PROJECT MUSE®

"Looking at the Whole Student": Identities and the

Higher Education Accommodation Process

Morgan M. Strimel, Grace L. Francis, Jodi M. Duke

→ For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/877712

"Looking at the Whole Student": Identities and the Higher Education Accommodation Process

Morgan M. Strimel   Grace L. Francis   Jodi M. Duke

College students with disabilities are entitled to equal access under both the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (1973). Typically, equal access comes in the form of *reasonable accommodations*, or modifications to a program, service, or activity that address an environmental barrier (ADA, 1990). To access accommodations, students must disclose their disabilities to disability resource centers (DRCs), formally request them, and work with disability resource professionals (DRPs) to determine if the requested accommodations are *reasonable* (Lyman et al., 2016). Although guidance is available for DRPs on determining reasonableness (e.g., AHEAD n.d.; Gaddy, 2012; Laird-Metke, 2016; Meeks & Jain, 2015), it narrowly focuses on assessing factors related only to students' disabilities.

Although compliant, this approach may be troublesome as disability is merely one identity among students' other intersectional identities (Annamma et al., 2013; Krebs, 2019; Yull, 2015). Further, in some cases, DRPs select accommodations from a predetermined list, shedding light on the complicated nature of reasonableness and bringing into question for whom this threshold was designed (Krebs, 2019; Kurth & Mellard, 2006). As a result, DRPs need to acknowledge the intersectional identities of students with disabilities and individualize accommodations by considering their unique identities and experiences. Therefore, the purpose of this paper was to explore DRPs' perspectives on the role of student identities in the accommodation process and how identities are incorporated into accommodation decisions.

METHOD

The research team recruited DRPs using convenience sampling methods (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Researchers distributed an anonymous survey to all members of the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) and the College Autism Network (CAN) and to followers of two researchers' Twitter accounts who were eligible to participate in this research (i.e., DRPs). The survey included 22 questions regarding participants' demographics, accommodation decision-making process, and perceptions of experiences and identities in relation to accommodation decision-making. At the survey's conclusion, respondents could leave their contact information to participate in a follow-up interview. There were no incentives for participants to engage in either phase of this research.

Morgan Strimel, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9256-5302, is a Doctoral Candidate; Grace Francis, https://orcid.org/000 -0002-8707-9430, is Associate Professor of Special Education and Jodi Duke, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2313-0935, is Associate Professor of Special Education all at George Mason University.

A total of 38 DRPs completed the survey, and 13 agreed to participate in follow-up interviews. Most participants were White women. More than half identified as having a disability (*n* = 7), and all participants disclosed English as their primary language (*n* = 13). Participants' geographical locations varied: One worked in the Midwest region of the US, four in the Southeast, two in the Northeast, four in the West, and two in the Southwest region. Institution types were primarily private 4-year (*n* = 6) or public 4-year (*n* = 6) universities.

Interviews took place over Zoom. The first author began each interview by explaining the study's purpose and obtaining consent for audio recording. Researchers followed a semi-structured interview protocol that included questions about how students' identities related to the accommodation process (e.g., ". . . a new DRP has just started working in your office. They have approached you seeking advice on whether they should try to be mindful of other factors of students' identities and experiences outside of disability . . . what would you tell them?"). The entire protocol is available upon request.

The first author transcribed, cleaned (e.g., removed filler words, shortened asides), and de-identified interview data. The research team then independently open-coded one transcript to identify initial categories in the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). After open coding, the research team compared codes and developed an initial codebook. Next, researchers used this codebook to code another transcript individually. This iterative process resulted in a third and finalized codebook used to recode all transcripts with qualitative analysis software (Dedoose) and engage in thematic analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

To ensure trustworthiness throughout the research process, the research team: (a) maintained an audit trail, (b) conducted verbal member-checking with participants during (e.g., "What I hear you saying is . . .) and at the end of interviews, (c) engaged in peer debriefing (e.g., reviewing researcher notes together), (d) recorded memos, (e) triangulated data (i.e., multiple investigators, multiple sources of data), and (f) interrogated the potential influence of their positionalities on the data collection and analysis procedures through memoing and discussions during weekly team meetings. The first author is a White English-speaking cis woman, a former DRP, and a second-year doctoral student with invisible disabilities. The second author is a former special education teacher, first-generation high school and college graduate, White English-speaking cis woman, and special education faculty member with a medical condition requiring workplace accommodations. The third author is also a former special education teacher, a White English-speaking cis woman, and a special education faculty member.

