

Accessing Disability Accommodations: The Barriers that College Students Face When Trying to
Even the Playing Field

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Abstract

An increasing amount of people with disabilities have decided to attend post-secondary school. Disabilities can make schooling more difficult making it harder for students with disabilities to obtain degrees in higher education. Accommodations such as extended time on tests or receiving digital notes aid students with disabilities in achieving higher grades in class. Disability accommodations essentially even the playing field for students which is why laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) have been put in place. The Americans with Disabilities Act ensures that accommodations will be available for students. Recent studies have suggested that students with disabilities that take advantage of the accommodations that are available to them are more successful academically and have higher graduation rates. Despite the fact that accommodations are available, many students with disabilities do not choose to use them. There are many different reasons why students may not take advantage of these accommodations, all of which have the ability to alter the quality of the education experience for students with disabilities.

Keywords: Psychology, Students with disabilities, College, Postsecondary Education, Barriers, Accommodations, Disability Resources

Accessing Disability Accommodations

Introduction

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act is the law that requires students with disabilities to have Individualized Education Programs (IEP). There are thirteen disability categories that are covered under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Lee, 2019). However, students are no longer covered under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act once they enter higher education. Students with disabilities attend college at approximately half the rate of students without disabilities (Dowrick, Anderson, & Acosta, 2005). Only 35% of individuals with disabilities report their disability to the university that they attend (Newman & Madaus, 2015). Colleges and universities generally have adequate accommodations for students in need of additional resources, due to the Americans with Disabilities Act, however, the students do not automatically receive accommodations. Despite the fact that the accommodations are available to students with disabilities many students do not utilize them. Disabilities can be visible or invisible, and can range from anything such as a motor impairment to a learning disability. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, an individual qualifies as having a disability if the person has a physical or mental impairment, that limits the activities that a person can do (2019).

Students that may have utilized accommodations in high school may now opt not to. There are many different reasons both internal and external that explain why students may not utilize accommodations when they enter higher education. Some of the reasons include the student's own self-image and the identity of the disability. The student may also not be familiar

with accessing the accommodations on their own because previously a parent or guardian could assist them. Students with disabilities may not utilize their resources due to negative reactions that they perceived from individuals in the past, particularly from those who are apparent authority figures. Negative feedback from parents or faculty members who do not acknowledge the importance of accommodations may alter the perspective of the individual with the disability, causing them not to make use of their resources. Students that receive the proper accommodations are more likely to have increased academic achievement as well as graduation rates (Datta & Talukdar, 2017).

Many students who have a disability do not wish to disclose their disability to those who have access to offer the appropriate accommodations. A study performed by the National Center for Special Education Research discovered that approximately a quarter of students disclose their disabilities at the post-secondary level (Newman, et al., 2011). It is important to understand the reasons why individuals may be hesitant to seek accommodations in order to ensure that students with disabilities feel more comfortable using the accommodations that are available to them. Individuals that obtain a college degree are more likely to be employed than individuals with less education. However, individuals with disabilities are less likely to be employed than individuals without a disability. Receiving a college degree makes individuals with disabilities more likely to become employed (2015).

Internal Barriers

Internal barriers are factors that a student faces personally. There are many internal factors that cause students with disabilities to be reluctant to seek accommodations. One theory as to why students do not use their accommodations proposes that students may feel that the

accommodation is unfair and want to be self-sufficient or independent (Lyman, 2013). When students do not use the accommodations that are available to them they can be at a disadvantage that has the ability to impede their ability to learn. Internal barriers can help to understand why some students may not utilize accommodations that are available for them.

Fear of an unfair advantage

Some students fear that using their accommodation puts them at an unfair advantage. It is a common scenario for students to feel that they are not “disabled enough” to receive certain accommodations (Lyman et al., 2016). Students do not always entirely understand how or why they qualify for accommodations, which may make them feel like they may be wrongfully receiving accommodations. They often do not want to use them because they feel that other people with more visible disabilities should be helped (Newman & Madaus, 2015). When students feel that accommodations could be more beneficial to others they may opt not to utilize the accommodation available. This can often be a good thing resulting in students feeling more independent, but in some cases this can lead students to become overwhelmed.

