receive note-taking support for virtual lectures. Students also wanted more information regarding how accommodations can best be used in remote settings. For instance, one student described, "They could have provided more detailed information about possible accommodations and technologies that could be helpful to us that we may have previously been unaware of." Another noted, "I think just a clear outline of how accommodations work for online vs. in-person learning vs. hybrid learning would have been very helpful." Other areas in which students desired additional support from disability services included assistance coordinating accommodations with professors (n = 19), providing more guidance to professors regarding how to assist SWD in remote environments (n = 15), and providing learning resources specific to remote learning (n = 17), such as how to stay organized, manage one's time, study for and take virtual exams, and use online tutoring services.

Evaluation of Institutional Support

Support Strengths

Reflecting on actions taken by their institutions, students' qualitative responses coalesced around three major types of support: (1) remote learning preparation, (2) regular communication, and (3) flexible school policies. Thirty-seven students stated their institution prepared them to learn remotely, including ensuring they had access to laptops and Wi-Fi, providing instructions regarding how to use online learning management systems, and extending spring break to allow students more time to prepare for remote learning. Participants indicated that communication was a strength of their institution during the switch to remote learning. Thirty-five students revealed their institution kept students informed by sending consistent email updates. Students also appreciated that their institutions implemented flexible policies to accommodate the sudden changes (n = 27). The two policies mentioned most frequently included flexible grading options, such as converting all grades to a pass/fail scale, and offering tuition or residential life refunds.

Concerns with Supports

Throughout the qualitative data it was clear students desired more institutional support for themselves. Twenty-four students responded they wished their institution provided trainings for students to use online learning systems or offered related support. Shared examples included Wi-Fi provision, groups to keep students connected, and virtual mental health resources.

While many students were pleased with how frequently their institution communicated with them, thirty-two students believed updates from their

schools were unclear or not frequent enough. Several individuals described how it can take additional time for SWD to adapt and coordinate their learning. One student from a 4-year public school encapsulated her experience as follows:

> My school touted the possibility that we might come back until the last possible second. We were one of the last universities to make a final decision in our state. Because of this, most people did not bring back important belongings from their dorm. I myself left my printer, which is so vital to my learning style (remote and in person) because I like to print out lecture slides before the lecture and annotate them during.

Remote Practices to Continue when Face-to-Face Instruction Resumes

Disability Services Practices

Students identified specific benefits to disability services operating remotely. Sixty-three students described several practices that should be continued when face-to-face instruction resumes, including virtual meetings with DSPs and using an online portal to coordinate accommodations. Virtual meetings with DSPs were easier for students to schedule or attend, especially if they were dealing with disability-related issues that would prevent them from attending in-person meetings. One nonbinary student from a 4-year public institution described the benefits of "Meeting with disability counselors virtually rather than being required to show up in office." This student stated, "As a person with a chronic illness, it has always been difficult to show up and I've always found it to be inaccessible of them to request from everyone regardless of disability prior to now." Others felt that the virtual format of meetings facilitated additional opportunities for DSPs to check in on students and their accommodations. One female student from a 4-year private school commented,

> They [the DSPs] checked in with me a few times on how notes/note taking was going. It would be nice they checked during face to face (sic) classes too to ensure that I am getting all the notes and things I need. Sometimes, it can be intimidating to contact them with a problem regarding taking notes or not receiving my notes from the note taker. So, it would be helpful if they periodically asked if it was going okay.

Some students described that during face-to-face instruction, their disability services office required them to hand-deliver accommodation letters to instructors. During remote learning, however, students detailed how this process became digital, allowing them to request accommodation letters through an online portal, which DSPs then emailed to instructors. All students (n = 13) who described this change indicated the new process was preferred. Nineteen additional students explained that in a remote-learning environment, some accommodations were automatic and did not even need to be requested, such as captioning and receiving recordings of lectures.

Discussion

Student perceptions of effective and challenging DSP and institutional support services during the spring 2020 semester, through an analysis of the qualitative data, is discussed.

