

Higher Education Accommodation Decision-Making and Positionality: A Survey of Disability Resource Professionals

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Abstract

In higher education settings, the central function of a disability resource professional (DRP) is determining accommodations in collaboration with disabled college students, making their role in the outcomes of students with disabilities paramount. Despite this importance, research on the process of determining accommodations is minimal, and professional guidance on the matter can be interpreted in varied ways, leading DRPs to rely on their *professional judgment* to reach final decisions. What subtly informs this professional judgment, particularly concerning DRPs' positionalities and student identities, is largely unexplored. The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of U.S. DRPs related to their accommodation decision-making processes, experiences, and perceptions. Based on the results of this exploratory national survey of DRPs, accommodation decision-making processes described by participants can be divided into four components: (a) forming initial opinions, (b) engaging with students, (c) consulting with others, and (d) making final decisions. Notably, participants' perceptions of positionality and identities in the accommodations process situated those of students to be more heavily considered than their own. Following a presentation of findings, the authors conclude with implications for the field and recommendations for future research.

Keywords: disability resources, accommodations, college, decision-making, higher education

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According to Ma and colleagues (2019), there are numerous benefits to participation in higher education, including a greater likelihood of employment, higher earnings, and healthier lifestyles. However, degree completion rates among college students in the United States vary across several populations (Ma et al., 2019). Researchers have demonstrated, for example, that despite the availability of disability resource centers and academic accommodations (i.e., promises of *equal access*), disabled college students finish degree and certificate programs at lower rates than their nondisabled peers (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015); this gap in completion rates is accompanied by a sharp increase in enrollment in postsecondary education among disabled college students over the last decade (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019). Altogether, these data paint a troubling picture for current and incoming college students with disabilities and bring into question the extent to which *access* is achieved in higher education settings, let alone *equity*.

At the forefront of efforts regarding equity and access for disabled college students are disability resource professionals (DRPs). DRPs typically lead institutional efforts around removing barriers to access that persist in higher education settings; as outlined by both the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (1973), DRPs' central function is to determine individualized accommodations for disabled students and consult on matters of access (e.g., classrooms, testing environments, university housing) across their campuses (Hatzes et al., 2002). Although DRPs can and should go beyond matters of compliance alone (i.e., accommodation development) in their roles, accommodations currently serve as a primary means to facilitate access for disabled college students while simultaneously advocating for proactive inclusive design in higher education broadly that would ultimately reduce or eliminate the need for accommodations altogether (Kraus, 2021).

Unlike many other professions that require a multi-year degree program (Madaus et al., 2010), DRPs generally derive their accommodation decision-making practices from their institution's policies and procedures, models from research, or guidance from the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD), the leading national organization in the field of disability resources (Dukes & Shaw, 2004), rather than a college degree program. To varying degrees, for example, models from research suggest that when making accommodation-related decisions, DRPs should consider (a) relevant medical documentation, (b) a student's self-report (narrative impact of their disability), (c) the environments in which accommodations are being requested, (d) the limits of 'reasonableness' as set forth by federal law, and (e) professional judgment (Gaddy, 2012; Hsiao et al., 2018; Laird-Metke, 2016; Ofiesh et al., 2004). This is similar to guidance within AHEAD's publication of *The Professional's Guide to Exploring and Facilitating Access* (AHEAD, n.d.), which instructs DRPs to weigh each of the aforementioned factors during what they call the "interactive process" of accommodation

determination (AHEAD, 2012, Q & A section, para. 4). AHEAD, however, uniquely emphasizes the “fluid” nature of the accommodations process and the potential for not needing relevant medical documentation to support an accommodation request (AHEAD, n.d., para. 1).

Because this cumulative guidance is vague in nature and can be applied by DRPs in many ways, disability-related resources and accommodation decision-making practices may vary in implementation across institutions, Disability Resource Centers (DRCs), and individual DRPs (Kurth & Mellard, 2006). Further, according to Weis and colleagues (2016), such inconsistency in guidance may lead DRPs to make accommodation-related decisions primarily based on their own professional judgment and their compassionate drive to support students. Because of an inherent reliance on opinions and instincts, it is imperative to consider DRPs’ *positionalities* (i.e., backgrounds, identities, and experiences) and their subconscious influence on accommodation decisions for students with disabilities. Nevertheless, to date, the influence of these internal factors on the accommodations process is largely unknown.

Conceptual Framework: Positionality

Together, DRPs’ backgrounds, identities, and experiences blend to inform their *positionality*, or lens for understanding and interacting with the world (Holmes, 2020; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For example, positionality may include (but is not limited to) an individual’s: race, gender identity, career, disability, geographical context, sexuality, academic experiences, culture, and influential life experiences. Importantly, at any given moment, specific aspects of positionality may be more preeminent than others depending on the time and space that one is in (e.g., being a woman in a male-dominated space). Further, all aspects of positionality (i.e., identities and experiences) are unique to everyone, as they may hold differing meanings (e.g., motherhood) dependent upon the interaction of other components of positionality (e.g., familial experiences; Walton et al., 2019, Chapter 3).

