The Role of Disability Resource Office Websites:
Information on Accommodations for Experiential Activities Outside College Classrooms

Carolyn Plump[1]
Katherine C. Aquino[2]
Kayleen Montesdeoca[2]

Abstract

While experiential learning experiences provide important professional development opportunities for all college students, successful real-world experience is even more important for students with disabilities, who experience decreased success within the professional setting. This study investigated what information disability resource office websites provided regarding accommodations for experiential learning activities outside of the classroom. A review of public online content of postsecondary institutional websites revealed nonexistent, incomplete, or inconsistent information about accommodations for experiential learning. Of the 397 disability resource office websites reviewed, only 4.0% (*N*=16) contained any reference to accommodations for experiential learning opportunities outside the classroom. The primary recommendation based on these findings is that institutions must be aware of and communicate accommodations for students with disabilities when participating in experiential learning opportunities outside of the classroom.

Keywords: students with disabilities, higher education, experiential learning, accommodations

Research indicates that the format and content of a higher education institution's website can have a significant impact on student success within the postsecondary setting (Alexander & Ishak, 2018). Considered "the face of the organization" (p. 119), Karani et al. (2021) determined that website usability, navigation, interface design, and effectiveness all impact student satisfaction when accessing website information. While institutions construct websites to include information about their missions, programs, curricular requirements, and services, the presentation of the content found on each institution's website may not be useful to all individuals accessing the site (Saichaie & Morphew, 2014). The content included on institutions' websites may be inaccessible or fail to include necessary information, creating additional barriers to user access and overall use. When investigating the accessibility of thirty community college websites, Erickson et al. (2013) found that less than 1% of the pages evaluated in the study were complaint with accessibility web standards found in Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Inaccessible content on an institution's website may limit students' ability and opportunity to access and obtain necessary information for their academic requirements, including experiential learning opportunities linked to their program curriculum.

Experiential learning experiences provide important professional development opportunities for all college students; however, experiential activities for students with disabilities can have a greater impact for this student group's future professional pursuits (Stewart & Schwartz, 2018). Having information that is clearly shared for students with disabilities is key for their overall success within the higher education environment. When investigating the availability of adequate resources on institutions' websites for students with disabilities, Costello-Harris (2019) reviewed 26 public and private institutions located in the U.S. Midwest for evidence of inclusion, including information related to academic accommodations and human support. Findings revealed that the included institutions possessed "poor" (Costello-Harris, 2019, p. 268) evidence of inclusion for individuals with disabilities on their websites. When institutions do not construct and disseminate helpful information via their websites that supports student success, including the success of students with disabilities, they

fail to provide an inclusive educational environment, which can negatively impact student engagement and belonging within the campus environment (Costello-Harris, 2019; Mitchell, 2015; Vaccaro et al., 2015). Failure to create an inclusive environment, including inaccessible content on institutions' websites, may restrict students' interest and ability to fully engage in campus activities, including experiential and extracurricular learning opportunities due to the perceived lack of support and guidance from the institution.

Inclusive Content and Accessibility of Institutional Websites

To ensure the accessibility for all website users, institutions must include and deliver content that can be accessed and reviewed for individuals with various abilities (Bruyère, 2008). An institution's website includes information related to the various academic and administrative services that support a student's postsecondary journey. As noted by Nachman and Brown, "websites are an important digital platform to assess inclusivity and campus climate" (p. 211). When evaluating equity and availability of financial aid information on the websites of public four-year institutions for students with disabilities, Perlow et al. (2021) found that institutions often presented financial aid information that failed to include guidance for students with disabilities, including how students can adjust available financial aid for expenses and services specific to their disability and needed accommodations. When website content is not presented in a way that can be easily accessed for all campus community members or information is not available to address the student needs, it diminishes the opportunity for the diverse student population to fully engage with the available services and programs.

