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Easing transition: A resource for high school students with disabilities as they transition into college

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as they transition into college

By

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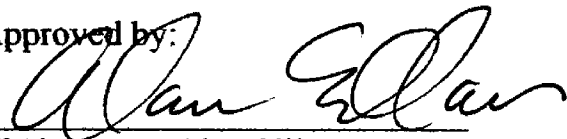
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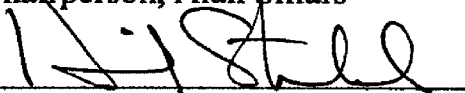
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ABSTRACT

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Easing Transition: A resource for high school students with disabilities as they transition into college

Advisor: Dr. Alan L. Sillars

   The purpose of this study was to create a resource that high school students with disabilities could consult as they are preparing for college to assist in their transition. After investigating the various transitional programs already in place and the dynamics at play in developing relationships for people with disabilities, it was found that there was no discussion of how developing relationships effects the transition process for students with disabilities. As a result, this study investigated the various tensions in relationships a student with a disability may encounter within a university. Seventeen individuals were interviewed to get as wide of a range of experiences as possible. The data was used to demonstrate how the experiences fit within a discussion of communication-based principles and theory as well as the transitioning process. The resource produced from the findings addresses the many practical concerns a student with a disability should be aware of as well as the relational dynamics they may be presented with as they transition into college. The resource's goal is to assist in providing students with the necessary tools to transition into an accessible, healthy, and successful college environment.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my mother and father for the continued love and support throughout all of my college years. Without their presence and influence, I certainly would not have gone this far. Second, I would like to thank all my friends in and outside the university (including Renata, Stool, Vandy, King, Kingo, Nick, Champ Sand, Gange, Bucy, Knudson, and Paul Cobalt). They provided me with enough humor, love, and attention so I would not get lost along the way. I would also like to thank my advisor, Alan Sillars, for his input and support. I thank Melanie Trost for her attention to detail and understanding ear. I thank Darrell Stolle for saving me in a crunch and being a wonderful resource. I thank Dan Burke for supplying me with an endless amount of detail, information, and laughter. I also thank him for letting me vent my frustrations without ever judging them. He is a huge asset to the University of Montana and the students with disabilities who attend this fine institution.

Last, I would like to thank all my colleagues for providing me with people to make fun of but also rely on for support. To Jessie, that just doesn't make any sense at all. To Rowland, thanks for making me think in ways I didn't think imaginable. To Becca, for helping me practice my cheerleading moves. To Heather "B.S." Michail, you'll graduate someday. To Kenna, beware the dentist. To Shawna, for speaking her mind. To Amanda, Matt, and Jenn, we leave the office in good hands.

After six years at the University of Montana, my time draws to a close. I will take with me from here a love for Montana, for Missoula, and, most importantly, for the Grizzlies. Here's to the 2003 Division I-AA National Champions in football, The University of Montana Grizzlies.

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Elizabeth Shin was the salutatorian of her graduating class in Manhattan, New York. She struggled with the decision about what post-secondary school to attend, Yale, Harvard or M.I.T. Since she wanted to find cures for diseases, although she was not exactly sure what disease that might be, she decided M.I.T. was the logical fit. During her first year, Elizabeth struggled with depression and had manic episodes where she contemplated her own death. In an environment where success was so highly esteemed, Elizabeth struggled to achieve high marks. However, she managed to survive her first year. That summer she worked at her family friend's law firm and showed no apparent signs of depression, but the thoughts of her own death still lingered in her mind. Her parents were completely clueless. She returned to M.I.T. in the fall and continued to struggle in school but she worked hard and managed. She was open about her manic depression and sought help from multiple sources, resident assistants, clinical psychologists, deans, faculty and peers but none seemed to offer the consolation she sought. In early April of 1998, Elizabeth Shin set herself on fire inside her dorm room and died a couple of days later. Her parents have filed a $27 million wrongful death lawsuit against M.I.T. with the accusation that they failed to provide adequate mental health care.

Is M.I.T. to blame for Elizabeth Shin's death? That decision will ultimately be left up to the courts to decide. However, the finger of blame could be pointed at one of many culprits. Elizabeth was extremely open about her disability to many people. Perhaps her resident assistants should have recognized the cry for help, or maybe faculty members should have offered the solace that was needed to negotiate the accommodations her disability required. The simple fact is that they could not. They did

not possess the experience, knowledge or understanding of disability or were unable to negotiate their own understanding of disability and how it affected an extremely important interpersonal relationship. If they could have done so perhaps Elizabeth Shin would still be alive.

I, by no means, wish to cast blame on an institution for such a horrific tragedy, but I would like to look at all of the parties that may have been involved in Elizabeth Shin's untimely death. It is absurd to accuse a professor for her death simply because he or she did not possess the skills or knowledge necessary to properly accommodate Ms. Shin. Professors are confronted with hundreds of unique experiences and circumstances presented to them by their students, and being prepared to adequately adjust to each is an insane request. It is also ridiculous to implicate a resident assistant because he or she was unable to render the proper advice or comfort needed to rationalize Ms. Shin's experiences and concerns specific to her disability. Resident assistants are, at the same time, undergoing the same maturation process and are confronted with many of the same issues. It seems unfair to require them to maintain the ability to counsel issues of such high magnitude. In Ms. Shin's case, it does not appear that the finger of blame can be pointed at any single culprit. Rather than mandating that every person who may have had an encounter with an individual with a disability be sufficiently prepared to deal with the hundreds of varying experiences and types of disability, perhaps the student should be given the proper education and preparation so their transition into college does not have the same tragic ending as that of Elizabeth Shin.

Granted, Ms. Shin's case is extreme. She had an extreme disability and attended a school where high levels of stress are expected and anticipated. However, if Ms. Shin

flunked out of school because she was ill-prepared for college due to the unique circumstances that an individual with a disability experiences, it seems highly unfair. The skills necessary to compete at the collegiate level and to transition into college must be imparted to students before they set foot upon a university campus. Circumstances and dynamics at play for individuals with disabilities should be accounted for in a unique guide for transitioning into college. This research will be focused on developing a resource that is aimed at easing transition into college for high school students with disabilities. It will address the transition process in two regards. First, the resource will focus on some of the practical aspects of college that individuals need to be aware of such as documentation of their disability, knowing the laws, and where and how to seek accommodations. Secondly, the research will highlight some key aspects of the varying interpersonal relationships individuals will encounter within a collegiate setting. It will also focus on how tensions can be decreased to ensure that the comfort level in the new setting can be increased. Ultimately, the goal of this research is to continue the endeavor of equaling the playing field of post-secondary education so that all individuals have an accessible and comfortable learning environment.

Rationale[1]

There are three major issues that make this research important. First, disability is and can be viewed as a taboo topic in today's society, regardless of whether or not it is in the media or the classroom. More studies need to be done to bring issues relevant to

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[1] In dialogue within the disability community, especially professionals who work in university settings, the anagrams SWD and SWOD are used to refer to students with disabilities and students without disabilities. Also, PWD and PWOD are used to refer to people with disabilities and people without disabilities. Throughout this paper, similar acronyms will be used to refer to the same populations.

PWD to the forefront. Second, the transition into college can be stressful for any individual, even if they do not have a disability. If university systems are going to promote an inclusive environment, addressing issues pertinent to the section of their student population with disabilities is essential to stay within the guidelines put forth by the law. Lastly, the way disability is talked about within high schools compared to college is quite different. There are certain considerations that need to be taken into account to help transitioning high schoolers recognize the differences between high school and college environments.

Disability as Taboo

Today, disability has become a taboo subject for discussion or comment (Longmore & Umansky, 2001; Williams, 1994). It seems as though there is more public advocacy for other stigmatized groups (e.g., individuals who are gay or lesbian) than there is for SWD. Evidence for this phenomenon can be witnessed within most university communities including The University of Montana.[2] In the researcher's experiences, rallies sponsored by the Lambda Alliance are far better attended than similar rallies sponsored by the Alliance for Disability and Students at the University of Montana (ADSUM). This suggests that the homosexual community is more willing to actively display their minority characteristics than the disability community. More generally, the disability rights movement seems to lack the veracity and visibility of other social movements. The disability rights movement may lack these qualities due to the fact that there is really no strong adversarial group (Shapiro, 1994). For instance, the women's

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[2] The contexts referred to mostly throughout this research project are the experiences the researcher had while working with individuals with disabilities over a 5 and a half year period at the University of Montana. There are over 700 students on the University of Montana campuses who are registered with Disability Services for Students.

suffrage movement and African American rights movement had strong advocates on the opposite side, urging the country to strongly adhere to the beliefs and legislation that were already in place. In the case of disabilities, there are no advocates against equal access and opportunity. Not having an antagonist, however, is not necessarily a good thing. Perhaps if there were strong advocates against removing barriers that restrict individuals with disabilities from fully participating in society, the issues would become more visible.

Regardless of the players who could be involved in such a debate, there is already legislation in place that prohibits discrimination in work and educational environments, although these requirements are hard to enforce due to monetary restrictions and shortcomings. Yet, despite legislation and no true adversary, there still seems to be discomfort that arises in interpersonal relationships when a person with a disability and a person without a disability interact (Braithwaite & Thompson, 2000). There seems to be a strong dynamic in these particular relationships that is not present in other, non-disabled/non-disabled or disabled/disabled interactions. There is a bit of unfamiliarity that keeps relationships from developing into healthy, nourishing relationships because each group is not sure how one perceives the other. These very issues are critical to bring out and discuss because they play an important role in how well young adults with disabilities transition into new environments, specifically into a university setting.

Transitions are Stressful

College years are extremely stressful for young adults. Going to college involves changing one's lifestyle and adapting to surroundings that are terrifically foreign particularly if one leaves home to do so. It requires accepting responsibility for one's

own education and development. It requires breaking out of the social mold developed in high school and forming new, healthy social relationships. These years become even more stressful when a student needs to actively seek accommodations for a disability. It is time consuming, it requires the juggling of many different people, events and times, and it is an experience that the majority of people do not have to encounter. To make matters even worse, in the process of managing all those responsibilities, SWD are often confronted with a sense of uneasiness or discomfort if the other person in the relationship has never interacted with a SWD before (Braithwaite & Thompson, 2000).

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 requires that universities strive for equal access and opportunity for students with disabilities. Universities frequently interpret that law as only requiring the destruction of physical barriers, such as adding an elevator or making a bathroom door wider. However, if a barrier to access and opportunity is created simply because there is an automatic stigma placed on a SWD by PWOD, although not explicitly stated within the ADA, it can and must be eliminated. If a transition plan is incorporated into high schools, students could be better equipped with the necessary skills needed to facilitate their transition into college and into new interpersonal relationships. This research will ultimately assist in the creation of equal access and opportunity for all students.

Talk About Disability

Lastly, research of this nature is necessary because there is a key difference in how disability is talked about within high schools compared to universities. First, according to Dan Burke (personal communication, February 18, 2003), Access Coordinator at The University of Montana, there is a paternalistic way of speaking to and

about SWD in high schools that leads to the infantilization of those students. In turn, when these students advance onto the collegiate level, they expect the same type of conversations and expect to be handled in the same child-like manner. However, as most students can attest to, this is certainly not the case. Students are expected to integrate themselves into college groups, dorms, classrooms, and the environment as a whole with little assistance from outside. This inconsistency that students encounter in the way they are treated can be a traumatic experience. To address this inconsistency, literature and discussion needs to be introduced into high schools.