Overall, positionality is a complex and fluid aspect of the human experience that inherently influences actions, reactions, and choices in day-to-day life (Holmes, 2020). Notably, however, it may not always be the case that individuals are aware of exactly *how* their positionality influences them. If positionality is examined through deep and intentional self-scrutiny, though, it is possible to identify and interrogate personal biases that influence decision-making (Berger, 2015). As a result, understanding DRPs’ accommodation decision-making processes and the extent to which positionality is involved in this process may shed light on the influence it may have as they rely on their ‘professional judgment’ to make crucial decisions with disabled students on a daily basis.

Purpose

To better understand the factors involved in accommodation decision-making among higher education DRPs, the purpose of this study was to investigate the perspectives of U.S. DRPs regarding their accommodation decision-making processes, experiences, and perceptions. The study was guided by four research questions:

- (1) What accommodation decision-making process models do DRPs use?
- (2) What are the primary factors considered during the accommodation decision-making process?
- (3) To what degree are students' and DRPs' identities considered during the accommodation decision-making process?
- (4) How do DRPs describe an ideal accommodation decision-making process?

Method

To answer each research question, the authors conducted an exploratory study by distributing a researcher-developed survey to DRPs working at higher education institutions across the U.S. The authors recruited participants by sending a recruitment message that described the purpose of the study, the nature of the questions and the length of the survey, and a link to the survey through the AHEAD and College Autism Network (CAN) listservs. Two authors also posted recruitment materials (e.g., flyers, links to the survey) on their professional Twitter accounts.

Author Positionality

Three researchers conducted this study. The first author is a doctoral candidate in special education, whose research focuses on higher education disability resources based on her personal professional experiences as a DRP. She identifies as a white, cisgender woman, a student with invisible disabilities, and strongly as a DRP despite her current role as a full-time student. The second author is a special education faculty member; she is also a white cisgender woman. Her research, however, is focused on young adults with disabilities as well as family support systems. The third author is also a special education faculty member and a white cisgender woman but situates her research around college students on the autism spectrum. All three authors approached this research with the common epistemology of critical constructivism that influenced the study's design, implementation, and data analysis.

Because of their identities, beliefs, and experiences (e.g., personal disability experiences, professional experiences, common demographic identities with participants), the research team engaged in critical self-reflection throughout this study. Specifically, reflexive actions and practices included: (a) peer debriefing, (b) rigorous memoing to capture emotions and reactions to data, and (c) researcher triangulation in analyses.

Participants

A total of 51 individuals agreed to participate in this research, and 38 completed the online survey. Participants overwhelmingly reported their race as white ($n = 34$) and identified as women ($n = 31$). All participants reported their primary language as English. Participants' ages ranged from 21–30 years ($n = 6$) to 71 years or older ($n = 1$), with most participants indicating they were aged between 41 and 50 years ($n = 11$). The most commonly reported highest level of education earned among participants was a master's degree ($n = 25$), and participants reported various areas of study within their degrees (e.g., special education, higher education). The most commonly reported degree subject was "other" ($n = 18$).

Further, 13 participants identified as an individual with a disability and 24 indicated that they had one or more family members with a disability. Participants worked in various higher education settings, with the majority at a 4-year public university ($n = 20$). The majority of participants reported working as a DRP between 5–10 years ($n = 14$) or for ten or more years ($n = 15$), working with students with various disabilities (e.g., autism spectrum disorder, specific learning disabilities, multiple disabilities, other health impairments). However, psychological and emotional disabilities (including anxiety, depression, and other mental health disorders) were most commonly reported as the primary disability population with whom participants worked. See Table 1 for additional demographic information.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

	N = 38	Percent
Race/Ethnicity		
Black/African American	1	2.6
Hispanic/Latinx	3	7.9
White/Caucasian	34	89.5
Primary Language		
English	38	100
Gender Identity		
Woman	31	81.6
Man	7	18.4
Age		
21–30 years	6	15.8
31–40 years	8	21.1
41–50 years	11	29
51–60 years	9	23.7
61–70 years	3	7.9
71 years or older	1	2.6

Table 1. Participant Demographics (*continued*)

	N = 38	Percent
Highest Degree Earned		
High school diploma	1	2.6
Professional degree	1	2.6
Bachelor's degree	3	7.9
Master's degree	25	65.8
Doctorate	7	18.4
Other	1	2.6
Subject of Highest Degree Earned		
Special education	6	16.2
Higher education	9	24.3
Disability resources	4	10.8
Other	18	48.7
No response	1	
Individual with a Disability		
Yes	13	34.2
No	25	65.8
Family Member with a Disability		
Yes	24	63.1
No	14	36.8
Workplace		
Community college	4	10.5
4-year public university	20	52.6
4-year private university	12	31.6
Other	2	5.3
Years Working as a DRP		
Less than 3 years	5	13.2
3–5 years	4	10.5
5–10 years	14	36.8
10 or more years	15	39.5

