

BEYOND ACCOMMODATIONS: PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN A HISPANIC

SERVING INSTITUTION

NEELAM AGARWAL

Department of Educational Leadership and Foundations

APPROVED:

Arturo Pacheco, Ph.D

Rodolfo Rincones, Ph.D.

Penelope P. Espinoza, Ph.D.

Beverley Argus-Calvo. PhD

Benjamin C. Flores, Ph.D.
Acting Dean of the Graduate School

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Dedication

To my father, Krishna Kumar Agarwal

and

To my son, Vyom Kumar

PREVIEW

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BEYOND ACCOMMODATIONS: PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN A HISPANIC
SERVING INSTITUTION

by

NEELAM AGARWAL, B.A, MSW, M.A, CRC

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this mixed method study was to explore perceptions of students with disabilities in a predominantly Hispanic serving institution. Factors of transition from high school to college, campus involvement, engagement in student organizations and their perceptions of campus climate were investigated through both a survey with 104 participants and in-depth interviews with 11 participants. This study also explored how undergraduate students with disabilities perceive their academic success and what are influential factors that impact their college experiences. Data were analyzed and interpreted through Tinto Interactionalist Theory of Student Departure, a Social constructivist perspective, Attribution theory, Rendon's model of validation, and Bronfenbrenners (1979) ecological systems theory.

Overall findings indicate that disabled students who participated in this study seemed comfortable in the environment and felt rather positive about themselves and their communication with others. These findings suggest that disabled students have perceptions of positive interactions with faculty, staff, and fellow students. Equally important, they seem to feel a part of the campus. This conclusion is further supported by positive perceptions regarding the transition services, nature of adjustment to college, campus involvement and with the technology that are seen as characteristic of the campus environment. The uniqueness of characteristics of disabled students was apparent through some of the individual responses that reflect their own experiences based on how they perceive accessibility and interactions with others.

A significant finding of this study is that most students reported that typical interactions with faculty tend to be more formal, brief, and need-based versus informal (i.e., access formal accommodations such as extra time on exams). Tinto (1975, 1993) emphasizes the importance of interaction with both faculty and student peers. This model (Tinto, 1975, 1993) suggests a socialization process whereby students who become successfully socialized into the campus academic and social systems are more likely to persist. Since Tinto's theories also find a strong link between faculty support and student retention and especially with non-traditional students, this study suggests that UTEP needs to be more strategic and systematic in finding ways to develop faculty-student interactions for students with disabilities who are predominantly first-generation and working-class college students. I argue that as UTEP serves non-traditional students thus Rendon's validation model is more applicable. These non-traditional students are first in their family to go to college, are commuter students and are older than typical student population. Research has also found Rendon's validation model to be particularly applicable to low-income, first-generation students enrolled in higher education (Rendon-Linares & Munoz, 2011).

Some of the issues that students revealed in the study included social barriers stemming largely from a lack of friends, feeling socially alienated, and lack social support. Some students also felt that they were misunderstood by faculty, those faculties are not aware about different disabilities that are not visible. Some students are reluctant to request accommodations for fear of invoking stigma. Some also felt they had to spend considerably longer hours in completing coursework than nondisabled peers. Even though the study finds few instances of negative experiences with some of the faculty members, the study suggests that changing the

attitudes of faculty toward students with disabilities is critical to promote social inclusion and equal opportunities. ADA is a civil rights legislation to prevent discrimination. While it is not written into the law itself, a subsequent impact of these laws is to improve the attitudes of individuals without disabilities towards individuals with disabilities. However, in order to create more positive attitudes through legislation first thing that is important is to foster an atmosphere of integration for individuals with disabilities in society. However, this can occur only with a change in the attitudes of the individuals within that society (Livneh, 1988).

The system of higher education plays a significant role in the prevention of social inequality and exclusion. It is one of the tools that enables social mobility and social integration of excluded populations (Kelso, 1994). It is ironic that the programs and supports that we have on university campuses focus mostly on removing the academic and physical barriers, but apparently do not work on removing the attitudinal barriers to reduce the social gap, stigma, and social isolation experienced by many students with disabilities, especially invisible disabilities. In addition, most research and discussions on the inclusion of students with disabilities focus on their academics, and neglect the implications of social barriers on their social integration in society at large. Research has shown that lack of informal social interactions between people with disabilities and people without disabilities can be barriers to social integration into higher education. True success or the goal of ADA will only be achieved when these social barriers are also removed. Thus this study calls for academic institutions, student affairs directors, student organizations, and policy makers to promote social integration programs, as part of the services provided in higher education institutions. If students with disabilities are able to remove these social barriers at this college level, this will also help in

their future workplace. In their new role in work-environment these students must overcome the social barriers that prohibit their successful reintegration into an organizational workforce as this work-environment comprised of nondisabled individuals as the majority population.

