

Barriers Impacting Students with Disabilities at a Hong Kong University

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Abstract

A qualitative study was conducted to examine the barriers to postsecondary education experienced by students with disabilities in Hong Kong and the impact of those barriers. Data were gathered from six students with disabilities, their instructors, and university staff with whom they interacted to procure disability-related services using participant observations and semi-structured interviews. Barriers clustered in the areas of architecture, environment, systems, instructor- and classroom-related, student-generated, and the lack of evaluation. Implications are presented for increasing access to postsecondary programs for students with disabilities in Hong Kong as well as for international students who enroll in programs in the United States.

Keywords: Disability barriers, Hong Kong, access, postsecondary students, admissions practices

As one of China's most notable cities, Hong Kong stands at a crossroads between its past and its future, between its traditional makeup and the one being forged by the immigrants from the Mainland of China, and by the changing nature of its postsecondary education system. Orienting readers from North America's education systems with the system in Hong Kong is imperative to contextualize the barriers postsecondary students with disabilities face in Hong Kong. Four categories of barriers to successful postsecondary education for students with disabilities are cited in the Western literature. These include student, faculty, institutional, and social service.

Barriers to Postsecondary Education for Students with Disabilities from the Western Literature

When embarking on an education beyond high school, students with disabilities face a range of challenges over and above those faced by postsecondary students without disabilities (Durham Webster, 2004). Despite the passage of legislation to the contrary, some campuses remain inaccessible physically (Gilson, 2010a; Kroeger & Schuck, 1993), programmatically, (Gilson, Dymond, Chadsey, & Hsu, 2007), and attitudinally

(Gilson & Dymond, 2011) to many students with disabilities. The result is often quite disturbing, as students with disabilities are less likely to remain in their programs of study than are their non-disabled peers (Henderson, 2001).

Student Barriers

In the postsecondary system in the United States, students must self-identify as people with disabilities (Stodden, Stodden, Kim-Rupnow, Thai, & Galloway, 2003; Tagayuna, Stodden, Chang, Zeleznik, & Whelley, 2005), provide documentation of their disabilities to their university's Disability Service (DS) office (Loewen & Pollard, 2010), request reasonable accommodations for their disabilities if warranted (Pliner & Johnson, 2004; Roessler, Brown, & Rumrill, 1998; Stodden, Jones, & Chang, 2002), problem-solve if accommodations break down or fail to meet their needs (Gajar, 1998), and interact with faculty concerning reasonable accommodations (Lancaster, Mellard, & Hoffman, 2001). New college students may need time to learn how to interact with college personnel in such a proactive manner because these skills, in general, may not be required or taught at the secondary level (Stodden et al., 2003).

Students lacking problem-solving skills often react passively to budding academic difficulties (Green, 1996). Other students do not make their disabilities known to DS staff and, therefore, do not receive accommodations (McBroom, 1994). Still others register for services through DS offices but fail to initiate requests for accommodations. Typically, DS providers offer accommodations that are functional rather than interactional (Stodden et al., 2002), meaning that the DS staff suggests what accommodations may be provided for given disability types instead of asking about the supports a particular student with disabilities may need in a given class (Kurth & Mellard, 2006).

To further complicate their adjustment to postsecondary life, the support network of other students with disabilities and the disability culture familiar to them in secondary school radically changes in college (Cawthon & Cole, 2010; Stodden et al., 2003). The level of support from family and friends offered to students with disabilities varies widely in the United States (Brockelman & Olney, 2005), and the amount of competition among students at the postsecondary level is higher than in high school (Cawthon & Cole, 2010; Stodden et al., 2003). In addition, those with disabilities often have fragile self-esteems (Barry & Mellard, 2002; Hartman-Hall & Haaga, 2002). Many students with disabilities are reluctant to ask for help for fear of being viewed as burdensome (Barry & Mellard, 2002; Roessler et al., 1998).

Institutional Barriers

There is a lack of consensus among professionals regarding the accommodations needed by postsecondary students with disabilities (Tagayuna et al., 2005). Student service offices are grappling with shrinking budgets (Bok, 2003). American postsecondary students with disabilities have repeatedly noted that their requests for reasonable accommodations under disability anti-discrimination laws are often not implemented in a timely fashion or in an effective manner (Durham Webster, 2004; Gilson et al., 2007). Because different disabilities present varying access needs, an examination of some specific barriers is warranted. Physical access to many buildings for students using wheelchairs may be nonexistent (Gilson, 2010a) or so cumbersome as to discourage students using wheelchairs (Holloway, 2001). Students who are deaf or hard of hearing struggle to comprehend in classes when sign language interpretation, Communication

Access Real-Time Translation (CART), or C-Print are not present (Kroeger & Schuck, 1993; Marschark, Leigh, Sapere, & Burnham, 2006; Marschark, Sapere, & Convertino, 2005). Students with learning disabilities weigh the merits of disclosing their disabilities to faculty against trying to turn in work and complete tests on time without reasonable accommodations (Cawthon & Cole, 2010; Finn, 1997; Loewen & Pollard, 2010), while students with psychiatric disabilities regularly encounter stigmatization by faculty when disclosing their disabilities (Weiner & Wiener, 1996). Students with visual impairments worry that they will not have access to accessible formats of their textbooks in time to keep up with reading assignments (Gilson et al., 2007; Holloway, 2001).

