Accommodation Strategies of College Students with Disabilities

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College students with disabilities develop and utilize strategies to facilitate their learning experiences due to their unique academic needs. Using a semi-structured interview technique to collect data and a technique based in grounded theory to analyze this data, the purpose of this study was to discern the meaning of disclosure for college students with disabilities in relation to the strategies they invoke while seeking accommodations. The study revealed three underlying themes common to the accommodation-seeking strategies of the participants who were academically successful college students with disabilities. These themes include: scripting disclosure of one's disability; negotiating accommodations with faculty; and downplaying one's disability status. Key Words: Disability, College Students, and Stigma

Introduction

Just by the nature of it, it's not fun to do…but I can't help it. It takes courage to ask. (Jack, a graduate student with cerebral palsy on requesting accommodations)

Individuals with disabilities represent a population of college students that has tripled and by some estimates, quadrupled over the past twenty-five years (Olney, Kennedy, Brockelman, & Newsom, 2004; Palombi, 2000). This population of students has grown dramatically despite being historically underrepresented (Beilke & Yssel, 1999; Shevlin, Kenny, & McNeela, 2004). Legislation, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), has been largely credited with the increasing access to higher education for individuals with disabilities, along with advances in assistive and medical technologies (Konur, 2006; O'Day & Goldstein, 2005; Rocco, 2002; Thomas, 2000; Wolf, 2001). Under the ADA, disability refers to a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of an individual. The phrase "students with special needs" can refer to individuals with disabilities but also includes students with other types of special needs such as limited English proficiency or students who may be considered homeless or transient. The ADA of 1990 requires institutions of higher education to provide reasonable accommodations in such areas as academic programming, examinations and evaluations, housing, and recreational facilities. As such, *students with disabilities* (SWDs) represent an emerging population in institutions of higher education, whose

perceptions and experiences of higher education are ultimately shaped by their classroom and other collegiate experiences. Despite these increases in enrollment of this student population, many students with disabilities SWDs however fail to successfully complete their education (Quick, Lehmann, & Deniston, 2003).

Several reasons have been suggested as to why SWDs have been leaving higher education. One reason cited has been a lack of understanding by institutions of higher education for this special student population. Greenbaum, Graham, and Scales (1995) have noted that "the most common institutional barrier cited by SWDs was a lack of understanding and cooperation from faculty and administrators…" (p. 468). SWDs have reiterated this sentiment, reporting being generally dissatisfied with the level of knowledge and understanding on the part of faculty and administrators regarding their issues and concerns (Hill, 1996; Lehman, Davies, & Laurin, 2000; Wilson, Getzel, & Brown, 2000). In reviewing the extant literature regarding faculty attitudes towards SWDs, Rao (2004) concluded that amongst faculty and staff that there is a "need to be better informed about disabilities and students with disabilities" (p. 197). Thus, from this lack of understanding and knowledge on the part of faculty and staff, the integration of these students into collegiate environments may be considered hindered by stereotypical beliefs and discriminatory practices on the part of both professors and fellow students (Gmelch, 1998).

Despite legislative mandates requiring institutions of higher education to accommodate SWDs along with providing information about disability accommodations, SWDs are not maximizing the services entitled to them. In reviewing the literature, SWDs are not maximizing services in two ways: (1) not seeking these services out, or (2) seeking these services too late. Disability service providers have reported that while 9% of full-time college students report having a disability that only between 1% and 3% of all students actually request disability-related services (Hartman, 1993). Research has suggest that these students may be apprehensive about requesting accommodations, and therefore unwilling to discuss their academic needs (Norton, 1997), or may simply desire to assert a new identity and independence when entering higher education (Torkelson Lynch & Gussel, 1996). An alternative explanation for these students not maximizing services entitled to them may be that institutions of higher education, unlike primary and secondary schools, are not required to take affirmative action in seeking out and identifying SWDs. In order to receive accommodations, SWDs must take the affirmative action and seek out disability support services and request necessary accommodations (Torkelson Lynch & Gussel). As a result, SWDs often do not appear to be prepared to request accommodations in higher education. This lack of preparation has prompted disability service providers and coordinators working in higher education to express "dissatisfaction with how well high school staff informed students of the services available for SWDs at the college level" (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002, p. 466).