Note. DRP = disability resource professional

Instrument

The online survey was hosted on the Qualtrics operating system (Qualtrics, Provo, UT) and developed by the authors based on a review of the literature and relevant professional guidelines for DRPs (e.g., AHEAD). In the instrument's design, the researchers also used Dillman and colleagues (2014) guidelines on best practices in survey development. The survey included 12 demographic questions (see Table 1 for topic areas). In addition, the survey included 10 questions regarding DRPs' decision-making processes informed by relevant literature and AHEAD recommendations and requirements (e.g., AHEAD, n.d.; Gaddy, 2012; Lindstrom, 2007; Ofiesh et al., 2004). Specifically, survey questions investigated (a) DRPs' models of accommodation decision-making, (b) the consistency with which accommodation decision-making processes are used, (c) the degree to which and with whom DRPs collaborate when making accommodation decisions, and (d) the primary factors considered when making accommodation decisions, including their own identities and those of their students. The full survey is available upon request.

Survey question structures varied based on the nature of the question and included dichotomous questions (e.g., "When meeting with students to discuss accommodations, do you follow a consistent process that you could describe to another person?"), multiple-choice questions (e.g., "At your institution, which of the following best reflects the model for how accommodation-related decisions are made for college students registered with disability resources offices?"), a matrix question (e.g., "In a typical month, how often do you consult with the following outside parties before making an accommodation-related decision?"), Likert scale questions (e.g., "To what degree do you feel that your own experiences impact your decision-making when considering a student's accommodation request?"), and open-ended questions (e.g., "Please describe the process you use for making accommodation-related decisions."). This survey was estimated to take participants 15 minutes to complete. The survey was also distributed via Qualtrics, using guidelines provided by Dillman and colleagues (2014). Specifically, the survey was distributed three times across three weeks via the two listservs.

Analysis

The data for this paper were generated using Qualtrics software, Version XM. The researchers downloaded frequency data and the brief, open-ended survey responses to Microsoft Word, and one author engaged in basic interpretive analysis, seeking to understand "(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24). The author open-coded data for each open-ended survey question, in isolation, by first clustering similar data together to identify basic codes. The author then identified emergent themes based on coded data before meeting with the other authors to discuss the codes and emergent themes for each survey question, including a review of the raw data. The authors engaged in peer debriefing by reviewing, discussing, and questioning interpretations of data to ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Results

What Accommodation Decision-Making Process Models Do DRPs Use?

The first research question sought to explore the accommodation decision-making process models used by DRPs in the U.S. Across all participants, accommodation decision-making process models varied. Forty percent of participants indicated that the accommodation decision-making model at their institution involved DRPs making accommodation-related decisions on their own sometimes and working with colleagues other times. In contrast, 36% of participants indicated that they typically met with students by themselves and made accommodation decisions on their own. One participant indicated that they typically met with students and made accommodation decisions as a group. Another 20.5% of participants, however, selected “other” to describe the process used at their institution, describing models of “meet[ing] with students individually and mak[ing] accommodation-related decisions as a group with the DSS (i.e., DRC) team during committee review,” or that they “consult” with “another DRP” or a “team” or “committee” (e.g., housing, “document review” committees) when they are “uncertain” about a “decision” or when presented with a novel “situation/request.”

In addition, while models of accommodation decision-making processes varied, participants overwhelmingly (i.e., 95%) indicated that they consistently used the same model over time. Regarding collaborating to make accommodation decisions (a practice in which most participants engaged), participants most frequently collaborated with disability resource coworkers, followed by professors (see Table 2). In contrast, participants frequently reported “never” collaborating with students’ medical providers (43.6%), family members (56.4%), and significant others (84.6%).

Table 2. Collaboration with Professionals to Make Accommodation Decisions

	Daily	A few times a week	~Once a week	A few times a month	~Once a month	Never	Prefer not to say
Coworkers	15.38%	28.21%	23.08%	20.51%	12.82%	0%	0%
Professors	0%	18.42%	13.16%	13.16%	34.21%	21.05%	0%
Medical providers	5.13%	0%	2.56%	7.69%	35.90%	43.59%	5.13%
Family members	0%	2.56%	10.26%	5.13%	23.08%	56.41%	2.56%
Significant others	0%	0%	0%	2.56%	10.26%	84.62%	2.56%

Descriptions of Decision-Making Processes

Thirty-six participants provided additional information about their accommodation decision-making process models via an optional, open-ended question (“Please

describe the process you use for making accommodation-related decisions.”). Processes described by participants can be divided into four components: (a) forming initial opinions, (b) engaging with students, (c) consulting with others, and (d) making final decisions.