Faculty Barriers

Administrators and faculty play key roles in creating a supportive environment for students with disabilities (Wilson & Getzel, 2001). Although many faculty are willing to interact positively with students with disabilities (Gilson, 2010b) they may unintentionally erect barriers inhibiting student success (Thomas, 2002). Some faculty have never been adequately trained in providing accommodations to students with disabilities (Cawthon & Cole, 2010; Finn, 1997; Tagayuna et al., 2005) or have not been exposed to students with disabilities (Leyser et al., 1998). The result is that faculty often are unaware of how to adapt their teaching to suit the needs of students with a variety of learning styles (Stodden et al., 2003).

Social Service Agency Barriers

Barriers can arise from the very social service agencies designated to serve students with disabilities. For example, many postsecondary students lack adequate training in assistive technology (AT) (Kapperman, Sticken, & Heinze, 2002) and AT is often prohibitively expensive (McBroom, 1994; Michaels, Pollock, Morabito, & Jackson, 2002). The vocational rehabilitation system's eligibility criteria and service intricacies can be a formidable challenge for students with disabilities (McBroom, 1994). Obtaining benefits from cash assistance programs for people with disabilities is often a slow and complex process. These barriers present difficulties that are not negotiated by students without disabilities.

Barriers to Postsecondary Education in Hong Kong

Few barriers to postsecondary education in Hong Kong are indexed in English-based academic literature from the West. Competition for admissions slots at the university level is particularly fierce in Hong Kong (Chan & Ma, 2004; Wong, Pearson, & Lo, 2004; Wong & Seeshing, 2004). Students wishing to matriculate into higher education in Hong Kong must pass the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) – an examination given in what is equivalent to the 11th grade in the United States. Students take tests in eight areas, including Chinese and English. A passing grade is given to students who succeed in five of the eight subjects (Wong & Seeshing, 2004). These practices are vestiges of Great Britain’s influence on Hong Kong’s educational system (Tsang, 2004). Even those who pass the HKCEE might not necessarily secure a place in postsecondary education. Therefore, the chance for those students who fail the HKCEE to gain admittance in higher education is practically nil (Wong & Seeshing, 2004).

Levels of family support for postsecondary students with disabilities in Hong Kong vary (Gilson, 2010b). The cost of AT is prohibitively high for Hong Kong students with disabilities (Tam, Mak, Chow, Wong, & Kam, 2003) and is perceived as a luxury rather than a necessity. Given that people with disabilities can often become more independent and productive through the use of AT, barriers to its procurement can impact postsecondary education success rates. The reaction of people without disabilities to those with disabilities plays a role in the stress level experienced by students with disabilities. While people without disabilities in the West tend to hold more positive attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities and mental illness than they do toward people with physical disabilities (Rubin & Roessler, 2001), in Hong Kong and Taiwan, postsecondary students with physical disabilities tend to be viewed more positively than those with mental illness or intellectual disabilities (Tam & Watkins, 1995).

Graduation from colleges and universities creates many more opportunities for people, with or without disabilities, when seeking employment. In a status-conscious culture such as that in Hong Kong, earning postsecondary degrees results in attainment of a new level of respect in one’s community. Therefore, adults with disabilities who are eager to work and gain respect in their communities should have the chance to attend higher education. Investigations of the barriers faced by

postsecondary students with disabilities in Hong Kong are lacking in current, English literature. Though the perceptions of postsecondary students towards people with disabilities were investigated by Tam and Watkins (1995), the research took place before civil rights legislation for people with disabilities – the Disability Discrimination Ordinance (DDO; 1996) – was passed in Hong Kong. When students without disabilities were exposed to people with physical disabilities, their positive attitudes toward people with disabilities increased (Chan, Lee, Yuen, & Chan, 2002). The lack of Chinese literature is especially disturbing, since such literature might convince academics on the Chinese Mainland to work towards admitting more students with disabilities to universities.

The Hong Kong government has sought to eliminate barriers for people with disabilities in employment, education, and public accommodation with limited success. The DDO aims to eliminate discrimination and applies to postsecondary education institutions as well as primary and secondary educational settings. The DDO specifically identifies educational settings as covered entities. Educational institutions are charged with “ensuring that persons with disabilities have equal opportunities in access to, and meaningful participation in, local education” (Equal Opportunities Commission, para 1, n.d.). The DDO defines disability from a medical perspective and lists specific conditions that are disabilities. Claimants may seek redress of disability discrimination, harassment, and vilification.

Given the adoption of the DDO and growing numbers of postsecondary students with physical disabilities, the purpose of this study was to examine the remaining presence and impact of any barriers to postsecondary education experienced by students with disabilities in Hong Kong. Students with disabilities have been attending universities in Hong Kong for many years; their stories should be told, both in popular culture and in academic circles. Dissemination of the findings of this study may stimulate other academicians to adopt similar lines of research and assist DS staff in Western cultures to appropriately accommodate the needs of international students with disabilities.