Once seeking out accommodations, on-campus offices of disability accommodations usually furnish SWDs a letter of accommodation (LOA) after determining their eligibility for services. To be eligible for services and thus obtain a LOA, a student with a disability must first provide a full and complete disclosure in order to receive services from their on-campus office of student disability. This disclosure includes appropriate medical and/or psychological documentation of their disability as demonstrated by a battery of approved tests (usually listed in the institutional application

materials) conducted by an appropriate licensed professional. Upon being determined eligible for services, SWDs must present their individual LOAs to their instructors in order to receive accommodations approved by their respective offices of disability accommodations. Instructors may of course provide accommodations without a LOA but are not required to do so. The physical act of handing an instructor a LOA is a disclosure in itself by the student of some sort of disabling condition requiring accommodation in the classroom. The disclosure of a student's disability obviously does not stop at physically handing an instructor a letter of accommodation but is followed by questions from faculty members. These questions can range from the highly personal (e.g., asking specific questions about person's a disability) to the impersonal relating only to satisfying a request for accommodations (e.g., asking questions only in order to satisfy a request for accommodations).

Disclosure means different things to different people, especially among persons with disabilities, given that there are various costs and benefits associated with disability disclosure (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003; Smart, 1999). Cozby (1973) has described the process of self-disclosure as an individuated process entailing "any information which Person A communicates verbally to a Person B" (p. 73). This definition does not include information that one communicates nonverbally, such as disability status. Olney and Brockelman (2003) have noted that college SWDs are aware that the verbal or nonverbal transmission of knowledge about their disability status could alter the behavior of others toward them. Wheeless and Grotz (1976) provide a definition of self-disclosure that includes, "any *message* [sic] about the self that a person communicates to another" (p. 338), thus integrating nonverbal messages. For Jourard (1971), disclosure is a process where the individual determines the degree of intimacy they want to achieve with another. Similar to Jourard's conceptualization, the act of disclosure for Petronio (2002) is the process of regulating privacy boundaries on the part of the individual. Petronio deemphasizes the actual communicative act of disclosure and focuses on the internal, psychological process that accompanies an individual's ability to disclose.

Regardless of how you define the process of disclosure, for most people, revealing personal, private information about oneself is a gradual and ongoing process dependent first and foremost upon with whom one is communicating with (i.e., one's audience) and in what context (i.e., the location, the purpose; Petronio, 2002). Most people do not disclose personal and private information with just anyone anywhere and especially not upon first meeting them. Requesting classroom accommodations for SWDs requires the disclosure of personal and private information to faculty members, oftentimes with little or no prior introduction. Disclosing information about one's disability may be comfortable and therapeutic for one person with a disability yet an awkward and even intimidating experience for another, depending upon a variety of factors. The academic accommodations process for SWDs steps out of the realm of typical interpersonal discourse as the process requires disclosing what would normally be personal and privileged information to an essential stranger, a faculty member.

The process of disclosure has been found to be the function of a series of active choices based upon a variety of factors for persons with disabilities (Torkelson Lynch & Gussel, 1996). Braithwaite (1991) outlined four factors that influence the disclosure behaviors of persons with disabilities: (a) their relationship with the able-bodied other; (b) the relevance or appropriateness of disclosure dependent upon the context of the

situation; (c) the appropriateness of the able-bodied person's response; and (d) the perceived appropriateness of disclosure based upon their own personal feelings about their disability. These factors influencing disclosure as outlined by Braithwaite (1991) may provide some explanation as to the disclosure behaviors of SWDs in choosing to disclose their disability to faculty in order to receive necessary classroom accommodations, but all these factors are predicated on the assumption that the disclosure is purely voluntary in nature for the person with a disability. Visibility of the disability by able-bodied others can preclude the voluntary nature of a disclosure on the part of the individual. In order to receive necessary accommodations in the classroom, SWDs are compelled to disclose their disabilities, limiting the voluntariness of the disclosure. In this sense, disclosure can be viewed as both involuntary (e.g., students who use a wheelchair or a cane) and voluntary (e.g., students who must disclose their disability verbally to be considered disabled).

The purpose of this study is to discern the meaning of disclosure for SWDs in relation to the strategies they invoke when requesting classroom accommodations. This study examines how the participants as academically successful SWDs disclose private and confidential information about their disabilities to faculty and staff strategically in order to receive classroom accommodations while serving their own psychosocial needs. By examining how the participants manage disclosure and seek accommodations, we can discern the meaning of disclosure for academically successful SWDs. This topic is especially relevant for study given that "there is little research that gives voice to the experiences and perceptions of individuals with disabilities" (Dowrick, Anderson, Heyer, & Acosta, 2005, p. 41). The overall objective of this study is to benefit the educational experiences of all SWDs by illustrating to faculty members and disability service providers the accommodation-seeking strategies engaged by academically successful SWDs. While the perspectives of SWDs who are not academically successful may be of interest, we chose to focus on those behaviors and activities associated with positive academic outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

Method

Participants

The study occurred at a large, Southwestern public university with an enrollment of approximately 22,000 students. The participants were self-selected through voluntary response to an e-mail transmitted over a student disability services campus listserv. This method of recruitment permitted the researchers to contact potential participants *en masse*. This e-mail recruitment message was aimed at academically successful college SWDs (e.g., with at least the classification of a junior). This listserv contained the e-mail addresses of all students having registered as having a disability with the on-campus disability support services office. Initially, ten students responded to the recruitment e-mail message. Two of these students responded that they would like to participate in the study but did not have the time. One student was withdrawn from the study. Two students responded that they would like to participate in the study in concept but did not feel comfortable enough with the topic. As a result, five SWDs were interviewed.