Independence

Many students want to be self-sufficient. They want to be independent because for many individuals this is the first time that they can be. In lower levels of education parents or guardians were always involved in making decisions, but when a student reaches their late teens, they may choose to handle their accommodations however they want. For some people, this means not using accommodations at all. Some students felt that they did not have a disability or were not disabled enough and should not receive accommodations and others chose not to disclose for other reasons (Newman & Madaus, 2015). Some students said that they simply chose not to use

their accommodations in order to see if they needed them. One student reported that he wanted to “test” himself to see if he could do well without his accommodations. Some students felt that it was self-defeating to use the accommodations (Lyman et al., 2016). Others said their sense of pride often prevented them from using their accommodations. Having the accommodations as a backup option if needed comforted some students and aided in lowering anxiety. Students said that having the resources available comforted them even if they did not want to use it originally (Lyman, 2013). Having a sense of independence can be empowering to students. When they feel like they do not need to rely on their accommodations they can feel more confident in themselves.

External Barriers

External barriers are factors that a student faces that deal with interpersonal relationships. There are many different factors that are external that can cause a student to decide not to receive accommodations. The student may be facing stigma either from their peers, their professors or even themselves. The school may also not have sufficient outreach or information about disability accommodation programs. The barriers that students face help to understand why so many students with disabilities choose not to receive accommodations at the post-secondary education level.

Stigma

Although higher education is generally associated with less stigmatization, it is still very prevalent on college campuses. This leaves students on college campuses afraid to seek the help that they would benefit from. A common example occurs when professors stigmatize students that received accommodations. College students may also fear being stigmatized by their peers

which can lead to individuals choosing not to disclose their disabilities and leaving them feeling isolated. Stigmatization can prevent individuals from seeking help and affects a student's decision of whether to disclose or conceal their disability. Removing the stigma of disabilities would enable individuals with disabilities to seek treatment and receive support earlier. Less stigmatization could also lead to more professors being readily available to students.

In high school, students may have felt like their identity was associated with their disability. For many individuals, with or without disabilities, college is a place to reinvent and rebrand yourself. Students may have felt stigmatized their entire educational career up until they entered higher education and they may want to escape the stigma (Lyman, 2013). Although students may not know the exact diagnoses a student has, receiving accommodations is typically not entirely private. Many times students have to ask professors for specific accommodations or at least remind them of their accommodations. This can lead to students being treated differently or feeling singled out by their peers or professors. Not receiving accommodations may mean that students will no longer have to be known as an individual with a disability.

Students may also choose not to utilize accommodations because of the stigma that receiving accommodations has. Many students reported not wanting to use their accommodations because they felt like they were “not disabled enough” (Lyman, 2013). Another student felt that because they were not in a wheelchair or did not have a physical disability they did not deserve accommodations (Lyman, 2013). There is a lot of misinformation or a lack of information surrounding disabilities and disability accommodations.

Professor Views

Higher education is usually associated with less stigmatizing attitudes towards people with disabilities. However, many college professors lack adequate knowledge about disabilities and how accommodations should be handled. Many professors are not prepared to manage students that do not fit the typical student behavior. Margaret Price (2011) described a conversation she had with a colleague about a student that was not following the “tacit script”. The student would have random outbursts, and would do things that were considered unusual, such as bringing a big bowl of icecream to class. Price admitted that she and her colleague laughed about the situation awkwardly and did not know how to react. Later in the semester, her colleague received a note from the disability resource center informing the professor that the student had a learning disability (Price, 2011, p.59). The Professors were not intentionally talking about the student in a mocking way, they simply don't know what to do about the unusual situation. It can be assumed that many instructors would react similarly, not to any fault of their own. Simply because they were never educated on what to do when a situation like this arises.

Most students with disabilities that have received accommodations in the past have at least one negative experience with a professor. Students also recalled that professors have denied the students their accommodations (Lyman et al., 2016). This results in students feeling awkward interacting with the professor and being discouraged to use the accommodations that they are entitled to. One student described receiving accommodations as a catch 22, he explained that although the accommodations are helpful, the professor then treats you differently. The student said it felt like professors tiptoe around students with disabilities in order to avoid upsetting them (Lyman, 2013).

Students with disabilities can commonly be mistaken for students with no motivation and associated with having “bad attitudes” (Prince, 2011, p.67). This can lead to professors drawing conclusions about students without actually knowing the whole truth. Students also do not want professors to view them as different from other students (Lyman et al., 2016). People’s disabilities often become their identity in the eyes of others and it can be hard for people to look past them once they are informed. One student reported that a professor said that they never had a student “of that kind” before (Grasgreen, 2014). Negative experiences such as these are the reasons that students choose to conceal their disability and forego accommodations. In general, there is not enough training provided for educators on how to specifically work with individuals with disabilities. Bonni Stachowiak, a professor and dean of teaching at Vanguard University, wrote that she has witnessed faculty being disdainful by notifications for student accommodations (Stachowiak, 2019). Unfortunately, there is still a lot of stigma surrounding disabilities and whether or not people should have accommodations.

