

# Advising New Students with Disabilities: Challenges and Opportunities

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*This study focuses on students with disabilities' (SWD) transition to and experiences in college using both quantitative and qualitative data. SWD report similar levels of interaction with advisors and faculty, despite the additional contact that accommodations typically require. SWD also persist at lower rates than do their non-disabled peers. On campuses, SWD must contend with decisions about disclosure, seeking accommodations, self-advocacy, college bureaucracy, and time management. Recommendations are to include disabilities as one aspect of campus diversity within orientation programming and create orientation programs specifically designed for SWD and their parents.*

All new students face myriad opportunities as well as challenges when they begin their education in a post-secondary environment (Clark, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). New students with a disability (SWD) face the same challenges and opportunities as other students, but with the added complexity that their disability presents (Reiff, 2007). Some of these challenges and opportunities are inherent in organizational structure of colleges and universities, some emanate from the ADA statutes, some are imbedded in the dynamics of the classroom, and some are simply part of the social fabric which can become frayed when one faces a disability.

Additionally, the concept of disability is multifaceted and multi-layered, which presents a seemingly inexhaustible range of human variation. The range of what constitutes a disability is enormous and thus categorization is in itself can be a difficult task (Gordon & Keiser, 2000). This challenges our ability to discuss the topic of advising new students with disability.

The category "students with disability" is also an exceedingly heterogeneous aggregate. Within this category are students with physical and cognitive challenges as the result of spinal cord injury, epilepsy, spina bifida, dyslexia, hearing impairment, attention deficit disorder, visual impairment and blindness, autism spectrum disorder, cerebral palsy, diabetes, bipolar disorder, and lupus, to name a few qualifying disabilities (Getzel & Wehman, 2005). These students face a variety of unique challenges specific to their disability as well as sharing some barriers

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that all college students share and must grapple with. It is the former category of challenges we address in this article.

## **Background and Literature**

College students with disabilities are an underrepresented population in higher education; however, they are beginning to receive an increased focus from researchers as well as student affairs practitioners and administrators. Yet, the recent body of work has focused mainly on transitional issues from high school to community college (Dutta, Schiro-Geist, & Kundu, 2009); access barriers (Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009); transitional program evaluation (Rothman, Maldonado, & Rothman, 2008); or on a particular type of disability (Boutin, 2008; Stage & Milne, 1996; Trainin & Swanson, 2005), sometimes examining and comparing students with specific types of disabilities with their non-disabled peers (Cosden & McNamara, 1997; Hall, Spruill, & Webster, 2002). Several studies focused on specific skills or behaviors that are important for college success, including writing skills, help-seeking skills, and cognitive and academic performance (Hartman-Hall & Haaga, 2002; Hughes & Smith, 1990; Li & Hamel, 2003). Recently, researchers have begun to examine students' experiences in higher education and what students find helpful, but these studies have been confined to single institutions with relatively small samples (Carney et al., 2007; Fuller, Healey, Bradley, & Hall, 2004; Graham-Smith & Lafayette, 2004; Holloway, 2001). These students experienced faculty and staff insensitivity (Carney et al., 2007; Fuller et al., 2004), a lack of knowledge among faculty and staff (Fuller et al., 2004; Holloway, 2001), inappropriate accommodations (Carney et al., 2007), and continuing difficulties with access (Fuller et al., 2004; Holloway, 2001). Students found that faculty and staff who were knowledgeable and caring were helpful in creating positive experiences (Graham-Smith & Lafayette, 2004). As of yet, research does not provide the holistic information that practitioners need to support and assist students with disabilities in their transition from high school to college or university and the issues they face once they arrive in college.

### *Transition to college*

First-year students are much like immigrants needing to assimilate into a new culture with heightened academic expectations; a doubling of the pace of learning requiring increased personal management skills; a more competitive environment; and a wider range of course offerings, academic majors, and co-curricular and extracurricular activities (Chaskes, 1996). First-year students, not only those with disabilities, generally face challenges while attempting to successfully navigating this transition (Upcraft, Gardner, & Associates, 1989). All new students seek an opportunity to make new friends and establish a rich social life. For first-year students with disabilities, this transition may mean a new start and an opportunity to discard the stigma of being labeled as disabled. In addition, all students

typically seek to develop more autonomy and independence from parental and institutional supervision (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). These three goals—a fresh start, a rich social life, and greater autonomy—are more difficult to attain for SWD (Brinkerhoff, 1996).

