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**IN TRANSITION: EXAMINING FRESHMEN STUDENTS WITH LEARNING  
DISABILITIES' TRANSITION FROM HIGH SCHOOL TO COLLEGE  
THROUGH SCHLOSSBERG'S TRANSITION THEORY**

by  
Margaret Bonanni

Submitted to the  
Department of Educational Services and Leadership  
College of Education  
In partial fulfillment of the requirement  
For the degree of  
Masters of Arts in Higher Education Administration  
at  
Rowan University  
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Thesis Chair: Burton R. Sisco, Ed.D.

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## **Dedication**

*I would like to dedicate this study to people in transition.*

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank my friend and mentor, Christine Larsen-Britt. She unknowingly inspired the idea for this study and has helped me with my transition from undergraduate to graduate education through her words of support. Thank you for listening to me, being there for me, and encouraging me to go to graduate school. I would also like to thank Dr. Sisco. He has guided me through the difficult process of writing a thesis and made me realize that it is possible. Thank you for answering all of my questions, making countless edits, and for making appointments with me to go over my work.

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## Abstract

Margaret Bonanni

IN TRANSITION: EXAMINING STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES'  
TRANSITION FROM HIGH SCHOOL TO COLLEGE THROUGH SCHLOSSBERG'S  
TRANSITION THEORY

2014/2015

Burton R. Sisco, Ed.D.

Masters of Arts in Higher Education Administration

The goal of this study was to find out what selected freshmen students with learning disabilities reported about their experiences while transitioning from high school to college and the circumstances or situations that impact such experiences in relation to Schlossberg's Transition Theory. The participants in this study were six freshmen students between 18 and 22 years old registered with Rowan University's Office of Disability Resources who self-identified as having one or more learning disability during the spring 2015 semester. Data were collected using an adapted interview protocol with permission from Samantha DeVilbiss' (2014) dissertation, *The Transition Experience: Understanding the Transition from High School to College for Conditionally-Admitted Students Using the Lens of Schlossberg's Transition Theory*. The interview protocol consisted of two interview schedules with roughly 12 questions each, which totaled to about 24 questions. The questions asked about the feelings and experiences related to the participants' transition from high school to college. Content analysis reported that multiple themes related to the four Ss of Schlossberg's Transition Theory impacted participants' transition experiences. The most significant themes were trigger, independence, assessment of the transition, awareness and acceptance of disability, institutional support, and community involvement.

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## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

As new student groups enter higher education institutions, student affairs practices must constantly adapt to meet students' unique needs. Traditionally, students with disabilities were discouraged from participating in higher education. They were denied access to academic institutions and accepted students were often discriminated against within their institution because of a personal disability (Belch, 2005). In the past two decades, more students with learning disabilities have chosen to enroll in colleges and universities. Sixty seven percent of young adults with learning disabilities enroll in some form of postsecondary education within eight years of leaving high school, on par with their nondisabled peers (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014).

Despite this increase, students with disabilities are still a marginalized and underrepresented group in higher education; only 41% of students with learning disabilities complete their postsecondary education, compared to 52% of the general population (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014; Walpole & Chaskes, 2011). The difference in completion can be attributed to students' difficulty in transition from high school to college.

Students with learning disabilities such as Asperger's syndrome, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, and various disabilities on the Autism spectrum experience difficulty while transitioning from high school to college. Transitional difficulties may put students with learning disabilities at risk of not completing their degrees, which could explain their low retention rates at many colleges and universities (Belch, 2005). Student

affairs professionals are expected to ease students' transitions by implementing policies and programs designed to facilitate the transition process. Despite this responsibility, many student affairs professionals are not properly trained or capable to help students with learning disabilities. Additionally, the concept of disability is multifaceted. It includes a wide range of disorders with ranging severities that impact each individual differently (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). These aspects make serving students with disabilities and easing their transition from high school to college challenging.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Although more students with learning disabilities are enrolling in colleges and universities, they remain a marginalized and underserved group. Though no universal list of disabilities is used in higher education, the *Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)* defines an individual with a disability as someone 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” (ADA, 2009, p. 2). Students with learning disabilities, like other new student groups, experience difficulty transitioning from high school to college. An inability to cope with this transition distances students from completing their degrees and achieving the education requirements to have economic and civic security. Students with learning disabilities' lower rate of college completion makes them more susceptible to earning low wages and being unemployed (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). Although transition difficulties are evident because of low retention rates at many colleges and universities, student affairs professionals struggle to help students with their transition

difficulties because they do not understand the exclusive factors involved in students with learning disabilities' transition process (Milsom & Hartley, 2005; Walpole & Chaskes, 2011). By pinpointing the factors that make the transition process difficult and their impact, student affairs professionals may be able to better understand the transition process for this student group and tailor their resources and programs appropriately.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore students who self-identify as having one or more documented learning disabilities and their transition from high school to college. Through conducting a qualitative research study with personal interviews, I collected research on the students' experiences and what situations or circumstances impacted those experiences. A qualitative methodology allowed me to gather in depth data that could provide insight on students with learning disabilities' unique experiences.

### **Significance of the Study**

This phenomenological study examined students with disabilities' transition from high school to college through Schlossberg's Transition model. By using this model to frame students' experiences, higher education administrators can better understand how self-advocacy and other factors impact students' education. They can better comprehend the circumstances and hardships these student undergo during the transition process that their non-disabled peers may not experience. This knowledge can be used to create or improve existing transition programs. Additionally, this information can be used to educate other student affairs professionals that work with students with learning disabilities, improving students' overall quality of education.

## **Assumptions and Limitations**

The scope of this study was limited to students who self-identified as having a documented learning disability at Rowan University in Glassboro, New Jersey, during the spring 2015 semester. My employment in Rowan University's Tutoring Center and role as a volunteer academic coach for the SurePass to Success Program deems my sample as a convenience sample. These roles also introduced the chance for researcher bias. Because of confidentiality policies, I asked through a third party for interview participants and could not randomly select participants. Another limitation of this study is the assumption that all participants were truthful in their interview responses.

## **Operational Definitions**

1. **Academic Coaching Program:** An institutional program that pairs a disabled student with an upperclassmen student mentor. The program encourages participants to meet on a weekly basis to discuss social, academic, and other challenges they may face during their time at the institution (Brown, 2007; Ciocco, 2011).
2. *Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA):* A 1990 civil rights law preventing discrimination of persons with disabilities. The law was revised in 2009 (ADA, 2009).
3. **College Compass:** A transitional program offered by the Office of Disabilities Resources. This summer residential program helps students build the needed academic and social skills to be successful in college.

4. Engineering Learning Community: A group of students who share common career interests and academic majors who live in a sponsored residence hall. The students are encouraged to build a community around their shared interests to foster a sense of community and support for the students involved.
5. EOF/MAP: Education Opportunity Fund Program/Maximizing Academic Potential Program. Both programs, housed in one office, are deeply committed to supporting the continued and increased enrollment of a diverse population. The EOF program provides funding and programming for students from diverse and marginalized backgrounds to encourage college persistence. The Maximizing Academic Potential Program provides access to higher education to academically underprepared, first generation students who do not qualify under the financial eligibility guidelines of the EOF program.
6. *Family Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)*: A federal law that protects college students' personal education records (Policy Compliance Office, 2014).
7. Grade Point Average (GPA): A numerical indication of a Rowan University student's academic success at a college or university that is self-reported by the student.
8. Individualized Education Program: A specialized program for students with disabilities that outlines their post-secondary goals and includes information on college transition services. This plan is mandated by the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*, which states that counselors must establish this plan for students 14 years of age and older (Belch, 2005; Milsom & Hartley, 2005).

9. *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*: A law that mainly impacts secondary education; created to help ensure that students with learning disabilities received a free and appropriate education in public schools in an unrestrictive, educative learning environment (Brinckerhoff, Shaw, & McGuire, 2002).
10. Learning Disabilities: Learning disabilities, unlike physical disabilities, are invisible and go unseen. They affect an individual's ability to receive, store, process, retrieve or communicate information (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014; Office of Disabilities Resources, 2014).
11. Office of Disabilities Resources: This office is within Rowan University's Academic Success Center. It provides support to students with documented disabilities in compliance with *Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973* and the *Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)* of 1990 (Office of Disabilities Resources, 2014).
12. Participants: Students who self-identified as having a learning disability and were registered with Rowan University's Office of Disabilities Resources during the spring 2015 semester. These students may or may not have taken advantage of accommodations provided by the office.
13. Pre-College Institute Program (PCI): The summer program provides students with an orientation, moves them onto campus early, and enrolls them in two college classes. These classes help them build better academic skills and habits needed to be successful in a collegiate setting and provides them with social activities to build a sense of community (EOF/MAP Office, 2015).



14. Residential: This term is an adjective that refers to a student's living arrangements while enrolled in an institution of higher education. If a student lives on campus, he or she is labeled as a residential student.
15. *Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973*: A national law that protects qualified individuals from discrimination based on their disability. The nondiscrimination requirements of the law apply to employers and organizations that receive financial assistance from any Federal department or agency, such as a state college or university (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006).
16. Self-advocacy: A term that refers to individuals with disabilities taking control of their own representation, wellbeing, and decision-making within their educational institution. Self-advocacy is an individual's ability to ensure that he or she is getting a proper education and utilizing the right resources without outside control or influence (Ciocco, 2011).

### **Research Questions**

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What do selected students with learning disabilities report about their experiences during the transition from high school to college?
2. What circumstances or situations have impacted or affected these experiences?

### **Overview of the Study**

Chapter II contains a review of scholarly literature pertinent to this study. This sections includes an examination of the definition of learning disability. Laws that impact

students with learning disabilities' education in high school and college are discussed. It also includes an overview of Schlossberg's Transition Theory and the included components of the theory as they relate to students with learning disabilities. Additionally, the literature review presents research on student resources that ease students' transition.

Chapter III describes the study methodology and procedures. This section includes: the context of the study, the population and sample sized used in the study, the data collection instrument, the data collection process, and how the data were analyzed.

Chapter IV presents the study's findings. This chapter addresses the research questions posed in the introduction of this study. A content analysis and coding scheme were used to analyze the data from personal interviews and present major findings.

Chapter V summarizes and discusses the major findings of this study, with conclusions and recommendations for further study and practice.

## **Chapter II**

### **Review of Literature**

The literature review provides an overview of scholarly research pertinent to students with learning disabilities' transition from high school to college. First, the term learning disability is defined in addition to the history that has shaped the definition's consensus in an academic setting. Then the laws that govern students with disabilities' education in both high school and college are explained to reflect the impact they have on the transition process. The review also outlines the institutional efforts put forth by colleges and universities to ease students' transition.

Finally, Nancy K. Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1995) is offered as a theoretical framework. Although the theory originally described adults in transition, it was adapted for use in college student development theory. The theory focuses on an individual's transition during a specific event and time period. The core components of Schlossberg's theory and the four major factors – Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies – that impact a student's transition are examined. The four Ss determine whether an individual copes positively or negatively with transitional change (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995).

#### **Definition of Learning Disability**

The term learning disability is difficult to define because of its elusive nature. Doctors, educators, and psychologists are sometimes unable to pinpoint exactly how learning disabilities affect an individual's cognitive ability (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). Also, learning disabilities impact individuals over their lifetime. A lack of lifespan

research and attention to adults' experiences with learning disabilities create many misconceptions about people affected by such conditions and cloud the term's true definition (Ciocco, 2011).

