

**The Analysis of How Students With Disabilities on College Campuses are Supported as a
Group Through an Intersectional Lens**

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I: Introduction:

"But at the same time, I felt like if I didn't say something, someone else is going to tell my story"

(Focus group, Ivy) That quote concisely reflects the attitude of students who know how to successfully advocate for themselves in an academic environment. Personally, as a student who has received accommodations throughout my entire educational journey, I echo that mantra. I developed a comfortable routine in my district where I attended school K-12, received an Individualized Education Plan(IEP) and course meetings were done by the letter of the law. My district was generally very open to addressing my unique physical and academic needs.

Discussions with the school were often led by my mom, who happens to be an expert in this field and a litigator, as well as support professionals such as social workers and school psychologists from the school. Every decision made by a team of professionals and loved ones was made to best support my academic, emotional, physical and social growth. Fast forward to college and all of the sudden the playbook has changed and I am no longer part of the same team.

Students with disabilities share some of the excitement and apprehension with their non-disabled peers in the process of applying to and choosing what college seems to be the “perfect fit”.

However, students with disabilities have the added stress of factors such as support services, distance from home, physical layout and safety for those with physical or visual disabilities as well as the added social issues that seem to attach to students with disabilities. Students with disabilities also have an added sense of excitement in that the reality of achieving this milestone is not lost on them, nor do they ignore the added independence that will also be realized. Often, it is not until the preregistration forms and reality of the social, emotional and academic stresses that may occur while embarking on this exciting college experience sink in do all students become nervous and anxious. While all of these feelings are a normal part of the college

experience, students with disabilities have an added layer to navigate and these added stresses and experiences may affect their ability to be successful in all aspects of higher education. Due to steadfast activism by individuals with disabilities, all universities and colleges are required to have some form of an office for students with disabilities. The depth and breadth of these departments vary significantly and are often telling of the atmosphere and attitude towards students with disabilities. When participating in my idyllic college searches, typical of all high school (juniors/seniors) and scheduling campus tours, my school social worker told me to look at the size of the office and where it is located. If it is hard to find and hidden in a basement she assured me that it would be indicative of the culture on campus and the attitude towards inclusivity and acceptance. So, in addition to finding out about whether the dining hall had unlimited swipes, or if there was school spirit at sporting events, I also searched out and attempted to meet with people in the respective offices of disability. My school's social worker was correct in her assessment and that narrowly focused my choices for college. It was clear from my meetings with, or the inability to meet with anyone from these different colleges, that navigating the college system as a disabled individual could be a challenging and long process. It was not until I became fully integrated at The College of New Jersey (TCNJ) and in my major of Women and Gender Studies (WGS) that I started to understand about systemic issues in education and how oppressed classes intersect and in the case of disabled students, this is often underrepresented. Furthermore, throughout my journey, and in speaking with others, it became clear that supporting students with disabilities at the college level is much more than academic support and that it is essential to analyze what is being done at the residential and social level to make sure these students are supported and primed for success. If these issues are not complex enough, it also becomes clear that students with disabilities are often lumped together as a class,

and there is little recognition by institutions or peers on how a student's individual journey due to class, race, gender and identity intersect with his/her disability.

This paper looks at the institution of higher education and how it approaches supporting students with disabilities in different aspects of their college experience. In doing so, I use intersectionality to focus on the intersecting aspects of students with disabilities and how institutional systems are deeply patriarchal in their approach to supporting students with disabilities. This analysis includes a look at the academic, residential, social and physical supports of these students and whether what is envisioned and offered is sufficient for students to be successful in college.

TRANSITIONS

Transitioning from secondary education to higher education is challenging for all students. With new found freedom and independence comes new social and academic pressure. Students with disabilities may experience additional challenges in this transition process. For instance, an entirely new set of rules and expectations exist in securing the necessary accommodations that they need to be successful in school. The biggest difference is that in college, students do not have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). An IEP is a binding legal agreement between the school and student that guarantees provision of a free, appropriate, public education in the least restrictive environment.” (Madaus et al., 2014) This also includes access to an IEP team, created to help students be successful and serves as an advocate on students behalf. An IEP is a document that also contains goals and measurable outcomes to make sure that progress is being made. Students in college often struggle without such safeguards and measures of accountability in place.