Procedure

The researchers did not have access to the individual e-mail addresses nor any other identifying information regarding those students registered with the student disability services office. Rather, the on campus student disability services office forwarded the recruitment e-mail message at the request of the researchers via the listserv. Upon agreeing to participate, all interviews were audio-recorded with the informed consent of the participant. The audio-recordings, which can provide researchers an opportunity to revisit an interview and review it in its totality, were then transcribed and checked for accuracy by re-playing the audio-recordings and comparing the transcriptions against these audio-recordings. Field notes, which can capture immediate impressions and note important nonverbal behaviors, were recorded immediately after conducting each interview. Archival documents such as letters of accommodation, which were utilized only to verify the status of participants as SWDs, were collected from participants with their consent. All identifying information was removed from all interview transcripts and archival documents.

As this study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the university where the study took place, participants were reminded that participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any point during the study including the return or destruction of any documentation provided to the researchers. With regard to researcher bias, all three of the co-authors had familiarity with issues associated for persons with disabilities in higher education, being in the fields of educational psychology and/or special education. At the time of the study, the first author was a doctoral candidate who conducted the interviews, which helped to build rapport between the researcher and participants as a fellow student. The second and third authors were professors at an institution of higher education and had experience working with and researching SWDs at the university level as well as having some experiences with SWD issues in their own personal lives. Thus, any bias on the part of researchers would appear to err on the side of the participants as previous advocates for students with special needs in teaching and/or research.

Data collection

Data was collected primarily from face-to-face, individual interviews with each of the participants. A semi-structured, focused interview technique (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) was utilized to discern the perceptions and experiences of each of the participants. An interpretive framework guided the focus of our semi-structured interviews which provided in-depth rich contextual information for the researchers. An interpretive framework consists of research practices that are subjective in nature and does not privilege one paradigm or perspective over another (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Through an interpretive framework, the purpose of the research was to have interviews focus on the perceptions and experiences that were salient to the participants and let those perceptions and experiences guide the interview rather than being limited to only the responses of the participants to questions and probes derived by the researchers. Some questions and probes were derived from the Jourard Self-Disclosure Questionnaire (JSDQ; Jourard, 1971). The JSDQ examines the comfort level of an individual in

disclosing information that may be considered typically private versus public on a Likert-type scale (i.e., disclosing their income versus their long distance phone carrier). In using some of the questions from the instrument, the JSDQ provided us a baseline of how comfortable the participants were in disclosing information that may be considered private to the general population, not exclusive to disability. If a participant responded that he or she did not feel comfortable disclosing information typically considered not private (e.g., your favorite kind of food), then researchers would infer that the participant may not feel comfortable disclosing more personal, private information. While other questions and probes were obtained from relevant literature (e.g., Allen & Carlson, 2003; Braithwaite, 1991; Gray, Fitch, Phillips, Labreque, & Fergus, 2000; Low, 1996), some open ended questions and probes included:

- Do you tell people you are disabled? If so, how, when, and to whom?
- For what reasons, would you tell a member of faculty or staff that you are disabled?
- Do you feel comfortable discussing your disability with people in general?
- Do you feel comfortable discussing your disability with faculty and staff?

In the process of using these probes and questions, the researchers asked the interviewees to share any particular instances or moments that were salient from their perspective in disclosing their disabilities and requesting accommodations. For instance, if a participant began to discuss a topic that was not covered in our interview protocol, we permitted this topic to guide the interview.

Data analysis

As data were collected from an interpretive lens that prescribes no paradigmatic perspective, our analyses may be considered as having a reduced likelihood of being influenced by pre-existing perspectives with regard to persons with disabilities. Wolfensberger (1983, 2000) discusses how society (the particular focus of his work being Western society) has tended to place persons with disabilities into devalued roles such as persons that deserve pity, charity, or even as sub-humans. Our interpretive lens has been particularly valuable to this research in order to avoid dis-ablist perspectives that have permeated research as well as society (Mercer, 2002).

The current study employed a technique, where each of the interview transcripts were first open-coded, which entailed a data-driven approach where we examined the transcripts line by line and generating codes that categorized pieces of data into specific concepts and patterns making data more manageable (Berg, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The next stage of axial coding involves examining these categories of concepts and patterns generated and creating subcategories resulting in the development of salient themes. Summary sheets were created for each participant for each theme while also including all relevant interview comments from field notes. These field notes recorded the immediate impression of interviewers along with noting any nonverbal behaviors that would indicate the comfort level of the participant in discussing his or her disability, thus

further cross-validating our findings when compared to transcripts of verbal behaviors indicating comfort level. Letters of accommodations (LOAs) and wrap-around plans as available (plans for accommodations that include all relevant service providers) served as a means of verifying some of the information, which participants provided such as disability status and requests for accommodations.