Methodology

Participants

Three populations at a university in Hong Kong were interviewed for this study: university students with disabilities, their instructors, and staff whose roles brought them into contact with students with disabilities. As compared to the rates of students with disabilities at higher education institutions in the United States (Henderson, 1999), the rate of attendance for students with disabilities at the university where the study was carried out in Hong Kong was quite low, with only 18 out of approximately 20,000 students self-identifying with disabilities (A. Chow, Personal Communication, September 5, 2005). Due to the small number of students with disabilities at the university, a purposive sample (Krathwohl, 1997) was employed in this qualitative study to locate students with a range of disabilities and experiences for study participation. All student participants were from Hong Kong and had sufficient English language fluency to participate meaningfully.

It should be pointed out that English proficiency was a requirement for matriculation at the university in question. Only students who had their disabilities for more than 12 months were approached for participation. This criterion was established to minimize the effects of grieving that typically accompany the acquisition of a recent disability. Students also had been registered at the university for two full semesters prior to the semester when the study was conducted. These two criteria were established in order to select only students with disabilities who were familiar with how their disabilities impacted their daily lives and to learn to what extent the university campus, instructors, and staff were helpful to them as students with disabilities.

The researcher emailed all students with disabilities a general letter describing the purpose of the study and requesting their participation; this action resulted in no responses. The researcher then asked the DS staff to personally contact students to inquire whether they would be willing to participate in the study. Five students with disabilities agreed to participate – four males and one female. A sixth female student indicated initial interest but then decided not to participate. While it would have been preferable to include interviews with students with non-apparent disabilities such as learning disabilities, such students were not registered with the DS.

Participants selected a pseudonym to protect their anonymity. Their majors at the university were

English/geography education, mathematics, political science, and literature. Profiles of the students, minus information that could identify them personally, are provided below.

Berry. A 21-year-old, Berry used a long, white cane for orientation and mobility. Berry had been totally blind since the age of two and was in the second of three years in his undergraduate program. Berry lived in a dormitory for his first year of university and at home with his parents for his second year. His interests included going out with friends, running, and participating in religious activities. He attended a residential school for the blind from kindergarten until the age of 15. At that point he began attending a secondary school for boys with and without disabilities bound for higher education.

Clint. A second-year student who was 28-years-old, Clint had low vision and did not use a cane. Clint began losing his sight in his early teens; he could see steps when lighting was neither too bright nor too dark. He could still make out colors and shapes. Clint had not received orientation and mobility training or learned braille well enough to use it in his daily life. Like Berry, Clint spent his first year at university in a dormitory and elected to live with his family at home for the second year of his program. No one else in Clint's family had a disability. Clint was a connoisseur of the fine arts and he often attended plays and concerts by himself or with his girlfriend. Clint was educated in his neighborhood school; little adaptation was made to the curriculum or instruction to accommodate his vision loss. As Clint's vision continued to ebb, he began experiencing heightened anxiety. At the time of the study, Clint reported bouts of emotional instability and nervousness.

Kathleen. The only member of her family to have a disability, Kathleen was 20 and was a second-year student who had an above-knee amputation of her right leg. She wore a prosthetic leg at all times when in public. With this leg, she was able to climb stairs and traverse the ubiquitous escalators and steep hills of Hong Kong. Kathleen enjoyed an active social life with her friends, including attending clubs and religious activities. Kathleen went to her neighborhood school for elementary, middle, and secondary school. She was excused from physical education classes and recess, but no other adaptations were made for her disability while in school.

Po Sing. Po Sing was 22-years-old and had moderate hearing loss in both ears. He wore hearing aids and his speech was slightly different because of his hearing loss. Po Sing was extremely involved on campus. He had chaired his dormitory's activities committee, volunteered at various organizations, and held down two part-time jobs while at university. Po Sing was the only member of his family with a disability. He attended his neighborhood school from kindergarten through graduation from high school. Other than allowing him to sit in a desk conducive to his hearing, Po Sing was not provided any adaptations to the curriculum or instruction he received in school.

Tony. Of all the students interviewed, Tony's disability was least obvious visually. A 21-year-old, he had a severe hearing loss in his left ear. Tony never wore hearing aids and disclosed his disability only to the DS office and a few close friends. He was active in the university bridge club. Tony enjoyed reunions with his extended family and still lived at home. None of Tony's family had disabilities. He attended his neighborhood school from kindergarten until graduation from secondary school. He was allowed to wear headphones to better hear oral English examinations in school.

The interactions and supports provided by instructors and support staff at a university inevitably affect students with disabilities. Therefore, study participants from both of these populations were recruited. Each of the student participants suggested instructors that the researcher might interview; a total of nine instructors were recruited. A judgment sample (Krathwohl, 1997) was used to select staff for study participation. Representatives from the Equal Opportunity office, the physical plant, student affairs, the counseling center, and the library were chosen, since they had interactions with students with disabilities by virtue of their jobs.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with students with disabilities, staff, and instructors, as well as through classroom observations of students with disabilities. During interviews, the researcher noted vocal intonation and emphasis in addition to the words uttered. Because the observer had a significant visual impairment, participant observation of students with disabilities consisted of focused listening to utterances of students and instructors and notation of audible gestures (e.g. pen tapping, paper shuffling, and repositioning in desk chairs).