Two main areas of concerns are identified through this study – communication and awareness of disability and psycho-social needs of students with disabilities. For students participating in this study, family plays a major role in providing supports for students. An aspect of this study necessitates further study. The study recommends that UTEP look into developing a strong peer mentor program that will help new incoming students to learn from peer mentors that as students with disability they can also build positive identity and competence by participating in different activities on campus. The study also reveals the need of regular sensitivity training programs for faculty members on disability issues.

Recommendations for future practice arising from this study called for a greater focus on creating more opportunities for students with disabilities to engage with other similar students within and outside the classroom, encouraging cultural centers and student organizations for students with disabilities with an aim to support connections between students with disabilities and their allies on campus. The other recommendations include increased disability training for professors on universal design, disability issues, and kinds of disability, more staff support for disability service offices, and peer mentoring programs to foster inclusion in postsecondary education and to provide emotional and instrumental support to the students.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Students with disabilities add to the growing diversity of a university community. The academic and social environment of campus is greatly enhanced by the diversity of the student population, which prepares students to thrive in our global society. Unfortunately not all the colleges consider disabilities when they proclaim diversity for example when college brochures and web sites depict people of various races and ethnicities, people with disabilities are omitted (this, of course, refers to people with visible physical disabilities only). Typically today's college campuses are represented by a wide scope of student diversity in terms of age, life experiences, academic preparation, ethnicity, native language, learning styles, abilities, and disabilities (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2009). Thus it is important for colleges to reexamine their instructional needs in order to serve the needs of this diverse population. Research shows this increase in higher education diversity includes 35.35% of students being of minority status, 45.3% of students attending part time, 21.5% of students being ages 25 to 34 with 18.4% being over age 34, and 11.3% of students reporting a disability (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2008).

According to World Health Organization report on disability 2011, the proportion of individuals with disabilities is growing worldwide. One of the report's most important findings is that the overall prevalence of individuals with disabilities is 15 percent of the world's population, or over 1 billion people, have a disability of some type. This replaces the often-used 10 percent estimate that dates to 1970s, the last time an estimate was attempted. The increase in campus diversity requires that we understand the growing concerns of students with

disabilities and respond in multiple ways by creating comprehensive programs to fulfill their wide variety of needs, issues, and student aspirations (Hall & Belch, 2000).

The enrollment of students with disabilities in higher education has increased in the United States since the 1960s (Dukes, 2001). The increase in students with disabilities who pursue postsecondary education can be attributed, in large part, to legislation, which mandated that both high schools and colleges/universities take active steps to improve the equal access of individuals with disabilities. Demographic trends confirm the efficacy of the laws with regard to access as an increasing number of students with disabilities are enrolling in postsecondary education (Hall & Belch, 2000).

A trio of laws has been enacted within the past 30 years that has significantly changed the landscape for students with disabilities in K-12 settings as well as in the postsecondary education. The confluence of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has served to open the door and increase opportunities to students with disabilities in higher education. This has been reflected in the results from waves one and two of the National Longitudinal Transition Study: Part II (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, & Levine, 2005). Between wave one (1987) and wave two (2003) of the study, the rate of participation in postsecondary education for students with disabilities increased by 17 %.

Today an estimated 11% of undergraduate students—more than two million—report having some type of disability (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008b; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2009). Institutions of higher education have witnessed an increase in the number of students with disabilities over time and also the range of disabilities

in the student population has expanded as well (Kroeger and Schuck, 1993b; Ryan and McCarthy, 1994). The most prevalent disabling conditions today are unapparent in nature (learning disabilities, health impairments, speech impairments, low vision, or loss of hearing) than apparent (deafness, orthopedic, blindness) (Henderson, 1992). This data is also supported by the United States Government Accountability Office report (2009). In 2008, the largest proportion of students with disabilities, 24 percent, reported having either a mental, emotional, or psychiatric condition, or depression. Attention deficit disorder (ADHD) was the next most common type, accounting for 19 percent of such students. With regard to physical disabilities, 15 percent, reported that they had an orthopedic or mobility impairment. However, a decade ago partially sighted or blind was the most prevalent disability among college freshmen; it was fourth in frequency of reporting in 1998 (Henderson, 1999). This reflects that the proportions of non-apparent and apparent disabilities have reversed, with significant growth occurring in the former category and decline in the latter (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2009).

