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Understanding the Transition to College for Students with Learning Disabilities

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Eastern Illinois University

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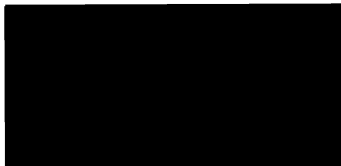
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Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.....	i
DEDICATION.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
Chapter I.....	2
Purpose of the Study	3
Research Questions	4
Significance of the Study	4
Limitations of the Study.....	6
Definitions of Terms	7
Summary	8
Chapter II	9
History of Disabilities and Access to Higher Education	9
Overview of Individuals with Disabilities Access to Higher Education	22
Transition To College And Theoretical/Conceptual Framework.....	29
Summary	38
Chapter III.....	40
Design of Study.....	40
Participants.....	40
Research Site.....	42
Instruments.....	43
Data Collection	43

Data Analysis	44
Treatment of Data	44
Summary	45
Chapter IV	46
Support Systems Utilized in College	42
Transition process from high school to college	55
Identity Development in College	60
Summary	65
Chapter V	66
Discussion	66
Implications for Student Affairs Professionals	71
Implications for the Office of Disability Services	72
Recommendations for Future Research	74
Conclusions.....	75
References	76
Appendix A.....	87
Appendix B	88

Abstract

This study sought to investigate the transition to college for students with learning disabilities at a mid-size Midwestern university. A qualitative approach was used to provide insight in student's perspectives on the transition from high school to college. Three undergraduate students with learning disabilities were individually interviewed to gain understanding of the transition to college. The results demonstrated a critical need for institutions to address the transition to college for students with learning disabilities and create incentives that guide support for student success. Students utilizing various support systems like academic student services, and peers. The transitions to college for students with learning disabilities in this study were influenced by high school preparation differences and the importance of connection to the college. Developing independence in college was discussed as a way to break barriers and to be seen as adults. Results of this study cannot be generalized for all students with learning disabilities in college as many are in different stages of growth and development based on their own needs and experiences.

Key words: Students with Disabilities, Learning disabilities, Advocacy, Office of Disability Services.

DEDICATION

“You were put on this earth to achieve your greatest self, to live out your purpose, and to do it courageously” (Maraboli,1999). This is a quote that continues to fuel me with the drive to find and explore my passions and make a difference in the world. On the search to living out my purpose, I have had the greatest opportunity to meet and work with individuals that have opened my eyes to the world by learning alongside with them in many different walks of life.

This work is dedicated to my little sister, Marissa who did not let her learning disability define her path in life and truly exemplified courage and grace going through the challenges and obstacles life threw at her. I watched how difficult your transition to college was as you navigated through your first year and your strength to not give up to find ways to be a successful college student. You have grown into such a beautiful, talented, intelligent strong woman and I am proud to be your sister. These words are dedicated to you.

To all my past students who have brightened my life and helped me grow as a professional in the special education field. I thank you for allowing me to learn with you and teach me things that will last a lifetime. Each one of you has made an impact on my life and I am grateful to have known you. The world is a better place with you in it. Remember to always believe in yourself and your purpose. These words are dedicated to you.

To my future students who I do not know yet, but I am so excited to meet. I hope you know that I am cheering for you as you navigate through your college journey. I promise to be a listening ear, a person in your corner, and someone to motivate you

through the challenging times. I will work very hard to guide you along your path and I hope that all your dreams will come true. These words are dedicated to you.

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Lastly and very importantly - Thank you to my participants, Jason, Charlie and Sarah for trusting me with your stories and allowing me to learn about your experience with the transition to college. All three of you have such bright futures in front of you. Always remember to believe in yourself and your journey.

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Chapter I

Introduction

The process of transitioning from high school to post secondary settings needs more attention, especially how environments are effectively collaborating to ensure student success in the next stage of their educational career (Banger, 2008). In recent years, K-12 systems have started to eliminate the comprehensive model of tracking students to funnel them into different subcategories which led to different academic and or career paths (Conely, 2010). As a result, high schools recognize that all students are capable of obtaining formal learning outcomes in post-secondary environments (Conely, 2010). In fall 2016, approximately 20.5 million students enrolled in United States colleges, which is a considerably large increase from 5.2 million students enrolled in 2000 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). More than a million students enrolled each fall will be recent high school graduates with high hopes of obtaining a college education (Castleman, 2014). With the increase in the number of students attending college, high schools support in the transition process becomes essential for students' success (Conely, 2010).

As college becomes more of a reality for students, universities are also becoming more accommodating for students with disabilities; there has been an increase in enrollment of this population within these post secondary settings (Hadley, 2006). A majority of students with learning disabilities (about 54 percent) express goals for post high school life as attending a two or four year university (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). For students with learning disabilities, it's essential to break down barriers of dependent patterns of behavior that exist within the K-12 setting and lead students to independent roles as college students (Hadley, 2006).

During the first year of college, students experience many challenges and struggles academically and socially (Wilcox et al., 2005). Hadley (2006) stated an increased amount of preparation in high school on skills needed in college settings can help students with disabilities become more successful in their first year at an institution. Through the high school to college transition planning process for this population specific strategies need to be employed to develop independence in a new setting to ensure success of students (Hadley, Twale, & Evans, 2003). When self-determined students with disabilities have acquired skills like self-advocacy and self-awareness there is an increase in positive post secondary outcomes (Penny, Little, & Martin, 2010).

The National Center for Learning Disabilities reports that students with learning disabilities entering post secondary settings often do not go through the process for accommodations under the Office of Disability Services (Gose, 2016). Nationwide, about 94 percent of students with learning disabilities receive accommodations in high school and only about 17 percent of students with learning disabilities in post secondary settings report they receive accommodations through Office of Disability Services (Gose, 2016). Students with disabilities arrive at universities with varying levels of preparedness to be successful within the college setting (Abreu-Ellis et al, 2009). In order to provide a successful transition for students with disabilities, high schools and universities need to work more diligently to increase support in teaching skills for success (Abreu-Ellis et al, 2009).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the transition to college for students with learning disabilities. Successful transition to college can set students up to gain the

most out of their post-secondary experience. As skills learned in high school translate to college, students are learning and developing in these new environments. Findings from this study can be useful for universities to evaluate programs needed during the first year to help students with disabilities transition to college.

Research Questions

This proposed study was seeking to answer the following research questions:

1. What types of support systems do students with learning disabilities utilize in college?
2. How do students with disabilities describe the transition process from high school to college?
3. How do students with learning disabilities describe themselves now compared to high school?

Significance of the Study

On average, 26 percent of first year students at four-year universities do not return for their sophomore year (Izzo, Herzfeld, Simmons-Reed & Aaron, 2001). According to Izzo et al. (2001), the majority of the students leaving after the first year is attributed to minority and students with disabilities statuses. Students who did not have visual disabilities are classified with a *hidden* disability and can have difficulties disclosing information about their needs due to being misunderstood by professionals (Picard, 2015). Students with learning disabilities in post secondary settings need to learn how to explain their disability and needed accommodations to professionals in a way that will increase their potential to be successful (Picard, 2015). Students with disabilities who do not self-advocate for themselves have a more difficult time adjusting to the new college

environment than students who have the level of confidence gained through experiences in high school (Heiman & Precel, 2003). The proposed study can help universities learn more about student perceptions on their own transition from high school to college. The results from this study provided information on possible needed implementation of programs and added resources to guide students with disabilities through a successful first year, and collegiate experience.

Faculty members on campus have a great responsibility that often goes further than academics in the classroom (Hodege, & Lear, 2011). Professional staff and faculty should be creating a safe space to support student assistance, however that doesn't always happen due to lack of knowledge from professionals (Kim & Lee, 2016). Student affairs professionals are required to follow the same laws under ADA when working with or hiring students with disabilities in their offices (Watson, Bartlett, Sacks, & Davidson, 2013). Student affairs professionals often lack knowledge about the disability categories, accommodations needed for students, and policies that ensure equality and success for students with disabilities within their first year on a new college campus. (Kimball, Vaccaro, & Vargas, 2016). Watson et al. (2013), explains that accommodations set for students can vary and student affairs professionals should consult with other professionals that might have more experience in that area. Constantly learning from students' perspectives can be an essential part for professional staff and faculty to continue to implement effective practices that are shown to help all students, especially students with disabilities. Thus the proposed study gives professionals an in-depth understanding of the transition to college as shared from the perspective of students with

learning disabilities, the themes found can be essential to ensuring students success personally and academically.

Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations that could have impacted the outcome of this study. One of the elements of limitation is the access to participants who wanted to be involved in the proposed study. As stated above, students with disabilities will not always disclose that they have a learning disability to others. Therefore, access to a larger number of participants was limited. In order to help with this limitation, I ensured sensitivity in the call for participants by talking to colleagues and or professionals on campus that have worked with students that disclosed having a learning disability and were willing to participate in the study.

A limitation based on the methodological factor included the willingness of participants to open up about experiences based on preconceived notions of professional's lack of knowledge and or supportiveness for students with disabilities. This could have led to participants not being honest about their true experiences with transition from high school to college based on their prior preparedness. In order to help with this limitation, I took time in the interview to build rapport and trust so they will be more comfortable and open to sharing more of their experiences. Gaining their trust was filled with rapport built as well as added reassurance and support that this is a safe space for conversation about experiences.

Delimitation factors may include the timing of the study for participants to remember their first year on campus and the transition from high school to college. Based on the timing of when the interviews are given, students with disabilities may be distant

to the experiences of transition. A senior may have a different account to transition from high school preparedness than a first year student that just went through the transition. In order to help this limitation, I obtained students with learning disabilities that are just beginning their second year on campus.

Definitions of Terms

Regulations made by the federal government to protect students with disabilities provide specific definitions to follow and be understood when working with this population. Within the literature, there are many interpretations of other terminology that are important to be understood that professionals need to be aware of as they are working with a diverse group of students.

American Disabilities Act. A civil rights law, that forbids discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all aspects of life, employment, school, public transportation and or public accommodation (“A Guide to Disability Rights Laws, 2009).

Advocating. Student’s ability to recognize and acknowledge what they want, knowing what they are legally entitled to, and how they are going to effectively reach their goals (Brinckerhoff, 1994).

First Year Student. A student that has graduated from high school and is attending a university for the first time (Rutgers, 2009).

Individual Education Plan (IEP). A written legal document that is created by teachers, parents, services, personnel, school administrators and students (when appropriate) to improve educational experiences for students with disabilities by

indicating specific needs (“A Guide to the Individualized Education Program, 2007).

Second Year Student. A student that is in their second year at a university regardless of the amount of credits gained (Heier, 2012).

Students with Disabilities. “An individual with a disability is defined by the ADA as a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment” (A Guide to Disability Rights Laws, 2009 <https://www.ada.gov/cguide.htm>).

Summary

Chapter one contains a detailed outline of the proposed study on understanding the transition to college for students with learning disabilities. Chapter two will give a literature review on the history of disabilities and access to higher education, review of regulations and laws associated with ensuring equal rights for individuals with disabilities, and an overview of disabilities and access to higher education. Lastly, chapter two will address theoretical framework that helps explain students with disabilities transition to college.

Chapter II

Review of Literature

Within this chapter is provided a detailed literature review on the history of disabilities and access to higher education, review of laws and regulations, and an overview of disabilities and access to higher education. In addition, an overview of the theoretical frameworks that help explain students with disabilities transition is provided.

