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SWD's in Higher Education

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“Students with Disabilities in Higher Education.”

WSP 499

Professor S. Creley

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“What has changed in the past 20 years for college students with disabilities in higher education? How can we provide services, awareness, and treatment?”

Defining Disability

Throughout history, many scholars have tried to figure out how to define disability. Although disability is a socially constructed term, understanding the implications of having a disability as well as the types of services that students with disabilities qualify for is important. In the article “*Disability and Employment- Overview and Highlights.*” Vornholt et al., highlight the definition of disability outlined in the ICF Biopsychosocial model. This model provides legislation around the world for people with disabilities, as well as attitudes towards workers with disabilities and strategies to overcome negative attitudes. According to the authors “persons with disabilities include those with long term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments which interacts with various barriers and may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.” (UNCRPD, , 2006, 43,). This definition of disability shaped my understanding of disability, especially when I was in school. I often noticed how students with disabilities were segregated into classrooms in the back of the school campus or how students with disabilities were put to the side in the playgrounds and social events. Although they were usually the individuals with the cognitive or physical disabilities, many of these students appeared “normal”. As a young kid, I was always curious about what disability meant because throughout my whole life in education, I received different answers. The usual answer was individuals who have trouble comprehending information or being

physically incapable of doing daily activities. While they were not completely wrong in their definitions, disability goes beyond just that. In my research paper, I am studying the ways in which students with disabilities who are enrolled in college can continue and receive the services they need to be successful and graduate. I am also interested in understanding ways to help college students with disabilities get the necessary accommodations and help change the negative perceptions of SWDs as they are one of the most marginalized groups of students in K-12 schools, colleges, and universities. To broaden my understanding of this complex topic, I also intend review and analyze the numerous disabilities acts that have shaped our current college system today, what has benefited SWD's, what needs to improve, and how we, as a society, can not only learn but help our marginalized community of college students with disabilities thrive in a rather rigorous yet fruitful environment. It is our duty as educators and future educators to bring awareness, develop more resources, and find the necessary treatment to help these students become future leaders in our community as we can help these students believe that nothing is impossible for them with the proper accommodations, support, and guidance they will need for their futures.

Disabilities Acts

For many months, I have been adamant on my career path on working with college students with disabilities and I have had many questions that have allured me. The research question that guides this work is "What has changed in the past 20 years for college students with disabilities in higher education?". I believe that while we have had some serious strides in providing the basic needs for college students with disabilities, I still think that we could become more educated in the realm of disabilities, distinguish what is needed and hire the right professionals to work with this marginalized population in the college system. I have been

very passionate about this topic as I have noticed that the most marginalized community in college campuses is college students who have a disability. As a matter of fact, numerous studies have shown that college students with disabilities are in fact, the most marginalized population in college campuses. As future educators, we must look at what has happened in the past two decades and how we can improve the experiences of students with disabilities to thrive in a college setting.

After reading “*Beyond Section 504: Satisfaction and Empowerment of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education.*”, my awareness of the history of disability activism, rights, and higher education recent policies has changed for the better of my own purpose in higher education along with my goal for promoting educational justice and studying student affairs, I realized that it is the responsibility of colleges and universities to empower our students with disabilities by making sure that they receive the services that they need to be successful such as academic accommodations. Furthermore, self-advocacy is very important for individuals with disabilities to master as our college systems will be difficult on this general population. Another thing that must be discussed is to ensure that students with disabilities must not be discriminated against for their education. In 1973, the Rehabilitation Act (Sec 504), was passed to ensure that people with disabilities will be receiving or benefiting from financial assistance. In 1977, the Nondiscrimination on basis of the Handicap was passed to ensure postsecondary education for individuals with disabilities to pursue education and thus, prohibits discrimination of recruitment, admissions, athletics, counseling services, etc. That alone has been a very big change in our higher education curriculum. During my research, I have noticed that in “*Beyond Section 504: Satisfaction and Empowerment of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education.*”, that students with disabilities have been more satisfied with their education and services at the