While there are departments at colleges such as Accessibility Resource Center (ARC) at TCNJ

who will work with students with disabilities, the emphasis is on the student advocating and speaking up for themselves. This shift, coupled with the fact that “between 1990 and 2005 there was a 19% increase in students with disabilities attending college or receiving some level of postsecondary education (PSE) within 4 years of leaving high school” (Madaus et al., 2014, Newman, Wagner, Cameto, Knokeyu and Shaver, 2010) has resulted in colleges needing to recognize that they need to figure out a way to support these students once they are on campus. One reason for the steady increase in this student population is that parents of these students recognize that this additional form of education would be helpful in social and employment situations for their children. However, Madaus, et al recognize that a lot of these students were not adequately prepared for this transition while in high school. In fact, the student must initially contact ARC or similar departments in colleges to initiate the process for services and is also responsible for providing the necessary documentation. This can be daunting, especially to some students whose disabilities may hinder one’s ability to self advocate. These students can encounter different challenges when learning how to effectively advocate to assist in getting the support that is needed. Some students might find it easier to have this transition then others if the student had the opportunity to advocate for themselves earlier in their academic career. “Also, compared to their typical peers, students with LD [Learning Disability] are less able to communicate their special needs in the educational or employment setting.” (Janiga & Costenbader, 2016)

This struggle could affect more students who are of color, socioeconomics, or are in a school district which is underfunded. For low-income students with disabilities struggles arise for these students and families when thinking about college, “These barriers include substandard academic preparation, lower levels of expectation about college attendance, and the rising costs of college

attendance.” (Madaus et al., 2014) This analysis can not be fully understood and explained to others without highlighting how intersectionality plays a significant role for these students.

Adding gender to the disabled discussion is important as not only do individuals with disabilities have to advocate for their needs, they also need to be empowered to overcome gender and racial bias which often accompanies women and women of color. It is this narrative switch from looking at these individuals and their intersectionality as a deficit to instead “view the strengths of those who have been socially constructed as a marginalized other ...and view how their strengths of their intersections led to academic success.” (Tevis & Griffen, 2014)

During the initial transition process, integration and inclusion is particularly important. “Leading scholars in higher education research have argued that belonging is an ‘especially necessary, but challenging, endeavor for students from historically marginalized self-identity groups’, as there are some students who are at greater risk for feeling unwelcomed, lonely, or left out.” (Fleming et al., 2017) Failure to support these students during this critical time period can ultimately play a large factor in whether or not the student has a successful college experience and whether he/she graduates.

LEGAL BACKGROUND

The process between K-12 and higher education is often a difficult transition for students as the documentation process and the amount of provisions legally required are quite different between the two. The issues in supporting students with various disabilities in postsecondary education is a less researched topic but equally important. Colleges are not required to provide the same sort of accommodations and services that are required in primary and secondary education. By law, colleges receive federal funding under Section 504 of The Rehabilitation Act (504), in exchange for providing students with appropriate accommodations due to a documented disability.

Colleges are also bound by the American with Disabilities Act (ADA) for legally providing accessible spaces and the appropriate physical modifications necessary for students to interact with their non-disabled peers. “The ADA was enacted to prohibit discrimination against on the basis of disability by the multitude of entities not governed by Section 504.” (Tucker, 1996) “Under the ADA, disability refers to a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of an individual.” (Barnard-Brak et al., 2010) “One of the important aspects of this law is that it provides for protection and expands beyond academics and also covers the residential part of the college experience for these students.” (Tucker 1996)

It has undergone numerous revisions since its inception. The ADA has few details when it comes to how the document defines disability. The definition states, “A) a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of such individuals; B) a record of such an impairment; or C) being regarded as having such impairment.” (Wilhelm, 2003) With this definition, some students who seek accommodations without appropriate supporting documentation can be turned down for these accommodations.

Section 504 regulations provide “that a postsecondary educational institution may not, on the basis of [disability], exclude any qualified [disabled] student from any course, course of study or other part of its education program or activity.” (Tucker, 1996) It also has strict provisions on protecting a student from a University inquiring about a disability or using that information as a way to deny admission. However, once the student is admitted, the institution is allowed to request documentation of a disability in order for the student to receive accommodations. In addition, Section 504 also mandates that the “reasonable accommodations” are paid for by the institution. It is important to note that since this is a Federal Statute, violations of these provisions can result in the institution losing federal funding. These accommodations go beyond

the classroom and also mandate that college career counseling be provided etcetera.

Furthermore, an entire section is dedicated to nonacademic programs which include but are not limited to residential housing, athletics, health insurance and other extracurricular activities.