Forming Initial Opinions. Before meeting with students to engage in the accommodations process, participants discussed practices that occurred beforehand that allowed them to form initial opinions on appropriate accommodations. Many participants explained, for example, that their institution’s accommodation process was initiated by students, who needed to “disclose [their] disability” by submitting various reported versions of “intake” documentation: (a) “student narrative” or “self-report,” (b) “diagnosis” documentation, (c) “any observations provided from professors or other relevant parties,” (d) “recommended accommodations,” (e) “requested accommodations,” and (f) “why the accommodations are needed in relation to student’s disability and areas of functional impairment.” Most participants reported conducting a “full review” of this requested documentation before with students to “determine if [they] are eligible [for accommodations] under the ADA,” noting that they sometimes may need to “request additional documentation” before moving forward with accommodations. In contrast, however, some participants noted being less “strict about having to have everything in place before meeting with [students].”

Engaging with Students. Participants discussed engaging with students as the central component of their accommodation decision-making process models. Student engagement was generally referred to as “intake” meetings, structured as an “interactive process” to discuss students’ “lived experience[s].” Specifically, intake meetings typically involved reviewing “requests [and] disability-related documentation” with students, examining students’ “functional limitations” as they related to “barriers to access,” and the limitations that “might be related to their courses.” Participants also discussed “potential accommodations (with the emphasis that we are access based, not success)” by asking students about previous accommodations they used and “if they have any ideas about accommodations they might need,” and “suggest[ing] additional accommodations based on diagnosis documentation or professional opinion.” Therefore, participants noted that it is “helpful if the student is aware of how their disability impacts them in academic settings and is able to articulate what accommodations they need.” Some participants indicated, however, that they did not meet with students for “more routine, straightforward requests like 1.5x [on exams] or quiet testing [environments].”

Consulting with Others. In some instances, participants described collaborating with other university-based professionals (e.g., “assistive tech staff,” “legal department,” “counseling resources,” housing staff, dining staff) regarding “accommodation needs that are less common or that have never been requested before.” Participants also noted that they “consulted with faculty to determine if an accommodation would result in an ‘undue burden’ or ‘fundamental alteration’” to a course, as well as to brainstorm innovative ways to provide accommodations (e.g., “remote instruction”)

“while still providing equal access to the educational environment and experiences.” Further, participants consulted with disability resources coworkers or supervisors to discuss “high-level accommodations,” “to justify each accommod[*sic*] request,” or to “vote” when an accommodation is in question. Participants also consulted with university “legal department[s]” or other “risk management” offices when “it look[ed] like a denial” of an accommodation would occur.

Making Final Decisions. Regardless of the steps taken to explore accommodation requests, participants discussed how they ultimately reached final accommodation decisions.

One participant’s description of their decision-making process captured the sentiments of many others: “I examine if a barrier exists and the nexus between the barrier and the student’s disability. If a nexus exists, the requested accommodation is evaluated for reasonableness.” Participants did this by “teasing apart [student] need and want,” focusing on the “description of impact and requested accoms[*sic*],” and, as one participant wrote: “A) IS there a disability? B) If yes, what is the related barrier impacting them as a student? C) Does the requested accommodation (or some other accommodation) remove or mitigate the barrier?” When denying accommodation requests that were “not appropriate or reasonable,” participants described explaining their decision to students “in person and in writing with information on how they can appeal the decision” and “offer[ing] other recommendations,” such as other resources available on campus on strategies to use (e.g., “note taking strategies”).

What Are the Primary Factors Considered during the Accommodation Decision-Making Process?