private colleges they attend than their peers who attend public universities. According to the authors “A greater percentage of private college students reported that they were reasonably or very satisfied than did students who attended 2-4 year universities.” (West, 460, 1993). In the ADA Civil Rights Act of 1964, this law would prohibit the discrimination of any individual with a disability just as the notion outlawing discrimination based upon race, class, gender, nationality, skin color, etc. But this was just written on a piece of parchment that individuals will not be discriminated against. It did not implement too many federal agencies up until the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which in short, was able to promote and fund for financial assistance along with federal employment provided, making it, therefore, accessible towards adults with disabilities in the employment field. The 1964 ADA act actually did help college students to apply to colleges, as universities cannot discriminate on the basis of the individual’s disability. The following disability act that also benefited adults with disabilities was the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. This act prohibited any kind of discrimination against people with disabilities access towards the likes of transportation, accommodations, employment, and local services that enable people with disabilities get the access they need to live a productive life. This also led towards the creation of the disability human rights paradigm. In their work, “*Beyond Disability Civil Rights.*” Stein and Stein explain the paradigm is actually designed to rectify the exclusion of individuals with disabilities and makes it an emphasis to add inclusion for the need for human development in lieu of basic human rights. The authors state that “ The framework acknowledges the role that social circumstances play in creating disabling conditions and seeks to remake the environment as a means of ensuring the full equality and inclusion of persons with disabilities.” (Stein, & Stein, pp. 1221, 2007). This also would acknowledge we try to stride for inclusion, society still has a big impact on the trajectory of equity, justice,

inclusion, and diversity amongst our society, thus, we must find ways to better include young adults with disabilities in our communities, therefore, making it safe for them to express their feelings and opinions, just like everyone else.

Private Colleges vs Public Universities

The smaller private colleges have been beneficial to students with disabilities as they provide testing accommodations, in class lecture notes, and counseling services that are more aligned with the needs of the students. In *“A Door Must Be Opened: Perceptions of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education.”*, students with disabilities will face, such as adversity in college due to academic, institutional, economic, and other legal obstacles that could impede their educational trajectory. In this study, the researchers show how students with disabilities who ask for accommodations, and promote their own self-advocacy adjust better in the college settings, and can believe in themselves to contribute towards their communities. With the numerous disability acts being implemented, this will be instrumental in helping students with disabilities overcome their fears of not being able to be successful and thus, find clarity in their psychological thoughts that they do belong and can contribute to society rather than being put in the background.

While I have listed some of the positives of accommodations of SWD’s in higher education, there have been some negatives along the way in the past 20 years. First, SWD’s, despite having certain accommodations, still leave higher education early, thus, meaning that they would drop out of college. Two ways they have not been able to take advantage of these accommodations is they would either just simply not seek the services out or they would actually seek accommodations too late. In the qualitative research article *“Accommodation Strategies of*

College Students with Disabilities.”(2010), researchers Brak, Lechtenberger and Lan (2010) begin their research by further noting that even though a good amount of colleges provided accommodations for SWD’s, they have not been fully maximized by these particular students and developing strategies to utilize these accommodations is key towards their success. The author states that “Upon being determined eligible for services, SWD’s must present their Letters of Appointment (LOA’s) to their instructors in order to receive accommodations approved by their respective offices of disability accommodations.”(412,). LOAs are letter of appointments administered by the human resources department and they are also considered educational benefits to help students legally receive their accommodations whether it is their cognitive or physical disabilities in need of accommodations. This is also used to prioritize and dictate the learning outcomes of individuals with disabilities especially those who are pursuing education in college. Brak(2010) also discusses the importance of “disclosure” in higher education and how like a counselor in psychology, all things remain confidential for the student and instructor as the information is legally disclosed by the school for these students to receive accommodations within the classroom setting. The author adds that “Requesting classroom accommodations for SWD’s requires the disclosure of personal and private information to faculty members oftentimes with little or no prior interaction. Disclosing information about one’s disability may be comfortable and therapeutic for one person with a disability yet an awkward and intimidating experience for another, depending upon a variety of factors.” (413,). This can lead to the notion of stigma towards one’s disability and while some peers are mature in college, others can be mean and bigoted towards these students so it is important to maintain a level of trust and security for all students who need accommodations for their learning disabilities. This can be a

true negative if one reveals the accommodations towards the students' peers and create a stigmatized label on them for the time to come.