History of Disabilities and Access to Higher Education

The Disability movement started in the 1960s as modeled by other movements such as the civil rights, women's movement and free speech across the United States (Patterson, 2012). Before this movement, individuals with disabilities were seen with no social changing powers and were often denied access to human fundamental rights based on the negative stigma placed on their diagnosis (Vance, Lipsitz & Parks, 2014). During the 1960s and 1970s popular social movements were more centered on racial desegregation and woman's rights, therefore the disability movement was not published often in mainstream media (McCarthy, 2003). McCarthy's (2003) study focused on interviewing individuals during the late 1990s about their own historical development. While interviewing eight accomplished individuals with disabilities, each shared their understanding of the disability movement and the majority of the participants were more knowledgeable in current challenges facing people with disabilities rather than having a significant understanding of the historical framework of the movement that lead toward equality for people with disabilities (McCarthy, 2003). To develop disability awareness, participants explained the importance for people with disabilities to have role models (McCarthy, 2003). Individuals need qualified professionals to assist in educating about

the past, present, and future stances of the disability movement and help awaken disability consciousness to continue dialogues that will keep improving quality of life for this population (McCarthy, 2003). As nothing seemed to change until someone or a group of individuals stepped forward and challenged the status quo.

McCarthy (2003) identified individuals' lack of knowledge of Ed Roberts, who was a key barrier breaker for people with disabilities access to education in 1962. While James Meredith was an important individual in breaking barriers for the civil rights movement for equal opportunity for African Americans access to higher education, Ed Roberts who lived with polio was a leader in fighting for equal rights for people with significant physical disabilities to have opportunities to independently live on campus (McCarthy, 2003). Despite being the hidden movement to many Americans, the disability movement kept on breaking down barriers for individuals with disabilities well into the 1970s and beyond (Patterson, 2012).

Patterson (2012) examined origins of the disability rights movement and social roots of political activism in higher education during the time period of the 1960s and 1970s. Judy Hermann and 50 fellow Disabled In Action (DIA) members held a protest in the middle of one of Manhattans busiest streets in 1972 to reject President Nixon's decision to veto a bill that would ensure individuals with disabilities equality under the law (Patterson, 2012). DIA was a key organization of disability activist that worked for equal rights for individuals with disabilities and continued to demand that President Nixon provide a public statement explaining the veto (Patterson, 2012). Protests were held for a total of 11 months in a variety of locations such as Washington, DC, Berkeley, CA, Champaign Urbana, IL and Boston MA until President Nixon signed the

Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Patterson, 2012). The signing of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 to replace the Vocational Act was an important step in moving forward to ensuring disability rights (“A Guide to Disability Rights Laws,” 2009). Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, ensured the rights of individuals with disabilities equal access to services, programs, and federal funds and was essential for affirming equal access to attend universities (Vance, Lipsitz & Parks, 2014). To continue to move forward with equal rights for people with disabilities, the All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EHA) was created to address education for children with disabilities, this included all disabilities visible and hidden (Vance, Lipsitz & Parks, 2014). The EHA changed its name in 1990 to the Individualize with Disabilities Education Act, which would be amended in 1997 and 2004 to guide professionals and families to work together to give students with disabilities the ability of a world class education (Duncan & Posny, 2010). Therefore, as one can see the history of disabilities rights started during the civil rights movement is still being adapted today to ensure that all students are granted equal access to education (Vance, Lipsitz & Parks, 2014).

The Disability movement of the 1960s and 1970s allowed access to address equal rights for individuals with disabilities. The movement did not stop there, and time went on, there was an increased pressure for the revisions in the federal laws created as well as additional parts added to continue to provide opportunities for individuals with disabilities (Vance, Lipsitz & Parks, 2014; Duncan & Posny, 2010; McCarthy, 2003). Access to education for students with disabilities is still an ongoing fight today, essentially with post secondary options of attending higher education becoming more accessible for all students with disabilities. The major legal terms highlighted in disability

law literature that impacted higher education institutions are the American with Disabilities Act (ADA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

American with Disabilities Act. The American with Disabilities Act established in 1990 is an important federally created legal document that prevents discrimination and gives equal opportunities to individuals with disabilities (“The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and Revised ADA Regulations Implementing Title II and Title II”, n.d). In 2008 the American with Disabilities Amendment Act (ADAA) was created to provide revisions that would protect individuals with disabilities further under ADA by expanding the definition of disability to be interpreted in favor of a wide coverage (Massey, 2006). Within ADA, there are five titles, or areas of provisions for individuals with disabilities. – Employment, State and Local Government, Public Accommodations, Telecommunications, and Miscellaneous Provisions (Kaplin & Lee, 2007.)

Title I: Employment. Title I of ADA provides provisions related to employment; which means that individuals with disabilities are protected from discriminatory hiring practices (Rumrill, Gordo & Roessler, 1993). This meant that public and private entities must follow non- discriminatory practices when considering qualified individuals with disabilities in the hiring or firing process (“Employment: Title I”, n.d.). As indicated by the Social Security Administration, Equal Employment opportunity and the U.S Department of Justice, stress the importance that individuals with disabilities and or care givers should be aware of regulations set by ADA; perspective employees must be able to do the job they are required to perform with or without reasonable accommodations (A Guide for People with Disabilities Seeking Employment, 2000). In regards to reasonable

accommodations outlined in Title I, a change or an adjustment to a particular work environment or a job that would allow an individual to perform particular job functions and have equal access to benefits available to other employees (A Guide for People with Disabilities Seeking Employment, 2000). An example of a reasonable accommodation that can be made for an individual with a disability would be to create a modified work schedule or provide special equipment like a braille writer or an augmentative communication device (Thompson, 2015).

Title I: Employment of ADA in regards to higher education is an important regulation for students with disabilities as individuals job search post earning a degree, but also seeking employment during their undergraduate studies (Rumrill, Gordo & Roessler, 1993). Professionals employing students with disabilities must educate themselves on the terms and regulations used in Title I to provide assistance in the collaborative processes between students and potential employers (Rumrill, Gordo & Roessler, 1993). This collaboration process begins with identifying accommodation needs, utilizing off campus resources, and providing direct communication with potential employers to ensure the successful career access for students with disabilities (Rothman, Maldonado, & Rothman, 2008) Title I is essential to the development of equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities to be fully functional members of our communities, especially while they are in college (McCleary-Jones, 2005).

Title II: State and local government. In order to ensure that state and local government run entities refrain from discriminating individuals with disabilities the title states,

No qualified individual with a disability shall, by reason of such disability, be excluded from participation in or be denied the benefits of the services, programs or activities of a public entity, or be subjected to discrimination by any such entity (McCleary-Jones, 2005, p. 24).

To explain the federal mandate by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1975 that federal funded public entities must not discriminate against individuals with disabilities benefiting fully from their services, Title II of ADA was created to expand the regulation to pertain to all public and private entities regardless of federal funding to ensure that every citizen has equal access to businesses (Rifkin, 2017).

Under the terms of Title II, colleges must conduct extensive self-evaluation processes to ensure that programs, services, and or any activity on campus are all accessible to all students in the fullest of capacities (McCleary-Jones, 2005). Students with disabilities should become aware of the regulations made by Title II on public and private entities, so compliance notices can be made if entities are violating access to the full benefits of services for individuals (Rifkin, 2017). As higher education creates inclusive environments that comply with Title II of ADA, this positively impacts students' equal access to programming that will enhance the college experience for all students (Hart, Grigal, Weir, 2010).

Title III: Public Accommodations. As apart of ADA, Title III ensures that individuals with disabilities are not discriminated against in regards to public accommodations (Briggs & Sass, 2016). Within this part of ADA, there is an explanation of reasonable accommodations that can be requested by individuals with disabilities to access social, financial and support services within a public setting (McCleary-Jones,

2005). If any private entity is considered to operate as a place of business and fall within one of the 12 different categories provided within Title III of ADA, they are required to provide an environment that has equal access to people with disabilities (Briggs & Sass, 2016). As plans for renovations of buildings are drawn up, Title III mandates that the building be brought up to ADA Standards (Accessible Design, 2005). There are ADA standards of accessibility for parking lots, sidewalks, entrances, rest rooms, door switches, and a variety of other features to ensure buildings and facilities have equal access for all citizens (Accessible Design, 2005).

For higher education institutions Title III means institutions must provide equal access to students with disabilities (Baker & Kaufman-Scarborough, 2001). Universities have a responsibility to examine the human aggregate, physical environment, and social climate currently on their campus and strive to provide inclusive environments for equal access to all students (Strange & Banning, 2001). This must be done in a reasonable and responsible manner. It does not mean that institutions were required to make immediate changes, but that they have plans to make their campus more accessible to individuals with disabilities.

Title IV: Telecommunications. Title IV: Telecommunications of the American with Disabilities Act pertains to access to telephone and television for individuals with hearing and speech disabilities (A Guide to Disability Rights Laws, 2009). The telecommunications relay services enables conversations between people with and without disabilities by having communications assistance in converting conversations from text through teletypewriter to speech or vice versa (Nuckles, 2017). As apart of the federal law mandate in Title IV of ADA, public service announcements provide

messaging with closed captioned for individuals with hearing impairments (Nuckles, 2017).

Telecommunications regulations created by Title IV becomes important in higher education to ensure that technology is being available and implemented in settings to increase student with disabilities outcomes in and out of the classroom (Venkatesh, Croteau & Rabah, 2014). For example, equipping residence hall rooms with flashing alarms or doorbells is useful for the hearing impaired. Another example is ensuring that web pages and web resources that can be enlarged for those with sight impairments. Having the ability to fully communicate with faculty, staff and peers while attending post secondary settings and beyond is an empowering tool to be full members of society (Venkatesh, Croteau & Rabah, 2014).

Title V: Miscellaneous Provisions. As a part of Title V of the American with Disabilities Act, its purpose is to broaden application of provisions across the other titles (An Overview of the Americans With Disabilities Act, 2015). This section provides detailed explanations of the Americans with Disabilities Act relationship to other laws, such as Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Mayer, Stephens & Bergman, 1995). In addition, Title V expands coverage in insurance and benefits and as well provides regulations on the prohibiting of retaliation and oppression against individuals with disabilities (National Federation of the Blind, 2017). To further explain the definition of disability, this section outlines specific terminology that shall not be considered under the law as a disability (Nuckles, 2017). Lastly, Title V provides protections for individuals with and without disabilities as there is a section explaining the U.S Board of Accessible that regulates the accessibility standards (Nuckles, 2017).

For students with disabilities in higher education, Title V of the American with Disabilities Act can provide further explanation to broaden other titles as provisions being made to the law directly impacts their everyday lives (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005).

Therefore, students with disabilities have an equal opportunity to attend post-secondary schooling and ADA helps ensure that all individuals are seen without the disability label. Within 2008, the American with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAA) definition of disability was given more of a wide range to ensure that individuals were being granted Office of Disability Services, especially important within services in post-secondary settings (“The American With Disabilities Act”, n.d).

Individual With Disabilities Education Act

As stated above, during the disabilities movement, the All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EHA) was created to address education for children with disabilities; this included all disabilities visible and hidden (Vance, Lipsitz & Parks, 2014). Within provisions that were made, EHA changed its name in 1990 to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), to guide professionals and families to work together to give students with disabilities access to a world-class education (Duncan & Posny, 2010). There were amendments made to the law in 1997, and reauthorized by President George W. Bush in 2004 to sharpen federal mandates to support state and local responsibility to educate students with disabilities (Duncan & Posny, 2010). The following are the six major principles of the IDEA, focusing on student’s with disabilities rights and the responsibilities of public schools to educate them - 1) Free appropriate public education; 2) Appropriate evaluation; 3) Individualized education plan; 4) Least restrictive environment; 5) Parent participation and 6) Procedural safeguards.