In collecting LOAs and other documentation as available from participants, this process provided evidence towards the trustworthiness of our results. The trustworthiness of results in qualitative research may be likened to the concepts of reliability and validity in quantitative research (Golafshani, 2003). As such, Golafshani notes that, "although reliability and validity are treated separately in quantitative studies, these terms are not viewed separately in qualitative research" (p. 600), but rather considered as both encompassing trustworthiness. To provide further evidence towards the trustworthiness of our findings, the researchers, as mentioned previously, administered items of the JSDQ before interviewing participants, recorded and transcribed interviews, and then checked these transcripts for accuracy with respect to audio recordings. As transcripts were coded, these codes and the themes, which emerged, were checked and re-checked by fellow researchers to ensure a level of trustworthiness. This process of peer checking or peer debriefing (Creswell, 2006) consists of having a peer-researcher review and contribute to the research process. For the purposes of the current study, we will use the term peer checking rather than peer debriefing as peer debriefing appears to refer more often to the process of including *external* researchers to audit the research process (Creswell). This internally-driven process of peer checking included each researcher independently open-coding each of the five transcripts of the participant interviews. Then, the results of this open-coding were compared. Differences in how different parts of a transcript were coded were discussed and resolved by the consensus of the researchers. Field notes were utilized to resolve coding differences among the researchers whenever possible. The content of field notes, however, differed according to each researcher. In axial coding, the same member checking process was utilized to ensure inter-coder/rater agreement among researchers. Additionally, all five participants were provided with a draft manuscript of the current study via e-mail and were asked for any feedback before we submitted the manuscript for publication. Two of the five participants did not respond while the other three participants provided positive feedback to the researchers that the research represented them accurately. Further triangulation regarding the perspectives and experiences of the participants by disability service providers/coordinators and faculty members (even with possible consent of the student) was preempted by university regulations protecting student confidentiality in compliance with federal law (ADA).

Findings

The accommodations process

> I was very reticent to sign up with [the student disability services office] at first but then I did and talked to someone about the services and I thought, "Wow, this is pretty cool." (Hannah, a recent graduate who is blind)

In discussing the findings of the current study, pseudonyms were assigned to each of the five participants: Jessica, a third year student with bipolar disorder; Tom, a graduate student with a visual impairment; Alma, a fourth year student with both a learning disability and post-traumatic nerve damage causing her to walk with a cane; Jack, a graduate student with cerebral palsy; and Hannah, a recent graduate who is visually impaired or blind. For both participants with visual impairments, the informed consent was read aloud by the interviewer. Overall, the participants indicated that the accommodations process was satisfactory despite experiencing some negative instances with faculty members in disclosing their disability and seeking accommodations. Despite Jack terming the accommodations process "a catch-22" and Alma describing it as a potential battle, all participants can recall a number of instances where faculty members showed consideration for their disability and academic related needs. Jessica cites an instance where a Finance professor tested her verbally over material due to her test anxiety associated with her espoused learning disability. Alma discusses an instance where a professor permitted her to have two desks instead of one in a crowded lecture hall given her struggle reaching down to pick up her bag from off the floor after class. Jack cites an instance where a professor stopped class to print off PowerPoint slides so he could follow the lecture with his fellow classmates. These instances are just a few of many that SWDs can attest to where faculty members went above and beyond the requirements of the LOA. In their overall estimations, the responses of the participants seemed to concur with Jack, a graduate student with cerebral palsy, where he assessed faculty willingness to accommodate as "each case is different" yet reiterated that faculty members generally lack understanding as to the disabled experience. In this sense, the participants seemed to acknowledge that faculty members could be exceptional in providing accommodations but this performance was not consistent across faculty members. Jessica, a student with bipolar disorder, noted that:

> With some of my professors, we have a long conversation over my accommodations. Some of them don't even read my LOA, they just sign it. That's just the way it is. Yet, none of them understand what it is to be disabled.

Alma, a student with both a physical and learning disability, further notes the lack of understanding on the part of faculty felt by participants,

> If they [faculty members] knew exactly what I go through everyday, they may rethink what they say and do.

From the responses of the participants, experiences with the accommodations process were mixed depending upon the individual faculty member involved, noting that faculty members as a whole did not appear to understand the nature of disability from the perspective of the participants as disability is generally low-incidence (less than 10%) in the pre-geriatric population and encompasses many disorders and impairments. This finding would also appear to indicate that the faculty members had limited exposure to persons with disabilities prior to coming to meet these students.