Furthermore, in my research questions, I found the data collection within the article of "*Accommodation Strategies of College Students with Disabilities.*"(2010), 'conducted by Brak et al, that most data in this article was usually conducted via one-on-one interactions with the students and the interview style was rather semi-structured. In this interview, the interviewees asked numerous questions that connected with their disabilities. The questions would consist of "Do you tell people that you are disabled?" "Do you feel comfortable discussing your disability with people in general." The consensus after conducting these questions was the simple notion that trust plays a big factor in answering these questions to both the interviewers and their counselors at the level of higher education. "Experiences with the accommodations process were mixed depending upon the individual faculty member involved, noting that faculty members as a whole did not appear to understand the nature of disability from the perspective of the participants as disability is generally low incidence (less than 10%) in the pre getratic population and encompasses many disorders and impairments." (418,). This was an indicator that faculty members haven't been generally exposed towards students with disabilities up until the student themselves, confirmed their disabilities towards their counselors/faculty member. The stigma of receiving accommodations is still very high as from the outside perspective, receiving accommodations means that you are disabled and implies that the person cannot do daily things in the classroom on their own. In the article, downplaying disabilities actually helps the participants in the case study to be in tune with their disabilities. "Being disabled and receiving accommodations all gets lumped in together so there is a stigma attached with receiving accommodations because there is a stigma about being disabled." (Barnard Brak, pg 421, 2010).

This passage alone can hinder one's ability to seek accommodations and help from faculty members.

SWD's have many unique and diverse needs in regards to their education in higher education. It is a very marginalized community of students and as I have studied, the SWD's succeed in the classroom by being assertive and confident in their ability to negotiate for their accommodations, learning about disclosed statements that will prohibit them from biased views from their peers. Another way SWD's found to be effective in their educational trajectory is to downplay their own disability status as that alone can positively impact their higher education and even educate their peers about their disabilities. The notion of accommodations shouldn't be looked at as a weakness but rather as a strength as they advocate for their own disabilities and pave the way for other students in need of academic accommodations for their disabilities. This establishes that students with disabilities have their own voice in this matter and they would feel the levels of support and confidence to further their education and not be labeled for their "disability" but be labeled for their "abilities". In "Funding and inclusion in higher education institutions for students with disabilities." written by Desire Chiwandire and Louise Vincent, the academic journal states that for the past 20 years, research in the United States has given light on how with the bigger emphasis on funding for support for SWD's, they see that other countries doing so, gained an increased enrollment of SWD's in higher education. However, with the 2008 Recession in the United States, the cuts of public funding for SWD's drastically affected their tuition payment and many of these students typically come from lower income families, thus, making it harder for them to gain access to higher education or even attempt to try. "Despite the obligations imposed by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 upon HEI's in relation to RAs for SWD's, in the context of budget constraints, many institutions object strongly to the cost of compliance."

(Scotch 2001; 125). Basically, in shorter terms, institutions primarily public institutions have struggled in the past to cover for SWD's academic needs due to recent recessions and feel that they may not have enough to spend for SWD's. It comes down to whether or not public/private institutions are willing to provide extra financial aid and assistance towards SWD's. Most private universities have been able to do so in the past as they usually have a good amount of funding to spare and also have one on one venues that SWD's can actually thrive with their counselors. The public universities, while big and spacious, do not have as much of a 1 on 1 basis that the private universities/colleges would offer. That would include more time with a counselor, quickly getting more accommodations such as extra time on tests, note-takers, hiring a personal tutor on campus, and hiring a lecture recorder for SWD's. Public universities are just simply too huge for all SWD's to receive the critical counseling and guidance they need in order to succeed in higher education as dropout rates have been more prevalent in public schools than private schools. As a college student myself, I found attending a private college has been beneficial towards my educational trajectory as I have received the proper guidance and advice to succeed in higher education.