As the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 provided regulations improvements to support education, the revisions issued in 2006 to IDEA by the federal government expanded methods to increase identifications of students with specific learning disabilities (SLD) (Ahearn, 2009). Revisions issued addressed diagnosis of SLD tends to be more challenging to identify as an educator cannot visibly see the disability and therefore, the definition and evaluation process reflected in the revisions of IDEA in 2006 accounted for the challenges educators face and issued proactive ways to identify students (Specific Learning Disabilities, n.d.) According to the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act,

Specific Learning Disability' means a disorder in 1 or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations (Evaluation and Eligibility for Specific Learning Disabilities, 2015 p. 1)

As part of the regulations made in IDEA of 2004 and 2006 to support state and local responsibility to educate students with disabilities; a new program called Response to Intervention (RTI) was enacted to allow alternative ways to identify students with learning disabilities by the use of evidence based interventions (Boynton Hauerwas, Brown, & Scott, 2013). Boynton Hauerwas, Brown, & Scott (2013) studied the extensive process at state level to adept this new policy to their public schools. Through qualitative interviews majority of states in the US indicated that they turned the responsibility to the districts to determine specifics in RTI data collection and the criteria responsiveness for Specific Learning Disability Eligibility (Boynton Hauerwas, Brown, & Scott, 2013).

Within the multi-level assessment system, the three tiers framework helps identify and support all students with academic challenges (Moors, Weisenburgh-Snyder, & Robbins, 2010). Tier 1 assesses all students response to evidence based interventions through progress monitoring in a large group setting; eighty percent of students in a classroom will stay in tier 1 (Moors, Weisenburgh-Snyder, & Robbins, 2010). Tier 2 involves small group setting for students that are in need of more intensive interventions based on not progressing in tier 1; fifty percent of students in a classroom will be in tier 2 (Moors, Weisenburgh-Snyder, & Robbins, 2010). Tier 3 is individualized instruction for students continually not showing progress in evidence based interventions, and during this tier can be eligible for special education services; five percent of students in a classroom will be in tier 3 (Moors, Weisenburgh-Snyder, & Robbins, 2010). The implementation of RTI and the changes that come with the program in public schools seems to be taking a significant period of time as complexity of special education procedures are being adopted by general education teachers (Ahearn, 2009). Ahearn's (2009) study states statuses on implementation of Response to Intervention program to help determine eligibility for special education services. What she found was that a majority of states indicated that intensive training and coordination with the special education team as well as administration are needed for successful use of the policy.

As IDEA continues to support education for students with disabilities and create regulations like Response to Intervention (RTI) being mandated for public schools, the challenge often arises with students in their secondary level of their educational experience (Scanlon, 2013). RTI is utilized in primary schooling to help students through learning difficulties and possible prevention of a learning disability diagnosis (Scanlon,

2013). During elementary and middle school years, students with disabilities that qualify for special education services will have a developed Individualized Education Plan (IEP) as IDEA ensures students are supported academically (Scanlon, 2013). In contrast, students with disabilities in secondary schooling are still supported academically by services included in their IEP, but there is also an emphasis on gaining skills outside of academics as a way to increase success in post secondary schooling (Scanlon, 2013). Overall, the policies indicated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act help support education for students and to continue to set them up for success and prepare them to be productive members of our communities.

The IDEA Act does not apply to higher education (Madaus & Shaw, 2006). As a result students, families, and educators should take note that the policies and laws in place to protect students with disabilities are non-existent post high school (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005). IDEA does not apply to higher education as its purpose is to provide individualize education for students with disabilities in primary and secondary schooling, and therefore, laws such as The Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act are in place to provide access to education, prohibiting institutions from discriminating against students (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005). Within the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 an increase in transition planning guidelines was introduced, and this regulation positively impacted students with disabilities successful transition to higher education through greater support and development during high school (Madaus & Shaw, 2006). Madison and Shaw (2006) stated that even though the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act does not directly apply to higher education, students with disabilities are

benefiting from individualized services in primary and secondary schooling that sets them up for success in the future.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973

As stated above, one of the main laws that directly supports and ensures access to higher education for students with disabilities is Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. Students with disabilities that chose higher education for their post-secondary options should be aware of the special education laws that change post high school. One of the major changes is that IDEA places the responsibilities in public school districts to find individuals with learning disabilities. In contrast, post secondary special education laws, like ADA and Section 504 have strict guidelines to prohibit institutions from seeking individualizes with disabilities (Madaus & Shaw, 2006). This means that there is a transfer of responsibility to the individual to disclosing information about specific disabilities to receive services at an institution (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005). A student with a disability receiving services through their IEP since 1st grade and a student that has never been diagnosed with a disability starts college the same in a sense that both individuals must seek out supports to ensure success in this new educational environment.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act is a civil rights statute that prohibits discrimination and ensures equal access and opportunity for individuals with disabilities (Vickers, 2010). Through this federal regulation, people with disabilities cannot be excluded from participating, denied benefits and or in any way discriminated against by federal assisted programs and businesses (Kim & Aquino, 2017). Vickers (2010) stated to ensure student success; higher education institutions must make reasonable and

necessary modifications to curriculum and policies, which will allow equal access for the entire student population.

Overview of Individuals with Disabilities Access to Higher Education

The proposed study examined the transition to college for students with learning disabilities, however having understanding all the disabilities categories access college is important to provide greater knowledge about how students with disabilities access and experience higher education. The disability categories each will be addressed specifically as separate however should be noted that students could be diagnosed with multiple disabilities. For example, a student with an intellectual disability might also be diagnosed with a visual impairment or a student with ADHD may be diagnosed with a learning disability. Educators and professionals working with students with disabilities need to take into consideration that multiple disability needs may need to be addressed for services and accommodations to continue educational success for each student.

Physical Disabilities. In the area of physical disabilities, there are several categories that must be defined and understood. Hearing, vision, and or orthopedic impairment are within the scope of disabilities classified within the larger label of physical disabilities (Meeks, 2016). Students with vision impairments include those who are blind or have partial sight even with corrective assistance (Meeks, 2016). Students with hearing impairments have permanent or fluctuating hearing (Meeks, 2016). Lastly within the category of physical disabilities is orthopedic impairment. According to Meeks (2016), chairman of the Illinois State Board of Education, there are three categories under orthopedic impairment, all of which are considered permanent and irreversible. Impairment caused by congenital anomaly (i.e. clubfoot), impairment caused by disease

(i.e., poliomyelitis), and impairment caused by other causes (i.e., cerebral palsy) (Meeks, 2016).

Students with physical disabilities face barriers once they are admitted to colleges as institutions must provide support that will ensure success in and outside of the classroom (Stumbo, Martin, & Hedrick, 2009). As stated above much of these accommodations are required by law. Each student entering higher education, even those with the same identified disability may require different forms of support. Support can vary in post secondary settings for students with severe physical disabilities and for individuals with moderate physical disabilities (Stumbo, Martin, & Hedrick, 2009). Accessibility to buildings on campus and residence halls for students that use wheelchairs can impact their access to all the benefits an institution offers (Losinsky, Levi, Saffey, & Jelsma, 2003). Universities have a responsibility to assess building structures and policies to ensure that students with disabilities are given equal access and opportunities on campus (Losinsky et al., 2003). Stumbo (2009) conducted a study on personal assistance for students with severe physical disabilities in post secondary education; this study indicated that higher education has come along way to accommodate for students with disabilities, but strides still need to be made to address barriers that impact access to a post secondary degree.

For students with visual and or hearing impairments barriers on a college campus can impact learning and overall experience. Accommodations for students with visual impairments can vary by student, however some examples that are provided by universities are larger print and or braille notes and textbooks, service animals, and or sided guide aid for campus activities (Cawthon, Schoffstall, & Garberoglio, 2014).

Hearing impairments are also considered under the category of physical disability, and students will need additional accommodations specific to hearing impairments to be successful in post secondary environments. Examples are flashing lights in residence halls to let the student know when someone is at the door, interrupters in class and at any campus activity and the use of microphone by individuals interacting with student (Cawthon, Schoffstall, & Garberoglio, 2014). Conscious efforts to continue to include students with physical disabilities in conversations about providing support to fully access universities is an important step for individuals to have opportunities to work towards personal and career goals in effective environments (Stumbo, Martin & Hedrick, 2009).

Intellectual Disabilities. An Intellectual Disability means there are major limitations in intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior that manifested in development period before an individual is 18 years old (Bever, 2017). Students with intellectual disabilities adaptive behaviors are limited in conceptual, social and practical adaptive skills (Bever, 2017). The special education field is consistently changing and adapting terminology and definitions to address concerns and needs for students with disabilities. In recent years, the term cognitive disability changed to Intellectual disability within laws and literature, however the definition of this disability category showing significant limitations in intellectual function and adaptive behavior has not changed in over 50 years (American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 2017). Individuals with Down syndrome, Fragile X syndrome, and Autism Spectrum Disorder are seen on campus as college students exercising their right for continuing education (Toma, Gil, Ossowski, & Dierssen, 2016).

Historically, access to higher education for students with intellectual disabilities has been the lowest population of individuals with a disability attending any sort of post-secondary education (Kleinert, Jones, Sheppard-Jones, Harp, & Harrison, 2012). In recent years, professionals and families in IEP transition planning meetings have increased conversations about post-secondary plans for individuals with intellectual disabilities often looking at opportunities in programs that universities offer but even today, few are available (Kleinert, Jones, Sheppard-Jones, Harp, & Harrison, 2012). A study performed by Miglorie, Butterwork and Hart (2009) looked at students who have participated in post-secondary schooling and vocational rehabilitation to identify their employment viability. What they found was a correlation between students who have participated in both post secondary education and vocational rehabilitation leading to positive employment outcomes. Higher education institutions offering programs to students with intellectual disabilities are providing opportunities for students to grow and define personal goals that are related to employment, social connections with peers, and adult learning (Papay & Griffin, 2013).

Other Health Impairments. Other Health Impairments include chronic or acute health problems such as attention deficit disorder, epilepsy, asthma etc. (Meeks, 2016). The health problems may not cause interference with educational performance on a daily basis but still impact the student's academic progress, therefore proactive plans on how to address the health problem if it happens at school should be addressed by student, parents, and educators. For example, a student with epilepsy may not have a seizure all year, but a plan will be in place to prepare professionals on the proper steps to handle the situation to keep the student safe. There is a wide scope of disabilities and disorders that

fall under other health impairments and IEP teams will be responsible for accessing the health problems affect on the child's educational performance to determine if special education services are necessary for students success (Schnoes, Reid, Wagner, Marder, 2006). If there is not a coexisting disability associated with the disorder like a diagnosed learning disability or an emotional behavioral disturbance, IEP teams may decide to place the student on a 504 plan to ensure equal access to education (Schnoes et al., 2006).

Students with other health impairments tend to be most successful in university settings that offer personal assistance services to accommodate for student independent living on campus (Targett, Wehman, West, Dillard, Cifu, 2013). Since there is a wide scope of disabilities and or disorders that fall under other health impairments, students along side with transition teams should meet with colleges to determine the supports needed for the student in assessing post secondary schooling (Targett et al., 2013). As transition planning continues to increase for students with other health impairments, access to higher education will rise to accommodate for all populations (Schnoes et al., 2006).

Learning Disabilities. The National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) defines specific learning disability as

A neurological disorder that affects the brains ability to receive, process, store, and respond to information (<http://www.nclld.org>)

Students with learning disabilities experience difficulties in one or more of the basic psychological processes that allow understanding and the use of language, spoken or written (Cullen Pullen, 2016). This can lead to challenges in listening, thinking, speaking, reading, writing, spelling, and or doing mathematical calculations (Cullen Pullen, 2016).

The three broad specific learning disabilities are Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, and Dyscalculia (National Center For Learning Disabilities, 2017).