Regardless of the challenges and limits to these acts, they provide a legal bar that schools must reach in providing services and accommodations. TCNJ has a policy listed as ADA, and provides a framework for the responsibilities placed on TCNJ to provide accommodations to students and employees. It also lays out the requirement of the student to self-disclose. A small paragraph explains the overall role and responsibilities of ARC.

The Accessibility Resource Center coordinates services for students with permanent disabilities including assistance in registration, advisement, parking, referrals, adapted classroom activities and other special needs. It is the responsibility of the student to identify him/herself as disabled and to request assistance from this office. The College does not provide specialized tutors or individual assistants for students. (*The College of New Jersey's The Americans with Disability Act (ADA) Policy 2020*)

While this policy is not exhaustive of the services available, on its face it does not consider that those without knowledge of the process may not avail themselves of these services. However, TCNJ is aware of these limitations and as one student in the focus group stated, "... some of the policies that were created. And fortunately, some of them have been changed and like even ARC has been rebranded to have a more inclusive name". ARC does provide a breadth of accommodations with some examples of common requests including having a notetaker, extended time on exams, and writing assignments. These accommodations allow for students to have the same access to do well in their classes like the rest of the students in the classes. While these crucial documents are put into place to support students with disabilities in their postsecondary education, barriers still exist and make the experience more stressful and challenging than it needs to be. Such barriers are related to accommodations and advocating for

oneself in academic, residential and social areas.

II: Literature Review:

Articles about transition to higher education and what colleges must legally provide as services exist, but they often look at students with disabilities as a whole. Understanding how colleges could support students, and what laws they are required to abide by, is critical in understanding how to ensure student success on campus. (Tucker, 1996) Further, there is a void of discussion on the individual student and various disabilities and how this impacts their entire college experience. (Tevis & Griffen, 2014) Rather than focusing on one certain part of the experience for students with disabilities in college, my research takes a holistic approach to the study of college students with disabilities that consists of both the academic side and social part of the college experience. Specifically, my disability research will provide insight into what these students are entitled to and even more importantly how they access services to be successful within their community. I will identify and analyze obstacles that exist in all aspects that play a role in college life. This includes a general bias due to the lack of a feminist or intersectional lens in existing research and resulting policies and approaches that seek to address barriers due to disability. Feminist disability research is important because it looks to erase the stereotypes tied to the narrative of disabled students and individuals. This is important because everyone has a unique disability and it is these differences that need to be discovered so that everyone can benefit from how to best provide services and how a student can benefit from the services. (Braithwaite, 1991) This also provides greater representation and identity for those with disabilities instead of being lumped together.

The literature primarily looks at students with learning disabilities or visible physical disabilities, who are stereotypically middle or upper class, white, cisgender,

straight students. (Harley et al., 2002) There is a lack of research into how the diversity of a student plays a role in their ultimate success or lack thereof. Race, color, gender, first generation or LGBTQI+ students bring unique aspects to this discussion and the intersectionality of disability with these other groups deserves a critical analysis to understand if there is a secondary hierarchy in disabled students that impedes success or whether it does not play a role.

III. Methodology:

For this research it is necessary to combine a few different theories. I chose feminist standpoint theory as my main methodology because of my lived experience in this realm. Caroline New, in her article states that feminist standpoint theory “...argues that women are epistemologically privileged by virtue of their social positioning”. (New, 1998) As someone who has a disability and lives and studies on a college campus I experience first-hand the successes and challenges that can exist. While my experience is overall positive, it clearly represents my own journey and as I found is not necessarily representative of those from similar backgrounds or with different intersecting factors such as race, class and gender. Specifically, as literature and personal experience show a feminist perspective often favors an able-bodied individual in the societal norm of competence and not dependent on others. This does not always connect with those women whose disabilities are visible and physical. It is from understanding the limits of this theory, that I decided to choose focus groups/interviews as a way to get cross representation in the data to provide a more authentic portrayal of the successes and challenges that exist.