FINDINGS

In this section, we detail themes that emerged during data analysis and provide direct quotes that either reflected general sentiments that cut across participants or provided examples that enhance the presentation of findings. Participant numbers assigned during analysis are included with quotes to reflect their diverse voices.

The Importance of a Holistic Perspective

Participants unanimously agreed that DRPs could not separate disability from other student identities. Specifically, participants emphasized that DRPs must consciously acknowledge and understand that students likely hold multiple identities that intersect with disability (e.g., students with disabilities who

are also a[n] ". . . English language learner" [3], "first-generation student" [8], "Person of Color" [19]) and influence their higher education experience. Participants also discussed the importance of DRPs staying mindful of student experiences and how society marginalizes other identities: ". . . it's disabling to be hungry . . . racism is disabling, sexism is disabling. It's all disempowering, it's all disabling" (7).

As a result, participants believed DRPs should adopt a holistic lens while working with students, particularly during the accommodation process. Participants specifically highlighted DRPs' responsibility to "meet students where they are" (13), as identities and experiences inherently shape student access to and implementation of specific accommodations (e.g., technology-based accommodations in relation to financial resources). Further, participants discussed the impact of multiple oppressed identities on students using accommodations. For example, one participant discussed the complexities of being a Person of Color and disabled and how these identities may affect a student's comfort in implementing accommodations: "Is a Person of Color who uses a wheelchair going to feel comfortable speaking out in a class? . . . Some People of Color . . . they're like 'look, I stand out enough as it is'" (19). Overall, participants underscored the importance of DRPs expanding their perspectives during the accommodation approach to consider students' collective identities and experiences, citing this approach as respectful, equitable, and necessary "just on a human level" (16).

Understanding Disability as an Identity

Participants recommended that DRPs recognize disability as a complex identity. This concept was discussed both in isolation (i.e., an awareness of how students understand their own disability identity) and in tandem with its relationship to other identities (e.g., culture and disability). In both instances, however, disability identity was emphasized as unique to all students who possess it. Many participants noted, for example, that some students have concerns with anonymity and, as a result, do not identify as disabled. Other students strongly identified with their disability identity (e.g., a student who identified as "Disabled with a capital D" [7] and readily shared disability-related information during the accommodation process).

Altogether, participants emphasized that disability identity is fluid, complex, and unique to each student. As such, participants noted that DRPs should respect where students are in their identity development and empower them to undo any damage of stigma and oppression: "I think it's important to help students recognize that, 'yeah, you have something a little bit different; we're all different. There's diversity . . . and that's okay'" (8).

Intersectional Identities and the Accommodation Process

Participants described numerous ways DRPs can support students with intersecting identities, emphasizing the influential role DRPs play in students' higher education experiences. For example, participants discussed the importance of taking a holistic perspective toward students' experiences regarding access to documentation typically required to establish accommodations. Specifically, participants noted barriers associated with obtaining disability documentation (i.e., disability verification from a healthcare provider) for students who either are "from a lower-SES background" (15) or are "undocumented immigrants"(8) or DACA beneficiaries. In these instances and others, documentation requirements can hinder students' ability to access accommodations and, as noted by participants, may need to be removed or adjusted.

Participants also emphasized the need for DRPs to make accommodation decisions that are appropriate for the whole student, not just their disability. For example, one participant discussed a request for a single dorm room she received from a student who was "transgender or transitioning" (11) and had a learning disability. The DRP approved this request due to the impact of the student's gender identity on their mental health more so than their disability. Moreover, participants discussed a DRP's ability to connect students to other resources relevant to identities shared (e.g., a student parent support group). Finally, participants stressed the importance of "making sure [DRPs are] not making assumptions" about students' identities and managing their biases as they learn about students' backgrounds and experiences.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this paper was to explore DRPs' perspectives on the role of student identities in the accommodation process and how DRPs incorporate them into accommodation decisions. Participants unanimously agreed that DRPs must view students holistically, considering their intersectional identities (related and unrelated to disability) during the accommodation process and the unique experiences accompanying each identity. According to participants, failing to work with students in this way would not only put students at risk of not receiving baseline equal access through reasonable accommodations but also potentially reinforce inequities for students with disabilities in higher education.