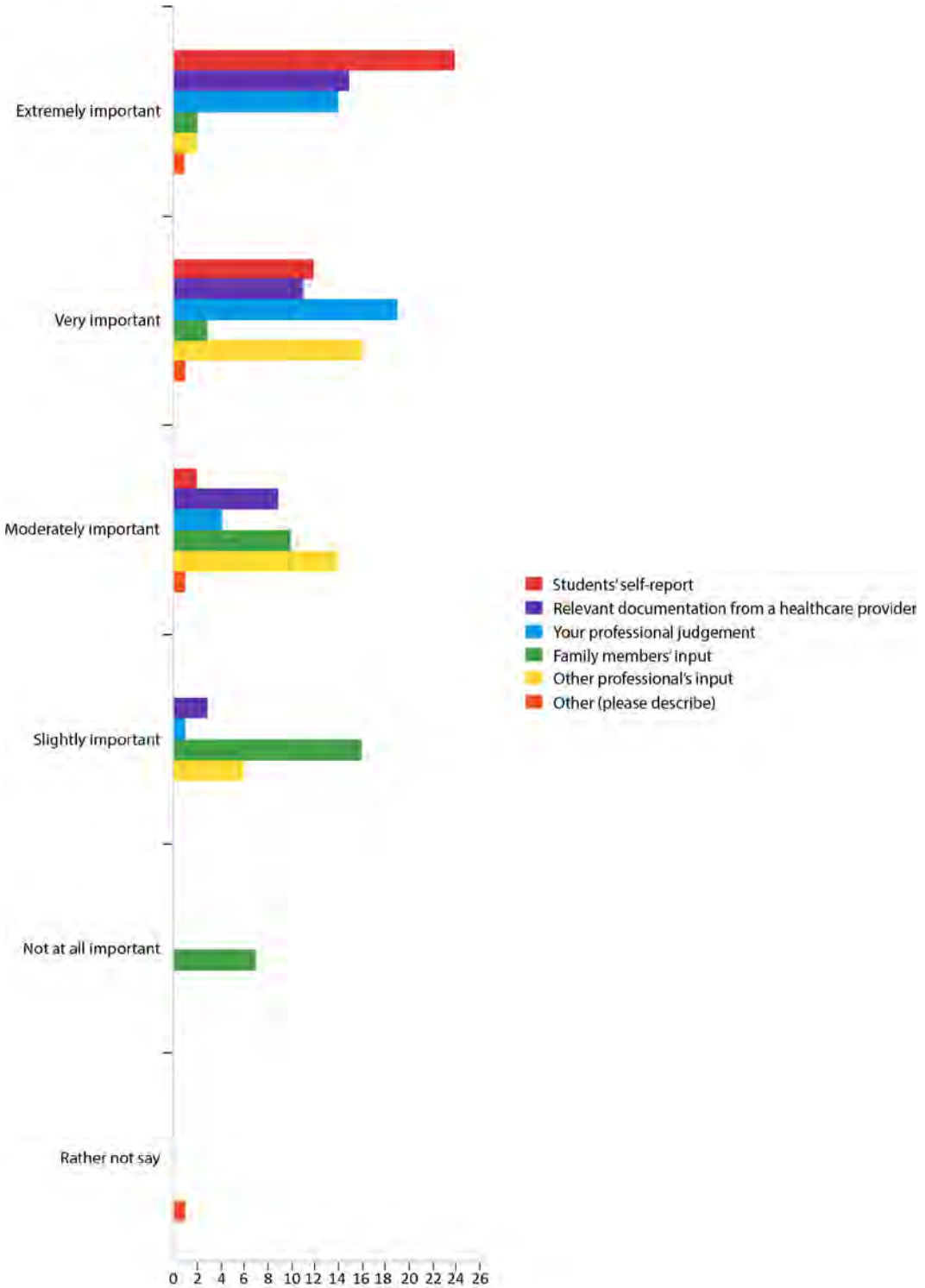
The second research question was related to the varying factors DRPs consider during the accommodations process and the extent to which they were perceived to be important when reaching final decisions. Figure 1 displays the degree to which participants found the following factors important to them when making accommodation-related decisions: student’s self-report, healthcare provider documentation, participant professional judgment, student’s family member input, and other professionals’ input (participants were also provided an “other” option for an open-ended response). As Figure 1 demonstrates, participants ranked a student’s self-report, followed by their professional judgment, as the most important factor when making accommodation decisions. Conversely, participants ranked the input of students’ family members as the least important factor to them during this process.

To What Degree Are Students’ and DRPs’ Identities Considered during the Accommodation Decision-Making Process?

Student Identities and Accommodation Decision-Making

The third research question focused on the degree to which both students’ and DRPs’ identities were considered in the accommodation decision-making process, regardless

Figure 1. Factors Considered During the Accommodations Process



Note. This figure demonstrates the degree to which participants felt various factors were important to consider during the accommodations process.

of the model DRPs used. Most participants indicated that they were “very” (34.21%) or “fairly” (31.58%) aware of student identities (e.g., race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religion) during the accommodations process. Only 15.79% of participants indicated they were “aware,” and 18.42% reported being “slightly” aware of student identities. No participants indicated that they were “not at all aware” of student identities during the accommodations process. When discussing student identities, participants described (a) the influence of identities on decision-making and (b) the importance of considering student identities.

Influence on Decision-Making. Thirty-three participants provided additional information about the influences of student identities on the accommodation decision-making process via an optional, open-ended question (“Please describe the impact, if any, this awareness has on your decision-making process.”). On the one hand, some participants indicated that although student identities “certainly need to be accounted for when understanding student narrative and their preferences with using support resources,” such identities did not influence “decision[s] on an accommodation directly.” Specifically, one participant wrote: “Accommodation decisions should be based on disability and impact of the disability to ensure an equitable opportunity (no guarantee of success/preference).” On the other hand, however, many participants noted that “the intersection of disability with other identities is important because there are layered impacts that need to be considered,” including “the ability of the student to present information regarding the impacts of their disability in an academic/institutional environment.”

For example, one participant wrote that their university’s “approach to documentation requirements” changed “as a result of systemic barriers that many students face” regarding marginalization, classism, and access to basic needs (e.g., “healthcare”). Participants also richly described the implications of student identities and how they related to their thinking as a DRP. For example, student “SES” (socioeconomic status) and “low income” were common “external factor[s]” participants noted considering regarding access to getting evaluations, the correct documentation, “resources/tools [that] may fall beyond our scope as an office,” as well as “what supports the university can offer them” outside of accommodations provided through the DRC (e.g., mental health resources, funding, student food pantry). Other “intersecting identities” participants described included “first-gen [students who] are unaware of resources/accommodations,” students “transitioning” genders, or students who may find some accommodations or processes “culturally or religiously unacceptable.” In these cases, several participants also noted that they tended to be more lenient with approving student requests: “Of course, I would like to think it doesn’t have an impact, but I suspect I’m probably more ‘giving’ with marginalized students.”