Interview protocols were developed to incorporate questions about barriers discussed in both Western and Hong Kong literature. Academicians from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea as well as an American disability rights advocate reviewed the protocols and made cultural and grammatical suggestions. The protocols were revised accordingly. Questions about barriers to physical, attitudinal, and systemic access to university life were posed to student participants. Instructors and staff were questioned about the adequacy of university resources designated to assist students with disabilities, training offered in working with such students, and personal interactions between participants and students with disabilities. The interviewer conducted four semi-structured, face-to-face interviews per student in order to develop rapport and to deepen understanding. One interview each was conducted with nine instructors and six staff at the university as well. All interviews were semi-structured, which allowed interviewees to control the order of the questions presented and the content emphasized.

The researcher conducted observations in student participants' classrooms. Student attendance and participation in class were noted when conducting observations in order to document how students with disabilities interacted with their classmates, the course instructors, and others in the settings. The researcher observed each of the students with disabilities' classes a total of ten times. This amount of engagement with the participants was critical to gain a deep understanding of the students (Bogdan, 1972).

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The lead author who carried out this study is totally blind and counts herself as part of the disability rights movement. Therefore, her biases as a disability rights advocate have influenced the interpretation of these data and the relationships she formed with study participants. While the researcher grew up in the United States and had minimal contact with people from Hong Kong until her study began, all student participants grew up in Hong Kong and spoke Cantonese as their first language. Had the researcher been able to interview the participants in Cantonese, it is likely that the study findings would have been richer. The researcher also acknowledges that her lack of lived experience in the Hong Kong culture means that her interpretation of the study findings probably varies significantly from what a Chinese researcher might find. Nevertheless,

member checks were employed as a means of minimizing the bias brought to the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checks allowed participants to assume a more equal role with the researcher.

A modern form of content analysis (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005) was employed to analyze the data collected in this study. Notes taken during participant observations were re-read and expanded upon after each session by adding reflections about four dimensions: method, ethical dilemmas and conflicts, the researcher's frame of mind, and points of clarification. The interviews with students, instructors, and staff participants were transcribed in their entirety. The transcripts were initially categorized according to the questions posed during the interviews. All of the interview and participant observation data were coded by the first author, and 20% of the coded data were read by the second author. Consensus was reached about the development of codes and the ways in which data were organized under the codes. In order to represent all participant perspectives thoroughly, both convergence and divergence were sought in this study. Thus, triangulation was not a goal. The credibility of the findings was enhanced as a result of complementarity being reported (Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989). Whether a particular person's point of view agreed with others did not determine whether their data were reported.

Findings

The barriers identified by student, instructor, and staff participants in this study could be characterized as architectural, environmental, systemic, instructor- and classroom-related, student-generated, and lack of evaluation. It should be noted that the supports offered to students with disabilities in this study have been published elsewhere (Gilson, 2010b). By and large, the students with disabilities interviewed for this study were happy with the accommodations they received at their university.

Architectural and Environmental Barriers

The landscape of Hong Kong Island, being exceedingly hilly and prone to mud slides, presents challenges for providing physical access. The university was built on a "steep, steep hill, and with different platforms," according to the architect employed by the physical plant of the university. When referring to as recent as 30 years ago, a university staff member commented,

"At that time physical accessibility was in fact...not a very common concern." Environmental barriers often posed challenges for students with disabilities. Environmental factors were barriers to some students but less problematic for others. Of the five students observed, only one seemed to sit in classes where outside noise did not disrupt the class significantly. Audible distractions included students shouting near classroom doors, construction drills, the slamming of doors, the movement of loud carts down corridors, wind whistling through doors, and the loud use of audio visual equipment in other rooms. The weather's effects often impeded the ability of Clint and Kathleen to move around the campus safely. When the sun was too bright or not bright enough (e.g., at dusk), Clint could not see well enough to discriminate changes in elevation such as steps. He preferred to stay home at nighttime. Kathleen found certain areas of the campus to be very slippery when it was raining or had recently rained. On one of the occasions that the researcher observed Kathleen, she was late to class because she had just fallen, due to the rain.

Systemic Barriers

Several services commonly provided by DS offices in the United States were not provided to students with disabilities at the university. While this university is well known for its services for students with disabilities, when this study was conducted, the DS office did not provide sign language interpreters for students who are hard of hearing or deaf. Whether that is because no deaf students had requested an interpreter or because the university would not provide such accommodations is unknown. The Disability Discrimination Ordinance Code of Educational Practice does require educational institutions' goods, services, and facilities to meet the needs of people with disabilities, unless doing so would constitute unjustifiable hardship (Equal Opportunities Commission, n.d.). Provision 16.2.2 of this document does require that an appropriate medium of communication be made available and does provide an example of sign language as one communication medium.

Students who use wheelchairs are advised to attend another university in Hong Kong, which is more physically accessible. Students with learning disabilities in Hong Kong rarely even take college entrance examinations. Therefore, would-be university students with learning disabilities seldom have the chance to enroll at university.

The university's financial aid office oversees funds designed to purchase equipment for students with disabilities such as computer hardware and software and hearing aids. At the time of data collection, two of the student participants had applied for funding through this office but had not been awarded any money. Therefore, Po Sing had to purchase his own hearing aids. Once Kathleen turned 21 and was no longer covered under her mother's health insurance plan, she would have to pay at least partially for any alterations to her artificial leg. She found contemplation of this added cost to be stressful. While she could also apply for funding to offset these costs, awarding of funding is not guaranteed.