IMPLICATIONS

This study highlights several implications for higher education DRCs to support students' intersectional identities and incorporate them into the accommodation process. Notably,

participants discussed the importance of viewing students holistically. As such, future guidance from research or professional organizations (e.g., AHEAD) may address the role of student identities beyond disability in the accommodation process, including strategies for engaging students in discussions about their experiences and connecting them to appropriate resources outside DRCs. Future guidelines may also include strategies for DRPs to engage in reflexivity (e.g., critically examining one's biases) when working with students to examine how their unconscious reactions to students' identities and experiences may influence their actions.

Further, when developing professional guidance on this matter, relevant organizations should consider involving students and DRPs of diverse identities and experiences to better understand how relevant stakeholders operationalize the nature of supports and services students with disabilities should receive from DRPs concerning intersectional identities. Involving individuals with diverse identities is imperative to any effort of this nature. Within the present study, despite fruitful conversations about holistic student support, discussions of racial identities were limited, shedding light on how our own identities (in this case, a sample of primarily White women) shape our perceptions and understanding.

CONCLUSION

Overall, participants' suggestions for practice may serve as a starting point for DRPs to view students holistically rather than simply as individuals with disabilities and to think critically about the nature of *reasonableness* in the accommodation process. Further, the findings may provide a foundation for the field to develop guidance on how to engage in the accommodation process more equitably. Doing so will align DRPs' practices with social justice-related efforts and facilitate more inclusive and

equitable experiences for students within DRCs that positively impact their higher education experience (Kraus, 2021).

Correspondence concerning this manuscript should be addressed to Morgan M. Strimel, George Mason University; mthomp26@gmu.edu

REFERENCES

AHEAD. (n.d.). *The professional's guide to exploring and facilitating access*. Association on Higher Education and Disability. https://www.ahead.org/professional-resources/accommodations/documentation/professional-resources-accommodations-professional-guide-access

Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990, 42 U.S.C. § 12101 et seq. (1990).

Annamma, S. A., Connor, D., & Ferri, B. A. (2013). Dis/ability critical race studies (DisCrit): Theorizing at the intersections of race and dis/ability. *Race Ethnicity and Education, 16*(1), 1–31. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2012.730511

Gaddy, S. (2012). 2–part process can help you determine reasonableness of requested accommodations. *Disability Compliance for Higher Education, 18*(2), p. 6.

Kraus, A. (2021). *Operationalizing our commitment to social justice: A guide for disability resource professionals in higher education* [Monograph]. Association on Higher Education and Disability.

Krebs, E. (2019). Baccalaureates or burdens? Complicating "reasonable accommodations" for American college students with disabilities. *Disability Studies Quarterly, 39*(3). https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/6557/5413

Kurth, N., & Mellard, D. (2006). Student perceptions of the accommodation process in postsecondary education. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability, 19*(1), 71–84. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ844625.pdf

Laird-Metke, E. (2016). Disability decisions by committee: An increase in risk and decrease in student well-being. *Disability Compliance for Higher Education, 21*(7), p. 8. https://doi.org/10.1002/dhe.30148

Lyman, M., Beecher, M. E., Griner, D., Brooks, M., Call, J., & Jackson, A. (2016). What keeps students with disabilities from using accommodation in postsecondary education? A qualitative review. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability, 29*(2), 123–140. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1112978.pdf

Meeks, L. M., & Jain, N. R. (2015). *The guide to assisting students with disabilities: Equal access in health science and professional education*. Springer Publishing Company.

Merriam, S. B. & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: Guide to design and implementation* (4th ed). Jossey-Bass.

Rehabilitation Act of 1973, 29 U.S.C. § 701 et seq.

Yull, A. (2015). The impact of race and socioeconomic status on access to accommodations in postsecondary education. *Social Policy, 23*(2), 353–392.