



Kurth, N. & Mellard, D. (2006). Student perceptions of the accommodation process in postsecondary education. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 19(7), p. 71-84.

Annotated by Kara Smith and Michael Hong – 02/16/2017

ABSTRACT One cause of the underrepresentation of students with disabilities in postsecondary education may be a lack of appropriate and effective accommodations (e.g., West et al., 1993). This study hypothesized that ineffective and inappropriate accommodations result from an accommodation selection process that focuses on disability type rather than students' contextual and functional needs. Quantitative and qualitative methodologies were used to obtain students' perspectives of the accommodation process and experienced or potential barriers to their participation in postsecondary education. Students with disabilities completed surveys (n=108) and participated in focus groups (n=104). These students, who had various disability conditions, attended 15 community and technical colleges in California, Minnesota and Kansas. Participants' responses reflected satisfaction with certain practices and procedures as well as a need for improvements in others. More individualized methods of accommodation selection that (a) consider the context of students' lives, (b) individual functional needs, (c) trade-offs between immediate and long-term costs and (d) benefits and incorporate system wide universal design concepts are presented as an alternative framework for consideration by Disability Support Services staff.

SUMMARY

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to identify appropriate accommodations to be considered during the accommodation selection process for students with disabilities in postsecondary education.

Framework

The Americans with Disabilities Act has brought more attention to the accommodations of and awareness of individuals with disabilities, while also encouraging those individuals with disabilities to attain jobs and attend schools in the larger community. However, there are discrepancies regarding equal access between individuals with disabilities and individuals without disabilities in the world of postsecondary education, and the authors attribute this to the theory that individuals with disabilities find it more



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difficult to request accommodations for their specific needs when they enroll in postsecondary education as opposed to their experience in the K-12 school system.

Population and Sample

The participants were chosen from 3 states which were Minnesota, Kansas, and California, each chosen for their well-known diversity. There were 16 colleges represented, but only 15 were included in the final sample. From those 3 states, at least 5 Disability of Support Services (DSS) administrators were requested, and there were 16 total DSS administrators in the sample. Those 16 DSS administrators chose a sample of 108 students with disabilities that they serve, paying each student \$40 for their participation and for completing a survey.

Overview of Methods

The methods included both quantitative and qualitative means of measuring the sample of students' perspectives on accommodations in their postsecondary institution. The individuals were given four different surveys and interview developed specifically to measure the students' opinions on their accommodation process. The first survey included 4 parts:

1. Demographic and personal information
2. Accommodation process satisfaction survey
3. Factors affecting the choice of accommodations survey
4. Open-ended questions regarding accommodations the participant utilized and the effectiveness of those chosen accommodations (pg. 75)

In a second survey, the students were asked to either agree or disagree with a set of five different statements based off a Likert scale. In the third survey, the students were given twelve different factors (which were amount of training required, appropriateness for various tasks, availability, cost to student, cost to school, ease of use, effectiveness, increased independence, currently or previously used by another student, student's own previous use, disability, use across various environments or portability) and were asked to rate them each on degree of importance to the individual. In the fourth survey, the individuals were asked to name their accommodations they were given and rate the effectiveness of those accommodations. These surveys were given over a three year





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period in three different phases and were given by two interviewers at the 15 different institutions.

Variables or Broad Topics

1. Personal accommodations: These were found to be feelings of belonging and immediacy on a personal level. These are accommodations designed to accommodate the individual's mental and emotional well-being.
2. Accommodations based on disability: These would be accommodations that include, but are not limited to, extended exam time, note-taker's, notes ahead of class time, changing locations within the classroom, and changing exam locations. These are specific to accommodating the disability itself, not the person.

Findings/Results

Overall, students found that accommodations tailored to their specific disability such as (a)note-takers, (b)extended test time, (c)accommodations regarding location within the classroom, and (d)public transportation to be extremely effective at least 80% of the time.

1. Receiving class notes ahead of time was not found to be effective for some.
2. Most students desired a feeling of belonging, which is a feeling brought by the provision of accommodations because it made the individuals with disabilities feel welcome as they are.
3. Students found that accommodations that are specific to a certain disability are not necessarily as effective as accommodations to their personal-individual needs, like the feelings of belonging.