Second, students not only need to be aware that there is, in fact, a difference; they need to be cued into the way disability is talked about in the university community. Within the disability community, there are rules and established ways for people to participate in successful communicative conduct. The way people talk, the words that individuals use, and the meaning assigned to contexts and situations are extremely specific within the disability community. For instance, "motherly" styles of communicating are heavily discouraged. For example, some individuals within the disability community who have direct contact with students try to offer as much assistance as possible. If a SWD needs a certain accommodation for the classroom, rather than encouraging the individual to seek those accommodations on his or her own, the PWOD who is offering "assistance" might seek out the accommodations for the student instead. The use of "motherly" styles of communication violates two major notions about the way in which talk is used within the community; talk is meant to promote self-determination and self-advocacy.

The disability community also has their own set of words and phrases. Words commonly heard within the community are "accommodating," "accessibility," "mainstreaming" and "empowering." There are also some words that are never used. For instance, the word "retarded" or any variation of the word is never used and would be sanctioned heavily if it was used. Individuals within the community attempt to promote an inclusive and healthy environment for all of its participants and the use of the word "retarded" is derogatory and offensive. Thus, its use restricts the inclusiveness of the environment. Although this is only one example, students should be aware that there is a difference in the way people are expected to talk and go about accommodating their own personalized experiences.

Easing Transition

Thus, the purpose of this investigation and creation of a resource is to give those SWD who are preparing for college as much knowledge as possible about the various differences and dynamics at play within a university setting. If students are offered an educational tool that addresses the concerns that produce uncertainty, in the future, universities can prevent another "Elizabeth Shin" incident from happening. Ultimately, the goal of this project is to create a model that would not only assist students but enable a university to create an inclusive, accessible, and healthy environment for all students.

The audience for this research should be university communities over the entire United States. Although the data collected in this research does not necessarily suggest generalizablity, the information presented should at least be of interest to those concerned with the issues presented. Each individual at a university should be inherently concerned with creating the best environment for all students. In order for such an environment to

exist, the community at large must be receptive and perceptive of the feelings and ideas of those who are a little different from the majority (Fries, 1997). The intended audience for this study, then, includes those who actually care about creating a healthy, accessible, inclusive, and productive environment in a university setting.

It should be abundantly clear by now that there is, indeed, not only a need for a continued discussion of disability but also a dialogue between high school students with disabilities who plan on entering college and the colleges they wish to attend. For that dialogue to be productive and for the students' transition to be as smooth as possible, the following research questions will be answered in order to create an inclusive and educational resource for easing transition:

RQ1: What information do high school students with disabilities, their school counselors and teachers need to know about college to properly prepare them for the transition?

RQ2: What methods do individuals with disabilities utilize to reduce uncertainty and successfully enter into social relationships and groups within a university setting?

RQ3: What obstacles occur that hinder the transition process and what strategies can be used to eliminate those obstacles?

With these questions in mind, a literature review will now be presented that will focus on the issues presented in the research questions. The review will also offer some initial speculation on answers that may arise within the research.

Literature Review

This review will attempt to accomplish several things. It will start with a discussion of communication theory that provides a foundation for transition programs. A discussion of both social penetration theory and uncertainty reduction theory will be presented, highlighting the aspects of those theories that are applicable within this context. Then, the issues that are specifically related to the study of disability and how they effect and are shaped by the interpersonal dynamics present in relationships will be discussed. Lastly, transition programs will be discussed. First, transition will be defined, followed by an overview of transition programs already instituted within the United States. As the reader will soon realize, a discussion of the interpersonal dynamics present within the transition process is absent in almost any form in any of the transition programs already in practice.

Social Penetration Theory

Altman and Taylor's (1973) social penetration theory has been used quite extensively over the years to talk about the ways in which individuals enter into social relationships. They assert that there are multiple layers of personality within each human psyche. It is only through allowing the partner in an interpersonal dyad to penetrate through those layers that an interpersonal bond and connection can be created and maintained. The surest way to penetrate those layers is through self-disclosure. However, disclosing information can also lead to vulnerability. Exposing certain bits of information about one's self can also show individualized weaknesses. To be able to disclose this type of information, a person needs to be comfortable in the relationship.

Griffin (2000) articulates this idea by saying that the "depth of penetration [equals the] degree of intimacy" (p. 128).

Altman and Taylor (1973) develop four propositions about how and when penetration occurs in relationships. First, they assert that peripheral items are exchanged more frequently than more private information. By exchanging peripheral information, individuals are able to feel out the relationship and decide whether or not disclosing more personal information is appropriate or necessary for the relationship to continue. Second, they state that disclosure should be reciprocal in nature. Typically, individuals demonstrate equal levels of openness. If one person does not reciprocate disclosure then the relationship will likely remain at its current stage and will not increase in closeness. Third, Altman and Taylor state that penetration happens quickly at the beginning of the relationship but begins to decelerate as the relationship moves forward. This deceleration is important to address because individuals may become discouraged to continue disclosing important relational information because they feel the current status of the relationship has plateaued. However, it can be quite the opposite in reality; it is just that the two people have reached a state that does not allow for the disclosure of any further personal information. Last, the authors assert that de-penetration can occur. In this case, individuals stop talking about information or feelings that they were previously open to talk about. This step can be a clear indicator the relationship is heading towards failure.

Throughout this process, individuals are consistently weighing the costs and benefits of staying within the relationship. If the benefits outweigh the costs, the individual is likely to continue on in the relationship but if the reverse is true, people are likely to stop disclosing information and pull themselves out of the relationship.

According to Griffin (2000), "[e]xperiences that take place early in a relationship can have a huge impact because they constitute a large proportion of the total relational history" (p. 132). Individuals are continually restructuring and reframing their relationships based upon these past experiences as well as new encounters. If there comes a point where an outside alternative becomes more attractive to an individual, it is unlikely the relationship will continue. The need for social penetration is rooted firmly in the notion that the relationship is worth saving for some reason. It can be quite tricky to balance all the requirements in order to successfully enter into new relationships.

There are many studies that look at how social penetration functions in new relationships (Vanlear, 1987, 1991; Berg, 1984). These studies look at the varying obstacles that people encounter when attempting to penetrate other people's personalities and mesh these personalities with their own. However, the discussion of social penetration should not be limited to interpersonal relationships. The propositions and ideas of social penetration theory as put forth by Altman and Taylor (1973) can easily be transferred to looking at how individuals successfully penetrate social groups. The same dynamics are required if an individual wants to gain acceptance within a certain population. The present research is concerned with both phenomena. It is important to understand how people integrate themselves into new interpersonal relationships but also how they penetrate new social groups.

Uncertainty Reduction Theory

Berger (1975), in his uncertainty reduction theory, posited that it is natural for individuals to feel uncertain about predicting the outcomes of initial interactions. Berger states, "central to the present theory is the assumption that when strangers meet, their

primary concern is one of uncertainty reduction or increasing predictability about the behavior of both themselves and others in the interaction" (p. 100). Our struggle to reduce uncertainty in relationships is motivated by three conditions: anticipation of future interaction, incentive value (they have something we want), and deviance (they act in a peculiar way). To motivate efforts at uncertainty reduction, each of these three conditions should be present. However, when entering new relationships, we are met with a few different types of uncertainty. First, we possess behavioral uncertainty; that is, we are not sure of how to act in new encounters. Second, we have cognitive uncertainty; that is, we are unsure of our perceptions of the other person and we spend time trying to figure him or her out.

Berger and Calabrese (1975) also set up a series of seven axioms (an eighth was introduced later) that explain the role of certainty in initial interactions. Axiom 1 states that as verbal disclosiveness between strangers increases, uncertainty decreases. Axiom 2 states that when nonverbal expressiveness increases, certainty also increases. Axiom 3 states that high levels of uncertainty motivate individuals to seek out new information. Axiom 4 states that uncertainty decreases if the content disclosed becomes more personal. Axiom 5 states that high levels of personal disclosure are reciprocated and low levels of personal disclosure are also reciprocated. Axiom 6 states that discovering similarities increases certainty, whereas locating dissimilarities increases uncertainty. Axiom 7 states that increase of certainty produces liking, whereas an increase of uncertainty promotes dislike. Finally, Axiom 8 states that sharing communication networks with other people within a certain context can increase certainty. These axioms are important because decreasing uncertainty is one of the primary goals within

developing interpersonal relationships. Thus, individuals should be keenly aware of uncertainty reduction phenomena.

Berger (1979) goes on to tell how individuals can begin to account for uncertainty reduction phenomena and prepare themselves for their occurrence. First, individuals need to seek out information about the person they will interact with. This can be accomplished in three ways. Passive observance, or watching from a distance, is one way to garner information about another. Also, active pursuance of information by asking a third party is another way to seek out new information. Last, an interactive style, or face-to-face communication is another way to find out information and decrease uncertainty within relationships.

Individuals also choose a plan for presenting information about themselves in these varying types of interaction. They decide the level of detail they wish to disclose in initial interactions and may have a contingency plan or plans if the original plan does not work. Last, individuals may practice hedging. Hedging is one way to save face for both participants and can be accomplished by using ambiguous language or perhaps humor to distract from the amount of uncertainty between two individuals.

Berger and Calabrese's (1975) ideas and their set of axioms were only speculative in nature. Kellermann and Reynolds (1990) were interested in testing these axioms and motivations for uncertainty reduction in actual relationships. They found that deviant behavior plays a different role that Berger and Calabrese anticipated. They found that continued deviant behavior actually makes individuals less likely to attempt to reduce the amount of uncertainty in their relationship. In response to axiom 3, the authors state, "despite the intuitive appeal that this axiom has, level of uncertainty simply did not

correlate with information seeking" (p. 67). Thus, although deviant behavior may play in a role in the initial curiosity of an individual, it does not play a role in motivating individuals toward reducing uncertainty.

A number of studies do apply Berger's uncertainty reduction theory to initial interactions in various contexts (Kramer, 1994; Neuliep & Grohskopf, 2000; Douglas, 1990; Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985; Ayres, 1979; Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). Most of this research is concerned with ways in which uncertainty is reduced in interactions and, as a result, produces liking. It seems appropriate to consider these dynamics in interpersonal relationships within a university setting as well as keeping in mind the actual role deviant behavior plays. Ultimately, most people experience discomfort when approaching a professor, administrator, and so forth, because they experience some level of uncertainty about that particular relationship. The present research narrows the focus even more however. This research assumes that the dynamics of uncertainty reduction and social penetration are different for individuals with disabilities. The following review will show exactly how those dynamics differ and where they might be may manifested.

Why Study Disability? What's different?

First, the continued study of disability seems timely at this point. Over the last few years, there have been numerous appeals to the Supreme Court to extend the definition of disability that is outlined in Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. *Sutton vs. United Airlines, Inc.* (1999), *Albertson's Inc. vs. Kirkingburg* (1999), and *Bragdon vs. Abbott* (1998) are all examples of cases in which the Supreme Court has been forced to discern what the law outlines as a

disability. One of the most recent cases, *Toyota vs. Williams* (2002), deals with a worker who was limited in her capacity to perform a specific task on the job due to carpal tunnel syndrome. The disease in her wrists restricted her from lifting weights over 20 pounds. The court specifically looked at the definition of "substantially limits" and "major life activity" as defined through legislation. Sandra Day O'Connor wrote the court's opinion: "When addressing the major life activity of performing manual tasks, the central inquiry must be whether the (person) is unable to perform the tasks associated with her specific job" (Fawcett, 2002, p. 1). The court ruled in favor of Toyota and dismissed Williams' claims of discrimination.