Psychologists and medical professionals had a limited understanding of learning disabilities before the 1960s. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, students who exhibited such symptoms were assumed to have mental retardation because of a lack of understanding of their symptoms and behavior (Ciocco, 2011; Kosine, 2006). After conducting preliminary research while developing the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Kirk (1977), described this population as a diverse group of people that did not fit into established diagnoses like mental retardation, deafness, or blindness. He found that individuals with learning disabilities may experience abnormal visual, auditory, and motor development. They could also experience difficulties in reading, writing, spelling, math, and language arts, failing in some academic areas and thriving in others. Although they had isolated symptoms of mental retardation, deafness, and blindness, they did not fit into these disorders (Kirk, 1977). A deeper understanding of the population prompted *The Association for Children with Learning Disabilities* to adopt the term learning disability, which has since been used to categorize individuals that exhibit those symptoms.

Although a universally accepted term is used to identify the population, the definition of learning disability is still debated. Kirk developed the first descriptive clinical definition of a learning disability, defining it as "Delayed development in one or more of the processes of speech, language, reading writing, arithmetic, or other school

subjects resulting from a psychological handicap caused by a possible cerebral dysfunction and/or emotional or behavior disturbance” (1962, p. 263). He also stated that such symptoms were not the result of retardation, sensory deprivation, cultural aspects, or educational factors. Since the creation of Kirk’s definition, many other definitions have been offered to reflect the variance in scholarly and medical interpretations. Some of these definitions describe a discrepancy between an individual’s intellectual functioning and his or her ability to process information (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014; Shaw & Cullen, 1995). This definition, known as the Discrepancy Model, distinguishes individuals with limited intellectual functionality from those with learning disabilities.

In secondary education, the definition of learning disability is used to determine if a student qualifies for special education services and if the student’s academic institution qualifies for additional funding (Ciocco, 2011). *The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) definition is commonly used in the majority of schools in the United States. IDEA defines a learning disorder as a malfunction in the process of “understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations” (Knoblauch & Sorenson, 1998, p. 4). IDEA also includes perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and aphasia. In postsecondary education, students who were diagnosed with learning disabilities during their secondary education must register with the office of disabilities to receive accommodations. These accommodations are in accordance with the *Americans with Disabilities Act* (ADA).

## **Transition and the Law**

Many of the difficulties students with disabilities experience derive from the change in their legal environment (Katsiyannis, Zhang, Landmark, & Reber, 2009). Different laws govern secondary and postsecondary education, thus affecting the educational structure in which students are expected to transition. Laws pertaining to learning-disabled students impact their daily life, educational environment, and transition.

**Laws governing secondary education.** The main law that governs secondary education is the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004* (IDEA). IDEA was created to help ensure that individuals with learning disabilities received a free and appropriate education in public schools in an unrestrictive, conducive learning environment (Brinckerhoff, Shaw, & McGuire, 2002). Included are numerous disabilities, such as Speech and Language Impairments, Serious Emotional Disturbance, Autism, and specific learning disabilities. Services are provided in accordance to a student's Individual Education Program (IEP). An IEP addresses postsecondary transition concerns by prescribing a transition plan including a coordinated set of activities agreed upon by the institution, student, and student's parents that promotes transition from secondary to postsecondary education (Allen, 2010; Levinson & Ohler, 1998).

IDEA provides a structured, organized method for secondary students with disabilities to succeed academically and to achieve their postsecondary aspirations. The plan includes the necessary accommodations and encourages primary collaboration between the institution and the student's parents. This collaboration gives parents the primary role of advocate, letting students take a less active role in their education

(Walpole & Chaskes, 2011). Brinckerhoff et al. (2002) state that because students take a less active role in their secondary education, they often do not fully understand their disability, the accommodations they use, or why they receive accommodations.

**Laws governing postsecondary education.** The laws that govern postsecondary education are *Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973* (Section 504) and the *Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990* (ADA). Individuals protected under these laws include those with a physical or cognitive impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities or individuals with previous records/documentation of such impairments (ADA, 2009; U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006). Section 504 mandates that disabled individuals will be given equal opportunity to gain the same result, benefit, or level of achievement in the most integrated setting possible. It also states that no otherwise qualified handicapped individual should be denied from utilizing any program receiving federal funding or be subjected to discrimination under such a program (Allen, 2010; U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006).

Section 504 aims to limit the discrimination toward students with disabilities, ensuring that they have an equal opportunity to learn in a postsecondary setting (Brinckerhoff et al., 2002). Institutions create equal opportunity by altering requirements, practices, and evaluation methods that are discriminatory or limit participation of students with disabilities. They also implement accommodations for disabled students through their office of disabilities services (Allen, 2010; Levinson & Ohler, 1998).

Accommodations can include services such as separate testing services, extra time on tests, meetings with a counselor, and support groups. Although Section 504 requires

postsecondary institution to create an equal opportunity environment, it does not require institutions to revise requirements that would cause a fundamental change in the program or unnecessary financial burden (Allen, 2010).

The ADA was enacted after Congress found that despite the mandates of Section 504, disabled Americans continued to experience discrimination. The discrimination was found to severely disadvantage Americans with disabilities educationally (Allen, 2010). The ADA further supports the mandates of Section 504 and includes the addition of services not supported by federal funding. The law added such services as note taking, transcription services, and expansion of written materials to the list of possible accommodations (ADA, 2009; Brinckerhoff et al., 2002).

**Comparison of secondary and postsecondary education.** Unlike IDEA, which focuses on providing disabled children with quality education through fund entitlement and IEPs, Section 504 and the ADA are civil rights laws that focus on limiting discrimination in educational settings (Getzel & Wehman, 2005; Gordon & Keiser, 2000). The difference in educational law from secondary to postsecondary education reflect the practices and goals of each environment in addition to the transition challenges students must face in each education setting. Under IDEA, students' parents and the institution collaborate to ensure that students receive an appropriate education to support their postsecondary goals. This role gives parents the primary role of advocate instead of their children. Under section 504 and the ADA, students are solely responsible for their education, giving them the primary responsibility of advocating for their educational needs (Gordon & Keiser, 2000; Walpole & Chaskes, 2011). Taking on their new



avocational role can be intimidating for freshmen students with disabilities. They may struggle to develop self-advocacy skills, which can cause transitional challenges.

In addition to advocacy challenges, changes in disabled students' legal environment impact their ability to cope with a postsecondary workload. IDEA requires that students adhere to an IEP. This plan provides organized structure and accommodations to help students reach their educational goals. It also allows for constant monitoring from faculty and parents that keeps disabled students on track (Walpole & Chaskes, 2011). Students may not be aware of the specifics of this plan or impact that it has on their education (Brinckerhoff et al., 2002). Postsecondary settings are much less structured than secondary settings. Students experience larger class sizes, less personalized attention from faculty, and possess responsibility for their educational outcomes. Faculty and parents do not have access to students' educational affairs because of the *Family Rights and Privacy Act* (FERPA), which protects college students' personal education records (Policy Compliance Office, 2014). These circumstances force students to quickly adhere to their new self-advocacy role, whether or not they have received the necessary training and resources. It also forces them to rapidly transition to a low structure environment where they must manage their workload without outside influence and control from educational figures (Coccarelli, 2010).

### **Institutional Impact on Transition**

Transitional difficulties, retention efforts, and the mandates put forth by Section 504 and the ADA lead institutions to offer a variety of support services to ease students with learning disabilities' transition process (Allen, 2010; Ciocco, 2011). Many students

become familiarized to a special education environment, which causes them to experience difficulty in a less structured, more challenging postsecondary environment (Coccarelli, 2010). These students may not have the needed self-advocacy skills to prepare themselves for the level of diligence, self-planning, and goal setting required for collegiate academic success; thus they require special support in order to successfully integrate into higher education (Field, Sarver, & Shaw, 2003). Although some resources are available to the entire student population, they can help students with learning disabilities ease their transition. Students with learning disabilities can utilize academic support centers, academic coaching programs, and their institution's office of disability services to make a positive impact on their transition process.

Academic support centers, such as literacy centers, writing centers, and tutoring centers, offer a wide range of academic support for students with learning disabilities. Students can receive help with writing, study skills, note taking, test preparation, mathematics, and subject tutoring from these centers that better prepares them for the academic rigor of college level classes (Troiano, Liefeld, & Trachtenberg, 2010). In their study on students' use of academic support centers, Troiano et al. (2010), demonstrate that students who regularly attended academic support center appointments had higher rates of success than those who did not attend or who did not attend consistently. These students had higher grade point averages (GPAs) and were more likely to persist to graduation. They also found that students who had failing GPAs attended fewer than 50% of their scheduled appointments (Troiano et al., 2010). The relationship between the student and the learning specialist also played a role in student success (Brown, 2007;

Troiano, 2003; Troiano et al., 2010). Students that are more highly engaged, have more connections to faculty and support resources, and other motivated students are more likely to succeed in higher education.

Academic coaching is another support resource that helps students with learning disabilities transition to college. Most academic coaching programs pair a disabled student with an upperclassmen student mentor. They are encouraged to meet on a weekly basis to discuss social, academic, and other challenges (Brown, 2007; Ciocco, 2011). Such programs also organize workshops to help students with organization, time management, social skills, stress management, study skills, and other types of practical skills necessary to be successful in a collegiate setting.

In her study on a mid-Atlantic, state university's academic coaching program, Ciocco (2011) found that the program was successful in helping its' students develop necessary study, social, and self-advocacy skills that eased the adjustment to the social and academic aspects of college life and learn skills that will also help them in the workforce. Through comparing the pre and post program academic records of the enrolled students and distributing a Likert scale survey, Ciocco (2011) found that a large percentage of students experienced a rise in GPA. She also found that many of the students reported an improved outlook on university life because of the skills they developed in the program. Ciocco (2011) attributes this to an increased emphasis on self-advocacy training, which gave students more confidence in their ability to succeed at the collegiate level.

Like resource centers and coaching programs, an institution's office of disability services, or equivalent office, can also ease registered students' transition from high school to college. An office of disability services usually handles students with learning disabilities' accommodations; the office may also offer services such as social mixers, support groups, and workshops on skill or personal development (Bonneau, 2004; Brown, 2007). The major support service that an office of disability services can offer is access to accommodations. In her study on the efficacy of accommodations, Bonneau (2004), notes that students' access to accommodation services was essential to their success in higher education. She found that students who had access to accommodations were more likely to have higher GPAs and persist through their college education. Bonneau (2004) found that having access to helpful, sincere professionals within the institution had an impact on students' education as well; students who interacted with professionals within the office who did not understand their learning disability or unwilling to address their needs were less likely to persist through their education. Coccarelli (2010) corroborates these findings, stating that students who interacted with faculty members who were ignorant of the necessity of their accommodations were less likely to succeed academically and stay enrolled at the university.

### **Schlossberg's Transition Theory**

Students' learning disabilities, the law, and institutional resources influence the transition from high school to college. This study uses Schlossberg's Transition Theory to frame students' transition experiences. Although the theory was originally applied to adult transitions, student development theorists have adopted the theory to provide an

understanding for college students' transition challenges. Schlossberg's Transition theory was created to facilitate a common understanding of how people continually undergo transition; even past adolescence, the human life is subjected to changes to which the individual must adapt (Schlossberg, 1981). Her theory includes a characterization of transition, different forms of transitions, the transition process and factors that influence transition. Schlossberg et al. (1995) define transition as any event or non-event that results in altered relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles. Although transitions provide opportunities for growth and development a positive outcome cannot be assumed for all individuals involved (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988; Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Schlossberg et al. (1995) state that type, context, and impact are factors that must be considered when trying to understand the meaning that a transition has for a particular individual. Of Schlossberg's three types of transitions, students with learning disabilities' transitioning from high school to college undergo anticipated transitions. This type of transition occurs predictably. Anticipated transitions encompass major life events that result in the changing of roles during the progression of an individual's lifetime (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Events such as graduating high school, attending college, getting married, having children, starting a new job, or retiring are examples of anticipated transitions.