Current Case Studies

The COVID pandemic has been detrimental towards numerous families and students. The pandemic had shut down schools, closed down small business companies, made families bankrupt, and forced everyone to live a very tense, yet unprecedented lifestyle. This is now the new "normal" of how the global population has decided to embark their way of living. For this particular group of SWD's, in the case study "*Online Versus Face to Face Accomodations among*

College Students With Disabilities.” written by Lucy Barnard Brak and Tracey Sulak, this case study was used to distinguish how students with visible disabilities along with students with hidden disabilities feel about online accommodations and face to face accommodations. This is used to describe how each SWD’s opinion influences their thought processes on how each style of accommodation benefits them in their educational goals. “Students with disabilities, however, may have different levels of comfort reflected in attitudes towards requesting accommodations in the face to face versus online learning environments. In a study completed in Australia, “university students with learning disabilities claimed to feel embarrassed or guilty about requesting accommodations.” (83, 2007). I found this quote to be quite sad as SWD’s for generations have felt guilty about asking for help in general, especially in school, as other students and teachers would perceive their disability as their main weakness. I also found that during the first wave of the COVID pandemic, SWD’s have experienced numerous bouts of anxiety and stress as they ended up having limited resources for the educational needs during the COVID pandemic. “Young people with disabilities generally fare better when their routines and supportive environments are maintained and that includes educational settings. However, the shift to remote delivery necessitated by the coronavirus pandemic disrupted regular campus operations, and initial reports suggest that disability/accessibility accommodations were hindered.” (Meleo-Irwin, 2020) This case study titled “ *Online support information for students with disabilities in colleges and universities during the COVID-19 Pandemic.* ” was actually a case study that was showcasing how the coronavirus pandemic affected and hindered the accessibility of accommodations and limited the availability of counseling services within the New York region of colleges and universities. Within the case study, it showed that the association between the school size and resources were not statistically significant but, the key

consensus was that it is vital to keep information available for all SWD's in higher education. Another thing within the methods studies was testing the colleges/universities within the state of New York, and thus, trying to find which colleges had disability/accessibility pages opened online for accessibility for disabled students. The results in this case study revealed that 17% of colleges/universities had no link or correlation with having accessibility websites or counseling services for students with disabilities in higher education. Another shocking statistic was that only 4% of the 127 schools observed were providing students the option to contact counseling centers/service providers via email or phone call. That really was astonishing and quite sad as especially during COVID, many students were struggling both physically, mentally, and psychologically. In reality, what really makes a quality education for all is to provide the necessary services for all students to be able to reach counseling services via online as COVID has affected their families as well as their mental well being. "Nevertheless, barriers to equitable education continue to be part of the backdrop of daily life for SWD's". (Meleo-Irwin, 2020). I believe that this is a more accurate description of how a SWD feels about their education on a daily basis as the lack of accessibility, care into putting money into the education system, rigorous sociocultural barriers, and the lack of optimism given by our society in our SWD's in education. It was recommended in the case study of "Online support information for students with disabilities in colleges and universities during the COVID pandemic." that we must provide clear links towards creating a suitable environment in the disability/accessibility pages for all students with disabilities who attend institutions of higher education. The statistics are not overwhelmingly bad for SWD's but there is certainly a need for improvement for SWD's in order to build a sustainable education and uplifting their educational trajectory.

My Story

The reason that I am so deeply adamant and concerned about the future for SWD's is that I have always had accommodations ever since I was a young child. The reason being is that when I was eight years old, I was diagnosed with Central Auditory Processing Disorder (CAPD). It is a rather insidious disorder and it was a hidden one mainly due to the fact that I never looked like someone who could have a disorder because I always tried to find ways to cope with my processing disorder. Right after I was diagnosed, my parents became assertive and did their research on CAPD. They came to the realization that it was in fact, incurable, but there were still ways to make accommodations to better strengthen their knowledge and my knowledge as well about my disorder. I learned to ask for my teachers to repeat information as I usually did not understand the first time around, I sat in the front row of the classroom to avoid distractions and better listen to my professors, and I also asked for visual information to better understand what the activity was about as I didn't have to use my auditory skills to understand a visual concept of what my tasks entailed. Therefore, I was very successful in school, I was an honors student, I did well in sports, and I ended up still making friends at school regardless. However, growing up, I wasn't very confident about my hidden disability. I was insecure about sharing this information with my teachers and friends as I was afraid that I would be perceived as different, dumb, and odd. Unfortunately, that is what a lot of people in this world perceive and assume all people with disabilities are stupid and weird. In fact, it is inhumane for anyone to think that about such a marginalized community. But nonetheless, it was not an easy road for me to ask for help when I needed it at first. However, my parents, teacher's aide, and some teachers