Another theory applied in this paper, in various different ways, is social activism. “Social justice brings to feminism a particular emphasis on fairness and transformation; it is a modification that signals change.” (Kalsem & Williams, 2010) In order for institutions such as higher education to truly support all students with disabilities there needs to be change beyond tweaking the status quo. Activism in this

area includes looking at what works and what does not and instead of just modifying the existing systems, there needs to be accountability in the areas that need major restructuring. The research which I have found as well as the lack of information on certain social aspects are key to focusing on areas where feminist social activism is important in making systemic change. All students with disabilities in college, by nature of the laws that they are protected under, require a certain amount of activism. In the second focus group, one person articulated the need for activism to hold sororities and fraternities to the standards required at the college itself, with respect to equality amongst all students. The participant stated:

The bigger issue is that like sororities and fraternities have kind of a free will to let the students allow access on their own term, that is so easy for an abuse of power, especially when on campus disabilities have not been normalized. We are not normalizing them as well as like other issues, like the same way we have LBTQ speakers and discussions and posters and clubs, there needs to be an expansion of that and I think that obviously, you can't legally mandate someone to force that in, but there needs to be more support in administration in pushing for these kinds of things to be a thing on campus.

Whether it is my lived experiences of bias and exclusion in certain social organizations on campus, or other students denied equality in a club, class or activity due to their disability and intersectionality, advocacy in the form of activism is essential.

It is also important to recognize that there is not just one way to demonstrate activism. My primary research through focus groups and interviews weaves in the intersectional aspects that explain how students with disabilities may be excluded and how each student advocates for themselves. While this may be a micro lens of activism, it is through these shared conversations that there can be macro activism to support all students to be treated equal to their peers. This directly connects activism to social justice.

The social justice perspective is an important theoretical framework I am using to highlight the

desire of these students to be afforded the same opportunities as their peers on campus. Unity around destigmatizing disabilities on campus, is a form of social justice necessary to bring equality and success to these students in all aspects of their college experience. This would allow for students to feel more comfortable discussing topics related to disabilities; whether related to physical access, talking about their own disability, or showing more representation around campus to individuals with various disabilities, especially those that are “hidden”.

IV. Methods:

Focus groups were the main form of the method that was used. This method was used in order to hear a group of students' perspectives on various different topics. I thought it would be beneficial to start off with a group setting then allow students the opportunity to have an individual interview if they felt it would be better to share their personal experience on a one on one interview setting. In a focus group setting it allows students to feel comfortable with sharing their experiences and ideas relating to these important points of discussion.

Focus groups differ from in-depth interviews in that multiple respondents are interviewed together in a group setting. Focus group is one of the effective methods used in the community programs. Other part is that focus groups discussion is used as an additional method to collect data which could not be covered by in-depth interviews and quantitative study. (Aanand, 2013)

There is a new connection that is formed amongst the participants as the people they are talking to relate to them and there is a sense of belonging and community formed by people who beforehand did not know each other. This method is beneficial to my research because it allows for understanding from faculty members, staff, and administration from these student's own words and their thoughts. This allows a stronger statement to be made. The process for these focus groups had multiple steps. The first step involved consulting with Meghan Sellet from ARC to get permission and assistance in selecting students for the research. The individuals were selected by their affiliation with ARC. That was the

major qualifying factor. They were not preselected based on any disability, race, gender or identity. An email was then sent to those students to gauge their interest in participating in a focus group for this thesis. The purpose of the focus group as well as how the information will be incorporated into my research was explained in the email. Students responded to the interest email if they wanted to participate. When the students responded with interest I sent them an informed consent form to sign to make sure the participants were okay with the sessions being recorded as well as explaining their rights in the process and to confirm that no compensation was being given in exchange for their time.

A few days after the initial email was sent out the first focus group took place. There were ten participants in this focus group. There were six male students, three female students and one student who identifies as being non-binary. All the students were Caucasian. There were three freshmen, three sophomores, one junior, two seniors and one fifth year. The first focus group focused more on the process of receiving accommodations, the transition from high to college, advocacy and touched briefly on self-reported scenarios where they felt discriminated against and about their different social life through clubs on campus. After the focus group concluded, a survey was sent to receive feedback about the session and thoughts on a follow up focus group. Based on the feedback another focus group occurred one week later.

None of the participants were excluded from the second focus group but one new person attended and five from the first session did not attend due to scheduling conflicts. This focus group focused on areas such as how one's disability played a role in declaring a major, whether or not these students disclose their disability to their peers and if so, how? The participants also shared examples of ableist thoughts within different departments on campus, which led to discussions about the need for more representation and open dialogue for disability on campus. After the second focus group concluded, the participants felt it would be beneficial to have individual interviews to share more details about their

individual experience that has shaped their time at college. These interviews were conducted one on one.

V: Research:

Comparisons

Another theme which my research focuses on is looking at a comparison between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers. Research shows that students with disabilities are often compared to their peers especially by those in administration or other authoritative roles such as professors. (ADAMS & Proctor 2010) There are challenges that go beyond stigma and bias from authority figures to also how they are viewed by their peers in academics and social situations.