Similarly, information included on disability resource office (DRO) webpages is vital for both current and prospective students with disabilities (Mamboleo et al., 2015). As DROs must review and process students' disability documentation in advance of a student receiving disability accommodations, it is vital that DRO websites present information clearly to ensure students understand the requirements for their particular institution (Banerjee et al., 2020). However, DRO information is often inconsistently placed on a postsecondary institution's website (Jackson & Jones, 2014). When reviewing nearly 300 postsecondary institutions' DRO webpages, Banerjee et al. (2021) found that while approximately 90% of DROs identified the disability documentation process, variation was noted in "specific guidelines used, documentation recency expectations, and how students are expected to request and access services"

(p. 34). While some content may vary by institution, key policies, including disability accommodation processes to support students' academic work associated with their coursework (both in and outside of the classroom setting), are vital to include so students are aware of their rights and can receive appropriate support to obtain necessary accommodations for all academic tasks.

The Role of Experiential Learning Opportunities

Experiential learning opportunities provide postsecondary students with direct, real-world experiences that support the development of their professional interests and subsequent career (AAC&U, n.d.; Kutscher et al., 2019). Experiential learning allows students to engage in important training and networking experiences, as well as engage in activities associated with their professional interests (Silva, 2016). According to the Association for Experiential Education (2020), experiential learning opportunities can include a wide range of activities including clinical placements, co-ops, field study, internships, place-based educational activities, and service learning. Experiential learning opportunities are considered a part of high-impact practices (HIPs) that provide significant benefit to students' educational journeys (AAC&U, n.d.). Limiting access to these HIPs can in turn create an inequitable and discriminatory use of internships and other service-learning activities.

Possessing real-world experience within a specific professional environment provided by an experiential learning opportunity is often considered an important component in the job hiring process (Ortiz & MacDermott, 2018). However, for students to understand expectations of the higher education environment, including required experiential learning associated with their coursework and identified academic majors, information must clearly be shared in course syllabi, program manuals, and college websites (Fuentes et al., 2021; Wolf et al., 2014). For students to successfully engage in required experiential learning opportunities, it is also important for postsecondary institutions to provide clear guidance on how students can be supported in learning experiences outside of the classroom.

For students with disabilities who require accommodations, an additional layer of preparation for the experiential learning experiences outside of the classroom is necessary. Aquino and Plump (2022) found that while there is support for the accommodations of students with disabilities within the classroom environment, there is less consistent guidance on accommodation implementation for experiential learning off-campus and outside of the classroom. This lim-

itation of institutions in not providing clear guidance for accessing and obtaining needed accommodations within experiential learning opportunities may not only impact a student from completing a course assignment but deter them from successfully meeting program requirements and lose necessary real-world experience for future professional pursuits. For example, in *Stebbins v. University of Arkansas* (2012), a student with Asperger's syndrome requested an accommodation for his "tactlessness with professors." Unsurprisingly, tactless behavior outside the classroom caused issues too, ultimately resulting in his suspension for altercations with administration, organizations, departments, and students. The court ruled in favor of the university for various reasons including that the student did not request accommodations beyond help with professors. This case demonstrates that student disabilities do not end at the classroom door.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by the Interactionist Model of Disability (Evans et al., 2017). The Interactionist Model of Disability understands that an individual's disability is an element of their overall functioning with the world around them (Evans & Broido, 2011; Gordon et al., 2009). This interplay between the environment, the individual, and their disability creates potential location-based challenges. The environment may create limitations that fail to support the needs an individual may have due to their disability. The Interactionist Model of Disability emphasizes how environments can range in accessibility that allow for either an enabling experience or challenging experience (Sherwood et al., 2021).

The concept of ableism, the systematic prejudice of individuals with disabilities, can be found throughout the higher education environment as the postsecondary environment can often create learning experiences that may not always be fully inclusive of all learning needs (Dolmage, 2017). Required experiential learning opportunities assigned by instructors and programs may not consider the diverse functioning levels of the students completing these required placements, the environment of the experiential learning opportunity, and the potential complications of this environment on the student with a disability. An additional layer of ableism may occur if institutions do not provide clear guidance on the development of new (or the translation of existing) accommodations for students with disabilities if the experiential learning experience is outside of the classroom. If clear guidance does not exist on how to develop or adjust

accommodations for students completing experiential learning outside of the classroom, it can significantly impact the success of the student within a particular course or academic concentration. However, if postsecondary institutions, specifically the institutions' DROs, provide clear guidance on supporting accommodations in non-classroom experiential learning, the disability in question is experienced less as an obstacle and more as just another component of the student's identity.