Even though this ruling and most cases before the Supreme Court deal predominantly with whether or not physical impairments restrict individuals from participating in the work force or in an educational setting, it seems appropriate to extend the definition of "major life activity." With the decreasing strength of our nation's economy and unstable work force coupled with an already high employment rate, attending college can be considered a major life activity. Going even further, making the process to attend college as smooth and easy as possible should be a consideration for all types of people, especially if there are key dynamics at play that are different for SWD.

Regardless of whether or not attending college should be considered a major life activity under the law, the simple fact remains that individuals with disabilities do attend college and something needs to be in place to assist in their transition. Transition plans are in place for all students, as evidenced by the activities and information covered in college orientations and preparatory handbooks. Why bother making a new one simply for a section of that larger population? The simple answer is that there are different

dynamics at play for SWD in their transition into new interpersonal relationships and into college life. These issues need to be addressed in some format so that students are adequately alerted and prepared.

Dialectical Tensions for PWD

Braithwaite and Thompson (2000) discuss "communication and the management of dialectical tensions in personal relationships of people with disabilities" (p. 17). Braithwaite and Thompson discuss the differences between types of relationships and the inherent dynamics present in each category of relationship. They were specifically concerned with friendships but the categories are generalizeable enough to extend into interpersonal relationships experienced in different contexts. According to Braithwaite and Thompson, "friendships are especially important because, unlike nonvoluntary relationships of the family, the voluntary nature of friendships can be taken as an indication of 'true caring' versus obligation" (p. 20). The majority of relationships that SWD may encounter in a university community are much like the nonvoluntary relationships Braithwaite and Thompson write about.

Moving on, Braithwaite and Harter employ a dialectical perspective that, according to Montgomery (1993), "sees the natural state of relationships as change, fluctuation, evolution and movement. Stability is but a momentary transition in a stream of continuous change" (p. 208). Understanding these dialectical tensions is important because to manage these relationships, individuals have to be constantly aware of their evolutionary process, adjusting for obstacles and unforeseen shifts along the way.

Braithwaite and Thompson (2000) go on to develop three interrelated, dialectical pairs: autonomy-connection, openness-closedness, and stability-change. These

dialectical tensions play a significant role in the way individuals with disabilities develop interpersonal relationships. Braithwaite and Thompson explain that autonomy and connection implies that "all parties seek to manage the need to be simultaneously independent and dependent of one another" (p. 21). Autonomy-connection is a salient dialectic when an interpersonal relationship involves PWD because, no matter how severe the disability is, there is some inherent need for assistance or accommodation. The tension between autonomy and connection is reinforced if a negotiation of that extra assistance or accommodation is not addressed and accounted for. The second dialectical tension, openness versus closedness, is even more difficult for individuals with disabilities because they

> want more than anything to get through five minutes of conversation without having the subject come up at all. Most disabled persons would like a reference to that part of their life come in a conversation as casually as any one might mention their ability to swim or play the tuba. (p. 26)

When and where to disclose information becomes the most important aspect of managing ongoing interpersonal relationships with respect to openness-closedness. Whether or not partners are either open or closed in their communication comments greatly on the success of that particular relationship. The last tension Braithwaite and Thompson (2000) identify is stability versus change. The authors state, "this tension is predicated on the assumption that individuals desire stable characteristics in relationship, while at the same time being stimulated by spontaneity, novelty, and change" (p. 29). While individuals with disabilities seek stability in their relationships, they still yearn for

variance and challenges so they may test the boundaries and strengths of those relationships.

These dialectical tensions suggest unique attributes in developing relationships between PWD and PWOD that could have a direct effect on how well individuals transition into college and develop interpersonal relationships once at school. Braithwaite (1991) discusses some other issues that may cause tensions to arise within developing relationships between PWD and PWOD. She states, "disclosure is a salient issue for persons with disabilities in their new relationships with ablebodied persons" (p. 255). She continues by saying, "the perceived demand for information about the disability would most likely occur in the initial meeting or within the first few interactions with a newly-met ablebodied person" (p. 255). Her study reveals strategies PWD utilized to manage the amount of disclosure that takes place in initial encounters. For PWD to successfully engage in productive communication, the PWD needs to understand the amount of disclosure needed for that relationship and make the necessary steps to disclose the appropriate amount. She summarizes her results as, "these strategies were discussed as regulating privacy boundaries, whereby disabled persons seek to be acknowledged as 'persons first' by controlling dissemination of private information" (p. 254). It seems that regulating the amount of information that is disclosed in initial conversations during the development of a relationship could have a strong impact on whether or not people where capable or willing to develop an interpersonal relationship. The tension between the need for disclosure about a disability and the need to be acknowledged as a human first can be tricky to accommodate for PWD.

Identity Issues for PWD

Merrigan (2000) continues the discussion of dynamics that have an impact on developing relationships when a PWD is involved. Her research is focused on ways in which PWD need to manage their own identity in order to successfully enter a new relationship. She views identity as self-conception that is rooted "with the images of that person by others" (p. 224). Merrigan identifies four disability-related identity problems that most PWD encounter when faced with new social situations. Although a conception rooted in an individual's unique and personal experiences, identity formation and management require the negotiation and justification of other's perceptions of the PWD. The four issues she presents that can affect this process are the stigmatizing of disability, face-threats, incompetent and inadequate support, and cultural cohesion.

Goffman (1963) identified stigma as meaning "an undesired differentness" (p. 5). Taylor (2000) continues by stating that "a stigma is not merely a difference but a characteristic that deeply discredits a person's moral character" (p. 60). Numerous studies show that a stigma is placed on individuals with disabilities and, as a result, these individuals are rejected from society (Goffman, 1963; Bogdan & Taylor, 1994; Braginsky and Braginsky, 1971; Coleman, 1997). Smart (2001) adds that the stigma includes "emotional responses by people without disabilities to people who have disabilities [such as] fear, loathing, ambivalence, admiration, idolization, and paternalism" (Smart in Beagan, p. 120). Merrigan (2000) claims that work and research about disability has led to the stigmatizing of the word "disability" and that the stigma does not necessarily stem from an individual's own unique experiences. PWD are subject to beliefs and expectations of others and are unable to adjust and change those

presuppositions. PWOD enter relationships with these stigmatizing expectations for PWD behavior even if those behaviors would not have manifested themselves naturally though interaction.

Merrigan (2000) identifies the second identity issue PWD encounter as being the need to account for face needs. Face needs can be both positive and negative. Positive face needs are when individuals desire to be liked or respected. Negative face needs, on the other hand, refer to the desire of an individual to be autonomous. PWD are stuck in a peculiar dichotomous situation. On one hand, PWD need to prove they can be autonomous. Being autonomous is the first step to fending off feelings produced through a socially established stigma placed on disability, while still trying to elicit the admiration and respect of their counterpart within an interpersonal relationship. Balancing these face needs can be quite cumbersome and often times ineffective.

Another identity problem Merrigan (2000) identifies is the presence of incompetent and inadequate support. Often times, in educational settings, instructors take on the role of a nurturer with their SWD. As a result, they lower performance expectations and the face needs of the student are threatened as a result (p. 226).

The last identity problem Merrigan suggests is the lack of cultural cohesion. PWD have to manage the tension between their desires to be part of a collective group of individuals with disabilities, at the same time that they share the aspiration to be part of the larger collective. Negotiating this balance can cause a great deal of discomfort and apprehension on the part of the PWD.

Relationship Issues for PWD

In an explicit study of how SWD enact relationships, Strauss (2002) found three major themes that emerged when discussing past relationships that SWD had encountered within a university community. The three themes were disclosure, reciprocity and proximity. Each theme surfaced in interviews conducted with students as they commented upon relationships that had either failed or survived in their collegiate tenure. In relation to disclosure, Strauss found that the willingness of a PWD to disclose very personal information indicated the amount of trust the individual had in the relationship and how secure they were with the other person, as well as their own disability. Reciprocity functioned in different ways within different contexts. Reciprocity could be a way of making the playing field level so that the PWD did not feel as though they were being treated as a lesser being. It could also serve as a way for others to think that the PWD was not taking advantage of the fact that they had a disability. Reciprocity is important so that interpersonal relationships do not become imbalanced in the amount of investment each participant puts into the dyad. The last theme, proximity, is best defined as how close an individual is, either in experience or knowledge, to a certain disability. Proximity functions differently in every interaction and relationship. More often than not, however, the closer people are to experiencing a disability, the more likely they are to be comfortable at the initial stages of a relationship with a PWD. How that proximity is created is dependent upon the individual. It could be that someone's own brother had a disability or even that the individual him or herself was temporarily disabled. Whatever the case, the more experience and proximity there is, the more comfort there is as a result.

Worley (2000) talked specifically about "communication and students with disabilities on college campuses" (p. 125). He discussed context variables that exist on college campuses and how each might create barriers for PWD and relationships. The political climate of the day is the first variable. There are an increasing number of students with disabilities, over 880,000 in 1993 (p. 131). The removal of barriers, in this instance, becomes a financial burden. The second variable is interaction with college personnel. "Regardless of the generally positive response of nonfaculty personnel toward students with disabilities, these [disabled] students must actively seek assistance; they may be reluctant to do so because such action further emphasizes their disabilities over their personhood" (p. 131). Another variable is interaction with college peers. This variable is discussed in terms of how comfort level is directly affected by closeness, how PWD do not actively seek contact with peers, and that "nondisabled college students attribute fewer socially desirable traits to college students with disabilities due to persistent stereotypes born of both discomfort and social anxiety" (p. 132). Lastly, Worley comments specifically on the experiences of PWD by saying they "frequently encounter stigma, misunderstanding, social isolation, and attitudinal barriers in their interactions with nondisabled peers who are not friends" (p. 134).

Difficulties also arise from the communication abilities of PWOD. Hart and Williams (1995) suggest, "able-bodied individuals are unsure of how they should talk, what they should talk about, and whether people with disabilities are uncomfortable discussing their disability" (p. 140). Their goal is to help improve communication between teachers and students by examining the types of communication styles educators employ in the teaching setting. They created a list of four communicator types: the

avoider, the guardian, the rejecter, and the nurturer. Even though these categories are designed to suggest relationships between educators and students, they also seem general enough to extend them to other types of relationships. The avoider displays avoidance and generally nervous behavior when an individual with a disability is present. The guardian seeks to provide emotional, physical, or intellectual protection in an overly protective manner. The rejecter rejects the ability of the SWD and does not allow them to become a productive member of the class. The nurturer attempts to create an atmosphere that is supportive and encouraging. Hart and Williams conclude by saying, "students with disabilities are treated differently. Instructional communication practices, however, can and should facilitate equal treatment of those with disabilities in the classroom, and encourage similar practices in society" (p. 152).

As is demonstrated, there are many unique dynamics and variables that occur within the developing interpersonal relationships that can adversely or positively affect the relationship between PWOD and PWD. It is also quite clear that these unique dynamics fit quite accurately into a discussion of social penetration and uncertainty reduction, especially the role of self-disclosure. In order for PWD to be able to penetrate successfully into relationships and the university environment, and reduce the amount of uncertainty in those relationships, all of these dynamics must be addressed in some way or another. Next, a discussion of transitional plans that already exist and are practiced will occur. It should become evident that the unique dynamics and variables presented above are rarely addressed much less accounted for within the transitional guides.