Although students with learning disabilities anticipate the academic transition from high school to college, they remain unprepared for many social and emotional situations they encounter in the transition process. Many of these students must cope with leaving behind family, friends, and other valued support groups. They must also

adjust to new social settings and environmental challenges (Kosine, 2006). Although students with learning disabilities compare to non-disabled college student with respect to their academic and social needs, they differ in substantial ways. Because of their learning disabilities, these students face unique challenges that their non-disabled peers do not experience (Cowen, 1993). To help students successfully transition to higher education, professionals working with this student population must understand these unique challenges and incorporate appropriate resources in student programming to help students overcome them (Cowen, 1993; Kosine, 2006).

Context refers to the individual's relationship to the transition and the setting in which the transition takes place. An individual can be at the center or involved in a transition. Schlossberg et al. (1995) note that an individual central to a transition may positively affect the outcome, whereas someone involved in another's event can have no direct control and can only offer support while the transition unfolds. Setting also impacts transition. Where an event takes place determines the aspect of life impacted by the transition and the people involved (Schlossberg et al., 1995). When examining students with learning disabilities' transition from high school to college, the context consists of the relationship the student has with becoming a college student and the postsecondary education setting (Kosine, 2006). Students transitioning from high school to college are moving from a highly structured secondary educational system to the college setting – where students receive less contact with their instructors, have to make long-range plans to complete assignments, and are required to be more independent in their learning (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). Context greatly impacts the transition process. Taking the

context of the change into consideration allows students the opportunity to explore their new roles as college students (Coccarelli, 2010; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002).

Impact refers to the degree to which a transition influences the individual's daily life. It is the most important part of a transition because it can transform an individual's perception of relationships, routines, and outlook on the self, world, and roles (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Sargent and Schlossberg (1988) state that the more impactful the transition, the more resources and time it will take to assimilate the transition into the lifecycle. In addition to the typical issues that impact students as they enter college, students with disabilities are also impacted by the loss of support systems on which they traditionally relied and the newfound responsibility of advocating for their own needs (Coccarelli, 2010; Kosine, 2006; Walpole & Chaskes, 2011). Furthermore, students have the right to avoid seeking institutional services and thus must consider the impact the choice will have on their academic careers (Allen, 2010). The impact of students with learning disabilities' transition from high school to college are further influenced by Schlossberg's four Ss of Situation, Self, Support, and Strategy.

**Situation.** Schlossberg et al. (1995) note that an individual's situation differs according to the trigger (what caused the transition), timing, control, role change, duration, previous experiences with a similar transition, concurrent stress (what stressors is the individual dealing with?) and assessment (does the individual view the transition as a positive or negative experience?). Each transition, whether an event or non-event, is different. How these factors impact the individual, in addition to the way an individual perceives the transition, will determine the way the transition is handled (Merriam, 1998;

Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988). An individual who views the transition as a positive or neutral situation may be better equipped to handle it than someone who perceives it negatively (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988).

Research indicates that planning for the transition from high school to college early in a disabled students' high school education is more effective in facilitating the control, timing, and role change triggers of the situation (Belch, 2005; Kosine, 2006; Milsom & Hartley, 2005). Through use of an Individualized Education Program and counselor guidance, high school students with learning disabilities can more thoroughly prepare themselves for the transition process. Coccarelli (2010) found that such students can benefit from meetings with counselors to discuss the triggers impacting their situation in the beginning of a transition, and regularly throughout the process. Brinckerhoff (1996) corroborates that early transition planning encourages students with learning disabilities, who are often discouraged from continuing their education after high school, to consider postsecondary education options. Implementation of a structured, effective transition plan and counselor guidance can encourage students with learning disabilities to be more successful. Ciocco (2011) found that students who regularly saw a peer counselor benefitted from such meetings by having higher GPAs and more positive outlooks on campus life.

**Self.** Schlossberg's self is split into personal and demographic characteristics and psychological resources. Personal and demographic characteristics shape how an individual perceives what happens in his or her life (Merriam, 1998). Relevant factors in this grouping are socioeconomic status, gender, age, life stage, health, ethnicity, and



culture. Schlossberg et al. (1995) cite that these factors directly influence how individuals see their lives, and the course of action they take in life. These factors also frame an individual's life in different contexts, making different resources available (Merriam, 1998; Schlossberg et al., 1995). These students may be unable to successfully cope with the transition to higher education because of personal issues presented by these factors and by their disability (Milsom & Hartley, 2005; Troiano et al., 2010).

Psychological resources are the "Personality characteristics that people draw upon to help them withstand threats" (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978, p. 5). Schlossberg et al. (1995) include ego development, optimism, self-efficacy, commitments, and values as such characteristics. They may experience difficulty using their psychological resources because of their learning disability and lack of self-advocacy training. DeVilbiss (2014) found that many students with disability transitioning from high school to college feel an increased sense of independence in their new college environment. With less supervision from parents and authoritative figures, students are able to make their own choices. This presents a challenge for students with disabilities who are struggling to transition to a college environment. Walpole and Chaskes (2011) and Coccarelli (2010) found that such students heavily rely on their parents, teachers, and counselors to advocate for them while in high school. These students must transition from relying on these people for support to advocating for themselves when entering college. Students with learning disabilities must be able to effectively advocate and communicate their strengths and weaknesses on their own to be successful in a college or university setting (Layton & Lock, 2003). Because students with learning disabilities have difficulty communicating their strengths and

weakness, they often cannot effectively advocate for the help they require. This poses an obstacle in students receiving suitable accommodations and coping with the transition process (Allen, 2010). Coccarelli (2010) found that this transition is especially difficult for college students who heavily relied on parental and institutional support while in high school. Starting self-advocacy training early in a student's high school career can lead to better use of psychological resources, heightened awareness in services offered by students' academic institutions and a more positive transition experience (Allen, 2010; Coccarelli, 2010; Milsom, 2002).

**Support.** Schlossberg et al. (1995) acknowledge that support is a key resource in handling stress and the transition process. Support is comprised of three facets: types, functions, and measurements. Schlossberg's four types of support are intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, and the institution and/or communities to which the individual belongs. Students with disabilities need support from their academic institutions in order to cope with the transition from high school to college and also benefit from involvement in a community of students with similar disabilities (Milsom & Hartley, 2005; Skinner, 1998).

Support systems' functions are to help the individual take advantage of psychological resources, overcome emotional obstacles, and provide extra support in overcoming transitional changes (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn (2010) identify the functions of social support as an incorporation of affect, affirmation, and/or aid. Affect is an expression of admiring or liking, whereas affirmation refers to an expression of agreement. Aid is the exchange of money, time,

entitlements, or information. Measurement of social support refers to identifying the types of support present in an individual's life during a transition. Support can be classified as stable support, support that is role dependent, and support that is likely to change (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Students with learning disabilities seek various forms of support. Many of these students receive support from their parents, friends, religious figures, counselors, faculty, and staff. In her study on parents' perception of students' transition, Moore (2012) states that many students cite parents as a primary support system while in high school and can continue to benefit from this support while in college. Brickerhoff, Shaw, and McGuire (2002) note that many students with disabilities avoid seeking support from their academic institution because they think that such support decreases their independence. Students with learning disabilities may also avoid seeking support from faculty and staff members at their institution. Many high school students with learning disabilities are used to interacting with caring, familiar teachers in a more structured environment; when in college, students often report experiencing insensitivity and a lack of awareness from faculty and staff (Milsom, 2002; Moore, 2012; Skinner, 1998). This type of interaction can lead to inadequate support and negative academic experiences for students in transition.

Coccarelli (2010) links the avoidance of institutional support to students with learning disabilities' inability to accept their identity as a disabled student. Students who negatively label their disability feel shame and embarrassment, making them less likely to seek outside support. Students who accept their identity are less likely to feel

stigmatized and more likely seek the support they require (Ciocco, 2011). To achieve academic success, students with learning disabilities are encouraged to receive support from their academic institution. One of the most common forms of support are accommodations, which students can receive through registering with their disability office on campus. Allen (2010) found that students who receive accommodations perform better academically, easing their transition from high school to college. Students who do not receive institutional support during the beginning of their college career have difficulty navigating the college experience and transitioning to the workload expected in a collegiate setting (Bonneau, 2004; Brown, 2007).

**Strategies.** Strategies are coping responses that people utilize in order to avoid pain associated with the transition process (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). Coping responses can be categorized as those that modify the situation, those that control the source of the problem, and those that help manage stress after the transition. Individuals can also use four coping modes with these responses: information seeking, direct action, inhibition of action, and intrapsychic behavior. Pearlin and Schooler (1978) state that individuals who show flexibility and use multiple methods experience smoother transitions.

In contrast to these individuals, students with learning disabilities may have trouble utilizing coping responses and modes during transitions. Some depend on their counselors and institution for appropriate support systems and strategies that fit their learning style, personality, disability, and unique transitional situation (Milsom & Hartley, 2005; Schlossberg et al., 1995; Skinner, 1998). Many students with learning disability rely on accommodations and resources offered from the office of disabilities, or

an equivalent office, to ease the transition process. However, this can be difficult when students are unaware of such resources (Bolt, Decker, Lloyd, & Morlock, 2011), or feel uncomfortable using them because of the institution's academic climate (Troiano et al., 2010; Walpole & Chaskes, 2011). Milsom and Hartley (2005) note that satisfactory self-advocacy skills may help students find and use these resources, and thus transition more smoothly to college. Coccarelli (2010) corroborates that self-advocacy and proper use of accommodations will help students cope with their transition from high school to college.

### **Summary of the Literature Review**

Students with learning disabilities can experience difficulty during their transition from high school to college. Because of the limited understanding educators have of learning disabilities, pinpointing their exact impact on an individual and finding ways to ease the transition process can be difficult. The variances in laws surrounding secondary and postsecondary education for students with learning disabilities can also cause difficulty. IDEA focuses on providing secondary disabled students with a quality education, whereas Section 504 and the ADA focus on shielding postsecondary students from discrimination because of their disability. This causes students to transition from an environment where they may not play an active self-advocational role to one where they are primary advocates. Many students struggle with accepting this role. The differences in laws may also cause students to struggle with a postsecondary workload.

Transitional difficulties, retention efforts, and the mandates put forth by education laws lead institutions to offer a variety of support services to ease these students' transition. Many students with learning disabilities experience difficulty in a

postsecondary environment because of a lack of structure compared to secondary education and increased difficulty of coursework. Resources such as academic support centers, coaching programs, and offices of disability services can help students with learning disabilities make a positive impact on their transition.

Through Schlossberg's Transition Theory, it is possible to better understand the situations and circumstances that impact students with disabilities' transition from high school to college and connect them with the help and support needed to cope with their transition. Because students with learning disabilities depend on their institutions and counselors for support, it is important for higher education institution to have proper insight and resources for students to utilize. Although institutions try to effectively help students with learning disabilities transition from high school to college, they still need more insight as to what factors and situations precipitate these difficulties. Such insight can lead to higher quality resources, more qualified professionals, and more efficient transitions. Students with learning disabilities' experiences within the transition phase should be further researched. Other important factors in the transition process must be identified and their impact must be researched. The gap in knowledge of insight into the students' experiences and what situations precipitate difficulties needs must also be further researched.