Methods

This study aims to investigate what information postsecondary institutions, specifically DRO websites representing institutions, provide regarding accommodations for experiential learning experiences outside of the classroom. For this study, experiential learning experiences outside of the classroom include internships, field placements, fieldwork, and non-classroom learning experiences that are required for coursework and/or a student's degree. This project analyzed public online content through the formal review of postsecondary institutional websites (Hewson et al. 2015; Roberts & Sipes, 2018). The following research question guided this study: How do DRO websites include guidance and associated language for seeking accommodations for students' experiential learning experiences outside of the classroom?

Sample

This project included a stratified random sample of 10% of the nine institutional categories within the "Carnegie Classification 2018: Basic" classification. In total, 397 institutions were included in the analysis (Table 1). Institution lists were compiled in December 2021, using the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) Data Center. Of the included institutions, 53.7% (N=213) indicated that 3% or less of their undergraduate student population enrolled in the DRO—one of the few indicators related to disability support services tracked through the IPEDs Data Center. Please note that this percentage is quite misaligned from the national statistics indicating that 19.4% of undergraduate students indicate having a disability (NCES, 2018). This misalignment may be due to different survey methods and who is reporting the disability disclosure rates.

Data Analysis Procedures

Following the identification of the randomly sampled institutions from the Carnegie Classification lists, a data workbook was formed to include each institu-

Table 1

Institutional Counts and Categories

Classification Category	Classification Total	Sample
Associate's Colleges	943	94
Baccalaureate/Associate's Colleges	225	23
Baccalaureate Colleges	528	53
Doctoral/Professional Universities	145	15
Doctoral Universities	267	27
Master's College & Universities	667	67
Special Focus Four-Year	830	83
Special Focus Two-Year	322	32
Tribal Colleges	34	3

Table 2

Search Terms by Category

Search Category	Included Terms
Licensure-Related	"Certification," "Clinical Placement," "Field Placement," "Fieldwork," "Internship," "Licensure," "Practicum," "Student Teaching"
Support for Coursework	"Academic Service Learning," "Community Service," "Experiential," "Externship," "Field Trip," "Volunteer"
Travel Study	"Travel Study," "Study Abroad"

tion's characteristics including institutional website, type, student population, location, percent of students utilizing Pell funds, retention rate, transfer rate, and student to faculty ratio. Institutional data included in the data workbook were compiled using the IPEDS College Navigator tool. In addition to these general data, the workbook included DRO data also extracted through the College Navigator tool including the specific URL of the institution's DRO and the identified percentage of undergraduate students enrolled in the DRO. Once the sample list (*N*=397) included all necessary institutional data, three categories of terms were established to further explore experiential learning-related accommodation support. Table 2 includes specific terms identified and utilized.

To ensure consistency and accuracy between the research team members, an inter-rater reliability strategy was included by selecting 20 randomly identified institutions and double coding these institutions by two researchers. Following the specific coding period, the researchers reviewed the scoring and discussed any inconsistencies. It was determined that inter-rater reliability was 100%. This paper includes descriptive statistics to highlight the inclusion of language and content specific to accommodations of experiential learning experiences for students with disabilities in the higher education environment.

Findings

This study investigated what information postsecondary institutions, specifically DRO websites, provide regarding accommodations for experiential learning experiences outside of the classroom. The most striking finding was that of the 397 institutions, only 4% (*N*=16) of the DRO websites contained any reference to accommodations for experiential learning experiences outside the classroom. This project explored evidence of experiential learning experiences in three overarching categories: licensure-re-

lated (e.g., certification, internship), support for coursework (e.g., field trip, community service), and travel study. While the vast majority had information about classroom support (e.g., assistance with note taking, extra time on tests, permission to record lectures, and access to faculty presentation slides), this is just one part of the higher education experience. Students with disabilities must be provided with complete academic support and access to the full spectrum of academic opportunities.