Implications

A common theme found in this study is that all individuals with disabilities require different accommodations specific to their needs. For Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) specifically, these individuals may require additional tailored accommodations to meet



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their needs; but a general trait of these individuals is that they tend to be stereotyped in actions and do not necessarily try new things, such as new accommodations, even if it would be beneficial to them. An implication of this study would be to have accommodations plus an incentive in order for these individuals with ASD and other disabilities to try in order to determine what accommodations are best for their needs.

CRITIQUES & LIMITATIONS

Conceptual

The authors introduce the article by discussing the positive impacts of the American Disabilities Act (ADA) and issues that persist despite the effective ADA. However, they have neglected to critique how the ADA in postsecondary institutions sets limitations to students seeking personal services. These limitations contrast with the authors' recommendation that individualized accommodations are a good alternative to the current framework of support for students with disabilities, which includes inappropriate and ineffective accommodations.

Data

This study aims to understand the drawbacks of accommodation processes, as seen by students with disabilities. This analysis seeks to generalize the student perceptions to campuses throughout the United States, but faces some issues.

1. The authors described the selection process for participants in this study as having external validity, and defined the population as postsecondary students with disabilities who are currently enrolled in their institution and receiving accommodations from DSS programs.
 - a. However, these results were limited to 3 states and institutional type of technical schools. These results cannot confidently be generalized to all states within the U.S and would require additional investigation to its applicability to private and public 4 year institutions.
2. The methods of data collection appear to ask students how satisfied they are with various accommodations. However, these inquiries do not seem to explicitly state an objective definition with satisfaction levels. Furthermore, student feedback





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could differ if provided open-ended questions to provide qualitative information that would render greater insight compared to the the one-dimensional and uninformative binary responses provided by the study ("I am/am not satisfied with...").

Analysis

The authors agree to the challenges that addressed that external validity was not met through their method of two-stage process in selecting participants.

The article also includes a table of accommodations and the percentage of students who found each accommodation effective. The listed accommodations ranged from note takers to public transportation and even to tape recorders. The comparison of such a vast array of accommodations presents a few concerns:

1. Some accommodations, such as a time extension for tests, can have a more direct impact on student performance than others, such as mental health counseling services. Thus, the study lacks criteria - or even an operational definition - on what the accommodation improved (e.g. their course grades, their mental behavior, etc.).
2. A larger sample size is necessary in order to avoid misleading information. For instance, the percentage of students reporting a "copy of notes ahead of class" is 0.0%, but this is based off of a single student's report. If more students utilized this accommodation and were able to report it, the statistic could be dramatically higher.

In spite of these potential flaws, the authors are able to construct a cogent argument for individualized services by considering these issues as further evidence, rather than contradictions, of their argument that individualized accommodations are part and parcel of an alternative solution to address student needs while having the greatest benefits.

Interpretation

The methods and population of this study pertained to students with disabilities who are already receiving accommodations. However, this focus does not address a more important issue of why some students will not seek resources in the first place. If





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students do not possess symptoms of disabilities that are detrimental to seeking help (i.e. accommodations), then they also will not be included in the study. This is especially relevant for students who have finally sought out resources after a period of anxiety or unwillingness to communicate their struggles; the first experience with accommodations might affect such students differently, in contrast to those who are frequently seeking accommodations and have more ease with receiving interactive accommodations.

Application

In their resulting discussion, the authors convey doubt over the DSS's elective decision to provide accommodations with a focus on disability type. However, they neglect to discuss the financial costs and implications of designing and offering services that are more personalized to one's functional needs.

FOLLOW-UP

Little Questions

- Were personal accommodations defined to be specific to each individual or are they intended to be universal for all individuals?

Big Questions

- The discussion provides an anecdote in which one student reported that the accommodation of alternate testing locations made him feel "dismay and a feeling of isolation" upon leaving the classroom. What should postsecondary institutions and DSS offices do to facilitate an environment of reduced stigma and triggers of behavioral symptoms in students with disabilities?

Next Steps

Advocating for a change in disability policy is imperative in providing better accommodations. By becoming informed of what they are qualitatively lacking in assistance for students with disabilities, institution can provide accommodations that help enable students to achieve equal opportunities in postsecondary education.

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