Many of the challenges faced by SWD in a post-secondary environment arise from the shift or change in their legal environment (Katsiyannis, Zhang, Landmark, & Reber, 2009). While these students are in high school, the primary applicable laws covering students with disability are the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act of 2004 (IDEA) and Section 504 of Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The IDEA and Section 504 focuses on children needing special educational services, guaranteeing special services with funded entitlements at no cost to parents. A team evaluation of each student's individual needs is prescribed by an Individual Education Plan (IEP), which must be followed. Parents are heavily involved in the planning and evaluation of their child. The goal of these laws is to provide a quality education for every child, regardless of his or her disability status (Getzel & Wehman, 2005).

For higher education, the applicable laws are primarily the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) and the Americans with Disabilities Act Amended of 2008 (ADAA). These are *civil rights laws* enacted to protect the rights of citizens with disabilities (Gordon & Keiser, 2000). Under these laws, the student, legally an adult citizen at 18 years of age, must advocate for him or herself. New students with disabilities may struggle to develop these needed self-advocacy skills. Their parents are not exempted from the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), and are therefore not automatically entitled to information about their students. Additionally, in college, there are no funded entitlements or mandated IEPs as there were under IDEA and Section 504. Many of these parents have been highly motivated "helicopter parents" who are now being asked to take a significantly diminished role (Getzel & Wehman, 2005; Reiff, 2007). The students' long-acting advocates are often reduced to the role of advisors and coaches.

### A "Catch-22"

With these changes, the advocacy role shifts from the parents to the students themselves. However, new students with disabilities may find themselves ill prepared for their new role of self-advocacy. To be entitled to an accommodation, each student must register and document his or her disability with the organizational unit that functions as an office of disability services and resources. Albeit with varying amounts of assistance, the student is, once registered and properly documented, expected to negotiate any needed accommodations with faculty and staff as an independent adult (Getzel & Wehman, 2005; Gordon & Keiser, 2000; Reiff, 2007).

However, some SWD perceive self-advocacy as asking for help or "special treatment," thus diminishing their opportunities to be independent. They sometimes worry about how faculty will react, are embarrassed to self-identify, and may feel stigmatized (Carney et al., 2007; Hartman-Hall & Haaga, 2002). Thus,

SWD may try to be successful without registering as a SWD, asking for special accommodation, or even taking necessary medication.

## Methodology

This article explores students' transition issues and experiences in college utilizing a mixed methods approach, including both quantitative and qualitative data. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) was used in the quantitative analysis and provide demographic data from the Beginning Postsecondary Survey (BPS). This survey follows cohorts of students from their enrollment up to six years. Analyses in this study utilized information from a sample of college students who first enrolled in college in 2003, were surveyed in 2004, and were followed through 2006 (BPS 2003/2006), and includes the most current data available at the time. Descriptive level analyses were conducted utilizing the NCES Data Analysis System (DAS). DAS is an online (NCES-constructed) analysis program that provides researchers with the ability to conduct analyses using a restricted data set. Using DAS, we examined how often students met with advisors and faculty. We also examined early persistence and attainment data.

The qualitative data were collected through interviews with 18 students with disabilities on one four-year public campus in the mid-Atlantic region. Students were identified with the assistance of the campus center for students with disabilities and by the second author, a faculty member who uses a wheelchair. Of the 18 students, 13 were women. Six were first-year students, one student was a sophomore, five were juniors, and six were seniors. These students represent a range of physical disabilities and developmental impairments. Students' interviews were narrative and relatively unstructured in form (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Rubin & Rubin, 1995), and ranged from 30 minutes to over an hour. The respondents were told that the interviewer was interested in hearing their story about their lives on campus and how their college experience was shaped by their disabilities. The authors analyzed the data by reviewing transcripts and coding data as patterns emerged (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). All names included are pseudonyms.