The researcher asked staff whether they had adequate personnel, support, and time within their days to serve students with disabilities appropriately. Although his was one of only two voices that said no, one staff member's comments shed light on an important issue. The staff member worked at the university's student counseling office and expressed the following concern. "When you have five or six cases, and then, suddenly, you have a crisis. ... That's where our manpower now has reached to the stage where we cannot; we do not have a backup." A more representative observation was that staff could carry out their current duties adequately but were concerned about their ability to maintain their high level of service to students if other duties kept being added to their job descriptions. A high-ranking staff member in student affairs stated that the needs of students with disabilities were fulfilled as adequately as they were for all other students with sets of needs. He gave an example of an international student who is attempting to fit in at the university, for comparison purposes. Such an international student would have needs beyond those of a typical student as they attempted to become part of the university culture.

An attitudinal barrier identified by staff at the university used to be present but was less so at the time of the study. One of the staff who helped students with disabilities to succeed in their classes described the way instructors used to feel about welcoming students with more significant disabilities into their classes. She described them as more difficult to help than the students with milder disabilities. She recalled a student with fragile bones, saying, "That was a very difficult case...especially because that occurred years ago, when the whole university community was not that sensitive to the needs of the students." The student in question ended up dropping out of the university before he completed his degree.

Instructor and Classroom Related Barriers

Instructors learned that they had students with disabilities in their classes in two ways. The students either disclosed their disabilities or the instructor noticed the disability through observation of the student in question. If the DS office had attempted to notify the instructors of the presence of students with disabilities in their classes, those communications did not reach the instructors. The majority of the instructor participants were not certain whom they could contact to seek assistance regarding students with disabilities in their classes.

Several barriers were identified by the student participants in this study, which were intentionally or unintentionally erected by instructors at the university. While students were quick to point out the barriers, they were less eager to provide informative feedback that might aid the instructors in altering their instruction to better meet student needs. Instructors' intentions to accommodate students were usually good, but they sometimes forgot to continue to alter their content delivery or materials throughout the semester. Clint explained that he would ask his instructors a total of two or three times to announce what they were pointing to on the board as they lectured. If they continued to forget to verbalize their gestures, he gave up reminding them. Berry understood that it was difficult for instructors to change their teaching styles; therefore, he was patient with instructors who neglected to tell him what they were pointing to on the board.

In contrast to the interviews in which instructors and students explained classroom accommodations, the researcher observed few attempts by instructors to adapt their teaching styles to the individual needs of students with sensory disabilities. One of Po Sing's instructors often faced away from her students as she read aloud from her slide presentations. Her voice was frequently soft as well. While sitting for her interview with the researcher, she acknowledged that she should speak slower and louder to accommodate Po Sing. During a class that the researcher observed, this instructor likened her rate of speech to a "machine gun." Po Sing mentioned the thickness of her Spanish accent and the quietness of her voice as barriers for his clear understanding of her lectures. Po Sing's other observed instructor also spoke quietly, especially when she was not using the microphone. Both Tony and Po Sing struggled with comprehension when instructors spoke too quickly in class. In classes where instructors

used microphones, Po Sing observed, “The microphone used in class is not always so clear.” One of Tony’s instructors frequently talked into his microphone so loudly that it distorted his voice.

Berry and Clint emailed their instructors to request electronic versions of any handouts or slides for class. Clint estimated that about half of his instructors sent him his requested handouts or slides. Berry corroborated Clint’s assertion that some instructors neglected to send him handouts. “I was quite shocked because of her rejection,” Berry said of an instructor who refused to give him the lecture notes for his class electronically. He went on to say, “So, I really felt very bad that day, because...I don’t think I asked her for too much.” Clint stated that even when instructors sent him electronic versions of handouts, their structure often made them difficult for him to use with a screen reader.

Clint identified a systemic barrier that impeded his ability to receive meaningful feedback on his papers assigned in class. The university sends out papers written by students for external examination by anonymous reviewers. Clint emailed all of his instructors at the beginning of the semester to request that instructor and external reviewer feedback be written in an email so that he could read it, since he was unable to see comments written on the hard copies of his papers. Clint estimated that only 20% of his instructors complied with his request.

Student-Generated Barriers

The complexity of human interaction makes it necessary to examine attitudinal barriers from multiple perspectives. Peers of students with disabilities unknowingly erected barriers for their colleagues with disabilities. On the other hand, the students with disabilities themselves made some choices that negatively impacted their success at the university.

Attitudinal Barriers from Other Students. An important component of university life for many students is living in residence halls. Clint and Kathleen encountered discrimination in their dormitories when initially applying or reapplying for a room. A student committee from each dormitory reviewed applications and determined who would be allowed to live there. When Kathleen asked about the reason for the denial of her application, she was told that she would not be able to participate in sports activities organized in the dormitory because of her mobility impairment. Kathleen was able to secure a room in the dormitory after taking her case to the DS office.

Clint’s second year application to live in the dormitory was sent in late, since all notices of the application deadline were tacked up on bulletin boards. Because of his level of vision loss, he could not read print. He reapplied late, and his application decision was delayed. Furthermore, the student committee was worried about the traffic situation near the dormitory. They were concerned about Clint’s ability to navigate safely when entering and exiting his dormitory. The DS office was willing to intervene in the situation to help Clint, but he decided to live at home and save money for his second year at university. Clint was frustrated by the evasive approach the committee took. He wished they would have had a frank discussion with him about their concerns.