Another issue identified was inconsistent contact information on DRO websites. If students had questions on how to seek out and receive accommodations for experiential opportunities outside of the classroom, varying options for communication with the DRO may complicate this process. Of the 397 websites reviewed, only 36.5% (*N*=145) listed a specific person to contact for disability support service requests. Of the 63.5% (*N*=252) without a specific contact person to reach out for requests, 56.3% (*N*=142) of the websites included no email for students to utilize. Given the personal and confidential nature of the information students must share, the burdensome and confusing requirements for establishing a disability, the necessity of an interactive process for determining accommodations, and the requirement that students self-disclose their disabilities, it is important to have a person (or people) to whom students with disabilities can direct inquiries rather than a general DRO office or, worse, a main university number.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate what information postsecondary institutions, specifically DRO websites, provide regarding accommodations for experiential learning experiences outside of the classroom. More specifically, this study explored what information 397 postsecondary institutions' DRO websites provided regarding accommodations for experiential learning activities. Findings revealed an almost complete lack of reference to accommodations outside the classroom (i.e., a mere 4%) and a failure in 63.5% of the institutions to list a specific DRO contact person—and of that group 56.3% did not list an email address. Institutions must be more aware of accommodation needs of students with disabilities and the application of accommodations when participating in required experiential learning experiences outside of the classroom.

Academic experiences outside the classroom are a critical component of higher education (Kutscher et al., 2019). Building on extant literature, this project provided evidence that while DRO websites commu-nicate classroom accommodations for students with disabilities, a discrepancy in support and understanding of needs outside the classroom remains (Aquino & Plump, 2022; Lombardi et al., 2013). This discrepancy leads to a variation in the academic experience between students with and without disabilities. Such a discrepancy may impact students' with disabilities success and persistence in higher education (Kuh, 2008).

As it relates to the Interactionist Model of Disability framework, students with disabilities who do not receive accommodations when participating in experiential learning experiences outside of the classroom may experience additional obstacles and be at a disadvantage compared with students who do not need accommodations. Their environment may limit their success in the experiential learning experiences if no clear guidance is available related to accommodations outside of the classroom and if there is limited information for contacting administrators who could further assist in this unique accommodation plan development. If the postsecondary environment creates obstacles for obtaining and receiving disability support services for students' experiential activities, it essentially is creating an ableist setting limiting the learning opportunities of individuals needing necessary accommodations.

Limitations

Several limitations must be addressed for the reader. As previously noted, this project identified a sample of institutions of higher education and evaluated institutions' website information related to supporting students with disabilities completing experiential learning experiences outside of the classroom. All information gathered for this project was from publicly posted content of the sampled institutions and the corresponding DRO websites. While additional private website content may have been available to students with institutional credentials, this information was not publicly available to the researchers (Brownlow & O'Dell, 2002). Information can be constantly edited on a website and so it is possible that information not found on accommodations for experiential learning experiences outside of the classroom could be added to DRO websites at any time. Our review may have missed applicable content if the information was not publicly posted (i.e., included within the institution's password-protected Learning Management System). This project also created a workbook including findings directly from the institutions' websites and content included in IPEDs. It should be noted that IPEDS has a limited number of measures specific to students with disabilities and institutional disability support. Additional information collected by IPEDs related to

institutional information of disability support service tracking would have been beneficial in the development of our workbook and investigation of this research topic.

Our website review occurred in the spring 2022 semester. We realize that institutions, and more specifically DROs, may have updated their policies and available information to better address how to support students with disabilities completing experiential learning experiences outside of the classroom following our spring 2022 review. Additionally, there was a set list of terms used in our website review. We understand that other terms may have allowed for different findings. It is entirely possible that related terms not included in the search list were utilized by DROs to explain accommodation support for experiential learning opportunities; however, the term list generated by the researchers was driven by the literature and reviewed by a group of researchers with expertise in accommodations and disability support.

Implications

Postsecondary institutions can narrow the academic gap between students with disabilities and students without disabilities by including information on their DRO websites about accommodations for experiential learning opportunities outside of the classroom such as during service learning, field trips, internships, externships, co-ops, and study abroad. This information signals not only the institution's consideration of the full range of a student's educational needs, but also the institution's dedication to leveling the playing field for students with disabilities. For example, assume a student with verbal processing issues has an accommodation that allows them to receive a professor's written notes or lecture presentation slides. Now assume that same student applies for and obtains an internship for academic credit. The student may be eligible for written instructions about their internship responsibilities. Without this knowledge, they may needlessly struggle with their job responsibilities or fail to meet their supervisor's expectations. If students are made aware of their rights to accommodations beyond the classroom, they are more likely to utilize them. This process sets them up for success and reflects well on the institution.