While the focus groups and research generally support that the programs set up at colleges and universities to help with the physical and academic accommodations are generally successful, in an effort to level the playing field academically,

“those providing accommodations to students with disabilities must not underestimate the importance of services more indirectly related to academic success and degree completion (e.g. personal and career counseling, advocacy services, social-networking activities and college orientation).” (Adams & Proctor, 2010)

Such discussions extend beyond academics and deal with everyday situations such as physically disabled students having to choose where they reside or which clubs may accept them. In addition, despite the anti-discrimination laws and school policies, clubs and Greek life often discriminate based on bias against those who look or seem different than their non-disabled peers. Unfortunately, “these socially at-risk students with disabilities may not come to the attention of instructors or advisors because they are succeeding academically.” (Adams & Proctor 2010) This occurs for a variety of reasons and often disability is just one of the factors. It

is in this area where the standpoint theory plays a critical role in the analysis on why these students are treated differently. Students with disabilities “. due to the doubts and suspicions of others, may lack social support, struggle with reframing their disability in a positive manner, and suffer from low self-esteem which are all predictors of college adaptation.” (Gerber et al 1992; ADAMS & Proctor 2010) As someone who has shared in this experience, it is clear that on campus, a number of organizations such as Greek life, truly discriminate against those who are different. Personally, after going through rush twice, and feeling the pain of rejection from the backward stares and glances, it was clear to me that no one was taking the time to learn about my dry sense of humor or compassionate and sweet personality. Frank had a similar experience as he rushed for a fraternity. He stated:

I was very, you know like, like I said I'm very open about my dyslexia but I use it not to my advantage but I use it as a driver way to always do better and stand out and, you know what I mean, in a good way. And I don't necessarily I wonder, I question if that hurt, you know my ability to get into that group.

While rejection and resilience is part of the maturation and college experience, students with disabilities often have to question whether they are being discriminated against due to stigma and societal bias. While this can be construed as a violation of Section 504 which states that “a college or university that provides significant assistance to fraternities, sororities or similar organizations shall assure itself that the membership.... Do not permit discrimination on the basis of disability,” (34 C.F.R, Tucker.) that does little to boost the morale and self-esteem of the excluded student. This is emotionally exhausting and can lead students to give up and withdraw from social scenarios which can impact their overall success on campus. “Social constructivism in the weak sense tries to advance a commonsense approach to thinking about how people victimize individuals unlike them.” (Siebers, 2001) In this instance, my white privilege could not undo the societal bias of having a physical disability. Unfortunately, these instances are not

uncommon and they are often hard to prove from a discriminatory point of view.

This is reflected in the limited research on the issue of the true social impact of a student navigating college with a disability. The focus has been more on what is required and the accommodations. It seems that the social piece is generally addressed when it is a focus of litigation or claim against an institution. It lacks real academic qualitative and quantitative data to formulate systemic opinions.

Accommodations

Accommodations, which are “individualized adjustments to standard program requirements for particular students to allow for greater inclusion” (Johnstone & Edwards, 2020) are very important for students with any sort of disability. They are defined as “any technique that alters the academic setting or environment in some way, but does not change the content of required work.” (Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Pub. L. No. 93-112, 87 Stat. 394, codified at 29 U.S.C. § 701 et seq.,) Studies have shown that only 1-3% of students entitled to receive services seek out accommodations. (Barnard-Brak, Lechtenberger and Lan, 2010) While that number may be changing it highlights the hesitation amongst students to seek support. There are different struggles which students face in deciding whether or not to meet with disability support services and/or to disclose their disability to their professors. Accessing services requires a student to “disclose” their disability. This term connotes an internal conflict in a lot of people in deciding whether or not to reveal private information about themselves. While it can be empowering for some, it can be daunting for others. There are four factors according to Braithwaite (1991) that influence disclosure amongst those with disabilities: “relationship with able bodied other, relevance of disclosure dependent on context of the situation, appropriateness of the able -bodies person’s response; and perceived appropriateness of disclosure based upon

their own personal feelings about their disability.” (Barnard- Brak, Lechtenberger and Lan, 2010) A struggle that these students often face are not feeling comfortable advocating for oneself especially when it comes to accommodations. “Students with underdeveloped self-determination skills and little opportunities for practice during high school can be highly uncomfortable and lack confidence in postsecondary settings.” (Fleming et al., 2012) Some students in the focus group shared about their transformation from their inability to advocate for their needs in high school compared to their comfort in disclosing and advocating as a college student. Joe stated:

For me I was a little nervous going in because in high school whenever I had to give my accommodations memos to teachers they would kind of grill me over saying oh, you look pretty well put together, are you just trying to get out of assignments and really dig into what was wrong verses college, I send a quick email, and a five-minute chat.