## **Chapter III**

### **Methodology**

#### **Context of the Study**

The primary research for this thesis was conducted at Rowan University's main campus in Glassboro, NJ. Rowan University is a mid-sized state research institution with an additional campus in Camden, New Jersey and Rowan School of Osteopathic Medicine in Stratford, New Jersey. The institution also has degree-granting partnership with Rowan College at Gloucester County College, formerly Gloucester County Community College. Approximately 13,300 students attend the university's 13 academic colleges (Media and Public Relations, 2013). Of these students, about 3,600 live on campus and 7,200 receive a form of financial aid (Media and Public Relations, 2013).

In accordance with *Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973* and the *Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990*, students with a cognitive or physical disability are encouraged to register with the Office of Disabilities Resources located in the Academic Success Center in Savitz Hall (Office of Disabilities Resources, 2014). The office is administered by a director. The director oversees a program coordinator, secretary, and graduate coordinator. The office serves over 1,000 students, with 308 students registering in the fall 2014 semester (J. Woodruff, personal communication, November 17, 2014). Registered students have access to accommodations such as testing services, tutoring, accessible classrooms, appropriate seating within classrooms, assistive technology, and academic coaching. The Office of Disabilities Resources also hosts event, workshops, and targeted resources for registered students' support and enrichment.

## **Population and Sample Size**

The target population was freshmen and sophomore students registered with Rowan University's Office of Disabilities Resources for a learning disability during the spring 2015 semester. The available population was all students registered with the office for learning disabilities. I chose to focus on freshmen because they were either going through, or had recently gone through the transition process from high school to college. This proximity allowed me to collect recent data on participants' transition experiences, and other factors that influenced their transition. The sample size for the interview protocol was six participants. Because of confidentiality policies with the Office of Disability Resources, students who wished to participate in my interview process were recruited through a mass email sent to all students registered with the office. This deems my sample as purposive using convenience procedures.

## **Instrumentation**

The data-gathering method used for this phenomenological study was a qualitative interview. The interview protocol was adapted with permission (Appendix A) from Samantha DeVilbiss' (2014) dissertation, *The Transition Experience: Understanding the Transition from High School to College for Conditionally-Admitted Students Using the Lens of Schlossberg's Transition Theory*. The interview protocol consisted of two separate, flexible interviews schedules created by DeVilbiss. The first schedule focused on the beginning stages of the transition; questions concentrated on participants' high school experiences, prior preparation, previous transitions, and students' feelings about coming to college. The second interview schedule focused on the



later stages of the transition. Questions focused on participants' first impressions of the college experience, their feelings and experiences within the first semester of college, changes that occurred as a result of coming to college, and participants' coping strategies. The questions in both interview schedules encouraged students with disabilities to think about their experiences in transitioning from high school to college, influence on their experiences, and the factors, people, organizations, and support systems that impacted their transitions (DeVilbiss, 2014).

DeVilbiss (2014) created her questions with strict adherence to Creswell's (1994) rationale of using a qualitative research method. Creswell (1994) defines a qualitative study as "an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting" (pp. 1-2). The aim of DeVilbiss' (2014) study was to create a more holistic picture of students with learning disabilities' experiences within their transition from high school to college. The questions were designed to elicit responses that would provide answers to such an inquiry. This ensured that they would be appropriate for a study that utilized a qualitative research method (DeVilbiss, 2014).

The interview protocol used in the study (Appendix B) was edited for length and to fit the context of my study, which was smaller in scale. DeVilbiss' (2014) original instrument had a flexible interview style that utilized follow up questions. I chose questions from her interview schedules and made two set schedules that were asked to all participants. Each interview participant was asked all questions, but was given the option

to not respond to any question that made them feel uncomfortable. The interview protocol was adhered to in order to make the interviews go smoothly and to get focused, detailed responses from the participants, who all suffered from learning disabilities that could hinder their focus within the interview.

To establish content validity, I asked Caroline Venzie (the Graduate Coordinator in the Office of Disabilities Resources) and a sophomore student registered with the Office of Disabilities services for a learning disability, to examine the questions for readability, clarity, conciseness, and content. I also had Dr. Burton Sisco, my thesis chair and adviser, approve the instrument before conducting a pilot interview with two additional sophomore students registered with the Office of Disabilities Resources for a learning disability.

The instrument was approved by Rowan University's Institutional Review Board (Appendix C). Each interview schedule had approximately 12 questions, with 24 total questions between the two interview schedules. Each schedule took participants approximately 30 minutes to complete, with the entire interview process taking about an hour.

### **Data Collection**

Permission was verbally granted from John Woodruff, the Director of the Office of Disabilities Resources, to invite students with learning disabilities to interview with me. He sent the recruitment email (Appendix D) which invited freshmen students between the ages of 18-22 with learning disabilities to volunteer as interview participants. The email clearly stated that participants must have started their freshman year at Rowan

and were expected to complete two separate interviews that would approximately take a half hour each. The email also stated that as an added incentive to volunteer for an interview, each interview participant would be entered into a raffle to win a \$15 visa gift card upon completion of their second interview.

The first interview schedule was implemented on the week of February 22, 2015. The second interview schedule was implemented on the week of March 8, 2015. Before beginning the first interview, each participant was asked to sign a consent form (Appendix E) for interview participation. The consent form clearly explained the study's goal, why the participants were asked to participate, and resources they could utilize if they were emotionally harmed by the study. The consent form also clearly stated that participants could stop the interview at any time and change their mind about participating in the study. The participants were notified that they would remain confidential in the study. They signed an additional audio/visual release form. I invited the participants to interview with me in Savitz Hall's Office of Disabilities Resources and used an audio recording device to record the interviews. Completed interviews were scribed into transcripts. Each interview lasted 30-40 minutes.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative data methods from Dr. Burton Sisco's content analysis procedure were used when analyzing the interview data (Sisco, 1981). The content analysis started with the transcribed responses from each interview schedule being organized by question. The data were read through carefully multiple times, with the four Ss from Schlossberg's Transition Theory in mind. During my readings, I picked out themes within the data that

were related to the four Ss and research questions. Key words and phrases that fit these themes were highlighted, then developed into a coding scheme. The key words and phrases derived from this coding scheme were grouped into categories in conjunction with Schlossberg's Transition Theory. These categories were analyzed and prioritized based on frequency, meaning to the participants, and themes present in the data (Sisco, 1981).

## **Chapter IV**

### **Findings**

#### **Profile of the Sample**

Participants for the study were selected through the use of purposive sampling. John Woodruff, the director of the Office of Disabilities Resources, sent an email to students registered with the office for one or more disability. Freshmen students who volunteered and met the study requirements were then asked to participate. A total of six students participated in the study. Four participants were 19 years old, while the remaining two were 18 years old, with the mean age of the participants being 18.67 years of age. Three males (50%), two females (33.3%), and one transgendered student (16.67%) took part in the study. Four participants identified as Caucasian (67%), one as African American (16.5%), and one as Caucasian and Hispanic (16.5%).

The participants studied a range of educational majors, including Theatre, Education, Accounting and Finance, Mechanical Engineering, Communication Studies, and Computer Science. All participants lived in residence halls or apartments on campus. Each participant fulfilled the requirements to be involved in the study: full time Rowan University freshman registered with the Office of Disabilities Resources for one or more learning disability. Each participant was also required to start their freshman year at Rowan University in the fall 2014 semester.

The following is a biography of the six participants in the study:

Participant One is a 19 year old African American male. He majors in Theatre and is thinking of declaring a minor. He lives in a freshmen residence hall on campus. He

attended a large urban high school in southern New Jersey and graduated with honors. He is a first generation college student, and attributes his mother as his main source of inspiration for attending college. He was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and General Anxiety Disorder (GAD) in eighth grade. He uses accommodations and additional resources at the university.

Participant Two is a 19 year old, Caucasian female. She is an elementary childhood education major. She lives in a residence hall on campus. She attended a medium sized high school in northern New Jersey and had a B average in high school. Her family, which consists of her mom, dad, and younger sister, are very supportive of her decision to live away at college. Participant two was diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome and acute ADHD during middle school. She currently takes advantage of her accommodations, but eventually plans to not using them.

Participant Three is a 19 year old, Caucasian male. He is an Accounting and Finance major with a 3.2 GPA. He lives in a freshman residence hall on campus. He attended a small high school in central New Jersey and had a 3.14 GPA in high school. Participant Three was diagnosed with ADHD his freshman year of high school. He currently uses accommodations, such as extra testing time and private tutoring. Participant Three's family includes his mother, father, and younger brother.

Participant Four is an 18 year old Caucasian female. She majors in Mechanical Engineering and has a 3.6 GPA. She optioned to live in the Engineering Learning Community. She attended a large high school in southern New Jersey and had a high GPA, graduating with honors. Participant four was diagnosed with Dyslexia during her

sophomore year of high school. She takes advantage of her accommodations and uses additional learned strategies to cope with her disability.

Participant Five is a first generation, 18 year old Transgender student who identifies as male. He is a Communication Studies major and is Puerto Rican and Caucasian. He lives in a residence hall. Participant Five was diagnosed with Acute ADHD in high school, but was not diagnosed with Dyslexia until the summer before he started college. His Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) counselor encourages him to use accommodations, including extra testing time, Dyslexia support/learning groups, and tutoring. In high school, he had a low B average, but currently holds a 3.1 average in college. Participant five's family, which consist of his mother and younger sibling, live 45 minutes away, near the large regional high school he attended.

Participant Six is a 19 year old, Caucasian male. He majors in Computer Science. He lives in an apartment on campus. He attended a large regional high school in northern New Jersey and finished with a 3.5 GPA. Participant six was diagnosed with ADHD as a young child. He uses his accommodations and other services through Rowan University's Academic Success Center.

### **Analysis of the Data**

**Research question 1.** What do selected students with learning disabilities report about their experiences during the transition from high school to college?

The participants reported a variety of experiences within their transition from high school to college. The majority of these experiences relate to the participants' Situation and Self factors of Schlossberg's Transition Theory. Schlossberg et al. (1995) state that

an individual's Situation differs according to what caused the transition (trigger), timing, control, role change, duration, previous experiences with a similar transition, concurrent stresses and assessment (does the individual view the transition as a positive or negative experience?). Content analysis was used in order to determine the themes that related to Schlossberg's Situation (Table 4.1). The most common themes were Trigger, Comparative Difficulty of Transition, Independence, Role Change, and Assessment of Transition.

Table 4.1

*Results of Content Analysis Indicating Themes Relating to Schlossberg's Situation  
Component of Transition Theory (N=6)*

Category	Frequency	Rank
Trigger	6	1
Comparative Difficulty	6	1
Independence	6	1
Assessment	6	1
Role Change	5	2
Environment	4	3
Fitting in	3	4
Control	2	5
Total Frequency	38	

Each participant stated that the trigger, or causation, of their transition was their decision to go to college. Although all six participants decided to attend Rowan University, each had different thoughts, both positive and negative, and experiences that



motivated them to pursue higher education. Two participants stated that their parents' support and insistence motivated them to make the transition from high school to college. Participant One stated that although he performed well academically in high school, he was afraid that his ADHD and GAD would cause his grades to drop. When Participant One discussed his trigger for pursuing college, he stated:

I was afraid that college would be too hard and too much for me to handle. It was a struggle to concentrate in high school. I would lose concentration and focus, and then like, space out for hours on different things. Then I'd realize, oh heck, I have a huge paper due tomorrow and my anxiety would kick in and I would freak out and end up getting extra time to do the assignment. Um, I was afraid that my habit of doing that and lack of, um, focus would hold me back from doing well in college. My mom, yeah I'm a momma's boy, really pushed me to at least try college out for a year. She didn't want to see me waste all of my potential and hard work because of my own fears.

