

A Study of the Experiences of Students with Disabilities at Loyola University Chicago

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to interview students with disabilities at Loyola University Chicago (LUC) to ascertain the university's responsiveness to the needs of these students. While all students (fifty-five) who were self-identified with the LUC disability office were invited to participate, sixteen undergraduate and graduate students in programs throughout the university consented to be interviewed. Research has suggested that students with disabilities in higher education face a number of obstacles despite strict federal laws. Students interviewed evidenced a wide variety of disabilities and demonstrated a need for accommodations. Their experiences with university services, faculty responsiveness and disability awareness within the university community were both negative and positive, and some barriers to their education were revealed. The researchers discuss how they used the findings from this study to advocate for increased awareness of disabilities at Loyola University Chicago.

Introduction

Persons with disabilities have a significantly lower mean educational level than the general population (National Council on Disability, 2000). Before the weight of the law prohibited discrimination against students with disabilities, they were often denied admission to colleges and universities. A 1962 survey of 92 Midwestern colleges and universities revealed that 65 would not accept wheelchair-using students (Paul, 2000). Blind, deaf and hearing impaired students were also frequently rejected from college campuses. Recognizing the rights of persons with disabilities to equal opportunity for higher education, strict federal laws such as the historic Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA, 1990) have been enacted and students with disabilities are now appearing in increasing numbers throughout college campuses (Paul, 2000). These students face a number of obstacles once admitted to college, resulting in the likelihood that they will pursue a two-year rather than a four-year degree or drop out of college prior to completing a degree (Mull, Sitlington & Alper, 2001). Additionally, they are less likely to pursue post-graduate education than their non-disabled peers (Wolf, 1999). This study examines the barriers students with

disabilities at Loyola University Chicago encounter that may prevent them from completing a degree and developing to their highest potential.

Literature Review

There are roughly 43 million Americans who have one or more physical or mental disabilities, and this number will continue to increase (Hall, 2000). Historically, society has tended to isolate individuals with disabilities. While there has been some improvement, discrimination against individuals with disabilities remains a serious social dilemma. Unlike individuals who have experienced discrimination on the basis of race, religion, sex, or age, individuals with disabilities have often had little or no legal recourse to combat discrimination (Hall, 2000). Discrimination against individuals with disabilities continues to exist in most critical life areas, including education. This literature review will focus on the research and anti-discrimination laws that relate to post-secondary education.

Due to strict federal laws, the work of disability groups, positive media coverage, and political support, this country has seen increasing numbers of students pursuing postsecondary education every year since the passage of the ADA in 1990 (Paul, 2000). Individuals with disabilities now constitute the largest and fastest growing minority in the United States (Mull, Sitlington & Alper, 2001). Yet the literature shows that the efforts of congressional legislation and strict federal laws are aimed at eliminating discrimination and are not enough to provide students with disabilities adequate integration into the educational community (Paul, 2000). Wolf (1999) found that reasonable accommodation and appropriate support through a combination of individual and systemic resources are the keys to improving outcomes and achievement for students with disabilities. Lehmann, Davies and Laurin (2000) stress the importance of listening carefully to students' perspectives to identify and eliminate barriers to success, to identify personal and academic needs, and to provide support and a vision for the future. Dilger's (2000) research with students with disabilities identified two major obstacles to academic success and completion of education programs: (1) how the disability personally affects the student, and (2) how the student is affected by the environment due to her/his disability.

Anti-Discrimination Laws

There are several federal laws that address discrimination in post-secondary education; those of primary importance are Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. The regulations enacted by these laws prescribe minimum standards for colleges and universities in six areas: admissions and recruitment, treatment of students, academic adjustments, housing, financial aid and employment assistance, and nonacademic services (Milani, 1996).

The Americans with Disabilities Act was signed into law on July 26, 1990, and is designed to protect individuals with disabilities from discrimination in “employment, housing, public accommodations, education, transportation, communication, recreation, institutionalization, health services, voting and access to public services” (ADA, 1990). Title II of the act states: “No qualified individual with a disability shall be excluded from participation in or be denied the benefits of the services, programs, or activities of a public entity” (ADA, 1990). This same prohibition applies to private entities through Title III of the ADA, which bans disability-based denial of the benefits of the services, programs, or activities of “public accommodations,” including schools (Milani, 1996). The ADA defines discrimination as: (1) A failure to make reasonable modifications when such modifications are necessary and (2) A failure to ensure that no individual with a disability is treated differently than others because of the absence of accommodations, unless making accommodations would alter a program or would result in undue burden.