From a feminist standpoint perspective, my experience has been quite positive in accessing services and having professors ensure that the accommodations are met. This sentiment was the pervasive and majority sentiment and experience of most of the participants in the focus group. Zack stated, “Me personally, I’m lucky to be in the psychology field so all of my professors have been really understanding so far. Even of the disabilities that I have that are not registered with ARC.” Frank for the most part has had positive experiences with professors making sure all accommodations are met. One instance where this was not the case was, “I have one professor in the business school who refuses to give any students notes.” While the different participants from the research I conducted showed that the students were being proactive as well as strong advocates for themselves, “In one study, college service coordinators from 74 colleges indicated that students were not prepared to self-advocate.” (Daly-Cano et al., 2015) Interestingly, in most of the research reviewed, there was either no difference or no mention of the gender breakdown in this area. Either there did not seem to be any additional bias or problem with accommodations based on one’s gender or it is something that is not analyzed and is overlooked. Anecdotally, I

found that interesting as in K-12 I noticed that a majority of the students in pull out classes were male and that more of the female students were in inclusion or co taught environments. It appeared to follow the stereotype of the “disruptive boy” and that the female disabled student would behave or perform better. In college, the playing field, as it appears from the study done for this paper, seems to be more level. The differentiating feature may be based on certain majors being more accommodating or the student choosing whether or not to advocate for services, rather than the professor seeking to deny or be obstructive in providing the accommodation. In addition to the decision to disclose, there are certain strategies that students can choose to employ to advocate for accommodations. The focus group participants and those in the Barnak article chose to limit their disclosure to the least amount of information needed to share to receive services. In Barnak, there was a consensus that there is a stigma to receiving services because it is automatically connected to being disabled. This highlights the focus of the social construct of disability as a negative rather than focusing on differences and acceptance and inclusion. This is a topic which could use some more research to see if it contributes to long term outcomes in performance. In addition, in the case of TCNJ, Meghan Sellet and the team at ARC, are described by the focus group as working very hard to help facilitate and bridge issues between the students and the professors.

Advocacy beyond the classroom

In addition to academic advocacy, the paper looks at advocacy beyond the classroom. “To promote persistence, further actions can be taken to actively encourage the involvement of students with disabilities in all campus activities along with the proactive institutional attention to accessibility to facilitate the ability of students to participate.” (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011; Flemming et al., 2017) This extends to areas such as residential life, dining, and various student

affairs' services.

With respect to study abroad programs, one of the key elements is the disconnect between the concerns from staff compared to that of the student with the disability. “While staff were focused primarily on accommodations, students tended to value open communication and a ‘tailored approach’ to problem solving.... Students’ biggest fears were psychological, ...issues of disclosure, ... and fear of exclusion.” (Johnstone & Edwards, 2020) In addition, the coordination that is required between the student, the home institution and the hosting institution can be complex. This is where there needs to be open dialogue between all parties involved in order to understand the unique needs but also the legal right of the student with disabilities to participate in study abroad, similarly to their non-disabled peers. Furthermore, these types of ancillary programs still struggle in creating equal opportunities for students with disabilities. “The creation of a culture of inclusion in study abroad is a complicated and challenging task.” (Johnstone & Edwards, 2020)

Students with disabilities needing to advocate for themselves is not a foreign concept. Similarly, in the classroom environment, there are different circumstances where students need to speak up for themselves. Self-advocacy begins when visiting campus as a prospective student. One participant in the focus group commented about the Ambassadors Program on campus.

So ... one admissions ambassador I guess doesn't like the actual organization, whoever the supervisors are of that organization, apparently don't really take care to educate the ambassadors themselves ... I've also heard from Block It TCNJ and disabled at TCNJ [two different Instagram accounts created this past summer] that admission Ambassadors... lots of people will apply to be ambassadors and they keep hiring the same demographic of like white bread middle class white people presumably nondisabled from what I've seen.

The focus group participant further mentioned they had thought about applying to be an

Ambassador but did not for fear of bias due to their disability. I had a similar experience of feeling discriminated against because of my disability when I applied to be a Griffin, which is equivalent to an ambassador for transfer students.