Berry’s classmates may have been unaware of how to include him meaningfully in class. One of Berry’s instructors assigned her students to groups for presentations about their teaching practicum experiences during class. They were to prepare slide presentations for the benefit of the other students in the class. Berry had emailed all students, asking them to send him the slide presentations before class so that he could listen to them electronically. When they did not send the slides in advance, neither the instructor nor Berry followed up during class. The slide presentations were used as students presented, even though Berry could not read them due to his vision impairment. After class, Berry chose not to follow up with his classmates to obtain the documents. The instructor speculated about why Berry did not pursue the issue. “I do feel that sometimes he really just doesn’t want to, like, be a burden to his classmates.” Berry affirmed this instructor’s assessment of his wishes.

Barriers Caused by Students with Disabilities. Students with disabilities were sometimes reluctant to request accommodations from their class instructors during the lectures or tutorials. Instead, Po Sing and others were more comfortable asking for accommodations during class break times or in an instructor’s office. If students needed help in class and were sitting near their friends, they were generally comfortable asking for assistance from their friends but were not comfortable approaching acquaintances for help.

Berry’s lack of sufficient communication and follow-through resulted in more barriers in his attempt to participate fully in classes than was necessary. Despite one of his instructor’s valiant attempts to provide electronic formats of documents to Berry, she rarely

received useful feedback from him when doing so. For example, she asked Berry to notify her whether Microsoft Word® files were preferable to Adobe® Portable Document Files (PDF), but Berry did not reply to her emails. In a subsequent email she numbered her questions about his formatting preferences to encourage specific feedback. Because of Berry's lack of response, her attempt to remove this barrier for Berry was not as successful as it could have been.

Some students made choices that negatively impacted their academic performance. Po Sing did not wear his hearing aids during his first year of classes at university. This decision resulted in him not hearing much of class lectures and discussion. He had internalized the shame brought about when others reacted to seeing the hearing aids in his ears. In order to avoid that negative reaction, he was initially willing to endure the consequences of not hearing well in class at university (e.g., receiving lower grades than his hearing peers). He decided to begin wearing his hearing aids when he realized his academic results for his first year were not up to his standards of performance.

Clint identified another choice made by a student with a disability that likely resulted in poorer academic performance. The DS office had set up a program whereby volunteers scanned textbooks and course materials for students with print reading disabilities. The reading materials for one of Clint's Chinese courses were copied poorly, making them impossible to scan. Rather than locating someone to read them aloud for him or to record the readings onto an MP3 media player, Clint chose to not complete the assigned readings for his courses. He pointed out that few of his classmates did, either.

Kathleen's absenteeism from class was disability-related and likely affected her level of engagement with course material. Kathleen missed portions of her classes because of frequent doctor visits for the fitting of her artificial leg. Because she could not walk as quickly as her classmates, she was late to class at times as well. When the weather was rainy, Kathleen would occasionally choose to skip classes altogether. The reason she gave for these choices was that she tended to slip and fall more in the rain. She estimated that she skipped classes about once or twice per semester. Kathleen was not observed in all of her classes, but she missed at least two of the classes the researcher had intended to observe. Therefore, her rate of absenteeism may have been higher than her estimate. Kathleen's in-

structors seemed to be compassionate about her frequent absences in their interviews, but it is unclear how much content Kathleen missed that was covered in class.

Lack of Evaluation

During interviews with staff and instructor participants, the researcher found few formal attempts to evaluate the effectiveness of accommodations put in place for students with disabilities. However, informal mechanisms were adopted. Three instructors would pull the students with disabilities in their classes aside before or after class to ask them how they were progressing in class. As students with visual impairments who needed to gain access to teaching materials before class, Clint and Berry both initiated the process of requesting accommodations with their instructors. However, as the semester progressed, two instructors did not make formal attempts to evaluate the effectiveness of the accommodations they had put in place for Clint and Berry. Another of Berry's instructors did do so, but Berry failed to respond to her inquiries in a specific manner. Tony's instructors did not know that they had students with disabilities in their classes; therefore, they did not evaluate any accommodations made.

Staff verified the existence of channels through which students could address accommodation concerns, but few had processes in place to evaluate accommodation effectiveness. The staff member charged with upholding equal opportunities for minorities did monitor all of his open cases regularly by seeking feedback from both parties to the complaints. The DS staff met with each of her students with disabilities at least once per year to reevaluate their needs. No units whose staff the researcher had the opportunity to interview conducted formal surveys or evaluations for improvement, however.

Discussion

The accommodation of students with disabilities at university is a complex process involving many entities. Services are delivered by numerous university departments, which may or may not communicate information effectively across departmental lines. In addition to departmental efforts, instructors with differing levels of familiarity with disability teach students with disabilities. Student-instructor interaction is critical, and students possess varying skill sets in asking for and monitoring the provision of accommodations.

Though most students and instructors intend to be helpful, barriers often arise during interaction with students with disabilities. In the case of many of the students interviewed in this study, they were reluctant to confront their peers and instructors to eliminate such barriers.