## Results

### *Quantitative data*

The quantitative data provide an overview of students with disabilities, and how often they meet with advisors and faculty. According to the 2003 NCES data, 393,750 students or 10.3% of students who enrolled in college that year disclosed that they had some type of disability. Understanding how often students meet with faculty and advisors is critical because research has found that all students benefit from such interactions (Astin, 1993; Kuh, 2003; Tinto, 2006). Given that students with disabilities require unique accommodations, practitioners could expect to see

students with disabilities reporting higher levels of interaction with advisors and faculty than their non-disabled peers. However, data show minimal differences between SWD and their non-disabled peers when they were surveyed in both 2004 and in 2006 (see Table 1).

**TABLE 1**

**Frequency of meeting with advisors and faculty (in percentages)**

	Never		Sometimes		Often	
	SWD	Non Disabled	SWD	Non Disabled	SWD	Non Disabled
Met with advisors 2004 (n=3,513,771)	34	31	47*	53	18	16
Met with advisors 2006 (n=3,005,101)	20	17	63	63	18	20
Talked to faculty out of class 2004 (n=3,513,771)	29	26	57	60	14	14
Talked to faculty out of class 2006 (n=3,005,101)	22	18	51	55	27	27

\*  $p < .05$

We first examined how often students met with advisors. The sample sizes (including students with and without disabilities) were: 3,513,771 in 2004 and 3,005,101 in 2006.

Overall, both SWD and their non-disabled peers increased their interaction with advisors and faculty between 2004 and 2006. In fact, the percentage of both groups of students who reported interacting often with faculty increased substantially from 2004 to 2006. However, in the 2003-2004 academic year, in the first year at college, students with disabilities were more likely to both report that they never met with their advisors (34%) and that they met often with their advisors (18%), compared to their non-disabled peers (31% and 16% respectively).

Although these differences were not significant, students with disabilities were significantly less likely to report meeting with their advisors sometimes than their peers (47% vs. 53%). Students reporting disabilities also indicated they were less likely to talk with faculty about academics outside of class in 2003-2004, with 29% reporting that they never did so, 57% reporting that they talked with them sometimes, and 14% reporting having talked with them often, compared to non-

disabled students who reported rates of 26%, 60%, and 14% respectively. However, none of these differences were significant.

These differences continued in 2006. Students with disabilities were slightly more likely to report having never talked to faculty outside of class (22%) than their non-disabled peers (18%), and slightly less likely to report speaking with them sometimes than their peers (51% vs. 55%)—differences that were not significant. There were similar results for students’ self-reported frequency of meeting with their advisors in 2006; students with disabilities were slightly more likely to report never meeting with their advisors (20%), to report similar percentages for meeting with them sometimes (63%), and were slightly less likely to report meeting often (18%) than were their non-disabled peers (17%, 63%, 20%), but there were no significant differences.

Although SWD report similar interaction levels as their non-disabled peers with advisors and faculty in 2004 and 2006, we examined whether SWD have similar outcomes as their non-disabled peers. We examined and compared the sample of students with disabilities (sample size = 393,750) to the students who indicated no disabilities (sample size= 3,438,929). In 2006, students with disabilities were slightly more likely to report having earned a certificate (9%) and slightly less likely to report having earned an associate’s degree (5%) than their non disabled peers (8% and 7% respectively). These differences were not significant. Yet students with disabilities were significantly more likely to report that in 2006 they had not attained a degree and were not enrolled (42%) than their peers (32%), and significantly less likely to report being still enrolled and working toward that attainment (43%) than their non-disabled peers (52%) (see Table 2).

TABLE 2

**2006 Persistence and degree attainment for students with and without disabilities (in percentages)**

	SWD (n = 393,750)	Non-disabled students (n = 3,438,929)
Certificate	9	8
Associate	5	7
No degree, still enrolled	43*	52
No degree, not enrolled	42*	32

\*  $p < .05$

*Qualitative data*

We saw several themes emerge from the analysis of the qualitative data,

the most prevalent being identity disclosure. Included within this theme were students' decisions about self-disclosure, their attempts to manage college life without disclosure and accommodations, and their self-advocacy, which required disclosure. Another theme was the responses, both positive and negative, that students received from faculty. Finally, the third theme was the college bureaucratic challenges that students faced and about which campuses need to be more alert.