Importance of Considering Student Identities. Participants described how taking “these factors” related to students’ identities into account while making accommodation decisions “allows [DRPs] to come to a more socially-just decision when [they] recognize the human capital expended by some identities to seek help.” Participants elaborated on this sentiment by noting that awareness of student identities encouraged them

to “actively recognize the power dynamics at play based on [their] positionality as it intersects with the positionality of the person [they are] communicating with.” Participants also indicated the importance of “consider[ing] that they [students] experience an intersectionality [DRPs] do not understand or know about (which would make it harder for [DRPs] to fight my possible biases).”

Further, participants emphasized a need to avoid “making assumptions” about students and their personal identities while processing accommodation requests, and to seek out “a second opinion on areas where [they are] questioning if [they] handled it properly” based on personal biases. Participants also noted that awareness of student identities “just helps to know in regard to ways to approach the student.” Overall, most participants indicated that awareness of student identities informed how they “approach” students (e.g., “the language I use, and how I might interpret responses),” with some participants attempting to “try to match a student’s demeanor, level of vocabulary, formality, etc.” to develop rapport throughout the accommodations process.

DRP Identities and Accommodation Decision-Making

Twenty-one percent of participants indicated that they were not at all impacted by their own identities when making accommodation-related decisions. At the same time, 71% reported that they “sometimes” were impacted by their identities. Another 7.89% of participants reported that they were equally impacted by their experiences and student documentation and reports, and no participants reported that they were most impacted by their experiences when making decisions. Participants provided additional information about the influence of their identities on the accommodation decision-making process via an optional, open-ended question (“Use the space below to share why you do or do not feel your background is important when considering accommodation-related requests.”). Overall, responses were generally related to either (a) the influence of identities on decision-making or (b) the removal of identities from decision-making.

Influence on Decision-Making. Many participants acknowledged that “we interpret all experiences and information through our experiences” and that “new information cannot be separated from past experience,” making the consideration of personal backgrounds important, as “new ways of interpretation can be learned.” In addition, participants reported “hav[ing] seen many inequities and bias on display by professionals,” thus finding it “important” “to be cognizant” of their “background when determining accommodations, but not because it should be used to influence [their] decision but to help ensure that [their] personal experiences do not alter [their] judgments when working with students.” This was especially important when participant backgrounds “[did] not match those of [their] students, so that all students receive the same considerations, opportunities, and excellent resource standards when determining appropriate accommodations.”

Some participants also found their backgrounds important in building rapport when meeting with students: “I am an individual with multiple disabilities, I feel like this

helps me relate better to our students.” Finally, some participants described how their “life experiences guide [their] professional decision making.” Specifically, participants described their “experiences” as making them “much more open-minded” about approving or “advocating for” accommodation requests from a “social justice” perspective, when other “colleagues [may] shrug off” an accommodation “as students ‘playing the system,’ ‘whining,’ ‘just needing to buck up,’” or requesting accommodations “that help avoidant behaviors” (e.g., not wanting to learn how to take notes).

Removal from Decision-Making. On the other hand, some participants did not feel that it was appropriate for DRPs to allow their identities and backgrounds to influence their work with disabled college students and accommodation decision-making. Specifically, some participants noted that while “personal experiences” and “belief systems can help [them] build rapport with people, [backgrounds and identities] should not cause [them] to react differently to students with different identities that present with the same request/fact pattern.” Further, participants who held this perspective indicated that “identity SHOULD NOT [*sic*]” “come into play when considering need for access” or be a “factor to [*sic*] accommodation decisions.”

How Do DRPs Describe an Ideal Accommodation Decision-Making Process?

The fourth research question was: “How do participants describe an ideal accommodation decision-making process?” Thirty-five participants responded to the optional, open-ended question asking, “Please use the space below to describe what an ideal accommodation decision-making process would include.” Multiple participants indicated that they were “very satisfied with [their] current process,” noting that such processes are “efficient and compliant” or that their current process appropriately focused “more on the student’s self-reporting and trusting their experience to determine reasonable accommodations.”

Some participants provided a specific order of operations they considered ideal for determining accommodations: “1. Explaining the process to the student; 2. Receipt of documentation of an impairment from a licensed professional; 3. Formal request paperwork from a student; 4. Intake interview with the student.” The proposed order of operations of the “ideal” process differed among participants, with some focusing on the initial step as “student[s] emailing disclosure and request form[s]” and DRPs subsequently reviewing these documents, and another noting the initial step as engaging in the “interactive process with the student first and foremost.” Several participants indicated that the current accommodations process used at their institution did not require “comprehensive and current documentation” or that “disability documentation provided” did not need to “include a diagnosis” or other key information. As a result, participants noted, “it would be ideal to have current, clear documentation that describes the student’s disability and functional limitations and recommended possible accommodations.” Further, participants wrote that it would be ideal if students could

“give a good self-report on how disability impacts them and what the barriers are” for them.