In contrast to the lack of representation of disabled students mentioned above, Hunter shared his positive experience in the coed fraternity, Alpha Phi Omega (APO). He stated that this fraternity is inclusive to everyone and specifically, students with disabilities. APO has an inclusion chair and Hunter was asked whether he felt this position should be required in all organizations? He stated “I wouldn’t necessarily say that they would need an inclusion chair... It would be important to enforce club rules that basically enforce the idea of being inclusive to and accepting towards neurodivergent people.” In the different focus groups these topics were very important to the participants in regards to areas where they would like to see systemic change occur. While implementation of policies appears easier within the different departments that are staffed with TCNJ employees, it is also important to address social issues amongst peer and student organizations.

Residential life is an important part of the college experience as students spend at least a third of the time in their residence halls and room. This space is important because it is “theirs” for the academic year. There are many types of common accommodations which individuals with disabilities seek in respect to housing. Similar to other parts of a college or university, residential housing must comply with the ADA. Some common requests are for single rooms, air conditioning, accessible bathrooms and certain geographic locations on campus. While the reasons for the requests may vary, the process is generally uniform and requires medical documentation to support the request. Equal access and universal design are topics receiving much attention on college campuses. Schools are creating blueprints to ensure that needs of all

students are being met. This includes details regarding service animals, physical environments, training of staff, as well as how to provide for evacuations. At The University of Washington, they make it a point to include statements about universal design in their housing application form and all publications. (Burgstahler, 2018) From a standpoint theory and my lived experience, people working in residential life were very accepting of my needs and the different modifications that needed to be implemented in order to provide me with a safe space to reside. While the accommodations that I need may seem minor, the fact that they are acknowledged with respect is important in affirming my dignity and self-worth on campus which translates into more confidence in other aspects of my residential and academic experience. However, some of the subjects in the focus groups and interviews shared various instances where accommodations for housing were not being met. One participant shared their experience with housing issues as part of a student diversity committee that they were a member of. He stated:

So, I ended up being the representative for disabled students. And that was a really good experience that kind of like further solidified that. In the past a few things we talked about were like housing and accessibilities because there were some instances ...of students having assistive devices and like the elevators, for example, in certain buildings constantly breaking and never being fixed in time. That's a problem. One of the things we brought up was Braille signage around campus. I was told...the Braille signs thinks were like incorrectly labelled or didn't have Braille signs at all.... that the bathrooms in SSB, the Braille signs don't tell you which bathroom you are walking into, they just say bathroom. So that was like an issue at one point. My friend walked into the quote unquote wrong bathroom because gender is a social construct, but walked into the wrong bathroom and it was not a pleasant experience.

The variation in experiences is important to analyze to understand if there are systemic issues of noncompliance or rather if some individuals/staff are not informed as to the policies. Even if it is a miscommunication issue, examples where the student feels marginalized or unheard can cause irreparable damage to their self-esteem and can result in them becoming more passive and not

advocating for their needs on campus. Ultimately, this can hinder their success in all aspects.

Participant ‘A’ shared an experience where housing failed to meet their accommodation needs.

My freshman year I ended up having a housing situation where I had a housing accommodation I was supposed to be guaranteed before I moved in and I filled out all of my paperwork in April, [prior to freshman year], prior to moving in in August. Then like two weeks or week and a half before school started I got an email being like oh, there is a problem with your housing thing we are going to move you from the building or find you somewhere to live because you and your disability and accommodations are a problem. And Meghan was like absolutely not.

VI: Findings and analysis to date:

The main finding is that overall, students feel that the support that they have received from ARC has been helpful in order to be successful. Students also feel largely supported by the professors in receiving the accommodations that are needed. However, the research and students indicated that a more flexible curriculum allowing for alternate ways to show knowledge of the material would be a preferred method of inclusion. An area where TCNJ and higher education needs improvement is with the social aspect of college. Frank suggested that “maybe if President Foster and the ARC department could work together sometimes to really spread the word about what we do and the resources that are available for us.” There is agreement that staff and student leaders need to be better informed and trained as to best practices in universal inclusion and integration of all students, regardless of abilities.

Focus group participants suggested having a seminar at Welcome Week could be beneficial to highlight TCNJ’s commitment to a culture of social justice. Another opinion from the focus group was to add another Liberal Learning requirement mandating all students enroll in one course that focuses on the intersection of disability in students. Other identities are a part of the curriculum but disability is not included.