Transition Guides Already in Place

The idea and definition of transition fluctuates across contexts and situations. It is, however, an idea that is consistently used within the disability community. It has been defined within legislation and its major goal varies within different situations. The Education of the Handicapped Act of 1975 was implemented in order to provide funding and awareness of special education needs. Amendments of this act in 1983 integrated ideas of transition for PWD as they were finishing school and entering the workforce. It defined transition as:

> a coordinated set of activities for a student, designed within an outcome oriented process which promotes movement from school to post school activities including post secondary education, vocational training,…integrated employment, continuing adult education, adult services, independent living or community services. The coordinated set of activities shall be based on the individual student's needs, taking into account the student's preferences and interests shall include: instruction, community experiences, the development of employment and other post school adult living objectives and when appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation. (Education of Handicapped Act)

As time has progressed, it has become more plausible for PWD to attend college rather than pursuing other post school activities. Over time, the implementation of various transition programs for PWD into education settings has increased. Today, many colleges have their own transition programs, often supported by disability support services and available for students to use if they choose. Presented below are a couple of

examples that reflect the type of transition program initiated by the Education of Handicapped Act[3].

First, the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights has created a transition program entitled: *Students with Disabilities Preparing for Postsecondary Education: Know your Rights and Responsibilities*. This guide was designed to answer frequently asked questions by SWD interested in attending postsecondary education. It first addresses ways in which the law sees accommodation differently in regard to secondary and postsecondary education and then talks about the application process and whether or not PWD can be denied simply because they have a disability. It then goes on to talk about what types of documentation are required by colleges in order to provide academic adjustments. Lastly, the program shows SWD what to do if they feel as though the school they are attending or teachers they have in the classroom are discriminating against them.

The University of North Carolina at Wilmington is one university that has a transition page on their website for students to utilize. Their guide is aimed at giving students an adequate amount of information so that their first semester is not as big of an adjustment as it could be. UNCW's Disability Services' first objective is to inform SWD about the various laws that play a role in school, the ADA, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. In this discussion, they highlight key differences between what the law requires for high schools and what the law requires for colleges. Understanding these differences is essential for students to

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[3] A comprehensive review of these programs is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the applicable content presented in these programs will be integrated into the transition program developed in this research.

understand their rights. Along the same lines, they also list the differences between the responsibilities of high schools compared to colleges and talks about the responsibilities of the students. In the last section, the UNCW's website offers a checklist for SWD so they know what to accomplish before the first day of class and what to expect once they are on campus.

The University of Montana has developed a transition program for parents called *Toto: I Have a Feeling We're Not in High School Anymore* (http://www.umt.edu/dss/ toto-01.html). This transition program has been adopted by many other schools as the one they present to incoming students and their parents. Even though it is aimed at parents, since they are the ones most concerned with a smooth transition into college for their child, the information is highly applicable for SWD themselves. This program starts with an introduction to the Land of Oz. "The fundamental principle at work [here] is the assumption of integration and that the individual student is responsible for themselves, and is not the responsibility of the institution" (p. 2). Asserting this key ideological shift is essential if students are to understand the differences between the way high schools compared to colleges view them as individuals. The guide then goes on to define some key laws and terms that have a direct bearing on the transition process, such "reasonable accommodation," "otherwise qualified," and "entitlements" versus "rights." The next sections are dedicated to help parents and their children understand their responsibilities and to inform them of the position and function of Disability Services for Students within the transition process. In the next parts of the transition guide, DSS makes reference to some unique instances that could have a major influence on the comfort of the SWD in

the university community. First, the guide discusses why the use of labels on individuals should not be discouraged or seen as stigmatizing constructs. DSS states,

> students with disabilities have every bit as much to contribute to the University
> and to society as any other group of individuals. Thus, it is important to change
> attitudes about disabilities. Rather than thinking of ourselves as abnormal, we
> acknowledge who we are as people with disabilities and insist that it is normal for
> us to attend The University of Montana-Missoula. (pg. 14)

Next, the guide addresses issues that involve how they adapt to their new living environment and how to manage relationships with instructors. Lastly, the guide sends the SWD "Off to See the Wizard." As they prepare for college, SWD and their parents begin to understand that there is a major difference in the way they will be perceived and accommodated in college. Making adjustments for these differences is key to how well they transition into the university community. "It's a world completely different from any other -- both strange and wonderful. As they enroll at the University of Montana-Missoula, the things that you and your student came to expect before, almost black and white at times, are gone. It's all in Technicolor now" (p. 20).

The University of Montana's transition guide begins to hint at the varying dynamics at play within key relationships that SWD will encounter. However, even though it does acknowledge that there are major differences between high school and college, it does not offer any strategies that SWD can practice before coming to school to help increase the likelihood that they will develop healthy and productive interpersonal relationships. Discovering the dynamics that play a role in developing relationships is where the research involved in this project takes off from previous transition resources.

Uncovering those dynamics is important to aid in a successful transition into school. To do so, the following methods will be employed.

Methods

The process through which the data was gathered for this research endeavor is discussed in this section. The respondents were selected to gain as many different perspectives on the topic of transition as possible. They were asked to participate in an interview and discuss their experiences and knowledge on the uniqueness of transition into college for students with disabilities. Questions were asked to collect two forms of data. First, practical suggestions for easing transition were addressed, followed by questions on the tensions that arise within the interpersonal relationships they encounter. The interviews were analyzed by repeatedly visiting the audio recordings and transcriptions to pull out all practical suggestions, questions, and themes that were present within the experiences of the participants.

A total of 17 interviews were conducted. Each person was selected with the knowledge that they did have some experiences dealing with the transition into college. The interviews took the form of what Lindlof (1995) describes as informant and narrative interviews. Informant interviews are when a "researcher will see certain people as more valuable than others for achieving the research objectives" (p. 170). Narrative interviews are defined as being "based on the premise that the events of our lives, and the events of groups and organizations, are communicated through storytelling" (p. 173). So interviewees did not only have to have the knowledge of the topic at hand but also needed to be able to relay stories that comment directly upon their experiences. So, the initial contact made with each prospective interviewee included a question regarding whether or

not they have experiences in relation to transitioning into college and whether or not they would be willing to comment upon those experiences.

The selection of participants was the most important issue in relation to this particular research endeavor. The participants needed to have a strong base of knowledge on the pressing issues concerning the transition into college, as well as some practical experience in the process. To capture different variables and experiences, the participants were selected from three different groups. First, it seemed most appropriate to interview the students who have experienced the transition first hand. Since these interviews were conducted with a "vulnerable population," the way in which their input and time was solicited and the maintenance of their confidentiality was of the utmost concern. To account for these concerns and gather a diverse sample of participants, a flyer was posted at Disability Services for Students at the University of Montana to identify volunteers. The flyer asked for student's participation and gave the researcher's contact information. Once students contacted the researcher, nine individuals were selected to pursue interviews with. The participants were selected on the basis of their year in school, with at least one representative from each possible grade category, freshman through senior. This method was employed to elicit varying experiences in regards to their experiences in a collegiate setting. It was assumed that individuals with greater experience in college would be capable of more directly pointing out issues and skills that would make the transition into college easier. On the other hand, those further away from high school might not be as effective at articulating the immediate concerns of individuals who have just recently entered the university setting.

The second group of individuals who were approached for interviews were the four coordinators who are employed by Disability Services for Students at the University of Montana. These individuals have constantly been exposed to issues related to the transition process through their interactions with parents, interested students, vocational rehabilitation counselors, and students enrolled in the university. They should be astute at highlighting issues, concerns, and suggestions for easing the transition into college.

The last group of individuals who were interviewed was a group of high school counselors and special education teachers. These individuals are the ones responsible for the initiation of the process to get high school students prepared for college and will be responsible for the administration of the resource created through this research. They offer a unique perspective because school counselors and special education teachers are the ones who need to receive the proper tools and skills necessary to adequately educate their college-bound students. This group consisted of various professionals from the five Missoula-area high schools: Hellgate, Sentinel, Big Sky, Loyola and Valley Christian High Schools. This group ultimately consisted of two school counselors and two special education teachers. Although the amount of data collected in this project many not overtly suggest generalizability, the participants selected had the knowledge and experience to comment credibly on the issues at hand.

The number of interviews completed was based upon requirements set forth by the type of research being conducted. In qualitative interviewing, completeness is sometimes judged based upon whether or not a researcher determines that he or she has reached the saturation point. This point is reached when "each additional interviewee [you interview] adds little to what you have already learned" (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p.

72). With saturation and completeness, a researcher is able to gain confidence that his or her assertions and claims could be general enough to be consistent within different experiences and circumstances. Saturation, however, was not a goal of this research. The major goal was to find as many diverse experiences so that students could be aware of what to expect upon entering college. Completeness, in this research, was achieved by finding a diverse sample in the amount of time allotted. A much larger and broader group of participants would have to be interviewed to achieve saturation.

Even though saturation was not a concern, the interviews were still conducted with other rules for qualitative research in mind. As Lindlof (1995) states, "anyone who participates in a study should (a) do so voluntarily, (b) be able to understand what the study demands of him or her, (c) be able to understand participation's risks and benefits, and (d) have the legal capacity to give consent" (p. 99). To maintain the integrity of this research project, a written consent form was constructed and given to each participant before an interview commenced addressing these very issues (See Appendix B for a copy of the written consent form). Interviews were then transcribed after all the interviews had been concluded and any tapes or documents that could compromise the participant's identity were destroyed. Further, the names of the participants were changed to pseudonyms to help maintain the confidentiality of the participants.

The interviews were structured in a way that promoted as much of a conversational style as possible. Barker and Galasinski (2001) suggest, "ethnography becomes less an expedition in search of 'the facts' and more a conversation between participants in an investigative process" (p. 9). Also, as Lindlof (1995) states,

Other kinds of interpersonal research focus on the concepts that underlie such forms of social life as family and friendship. In most of these studies, the self is conceptualized as relational and cultural in nature, rather than as a self-sufficient ego. Interest centers on the ways in which people describe their relational bonds, and the dilemmas and difficulties they encounter. (p. 13)

Lindlof is concerned with discovering information that is situated within a specific social context. Barker and Galasinski (2001) are concerned with finding out information by studying conversations rather than interviews. In the present research, these two types of ethnographic discovery were combined to create the type of interview that was conducted: a conversation about experiences and difficulties that are situated within a particular context and culture (See Appendix A for an interview schedule).

After the interviews were transformed into texts, a two-fold analysis of the narratives began to pull out themes that were consistent across the perspectives. First, the practical suggestions and questions were pulled out and addressed individually. They were addressed individually because not all people may have the same conceptualization of what is important in regards to transitioning into college. To gain as much of an inclusive resource as possible, all the ideas presented needed be addressed and accounted for. Second, in regard to the reduction of interpersonal tensions, a particular strategy was employed to pull out the pervasive and consistent themes. Denzin (1996) believes that narratives "should be a catalyst for social criticism and change that is mindful of its historical context and sensitive to human suffering. The purpose of using narratives is to elicit compassion and the greatest possible shared meaning" (Denzin, 1996, in Kjesbo,

2002). Keeping in mind the social stigma placed on individuals with disabilities, creating a shared meaning of experience is best produced by analyzing narratives.