Scripting

> I tell the same thing to every professor. (Tom, a graduate student with low vision on disclosing his disability)

From analyzing the content of the interviews, the researchers discerned several prevalent strategies which SWDs invoked. First and foremost, the use of scripts by students in disclosing their disabilities to faculty and requesting accommodations emerged as a salient theme. Every participant utilized some form of a script in how they chose to discuss their disability and engage with all faculty members. Hannah, a recent graduate who is blind, utilized the most detailed script of any of the participants, which she shared:

> I have what is called ROP. Retinopathy of Prematurity. Basically, it is a condition where there's too much oxygen given to you so it burns the retinas. In my case, they are completely detached and cone-shaped. I was born at six and a half months so obviously you need oxygen to stay alive but then too much of it and they go. As far as I know, there is nothing that can be done to restore my vision.

For Jessica, a student with bipolar disorder, the script was quite sparse whereas she did not discuss her disability at all but focused on the bureaucratic, impersonal aspects of requesting accommodations:

> I just tell them [faculty members] that I am an [on-campus disability support services office] student and that I need them to fill out these papers so I can turn them back in.

Jessica was well aware of the stigma associated with bipolar disorder and chose to avoid direct discussion of her disability due to this. When pressed for more information by faculty members, Jessica would identify herself as having a learning disability concealing the true nature of her disability whenever possible. Jessica remarked she only disclosed the true nature of her disability to a select number of faculty members and peers after knowing them for an extended period of time and having a certain comfort level with them. Reactions to her disclosure of her disability appeared to be supportive after disclosing such information to certain faculty members, who could be considered empathetic. For Tom, a graduate student with a visual impairment, his style was more conversational and guided by faculty response. When asked how he requested accommodations from faculty members, Tom remarks, "I say I am a student with a disability. I have retinitis pigmentosis. Then ask, are you familiar with that?" Tom described his disability in much more depth as a function of perceived interest by faculty members. Jack, as a graduate student with cerebral palsy, purposely limits the personal information he shares with faculty members regarding his disability similar to Jessica. Instead of saying, "I'm Jack and my disability is…" I just say, "because of my disability, I need this help and how is it the best way for us to do that?" and leave it at that. The researchers asked why he would 'leave it at that.' Jack responded:

> It's been my experience they [faculty members] don't want to know very much. It seems to me that they get uncomfortable when I start talking to them.

From the responses of the participants, scripting can be viewed as a strategic mechanism for academically successful SWDs to make both the faculty member and the student as comfortable as possible when seeking accommodations.

Making peace not war

> It can be a battle, where we both end up scarred. (Alma, a student with both a physical and learning disability on handling disagreement over accommodations)

The second theme for SWDs in requesting accommodations was the attempt to negotiate with faculty members who are reluctant or hesitant to provide necessary accommodations rather than to report ADA noncompliance. The majority of SWDs can cite one or more non-compliant instances with faculty members in seeking accommodations yet only one in ten college SWDs will report an instance to relevant authorities (Torkelson Lynch & Gussel, 1996). Jessica, a student with bipolar disorder, best sums up the attitudes of the participants towards reporting faculty non-compliance as, "There's no winning, just degrees of losing." In losing, Jessica is referring to the consequences of reporting faculty non-compliance, even if eventually receiving requested accommodations, which include possibly being "outed" and "black-balled" by going through official channels and reporting non-compliance. Tom, a graduate student with a visual impairment, echoes this sentiment stating, "They [faculty] can degrade and demean me but I still prefer to handle things privately if at all possible." From the statements of both these students, there appears to be an apprehension surrounding reporting ADA non-compliance for fear of worsening a situation. The view of Jack, a graduate student with cerebral palsy, on reporting non-compliance was consistent with that of other participants stating, "There's really nothing you can do about it without causing a big stir" further adding, "I would rather discuss it with them than shove it down their throats and become *that* person in my program…a troublemaker…an agitator." From the responses of the participants, academically successful SWDs appear to desire negotiation and compromise over reporting ADA non-compliant behaviors in seeking necessary accommodations.

Downplaying a disability status

> I just want to be treated like a normal person as much as possible. (Alma, a student with both a physical and learning disability)

The third theme includes the preference of the SWDs not to disclose their disability status at all if possible or alternatively to minimize one's disability in order to pass as able-bodied. Each participant was asked whether she/he would disclose her/his disabled status if she/he did not have to do so in order to receive academic

accommodations. Each participant responded that she/he would not share her/his disabled status but for the accommodations process requiring disclosure. Jessica, a student with bipolar disorder, responded, "No, I wouldn't tell them [faculty] anything" while Hannah, a student who is blind, concurred, "I wouldn't say anything unless I absolutely had to" when suggesting the scenario of an online class format where she could choose to disclose her disability with the advent of improved assistive technologies. As the casual observer cannot discern Tom's disability status as a graduate student with low vision, he remarked that he purposely goes without accommodations whenever possible so as to not have to disclose that he is disabled. Jack, a graduate student with cerebral palsy, explains this reluctance to disclose one's disability status in order to seek accommodations:

> Being disabled and receiving accommodations all gets lumped in together
> so there is a stigma attached with receiving accommodations because there
> is a stigma about being disabled.