On a macro level, there were significant limitations in the research. Students with

disabilities are largely categorized as a class and not individually. Therefore, the research on students in higher education from an intersectional perspective, and specifically a feminist theory lens, was quite limited. As mentioned, this was one reason that focus groups were chosen as a way to obtain greater cross representation. While the participants did vary as to gender and sexual identity, there was no representation of students of color. This raises the question of why students of color and other intersectionalities are underrepresented and what institutions will do to address this concern?

The research and students in the focus groups supported the notion that higher education is trying to provide support to all students to ensure success. It is fluid and the number of students that need support and the complexity of those supports require commitments from the institutions to provide the resources needed. With the commitment success for students with disabilities in all aspects of college life is attainable.

VII. Institutional Challenges

Overall, the students that I spoke with had positive experiences with the resources that were made available to students. With that said, there were two different departments where students identified having difficulties. These concern departments related to physical and mental health on campus. These offices include Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) and Student Health Services. In multiple instances students in the focus groups and individual interviews shared experiences where they felt marginalized and discriminated against while trying to access these services. Frank stated:

But you know I was having real problems and the CAPS department really didn't do anything, they just asked me a bunch of questions, I said no, well here is the diagnosis I'm telling you what the problem is. I'm also telling you I have been on the same medication for many years and that I would like to see somebody to talk to about transitioning to something else and they wouldn't see me... I knew what the problems were and I had a solution in mind and they wouldn't listen. So, I think it would be great if

ARC could pair with you know if the upper leadership even with the president would be wonderful but particularly with CAPS too.

The article, *Differences Between Students with and without Disabilities in College Counseling*, addresses some of these issues and questions whether differential treatment exists between these two populations. The two questions the authors want to answer are, “(1) Do significant differences exist between students with and without disabilities related to the number of counseling sessions attended, and (2) Is there a statistically significant difference in termination condition between students with or without disabilities?” (Varkula et al., 2017) The research questions presented in this article represent issues that are important for TCNJ to understand on the microlevel as well as at other postsecondary institutions at the macro level. Interestingly, the students at TCNJ who participated in the focus groups and interviews concurred that they found the medical and emotional service offices to lack the empathy and support for students with disabilities. Specifically, three students had some sort of ableist experience in these places. They even went as far as to state that they felt that they were being treated differently because of their disability compared to their non-disabled peers. One participant went further and described the bias as being clear due to sexual and gender identity as well as an obvious disability. This student shared that this experience reinforced self-doubt not only in self but in the system as well. The article found that, “Specifically, participants with disabilities would be more likely to self-terminate than participants without disabilities.” (Varkula et al., 2017) This disparity, regardless of being perceived or real, is important to address. The mental and physical well-being of all students is important and if students with disabilities feel that they are not supported in this realm, then this can play a detrimental role in their ability to be successful on campus.

Health services is another area where students in the focus groups felt marginalized because of their disabilities. Students like Frank, experienced a similar reaction from health service. “....

they refused to see me. So, then I had to spend you know like 500 bucks to see someone to tell me the same thing to fix my medicine. So yeah I've had a bad experience with them too.” In addition, another participant due to their gender identity, was also dismissed and the student did not feel validated. A third participant was asked to leave because she had her service dog with her, even though it is registered. Experiences such as these impact students from a medical perspective. If they do not feel supported and safe in this environment, there is a strong likelihood they will not seek medical services again, which is problematic.

VIII: Contribution to current scholarship/Conclusion

It is my hope that this research brings to light the need for more research into how students with disabilities are individuals and that their own lived experiences viewed through an intersectional lens shape their identity. It is this identity that plays a role in the success of their college experience and higher education needs to support these individuals in all aspects of college life in order to set these students up for success. It is clear that colleges/universities are providing more opportunities for students with disabilities on college campuses. However, this paper highlights the need for the provisions to go beyond mandated accommodations for academics and physical access to a true understanding of the needs of these individuals. It showcases the successes of schools such as TCNJ as well as where there can be improvements. Furthermore, this research brings to light the need to address the reasons why a disproportionate number of students willing to participate in these focus groups are of one race compared to the actual representation of students with disabilities. Dismantling the barriers to inclusion go beyond physical. They are deep rooted in our institutions, whether conscious or not. It is through these important dialogues and discourse that systemic change can create true equality and opportunity for students of all disabilities on their own and not just in comparison to their non-disabled peers. The success of all students is paramount to us as a collective society and the removal of disability related

bias and the acceptance of the intersectionality of everyone individually will result in a more inclusive environment and success for all students.

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