Within these narratives, themes began to surface. To pull out these themes, Owen's (1984) scheme for investigating relational themes was employed. Relationship themes are defined as the "patterned semantic issue locus of concern around which a[n]...interaction centers. Themes, then, are less a set of cognitive schema than a limited range of interpretations that are used to conceptualize and constitute relationships" (p. 274). Whatever seems to be the focus or most concentrated concept within each interview was then translated into a theme by looking at three criteria: (1) recurrence, (2) repetition, and (3) forcefulness (Owen, p. 275). Recurrence occurred when two parts of a dialogue demonstrated the same meaning. Repetition involved the repetition of key words and sentences. Forcefulness referred to changes in voice inflection in order to signify importance.

After the themes were pulled out, the researcher contacted the participants to see whether or not the interpretations assigned to the narrative were appropriate and accurate. Lincoln and Guba (1985) state

> [t]he member check, whereby data, analytic categories, interpretations, and
>
> conclusions are tested with members of those stake holding groups from whom
>
> the data were originally collected, is the most crucial aspect of establishing
>
> credibility. (p. 314)

To simplify the process, the email addresses of the participants were procured after the interview ended and was used to contact each participant. Their particular narrative was emailed back to them, the way the researcher saw it functioning was articulated, and then

a response to the accuracy of that interpretation was requested. In every instance, the participants agreed that the interpretation was an accurate depiction of their thoughts and beliefs.

These themes are then discussed in relation to the ways in which they affected tension within the interpersonal relationships individuals encountered. Also, the themes are discussed in a way that addresses the research questions and concerns of this project.

Findings and Results

The data collected for this project was not intended to prove or disprove any of the theories or issues presented in the literature review. The intended use of the data is to create a resource for transitioning high school students. However, there were many instances in which the data does exemplify the dynamics presented by the various authors and theories. In the following section, the narratives that show the presence of these dynamics are presented. The findings that are new in this research will only be presented only in the resource guide attached as an appendix.

Social Penetration Theory

There was some evidence that suggested that the ideas behind social penetration theory play a role in developing relationships for SWD. Although these findings do not explicitly suggest the dynamics that Altman and Taylor (1973) discussed, they do comment on the process of social penetration. Students and professionals[4] commented in some instances about how they worked themselves into relationships or groups within the university community. For instance, one professional commented,

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[4] Students and professionals will be used from here on out to refer to the two main groups of participants. Students will refer to the nine students that were interviewed and professionals will refer to both the coordinators at Disability Services for Students and the Missoula-area school counselors and special education teachers.

What do people do when they develop relationships? They have something that brings them together in which they have to interact. With people with disabilities, it is sometimes hard because they don't know if you ever really get to know that person. Do you get beyond thinking of that person as having a disability? Simply put, people have to get something out of the relationship for them to work. One of the barriers is sometimes, people without disabilities think it would take a lot to be this person's friend and you wouldn't get much back. This quote exemplifies what Altman and Taylor were referring to when they discussed reciprocation occurring in relationships. In this particular example, it would appear that social penetration is unlikely to occur because the individuals participating in the relationship, especially the person without the disability, are not willing to reciprocate disclosure or investment.

Seeking out similarities and anticipating that participants will get something out of the relationship is definitely important in determining whether or not social penetration will occur. One student recollected about his first couple days on campus:

The first week, you know, I was interested in the typical things that you probably know about. All the aspects of college, people you'll meet, classes, roommate. I remember when I met my roommate, he was kind of shy, you know, now he is a good bud. When I came to college, I was really looking forward to meeting a bunch of nice girls. I've ended up making some good friends. I remember meeting guys on my dorm floor meeting that liked to fish and I said, "Oh, I like to fish too." Right away we had something to talk about and it was cool.

In this example, the participants in the interaction had something to disclose to each other immediately. As Altman and Taylor state, social penetration occurs like the peeling of the layers of an onion. Here, the information disclosed initially was really quite trivial but as their relationship progressed, and as they became closer, more personal anecdotes and information was disseminated.

Uncertainty Reduction Theory

Although there was some indication that social penetration does exist in relationships the participants experienced, ideas related to uncertainty reduction theory are much more salient and compelling. In many instances, participants talked specifically about reducing the amount of uncertainty in their relationships without any sort or prompt from the researcher. One student stated,

> I didn't know what to expect when I came to school. I didn't know how people would treat me and my confidence was pretty low at times. I didn't know how to interact with people. There was a lot of uncertainty for awhile. I was really uncertain on how to portray myself, I was uncertain about other people. I was really worried about getting rid of that uncertainty.

This student stated quite articulately what Berger and Calabrese (1973) were concerned within the development of their theory. This student would agree that removing the uncertainty in his relationships and environment was extremely important.

> When discussing new relationships, another student stated,
>
> They're unsure, you know, they're just not really sure. They are more afraid or what not. They don't really want to go asking (about my disability). You know,

> some people might take it personally and get really pissed and some are like, if
>
> you ask, hey, I'll let you know.

This statement reflects a solution for uncertainty reduction, which is highlighted in axiom four; uncertainty decreases if the content disclosed becomes more personal. The student with a disability is apparently ready to offer personal information about his disability in order to decrease the amount of uncertainty in the relationship.

Although Kellermann and Reynolds (1990) found that deviant behavior has an adverse effect on motivation for uncertainty reduction, there was some evidence in the narratives collected here that suggests otherwise. A professional discussed the importance of meeting people once at college:

> Discovering those relationships outside class are also very important. Those are
>
> the ones that are likely to last a long time. I remember sitting in a dorm the first
>
> day of class with a bunch of guys and a guy spilled his beer on me. He was
>
> embarrassed but we ended up becoming best friends and are still friends. Feeling
>
> those types of relationships out are as important as anything else.

Here, deviant behavior, the spilling of beer, served as the thrust for these two individuals to continue their relationship. In support of Kellermann and Reynolds, however, the deviant behavior did not continue after this instance so it is impossible to assert whether or not the relationship would have endured if the deviant behavior had continued. Berger and Calabrese were correct, based on this narrative, that deviant behavior can serve as initial motivation for uncertainty reduction.

This research does offer some new insight to looking at uncertainty reduction and perhaps even suggests another axiom. One student stated,

It's usually the other person that gets uncomfortable because they feel bad. But I don't care, I've been through this stuff. I usually laugh to help them feel more comfortable, I try to add comedy to the situation. Really people are pretty understanding. You know, you always run into a few that think highly of themselves or they are really not confident at all. I try to announce it better or spell it out for them. I have a disability. Sometimes I do get frustrated, but its life and you move on.

Axiom 9 could possibly state that, as humor is introduced in conversation, liking and certainty increases. The use of humor to ease tension was discussed on several occasions within the interviews. It does seem to serve well at reducing the amount of uncertainty and discomfort within a particular interaction especially for the person without a disability.

Dialectical Tensions

The results from this data do a good job of highlighting the dialectical tensions put forth by Braithwaite and Thompson (2000). It was encouraging to see these tensions played out within the interviews to help legitimize the interview structure and question development. There was evidence of each tension, but others seemed more salient than some. Presented here are the three tensions starting from the least supported to the one with the most support.

Autonomy versus Connection

There was limited evidence to suggest that the participants in this study were concerned with the autonomy versus connection dialectical tension. Rarely did anybody

articulate that they sought the need for individuality but were still interested in identifying themselves as part of a social group. One student did state,

> The best advice would be that, although, its great that DSS doesn't check up on you, it's up to you, its all or your own. That's great, nobody is babysitting you, you should be on your own. You know you are on your own, but there is always someone you can talk to. If there are any issues, relevant to school or not, you should feel free to bring them up with someone.

This student did demonstrate the desirability of autonomy but autonomy based upon a support structure. For this particular student, the management of this tension was successful.

Stability versus Change

There was more evidence that suggests the stability versus change tension is prevalent in the experiences of the participants in this study. In most cases, the need for change was articulated as being a positive occurrence and stability was more negative, especially in terms of transitioning. A professional stated,

> If you have a disability, you can do one of two things, or blend them. The thing you can do is change your own attitude and behavior or you can change the environment. That is how you make your way in the world. Those successful people with disabilities hang pretty heavily on changing their own attitude, so that they are not looking for someone else to solve your problems but doing it yourself, looking to get into the world as a contributor rather than just as a consumer.

Here, once attending school, change is important in order to ease the transition into school. It is accomplished by a person shifting the way he or she feels, talks, and acts based on his or her disability.

In another narrative, another professional demonstrated that change is, in fact, a negative state of mind. She stated,

> There was a kid who came in with his mother and as far as I could tell, was never without her. It got to the point where we told her that he could not go into tests with him. She would try to feed him answers. He played the role of the disabled crip and she played the role of the loving savior, and they loved it. They never broke out of that cycle and he did not finish.

In this example, the student was not willing to embrace or acknowledge the change part of the tension and ultimately failed in school as a result. The stability versus change dialectical tension appears to play a different role in the transition process than in developing relationships. In the transition process, it is more important to be open to change because the environment changes quite drastically from high school to college. If a student embraces change rather than holding on to stability, the transition is likely to be more successfully.

Openness versus Closedness

The openness versus closedness tension was the tension that surfaced most in this research. Most of the narratives suggest that there is a need to balance the amount disclosure in various relationships a student may encounter at a university. One professional said,

Disclosure can earn you a lot of accommodations but it can also earn you a lot of

stigma. People will do it when they when they have absolutely no other choice,

they'll do it for the right to swim in the mainstream. Disclosure can be really

difficult for some people and they just want the university to do everything from

them. However, our service says that no, you are in charge of, you should take

care of it, you should put your oars in the water and that will make you that much

more buffed for when you get out of college and are expected to pull your own

weight. I think there are other people who are so stigmatized that they don't

ask for it.

Openness, in this case, is important for students but hard for them to do. Remaining

closed means that students would not receive the accommodations necessary for their

individual disability but also means they will not have a stigma placed upon them. On

the other, openness earns the student the right to request services but also brings the

possibility of being assigned certain characteristics.

Another professional offered an example that demonstrates what happens when

students are unwilling to be open. He stated,

People don't want to identify themselves as disabled because they don't want to

stand out. I guess it goes back to that old western mentality. Overcoming an

obstacle by defeating your disability, defeating because it inherently means some

inferiority or deficiency. So there they are, in a classroom flunking a test,

because they don't want those attributes assigned to them.

Balancing this tension is not only extremely important, it is quite difficult. It is directly

related to the autonomy versus connection dialectic. If students do become open and

choose to disclose that they have a disability, others automatically assume that they require some sort of assistance thus blocking any chance of being perceived as an autonomous individual.

Relational Issues

There was also evidence in the findings of the three relational themes proposed by Strauss (2002), disclosure, proximity, and reciprocity. Although elements of each theme are present in both theories presented above and the dialectical tensions, the way the themes were uniquely supported, how they surfaced in the interviews, and how each could play a role in developing relationships is presented below.