Critical Analysis of Barriers for Postsecondary Students with Disabilities

When designing the interview protocols for this study, we thought that the students interviewed might have identified more barriers than they did. Perhaps one factor contributing to this was that students with the most pronounced mobility or hearing impairments were not attending the university at the time of this study. When student participants did identify barriers to their participation at the university as students with disabilities, it was surprising that they did not take proactive steps to address their own concerns.

Students with disabilities who do succeed at procuring sufficient accommodations at university must be more assertive than their nondisabled peers (Shevlin, Kenny, & McNeela, 2004). Assertiveness is sometimes discouraged in Chinese culture (Nisbett, 2003). This concern is also prevalent in the United States (Jones, 2002). Most of the student participants struggled to comprehend lectures and class discussions at the university because of a lack of accommodation in class. Instructor-caused barriers in higher education are not unique to Hong Kong by any means (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Chan & Elliott, 2000; Gilson et al., 2007; Kiyimba, 1997; Madaus, 2000; Meister, 1998; Senge & Dote-Kwan, 1998; Shevlin, et al., 2004; Tinklin & Hall, 1999). Had the student participants in this study been more willing to advocate for their accommodation needs, their academic success at the university probably would have been higher. Unfortunately, the fear of being burdensome to others when seeking assistance for disability-related needs is common among Hong Kong and U.S. students with disabilities (Barry & Mellard, 2002). Although some researchers have found that Western students reveled in the independence they experienced in college compared to high school (Barry & Mellard, 2002; Borland & James, 1999), independence was less desirable and more difficult to obtain for student participants from this study.

The Muted Presence of Non-Apparent Disability

Whereas postsecondary students with hidden disabilities have been seeking services and accommodations in the West in increasing numbers over the past two decades (Weiner & Wiener, 1996), the demographics of the students served by the university's DS office in this study indicated that students with non-apparent disabilities were not served as much. Whether such students were present on the university campus and merely chose not to disclose their disabilities, or were not allowed to enroll at the university, could not be determined in this study.

Clearly, the rigorous examination system present in Hong Kong to weed out would-be university students who struggle academically must contribute to fewer numbers of students with learning disabilities in postsecondary education. The researcher specifically asked whether students with learning disabilities often received accommodations at the university. Apparently, such students rarely passed the HKCEE examination. Therefore, they would be unable to apply for admission at a university. Certainly, obstacles at this early stage of higher education are not unique to Hong Kong (Cawthon & Cole, 2010; Tinklin & Hall, 1999).

Despite the above barriers, a few students with learning disabilities had attended the university according to the DS office representative. And yet, when instructor participants were asked about the types of students with disabilities they had had in their classes, none mentioned students with learning disabilities. This finding must be interpreted with caution, since those with learning disabilities may have elected to not disclose their disabilities to their instructors. An unfortunate cycle ensues. Students are reluctant to disclose their disabilities, faculty are not educated as to the presence of students with non-apparent disabilities in their classes, therefore students with non-apparent disabilities are not accommodated.

Even the accommodations used by students with hearing and visual impairments were less than those afforded to American students with the same disabilities. Someone with Po Sing's level of hearing loss would have likely been provided with an assistive listening device for comprehension of class lectures were he a student in the United States. Similarly, paid staff would have scanned Clint and Berry's textbooks if they were enrolled in a university in the United States (Gilson et al., 2007).

Barriers Present in the Study and in the Academic Literature

Additional barriers pose challenges for students and others with disabilities on university campuses. Physical barriers in higher education differ little in substance between the East and West (Gilson, 2010b) but are more pervasive in Hong Kong. Laws prohibiting inaccessible architecture in the United States have been in force since the 1970's (P.L. 43-112) but are only fifteen years old in Hong Kong (DDO, 1996). Furthermore, while the ADA allows individuals who have experienced discrimination to sue for redress, the DDO's Code of Practice for Employment is not legally binding (Ng, 2011). When these barriers are compared to the breadth of barriers present in the United States, those in Hong Kong can be characterized as having similar causes but as being more inhibiting at the current time. As disability becomes more mainstream in Hong Kong, it is anticipated that these barriers will gradually erode.

Communication difficulties between faculty, the DS office, external examiners, and students with disabilities were noted by instructors in this study and by faculty at American institutions (McEldowney Jensen, McCrary, Krampe, & Cooper, 2004). A lack of knowledge about support services or who to contact to set up accommodations for students with disabilities was reported by instructors in this study and by others (Leyser, Vogel, Wyland, & Brulle, 1998). Instructor participants who had not known they had students with disabilities in their classes would have preferred knowing about those students so that they could address their needs appropriately. Seamless coordination of services and accommodations involves careful planning but is worth the effort when improvements for students with disabilities are realized.

Training for instructors and students with disabilities on various topics is needed, according to these findings and to Myers (1994). The lack of training for students with disabilities on the use of AT is a barrier that is common to students in Hong Kong and in the United States (Kapperman, Sticken, & Heinze, 2002). The appropriate accommodation of students with psychiatric and learning disabilities remains a controversial issue (Phillips, 1994). A few instructors in this study and several from others (Barry & Mellard, 2002; McEldowney Jensen et al., 2004; Shevlin et al., 2004) felt that accommodating students with psychiatric disabilities was more problematic than students with physical disabilities.