The disability resource center (DRC) at most schools handles students’ accommodation requests. The disability office is then supposed to follow up with the professor but the communication between the disability resource center and the professor can often be brief leaving professors confused resulting in students being dissatisfied with their accommodations.

Peer Views

A majority of students with a disability do not seek accommodations because they are afraid of what their peers will say. A study was conducted on college campuses to determine how individuals view peers with disabilities. The study looked at both invisible disabilities, disabilities that they can't see, as well as visible disabilities, disabilities that they can see. In

addition, the study compared the type of disability that the individual has and the accommodations their peers thought they should receive. It was found that students believed that individuals with invisible disabilities and psychiatric disabilities to be the least likely to need accommodations (Deckoff-Jones and Duell, 2018). Ultimately, this means that students are less likely to approve of their peers receiving accommodations for disabilities that they can not physically see. Students that do not understand why other students receive accommodations are likely to have negative attitudes towards the students with disabilities. Students may feel that people are receiving extra help for no reason if they do not understand the disability. Negative experiences of students with disabilities being criticized for utilizing accommodations can lead to the student wanting to either hide or not utilize their accommodations.

Many individuals that struggle with invisible disabilities such as learning disabilities have dealt with stigma since they were diagnosed. Students do not want to be known as a disabled student (Lyman et al., 2016). The decision of disclosing or concealing a disability is difficult but with the additional pressure caused by stigma this decision is more thought-provoking. The decision to not inform other students or faculty of a student's disability could negatively affect them because this could disable students from being able to access certain resources. Stigmatizing disabilities make people with a disability feel uncomfortable and restricted in who they can disclose their disability to.

Many individuals may not want other people to know that they are receiving accommodations because they fear that they will question the legitimacy. Students reported that they had a fear that their peers may think that they are taking advantage of the system (Lyman,

2013). If students felt like they were judged by their peers in education previously, they may not want to risk being labeled again.

College Outreach Techniques

Different campuses' policies may slightly differ from one another. However, they typically follow similar policies and procedures in line with other institutions because of laws and regulations that are put in place.

The State University of New York at New Paltz requires professors to include the campus-wide disability accommodations policy on the syllabus. This is helpful because this means that every student at SUNY New Paltz has access to the campus policy. However, it may not be enough. Although the professors are required to include the information in the syllabus this does not mean that every student will necessarily read the information. In every syllabus the campus policies are listed at the end of the syllabus, even when professors read through the syllabus in class, they typically skip over the campus policies because they are tedious. Hopefully, most students review the syllabus and academic policies on their own however this is quite a large assumption. If students do not read the back of their syllabus they may not know the information about the disability accommodations New Paltz provides.

The policy at SUNY New Paltz states that Professors will be notified of a student's accommodations through email. However, having a connection between the disability services and faculty members can aid in enhancing the effectiveness of the impact of the accommodation on students (Roberts, Park, Brown, & Cook, 2011). Some students have reported that they prefer to talk to professors about their disabilities rather than go through disability services. This makes the individual feel more self-sufficient and may make the professors more open to helping the

student (Lyman et al., 2016). Students may prefer to talk to their professors personally rather than through the disability center at their school in order to improve the relationship that the students have with the professor.

Conclusion

There is a vast amount of research on the different accommodations available to students at the post-secondary level. Despite the accommodations being available, many students do not use the accommodations that are available to them once they reach the post-secondary level. There are many factors that could result in students with disabilities no longer wanting to receive accommodations. The barriers that a student faces while determining if they should receive accommodations can be internal or external. Students may feel that they should not be receiving accommodations for personal reasons. Another factor is that the student may have been ostracized or had negative experiences in the past that cause them to not want to receive accommodations.

Disabilities are still regularly stigmatized around the world today. Schools are required to have accommodations available for students. However, even though there are resources present, the professor's attitudes, as well as peer attitudes and the individual's stigmatization of themselves, can affect individuals' decision of whether or not to seek help. Stigma follows people and makes it difficult for individuals to take advantage of resources that may be helpful. Stigmatization of disabilities makes people reluctant to access resources that could help them in all aspects of their lives.

Future Suggestions

In the future, it would be beneficial to look into effective ways to make students feel more comfortable while accessing disability accommodations. This would enable students to feel comfortable taking advantage of the resources provided on campus which could help students in all aspects of their lives. The internal and external factors that prevent students from seeking accommodations can largely be related to stigma. Stigma creates the fear that students may be treated differently because of their disability. An effective method of reducing the stigma of disabilities on college campuses could result in more students seeking the accommodations that they are entitled to.

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