Dyslexia is language based processing disorder, in which students have difficulties with reading, writing, spelling and verbal communication (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2017). On college campuses dyslexia and or reading difficulties are the most common identified learning disability that have adverse skills in usage and development of reading, writing and spelling (Hadley, 2016). Dysgraphia is a written based disorder that affects a student's complex set of motor and information processing skills (National Center For Learning Disabilities, 2017). Within information provided by National Center For Learning Disabilities (2017) students with dysgraphia disorder may have difficulty with handwriting, spelling, organizing letter and numbers on a line. In post secondary settings dysgraphia can impact student's ability to put ideas on paper in and out of the classroom (Hadley, 2016). The third broad learning disability is Dyscalculia; a mathematics-based disorder that affects student's ability to calculate and use numbers (National Center For Learning Disabilities, 2017). As apart of coursework in college settings, some levels of math classes are graduation requirements to complete degrees, and accommodations for students with dyscalculia especially in these types of classes are important to ensure success (Hadley, 2016).

Hadley's (2016) case study of students with learning disabilities over their four years of college found that two major factors contribute to post secondary success after they access admission into a higher education institution. First, access to higher education for students with learning disabilities continues to grow, however unwillingness to disclose information on their particular disability and resistance to

communicate needs with others is impacting retention of students with learning disabilities on campus (Hadley, 2016). Second, learning disabilities are seen as hidden disabilities as there are not physical indicators; in a university setting the students need to disclose information to receive services and support if they have one of these disabilities (Couzens, Poed, Kataoka, Hartley & Keen, 2015). Professionals working in college environments should have goals to empower students to be independent learners, think creatively and self-sufficiently when making decisions about experiences, and lastly should help students effectively disclose disability information in necessary situations (Troiano, 2003).

Accommodations will be assessed in four categories, instructional, academic policy, testing, and or environment or physical. Instructional accommodations for students with disabilities could include course materials in an alternate format as in a different font and or in braille, note taker, record lecture, and or allowance of use of computer or calculator (Evans et al., 2016). Examples of accommodations that fall under academic policy will be flexible attendance with professor approval, priority registration, and or reduced course load (Evans et al., 2016). Testing accommodations include allowing a student to take breaks during test, extended time, separate room for students and or a document conversation (audio or braille) of the test (Evans et al., 2016). Finally, environment/physical accommodations can be met for students with disabilities, accessible parking and or transportation on campus, caption lectures and videos, and or physical access to doorways and bathrooms (Evans et al., 2016). Through informal network supports as well as supports from caring professors and tutors, students with

learning disabilities can have positive experiences for continued success in post-secondary schooling (Couzen et al., 2015).

Transition To College And Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

Three theoretical frameworks help in understanding the transition to college for students with learning disabilities. Each framework provides an in depth explanation of the level, stage, or repertoire to understand students development and or identity in college. Transition Theory helps provide insight into the transition to college. Utilizing disability identity theories helps in understanding this specific population in their unique developmental process. The theories used to understand disability identity are *Autism Identify and Disclosure* by Davidson and Henderson (2010) and *Disability Development Model* by Gibson (2006).

Disability Theory. For students with disabilities in post secondary settings, dealing with transition can be influenced by their development within themselves in understanding their own disability, to disclose information, advocate for accommodations, and educate others about their disability.

Stage model of disability identity. Patton et al. (2016) discussed the *Disability Development Model* by Gibson (2006) as examining the development of individuals with disabilities and how they come to understand themselves as well as understanding others with disabilities. The fluid three-stage model helps professionals understand students with disabilities who are going through these stages and provides reasons why students may revert back to previous stages when triggers of a situation occur (as cited by Patton et al., 2016).

Stage one is passive awareness. A student's medical needs are met in this model, but they deny social aspects of having a disability and will not interact with others with disabilities (as cited in Patton et al., 2016). Students with disabilities move to Stage Two in the *Disability Development Model* when there is a particular event that triggers the acknowledgement of their disability (as cited in Patton et al., 2016). As students begin to associate themselves with having a disability, they may experience emotions of self-hate with concerns of how others perceive them. *Disability Development Model* theory stage two of realization links to the emotions of self-hate or anger towards having a disability and the individual is concerned with how others view them based on their identified disability (Patton et al., 2016). In the event of moving into a shared room, students with disabilities may experience a trigger that could force them from stage one to stage two of realization to fully be apart of their new environment. Or they may revert back to stage one of avoidance of disability when moving into a shared space with a stranger to avoid any previous stigmas placed on them. Stages in *Disability Development Model* move along a fluid continuum that allows students to move in and out of the stages as they experience challenges and triumphs (Patton et al., 2016).

Acceptance stage is the last part of the *Disability Development Model* that allows students to view their disability in positive ways and interact with other individuals with disabilities to advocate for the community (Patton et al., 2016). As students with disabilities accept their disability, transition coping strategies will help them make direct action plans to ensure their success as well as help others through the transition process.

Transition for students with disabilities as explained by the *Disability Development Model* will move in a forward process, as each experience will present itself with new challenges and obstacles to navigate around a new campus environment.

Autism Identity and Disclosure theory. *Autism Identity and Disclosure Theory* by Davidson and Henderson (2010) examined disability identity for students with Autism through four repertoires that help explain the process of disclosing this information. However, Patton et al. (2016) explains that the theory can also be a guide to understand the disclosure process for students with hidden disabilities (i.e. learning disabilities).

Keeping safe is the first repertoire, where students are concerned with self-protection in disclosing information about disability to outside circles (Davidson & Henderson, 2010). When students with learning disabilities transition to college and reside in the keeping safe repertoire, they will not disclose information about their disability to protect themselves against unknown reactions or judgments from others. Low levels of psychological resources in self-efficacy as discussed in the transition theory can be connected to students staying in the keeping safe repertoire to protect themselves (as cited in Patton et al., 2016). As a result this can cause challenges for students to accomplish goals in the future.

Qualified deception is the second repertoire that involves ability to share information with certain individuals that will help the student be most successful in this new setting (Davidson & Henderson, 2010). As students with disabilities transition to college and into college courses, they will have to decide who they want as supports to help them along their path. Professors may need to be informed, as they will help with accommodations in class, however if the disability doesn't directly impact their

interactions with peers, a student may decide not to disclose information and will not receive support from new friends around them.

As students grow in the transition process they can move to the third repertoire of *like/as resistance*, which is described similar to the coming out process for LGBTQ and deaf individuals (as described by Patton et al., 2016). Whenever interacting with a new individual, students with disabilities will have the option of disclosing their disability to others or leaving that information out if they are not fully comfortable.

The last repertoire is *education* and refers to individuals building a community as a part of disclosing information about their disability (Davidson & Henderson, 2010). The hope is that students will eventually reach the education repertoire by the end of their collegiate career. Having the ability within one's self to educate and mentor others with disabilities can be an eye opening experience for students to continue through their disability development.

Transition Theory. Transition theory according to Patton et al. (2016) examines factors that influence an individual's ability to cope with a particular transition. A single event or even a non-event type situation could cause the transition process to begin (Schlossberg, 1984). Students entering college is an example of a situation that we would consider a planned event. Transition theory addresses how each student deals with transitions over a period of time, however each transitional process will vary based on the particular person and specific situation. For students with learning disabilities the transition to college will vary based on the level of comfort the student has in asking for help, identifying how to ask for help, and the preparation they have had for coming to college. Patton et al. (2016) discussed that transition for students can lead to positive

outcomes of growth or can lead to negative experiences that leave students in a position of uncertainty. Transition involves moving in, moving through and moving out, as the process is a series of phases that a student goes through when coping with a new situation (Bonanni, 2015). For students with disabilities, IDEA has provided them with transitional support throughout their K-12 experience. For most students their IEP teams have helped prepare them for the transition from high school to college starting at the age of 14, which hopefully leads to success in post-secondary settings (Trainor, 2005). As students enter college they may struggle with this overall transition. The effectiveness to cope with transition depends on recourses in the four “S’s” known as situation, self, support, and strategies (Patton et al., 2016).

Situation. In this theory, situation includes factors that are important to examining the situation during a period of transition (Schlossberg, 1984). Trigger is the first factor that deals with what precipitated the transition to begin. Graduating from high school and attending college, as a part of post secondary plans is an example of a common trigger for transition to begin to as students move to new environments. For purposes of this study, participants will be selected that went directly from high school to college to evaluate the transition of students that follow this particular educational path.

The second factor in transition theory according to Schlossberg (1984) is timing, which is transition that is considered on time or off time. Individuals in this study will be considered on time with timing transition because right after high school they attended a four-year university. For the purposes of this study, off time transition are students that after high school went to the military and or workforce for a period of time and decided to attend college more than five years after high school graduation.

Control factor according to Patton et al. (2016) is how individuals perceive what they control and not control in transition. Students with disabilities in high school may perceive that they had very little control in services set for them to receive during schooling. However, control changes in college, as they become the primary advocate for themselves to receive accommodations and some may enjoy this new freedom while others may need additional support.

Role change is a factor within situation that deals with the role changes that are involved in transition that can be seen to be positive or negative (Schlossberg, 1984). During primary and secondary schooling, students with disabilities had IEP teams made up of professionals and parents that supported and advocated for them throughout their educational experience. In college, students may have a case manager within Office of Disability Services, but the student will have a role change, as they become their own primary advocate to be successful in college. This can be viewed as positive or negative change as they have to take on more responsibility.

The duration is another factor within situation as transition is viewed as temporary, permanent and or uncertain (Schlossberg, 1984). When students begin the transition to college, the duration of the time to get comfortable in the new environment may be uncertain. However, transition to college can be viewed as temporary as students with disabilities learn to cope and become acquainted with the university setting.

Previous experience with a similar transition is a factor that deals with how the individual coped with the previous transition (Patton et al., 2016). The transition from grade school to high school may have been a similar experience for students with disabilities as their case manager and professionals worked with changed, which led

students to learn to cope with the new environment. In this study, participants may indicate previous experiences with similar types of transition that helped during the high school to college process.

Another factor in situation is concurrent stress, which deals with the several sources of stress that are present during transition (Patton et al., 2016). Any student that is transitioning to college may experience stress in some way as they are adjusting to their new environment. For students with disabilities, there may be an additional source of stress in working with disability service offices and professors to ensure that they are set up for success in and out of the classroom. Pressures to get involved on campus, make friends on their floor, and figure out what it means to be college can be concurrent stress that is a part of transition to college.

The last factor is assessment, which is who and or what is responsible for the transition and how is the individual perception affecting them (Patton et al., 2016). Students are responsible for the transition as they make the decision to attend college. In addition, parents may be viewed as responsible for the transition to begin if they pushed for college as their child's post secondary plans. Overall, in this study students will have an opportunity to self assess their own transition to college and discuss how certain factors affected their ability to adjust to the new environment.

For students attending post secondary education, the situations that trigger transitions could be leaving home for the first time, moving into a residence hall, making new friends, and or the difference between college courses vs. high school classes. To cope with the situation, resources within one self, support from others, and strategies learned to cope with the transition will help move through the process.

Self. In Transition Theory, self is another factor in coping with transition.

Personal and demographic characteristic of one's self like gender, age, ethnicity/culture, and socioeconomic status can influence a student's view on life (Patton et al., 2016).

Within Patton et al. (2016) the second factor of psychological resources within one's self helps in coping with transition through ego development and student's level of optimism, commitment to values, self-efficacy and level of spirituality and resiliency.

Through the transition to college, students with disabilities may experience feelings of anger (why me) as they have to deal with added stress in ensuring their voice is heard to receive services that will help them be successful at a university. This self-perception on one's life can influence interactions with others as well as difficulties with coursework when not accepting disability diagnosis. Students with disabilities that have strong skills in self-advocacy to be proactive in efforts to fully achieve goals in their post secondary schooling.