In downplaying or minimizing their own disability status, the study participants appear to be very much in tune with the dis-ablist zeitgeist of Western able-bodied society that can stigmatize and devalue persons with disabilities (Wolfensberger, 1983).

Discussion

SWDs as a special population in higher education have unique and diverse needs given the unique and diverse nature of disability. From the results of this study, these students implicitly and explicitly develop strategies to manage and meet their academic needs in requesting classroom accommodations. From conducting and analyzing the interviews of participants, the researchers have discerned that academically successful SWDs share three behavioral strategies in requesting accommodations for the postsecondary classroom: (a) scripting the disclosure of their disability and request for accommodations; (b) negotiating accommodations rather than reporting ADA non-compliance; and (c) downplaying their own disability status. Disclosure for SWDs, as part of the classroom accommodations process, is more than a simple act, but a carefully employed technique by these students to meet and manage their academic needs. For the participants as academically successful SWDs, we conclude that disclosure appears to be largely a matter of self-acceptance and interpersonal skills as indicated by the themes of scripting, making peace not war, and downplaying their disability status as strategies that were revealed in the current study.

By discerning the meaning of disclosure for SWDs as manifested by strategies invoked in requesting accommodations, this study contributes to the finite body of literature regarding a population of students that has been considered deviant by the able-bodied mainstream (Taub, McLorg, & Fanflik, 2004). While information regarding one's disability is socioculturally deemed as the private and confidential information of the individual, this imperative for privacy in itself implies that there's something wrong with being disabled. For example, why would information regarding whether a person had a disability or not need to be kept secret but for some kind of stigma associated with it? This implied deviance of disability as associated with the imperative for secrecy of

disability status can lead to LOAs being interpreted as proverbial *scarlet* letters by faculty members (Szymanski & Trueba, 1999).

Future research should consider interviewing faculty members regarding their perspectives as to how they respond to the disclosure of disability by students, LOAs, and how well they assess the academic needs of their SWDs. We suggest a similar study design to the current study could be employed to achieve this purpose. We could examine how well faculty assess their ability to satisfy the needs of SWDs by having faculty-participants read a series of vignettes or case studies about students with specific disabilities and respond as to how well they think they could satisfy their needs for accommodations. No study as of yet has qualitatively examined how faculty members perceive the disclosure of disability by their students and requests for classroom accommodations.

The reticence of the members of the disabled community to discuss their disability with able-bodied others was also apparent. From the findings of this study and relevant literature, college students and persons in general would generally choose not to disclose a disabled status if at all possible, thus concealing other disability-related information such as accommodation-seeking strategies. Establishing rapport thus becomes all the more important with this reluctant population. Many persons with disabilities have unapologetically come to see participating in research and working with researchers as a violation of their experiences, irrelevant to their needs, and failing to improve their material circumstances and quality of life (Oliver, 1992). Many potential participants chose not to participate after correspondence with the researchers. While some indicated that they did not want to discuss their disability at all and that their inquiries were a matter of curiosity, others indicated their discomfort with discussing their disability in person and desired to be interviewed through e-mail or telephone correspondence. The researchers declined to pursue this avenue in preference of face-to-face interviews as one of the key advantages of a face to face interview technique is the ability to interact with participants while being able to perceive both verbal and nonverbal cues. The information provided by e-mail or telephone correspondence does not compare to the contextually rich data that can be provided from face-to-face, focused interviewing including nonverbal cues such as body language. As a mode of inquiry, face to face interviewing, simply put, provides the researcher the opportunity to more actively understand the experiences of participants. It should be noted that other methods of data collection such as telephone or Internet-based interviewing may have yielded information we were not able to collect. For instance, some potential participants (who we did not interview) were unwilling to meet for face-to-face interviews because of the issue of disclosure. Future research should consider the combination of face-to-face interviews and interviews conducted at a distance. This combination of data collection methods would permit these students who were reluctant to participate to do so while still collecting rich, in-depth data from participants who were willing to participate in face to face interviews.