were very supportive and patient with me as I was growing up to be an ambitious learner. I became an avid reader, I started playing sports, and I later became a very sociable person. I realized later on, especially now in college, that my CAPD has never been my weakness, but it was a strength I never knew I had up until now. I developed a keen memory, an artistic mind, listening to the beat rather than the lyrics of a song, and a confidence that I never knew I had before. My confidence is that while I do have a hidden disability, it shouldn't be invisible forever and that people can learn from what I had to do to get to where I am today. A college student with a hidden disability/disorder. But the key word in front of disability is college student. I made it when I have had a few teachers doubt my abilities, some peers believing that I won't succeed in life, and even some family members who presumed that I was a lost cause. I used that fuel to make myself a successful and confident student but better yet, a confident young man who has ambition and desire to make the world a better place for SWD's. This brings me to why and what in the field of higher education I am interested in. I plan on becoming a college counselor, working with all students but primarily, establishing myself as a college counselor for SWD's. With this in mind, I plan on pursuing a masters in college counseling with an emphasis in higher education. I am also considering pursuing a doctorate later on in the future if that requires me doing so. My ambitions for my future is to not only become a college counselor for SWD's but also students in need. However, I feel a strong connection towards SWD's as they have to work twice, even three times as hard to try to achieve their dreams and aspirations in school as well as life as a whole. My goal is to provide the necessary support, accommodations, and guidance for SWD's in higher education to help them achieve their goals in education. I have taken numerous psychology, education, and sociology courses to understand the discrepancies, inequity, and injustice that too many students with disabilities face everyday when they step in or

out of the classroom. The depravity of society has shown its ugly colors towards SWD's as they have negative biases that can shape and affect the educational trajectories of these students. As a counselor, I have to show my professionalism by giving the necessary tools and support to guide them into success as well as making sure that it is always okay to ask for help. In other words, I want my students to feel safe in school as well as at one point in their lives, feel comfortable with themselves and express themselves by sharing their stories. Another way to describe this is to encourage them to let their diversity shine against the ugliness of inequity, biases, classicism, and institutionalized discrimination. This job would give me a meaningful purpose to fulfill and a duty that is not easy but certainly what I am passionate about and what I was meant to do. I am meant to guide the next generation of SWD's into success and confidence. That is what being an innovator is about. Setting the right example for all.

Conclusion

It has been apparent that there is a discrepancy in our educational system, particularly in the college system that has hindered numerous college students with disabilities for some time. Examples such as the COVID pandemic, stigma, the lack of proper accommodations, and socio-economic factors have all contributed towards the low rates of graduation amongst disabled college students. However, there has been disability acts and laws that have enabled these students, by their lawful right, to be given an opportunity to thrive in the college system. I have been very fortunate myself to have been fortunate enough to enable my strengths through the right guidance of my parents, right counseling, and given the proper accommodations to not only succeed academically, but conquer my fears of being ostracized by the educational system as well as society as a whole. Unfortunately, not many SWD's have the luxury that I have been

blessed with. They are not as aware of their own civil rights as well as aware of the services that are available to them in order to fulfill a full college experience both academically and socially. There has been a discrepancy between the equity of resources for SWD's compared to other students on campus especially after the COVID pandemic forced schools to close down and ultimately, led to remote learning for the better part of two years. My growing passion to become an educator has grown during my research of SWD's and I am determined to find creative ways to help shape our college community of diverse students. As a Latino student with a hidden disability, I am very much in tune with helping out all college students with disabilities with their struggles in school. My story really is a story of how perseverance, research, and valuable help along the way shows how it is possible to be a strong willed student. Uncertainty is still a shadow in our thoughts but it is up to us, as educators, to do what is best for our students with disabilities and a revision towards our accommodations is the most important revision for the success of our students. Everyone has a story and my story, hopefully, is a story that will be known as a story of will.

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