It is critical for students to be able to access relevant information regarding disability accommodations and resources before embarking in a specific academic journey, including choosing an academic major with associated requirements (e.g., clinical placements and field-based internships). Without it, they cannot understand and prepare for the requisites of the curriculum. Moreover, if students need to obtain paperwork to confirm their disability, this paperwork needs to be completed as they prepare for program requirements and associated experiential learning assignments. The availability of information on the general website rather than behind a student portal allows for increased transparency on student support and program necessities. For these reasons, universities should minimize information that is available only through current registered student portals. Additionally, institutions should ensure they list a specific person (e.g., Jane Smith rather than DRO Office), direct contact email (e.g., jsmith@university.edu rather than DRO@university.edu), and direct contact phone number (e.g., ext. 1234 rather than a general main number). Although turnover may require this information to be updated periodically, it should not be a heavy burden given that schools typically have someone responsible for updating website content and must do so for other matters (e.g., news articles, athletic results, awards, and new hires). In sum, there are numerous areas for higher education stakeholders, including disability resource professionals, to consider in best supporting students with disabilities and their use of experiential learning experiences outside of the classroom.

References

Alexander, O., & Ishak, Z. (2018). The influence of user interface component on university website towards student enrollment. International Journal of *Engineering & Technology, 7*(4.11), 55–63. doi:10.14419/ijet.v7i4.11.20688

Aquino, K. C., & Plump, C. M. (2022). Supporting experiential learning opportunities for students with disabilities. *Journal of College Student Development, 63*(3).

Association for Experiential Education. (2020). W*hat is experiential education?* www.aee.org/what-is-ee

Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U). (n.d.) *High-impact educational practices.* https://www.aacu.org/node/4084

Banerjee, M., Lalor, A. R., Madaus, J. W., & Brinckerhoff, L. C. (2021). A survey of postsecondary disability service website information. *Learning Disabilities: A Multidisciplinary Journal, 26*(2). doi: 10.18666/LDMJ-2021-V26-I2-10860

Banerjee, M., (2020). A survey of postsecondary disability service websites post ADAAA. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability, 33*(3), 301–310.

Brownlow, C. & O'Dell, L. (2002) Ethical issues in research on-line communities, *Disability & Society, 17*(6), 685–696.

Bruyère, S. (2008). Total access: Making college web sites accessible to students with disabilities. *Community College Journal, 79*(1), 36–39.

Costello-Harris, V. A. (2019). Evidence of inclusion on college websites: Academic accommodations and human support. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability, 32*(3), 263–278.

Dolmage, J. T. (2017). *Academic ableism: Disability and higher education* (p. 244). University of Michigan Press.

Erickson, W., Trerise, S., Lee, C., VanLooy, S., Knowlton, S., & Bruyère, S. (2013). The accessibility and usability of college websites: Is your website presenting barriers to potential students? *Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 37*(11), 864–876. doi:10.1080/10668926.2010.484772

Evans, N. J., & Broido, E. M. (2011, November 14). *Social involvement and identity involvement of students with disabilities* [Conference presentation]. Association for the Study of Higher Education Conference, Charlotte, NC, United States.

Evans, N. J., Broido, E. M., Brown, K. R., & Wilke, A. K. (2017). *Disability in higher education: A social justice approach*. John Wiley & Sons.

Fuentes, M. A., Zelaya, D. G., & Madsen, J. W. (2021). Rethinking the course syllabus: Considerations for promoting equity, diversity, and inclusion. *Teaching of Psychology, 48*(1), 69–79.

Gordon, D. T., Gravel, J. W., & Schifter, L. A. (2009). *A policy reader in universal design for learning.* Harvard Education Press.

Hewson, C., Vogel, C., & Laurent, D. (2015). *Internet research methods.* Sage.

Jackson, D. L., & Jones, S. J. (2014). Disability services information on public community college websites. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability, 27*(2), 129–138.