Support. In Transition Theory support is another factor in coping with transition (Patton et al., 2016). There are various levels of social supports including intimate relationships, family unities, networks of friends, and institutions/communities that help students during periods of transition (Schlossberg, 1984). Transitioning to college may cause a student to have to reestablish who falls within their support network and the role each person plays.

As students with disabilities grow a network of friends on campus that they connect with this can help them move through transition as they have others to lean on during this new experience. Relationships with high school teachers for students with disabilities often provide a great deal of support throughout the high school experience.

Support with college professors can be different types of relationships, but are still critical for the success in post secondary schooling. Students with learning disabilities will have to self-advocate and disclose information for support from professors, as collegiate environments are different from high school.

Student affairs professionals that are not in Office of Disability Services can play a key role in supporting students with disabilities. For example, resident assistants should be properly trained on how to effectively work with students with disabilities to ensure that their living environment is safe and enjoyable for equal access to the college experience. Support from parents and families back home can also be an important aspect to a successful transition to college as loved ones can give reassurance and advice when challenges arise. Students with disabilities in high school may have relied greatly on family and teacher support to be successful, and the same supports can happen in the college environment as students grow and develop.

Strategies. The last factor in Transition Theory to cope is *strategies*. Students find modes of coping by seeking information, direct or indirect action, and intrapsychic behavior (Patton et al., 2016). Events or non-events that cause change of relationships, change in routines, and assumptions and or roles of others that change will require individuals to employ multiple coping strategies as they move through the transition.

For students with and without disabilities, coping strategies can be learned in high school and or from prior situations that are similar to the transition to college. In addition, coping strategies can be learned from preparation courses or intentional orientation programs during their first semester on campus, which has shown positive outcomes that lead to successful transitions to a new environment (Reed et al., 2011).

Strategies that are taught to students with disabilities about self-determination every year starting in middle school, will increase the chance for students to consider college education and as a senior indicated a high level of college readiness (Radcliffe & Bos, 2013). Students may develop strategies on how to seek and ask for help and other students may be on the opposite of the continuum as learned behaviors of not seeking help for anything. In addition, students with disabilities will use resources on campus independently like writing and tutoring centers, counseling center, Office of Disability Services, and any other support as strategies to ensure success. Throughout the college experience, students will grow their toolbox of strategies that help them be successful in courses and ways to effectively be a part of the campus community.

Overall, Transition Theory helps educators evaluate students coping resources for transition, which also guides in understanding the transition to college for students with learning disabilities. In support with the Autism Identity and Disclosure Theory and Disability Development Model Theory, the complex nature of transition for students with disabilities to college can be examined in greater detail.

Summary

In this chapter, the literature provided the history of disabilities and access to higher education, a review of laws and regulations associated with individuals with disabilities, and an overview of disabilities and access to higher education. The theoretical frameworks that help explain students with disabilities transition to higher education were explored. Research shows that the American with Disabilities Act (ADA), Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 ensure students with disabilities equal access to all benefits of

communities and equal access in education. As higher education becomes more of a reality for students with disabilities post high school, universities are putting policies in place and regulations to adapt to making education accessible to every population. Each disability category will have its unique challenges while attending post secondary schooling and each access to higher education may vary depending on the specific disability. Students with learning disabilities are one of the largest populations of disability categories on college campus, but challenges arise with failure to disclosure to receive Office of Disability Services. As student affairs professionals, it is important to understand the legal and historical foundations to create safe spaces for students to learn and grow at our institutions.

Chapter III

This chapter outlines the methodological framework that was used to investigate the transition to college for students with learning disabilities. The qualitative method was used to provide insight in student's perspectives on the transition from high school to college. One-on-one interviews with students with learning disabilities guided discussion for learning about different experiences related to transition.

Design of Study

The proposed study used the qualitative method approach, which consisted of three one on one interviews between co- researchers. Even though, I as the primary researcher conducted the interview questions, the student participant was seen as a co-researcher to create an environment within qualitative approach, researchers are continuously learning about how things occur based on perspectives of participants (Fraenkel et al., 2015). Interviews are often used in qualitative method as a part of accessing participant's thoughts and feelings about a certain phenomenon, and within this proposed study interviews helped in learning about participant's perspectives on transition of skills from high school to college (Franekel et al., 2015). Each interviewee was a second or third year with an identified learning disability enrolled in degree-seeking programs at a midsized rural Midwestern four-year state university. The institution has approximately 8,000 students with 352 of student who have registered with the disabilities services office at the institution to receive academic accommodations

Participants

Three students with identified learning disabilities were selected to participate in the proposed study. Within the qualitative approach, the sample size is often determined by the ability to answer the research questions in effective ways and the method often

only requires a small sample size to gain insights from co researchers about the phenomenon (Marshall, 1996). Several offices were approached in the process of recruitment. Initially an email was sent out to all qualified students from the Office of Disability Services inviting them to participate. This email was sent out as a blind copy with the researcher copied and students who were interested were instructed to contact the researcher directly. Because this did not attract the desired participants, other offices (i.e academic resources, academic advising, etc.) were approached and asked to send an email to students they knew would meet the basic qualifications. Students were asked to participate in the study on a volunteer basis as they have disclosed a learning disability for which they have received services prior to college enrollment and are registered with the Office of Disability Services on campus. Three individual students were randomly selected and agreed to participate. Their names have been changed to protect their identity.

Jason. Jason is a sophomore majoring in international studies and plans to get his economics degree in hopes of becoming an international ambassador. He was diagnosed with a learning disability in 3rd grade in the area of dyslexia. He did not fully understand what his disability was until his teacher explained dyslexia to him in 8th grade. Jason spoke about having to push himself to be successful despite the circumstances around him.

Charlie. Charlie is a sophomore studying communications and enjoys public speaking and being social with his peers. While having conversations with a professional that referred him for this study, she explained to me that he thinks he has high functioning Autism, however based on tests she performed with him he does not meet the

criteria for this diagnosis. This professional explained to me that he has a learning disability, specifically dysgraphia and ADHD. When describing his disability, Charlie did speak about his Autism and how people didn't believe him. He did speak about his dysgraphia and how that impacted his major change from history to communications. Charlie was enthusiastic about his martial arts skills and teaching others about the art of meditation.

Sarah. Sarah is a junior studying accounting and has a love for numbers. She was diagnosed with a learning disability in 3rd grade, specifically reading and ADHD. Throughout her primary and secondary schooling, she had a lot of support from her mom who was a teacher and many accommodations were offered to her. Sarah spoke about recently wanting to be independent and learning to be on her own while in college.

Research Site

The research site was in a mid-sized Midwestern four-year university located in rural area with approximately 8,000 students. Students with disabilities can utilize Office of Disability Services to receive a variety of supports and accommodations through their office. The Office of Disability Services works with about 350 students each academic year who self-identify with the institution. The institution also has several support programs for students. Two of the most prominent are Academic Transition Program and Summer Bridge Program (these names have been changed for the purpose of this study to protect institution and program identity). The Academic Transition Program provides students with a individualize attention during their first year at college and creates personalized academic plans to lead to success. Within the program, students are required to meet weekly with transition advisors and attend regular study tables with a cohort of

peers. As apart of the summer bridge program, students attend a 5-week program designed to help with the transition to college before the fall semester. Students live on campus and are required to take classes that will go towards general education and graduation credits.

The interviews were conducted individually with each participant in a quiet private space on campus to gain information about their experiences as they transition to college. The location was mutually agreed upon with the participant and was not in a location where others would question what they were doing.

Instruments

The proposed study interviewed a small group of students with learning disabilities individually. Appendix B provides the interview protocol that was utilized to gain insight. Interview protocols become a guide for the interview process that directed the co-researchers on where the conversation might lead (Jacob & Furgerson, 2015). However, at times during the interview process prompts or follow up questions that were not in the direct protocol were utilized in order to clarify or expand more detail on a particular point by the co-researcher (Jacob & Furgerson, 2015). Each interview lasted about an hour and was audio taped and transcribed for data analysis.

Data Collection

One on One interviews were performed with each student as well as audio taped for the transcription process. A consent form was given to the participant at the time of the interview to gain agreement to be a part of research. Semi-structured type of interview was utilized as this type of interview that consists of verbal questions that are designed to prompt specific answers from co researcher (Franekel et al., 2015). Transcription process was utilized to gain more knowledge of themes throughout

each interview. Only the primary researcher had access to the audio recordings, which were transcribed.

Data Analysis

Each interview was transcribed and coded for themes by the researcher and thesis advisor. As part of the coding process, researchers divided up interviews in categories to find themes that can be compared to other interviews, but not losing value of the uniqueness of each interview (Hill et al., 1997). To ensure that transcription is an accurate depiction of what the participant wanted to say, the transcription was given to the participant to look at after completion. The hope is that participants indicate any additional information and or inaccurate statements, which will show the value in their participation and importance in the study (Hill et al., 1997). Microsoft Word and Excel was utilized to provide organization of transcription and common themes indicated in the interviews as a part of the proposed study on understanding the transition to college for students with learning disabilities.

Treatment of Data

As stated above, data collected were transcribed with detailed notes taken during the interview. Data was then coded to identify important themes throughout the small group of interviews. After completion of the interviews, participant's names and specific personal information about them were removed from the transcription to protect their confidentiality. The transcriptions and recorded video of the interview were on a password-protected computer that only the researcher had access to. Therefore, none of the confidential information or researcher findings was shared with anyone outside of the researcher committee.

Summary

This qualitative method approach examined the transition to college for students with learning disabilities at a midsize public university in the Midwest. Students with learning disabilities were interviewed to gain insight in transitional experiences to help professionals improve programming to set students up for success in college.

Chapter IV

Results

The purpose of this study was to examine the transition to college for students with learning disabilities. This chapter presents the findings from data collected from three undergraduate college students with learning disabilities and understanding their self-perceptions compared to high school, support systems utilized, and the overall transition to college. Data was obtained by conducting interviews where participants were asked to talk about their own transition and how support systems play a role in the transition to college. Throughout the coding process from the one-on-one interview, there were many themes that emerged related to each of the research questions. The research questions used to guide the study and used in the analysis process were (a) What types of support systems do students with learning disabilities utilize in college? (b) How do students with disabilities describe the transition process from high school to college? (c) How do students with learning disabilities describe themselves now compared to high school? This chapter will provide an overview of those themes in an effort to understand the participants' experiences.

Support Systems Utilized in College

Participants were asked about the different support systems that they use in college. Each participant discussed supports that they utilized for both personal purposes and more academic reasons. When discussing support systems that each participant used in college, there were several different examples that participants spoke about in their transition. These supports included peers, hometown support, academic services, and student services.

Peers. The participants in this study talked about the influence of peers being one of the main support systems that were utilized in college to provide help and guidance. As a part of the interview protocol, participants were asked questions about their friend groups. Participants in this study indicated that a classmate was considered a friend and classroom friends were a part of their support system. The aspect that varied within the interviews was if classmates were in a primary friend group or a secondary friend group. Jason and Charlie spoke in depth about support from friends made in class as being their primary academic source. Jason stated,

Most of my friends are from my classes so I get to see them and we keep in touch like how we are doing, how are classes going, and is everything running smooth and all of that. If not, I have some friends that can help me out.

Charlie who is studying Communications spoke about his peer support in classes, and said “peers help me because they are in some of my classes, so I use them as resources to help me.” In this case the student identified those classmates from specific classes as a source of information and support. Sarah, an Accounting major spoke about the importance of finding friends in her classes to provide support; however, she said she didn’t find the need until her junior year, “I recently started to make more friends with people in my classes and there is this one girl that is in all of my classes and we help each other.”