In the current study, we emphasized those SWDs who may be considered academically successful, thus only emphasizing successful strategies. This academic success was readily apparent for participants Hannah, Tom, and Jack who all graduated from college and with Tom and Jack pursuing graduate studies. Additionally, Jessica and Alma both were completing their third and fourth years of study respectively with on-

target expected graduation dates. The accommodation strategies of academically successful SWDs are especially relevant for both disability service providers and faculty members concerned with the retention and development of this population of students who are not academically successful. While the strategies and viewpoints of academically unsuccessful SWDs are worthwhile to study, we suggest emphasizing those strategies that are associated with academic success rather than failure. We should note that these students who are not as academically successful can provide insight to what exactly goes wrong for SWDs in higher education. In discerning those strategies associated with academic success, faculty and staff alike can gain awareness and aid SWDs struggling with disclosure and requesting accommodations.

Lessons from the first theme should especially be imparted to those students struggling with disclosure and requesting accommodations by directing those students to rehearse or mentally map out how they would discuss their disability and related academic needs. Given the number of SWDs that do not seek necessary accommodations who are more likely to consequently leave higher education, rehearsing or scripting disclosure of one's disability in requesting accommodations would appear to be beneficial if only to increase the probability of SWDs actually disclosing and requesting accommodations. The researchers contend that it is not so much what SWDs say in disclosing and requesting accommodations but that they do in fact develop the comfort and confidence to actually say it such as through using a familiar script. Coming out of the disability closet is a matter of personal acceptance that cannot be achieved simply through the use of a script. These scripts mark the beginning of a gradual, individuated process (Smart, 1999). This process includes discussing one's disability for those students struggling with disclosure and requesting accommodations to accepting disability as part of one's identity. While among students who desire accommodations, this coming out is necessitated by the accommodations process that requires disclosure. SWDs who either do not desire or need accommodations (e.g., academically successful without accommodations) can make that decision. These students can choose to disclose their disability out of just the personal desire or inclination to share and connect with others such as in a relevant class discussion.

As for the second theme, negotiating accommodations rather than reporting ADA non-compliance denotes a goal-oriented attitude towards seeking accommodations, where the end result is considered more important than necessarily being in the right and enforcing accommodations. For the study participants, this attitude indicates a focus on the overarching goal of completing coursework and graduating rather than perseverating on non-compliant and/or negatives responses to accommodation requests. The researchers contend that in attempting to negotiate accommodations with faculty members that these students are essentially trying to create win-win situations for both themselves and faculty members. Conversely, it is obvious that the study participants are apprehensive about possible negative consequences associated with reporting ADA non-compliance. This apprehension across participants did not appear to be based upon any personal experiences revealed during the course of the interviews but appeared to be motivated more so out of the fear of being outed and stigmatized for participants with hidden disabilities and the fear of being further stigmatized for participants with visible disabilities, who are already outed by outward appearance.

As ADA stipulates that persons with disabilities are entitled to reasonable accommodations upon being determined eligible for services in higher education, disability service providers cannot advise students to forfeit reasonable accommodations afforded to them for the benefit of keeping the peace. Disability service providers however can encourage SWDs to develop an interpersonal orientation when seeking accommodations and dealing with faculty as evidenced by the study participants' comments. Conversely, faculty members can be encouraged to be sensitive to the struggles encountered by SWDs and the nature of disability itself. The researchers recommend that faculty members be made aware of the highly individuated and personal nature of disability and that SWDs are a fundamental part of the diversity that institutions of higher education are attempting to embrace and celebrate. The lesson for faculty members would be that SWDs belong in collegiate environments as much as any student and should be respected as being equally capable and worthy of pursuing a college education regardless of impairment. A request for accommodations should not be treated as an indication of inability (because every student with a disability admitted to an institution of higher education does have ability), but rather an acknowledgement of certain functional limitations that the student has. In life, we all have limitations. Some persons' limitations are more pronounced than others and require accommodations to be made in order to counter or remove the effects of these limitations. Accommodations in higher education as such do not intend to give an unfair advantage to SWDs but rather intended to level the playing field according to federal legislation (e.g., Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Rehab Act of 1973).

In regards to applying the third and final theme to help SWDs struggling with disclosure and requesting accommodations, faculty and staff members informing students who need accommodations to downplay their own disability status would be counterproductive and may push students struggling with disclosing their disabilities and requesting accommodations back further into the disability closet. From this final theme, downplaying one's disability status appears to be a strategy invoked as a matter of being a person with a disability in Western society rather than a characteristic exclusive to the study participants. Minimizing or downplaying one's disability status in order to make able-bodied persons feel more comfortable is a strategy regularly invoked by persons with disabilities in seeking the acceptance of others (Smart, 1999; Taub et al., 2004).