Student Perceptions of How Services Worked

This analysis examined postsecondary SWDs' experiences during the spring 2020 semester transition to remote learning, specifically their perceptions of disability services and institutional support. Students were also able to identify benefits they experienced during remote learning and practices they would like continued when face-to-face instruction resumes. Of particular note, participants described the same two areas as the primary ways that disability services offices performed well and could have improved — clear and proactive communication and support in transitioning to remote learning. This finding may indicate SWD in this study valued being informed about how services would be provided. Receiving proactive communication from service providers also helped students feel supported. Additionally, the opposing responses from different respondents (e.g., disability services communicated sufficiently versus insufficiently) may suggest disability services offices adopted different approaches to communicating with and providing services to students. Alternatively, it may reflect that SWD experienced a range of needs, some of which were not met by the services offered by their specific disability services offices.

A similar contrast was found regarding how students perceived the support offered by their institutions. Students reported on three matters their institutions provided: appropriate preparation for online learning, clear and frequent communication, and flexible school policies involving grades and fees. Other students, however, believed their institution underperformed with regard to clear and regular communication as well as preparation for online learning.

Students shared a preference for aspects of remote disability services, such as virtual check-ins and emails with their DSPs and coordinating accommodations through a virtual accommodation portal (ver-

sus being required to hand-deliver accommodation letters to instructors). These changes required less physical effort and time from students (e.g., walking to the disability services or instructors' offices) which accommodated their accessibility needs.

Limitations

As both a qualitative study and novel survey, limitations related to sample size and generalizability should be considered. The majority of responders identified as female. Additionally, many participants reported attending four-year institutions and/or attending a school in the Northeast or Mid-Atlantic regions. ADHD, mental health disabilities, and learning disabilities were also reported in high numbers, so results may not be as generalizable to students with other disabilities. This survey also asked students to self-report their disability, so there is no way to externally confirm if the information is accurate.

Recommendations for Practice

To ensure SWD are aware of and able to access available services, DSPs as well as institutions may need to develop procedures to provide consistent and clear communication; improving communication methods may be especially critical during times when typical academic instruction is altered. Banerjee and Lalor (2020) recommended ways to augment the clarity of disability services websites, including making the website welcoming (using tabs to delineate specific areas of information) and accessible(ensuring all users can equally access its features). Disability services offices should clearly present how to contact and register with the office, eligibility requirements, and include specific information regarding accommodation processes, protocols, and additional disability resources (Banerjee & Lalor, 2020; Banerjee et al., 2020). Additionally, disability services offices may consider reevaluating the accessibility of their practices, including requiring in-person meetings or hand-delivery of accommodation letters, to determine if they could be simplified to minimize physical effort or time requirements. Finally, disability services offices may collaborate with centers for teaching and learning, offices that can support faculty and facilitate specific training on the needs of SWD (Behling & Linder, 2017).

Future Work

Moving forward, research should continue to be conducted to determine the impact of remote learning on college SWD. This examination focused on the spring 2020 semester, and research should also examine experiences with remote learning in the 2020-2021 academic year. During the spring 2020 semester, there was a rapid transition to remote learning, which left disability service offices and institutions with little time to prepare for the change. In the fall 2020 and spring 2021 semesters, students may have different experiences because these entities had additional time to prepare courses. Once typical face-to-face instruction has resumed, another area of potential research could be to examine whether disability service offices and institutions continued to use any methods that began during remote learning, such as virtual office hours.

Moments of crisis, such as the COVID-19 interruption during the spring of 2020, provide a critical window to view DSP and university service delivery systems for SWDs. Exaggerated stress on a postsecondary system, as measured in the current student qualitative responses, indicates both practices to continue and those that require revision. It is likely that how DSPs and institutions reflect on the lessons learned during this unprecedented trial will be fundamental to an institution's future ability to attract, retain, and ultimately to graduate SWDs. Using the data presented here to examine current practice and future service delivery is an important place to start.

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Appendix A

Open-Ended Questions Analyzed in this Investigation

What things did your campus disability services office do well in supporting you in making the transition to remote learning?

Describe any practices that your campus disability services office used during the remote learning period that could be helpful to you (and other students) when face-to-face instruction resumes.

What could your campus disability services office have done to better support you in making the transition to remote learning?

What things did your institution do well in supporting you in making the transition to remote learning?

What could your institution have done to better support you in making the transition to remote learning?