Without altering a program, these “academic adjustments and reasonable modifications” (e.g. extended time) and the provision of “auxiliary aids and services” (e.g. signers for individuals who are deaf) are vital tools for extending an equal education opportunity to individuals with disabilities (Grossman, 2001). Students may not be charged a fee for accommodations that they are entitled to by law. These devices are instituted to allow for equal access to education, and are known as “reasonable accommodations” (Grossman, 2001).

Once a student is admitted to a program, the school’s legal obligation for making accommodations begins when the student discloses his/her disability. When a student receives admittance to a program, the student is responsible for notifying the school of his or her disability, requesting academic adjustments, and providing necessary evidence of a disability - related need for adjustments (Milani, 1996). The duty

to accommodate does not begin until the school receives sufficient documentation of a disability and the need for certain types of accommodation.

Barriers to Accommodation

The ADA and Section 504 provide institutions of higher education with a framework of ethical protocol in regard to students with disabilities. However, it is evident that problems do occur and educational institutions are failing to assist these students, despite the legislation. Because of this, colleges and universities have attempted to redevelop their plan for implementing services and accommodations (Simon, 2000). One problem, which will be discussed later in further detail, is that faculty members have negative attitudes toward students with disabilities (Scott & Gregg, 2000). Another problem is that students need to identify their disability through documented proof. In many cases, the required documentation has been quite extensive and difficult to obtain because the disabilities are considered to be “hidden disabilities” (Simon, 2000). Perhaps requiring documentation is not unreasonable, but some of the individualized requirements may be unreasonable, especially if students are feeling uncomfortable with this initial part of the process to obtain services. Another issue is that services and accommodations are not always provided in due time. Finally, colleges and universities may not consider it feasible to make substitutions and adjustments to degree requirements in order to accommodate students with disabilities (Simon, 2000).

Marks (1997) suggests that “attitudinal barriers” can be just as effective at excluding disabled students as a separate classroom or program. The literature on this subject overwhelmingly suggests that students with disabilities are not seen in a positive light (Beilke & Yssel, 1999). Many times there are no noticeable differences between students with hidden or mild disabilities and other students, which leads some teachers to expect them to be able to “behave and perform at the same level as their non-disabled peers” (Cook, 2001, p. 8). Teachers must be able to set attainable and realistic expectations for their students, despite the demands placed on them to produce a classroom full of academically excellent students (Cook, 2001).

There are some extreme cases of prejudice against disabled students where faculty have voiced their opinion that students with learning disabilities should not be allowed to attend college (Boone, 2002). For the most part, faculty members see themselves as being willing to make the accommodations necessary to help these students. Although they are willing to provide support, they do have reservations and con-

cerns. These concerns revolve around being able to adequately accommodate these students while at the same time ensuring that the rest of the class receives the education they expect (Boone, 2002).

Research suggests that universities can afford to shift efforts and funding from preparing university facilities for people with disabilities to educating faculty members to provide the most effective ways to educate students with disabilities. Some studies have found that universities are doing an acceptable job of preparing their buildings and facilities for their disabled students, but are not preparing their teachers for these students (Sheppard-Jones, 2002). One study found that faculty members' disability awareness varied greatly, ranging from the claim that accommodations were merely "common sense," to admitting that they were "woefully ignorant" (Beilke & Yssel, 1999).

Research has identified that students with disabilities are significantly more lonely than non-impaired students (Dilger, 2000; Gambrell, Florian, & Splaver, 1986). One study found that a full 75% of the students with disabilities interviewed rated high for loneliness (Dilger, 2000). And the longer the perceived duration of loneliness, the more affect it had on performance in academic settings as measured by the student's grade point average (Dilger, 2000). Several researchers have emphasized that a support community is key to academic success (Paul, 2000; Bucaro & Kopfstein, 1999; Lock & Layton, 2001), and Paul (2000) found significant differences in student experiences of social support networks. Dropouts indicated a lack of social support as one contributing factor to their dropping out. For many students, the support community includes other students with disabilities. One student with disabilities described it this way:

[An] immediate sense of community emerged upon meeting my peers with disabilities. There are benefits of being a part of a community of disabled people, including the support of the group, being a part of the disability culture, and shedding years of shame and inauthenticity. When I socialize or work with other disabled people, this acute sense of tuning in is so evident and so refreshing (Bucaro & Kopfstein, 1999).