Moreover, participants described the ideal skills DRPs would develop and use to determine accommodations, including (a) reviewing documentation, (b) establishing rapport through “interactive dialog [*sic*],” (c) explaining “when an accommodation would not be appropriate or reasonable” to students, (d) being “willing to discuss and address accommodation needs that are less common or that have never been requested before,” (e) developing “general knowledge of various disabilities and the types of accommodations that students with such conditions tend to need,” (f) respecting “student[s] as the expert in their experience,” and (g) encouraging “student self-advocacy.” Participants also desired a “consistent process that is applied individually,” as well as greater “collaborative and group oriented” processes “across coworkers with different specialties and experiences.” “Ideally, having a coworker to bounce any accommodations off of is important.” Finally, many participants wrote that an ideal decision-making process would allow for greater “flexibility” and “freedom to make up accommodations” that could be better individualized to students: “The only accommodations I can give out are from a set list.”

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of U.S. DRPs regarding their accommodation decision-making processes, experiences, and perceptions. Specifically, this study focused on understanding currently used accommodation decision-making models, factors taken into consideration during the accommodations process, the degree to which student and DRP identities are considered within accommodation decision-making, and what DRPs consider to be an ideal accommodations process. Altogether, the results of this exploratory study may serve as a baseline from which to determine future directions and research on the process of accommodation decision-making and the role of positionality in higher education disability resources to make a long-term difference in closing the gap in completion rates for college students with disabilities through equity, access, and excellence in higher education.

Notably, participants of this study overwhelmingly reported having been in the profession for at least five years, with most having been a DRP for over 10 years. Most participants also reported having a personal connection to disability, either having one or more themselves or at least one disabled family member. These demographic trends are important to consider as a key finding as they may be broadly reflective of the field and, further, frame the subsequent themes that emerged within the results regarding accommodation decision-making procedures and perceptions of identities and experiences in relation to this process.

With regard to accommodation decision-making process models, many participants emphasized collaboration as an important aspect of determining accommodations,

although this sentiment was not well-reflected within relevant frequency data. Specifically, when given the choice of several parties outside their respective offices with whom they may collaborate (e.g., medical providers, students' professors, student's family members), many participants indicated that they never collaborated with them or, if they did, only on a monthly basis. This finding sheds light on the discrepancies between DRPs' desires for what an ideal accommodation decision-making process would entail and the reality of the profession. Specifically, although Miller and colleagues (2019) recommended that collaboration with faculty be a part of the disability accommodations process, DRPs may not have the time or resources to invest in collaboration with outside parties to the extent that they would like, albeit important to them as professionals, dependent on the ratio of DRPs to students with disabilities at their institution.

Moreover, despite having access to an "other" option to identify parties outside of those prescribed in the survey with whom they collaborated, participants did not elect to identify additional collaborators. While this is consistent with previous research identifying only students' professors, coworkers, and medical professionals as prominent collaborators when determining accommodations (Laird-Metke, 2016; Meeks & Jain, 2018), one may consider the benefits of DRPs working with other university-based offices to provide more holistic support to disabled students. Counseling resources, for example, could serve as particularly helpful when considering accommodations for students with mental health-related impairments, particularly given that this population was reported as being the most common with whom participants worked.

Participants also ranked a student's self-report followed by their professional judgment as the most important factors to consider when making accommodation-related decisions, whereas previous research indicated that DRPs reported reliance on documentation, professional judgment, and conversations with the student (in this order) during their decision-making process (Hatzes et al., 2002). Although implemented in various ways, this rank order of factors is also consistent with AHEAD guidelines that emphasize the importance of the self-report, suggesting a general adherence among DRPs to decision-making guidance from professional development organizations (AHEAD, n.d.). Interestingly, most participants reported that "family member's input" regarding accommodation requests was the least important factor among those provided for consideration. This finding contributes new information on the influence of family members in the accommodations process, shedding light on important considerations for college students with disabilities, particularly those transitioning from K-12 settings, as they initiate accommodations at the postsecondary level with familial support.

Consistent with their reported reliance on student's self-report, many participants indicated that they were either very aware or fairly aware of students' identities and experiences during the accommodations process. This finding adds to current knowledge by confirming that DRPs are cognizant of the various identities that disabled students hold beyond that of disability, building on previous sentiments that such awareness may create biases potentially harmful to the accommodations process if not

interrogated (Krebs, 2019; Yull, 2015). In contrast to this recognition of student identities, however, participants mostly reported that when considering accommodation requests, they are only “sometimes” impacted by their own identities and experiences, and many considered them to be “not at all important.” Instead, participants indicated that they mostly relied on facts (e.g., medical documentation) to make final accommodation decisions, leaving one to consider the feasibility of being aware of students’ identities yet simultaneously ignoring their own. Participants did not, however, describe *how* they maintained their positionality as separate from their decision-making processes. This finding places DRPs’ perceptions of identities in the accommodations process in an interesting and notable dichotomy, where those of students are seemingly considered more heavily than their own whilst making accommodation-related decisions. As a result, future research should investigate the actions DRPs take to consider and, perhaps more importantly, disconnect their experiences and positionalities from decision-making.