Participant Five had a similar response. He was originally unsure of attending college and at first decided against it. He felt that he would ultimately fail out and be unable to adjust to the college lifestyle. He was also afraid that after he failed out, he would be unable to pay back loans, resulting in more unnecessary financial pressure on his mother. He noted that her support, which bordered on "insistence" was a key trigger to his decision to attend college:

I was so afraid, terrified, to make the um transition from high school to college. I, I just couldn't see myself, with my reading problems, which I didn't know was

dyslexia at the time, and my focus issues doing well in a college class. I knew I had issues reading ever since elementary school. ...so I didn't really apply myself in high school because I was sure that I wouldn't go to college. I also, um, didn't want to fail out and my mom have to pay my loans. She raised us as a single mom, so we always had money issues. She told me she'd make the money work and that I was going to college, no question. She didn't want me to experience the same financial problems she has.

Two participants stated that they motivated themselves to attend college.

Although they were afraid and unsure they would be able to make the transition from high school to college, they found the motivation within themselves to decide that college was right for them. Participant Four said that her desire to become an engineer fueled her motivation to attend college, particularly Rowan University. After finding out that she wanted to major in mechanical engineering, Participant Four knew that in order to achieve her goal of becoming an engineer, she had to plan ahead to attend college. She stated:

I always had an interest in science and math. I took all of these honors and AP classes, even though I had Dyslexia... when I found out I wanted to be a mechanical engineer my sophomore year, I knew I had to go to a college that was affordable and had a good program. I started planning for it with my guidance counselor and working really hard to reach that goal. All of the fear about not being able to do it disappeared.

Although she was afraid to make the transition from high school to college, Participant Four felt that her career aspirations motivated her to become successful and make the transition from high school to college.

Comparative difficulty of the transition was also a prevalent theme. All six participants compared the transition from high school to college to a previous transition they faced and agreed that the transition from high school to college was more difficult. Four of the participants compared this transition to the transition from middle school to high school, noting the vast differences they faced. Participant Three stated that he had a sense of familiarity to rely on when transitioning from middle school to high school. He commented that his high school environment provided more structure than college. The change from a high school to college environment was difficult for him. Participant Three stated:

The transition from middle school to high school was easier because I had the same group of friends, we all had the same classes, and like, we were there from 7-2:30, with the same daily schedule. Transitioning from high school to college was just a lot harder. My schedule is different every day, I don't even like, know my professors really. There's a lot less structure and you get to choose how to spend your time. I was sorta, um, challenged by this in the beginning but now I like the freedom of extra time in the day.

Independence and Role Change were also very prevalent themes in the research. All of the participants stated that their transition from high school to college gave them more freedom to make their own decisions about aspects of their life. They cited that they

were able to choose how to spend their time, what to eat, and with whom to maintain friendships. All six participants linked their increased independence as a sign of becoming more like an adult. Five of the participants attributed increased independence to the related theme of Role Change. By being away from previous authority figures, such as parents and teachers, they became more independent, taking primary responsibility for themselves. Without supervision, they were able to have a higher impact on the Situation aspect of their transition. Participant Two stated:

I'm on my own, away from home for really long periods of time. Sometimes for a couple of months. It's nice because I get to establish my own ground instead of having parental restrictions and past notions of me. I choose my friends, what to eat, what to do; my disability doesn't factor into it. I get to be my own person here without anybody telling me what to do or who I am. I'm responsible for myself, for doing my own thing, and it feels really good to live that way.

Participant Two saw her new-found independence as a positive aspect of her transition from high school to college. She enjoyed taking responsibility for managing her time and activities while away at college. Participant Six, however, felt that the independence resulting from his transition from high school to college was overwhelming. He cited that because of a lack of supervision, he often felt unmotivated and alone. He said:

I thought the freedom would be good for me, but sometimes it's really overwhelming. My parents aren't there to push me anymore or motivate me. I feel disconnected from them and alone sometimes. It's hard to concentrate and focus

on school work, and then I don't get anything done... I think that not having [my parents] there is a bad thing; I'm not getting my work done... I just sit in my room, by myself.

The final theme that related to Schlossberg's Transition Theory's Situation component was the assessment of their transition. Schlossberg (1995) states that an assessment is whether or not the individual found the experience to be positive or negative. All participants offered an assessment of their transition from high school to college. Assessment is integral to the transition process because it provides a frame of reference for the events that occurred within the transition (Schlossberg, 1995). Each participants' assessment of their transition (Table 4.2) reflects their views of their transition and whether they found it to be a successful experience.

Table 4.2

*Assessment of Participants' Transition from High School to College (N=6)*

Category	Frequency	Rank
Positive	4	1
Mixed Experience	1	2
Negative	1	3
Total Frequency	6	

Participant Two sums up her experience as positive, but can understand why someone with her circumstances may have a negative experience. She stated:

Having a disability, whether you see it or not, is hard. Like, you have to work harder to be like everyone else. Um, you need to work harder to act like everyone else. You may feel like you're not good enough to be like everyone else. But I worked hard, I put myself out there, and I overcame my disability to have a positive experience... Not everyone is up to that. They can get weighed down by all of the stuff going on and a lot of self-doubt.

Assessment of transition can be attributed to many factors, but in Participant Two's case, it is strongly linked to overcoming self-doubt. Many traits can help students with disabilities overcome self-doubt, so they may have more confidence in their academic ability.

Two major themes emerged from the research that relate to Schlossberg's Self component of the transition theory. Schlossberg's Self is split into personal and demographic characteristics and psychological resources. Personal and demographic characteristics, such as race, gender, or age, shape how an individual perceives what happens in his or her life (Merriam, 1998). Although the transition experience did not present major variances across gender, ethnicity, race, or type of disability, there were major variances among participants concerning psychological resources.

Psychological resources are facets of an individual's personality that they use to withstand threat (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). Schlossberg et al. (1995) include ego development, optimism, self-efficacy, commitments, and values as such facets. Content

analysis found two major themes related to psychological resources, Acceptance of Disability and Awareness of Disability (Table 4.3).

Table 4.3

*Results of Content Analysis Indicating Themes Relating to Schlossberg's Self Component of Transition Theory (N=6)*

Category	Frequency	Rank
Acceptance of Disability	6	1
Awareness of Disability	5	2
Overcoming Anxiety	3	3
Belief in Self	2	4
Total Frequency	16	

Of the six participants, four reported that they had accepted their disability. They stated that they did not see their disability as a barrier that separated them from others. They also stated that they had no issue publicly expressing that they were a student with a learning disability. Two participants reported that they struggle with accepting their disability because of the stigmatization that can often come with having a disability. These students felt separated from society by having a learning disability. They also expressed reservations talking to professors and other students about their disability. Participants who had accepted their disability were found to have a more positive transition from high school to college, whereas students who felt stigmatized by their disability reported more negative experiences. Participant One felt that accepting his disability has improved his educational experience. He stated:

Once I learned to live with my disability, I realized that it didn't make me different than anyone else. My ADHD makes it harder for me to focus and it fuels my anxiety, but once I get over that hill, I'm golden. I learned different strategies to deal with it, so it isn't getting in the way of my life. Everyone has their cross to bear. Everyone has 'something wrong' with them, and if the only thing I have wrong is this, than I'm blessed.

Participant One also reported that he had a very positive transition from high school to college, attributing part of his transition to his coping with his disability.

Participant Six, however, is one of the two participants who feels stigmatized by his learning disability. He feels that having ADHD is looked down upon and that it makes people think less of him. He also credited this to part of the reason he reported having a negative transition. He stated:

I don't like to tell people that I have a learning disability, especially because I have ADHD. People make a joke of it and say mean things. But the feeling of, um, not being able to concentrate and focus is horrible. I hate not being able to complete assignments and feeling less than everyone else. It makes me very angry at myself and I have no control over it, especially since moving away from home... this is a reason I would say my transition was bad so far.

The second major theme related to Schlossberg's Self component is Awareness of Disability. Five of six participants noted that through their transition from high school to college, they became aware of how their learning disability impacted them in a post-secondary education setting. They took their knowledge and used it to better adapt to a



collegiate setting. Participants stated that they use this psychological resource while learning in classrooms, in social settings, study groups, and when reading emails from the school. Participant Four finds the awareness of her dyslexia helpful in multiple ways. She stated:

It helps to be aware of how my disability influences me. And dyslexia is very different in each person. Um, like when I'm studying engineering or physics math problems in my learning community study group, I know it takes me longer, so I try to do the problems on my own ahead of time. Sometimes it helps me in class as well. I'll look in the syllabus, try the example problems ahead of time, so I won't struggle so much to process everything in class.

Students who are more aware of their disability, like Participant Five, are more likely to develop strategies that help them overcome obstacles within their transition.

**Research question 2.** What circumstances or situations have impacted or affected these experiences?

The participants reported a variety of circumstances and situations that impacted their transition experiences. The majority of these circumstances and situations relate to the participants' Support and Strategy factors of Schlossberg's Transition Theory. Schlossberg et al. (1995) state that an individual's Support is a key resource in handling stress and the transition process. They cite four types of support: intimate relationships, family unit, networks of friends, and the institution and/or communities to which the individual belongs. All of these types of support were found in the content analysis, but institutional support and family unit were the most common type (Table 4.4).

Table 4.4

*Results of Content Analysis Ranking Support Types (N=6)*

Category	Frequency	Rank
Institutional/Community Support	6	1
Family Unit	5	2
Network of Friends	3	3
Intimate Relationships	2	4
Total Frequency	16	

All six participants in the study cited institutional support as a form of support they relied on during their transition from high school to college. Among this type of support, students mentioned use of academic support centers, accommodations through the Office of Disabilities Services, Wellness Services, and institutional support that is directed at addressing students' transition difficulties, such as EOF's Pre-College Institute program (PCI), Residential Learning Communities, and the Office of Disabilities' academic coaching program and College Compass transition program (Table 4.5).

Table 4.5

*Results of Content Analysis Showing Types of Institutional Support Used by Participants (N=6)*

Category	Frequency	Rank
Accommodations	6	1
Transitional Institutional Support	4	2
Academic Support Centers	3	3
Wellness Services	2	4
Total Frequency	15	

All six participants reported using accommodations through the Office of Disabilities Resources. Extent and type of accommodations varies between participants, depending on their disability and course types. Participants used a combination of resources, such as extra testing time, note-taking, extended due dates, private tutoring, and support groups. All six participants cited accommodations as a key resource they use to overcome academic obstacles within their transition. Participant Three said:

My accommodations are, like, really helpful. Having extra test time gives me the time I need to, to complete the test at my own speed, um, think things through. And [private] tutoring is good to go over the material, one-on-one. Sometimes I learn it and forget or do not fully understand what I learned so I, um, appreciate the help. Also, the writing center, because I can like, better organize my thoughts with their help and that makes writing easier. The accommodations made the transition easier for me and helped me get better grades the first semester than I thought I would.

The second most prevalent type of institutional support participants cited using was programs that specifically addressed transition difficulties. Five participants were members of such programs. Two participants participated in EOF's PCI program. The summer program provides students with an orientation, moves them onto campus early, and enrolls them in two college classes. These classes help them build better academic skills and habits needed to be successful in a collegiate setting and provides them with social activities to build a sense of community (EOF/MAP Office, 2015). Participant Five noted that his participation in EOF's PCI program gave him a game plan of how to be successful in college.