Implications for research

This study reveals findings relevant to improving the educational experiences of all SWDs in disclosing their disabilities to faculty members and requesting accommodations but does not specifically address those students who do not register their respective offices of student disability services thus do not seek accommodations. Future research should examine why SWDs choose not to register with student disability services by examining issues of disability disclosure (Petronio, 2002) and self-acceptance of disability (Smart, 1999). As a whole, college students with and without disabilities develop and utilize strategies to facilitate their learning experiences. Persons with disabilities however are uniquely and diversely situated in institutions of higher education and in society as a whole, thus have a set of unique and diverse needs. As such, SWDs have academic needs that often require accommodations to be made in the postsecondary

classroom to achieve that are altogether different than the needs of their able-bodied peers. By examining those strategies in disclosure and seeking accommodations that the participants as academically successful SWDs invoke, this study hopes to provide insights as to how faculty members and disability service providers alike can assist this population of students in higher education to utilize the same or similar strategies and gain an awareness as to how these students experience higher education.

Implications for practice

As SWDs in higher education can have difficulty disclosing their disability and requesting accommodations from faculty, we suggest several strategies that could be implemented by faculty and higher education administrators on behalf of students. Closer attention to the principles of universal design in the higher education classroom could alleviate some necessity for SWDs to disclose their disability and request accommodations. Universal design refers to a set of standards for designing products and processes in order to make these products and processes accessible to as many persons as possible (Preiser & Ostroff, 2001). As such, universal design has been termed design for all. For instance, instead of timed tests, take-home projects could be assigned so that a student with ADHD would not necessarily require the accommodation of extended time on tests. Adhering more closely to the principles of universal design could make disability a non-issue for some and maybe eventually all learners in the higher education classroom. We acknowledge though that timed, in-class tests are very much a traditional form of assessment in our educational system. Thus, it may be difficult to convince faculty members to avoid using this form of assessment given its prevalence. Alternatively, adhering to the principles of universal design could be extended to delivering traditional face to face courses online or at a distance. In this way, SWDs who may have issues with mobility or require extensive assistive technology may be better accommodated in the higher education classroom (Pisha & Coyne, 2001).

Additionally, some programs at universities have one or two persons who coordinate all disability accommodations on behalf of faculty members and students. In this situation, faculty members teaching never know which students (if any) have a disability unless this disability may be considered visible such as those students requiring the use of a wheelchair. These persons who coordinate disability accommodations act as liaisons between SWDs and relevant faculty members. As a result, the student is never required to disclose or discuss his or her disability with anyone but the liaison. While this structure permits more privacy for SWDs in disclosing their disability and requesting accommodations, this structure also creates an extra layer of organizational bureaucracy, which could impede the delivery of necessary accommodations and services.

To avoid this introduction of an extra layer of bureaucracy, more informal approaches to accommodating SWDs could start to be accepted where a student with a disability would not necessarily have to disclose and request accommodations through formal channels in order to receive necessary accommodations. This informality to the accommodations process could create problems such as other students claiming that a student with a disability is receiving an unfair advantage without providing documentation or proof of disability. Faculty members, for instance, who have given a student with a disability lecture notes without requiring documentation have been

accused of favoring one student over another without cause. To remedy this, faculty members have consequently been forced to give their lecture notes to all students to giving any student an unfair advantage. In short, these suggested strategies to be implemented by faculty and higher education administrators can address some issues associated with the discomfort of disclosing and requesting accommodations for SWDs but appear to create their own problems also.

Limitations

In the current study, several limitations emerged. The first limitation concerns the fact that all participants were academically successful students with disabilities. Thus, the findings of the current study may be viewed as not transferrable to students with disabilities who are not academically successful. This limitation, however, is logical as students with disabilities who are not academically successful would appear not to engage in these strategies as revealed by the themes that emerged in the current study or else they would be academically successful. A second limitation of the current study concerns the institution of higher education where the study was conducted. The institution of higher education is a large four-year, doctoral research university located in the Southwestern United States. As a result, the students (with and without disabilities) who attend a university with these characteristics may be different than students who would attend a two-year institution. For instance, a student with a disability may self-select to attend a two-year community college over a larger, four-year university in order to have a more nurturing environment (Bigaj & Shaw, 1995). Another limitation of the current study concerns our data collection methods. In choosing to perform face-to-face interviews versus interviews at a distance, we were not able to interview some students. These students could have provided a unique perspective in contrast to students who were willing to participate in face to face interviews.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the current study examined how SWDs develop and utilize strategies to facilitate their learning experiences with respect to their unique academic needs in higher education. The study revealed three underlying themes that depicted the accommodation-seeking strategies of the participants who were academically successful college students with disabilities. These themes included: scripting disclosure of one's disability; negotiating accommodations with faculty; and downplaying one's disability status. These themes provide valuable information as to how students with disabilities, who have succeeded in higher education, navigate the process of requesting and receiving accommodations. In understanding how these students who were academically successful navigate this process, the current study provides information to faculty, disability service providers, and other relevant administrators in higher education as to what strategies to direct SWDs to invoke that have been successful.

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