Disclosure

Disclosure, although it is covered heavily in all the discussions on disability and in theory, did not elicit much individual attention within these narratives. However, there was some evidence of the effect disclosure actually has once it takes place. One student who has Turrets Syndrome stated, "Sometimes, like when I'm talking on the phone, and one of my ticks, which sounds like I'm laughing, makes people really uncomfortable. I have to explain it to them and say, 'Hey, I have turrets.' Most people are very understanding." In this case, disclosure usually has a positive effect on the relationship. Rather than making people feel uncomfortable, this student is willing and capable or articulating his disability. The student continued, "When I tell people about myself, it usually clears up any misconceptions. Having Turrets makes your whole life a sociology class. Some people are just curious, some people take offense." Balancing disclosure is important because it can have both positive and negative effects on initiating relationships. It is hard to judge when it is and is not appropriate or needed.

Proximity

Just as in previous research, proximity surfaced in various contexts, serving various purposes within developing relationships. Proximity appears to serve a strong function in decreasing the amount of tension in relationships. One student stated,

I think there is a big difference between a class where I know the professor compared to one where I am just a face among 400 people. It helps to know that you have someone to talk to, get more comfortable to know exactly what he wants, you know, feel free to go up and ask him stuff. I think if you know him a lot better, you feel more comfortable to go meet with him after class.

In this example, the student feels more comfortable in classes where he is in closer proximity to the professor. Another example discusses proximity in different terms. A student stated,

My disability affects my relationships good and bad. There are a few kids that are amazingly receptive. I don't know where they get that from. There a few kids that I found out later that they have an aunt or a brother that is disabled so it doesn't bother them.

Here, the relationship is affected by proximity because the PWOD has previous experience with a PWD. In both cases, proximity serves to decrease the amount of tension in the relationship.

Reciprocity

Reciprocity was referred to in many instances throughout the interviews. It functioned differently in different contexts but was largely viewed in the same light, sharing a give-and-take in relationships to maintain a balance. Reciprocity seemed

important in different relationships. It was present in faculty and friend relationships, relationships that seem especially important in a university. To start with, a student gave one story of how reciprocity functions in making friends.

> Students on my floor are usually really open about my disability. Also, when I want to get to know someone, I usually just tell them about my disability and then they open up and tell me something about themselves. I've had one or two friends that I've met through school that are going through the same stuff as me. It helps because then you know you have someone to talk to. People have been open and become more comfortable and finally accepting me for who I am.

In this single narrative, reciprocity functions in different way. First, reciprocity opens up the lines of communication. Not only is it something that helps bring about disclosure, it is something students can proactively do to help start relationships. It also functions to demonstrate that the SWD is not being treated as someone different in the university. By articulating her experiences, it becomes evident to PWOD that, even though that person may have a disability, they share the same frustrations while attending school.

Reciprocity also served an extremely important role in establishing healthy relationships with faculty. In these relationships, if reciprocity was evident there was success. However, if reciprocity was absent, the relationships seemed to fail for the most part. One example where success was likely was articulated by one professional. She stated,

> There has to be some balance in getting something and giving something to the relationship. If a student is in a classroom, one of the best ways to make it clear and maintain that relationship is show up for the class and frankly to do well. If

there is anything that instructors love, it is for them to think their class is important and that is demonstrated by the work you do and your participation. What students are expected to give back in classes is relatively small in comparison.

Reciprocity is achieved in this example by a student doing well in a course where the professor is devoting his or her time and energy into teaching the course material. Another professional added,

> Building your relationships with your teacher is really why you are here, to succeed in the class. As long as you are a responsible student that does your work, it's really up to them to do their part. If teachers aren't willing to help outside class, that can be a really big downside to your relationship with the teacher.

In this example, success in the class serves as the reciprocated behavior that is expected. However, this example also highlights the idea that if reciprocity is not present, it can cause tension in the relationship. If a student was willing to do extra work and meet outside of the class and the teacher was not willing, it could cause damage to the relationship. Another student states,

> I guess there are some teachers, I never really wanted to talk to him, it was a class I wasn't interested in. The teacher expected so much, yet sometimes he wouldn't show up, so you would kind of get those mixed signals. I did what you wanted and you're not here.

Reciprocity was clearly not achieved in this relationship. However, it was the teacher, in this instance, who failed to meet the requirements of the relationship. Reciprocity is

absolutely a necessary function in relationships individuals encounter within a university community and if it is not reached, the relationship is likely going to fail.

Easing Transition: A resource for high school students with disabilities as they transition into college

The rationale for this research was to determine if SWD felt that relationship formation was a critical mediator of college adaptation. A good portion of the evidence presented already demonstrates that developing relationships in a collegiate setting is important based simply on the amount of discussion that took place on the topic. However, interwoven in the rationale was the idea that transition guides already in place and the people responsible for developing those guides fail to address the importance of developing relationships in the transition process. After speaking with professionals in positions that would be responsible for creating such guides (two professionals interviewed had already contributed to developing a guide individually), it was found that professionals speak in the same way about relationships in college as do students. Both groups indicate that developing relationships is an important part of the transition process.

For example, one student said,

One of the best parts about coming to school was meeting people. Sure, I was scared and didn't know what to expect, but that is what I was interested in. I didn't care about going to class, I was more curious about whether or not I'd find a girlfriend, or just a really good friend. I think that is why everyone goes to school, to meet people.

On the other hand, a professional added,

It would be nice to think that students would be concerned with developing strong

studying skills and how to excel in class but those are not the types of questions

they ask. They're mostly concerned with how the dorms are going to be, how

hard it is going to be to meet new people and those types of things. Of course,

how many friends you make doesn't determine if you stay in school or graduate

but it does seem like the thing that they are most concerned with.

Another student goes on,

I was really proactive about getting out and meeting people. Where do I sign up

for rush, how do I get on an intramural team. I really wanted to make friends, and

make friends fast. Also, I found out that most professors are cool. I had one T.A.

for an English class that was really cool. It was nice to have someone that I could

talk to that was going through most of the stuff that I was. I'm still friends with

him.

Last, one other professional stated,

I really urge students to get out and try to meet people. It makes a world of

difference if you have people to talk to that have gone through the transition or

are going through the transition at the same time. A lot of the times, the students

that I have that succeed once in school are the ones that get to know the people in

their dorms, get to know their R.A., and get to know their teachers. Those

relationships are wonderful resources.

In all of these experiences, along with the evidence presented already, it is clear that

developing relationships is pivotal in the transition process. Regardless of who the

person is or what role that person may play in the process, both professionals and

students believe that developing relationships is an important and necessary part of being in college. It is interesting that this part of the process has not been addressed in transition guides.

This research is significant in pointing to the importance of developing relationships in college. The research has been focused on developing a resource that could be instituted within high schools, so that students and educators will be better prepared and educated to lead the transition into a university community (see Appendix C for copy of resource). Including the importance of developing relationships in that resource is a necessary and useful addition. The title of the resource has become, "The Answer is Know: Know the Law, Know your Disability, and Know your Way: A resource for high school students with disabilities as they transition into college." It consists of web-appropriate content (as demonstrated by the formatting employed) which could be easily transferable to the internet so the material would be accessible to wide range of individuals. It is outlined in a manner that could be utilized as an educational resource. The resource is constructed so that relevant issues are discussed in a way that is appropriate for individuals to learn from other's experiences. Each idea is addressed to demonstrate its significance to the transition process, followed by a narrative pulled from the research as an example, and ending with a suggestion for dealing with that particular dynamic or issue.

The resource is set up in a manner that will address the aspects of the research that need the most attention. First, the resource will closely mimic the parents' transition guide, "Toto, I Have a Feeling We're Not In High School Anymore," put forth by Disability Services for Students at the University of Montana. This guide's content is

comprised of solutions to practical issues and responses to frequently asked questions put forth by transitioning high school students as well as high school counselors. The types of issues addressed in this section are focused on, but not limited to, what the law states, definitions of certain aspects of the accommodation process, and how to get situated once a student is on campus.

The second part of the resource, and major thrust of this research, is focused on demonstrating situations SWD may encounter that may create obstacles to having strong and healthy interpersonal relationships. The content is focused on the participants' responses to questions that addressed how and where tensions existed in their experiences, ways in which they successfully penetrated into social groups, and how they reduced the amount of uncertainty in their newly forming relationships within the university community.

Within the resource, each individual communicative concept (social penetration, uncertaintly reduction, dialectical tensions, and relational issues) is presented in a way that is easily understandable by high school students. Second, how the participants' responses are applicable to their forthcoming experiences is shown. Last, the researcher presents possible ways that SWD can account for the dynamics that arise in interpersonal relationships. Ultimately, the hope of the researcher is to provide a SWD with a resource that can serve as the voice of an experienced SWD so that those newly transitioning students may be better attuned and prepared for college life and the experiences they many encounter.

This research has provided a strong starting point for continuing the discussion of disablity as it affects relationships PWD may encounter. This research, however, is

limited in the amount it can actually contribute to theory and present literature on the subject. It would be appropriate to conduct the same interviews with a much larger sample of students. That group of students should consist of varying ages, types of disabilties, backgrounds, and other dynamics that may contribute to people experiencing the world differently. Data of this nature would not only contribute to the literature about developing relationships in general, and relationships with PWD specifically, it could also be used to create a much more inclusive resource to be implemented in high schools. However, the data collected in this study provides a starting point in preparing SWD with the adequate skills to successfully transition into college and remove any obstacles that may arise simply because that person has a disabilty. This venture is not only appropriate, it should be a major goal of universities and individuals within those communities to create an accessible, healthy, and, ultimately, successful environment for all students.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

(For non-disabled participants)

1) How do you feel communication is affected between individuals when a disability plays a role?

   - Why do you think that is?

   - What adjustments can be made to account for those differences?

2) What do you see as being the major obstacle for maintaining a relationship with a person with a disability?

   - Do you think someone with a disability encounters different obstacles simply because they have a disability?

   - How would suggest accounting for those differences?

3) Specifically, what obstacles have you heard that students run into because they are disabled?

   - What did they do to remove those obstacles?

   - What should have they done to remove those obstacles?

4) Could you tell me a story, or stories, about students with disabilities you have interacted with as they were preparing for college?

   - What kinds of questions did they ask?

   - What obstacles did they run into?

5) Talking with students who are enrolled in a university or have graduated from college, what have they mentioned they wish they knew before enrolling in college?

6) What would you like to know about in order to assist the transition into college for students with disabilities?

- In what way could it be presented so it could be most useful for you?

- What way should it be presented so students would be willing to learn about the transitioning process?

(For disabled participants)

1) How do you feel communication is affected between you and others because you have a disability?

- Why do you think that is?

- How do you adjust?

2) What do think are the major obstacles for maintaining a relationship?

- Does having a disability created different obstacles?

- If so, how do you adjust your relationship to account for those obstacles?

3) What obstacles have you run into in college simply because you have a disability?

4) What affect does having a disability play on any of your relationships in college?

- What did you do to make those relationships more productive or healthy?

- What types of relationships simply will not work?

5) Looking back on your career here, what was the best advice you received for accommodating your own disability?

- What advice do you wish you had received?

- What advice would you give a student with a disability just starting here?

6) Could you tell me a story about the first week or so you were on campus?

- What was the hardest part about that first week?

  - What problems did you encounter meeting people or getting

    adjusted to your new environment?

  - Where did you seek assistance? Was it helpful?

- What types of information would have been useful to know beforehand that

  could have made that week easier?

  - Do you think that if someone had helped you prepare in high school for

    the transition into college you would have been better off?

    - If so, what would have you liked to know?

    - How should it have been presented?