Training for faculty on how to appropriately accommodate students with all types of disabilities in their classes was a concern not unique to the university studied (Kroeger & Schuck, 1993; Lancaster et al., 2001; Myers, 1994). Some American higher education institutions provide faculty training (Barry & Mellard, 2002). Evans, Assadi, and Herriott (2005) point out that significant contact among members of the university community with and without disabilities improves faculty awareness of disability issues. Myers suggests that people with disabilities be recruited to provide training to faculty and staff at universities. These barriers shared across geographic boundaries may be indicative of similar problems in the United States and Hong Kong. Faculty in both countries may be chronically over-worked, thereby lessening the chances of receiving adequate training to instruct and accommodate students with disabilities effectively.

Limitations

The range of disability types represented by student participants in this study was narrow; the sample drawn was not random and was very small. Hence these findings are not generalizable. Findings from students with psychiatric, learning, and health disabilities may have differed substantially from those reported in this article. The primary researcher was totally blind and this was obvious to those whom she interviewed. Her disability may have shaped the breadth and depth of the answers to questions posed. All research for this study was carried out in English even though the participants' native language was Cantonese in most cases. Lacking the level of understanding of the Hong Kong culture that comes with being raised in it, the primary researcher undoubtedly missed cues and underlying messages participants attempted to communicate. However, the primary researcher did ask Hong Kong colleagues to provide interpretation of transcribed interview passages that she found confusing.

Implications for Research

How successful postsecondary students with disabilities balance their need for accommodation with their culturally-determined values is a topic that warrants further study by those who are conversant with the culture and with disability in Hong Kong. In a culture such as Hong Kong's, in which figures of authority are generally revered, how people with disabilities will claim their rightful status as the best-informed experts

about their own lives is a critical question (Gilson, 2010b). The students interviewed did not use language that indicated their willingness to advocate strongly for themselves. Not only does the reluctance to advocate affect the levels of accommodation students with disabilities receive at a university, but it also may lead to potential problems in securing accommodations in employment settings upon graduation.

Awareness of disability issues by members of the general public as well as university officials is a concern in Western and Asian settings (Myers, 1994). Those uneducated about disability often resort to stereotypical myths that inaccurately characterize disability. When members of the university community are unaware of legislative, educational, or service provision efforts on behalf of people with disabilities, their ability to adequately assist students with disabilities is hampered. As postsecondary students from Asia and the West continue to study abroad, their cultural perspectives on disability and their needs for accommodations must be investigated in home and host institutions. Regrettably, many Westerners (Nielsen, 2004) and Asians (Gilson & Dymond, 2011) do not see disability rights advocacy as the most appropriate political action of citizens with disabilities. Indeed, one of the most famous American historical figures, Helen Keller, was a socialist and an avid feminist but held conservative views related to disability that are repugnant to today's disability rights activists (Nielsen, 2004).

Since one's status in society determines whether one is able to question current practices (Hampton, 2000), advocacy takes on an entirely different context in China. If one equates disability rights work with criticism of the current system, one likely encounters a roadblock in the academic system in Hong Kong. Kwok (2000) characterizes this phenomenon as stifling criticism. Whereas Asians tend to think that you cannot understand the part without understanding the whole, many Westerners feel that they can exert control over events because they know the rules that control objects (Nisbett, 2003). Understanding the various players in advocacy situations and their connections to each other is of critical importance in much advocacy done in collectivistic cultures (Hofstede, 2001) like Hong Kong. Americans conducting advocacy would rely on procedural safeguards and civil rights protections, whereas advocacy in Hong Kong might involve a private, non-direct conversation with a decision-maker. Hence, advocacy in Eastern and Western realms can

be very different. It is hoped that this study encourages Hong Kong Chinese to conduct research in Cantonese, which appropriately situates the context and meaning of disability rights advocacy in Hong Kong. Perhaps research will serve as a catalyst for sparking further disability rights advocacy in Hong Kong.

Practical Implications

Higher education institutions in Hong Kong are urged to elicit feedback from key stakeholders (e.g., students with disabilities) as services are redesigned to better meet the needs of students with disabilities. Affording all students equal opportunities to succeed at university is a measure of best practices (Nunan, George, & McCausland, 2000), and it is in the interest of higher education institutions to do so (Gilson, 2010b; Lian, 2005). Otherwise-qualified students with a wider variety of disabilities need to be given the chance to enroll in postsecondary education in the next few years. A more comprehensive range of accommodations and AT should be provided to Hong Kong students with disabilities in the future. The range of accommodations available to this study's student participants was smaller than ranges typical at Western institutions of higher education (Lancaster et al., 2001; Leyser et al., 1998). Even with the accommodations provided in classes, some students still struggled to participate optimally. Although the current study focused on barriers within postsecondary education, it appears that an equally important barrier exists for many students with disabilities simply in gaining access to university. Greater flexibility in the HKCEE examination system would allow students with a wider range of disabilities to benefit from a university education. This shift in demographics and their implications should be investigated.

The lack of academic courses on disability topics, few disability awareness events for students, and few advocacy efforts on the part of students with disabilities should be addressed on more campuses. Training offered on disability topics for a wide audience at higher education institutions benefits everyone and is a vital component of addressing attitudinal barriers related to disability. Students without disabilities who sign up for courses on disability studies may be transformed into allies of fellow students with disabilities. Students with disabilities who learn how to advocate for their needs more effectively benefit academically, as noted by the student participants in this study.

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