PCI made my transition so much easier because it gave me a chance to do a trial run of college before doing the real thing. I got to work out the kinks, and then when the semester actually started, I had a game plan and knew what I was doing. I learned how to actually read a college textbook and study for a test. I formed a PCI Family... we're all really close and went through this transition together. The staff involved in the program really helped too. I go to them whenever I need help with school or classes and they're always there for me.

Participant Four cited that her participation in an institutional transition program eased her transition from high school to college. She stated:

I would say that being in the Engineering Learning Community (ELC) definitely made my transition easier. All of the people I live around are engineering majors, so we all have the same assignments and need to learn the same stuff. If I don't understand something I can knock on my neighbor's door and get help. If I want

to be in a study group, there's always one going on I can join. The ELC also helps us get in touch with faculty if need be. We may not be similar people, but we all are in the same boat and use each other as support.

The other most common type of Support is Family Unit (Table 4.4). Five of six participants deemed their parents and siblings as a source of support during their transition from high school to college. Participant One said "My mom is always cheering me on... she's there for me and understands how important [my education] is."

Participant Two also noted that her parents are a valuable source of support. She stated:

My parents support me. They really understand that I want to succeed in this experience. They don't hover over me like they did in high school; they let me experience this all on my own and give me space which I need. But they're there for me when I need them. My mom will drop off water bottles when I run out; she's always there to talk to on the phone.

The participants evoked Schlossberg's Strategies component of her transition theory when discussing the situations and circumstances of their transition experience. Strategies are coping responses that individuals use to overcome obstacles in their transition (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Four types of coping responses are noted: information seeking, direct action, inhibition of action, and intrapsychic behavior. Through content analysis, three major strategies were identified that the participants found useful (Table 4.6).

Table 4.6

*Results of Content Analysis Showing Strategies Used by Participants (N=6)*

Category	Frequency	Rank
Time Management	5	1
Community Involvement	4	2
Workshops	3	3
Inhibition of Action	1	4
Self-Reflection	1	5
Religion	1	6
Total Frequency	15	

Five participants found time management a useful strategy for coping with the transition from high school to college. For college students, time management includes the juggling of academics, extracurricular activities, friends, family, and a part time job. For students with disabilities, time management can be more difficult due to their disability and possible lack of self-advocacy skills (Allen, 2010; Ciocco, 2011). Participant Three cited time management as an obstacle during his first semester of college. He stated:

I had difficulty managing my time when I first got here; there was all of this stuff to do and I had issues getting all of it done. School, clubs, friends. It was a challenge to sit still and finish my work because everyone has on a different schedule and always doing something. It would get a bit stressful because I would, um, forget to do my work, go out, and then get stuck pulling a long night...Managing my time taught me how to like, um, get the most out of my time.

Community involvement is another strategy the participants used to cope with their transition from high school to college. Four participants found support from becoming part of a community of like-minded students (Troiano et al., 2010). Because individuals have multiple identities, student development theorists use the term intersectionality to refer to the collection of these identities (Evans et al., 2010).

Participant Five uses community involvement as a source of transition support. He stated:

True Colors makes the transition easier too. True Colors is a group that supports Rowan's LGBTQA community. We can chill, talk, and discuss issues and topics related to our sexuality and the struggles we go through. That group gives me a sense of community and a place to be comfortable. I just got elected to the eboard, so I'm looking forward to becoming more involved and getting more people within the LGBTQA community to join.

## Chapter V

### Summary, Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

#### Summary of the Study

This study investigated freshmen students with learning disabilities and their transition from high school to college at Rowan University. The study aimed to determine what experiences impacted their transition experience, and what situations or circumstances influenced their experiences. Further, the study discussed issues that relate to this student population's transition experiences through the theoretical framework of Schlossberg's Transition Theory such as awareness of disability, trigger, comparative difficulty, acceptance of disability, psychological resources, independence, and strategies to overcome transition. Six participants, who all met participation requirements, took part in the study. Each participant was a full time student at Rowan University during the 2014-2015 academic year. They were all registered with the Office of Disability Resources for one or more learning disability. They started their freshmen year at the institution and were not freshmen students.

Each participant took part in two separate interviews during the spring 2015 semester. The interview instrument was used, with permission, from Samantha DeVilbiss' dissertation *The Transition Experience: Understanding the Transition from High School to College for Conditionally-Admitted Students Using the Lens of Schlossberg's Transition Theory*. The first interview focused on past experiences in high school, supportive people and organizations in high school, the emotions felt during the transition, and ways that the participant transitioned from their high school setting to a



collegiate environment. The second interview focused on participants' experiences in college. They were asked about their most used support system, people and experiences that stood out to them, successful transition strategies, and to describe the impact their transition had on them. Each interview was digitally recorded, transcribed, and analyzed.

To analyze the data, content analysis was used to code the transcribed interviews, looking for common and divergent categories and themes. The frequency of categories was displayed in table format. Participants' direct quotes were also used to discuss emergent themes in the primary research and relate them to the secondary research in the literature review. These quotes also illustrated the experiences of freshmen students with learning disabilities.

### **Discussion of the Findings**

**Research question 1.** What do selected students with learning disabilities report about their experiences during the transition from high school to college?

The participants reported a variety of experiences within their transition from high school to college. The most common themes related to Schlossberg's Situation theoretical component were Trigger, Comparative Difficulty of Transition, Independence, Role Change, and Assessment of Transition. Findings showed that parental support was one of the biggest triggers that motivated students to attend college. This finding supports Walpole and Chaskes (2011) and Coccarelli's (2010) findings that students with disabilities utilize parents as a major source of support during their transition from high school to college. Findings also showed that self-motivation early on, accompanied by planning to meet that goal, was a common trigger. This is consistent with Brinckerhoff's

(1996) findings of early transition planning encouraging students with learning disabilities, who are often discouraged from continuing their education after high school, to consider postsecondary education options. Implementation of a structured, effective transition plan and counselor guidance can encourage students with learning disabilities to be more successful.

Comparative difficulty was also a Situation theme that emerged from the study. Students compared their transition from high school to college with previous transitions, such as the transition from middle school to high school. All six participants cited that transitioning from high school to college was harder because college was less structured than middle school or high school. There was less familiarity and more choices, which boded better for some participants than others. This supports Brinckerhoff et al. (2002) and Coccarelli's (2010) findings that transitioning from a low structure environment to a high structure environment can present difficulties in the transition process.

Independence and Role Change were also very prevalent themes in the research. All of the participants stated that their transition from high school to college gave them more freedom to make their own decisions about aspects of their life; they linked this increased independence with becoming more adult-like. This finding supports research from DeVilbiss (2014), who found that students with disabilities transitioning from high school to college must adapt to an increase in independence to succeed in their transition into a college setting.

Five of the participants attributed increased independence to the related theme of Role Change. By being away from previous authority figures, such as parents and

teachers, they became more independent, taking primary responsibility for themselves. Some participants adapted to this change, while others experienced difficulty taking responsibility for themselves. These findings support Walpole and Chaskes (2011) and Coccarelli (2010), who found that many students with disabilities still heavily rely on their parents to advocate for themselves while in college. These students have not yet made the transition to being their own advocates. Bonneau (2004) and Brown (2007) cite this transition as a necessary step to ensure their success in post-secondary education endeavors.

Assessment of transition was the final theme related to Schlossberg's situational component. Four participants noted that they had a positive experience transitioning from high school to college, one participant had a mixed experience, and one had a negative experience. Assessment of transition can be attributed to many factors, but emergent research found that it can be strongly linked to overcoming self-doubt. Ciocco (2011) and Allen (2010) found that an increase in self-advocacy training during high school can help students develop the skills they need to develop confidence in their abilities, thus successfully transition to the academic and social demands of college.

In accordance with Schlossberg's Self component, two major themes emerged in the research: acceptance of disability and awareness of disability. The four participants who accepted their disability, whereas two participants struggled to overcome stigmatization and did not accept their disability. The participants who accepted their disability reported having more positive transitional experiences than the participants who did not. This finding supports research by Ciocco (2011), who found that students

with disabilities who accept their identity as a disabled student are more likely to have a positive experience and seek the support they require.

Five of six participants noted that through their transition from high school to college, they became aware of how their learning disability impacted them in a post-secondary education setting. They took their knowledge and used it to better adapt to a collegiate setting. This is consistent with seminal research from Pearlin and Schooler (1978), who found that students who can implement coping mechanisms and show flexibility in their use of strategies can experience smoother transitions. In contrast, students who experience transition difficulties may need institutional support to develop awareness of their disability in a collegiate setting or strengthen their coping mechanisms. Milsom and Hartley (2005) found that these students may depend on institutional support to find what best fits their situation, learning style, and disability.

**Research question 2.** What circumstances or situations have impacted or affected these experiences?

The participants reported a variety of circumstances and situations that impacted their transition experiences. Related to Schlossberg's Support facet of transition theory, research found that participants utilized a variety of institutional support types to ease the transition from high school to college. All six participants used accommodations, such as extra testing time and private tutoring, and cited them as a key resource used in their transition. The participants' use of accommodations as a tool for academic success in college supports Bonneau's (2004) findings that students with disabilities who use accommodations were more successful academically and have easier transitions from

high school to college. She also cited that students who used accommodations were more likely to persist in their college education. Participant Three's experience also supports Troiano et al. (2010) findings that students who regularly use academic support centers, such as tutoring centers and writing centers, had higher rates of success than students who did not consistently use they programs.

They also reported participating in programs that specifically addressed transition difficulties. Five participants were members of such programs. They stated that participating in such programs built academic and social skills that made their transition easier; they also cited that such programs gave them a sense of community. The participants' use of institutional programs that specifically address transition programs supports Brown (2007) and Troiano et al. (2010) findings. They found that students who participate in such programs have more interaction with like-minded students and helpful faculty, and are thus more connected with the institution. Such students are more likely to succeed in higher education and persist to earn a degree than students with disabilities who do not participate in such programs.

Five of six participants also cited parental support playing a valuable role in their transition. Some participants heavily relied on their parents' support, while others used it more sparingly. This matches Moore's (2012) findings. She found that students with disabilities use a high level of parental support while in high school and still benefit from their support during their time in college.

In accordance with Schlossberg's Strategies component of transition theory, five participants cited time management as an overwhelmingly important strategy for

transitioning from high school to college. The participants used time management to juggle school work and social activities. This is consistent with findings from Brown (2007), Ciocco (2011), and Walpole and Chaskes (2011), which state that time management as an important skill needed in students with disabilities' transition from high school to college and have a fulfilling, balanced college experience.

Community involvement is another strategy participants used to transition from high school to college. Four participants found that being part of a club or organization on campus that connected them with like-minded students helped them smoothly transition to a collegiate setting. Whether students with disabilities connect to other students with disabilities, or students with whom they share another identity, such connections can form support systems that help students cope with their transition (Troiano et al., 2010). They also make students with disabilities, who have a higher rate of attrition than traditional students, bond to the institution, increasing their retention and persistence rates (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014).

## **Conclusions**

The study has found some integral information regarding students with learning disabilities and their transition from high school to college. The data suggest that the transition process starts as early as students' decision to attend college. Participants had varied motives to attend college, with parental support being a common trigger. Participants stated that their parents were instrumental in their decision to attend college and persist through the first semester. This highlights the importance of parental

involvement during the college application process, and educating parents on how this process differs for students with learning disabilities.

The data also showed that self-motivation was a common trigger. Participant Four cited that early on in high school she realized that to become an engineer, she would have to attend college. This motivated her to seek guidance from a counselor for college planning. This demonstrates the importance of early career and goal planning in high school for students with disabilities. Early and frequent transition planning can drive the importance of a college education and encourage students with disabilities, who traditionally attend college less often than their non-disabled peers, to pursue post-secondary options within a collegiate setting (Brinckerhoff, 1996).