Participants also spoke about their friend groups outside of their classes. Charlie stated his primary friend groups are in his classes, but he did speak about peers in a club helping him as he is going through college, “My friends also are a support that are here with me still are in a club that I am in called gamers guild.” Close friend connections

outside of the classroom for guidance while here for undergraduate studies was the main focus of Sarah's support system. She spoke in depth about the supportive peers in her life at college, and said

I met a lot of supportive people here that have looked out for me and when something is going wrong they are able to talk to me about it. I have never had that before college, so it's nice here I have a close friendship that really helps me and they are there for me.

Each of the participants talked about their support coming from their friend groups in and out of the classroom, which have helped them during their time in college.

Support from Home. Each of the participants self-identified that they had an IEP while in high school; which means that they had regular check-ins with family, teachers, and administrators throughout high school to monitor their progress. Thus, questions were designed to identify what sort of interaction the participants maintained with each of these people once in college. When it comes to home support when away at college as a source for a support system, participants in this study shared a variety of perspectives. Questions were asked about the relationship with their family, high school teacher's influences to prepare for college, and opportunities to speak about other factors at home that provide support. The common themes for main influences of support from home while in college were family and high school teachers.

Family. Participants discussed their family dynamics and how that influenced their use of family as a support system. Sarah and Charlie talked about how they have the ability to go to family members for support if needed as seen in Sarah's, "I am not going to be able to do it by myself, as much as I can do everything on my own, I do need

support.” Sarah stated, when talking about her family support system, “I am a very family oriented person, they have become more supportive with the things that I have been doing.” She described her family being there for her now that they understand how her disability affects her, “With my disability, my Dad never could see how it was effecting me and when I worked for him over the summer, he was able to see my abilities.” Charlie spoke about his large family of with five siblings and parents that are divorced, and how his parents still work together to ensure that he is as successful as possible. He shared, “my parents hired a private tutor and we are still working together [in college] and its been working pretty well.” Sarah talked about her family dynamics, describing how her mother goes above and beyond to support her children to be successful, and described her in this way, “she is just over supportive not just with me, but with all of my siblings to be successful, even though they don’t have disabilities.” Even though, Sarah shared that she does rely on her mom for support sometimes, she talked about how she has come to realize that her mother can be “over supportive and invading” which has affected their relationship recently.

High school teachers. High school teachers were a type of support system discussed by participants, Jason shared the influence of high school teachers to attend college, “My high school teachers motivated me to get to this point.” Sarah and Jason talked about how teachers were a support during their high school years and some of them are still a support today. As Jason described his support systems, he talked about the importance of his high school teachers even today by going back every semester to talk to them about his progress in college, “My teacher seemed really happy to hear from me and going to talk to them.” When speaking about high school support, Sarah spoke about her

mom working at the school and the influences she made in making connections with her high school teachers as many of them were friends with her mom. She discussed that they were a lot of help during her high school years and said, "I still talk to some of my high school teachers today that my mom is friends with and they still provide me with advice." Participants talked about family and high school teachers being sources of support systems from home during high school years and currently while away at college.

Academic Support. When talking to participants about support systems, academic supports were utilized as a way to receive help in college courses. Questions were intended to identify how students are being supported in academic related issues, such as classes, projects, and exams. Each participant shared a variety of different ways that they receive academic help while at college, and the common themes were campus recourses like the writing center and student success center, the Office of Disability Services, and professors.

On campus resources. Participants shared which on-campus resources they were receiving academic support from for their classes; Sarah discussed,

For me, the writing center has been helpful but it's not the most helpful thing and I have used the success center but some people might not find it helpful. So I would say to find what is right for you and what is going to help you be successful.

When talking about difficulties with writing papers, Charlie explained, "I go a lot to the writing center here and that's been helpful." For one of Sarah's classes, it was required for the students to use the writing center to ensure that all students knew about the resource and talked about the positive experience there, "I also used the writing center for

one of my classes, which was a really cool place.” As Jason described how he ensures he is successful in his classes, he said, “I was going to the writing center and they were helping me out a lot and they were pushing me to be successful.”

Other campus resources were mentioned when addressing academic support systems. The student success center and counseling center were both supportive services for Sarah, as she described,

I do utilize the counseling center to talk to the counselors about things. I also have problems with anxiety so they have been helping deal with that and trying to also help me with that to help me with my focus. That has been really helpful for me to talk to someone there.

Sarah discussed that she recently has been reaching out to more resources on campus that can help her with her classes and other things going on in her life, she provided insight in how other students may not know about the student success center, “I recently have been going to the success center to talk about planning and stuff like that. Having all these things available is awesome and I wish more people knew about it.” This was not seen in the other two participants as neither Jason or Charlie talked about utilizing the counseling center or the student success center. Jason did talk about how there needs to be improvements made to ensure that students with learning disabilities are aware of all resources on campus, “schools and universities can find a way to put a system that helps all students with disabilities based on what level they are with resources and support they need.”

Disability services. The initial encounter with the Office of Disability Services according to participants was at summer orientation, where they learned about the office

and how to submit paperwork for accommodations, Sarah described the process, “I went when I came for orientation and I went up to their table and talked about the accommodations that I was going to get.” When using the office as a support with academics, Jason and Charlie explained using it mainly for setting up accommodations and explained the process of ensuring that their academic needs are met. In talking about this process Charlie said, “Disability services are mainly the ones that make sure that my accommodations are in place. And they help me understand things when I don’t know what is going on.” After setting up accommodations, Jason discussed how the disability services office went on to explain programs that he could be apart of as a support, “I didn’t know about the program until I went to get all the paper work done with disability services. So it was very helpful to find that they helped me find that out.” Sarah talked about setting up her accommodations at her summer orientation, but told the researcher “I haven’t gone back to disability services since my freshmen year. I know that’s bad, but I just never followed up with them.” She identified that she was able to manage her disability without assistance from this office.

Professors. Another academic support system that was discussed by participants was supportive professors that helped with ensuring accommodations are met and assisted in helping participants understand course material. This is seen in Charlie’s responses to questions about academic help in classes,

Most of my professors have been supportive. The exam I have tomorrow, I am going to be starting it in class. But since I have extended time for my accommodations, if I need more time, he will give it to me and let me finish in his office.

Jason spoke about how his instructors are supportive in providing accommodations; “Sometimes I can use my professors for support because in lectures they can type up the notes for me.” In addition to ensuring that accommodations are being met for students with disabilities, participants discussed how professor’s offer support by giving positive feedback and motivation for both academic and personal matters. Sarah spoke about one particular professor that went above and beyond to help her, “I am able to catch up with my teacher and he really looks out for me and cares about what is going on in my life.” When talking about the impact that professors have in academic support, Jason discussed the positive feedback he received, “I had my teacher helping me with my papers. He would tell me oh you have improved so much from last semester to now and that made me feel good.”

Each participant discussed academic support they receive in college as being in on campus resources, the Office of Disability Services, and professors.

Student services support. As participants were asked to speak about their academic support they identified various student support service areas. Each of the participants explained the student services personnel that were utilized as part of their support system while away at college. The designed questions helped determine which student services departments, individuals, and or programs participants were using as supports. As there are many student service options that can be utilized at any university, the common themes in responses from participants were the use of programs and student staff.

Programs. Participants discussed two different programs that assisted in providing support in college. For purposes of this study, they are called Academic

Transition Program and Summer Bridge Program. Jason described his participation in the Academic Transition Program,

I started three days early through the program, so I met a lot of people through that orientation. I had some classes with some of the students and we helped each other. The advisors helped support us. Like for study tables, if a student is not doing well in a class, the gateway advisors talk to them about troubles in this class and help you find a tutor.

In continuing to talk about the Academic Transition Program as a support for Jason, he said that there are some things he would change about the program, but they still support him, “there is a lot of stuff I do not like about the program or I would change. But they are still pushing me to be successful. This is my second year in program, my last chance. So I am pushing myself a lot.”

The summer bridge program was the second program that was discussed by only one participant as a source of support at college. When talking about the program, Charlie said, “the summer program allowed me to get used to campus and the new environment that I am in.” As Charlie spoke positively about how the summer program helped him get used to campus, he told the researcher about his challenges with a required summer class through the program that he did not pass, “At the end of the summer program, my teacher told me that if you turn in the last two papers you will pass the class, so I turned them in and I still failed the class.” Even though the class requirement provided some frustrations for Charlie, he stated about the summer program

the male RA that was in Ford hall during the summer program was also my RA during my first year here and also this year. So we know each other very well and he has been a big impact for me. I am glad for the program.

Student Staff. In many student services departments or programs, individuals help ensure support of students and success of programs. Student staff members that are university employee's help guide students through college and the participants discussed the impact of these individuals. Charlie shared "my RA and my tutor have helped me a lot as I get adjusted to college." In talking about his interactions with resident assistants, Charlie said "my RA has been around me when I was mad so he knew how to sort of calm me down but keep control. He has been a big influence while I have been here so far."

Jason described the student staff members as mentors in the gateway program, and told the researcher, "the student advisors help me because they understand how it is to be a college student today." Sarah spoke about the mentors in her residence hall building and tutors in classes as student support, "I met a lot of supportive people here that have looked out for me and when something is going wrong they are able to talk to me about it. I have never had that before college."

Programs and student staff members were student services supports discussed by participants that help them during college.

Transition process from high school to college

In discussing the transition from high school to college, participants were asked about the process of coming to college and living in a new environment. Participants shared their own experiences with transition their first year and impacts on adjusting to

college. Questions were designed to gain an understanding of how high schools are preparing students with learning disabilities to go to college, and assess what factors are helping with transition process once arriving at a university. In addition the questions asked gave participants opportunities to share detailed stories from their own experiences with transition. Common themes in the transition process from high school to college included high school preparation, connections to campus, and the emotional impact of transition.

High school preparation. When talking about their transition, participants discussed how high school preparation impacts being equipped for the next step in their education careers. Two participants spoke about little to no preparation from their high schools on how to be successful in college. Charlie discussed, “Some of the high school counselors talked to us about college, but not that much. I took some advanced history classes, but that didn’t help me for college because I knew more than my teacher in these classes.”

Sarah talked about her high school classes as being very engaging since her mom handpicked teachers who would hold her attention, however Sarah shared how this was not helpful in the end to prepare her for college classes,

As a whole the classes didn’t prepare me for college. My high school teachers used the best methods to help their students stay engaged and I never had to worry about paying attention. In college, I had to learn to do this because most of my instructors do not hold my attention.

Charlie talked about how he was prepared for college by activities outside of high school that challenged him to form skills that he uses today,

I learned a lot of things outside of my academics in high school. Like meditation I started doing outside of school as a part of my martial arts. So mainly things I learned or liked outside of high school helped me so far while I have been here.”

While Charlie and Sarah spoke about the lack of preparedness from high school, Jason discussed how his school had a central theme of college preparedness, “I went to a charter school and it was college success to pull students into college. So we had a class called college career skills and I started taking it freshmen year and we were assigned majors.”

As a part of the charter school experience for Jason, he spoke about the progression of preparing students for college from year to year, and said by Junior year, “we started to take a lot of field trips to out of state schools; and how people live in their dorm rooms, and stay in the city and what are the differences.” His senior year, the school helped with applying to colleges, and designed their classes to prepare students for college type of courses, “my senior year is when we did everything different as the teacher talked and the teacher did like a lecture like at a college.” Jason is still in contact with his high school today. He talked about how he goes back to his school every year to talk to the senior students about college and also keeps in contact with his teachers, who often send him encouraging letters throughout the year, “They send me notes saying you have proven success through all your high school years and I know you can do it. You can help students in college.” Each participant discussed high school preparation impact on the transition to college.