Karani, A., Thanki, H., & Achuthan, S. (2021). Impact of university website usability on satisfaction: A structural equation modelling approach. *Management and Labour Studies, 46*(2), 119–138.

Kuh, G. D. (2008). *High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter.* Association of American Colleges and Universities.

Kutscher, E. L., & Tuckwiller, E. D. (2018). Persistence in higher education for students with disabilities. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 12*(2), 136–155.

Lombardi, A., Murray, C., & Dallas, B. (2013). University faculty attitudes toward disability and inclusive instruction. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability, 26*(3), 221–232.

Mamboleo, G., Meyer, L., Georgieva, Z., Curtis, R., Dong, S., & Stender, L. M. (2015). Students with disabilities' self-report on perceptions toward disclosing disability and faculty's willingness to provide accommodations. *Rehabilitation Counselors and Educators Journal, 8*(2), 8.

Mitchell, D. (2015). Inclusive education is a multi-faceted concept. *Center for Educational Policy Studies Journal, 5*(1), 9–30.

Nachman, B. R., & Brown, K. R. (2020). Omission and othering: Constructing autism on community college websites. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 44*(3), 211–223.

National Center for Education Statistics. (2018). *Number and percentage distribution of students enrolled in postsecondary institutions, by level, disability status, and selected student characteristics: 2015-16.* https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20_311.10.asp

Perlow, E., Wells, R., Hedayet, M., Xia, J., Maclean, H., Ding, E., & McCall, A. (2021). Hidden inequality: Financial aid information available to college students with disabilities attending public four-year institutions. *Journal of Student Financial Aid, 50*(3).

Saichaie, K., & Morphew, C. (2014). What college and university websites reveal about the purposes of higher education. *The Journal of Higher Education, 85*(4), 499–530. https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2014.11777338

Sherwood, K. L., & Kattari, S. K. (2021). Reducing ableism in social work education through universal design for learning and policy. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 1–14.

Stewart, J. M., & Schwartz, S. (2018). Equal education, unequal jobs: College and university students with disabilities. *Relations Industrielles/Industrial Relations, 73*(2), 369–394. doi:10.7202/1048575ar

U.S. Department of Labor (DOL). (2020). P*ersons with a disability: Labor force characteristics summary*. www.bls.gov/news.release/disabl.nr0.htm

Vaccaro, A., Daly-Cano, M., & Newman, B. M. (2015). A sense of belonging among college students with disabilities: An emergent theoretical model. *Journal of College Student Development, 56*(7), 670–686.

Wolf, Z. R., Czekanski, K. E., & Dillon, P. M. (2014). Course syllabi: Components and outcomes assessment. *Journal of Nursing Education and Practice, 4*(1), 100.

About the Authors

Carolyn Plump received her B.A. in political science from Duke University, her law degree from Boston University Law School, and recently completed her M.B.A. in Management and Leadership from La Salle University. Her experience includes working as a tenured Associate Professor of Law at La Salle University; partner and associate at several international law firms; Assistant Chief Counsel for the United State Senate; and Deputy District Attorney in California. She authored the books *Giving Voice to Values in the Legal Profession: Effective Advocacy with Integrity* and *A Student's Guide to Business Law*. She is currently Legal Director at Merck. She can be reached by email at: CarolynPlump@hotmail.com.

Katherine C. Aquino received her B.S. in psychology, an M.A. in school psychology, a Ph.D. in higher education policy, and an advanced certificate in instructional design and delivery. She is currently an associate professor in the Department of Administrative and Instructional Leadership and the associate dean for innovation and partnerships in The School of Education at St. John's University. Her research focuses on disability and accessibility within the organizational environment and is dedicated to investigating the complexity of disability in the post-secondary setting. She can be reached by email at czadoaqk@stjohns.edu.

Kayleen Montesdeoca received her B.A. degree in Secondary Mathematics Education from Brooklyn College, M.S. degree in School Building Leadership from St. John's University, and is currently a Ph.D. student at St. John's University. Her experience includes teaching in K-12 schools and as an adjunct professor at CUNY. Her research interests include secondary mathematics education, culturally responsive teaching, and higher education. She can be reached by email at: Kaymonte18@gmail.com.