The data also suggest that students with disabilities experience difficulties transitioning from high school to college because of structural differences in the educational environments. The participants cited that high school is more highly structured, with a set schedule and more supervision from educators and parents. College is less structured, with more free time and less supervision from authoritative figures. The data highlight the importance of adjusting to a less structured environment in order to be successful in a collegiate setting (DeVilbiss, 2014). This involves students becoming more independent, taking the primary self-advocate role from their parents, and being responsible for their academic success.

This theme linked closely with the concept of assessment of transition. The research suggests that participants who became their own advocate and held responsibility for their academic had a more positive transition from high school to

college in comparison to participants who did not. These participants exhibited less self-doubt because they were more confident in their academic abilities (Allen, 2010; Ciocco, 2011). This highlights the importance of self-advocacy training at both the high school and college levels. Increasing self-advocacy training can help students with learning disabilities develop the skills they need to develop confidence in their abilities, thus ensuring a better chance at a successful transition.

The study also emphasized the importance of developing strong psychological resources as a means for success in a collegiate setting. Psychological resources are facets of an individual's personality that they use to withstand threat, which can include ego development, optimism, self-efficacy, and values (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978; Schlossberg et al., 1995). The data show that participants with more developed psychological resources were more likely to be accepting of their disability and experience less stigmatization. The data also showed that they were more aware of their disability and better able to use strategies to ensure a successful transition. This highlights the importance of psychological resource training with students with learning disabilities in the high school setting. Resources like counselor meetings, psychological services, and support groups can develop students' skills and better prepare them for college.

The data demonstrated the importance of institutional support in students with learning disabilities' transition from high school to college. Participants cited that accommodations, such as extra testing time, allowed them to be educated at their own pace, easing their transition from high school to college. Although participants used their accommodations more frequently in high school, they still cited them as a key resource.



This emphasizes the importance of students being registered with their office of disabilities in order to receive the option to use these resources. Also, it highlights the importance of these resources being properly staffed and advertised to students.

The data also uncovered that the participants were likely to participate in transitional programs. Five of six participants were members of a program that specifically addressed transition difficulties. Although Rowan University's Office of Disabilities Resources has their own transition program, College Compass, participants were also involved in EOF's Pre-College Institute and residential learning communities. Participants cited that these programs help build academic and social skills that they found helpful in their college transition. This demonstrates the important role of transitional programming aides in building students with disabilities' skillset (Brown, 2007). It also illustrates the importance of training for administrators and faculty that run these programs. They need to be properly educated on how to interact with students with disabilities and understand the specific circumstances and experiences that impact their transition from high school to college.

The data also highlighted the importance of strategy usage in participants' transition. The participants commonly used time management and community involvement as strategies to ease the transition. The ability to make connections with other like-minded students in the university community was linked with students feeling more supported and connected to the institution. Time management played a critical role in ensuring that participants were able to maintain their academics and make time to pursue community involvement. This again highlights the importance of skill develop in

student with disabilities' transition (Brown, 2007). It also demonstrates the importance of community building for students with disabilities. Being part of a community better retains this student population, enabling them to persist to degree completion.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Based upon the findings presented in this study and previous research on the topic, the following recommendations for practice of students with learning disabilities' transition process students are presented:

High schools should better prepare students with learning disabilities for their transition from high school to college. Data show that high school is an integral time to build necessary academic, social, and psychological skills that are needed to be successful in a collegiate setting. Time management, self-advocacy, study habits, awareness and acceptance of disability, and community building are examples of important skills that emerged in the data. Teachers and counselors should focus on prepping these students more during their junior and senior years through workshops, more frequent individual and group meetings with counselors, and providing hands-on, applicable ways to practice these skills.

Also, high schools should pay special focus to building self-advocacy skills. Self-advocacy skills allow students to better adjust to a less structured environment. They help students take over the primary role of advocate from their parents. This is an imperative step in students' transition process. Participants who are their primary advocate reported a more positive transition assessment than participants who did not. By being their primary advocate, students with learning disabilities can become more responsible and

independent during their transition. Self-advocacy skills also help student overcome self-doubt and stigmatization by increasing their academic confidence.

High schools and colleges should educate parents on how to be supportive in their child's educational pursuits. Students with disabilities cited parents as a major source of support. The data show that parents were the main trigger for participants to attend college and proved to be a valuable source of support during their transition. Parents need to be educated on how to help their child with learning disabilities during the application process and first semester. They also need to be educated in the type of support needed. They must be informed of the importance of helping their child become more independent through advocating for themselves.

Colleges should strongly encourage students with learning disabilities to register with their Office of Disabilities Resources (or comparable office). Students registered with this office receive resources, such as accommodations or academic coaching which can ease their transition from high school to college. Additionally, the office should require students to attend workshops that will further build their skillset and introduce them to involvement opportunities on campus.

Colleges should confirm that their institutional resources, such as tutoring centers, writing centers, and wellness services, are properly staffed and trained on how to interact/help students with learning disabilities. Participants referenced such institutional resources as important resources for overcoming academic and social obstacles in their transition from high school to college. It is important that students have positive interactions with these resources, so that they are encouraged to frequently use them.

Colleges should require that students with learning disabilities participate in an approved transitional program. The research and data strongly suggest that participation in a transitional program helps students build imperative skills to succeed in college. They also help participants connect to other students with similar circumstances, faculty, and administrators who may serve as support during the transition process. Students who connect to the university are more likely to be retained. Students with disabilities often need this extra support to ensure their persistence to a degree.

Community involvement in a collegiate setting should be encouraged during the orientation process, classes, meetings with academic coaches, in the Office of Disabilities Resources, and during meetings with counselors or advisors. Community involvement provided participants with a strategy to ease the transition from high school to college. Connecting with like-minded students can help students with disabilities feel more welcomed at their institution.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

1. A longitudinal study should be used to examine students with learning disabilities' transition from the beginning of the senior year of high school until the end of their freshman year. This method can provide a wider range of useful data.
2. A study should be conducted using a mix method approach with a survey, personal interview, and focus group component. Also, a control group of non-disabled freshmen students should be used for comparison.

3. Research should be done to examine transitional help programs at Rowan University and whether they meet the needs of students with learning disabilities.
4. Research should be conducted at a private academic institution, to compare and contrast students with disabilities' transition from high school to college in a public and private collegiate setting.
5. Future studies should focus on how faculty and administrators' interactions with students with disabilities impact the transition process.
6. A study should be conducted on how students with learning disabilities transition from college to the workforce.
7. Studies must be conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of Rowan University's transition programs; as integral resources for students with disabilities' success, they must be regularly evaluated and improved to meet students' needs.
8. Research should be conducted on whether students with disabilities' use of institutional support increases or decreases during their enrollment in higher education.

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## Appendix A

### Permission to Use Interview Protocol

1/13/2015

Rowan University Mail - qualitative instrument



Bonanni, Margaret <bonann25@students.rowan.edu>

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#### qualitative instrument

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Samantha DeVilbiss <sdevilbi@du.edu>

Tue, Dec 16, 2014 at 12:38 PM

To: "Bonanni, Margaret" <bonann25@students.rowan.edu>

Hi Maggie,

As long as it is properly credited and documented, you have my permission to use my interview protocol as your qualitative instrument with necessary modifications (with either the changes noted or a general notation that the original protocol was adapted for your purposes). Let me know if I can be of any help and good luck in your process!

-Sam

On Mon, Dec 15, 2014 at 7:37 PM, Bonanni, Margaret <bonann25@students.rowan.edu> wrote:

Samantha DeVilbiss,

Hello. My name is Maggie and I'm a graduate student at Rowan University in Glassboro, NJ. My thesis is on students with learning disabilities and their transition from high school to college. After reviewing your dissertation, I wanted to know if I could have permission to use your interview protocol as my qualitative instrument in my thesis. I also need permission to include the original instrument in an appendix. I may need to modify it to fit my thesis. If granted permission, I would provide credit and documentation to you within my thesis.

Thank you for taking the time to read my email and consider my proposal.

Best,

*Maggie Bonanni*

Graduate Coordinator - Tutoring Center  
Graduate Intern - Career Management Center  
Academic Coach - Office of Disabilities Resources  
M.A. Higher Education Administration, May 2015  
Rowan University  
[Bonann25@students.rowan.edu](mailto:Bonann25@students.rowan.edu)

## Appendix B

### Adapted Interview Protocol

Adapted Interview Protocol

**Pseudonym:**

**Date and time of interview:**

**Location of interview:**

**Establish rapport:** Ask participant how he or she is. Perhaps ask what they plan to do this week. For second interview, refer back to things already discussed. Share information as appropriate.

**Project overview:** I want to thank you for taking the time to allow me to interview you today for my master's thesis. As you know, I am studying the transition experience from high school to college. I am interested in your thoughts, feelings, and experiences – your own perspective; so please feel free to discuss anything that comes to mind related to your transition. As the interview progresses, if you need me to clarify something, have questions or concerns, or you would like to pause or stop the interview, let me know. There are no right or wrong answers to the interview questions. Just as a reminder, what we discuss today will be audio recorded, transcribed, and the original audio recording will be deleted. Are you ready to begin?

Before I start the interview, I want to get some background information:

- Age
- Gender
- Race/ethnicity
- Major in college

**Interview questions:**

1. Tell me about your transition from high school to college what dimensions, incidents, and people stand out to you?
2. Before coming to college, how did you feel and what did you think about leaving high school and attending college?
3. What transitions have you been through in the past? How is this experience similar? Different?

4. Before you started college, what were you doing to prepare for the transition from high school to college?
5. In what ways are you connected to your life before college?
6. How has your transition affected you?
7. What incidents and events connected to your transition stand out to you?
8. What people connected with your transition stand out for you? These could be individuals connected to your transition in positive and negative ways.
9. In what ways do you feel challenged or overwhelmed by your transition?
10. What people or organizations at the college have made your transition easier?
11. What people or organizations outside the college have made your transition easier?
12. Have you shared all that is significant with reference to your transition from high school to college?

**Conclusion:** Thank you for taking the time to interview today. Would you like to set up a date and time for our second interview, or would you prefer me contact you closer to the interview date?

## Follow-Up Interview Protocol

### **Pseudonym:**

### **Date and time of interview:**

### **Location of interview:**

**Establish rapport:** Ask participant how he or she is. Perhaps ask what they plan to do this week. For second interview, refer back to things already discussed. Share information as appropriate.

**Project Overview:** I want to thank you for taking the time to be interviewed today. During this interview, do not worry about what you said during the previous interview. I am interested in knowing about your experiences, thoughts, and feelings right now. As you know, I am studying the transition experience from high school to college. I am interested in your thoughts, feelings, and experiences – your own perspective; so please feel free to discuss anything that comes to mind related to your transition. As the interview progresses, if you need me to clarify something, have questions or concerns, or you would like to pause or stop the interview, let me know. There are no right or wrong answers to the interview questions. Just as a reminder, what we discuss today will be audio recorded, transcribed, and the original audio recording will be deleted. Are you ready to begin?

Before I start the interview, I want to get some background information:

- Hometown
- Family make-up
- Are you a first generation college student
- Size of high school
- High school GPA
- Major in college

Interview Questions:

1. Describe what your transition from high school to college has been like? (i.e. academically, socially, relationships)
2. How have you changed as a result of you transition from high school to college?
3. What feelings or emotional have been caused by the transition?
4. Over what elements of your transition do you feel you have control?
5. What resources have been available to you to assist you in your transition?
6. What or who have been your sources of support inside and outside the school?
7. What strategies have you used to successfully get through the transition? These could be things you have done, thought, or things you believed.
8. Are there any strategies that have made your transition harder? Easier?