### *Disclosure and self-advocacy*

The first decision students with disabilities must make when they enter college is the extent of their disclosure to others. In order to receive appropriate accommodations, students must be prepared to disclose information about their disability. For students with visible disabilities, the disclosure takes the form of how much information to provide about their disability, but for students whose disabilities are not visible, disclosure, or self-advocacy, is necessary in order to communicate their needs. Students expressed a range of comfort levels in disclosing and discussing their disabilities. Their concerns and statements have been summarized in the following passages and condensed for readability. One student, Connie, said regarding telling her peers about her disability, "That's not the first thing that comes out of my mouth." Another student stated, "It's never really a comfortable thing because you don't like telling people there's something wrong with you... it feels like, 'hey, I'm [Eileen] and I'm slow.'" Sally explained, "I really don't tell that many people about my learning disability because I just want to be treated like everybody else." Robert commented succinctly, "No one wants to be different."

Students did, in general, distinguish between disclosing to faculty and the disability resources center in order to receive accommodations, which they were more willing to do, and disclosing to peers, with which they were less comfortable. There were four students who at some point tried negotiating the college experience without accommodations. For three of those students, the time of experimenting with accommodations occurred during their first year. Lana explained, "I tried in my freshman year to do without the accommodations. That was a really bad idea. I would forget to hand the papers in, and because of that I fell really far behind. I had to withdraw." Peter said, "In my first semester, I wanted to try college without any extra help and try to be like everyone else. That had a pretty big impact on my first semester grades." After that semester, Peter changed his major, started taking his medication, and registered for accommodations. He reported that as a result, in his "second semester, I got all As and Bs."

Two additional students had attempted, with some success, different approaches for not registering with the disability center or not asking for accommodations. The underlying reasons for their decisions were related to the issues of independence and disclosure. One of these two students, Maria, was a senior who negotiated her own accommodations with faculty members, but who was not registered with the disability center, and, therefore, was not officially entitled to such accommodations. She enjoyed her independence, was somewhat

ambivalent about how much and to whom she disclosed information, and had generally been successful with faculty being accommodating even though she did not have the official paperwork. One faculty member, however, did not accept her individual negotiation without official documentation and required her to take a test even though Maria had explained that she was ill. Maria said, "I asked her if I could take it at a different time, and she said 'no,' that I had to come in. So I had to sit in the class."

Robert also discussed going without accommodations during his interview. According to Robert, he registered for accommodations during his first semester of freshman year, but "after that semester, I decided I didn't really need those things, so I don't hand teachers the letters anymore." When asked why he had made that decision, he replied, "The reason was that I didn't feel like I needed it. I just feel more comfortable, I guess, not having the stigma. I'd rather be just like everybody else." Later in the interview, Robert stated that his GPA was 3.4, which he was "pretty happy with."

For many students, self-advocacy is a new experience because previously they have relied on their parents to make those disclosures. One student, Connie, had a difficult situation with a faculty member during her first semester, and when the interviewer asked her about her response, she replied, "I called my mother crying." But she said that her parents had "taught me to be a self-advocator." She learned that she had to work with faculty, and said she told them, "Here's my accommodation letter, and this says the following, that you have to give me this." Andrew said his "parents have been a big forerunner for me, and now it's my turn to really step up to the plate and really fight for myself." He added, "I feel almost like a more confident person because of it." Melinda learned to become a self-advocate because she was "fairly independent... I know I can do it." She explained that in general, "people are nice, and I understand that they just have your best interest at heart. But I'm just so sick of having helicopter people around me. I just don't wanna deal with it anymore."

However, Melinda provided several examples of self-advocacy in response to situations when she first enrolled. She had been placed in a residence hall that was at the opposite end of campus from most of her classes. In response, she called housing to remedy that situation. Once Melinda got to her room, however, it did not provide a shower seat, which Melinda needed. She again used self-advocacy skills and "walked over to the community center and said to the RA [resident assistant], 'my house has no shower seat. I need a shower seat.' They had a shower seat there in like two hours."

### *Faculty responses*

For the most part, in terms of self-advocacy, students reported positive interactions with faculty members. Lana said that "most professors are understanding." Robert stated, "Professors were fine with it [accommodation letters]." Sally replied that professors "reacted pretty much [in a] positive manner, like, they don't put me down in any way."