Mossman (2002), an advocate of disability study and training, posits that study and training can result in the empowerment of students with disabilities. He perceives that the subtleties of discrimination and the complicated processes of building abnormality can be detected and changed. Alperin (1988), Mossman (2002), and Bucaro and Kopfstein (1999) discuss the

absence of disability course content in higher education curriculums. Bucaro and Kopfstein (1999) raise the question of why disability is left out of courses that study cultural sensitivity, when persons with disabilities are treated differently than others. They propose that disability is an aspect of diversity with its own culture and subcultures. Mossman (2002) also emphasizes the significance of disability studies in contributing to multicultural research on marginalized groups. He believes that expanding the scope of research on disabilities would articulate commitment to exploring social constructionism, engaging students in lively discussion of the connection between the body and identity, and demonstrating commitment to serve the underrepresented.

Due to the complexity of its nature, many researchers are choosing qualitative methodologies to study the lives of individuals with disabilities. Qualitative methods allow for greater depth in exploration, and frequently result in the emergence of new research questions. Qualitative data collection methods are diverse, and include interviews with individuals or groups, participant journals, focus groups, autobiographies, archival materials and videotaped social situations. Qualitative research can provide rich data about the attitudes and perceptions of individuals with disabilities, allowing for many important issues to arise (O'Day & Killeen, 2002). The new knowledge and insight gained by researchers will allow for further developments regarding the fair treatment of persons with disabilities in higher education.

Research Questions

Our review of the literature led us to many areas of interest concerning our research. The literature gives us an overall look at the way higher education in the United States accommodates students with disabilities. Our goal is to compare LUC's practice of accommodating these students to that of the information found in the literature. The questions we explore include: Is LUC fulfilling the requirements of law regarding accommodation and service? Are they creative and innovative in their response to students with disabilities? What are the personal experiences of students with disabilities at LUC, and how do they impact the student personally and educationally? By listening to the voices of each of these students, practitioners, teachers, faculty, and peers may gain a better understanding of the experiences of students with disabilities. Thus, one of the major goals of this study is to promote disability awareness at LUC and in higher education as a whole.

Participants

The total number of participants was 13, all of whom were undergraduate and graduate students at LUC. Of these students, five were male and eight were female with a mean age of 32.3. Eight of the students were enrolled in an undergraduate program, and five of them in a graduate program. One student experienced a psychological disability, five a learning disability, and seven a communication disability. Seven of these students had congenital disabilities, one was diagnosed as a preadolescent, two acquired their disability in adolescence, and two of the participants stated the age of onset to be in adulthood under the age of 50 years. Six of the participants attended Loyola's Water Tower Campus and eight attended the Lake Shore Campus. The participants' grade point averages were in the range of 1.97 – 4.0 with a mean GPA of 3.85.

Methodology

This research employed a qualitative method in designing this study. A field research design was utilized and data were collected via active involvement with participants in an interview format. Data were then used to identify similarities and trends in the participants' responses.

Sampling

As per LUC policy, students who request accommodations must register with the college or university's office of disabilities. To protect these students' confidentiality, researchers were not able to directly contact these students; however, the office agreed to contact each student by way of a cover letter and consent form requesting their participation. The total number of students registered with this office was 55. Sixteen were interested in participating in this study as confirmed by their email or by returning the self-addressed, stamped envelope. Two of these 16 students later refused to participate. Of the 14 respondents who agreed to participate, 13 students actually participated in the study.

This sample was a non-probability, convenient sample. Some limitations were discovered through this procedure. First, as mentioned earlier, only 55 students are registered with the disabilities office, which is a mere .3% of the total population at LUC. This in itself is a concern, as it is not near the average number of students with disabilities on other college campuses. Second, the small sample size may be useful for gathering detailed student opinions; however,

it is not large enough to be considered representative of the larger population of students with disabilities in higher education. It is important to keep in mind that this sample size merely provides a framework for future consideration in this area.