Connections to campus. Each participant talked about connections made on campus being apart of their transition process. The specific individuals, group, and or

programs that created connections varied in participants as they transitioned to this new environment. Jason and Charlie discussed that connections made prior to the official start of school within their programs were helpful in meeting their peers. Jason said, "I came here, I started three days early through the Academic Transition Program, so I met a lot of people through that, through orientation, so I had some classes with some of them." In talking about aspects that assisted in transition, Charlie spoke about the summer program allowing him to get adjusted to the new environment, "I was here the summer before so I was already pretty used to the campus." As Sarah began her transition to college, she talked about prior connections to people she knew which relieved some of the finding friends stress,

I instantly had a friend group here, which helped. I was mostly friends with my boyfriend's friends. Having someone that I was comfortable with that I knew really well helped me with my transition during these weeks.

While Sarah talked about having an instant friend group was helpful the transition to college her first year, she still wanted to branch out to different people and that happened for her within the second year, "when I started my sophomore year, I lived in [residence hall] and that was much more of a community." In reflecting on her transition, Sarah spoke about the connections made with others that helped her adjust to college, "I met a lot of supportive people here that have looked out for me and when something is going wrong they are able to talk to me about." These connections on campus are created in different ways and participants utilized these people to assist in the transition to a new environment.

Emotions. In discussing the transition process, participants described different emotions about coming to college and emotions experienced their first year. Questions were asked about the transition to college, and descriptions of how they felt as they told their stories kept coming up. Two participants talked about their transition to college as “overwhelming” and “confusing.” Sarah described her transition of living with a roommate and having to share a bathroom with a floor of girls as being an adjustment, “it was just really weird at first and took me a while to get used to.” When talking about the differences between college classes and high school classes, Sarah said, “it was confusing and overwhelming at first and I didn’t know where to start.” Similarly, Charlie described how he felt regarding college classes, “I got so overwhelmed my first semester in my class that I didn’t go to it for weeks. Because when I get overwhelmed in class, my brain will shut down.” His parents recognized the challenges that Charlie was going through and hired a tutor to assist while he was getting use to new classes,

My first year was rough which I think that freshmen year is always difficult. But second semester, my parents hired a private tutor and we are still working together and its been working pretty well.

While Sarah and Charlie talked about emotions of transition were similar, Jason spoke about his emotions differently with his adjustment to college. When discussing his first semester, Jason said, “For me when I started my first semester, I was really happy and I was really excited and energized to start school.” Jason attended a charter school that worked towards preparing students for college, as he said that coming to school he felt, “confident and excited” to finally start what he has been working towards. Each of

the participants spoke about different feelings they had as they reflected on their first year at college.

Identity Development in College

Through reflection on the transition to college and discussion on their current state of being, participants described themselves in regards to their identify development. As participants continue to develop, questions were designed to get them to talk describe themselves now compared to entering college. Every story of growth is unique to the experiences of each participant. Many participants through their post-college educational experience had a great deal of support through Individualize Education Plans (IEP) created and coming to college meant that they were on their own for the first time academically and socially.

Developing Independence. Participants indicated that finding independence in college was important to their growth in becoming adults post high school. Through discussions of independence development, Jason stated “I am the most independent student that graduated from my high school. So younger students often ask me how does it feel to be an independent student with a disability.” Factors outside of Jason’s control forced him to acquire skills on how to be on his own, “I want to forget everything about my family, I just want to forget about everything bad. And that’s why I now do things on my own.” While being independent is an essential trait for Jason to develop coming to college, he also talked about the balance of being on your own and learning how to reach out for others because “you have to learn to ask for help.” Jason talked about realizing this with his college professors, “that is something that changed over time, that I can go

to my teachers when I need help and communicate with them that I do not understand this or that.”

Sarah discussed developing independence in college finally this year, as she is a junior and stated, “I am in my 20s now and I should be able to do things on my own. I really crave to be independent and now I’m starting to do this for myself.” When talking about how she described herself in high school, Sarah indicated that she felt that she couldn’t make her own decisions because her mom was controlling everything she did,

My mom was always pushing us to be involved and was a big influence on the reason why I got into so many things and the decisions I made. Now that she is not here at college with me, obviously, I do not feel as much pressure to be involved in so many different things.

Through being on her own now in college, Sarah described that she has become an aware person and similarly to Jason has the skills to advocate for herself, “I see myself as a very aware person now. And in every situation I can communicate to tell someone what I need and what I need to do sometimes I need to do by myself.” Coming to college, Charlie indicated that he already had skills to be social and independent, explaining how a support service wasn’t helpful for him because he had the skills; “they were focused on getting people out of their rooms and to be social. And I did not have a problem doing that; I’m pretty social and independent.” Each participant highlighted their level of independence as a college student and spoke about how they developed these skills and it was different from when they were in high school.

Developing Disability Identity. There are different stages of disability identity development that each participant can go through in their life and in specific situations.

Participants talked about how they identify with their disability as a college student. The process of disclosing their disability to others can be difficult in new settings when the participants do not know how someone will react, Jason stated “telling others that I have a learning disability is hard because they cannot tell what is my disability.” Similarly, Charlie discussed protecting himself by only telling the people that need to know due to not knowing how others will react, “I really only tell the close people around me because I am paranoid and I don’t know how people are going to react.”

There are no physical indications to have a learning disability and the hidden piece of their disability can be hard to explain to others. Jason talked about the process he has gone through with his friends, “they ask me a lot of questions like I didn’t even know you had a disability, how do you have a disability and a lot of questions about how do you get it.” When Charlie feels comfortable with someone, he explained how he discloses his disability, “I just point blank tell them, and explain to them why I might act different. It really depends on the person because sometimes people understand things differently.” As Jason starts to feel comfortable opening up to someone about his disability, he talked about telling them about strategies that have helped him in high school and in college, “learning time management and focusing on classes and not getting distracted by other things going on.”

Jason and Charlie talked about the importance of disclosing disability information to the Office of Disability Services, as this is where they set up their accommodations each semester. Charlie shared, “Disability services are mainly the ones that make sure that my accommodations are in place. I have to tell them because they help me

understand things when I don't know what is going on." Jason also discussed how he tells the Office of Disability Services to receive his accommodations,

I got all the paperwork at orientation when I told them I had a disability and they explained to me how setting up my accommodations would work in college. This was based on my IEP from high school. It has been helpful having it here.

While Jason and Charlie are intentional about disclosing their disability to other people, Sarah explained how most people around her are aware of her ADHD without disclosing to them, "I view myself as a really hyper person and I like that about myself in some situations, so its not hard to tell people about it in my case." When talking about how her disability impacts her life, Sarah stated,

"It is not something that I think about all the time. It's not something that I think about everyday; I have had it for so long. It's just a part of me. That is why I was so willing to come talk to you about my transition and having a disability."

Disclosing her disability for academic reasons can be difficult for Sarah as she is willing to tell anyone about it, and she spoke about what this is like for her, "they cannot see my disability from the outside necessary because its hidden and sometimes people just think I get distracted and that's it so I get nervous if they have a negative stigma against the disability." Sarah spoke about recently revelations about how to treat her disability,

I learned this year taking my medication is ok and it's ok to be different than other people if it's going to help me. I really regret not realizing I needed to take it sooner as I see now how much it could of helped me with my transition.

Participants identify is influenced by the situations, people, and experiences they go through and this also impacts their disability in different ways in college.

Developing Self. In coping with the transition to college, participants spoke about how they develop and refine self-efficacy, commitment to values, levels of optimism and many more traits within their self through this experience. Sarah discussed increasing her self-esteem while being in college,

I always use to feel like I wasn't going to be accepted by people. I now don't feel the need to make others accept me and like me, I have grown to like myself and know that I have a great group of friends now and a support group that I need.

In the past, Sarah talked about not wanting to be different than other people "I didn't want to be different than the other students in my classes growing up. So I didn't take my medicine because I didn't want to be different." Charlie talked about others not being accepting of his disability while he was in high school and how that effected his self-esteem "In high school is was way worse having a disability, mainly because I was bullied a lot because I was different." Now in college, Charlie discussed growing to be more self-confident by being around people that accept him, "Here in college, I do not have to worry about that as much and people are more accepting of others differences."

Sarah is in her Junior year and explained that she has grown in recognizing her goals for the future and is more driven than ever to accomplish them, "I am coming to the point that if I don't get my stuff together than I am not going to be able to accomplish what I want to in the future." Similarly, Jason talked about his future goals and how he self-motivates himself to not give up and to find resources that will help him, "when you have a learning disability, you can never give up. I have pushed myself to go and get help from like the writing center." Throughout Jason's experiences thus far in college, he talked about the realization that his disability is a gift and not a burden, "for me, my

learning disability is like a gift for me, it empowers me to make a change.” In challenging situations, Jason has learned to “push himself” and overcome obstacles to be successful, “a person with a disability is going to put 150% effort. Because I think that students with disabilities put more effort into something to be successful. For me it might take a longer time. I know and believe that I will be just as successful.” Participants’ sense of self is developed through coping with the transition to college and growing as individuals during their time at a university.

Summary

Themes found during individual one-on-one interviews concerning support systems utilized in college, the transition to college from high school, and identify development in college were explored in Chapter IV. Different themes were explored under each research question and responses were compared. This chapter allows readers to gain understanding on the transition to college for students with learning disabilities. In Chapter V the discussion of findings will be presented. This will conclude by providing a summary of previous chapters, provide recommendations for students affairs professionals and include suggestions for future reaches on the topic of the transition to college for students with disabilities.

Chapter V Discussion

The current study sought to understand the transition to college for students with learning disabilities. This chapter is to summarize the research and highlight participants' experiences with the transition to college. Implications for student affairs professionals, students with learning disabilities, and other administrators will be presented to help gain insight into transitional experiences which will help professionals improve programming to set students up for success in college. The research questions used to guide the study were (a) What types of support systems do students with learning disabilities utilize in college? (b) How do students with disabilities describe the transition process from high school to college? (c) How do students with learning disabilities describe themselves now compared to high school? The results found for the current study are discussed below as well as recommendations for student affairs professionals and for future research.

Discussion

Three research questions were identified and themes explored through comparison of three one-on-one interviews that were conducted. There were several themes that were identified for each research question from the various experiences of each participant discussed in their interviews. Each participant shared the support systems that they utilize in college, explained the transition process from high school to college, and described their identity development in college. Discussion of the themes in comparison to the literature review will be discussed.

Support System Utilized in College. In most cases, the participants of this study did not fully disclose information about their disability to other peers or professionals

until there was a trusted bond. They did talk about a range of support systems utilized in college depending on different situations. Couzens et al. (2015) addressed hidden disabilities impact in support systems in colleges, and in order to ensure a supportive atmosphere students with disabilities need to disclose information to trusted people around them. Because the students had always been supported through their K-12 system they appeared to be more inclined to reach out and utilize the institutional academic supports that were in place, whether fully disclosing their disability in the process.

Participants talked about academic supports that their university provided as a way to get help in classes when professors were unavailable. The writing center on campus was utilized by all participants as one of the main ways to ensure student success during college. Academic and student services professionals should work together to educate students about the support systems that universities have already set up for students (Rothman, Maldonado, & Rothman, 2008). However, Kim and Lee (2016) stated at times professional's lack of knowledge about disabilities could impact the supportive space for students, which requires students to look for support elsewhere. While participants were asked to speak about the resources they utilized they most commonly spoke about the academic resources. This is due in part to their desire to excel in college and to the resources they learned to use in high school.