Appendix B: Written Consent Form

Subject Information and Consent Form

Title: Easing Transition: A resource for high school students with disabilities as they transition into college.

Investigator: Eric Strauss, Department of Communication Studies, The University of Montana, Missoula, MT 59812. (406) 251-0295, email: estrauss@hotmail.com

Faculty Advisor: Alan Sillars, Ph.D., Department of Communication Studies, The University of Montana, Missoula, MT 59812. (406) 243-4463, email: sillars@selway.umt.edu

You are invited to participate in a research study that will examine the ways in which the transition into college for high school for students with disabilities can be made easier. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This consent form may contain words that are new to you. If you read any words that are not clear to you, please ask the researcher to explain them to you. This study is being conducted by Eric Strauss, Department of Communication Studies, The University of Montana 59812. You may contact him at (406) 251-0295, or by e-mail at estrauss@hotmail.com.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to investigate ways in which the transition into college for high school students with disabilities can be made easier. The transition into college is difficult for any individual but there are a few special considerations that students with disabilities need to account for. This study will hopefully uncover practical solutions as well as suggestions on how to adapt to college life successfully. The range of this study will encompass both practical aspects of collegial life as well as some communicative aspects pertaining specifically to the various interactions a college student with a disability may encounter.

Procedures

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview designed to illustrate your experiences as being an individual who has some vested interest in students transitioning into college successfully. The interview will last approximately a half hour to an hour and will take place in a mutually acceptable locale. Participation in such interviews, or any follow-up, is completely voluntary, and may be discontinued at any time. The researcher would like to audiotape the interviews but the decision is up to the participant.

Risks/Discomforts

The anticipated risks from your participation are minimal. You may include slight discomfort, uneasiness of disclosing information, or slight anxiety during the process of recollecting an event. If any discomfort does arise, you can decide if you want to continue, will be asked if you wish to proceed, or other options may be discussed as well.

Benefits

Although you may not benefit directly from taking part in this study, your participation will help enhance the understanding of how notions of disability affect students on the university level and will assist future students as they transition into college.

Confidentiality

The records of this study will be kept private. In any report that may be published or distributed, information that will make it possible to identify a subject will be modified or omitted to protect your identity. Research records will be kept in a locked file; only the main researcher will have access to the records. Pseudonyms will be used to protect the identity of participants. Transcriptions will

also be changed to pseudonyms. Any resulting reports or published papers will exclude any names of participants, and any identifying details of participants will be excluded or changed in order to avoid recognition. Audiotapes will be destroyed after transcription of the interviews has been completed.

Compensation for Injury

Although the research team believes that the risk of taking part in this study is minimal, the following liability statement is required in all University of Montana consent forms. "In the event that you are injured as a result of this research you should individually seek appropriate medical treatment. If the injury is caused by the negligence of the University or any of its employees, you may be entitled to reimbursement or compensation pursuant to the Comprehensive State Insurance Plan established by the Department of Administration under the authority of M.C.A., Title2, Chapter 9. In the event of a claim for such injury, further information may be obtained from the University's Claims representative or University Legal Counsel" (Reviewed by University Legal Counsel, July 6, 1993).

Voluntary Participation

Your decision to take part in this research study is entirely voluntary. You many choose to withdraw at any time. You many refuse to answer any question. Refusal to participate, to answer any questions, or withdrawal will not affect you in any way.

Questions

If you have any questions about the research now or during the study contact: Eric Strauss, Department of Communication Studies, The University of Montana, Missoula, MT 59812, Phone: (406) 251-0295, e-mail: estrauss@hotmail.com; or faculty advisor Alan Sillars, Department of Communication Studies, The University of Montana, Missoula MT 59812, Phone: (406) 243-4463, e-mail: sillars@selway.umt.edu. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research subject, you may contact Professor Rudbach, through the Research Office at the University of Montana at (406) 243-6670.

Subject Statement of Consent

I have read the above description of this research study. I have been informed of the risks and benefits involved, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. Furthermore, I have been assured that a member of the research team will also answer any future questions I may have. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study. I also verify that I am at least 18 years of age. This letter will serve as my copy of this consent form, and my signing the bottom of this page will serve as my informed, voluntary consent to participate in this study.

_____

Printed (typed) Name of Participant

_____   _____

Participants' Signature   Date

Please sign if you agree to allow the interview to be audio-taped:

_____

Signature of Participant

_____   _____

Signature of Researcher   Date

Appendix C: "The Answer is Know"

The Answer is Know:
Know the law, Know your disability
and Know your way!

A resource for high school students with disabilities
as they transition into college

Table of Contents

1.0   <u>Introduction</u>

1.1   <u>Welcome</u>

This project is designed to assist you as you begin your transition into college. If you are reading this, it is pretty safe to assume that you are actually concerned with how your disability will affect you once you attend a university. That is a good thing because you will certainly be met with different dynamics in college than high school because of your disability.

1.2   <u>About Me</u>

My name is Eric Strauss. I created this resource for my master's project at The University of Montana. I was interested in these issues for multiple reasons. First, I worked at Disability Services for Students for 5 years. Over those years, having informal and formal conversations with many students with disabilities, they began to articulate obstacles they were encountering that I, as a person without a disability, never encountered. I began to think that perhaps that was a consequence of having a disability. If so, it struck me as being highly unfair considering the amount of pressure and change an individual experiences in the transition process alone.

Second, as a result of my experiences, I became interested in seeing if there were any transition programs out there that addressed these issues. I found many different guides and resources but none of them addressed the issues that I heard and saw arising. The issues that I am mostly concerned with are how disability and perception of disability effects the creation of relationships. I know what you are thinking, who cares about relationships, but I promise that meeting people will be one of the most enriching and important experiences of your time at college.

Last, I am a Communication Studies major. I was challenged with creating a project that addressed these issues and was still based within communication theories and practices. Therefore, I present to you a unique resource that will address many different issues. As the title suggests, I found that there are many things that you need to be made aware of before you ever even step on campus to make the transition into college smoother and less stressful.

1.3   <u>The Project</u>

I conducted many interviews will various people within the university and community that have varying interests in the transition process. From those interviews, and from transition resources already in place, I tried to pull the important, less obvious, aspects of the transition process that will help assist you in knowing the way. To help make these issues more relevant to you, I have included stories presented by students and professionals that highlight the issues I am discussing. It is one thing for me to tell you that you should pay attention to this or that, but hearing it from people who have already been there should certainly demonstrate that these dynamics are important.

The first part of this project addresses knowing the law. The laws that apply to you as student are different in college as compared to high school. This issue will only

be discussed in some detail. I can point you in the direction of the pertinent and applicable laws, but knowing and understanding them and how they effect you is part of the process of being a successful self-advocate.

The second part of the resource is aimed at trying to convince you to become more aware of what your disability is all about and learning how to talk about it. It would be impossible to teach about every disability because the range is so wide but as you become a self-advocate, it should become quite obvious that knowing what accommodations your disability necessitates, being able to articulate the medical aspect of your disability, and understanding where to seek services will enable you to concentrate your energy towards more constructive aspects of the college experience.

Last, this resource will hopefully inform you on those more constructive aspects involved with college. I'll attempt to give you information and stories that might remove some of the uncertainty you have about that first week you'll be on campus. Just like any other new student attending whatever college they choose, people rarely get a glimpse of what their new life will be like. After hearing about that process and experience from some or your predecessors, perhaps you'll be more prepared than you thought you could ever be.

2.0   **Know the Law**

2.1   Study the Law

A professional in a university made this comment to me while I interviewed him:

> The laws that effect high school are actually trying to address the difference between high school and college, and talk about transition. They try to put the student in charge of themselves, like the Individualized Education Plan that is under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or a 504 plan under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. But it is still pretty strong that even though you might be 18 or 19 and a senior in high school, you are still viewed as a child. The law tries to address that but it is only as good actually happens and a lot depends on the self-awareness of the student with a disability.

If you are anything like me, statements of this nature are quite befuddling and confusing. If so, it is apparent that you need to look at the various laws that play a role in protecting you from discrimination and ensure that you are given an accessible learning environment. The various laws that play a role in your transition and where you can read about them are:

ADA – Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.
http://www.ada.gov/

IDEA – Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
http://www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/Policy/IDEA/

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act
http://www.wrightslaw.com/info/sec504.index.htm

Understanding the differences between the way these laws address you as individuals in college compared to high school is important to help you articulate your rights and the responsibilities of the institution you choose to attend.

2.2   What are the differences in the law?

This resource won't provide you with a run down of all the laws and how they apply to you. However, what this resource will do for you is demonstrate some of the differences to make you think twice about passing on learning about the laws. There are definitely differences you will encounter, in terms of the law, once you step onto campus.

For instance, did you have an Individualized Educational Plan (I.E.P.) in high school? If so, you can forget it serving any purpose once you are in college. The rules that govern change once you leave high school. However, the ADA does require that any publicly funded institution must make its programs accessible to all individuals who are otherwise qualified. That means that if you are in wheelchair and need access to a classroom on the third floor and there is no elevator, the university must make changes to supply that accommodation. That also means if you have a learning disability and struggle reading, the university must supply you with the necessary technology to equal the playing field.

2.3   Reasonable Accommodations

Any publicly funding university is required to allow reasonable accommodations to make the learning playing field level. These accommodations are made to decrease the functional limitations that a disability may create. As mentioned before, there is a range of accommodations that may occur. Some examples are:

> ➤ A blind person can receive books on tape.
> ➤ Students with mobility limitations may request room changes
> ➤ Students with limitations that limit the ability to write or take notes may request a note taker or a scribe for test-taking
> ➤ Students who are deaf may request a sign language interpreter or other assistive technologies if they are available.

The important thing to remember, however, is that a reasonable accommodation must be just that, reasonable. It can not decrease the academic standards of the course or teacher. You aren't receiving "help" but rather are being supplied the necessary tools to successfully level the playing field.

3.0 **Know your Disability**

3.1 Why know your disability?

Knowing your disability is important for many reasons and is directly related to your success. First, to be able to articulate the reasonable accommodations that your disability requires, you must have an understanding of your own disability. Second, in order to be able to help others understand your perspective, you need to talk to those interested individuals to help them remove any confusion they may have about your disability. Last, if you know about your disability and feel comfortable about its dynamics, you will, as result, feel more confident and comfortable in various circumstances.

3.2 What do you need to know?

One student told me,

> If you need health care or need a health care practitioner, it is likely you will not have the same one when you get to college. I didn't even think about that. I had the same school psychologist for 9 years. I don't know what I assumed when I came to college, that he'd come with me? I should have researched that, found a new psychologist and become comfortable with him. If so, that would have made my first weeks much less stressful.

As this student basically said, if he would have had a better understanding if his disability in high school, he probably would have assumed that he wouldn't have had the same psychologist once he arrived at college. He could have, on the other hand, made an initial trip to the university, met with his new psychologist and been prepared for the initial shock of changing after so many years of repetition.

A professional adds,

> Students come to college without very many skills, they don't have a good understanding of their disability, they don't know what to expect or what to ask for, they don't know the differences between where they were in high school and where they need to be in college or how to make that happen. Students don't really know how to make things happen for themselves because nobody ever asked them to.