Limitations

This study had four primary limitations. First, our recruitment procedures (e.g., recruiting through organizations’ listservs and distributing flyers on social media) resulted in an inability to calculate a response rate for the survey with accuracy. Further, while 51 individuals agreed to participate, only 38 completed the survey. Second, the most commonly reported subject of highest degree earned among participants was “other” ($n = 18$); we did not collect data on degree programs outside of special education, higher education, and disability resources, limiting our understanding of participants’ educational backgrounds. Third, this study is limited by self-selection bias amongst participants, as they were able to opt-in or -out of fully completing the survey. Fourth, when asking participants questions regarding their models for accommodation decision-making, we did not seek information on the size of their DRC or university, which could have provided important context for interpreting results.

Implications

The results of this study present several implications for the higher education disability resources field. Specifically, although participants reported that they used the same accommodation decision-making process consistently, it is evident that processes vary widely across the field, placing DRPs with a tremendous amount of power as they review accommodation requests (Miller et al., 2019). Despite this variation, processes were generally rooted in consideration of the factors set forth by AHEAD’s guiding documents (AHEAD, n.d.). As a result, AHEAD should consider increased opportunities for DRPs to receive detailed, comprehensive professional development on the field’s model accommodation decision-making process so that DRCs can begin to align more closely with one another. They may, for example, consider developing educational materials that are (a) free, (b) on-demand, (c) accessible, and (d) applicable to DRCs of all sizes to reference as needed. Further, because of the discrepancies between processes

used by participants and those they described as ideal, AHEAD may consider soliciting feedback from DRPs on the guidance they put forth to understand how it translates into practice and adjust it accordingly.

Similarly, DRCs may interpret the results of this research as an opportunity to revisit their internal policies and procedures for DRPs regarding accommodation decision-making procedures. For example, those in leadership positions within DRCs (e.g., directors) may consider allotting time within full staff meetings to review and discuss expectations and foundational aspects of determining accommodations and invite feedback from DRPs on the effectiveness of current practices. Further, given participants' desires to collaborate with others during the accommodations process, DRCs should consider opportunities to ensure this practice can occur as appropriate, including faculty input and student participation (Hsiao et al., 2018). Because of the obstacles that may persist in this matter, however, leaders in DRCs may need to consider how they can advocate for the resources needed (e.g., increased staffing) to move DRPs towards accommodation decision-making practices that they consider both ideal and effective.

Finally, this study has several implications for individual DRPs. First, as a reflective exercise, DRPs may consider spending time answering questions similar to those in this study regarding (a) factors they consider when making accommodation decisions, (b) their accommodations process, (c) what an ideal accommodations process would entail, (d) the importance of collaboration with multiple outside parties, and (e) the importance of both their own identities and those of their students in determining accommodations. After reflecting on these questions, DRPs can synthesize their responses to understand how they approach their work with a critical lens for how any of the factors they used would hinder access and equity for students with disabilities.

Moreover, in light of the dichotomy between the importance of student identities and the relative unimportance of DRP identities, as reported by participants in this study, DRPs should consider their reactions (i.e., judgments, opinions) to identities in the accommodations process. If possible, it is recommended that DRPs seek professional development or relevant educational opportunities on identity, bias (conscious and unconscious), and intersectionality to advance their understanding of these topics as they apply to higher education disability resources and working with disabled students.

Future Research

In addition to the contributions of these findings to the literature, we recommend several directions for future research to understand accommodation decision-making processes in higher education better. First, because of the low response rate of our sample, we stress a need for future research of all kinds with this population, particularly given the importance of the DRP role in the experiences of students with disabilities. However, if this study were to be replicated, researchers should seek a more diverse sample to understand the applicability of themes across DRPs of differing identities, backgrounds, and experiences. In addition, future research should elicit additional

information from participants regarding how they came to the disability resource profession, the current structure of their DRC, and the size of their institution. By doing this, researchers could explore differences in responses to these factors and those in the existing survey and understand variations in practices across them.

Further, given the varied themes regarding collaboration as an important factor in accommodation decision-making, future research should seek more in-depth information on the nature of collaboration in higher education disability resources. Specifically, researchers should seek to understand how collaboration with various parties is initiated and the degree to which the desired amount of collaboration is met amongst DRPs. Finally, as this research is centered on equity and access for disabled college students, future research must seek input from students on decision-making procedures and factors considered by DRPs, such as their identities, when determining accommodations throughout their postsecondary experiences.

Declarations

We have no known conflicts of interest to disclose. No funding was received for this study.

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