Peer support was a main system utilized while in college and helped support during the transition into this new environment. Participants' peers varied from friends in classes, on residence halls floors, and friendships made in student organizations. Support systems in college were strengthened when students disclosed information about their

disability to those around them when appropriate. Students create their own unique support systems based on individual experiences and needs during college.

Transition Process From High School to College. Conely (2010) stated students with disabilities enrollment in college is increasing and there is more pressure in high school to support the transition process. Through successful transitions, high school and colleges work together to increase support for students moving to a new setting and teach skills for success in a variety of different ways (Abreu-Ellis et al, 2009). When students with disabilities are provided opportunities to explore, learn, and engage in conversations about college in high school they may come to college feeling more prepared, but also will describe feeling confident and excited during the transition process. In regards to the transition process from high school to college, Hadley (2006) discussed how the successful first year at an institution is based upon preparation in high school on specific skills that will support the transition process. While participants' high school experiences were different, the participants that did not have a curriculum set for college preparation and exploration in high school identified that they felt less prepared than the participant whose high school's curriculum included college prep all four years. High schools need to consider how they are preparing all of their students for college and create ways to actively engage in conversations regarding the transition to a new environment.

Each participants' stories on the transition to college was unique to their own experiences. High school preparation for college varied with participants, as Jason was the most prepared for the college experience with attending a Charter High school whose central theme was college preparation. There was a lack of preparedness from high school for Charlie and Sarah who identified that they did not feel they had the been

prepared for the skills that would be needed. Because there was little to no preparation, feelings during the transition process the first year were categorized as “overwhelming” and or “difficult.” In contrast, Jason’s preparedness created emotions during the transition period to be more positive as “excited” and “confident.” For all the participants, the connections on campus made a significant impact in getting adjusted to their new environment. Connections were developed in academic programs with peers and professionals and friendships created, participants built their own network of people that supported them in the transition process.

Identity Development in College. Schlossberg (1984) examines transition theory as factors of situations, self, support and strategies influence on the ability to cope with the transition process and ego development of student’s level of optimism and spirituality and resiliency, self- efficacy and commitment to values. Within the development of identify in college, coping strategies are created in the first six weeks in intentional courses and orientation programs positive outcomes for successful transition (Reed et al., 2011). For disability identity for students, Gibson’s (2006) *Disability Development Model* describes development of understanding themselves and others with disabilities. Through the fluid model, the stages consist of passive awareness, realization, and acceptance (Gibson, 2006). Each participants’ development within themselves and their disability identify development is unique within their own experiences. Evaluations on the current stage of development should be considered on an individual basis and not a generalized conclusion.

For these participants their identities are still evolving through their experiences and situations in college. Independence was a concept that all participants developed and

wanted to adapt more while in college. As Sarah and Jason transitioned from high school to college, creating a distance away from home life was important to mature into adult roles and responsibilities. Within the K-12 system, participants were supported in a variety of different ways in regards to their learning disabilities. The relationship with their disability ranged for participants as they discovered elements about themselves and the world. In her early college years, Sarah was in stages of passive awareness with her disability as she did not self-identify and avoided taking medicine and receiving accommodations to help her in her courses. Currently in her junior year, Sarah has moved into the realization stage as she develops an increased awareness of her disability and how it impacts her success in classes.

Charlie is currently in his second year in college and continuing to develop his disability identity. To be successful in his classes, Charlie uses resources such as going to his tutor and accommodations set by the Office of Disability Services. Because of this realization stage of development, Charlie has the ability to explain his disability to others in settings where his disability will be impacted. Charlie expressed that he only discloses his disability to a small group of peers in fears of how others will react, and therefore in some situations the stage of acceptance is still being developed.

Through discussions with Jason, he is in the acceptance stage of his disability development. In the ability to advocate, Jason understands his needs when he knows his disability will impact a part of his life, and takes opportunities to educate other people about his disability. Jason has found a way to feel empowered by his disability and is at the highest stage of identify development, "For me, my learning disability is like a gift

for me, it empowers me to make a change and it fits what my major is because I want to change lives and people and support them.”

Implications for Student Affairs Professionals

Within the high school setting, 94 percent of students with learning disabilities receive accommodations and only about 17 percent report to receive accommodations in college through the Office of Disability Services (Gose, 2016). Kimball et al. (2016) stated that student affairs professionals often lack understanding of different disability categories, which impacts the accommodations that their offices can provide for students, and knowledge about policies that need to be in place to ensure success of students with disabilities. In discussions with participants, and support from current literature, implications for student affairs professionals arose.

Participants responses focused more on academic transition for students with disabilities, however student affairs professionals have a responsibility as well to students to create positive experiences for all. The connection to campus was one of the key factors in participants' transition to college. As student affair professionals in areas of orientation, housing, admissions, student life etc., they should evaluate ways to ensure students feel connected to campus. Strategy planning will be required to create connections to campus for students with disabilities. Through this planning, professionals will need to enlist experts in the disability field to identify best practices for students with disabilities transition to college. Every new student coming to campus will have their own unique experiences with their transition. Through planning of programs, services and events there needs to be more detail into alternative ways that students can receive or attend these programs.

In discussions with participants, student affairs professionals are being utilized as support systems in college. Students are not just relying on faculty to support them through experiences. They are looking for other individuals on campus to provide support in their transition and beyond. Some areas of student affairs will work with the student with disabilities more often than others, however the hidden categories can make it difficult for professionals to identify the students that have additional needs. Training for all student affairs professionals should include workshops on how to best work with students with disabilities at the college level, in addition to the resources provided on campus. The strategies addressed can also help other students who learn and interact with others in unique ways. Student affairs professionals need to be proactive in addressing issues of transition for students with disabilities and how their practices are accommodating the needs of students. This helps to normalize the students' experience in college.

Implications for the Office of Disability Services

The Office of Disability Services at every campus has an essential role in supporting the success for students with disabilities. In this study, each of the participants had a different relationship with the Office of Disability Services and used the office for different reasons. As students with disabilities transition to college within their first year, the office needs to implement specific strategies to enhance student knowledge of the office as a resource and begin to advocate for students. This can be through intentionally reaching out to students during admission visits and through orientation programs, mentorship programs, and setting up weekly meetings to check in.

The Office of Disability Services at an institution has potential to be more than just a place to receive accommodations. Within the first year the standard needs to be set for students with disabilities requiring them to attend meetings and be involved with the office as a resource, if the standard is not set, students will continue to go elsewhere for support.

In regards to educating and training faculty and student affairs professionals, the Office of Disability Services has a great opportunity to make connections with other professionals and ensure students with disabilities are set up for success in all campus areas. Through trainings that can be provided by the Office of Disability Services, professionals and student leaders can learn about different disabilities and the best practices for working with students and supporting all the many learning styles toward success.

Finally, I would encourage the Office of Disability Services to collaborate with the Office of Admissions in reaching out to high schools to provide transitional information and guidance so all students are receiving support from high school to college. Bridging the gap will be helpful in the transition to college for students with disabilities as they prepare for the next step in their educational career. And, the Office of Admissions can make disability services a part of their campus visit experience. For example while touring campus they can identify where the disability services office as well as academic buildings, residence halls, health services, and so on. They can also provide perspective students with the opportunity to meet with a staff member from the Office of Disability services during a campus visit. This is all done to normalize the experience for the students interested in attending the college.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research is recommended on this topic based on the response of the participants, current literature, and observations of the researcher. These recommendations are as follows.

- Conduct the study on a larger scale, such as, different types of institutions (small, liberal arts, urban, private, etc.) to examine the transition to college in different settings.
- Replicate this study with other disability categories. Since this study focused only on students with learning disabilities, studying students with other disabilities perspectives on the transition to college can provide insight in understanding transition across the board as well as provide comparison for services provided and not provided for students.
- To access different racial and cultural perspectives with students with learning disabilities; replicate this study with specific demographic classifications.
- This study ended up addressing more academic needs than student affairs areas for students with learning disabilities in their transition to college, therefore follow ups for specific student affairs areas impact (housing, admissions, student life etc.). Thus, specific questions need to be asked to address student affairs areas that impact the transition to college for students with learning disabilities for increased social perspectives.
- Interview student affairs professionals and professionals working with first year students with learning disabilities about the programs and services that are provided to access areas of improvement at a universities.

Conclusions

The current study was carried out with the qualitative approach to understand the transition to college for students with learning disabilities. This research found that students with learning disabilities utilize academic supports systems in instructors teaching their classes; but also in resources like the writing center, as they understand how their disability impacts their academics. The main support system utilized in the transition to college was peer support.

Students with learning disabilities need high schools to prepare them for the college transition by increasing engagement in conversations about how to be successful in this new environment. In addition high schools should provide opportunities for students to visit colleges and learn more about class structures to decrease negative feelings about coming to college. Connections on campus prior to starting at the institution and during the first six weeks allows students to feel supported and at ease during the transition process.

While evaluating identity development, students with learning disabilities in college are at many different stages of growth and cannot be generalized. Developing independence through college experiences is important to students with disabilities as they become adults and start their careers. It is critical that institutions address the transition to college for students with learning disabilities and create incentives that guide support for student success.

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Appendix A

Hello!

My name is Breanna Rehor and I am currently a student in the College Student Affairs program. This email is regarding a study I am conducting as part of my Masters program under the direction of Dr. Dianne Timm. This study is on understanding the transition to college for students with learning disabilities. Office of Disability Services has identified you as having the qualifications for participation in this study. That is you have registered that you have a learning disability and are a student here at Eastern Illinois University. I am interested in hearing about your transition to college. Interviews will last about an hour in a convenient location for you. All discussions with me will be kept confidential, only used for the purposes of this study. My hopes are that information gained through this study will improve students with disabilities experiences coming to college and create an environment that all students can succeed.

If you are interested, please contact me through email at Brehor@eiu.edu I am looking forward to hearing your story! Thank you for your time,

Sincerely,

Breanna Rehor

College Student Affairs Masters candidate

Appendix B
Interview Protocol

1. Tell me about yourself?
 - a. Where are you from – hometown, high school (population), etc.
 - b. Tell me about your relationship with your family.
 - c. As you know this study is looking at students with learning disabilities, would you be comfortable sharing with me some information about yours?
 - i. When were you first diagnosed?
 - ii. Tell me about the support you have received in school before college?
 - iii. Did you have an IEP or special accommodations? What did that look like?
2. Tell me about your high school experience?
 - a. What sorts of things were you involved in?
 - b. Tell me about your friend groups.
3. How did your high school prepare you for college success?
 - a. Did you have conversations with teachers, counselors, therapists, family members about the college experience?
4. Describe what your first few weeks in college were like?
 - a. Did you have a roommate(s)? tell me about that relationship.
 - b. Tell me about your friend groups?
 - c. Did you get involved in any organizations? Tell me about that.
 - d. What was your adjustment like to classes in college?
 - i. What sorts of accommodations do you receive, if any?

- e. What resources did you utilize to help with academics (faculty, Office of Disability Services, peers, etc.)?
 - i. At what point did you make contact with Office of Disability Services? Tell me about how you work with this office. How does that compare with where you are now with this office?
5. Tell me about your support system during your first year?
 - a. How has your support system changed over time?
 - b. Who do you consider to be your champions in supporting you? Tell me about that relationship.
6. Describe strategies that you used to during your first year to get adjusted to college?
 - a. How has this changed over time?
 - b. Are there strategies that you find more helpful than others? Tell me about that.
 - c. Are there any new strategies/skills that you have developed since coming to college?
 - d. What role does disabilities services play in helping with these strategies or with accommodations?
7. How has your experience in college been different from what you experienced in high school?
8. Since coming to college, who have you disclosed your disability to?
9. In what ways could your current university make your experience or the experience of others with a learning disability better?

10. Is there anything else you would like to share with me that I may not have asked about?