But, faculty responses were not uniformly positive, and Sally had a class in which she “didn’t think I was being treated very fairly. I had to withdraw... she was saying she’d do one thing to accommodate my disability and... she would do another.” Connie had also had a negative experience with a professor who refused to allow her to take exams at the disability resource center. Connie relayed that the professor said, “‘That’s not how it’s gonna be done.’ She said ‘go find a professor that will.’ She refused to help me.” In this case, although Connie went to the disability resource center, the director of the disability center was out on maternity leave and nothing was done.

### *Negotiating college bureaucracy*

Both Sally’s and Connie’s experiences, and Melinda’s previously described experiences in self-advocacy, are indicative of the third theme in the interviews, which was the bureaucracy that students had to navigate in order to be successful college students. Students with disabilities experience an additional layer of bureaucracy related to registering as SWD, which can involve additional tests and doctor’s certifications as well as letters they must provide to faculty at the beginning of classes.

There are also unexpected challenges. For example, during an unusually large snowfall, Melinda was stuck in her residence hall for two days before she could get out. Then, her walk had been cleared only “wide enough for feet. I could walk through it, but my wheels [on the walker] were too wide. I literally could not get to class.” She contacted the disability resource office and talked to the director. The director “called somebody, and they came and plowed...I mean, I missed my class, but [the director] got right on it [and had the walks cleared].” The additional bureaucracy and advocating for accommodations takes a substantial amount of time. Several students relayed the time and emotional toll that the bureaucracy took. Lana explained, it took “longer to do every assignment. It’s hard sometimes to look at a deadline. I don’t know if I’m going to get it done in time. I don’t want points taken off, but I want to do good work.” Bill said of college, “Some days it seems like a battle; it’s tiring.”

## **Discussion and Implications**

When first enrolling, students with disabilities are less likely to report meeting with advisors and report similar levels of meeting with faculty as their non-disabled peers. This is despite the fact that they would be expected to report higher levels of contact as a result of their need for accommodations. In 2006, students both with and without disabilities reported higher levels of interaction with both advisors and faculty as compared to 2004, but again, there were few differences between students with and without disabilities. Also, by 2006, students with disabilities reported significantly lower rates of persistence and significantly higher rates of attrition than their non-disabled peers. Of course, these data do not indicate causation; in other words, we cannot say that higher attrition rates for

SWD are related to the amount of time they take when meeting with advisors or faculty. However, previous research has found that student-faculty interaction is key to students' college experiences (Astin, 1993; Kuh, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto; 2006).

In the qualitative data, it was clear that SWD on our campuses were concerned about disclosure when they transition to college, especially disclosure to peers. This concern may lead some SWD to try going without accommodations, which can have negative implications. Even students whose disabilities are visible have concerns about disclosure because they want to be independent and to be typical students; therefore, they may resent faculty and peers who hover or consistently inquire about their conditions. Furthermore, once students disclose and seek accommodations, students must advocate for themselves. The students in these interviews seemed to be, in general, making this shift to self-advocacy, although they did report a few difficult situations with faculty in which they were not successful in having their needs met. While most faculty reacted positively, several students reported situations in which faculty members refused to accommodate students.

The implications from these data reveal the additional layer of complexity SWD face when establishing relationships with peers in the college environment. Such relationships are critical for positive overall college experiences (Astin, 1993; Kuh, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto; 2006), but SWD must proceed more slowly than their non-disabled peers because they must decide how much to disclose and how to monitor their peers' reactions for negative repercussions, which can range from rejection to smothering. At the same time, SWD are learning to become self-advocates and are also learning to negotiate the intricacy of college bureaucracy with an additional layer of complexity related to needed accommodations, which often requires time.

## **Recommendations**

Campus administrators must work with all students to normalize disabilities as one aspect of diversity. Students repeatedly expressed concern about this issue. Discussing disabilities as an aspect of diversity, particularly within orientation activities, can help destigmatize these students. Orientation advisors can be trained and prepared to refer students for disability services. Furthermore, administrators may consider an orientation focused on students with disabilities that includes their parents in order to ensure an understanding of the services available and the complexities of receiving them. These orientation sessions could include topics such as time management, college bureaucracy, peer disclosure, and working with faculty, which were mentioned as areas of concern by students. Implementing these recommendations would positively impact students with disabilities and may increase their persistence rates. These recommendations could, by reducing the stigma associated with disabilities, make our campuses more equitable environments, which would benefit all our students.

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