If your experiences are similar to most students, you wouldn't have been asked to understand you disability in high school. The simple truth is you need to understand your disability to maneuver through a university system. As one student states,

> The best advice would be that, although, its great that DSS (Disability Services for Students) doesn't check up on you, it's up to you, it's all on your own. That's great, nobody is babysitting you, you should be on your own, but there is always

someone you can talk to. If there are any issues, relevant to school or not, you should feel free to bring it up with someone.

The major difference between high school and college is that nobody is going to be there to spoon-feed you or make sure you're getting certain things done at certain times. It is all in your hands. In order for you to accomplish this task, it is absolutely essential you understand what accommodations your disability requires. As a professional states,

> You need good disability skills, if you are blind, you need blind skills. If you have a learning disability, you need to know how to order books on tape. I'm willing to bet that the people who come to college and succeed and go on to work and have a happy life are the ones who come into college with self-respect, self-esteem, and self-determination. The laws are only a small piece of the picture. When it comes down to it, the individual either makes it or breaks it. Existence of those laws doesn't mean that justice is there.

Assuming it is your goal to succeed and seek justice, knowing your disability is essential element involved in the process.

4.0   **Know your Way**

The rest of this resource is to help show you the many various experiences that people, much like yourself, have been through as they transitioned into college. Knowing the law and know your disability are certainly important but accessing that type of information is quite simple. However, every student that I interviewed for this project mentioned that they wish they could have had someone to talk to that had been through the transition process before they went through the very same process. This is major goal of this resource. I hope to provide you with the voice of one of those students so that you may be more aware of what to expect in the process. I'll will relay stories that were told to me and I'll also propose to you things you could do to help prepare for any of the obstacles that these students ran up against.

4.1   Reducing Uncertainty

According to many researchers who study relationships, people, when confronted with a new relationship, attempt to reduce the amount of uncertainty in those relationships. This is the case in any relationship, and when a disability is apparent or suspected, the amount of uncertainty in that relationship is magnified. Many students and professionals told me stories about how this functioned in their relationships. One student stated,

> I didn't know what to expect when I came to school. I didn't know how people would treat me and my confidence was pretty low at that time. I didn't know how to interact with people. There was a lot of uncertainty for awhile, I was really uncertain on how to portray myself, I was uncertain about other people. I was really worried about getting rid of that uncertainty.

Do not be alarmed if this experience scares you in any way. This feeling is extremely common for people as they are confronted with a new environment and stimuli. It is natural to feel uncertain about certain things. The important thing, however, is how you cope with the uncertainty. This process can be difficult and it can play itself out in many different ways. How the process goes will determine largely how well that relationships goes. Another student states,

> It's usually the other person that gets uncomfortable because they feel bad. But I don't care, I've been through this stuff before. I usually just laugh to help them feel comfortable, I try to add comedy to the situation. Really people are pretty understanding. You know, you always run into a few that think highly of themselves or they are really not confident at all. I try to announce it better or spell it out. I have a disability. Sometimes I do get frustrated, but its life and you move on. Its not that big of a deal.

You will get frustrated at times but understand that it is all part of the process. Remember also, if you take the proper steps in learning your disability and being confident about yourself, it is likely the other person who is going to have the problems in relationships. In situations like this, you might want to take a step back and ask yourself whether or not the relationship is worth the stress. You chose to be in school, you don't have to stay. Take and pick the relationships you think are going to work and run with those.

As a solution, one professional stated,

> Some of these things happen regardless, but the person with the disability has to assert some type of control. Especially for young people, they go into interactions with a fair amount of uncertainty about themselves, about what they can and can not accomplish. The best things that people with disabilities can do is be more assertive, at least practice demonstrating a sense of confidence. Going into Walmart, or whatever, and greet the person and just try to make some connection so they will deal with you. There used to be the notion that people who are unsettling in any way shouldn't show themselves in public. People just need to identify themselves and be confident.

4.2   Disclosure

Perhaps the best way to reduce uncertainty in relationships is to disclose information about yourself. Disclosure provides the opportunity for you and the other person to share information with each other and clear up any misconceptions or preconceived ideas a person may have about you or you about them. Disclosure, unfortunately, is difficult and may cause discomfort if used. As demonstrated in the many narratives presented below, disclosure serves many functions in many different relationships.

>Disclosure can earn you a lot of accommodations but it can also earn you a lot of
>stigma. People will do it when they have absolutely no other choice, they'll do it
>for the right to swim in the mainstream. Disclosure can be really difficult for
>some people and they just want the university to do stuff for them. However, our
>service says that no, you are in charge of, you should take care of it, you put your
>oars in the water and that will make you that much more buffed up for when you
>get out of college and are expected to pull your own weight. I think there are
>people who are so stigmatized that they don't ask for it.

It is ultimately up to you to decide when it is appropriate to disclose certain types of
information. Just know, that it is not the universities responsibility to get your
accommodations for you, help you make friends, or find out where to go on Friday night.
Balancing how much you disclose and who you disclose to is tricky but an essential
function in developing relationships. Another professional adds,

>People don't want to identify themselves as disabled because they don't want to
>stand out. I guess it goes back to that old western mentality. Overcoming an
>obstacle by defeating your disability. Defeating because it inherently means some
>inferiority or deficiency. So there they are, in a classroom flunking a test because
>they don't want those attributes assigned to them.

Be careful in deciding whether or not you want to disclose information because if you
don't, it may have some serious negative effects on your college experience.

4.3   Reciprocity

The idea of reciprocity plays an extremely important role in the relationships you
will encounter in the university. Reciprocity is basically defined as the give and take in
relationships that help maintain a balance so one person doesn't feel as though they are
giving more than there are receiving. This dynamic is present in relationships you will
encounter with faculty as well as peers.

In terms of the relationships you might encounter will classmates, dorm mates,
and people you will simply meet along the way; this story shows well how reciprocity
functions in relationships.

>Students on my floor are really open about my disability. Also, when I want to
>get know someone, I usually just tell them about my disability and then they open
>up and tell me something about themselves. I've had one or two friends that I've
>met through school that are going through the same stuff as me. It helps because
>then you know you have someone to talk to. People have been open and become
>more comfortable and finally accepting me for who I am.

In this single narrative, reciprocity functions in different way. First, reciprocity opens up
the lines of communication. Not only is it something that helps bring about disclosure, it
is something you can proactively do to help start relationships. It also functions to
demonstrate that the you are not being treated as something different in the university.

By articulating your experiences, it becomes evident to others that even though you may have a disability, you share the same frustrations as them in school.

Reciprocity also serves an extremely important role in establishing healthy relationships with faculty. In these relationships, if reciprocity is evident there is oftentimes success. However, if reciprocity is absent, the relationships seem to fail for the most part. One example where success was likely was articulated by one professional. She stated,

> There has to be some balance in getting something and giving something to the relationship. If a student is in a classroom, one of the best ways to make it clear and maintain that relationship is show up for the class and frankly to well. If there is anything that instructors love, is for them to think their class is important and that is demonstrated by the work you do and your participation. What students are expected to give back in classes is relatively small in comparison.

Reciprocity is achieved in this example by a student doing well in a course where the professor is devoting their time and energy into teaching the course material. Another professional added,

> Building your relationships with your teacher is really why you are here, to succeed in the class. As long as you are a responsible student that does your work, it's really up to them to do their part. If teachers aren't willing to help outside class, that can be a really big downside to your relationship with the teacher.

In this example, success in the class serves as the reciprocated behavior that is expected. However, this example also highlights the idea that if reciprocity is not present, it can cause tension in the relationship. If you were willing to do extra work and meet outside of the class and the teacher was not willing, it could cause damage to your relationship. Another student states,

> I guess there are some teachers, I never really wanted to talk to him, it was a class I wasn't interested in. The teacher expected so much, yet sometimes he wouldn't show up, so you would kind of get those mixed signals. I did what you wanted and you're not here.

Reciprocity was clearly not achieved in this relationship. However, it was the teacher, in this instance, who failed to meet the requirements of the relationship. Reciprocity is absolutely a necessary function in relationships individuals encounter within a university community and if it is not reached, the relationship is likely going to fail. Remember, however, it can be up to you to ensure reciprocity occurs. Do your work in class and work at making your friendships balanced and you are likely to be greeted with success.

4.4   On a lighter note...

There are obviously other things you need to consider when getting ready for school. Many of the students that I interviewed articulated the types of things that you should be quite aware of. Although they don't necessarily have anything to do with being disabled, they still play a role in how well you adjust to your new surroundings. One student suggests that people should

> Discover and explore where you are going before you get to wherever you are. There are a lot of hippies here in Missoula. I would have like to know that.

He continues,

> It would have helped to talk to someone that is my age that has been to college and what the college experience is like. Like the sexual behavior and what ethical treatments are toward that behavior on campus. There were things that shocked me that didn't shock other people and there were things that didn't shock me that did shock other people. It would have been nice to know about that kind of thing. I would have really liked to know where the good fishing holes are. It took me forever to find where the good skiing hills were.

There is a simple solution to addressing these issues, get out and explore. The internet opens up a whole new realm of possible resources to find out about different places. Once you have decided where you want to go, make a visit, look on the net, and find out where your interests can be met within the community.

Most students also come to campus not knowing what to expect from their actually campus experience. For instance, what does the inside of a classroom look like, what are the professors like? One student stated,

> I wasn't quite sure what to expect when I walked into my first classroom. I realized quickly that I needed to be a lot more involved. You've got great big projects or lots of other assignments that take a lot of thinking. Just going out and doing it is important. The first couple of classes were a little overwhelming.

He continues,

> You know, you take a good look at the campus, make sure you can get around. Also, if you know someone who has already been there, asking them, cause a lot of the time they'll know because they've been through it and what not. Maybe knowing just some of the teachers to avoid, who some of the good teachers are to expect.

The solution here is also pretty easy. Most universities have some sort of peer advocate group that is willing to meet with students when they visit the campus. When you arrange your visit, think of some questions that you would like answered and ask them.

More often than not, students in advocate roles have a great deal of experience on the campus and are more than willing to share that type of information with you.

Finally, the most important thing to keep in mind is that you are not the first person who has gone through the transition. You should utilize all the resources available to you and make them work toward your advantage. Here is a nice story about how students with disabilities are beginning to feel about their experience in a university setting.

> There was a kid with CP, who come to college from a small town. He came through the accessible door that had a big metal plate for the button to open the door that you could slap with a shoulder or hand. He said to me as he walked in that he could tell that other people had been here before. He was expressing appreciation for the fact that he just didn't fall from the sky and that he was part of a chain of people pushing for the same things he was. As a consequence, people have the doors opened for them by the people that come before them and the threshold continues to get wider and wider.

5.0   I wish you luck finding your way!

Hopefully this resource provides you with a little "heads up" on what to expect when you get ready to head off to college. Remember, you are the one who ultimately determine how the process will be for you. This resource is not meant, in any way, to provide an inclusive look at to what the university experience will be like. However, it is meant to get you thinking about all the dynamics that might be present in your transition and the ensuing years following. It is important to think of these things ahead of time and make the necessary preparations so you don't get lost in the shuffle or spend so much time figuring out your disability you miss out on all the fun college offers. In closing, I will offer this advice to you: Once you decided where you are going to go to school, make a visit. While on your visit, visit admissions, tour the school, find someone to talk to about class, professors, and the dorms, get familiar with the campus, the town, the surroundings, and most important, set up an appointment with the school's disability support services. They will get you on the right track of knowing the law, knowing your disability, and, ultimately, knowing your way.