Research has revealed that in the postsecondary education setting students with disabilities do not have comparable rates of success when compared with their non-disabled peers (Murray, Goldstein, Nourse, & Edgar 2000). People with disabilities continue to face challenges that result in low attendance and graduation rates when compared to people without disabilities (Dowrick, Anderson, Heyer, & Acosta, 2005). Students with disabilities may have additional needs due to those disabilities such as, living on their own and dealing with the disability in an educational environment. The daily life chores of those with a disability are more complicated than their peers without disabilities (Graham, Weingarden, & Murphy, 1991). For

example mobility impaired students also have to face architectural obstacles within the school's existing environment.

According to the report, authored by Wolanin and Steele (2004) from the Institute for Higher Education Policy, students with disabilities face very fundamental challenges, including inadequate academic preparation in K-12 when compared to their peers without disabilities; lower academic expectations; inferior pedagogy and services; and the lack of full access to the core curriculum. In addition, they are not provided the counseling required for the transition to a dramatically different “culture” and system of higher education, what the report calls “a different planet”.

Statistic shows, however, that the retention rates in postsecondary education among students with disabilities have been persistently low (Stodden et al., 2001). Research has suggested that only 13% of individuals with disabilities possess college degree vs 30% those without disabilities to possess a college degree (Houtenville, 2007). Apart from that 40% of postsecondary students (special education) identify their disability to their postsecondary institution (NLTS2) and 88% actually then receive supportive services, accommodations or learning aids. On average, students with disabilities who finish postsecondary education take twice as long to complete their degree than do their non-disabled peers (National Survey of Educational Support Provision, 2000). The number of students with disabilities attending and completing higher education must increase if individuals with disabilities are going to be competitive in the labor market, financially independent, and successful within society (Stodden et al., 2005).

While there are many issues that impact the success of students with disabilities in post secondary settings a major issue that has been identified is that of transition. Wolanin and Steele (2004) also report that K-12 policies are based on a paternalistic model appropriate for minors that focus on strong parental involvement with little self-advocacy by students with disabilities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) law in K-12 focuses on “individual education plan” (IEP) aimed at “success” for the student. In stark contrast, higher education has no such structure or guarantees. Students with disabilities in higher education are only guaranteed “non-discrimination,” in part through “accommodations”. Once students graduate from high school they leave the auspices of IDEIA and its supportive environment and move into an arena governed by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA; Parker et al., 2005). These civil rights laws place the burden on the individual student to self-advocate while navigating higher education. Institution of higher education has no structured process or plan that aimed at achieving success for students with disabilities. Their scope is intended to provide only access rather than success (Parker et al., 2005).

Another major issue that students face is a change in the legal structure that protects their rights in college. This change in legal context dictates a considerable difference in the services available to students with disabilities. In addition, students don’t know that they will be accommodated in exactly the same way in college that they were in high school (Madaus & Shaw, 2004; Stodden et al., 2002). Another major adjustment to college for students with disabilities is the role that parents/guardians play in educational planning (Wolanin & Steele, 2004). Students with disabilities in high school are often accustomed to the involvements of not

only their parents or guardians but also every school professional in contact with students. Once they come to college, adjusting to a college environment presents challenges for all students; however, for students with disabilities, the responsibility of managing their disability along with accommodations and their academic coursework presents a set of challenges that are unique to these students. Often, students with disabilities enter college unprepared to disclose their disability or lack the knowledge of how to access services on campus. Students with disabilities must self-disclose to the university to request accommodations and support (Madaus & Shaw, 2004). However, students decide for varying reasons not to self-disclose as some are anxious for a new system in a new educational setting and to avoid dealing with being labeled. They want to shed their old identity of being labeled as a student with disability. In addition, some other students decide to wait to disclose until they are experiencing major academic problems (Getzel, 2008). The logistics of accommodation provision can be cumbersome for someone who need more complex accommodations or who need more comprehensive support services such as someone who may need a technology support as well as a reader, scribe and a note taker for accessing their learning accommodations (Wolanin & Steele, 2004). In addition, these services may vary considerably in both quality and quantity from one institution to another as some universities have more comprehensive service delivery than others (Stodden et al., 2002).

While students with mobility disabilities often encounter greater demands on their time due to the physical accessibility barriers they encounter and as a result they need more time with getting to and from campus locations. Students with disabilities related to learning may encounter time constraints due to a need for longer study sessions and relying on technology