9. So far in your transition, would you say it's been positive? Negative? Neutral? A mixed bag?
10. How would you compare your transition from high school to college to that of others?
11. Have you shared all that is significant with reference to your transition from high school to college?

**Conclusion:** Thank you for taking the time to interview today.

# Appendix C

## Institutional Review Board Correspondence

3/19/2015

<https://irb.rowan.edu/irb/Doc/0P57VISTA2Q74J025KA9TD4MS1F/fromString.html>



\*\* This is an auto-generated email. Please do not reply to this email message.  
The originating e-mail account is not monitored.  
If you have questions, please contact your local IRB office \*\*

DHHS Federal Wide Assurance Identifier: FWA00007111  
IRB Chair Person: Harriet Hartman  
IRB Director: Sreekant Murthy  
Effective Date: 2/19/2015

### eIRB Notice of Approval

#### STUDY PROFILE

Study ID: Pro2015000277  
Title: Students with Learning Disabilities' Transition from High School to College  
Principal Investigator: Burlon Sisco      Study Coordinator: None  
Co-Investigator(s): Margaret Bonanni      Other Study Staff: None  
Sponsor: Department Funded      Approval Cycle: Twelve Months  
Risk Determination: Minimal Risk      Device Determination: Not Applicable  
Review Type: Expedited      Expedited Category: 6  
Subjects: 10      7

#### CURRENT SUBMISSION STATUS

Submission Type:	Research Protocol/Study	Submission Status:	Approved		
Approval Date:	2/18/2015	Expiration Date:	2/17/2016		
Pregnancy Code:	No Pregnant Women as Subjects Not Applicable	Pediatric Code:	Not Applicable No Children As Subjects	Prisoner Code:	Not Applicable No Prisoners As Subjects
Protocol:	recruitment email.docx Permission from author adapled interview protocol first interview.docx Adapted Interview Protocol follow up interview.docx PROTOCOL.docx	Consent:	There are no items to display	Recruitment Materials:	recruitment email

\* IRB APPROVAL IS GRANTED SUBJECT TO THE STIPULATION(S) THAT:

<https://irb.rowan.edu/irb/Doc/0P57VISTA2Q74J025KA9TD4MS1F/fromString.html>

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**\* Study Performance Sites:**

Glassboro Campus

201 Mullica Hill Road, Glassboro, NJ 08028

**ALL APPROVED INVESTIGATOR(S) MUST COMPLY WITH THE FOLLOWING:**

1. Conduct the research in accordance with the protocol, applicable laws and regulations, and the principles of research ethics as set forth in the Belmont Report.
2. **Continuing Review:** Approval is valid until the protocol expiration date shown above. To avoid lapses in approval, submit a continuation application at least eight weeks before the study expiration date.
3. **Expiration of IRB Approval:** If IRB approval expires, effective the date of expiration and until the continuing review approval is issued: **All research activities must stop unless the IRB finds that it is in the best interest of individual subjects to continue. (This determination shall be based on a separate written request from the PI to the IRB.) No new subjects may be enrolled and no samples/charts/surveys may be collected, reviewed, and/or analyzed.**
4. **Amendments/Modifications/Revisions:** If you wish to change any aspect of this study, including but not limited to, study procedures, consent form(s), investigators, advertisements, the protocol document, investigator drug brochure, or accrual goals, you are required to obtain IRB review and approval prior to implementation of these changes unless necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to subjects.
5. **Unanticipated Problems:** Unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects or others must be reported to the IRB Office (45 CFR 46, 21 CFR 312, 812) as required, in the appropriate time as specified in the attachment online at <http://www.rowan.edu/som/hssp/>
6. **Protocol Deviations and Violations:** Deviations from/violations of the approved study protocol must be reported to the IRB Office (45 CFR 46, 21 CFR 312, 812) as required, in the appropriate time as specified in the attachment online at <http://www.rowan.edu/som/hssp/>
7. **Consent/Assent:** The IRB has reviewed and approved the consent and/or assent process, waiver and/or alteration described in this protocol as required by 45 CFR 46 and 21 CFR 50, 56, (if FDA regulated research). Only the versions of the documents included in the approved process may be used to document informed consent and/or assent of study subjects; each subject must receive a copy of the approved form(s); and a copy of each signed form must be filed in a secure place in the subject's medical/patient/research record.
8. **Completion of Study:** Notify the IRB when your study has been stopped for any reason. Neither study closure by the sponsor or the investigator removes the obligation for submission of timely continuing review application or final report.
9. The Investigator(s) did not participate in the review, discussion, or vote of this protocol.
10. **Letter Comments:** *There are no additional comments*

**CONFIDENTIALITY NOTICE:** This email communication may contain private, confidential, or legally privileged information intended for the sole use of the designated and/or duly authorized recipients(s). If you are not the intended recipient or have received this email in error, please notify the sender immediately by email and permanently delete all copies of this email including all attachments without reading them. If you are the intended recipient, secure the contents in a manner that conforms to all applicable state and/or federal requirements related to privacy and confidentiality of such information.

## Appendix D

### Recruitment Email

Students,

Hello, my name is Maggie Bonanni. I am conducting a research study entitled *Students with Learning Disabilities' Transition from High School to College* to fulfil my thesis requirement for my graduate program. The study focuses on students with learning disabilities' transition from high school to college. I am conducting a personal interview and follow up interview during my study, and request that freshmen students between the ages of 18-22 years old registered with the Office of Disabilities Services for one or more learning disabilities participate in my study. Each interview will take 30-45 minutes, an hour to an hour in a half total. All students who participate will remain confidential.

Students who complete both interviews will be entered into a raffle for a \$15 visa gift card.

Please contact me at [Bonann25@students.rowan.edu](mailto:Bonann25@students.rowan.edu) if you are interested in participating.

Thank you!

Margaret Bonanni  
Graduate Coordinator – Tutoring Center  
Graduate Intern – Career Management Center  
M.A. Higher Education Administration program  
[Bonann25@students.rowan.edu](mailto:Bonann25@students.rowan.edu)

## Appendix E

### Consent Form

#### CONSENT TO TAKE PART IN A RESEARCH STUDY

**TITLE OF STUDY:** *Students with Learning Disabilities' Transition from High School to College*

**Principal Investigator:** Burton Sisco

This consent form is part of an informed consent process for a research study and it will provide information that will help you to decide whether you wish to volunteer for this research study. It will help you to understand what the study is about and what will happen in the course of the study. If you have questions at any time during the research study, you should feel free to ask them and should expect to be given answers that you completely understand. After all of your questions have been answered, if you still wish to take part in the study, you will be asked to sign this informed consent form.

Margaret Bonanni, the co-investigator, will also be asked to sign this informed consent. You will be given a copy of the signed consent form to keep. You are not giving up any of your legal rights by volunteering for this research study or by signing this consent form.

This study is being done to explore freshman students with learning disabilities' transition from high school to college. The study fulfills the requirements of a master's thesis. You have been asked to take part in this study because you are a freshman student with a learning disability and your insight and knowledge of your experience is appreciated. Only freshman students between the ages of 18-22 with solely learning disabilities may take part in this study. Five to seven participants will take part in this study.

You will participate in two separate interviews. Each interview will take 30-45 minutes to complete, with the total time being an hour to an hour and a half. The study will take place in Rowan University's Academic Success Center. As a participant, you will be asked to answer about 23 questions between both interviews about your transition from high school to college. You will also be asked to give demographic information, such as sex, age, race, and major, for analysis purposes.

Research states that some students with disabilities are uncomfortable talking about their disability, thus you may experience emotional discomfort if you choose to participate in this study. . If you are uncomfortable discussing your learning disability, you may chose not to participate in this study. If you choose to participate in this study and you experience emotional discomfort, you can take advantage of Rowan University’s Psychological Services, which are free to all enrolled students. They are located in the Wellness Center on the Glassboro campus and can be contacted at 856.256.4333. If you are injured in this study and need treatment, contact the Wellness Center at 856.256.4333.

There are benefits to taking part in this study. If you complete both interviews, you will be entered into a raffle to win a \$15 Visa gift card. An anticipated benefit of participating in this study is that higher education professionals who read it will have a better understanding of learning disabled students’ transition from high school to college. Such insight may lead to higher quality resources, more qualified professionals, and more efficient transitions for this student population.

During the course of the study, you will be updated about any new information that may affect whether you are willing to continue taking part in the study. If new information is learned that may affect you, you will be contacted. There is no cost to participating in this study. You will not be paid per interview, but if you complete both interviews, you will be entered into a raffle to win a \$15 Visa gift card.

All efforts will be made to keep your personal information in your research record confidential, but total confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. Your personal information may be given out, if required by law. Presentations and publications to the public and at scientific conferences and meetings will not use your name and other personal information. Your name will not appear in the study. After the interview is typed and saved on Margaret Bonanni’s laptop, the recording will be deleted. Only Margaret Bonanni will have access to the data.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or you may change your mind at any time. If you do not want to enter the study or decide to stop participating, your relationship with the study staff will not change, and you may do so without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

You may also withdraw your consent for the use of data already collected about you, but you must do this in writing to Margaret Bonanni. You can email her at [Bonann25@students.rowan.edu](mailto:Bonann25@students.rowan.edu). If you decide to withdraw from the study for any reason, you may be asked to participate in one meeting with the Principal Investigator.

If you have any questions about taking part in this study or if you feel you may have suffered a research related injury, you can call the principle investigator at:

Burton Sisco  
Educational Services & Leadership Department  
856.256.3717

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you can call:

Office of Research  
(856) 256-5150 – Glassboro/CMSRU

**What are your rights if you decide to take part in this research study?**

You have the right to ask questions about any part of the study at any time. You should not sign this form unless you have had a chance to ask questions and have been given answers to all of your questions.

---

**AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE**

I have read this entire form, or it has been read to me, and I believe that I understand what has been discussed. All of my questions about this form or this study have been answered.

Subject Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Subject Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Investigator/Individual Obtaining Consent:**

To the best of my ability, I have explained and discussed the full contents of the study including all of the information contained in this consent form. All questions of the research subject and those of his/her parent or legal guardian have been accurately answered.

Investigator/Person Obtaining Consent: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**ROWAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD  
AUDIO/VIDEOTAPE ADDENDUM TO CONSENT FORM**

You have already agreed to participate in a research study conducted by Dr. Burton Sisco. We are asking for your permission to allow Margaret Bonanni to record your responses using an audio recording device as part of that research study. You do not have to agree to be recorded in order to participate in the main part of the study. An alternative is to have your answer transcribed with pen and paper.

The recording(s) will be used for analysis by Margaret Bonanni in her master's thesis, *Students with Learning Disabilities' Transition from High School to College*. The audio recording(s) will include your answers to the interview questions for both interview schedules. Your name and other identifiable information, will not be recorded. The recordings will be stored in Margaret Bonanni's laptop until they are transcribed. They will then be deleted. Your signature on this form grants the investigator named above permission to record you as described above during participation in the above-referenced study. The investigator will not use the recording(s) for any other reason than that/those stated in the consent form without your written permission.

**AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE**

I have read this entire form, or it has been read to me, and I believe that I understand what has been discussed. All of my questions about this form or this study have been answered.

Subject Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Subject Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Investigator/Individual Obtaining Consent:

To the best of my ability, I have explained and discussed the full contents of the study including all of the information contained in this consent form. All questions of the research subject and those of his/her parent or legal guardian have been accurately answered.

Investigator/Person Obtaining Consent: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_