Data Collection

When each prospective participant responded with the consent form, he/she provided the researchers with contact information. Of the 13 students, ten were interviewed via telephone, and three were interviewed face-to-face. Participants were paired up with researchers randomly. Responses were probed to give participants the opportunity to expand upon their answers. Those responses were then coded into themes developed from the literature: student's positive experiences, student's negative experiences, faculty attitudes/acceptance and university policy and recommendations.

In an attempt to eliminate researcher bias, researchers conducted a content analysis and placed responses with appropriate themes. Avoiding researcher bias was also attempted by constant introspection by the researchers. Content analysis allowed for identifying similarities and dissimilarities and to ascertain patterns of interaction and events that were common among the participants.

Ethical Considerations

Confidentiality of all subjects was protected by the absence of identifying information when data were compiled. This study was blind in the sense that researchers were unaware of which respondents provided specific data. At the conclusion of the research, the interview notes were destroyed. Confidentiality could not be completely controlled due to the limited number of identified students with disabilities at LUC. It is possible that statements could be linked to individuals if further examination occurs. Subjects were informed of the possibility of others deducing the fact that unique responses could only be derived from an individual with one type of disability. Because of this factor, some prospective subjects refused to participate in the study.

The data collection instrument used was developed for the purpose of this research. A standardized instrument that would meet the needs of this research was unavailable. The validity and reliability of this instrument have not been tested in previous research. The fact that it is not a standardized tool is cause for concern because we do not know the implications of

the questions, phrasing, order and length of time. Another limitation is that, in its original form, it assumed each student would be able to answer the questions. Modifications would have to be made if the need arose for a student's specific disability (e.g. TTY). When necessary, appropriate accommodations were made throughout this research.

Results

This research yielded a diverse array of results. This variance can be clearly seen in the reported experiences of students. A number of students reported that the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities was helpful and friendly. Conversely, numerous students reported that this office was disorganized and messages were not relayed; one student perceived office personnel to be more interested in playing computer games than helping the student. Some students reported that all of their requests for services were granted, while others stated that accommodations did not meet the students' needs, and some accommodations were not met. A number of students found LUC faculty to be responsive and understanding of their disability. However, various students responded that professors acted as if accommodating them was a burden, acted coldly towards them, and were skeptical of the students' need for services. One student reported that "the services provided were empowering and were a key to [my] success," while others stated they "felt shamed, pitied, overwhelmed, and like an oddity" as a result of their experiences at LUC.

There are a number of possible explanations for their varied reports. All of these explanations are questions for future research to gain a better understanding of which factors contribute to providing positive experiences for students with disabilities. One of the potential reasons for such diverse findings may be that there are a number of different professors and staff members interacting with these students and providing their accommodations. The variance in faculty's levels of understanding of disability issues would presumably have an impact on how sensitively and effectively they deliver their services. The majority of students interviewed perceived that their professors' knowledge of their disability, and how to best accommodate it, was insufficient to meet the students' needs. Findings from this research suggest that developing faculty and staff education and awareness on disability issues would enhance the experience of students with disabilities. These findings support the literature reviewed earlier, which revealed that negative interactions with faculty were a key factor in stu-

dents' failure to complete their educational program (Scott et al., 2000).

Some of our findings seemed to suggest that LUC may serve these students solely because of federal requirements, without a strong commitment to creatively and innovatively do all it can to accommodate individuals with disabilities. In fact, several students reported that they "perceived that LUC did the bare minimum to fulfill legal obligations and nothing more." Participants perceived that some school policies are detrimental because they expect students to fit into the already existing accommodations and buildings that are not welcoming or helpful to students with disabilities.

Our review of the literature revealed that the average university enrollment of students with disabilities is between 8 and 12%, yet at LUC only .3% of the student body is registered with the Office for Services for Students with Disabilities (Wolf, 1999). This discrepancy could be the result of a number of factors: some students with disabilities may choose not to identify themselves; some students may seek accommodations from professors without identifying with the disabilities office; and some students may not be aware of the availability of services due to poor information dissemination by the university. It is also possible that LUC may not make adequate efforts to recruit, welcome, include and/or serve students with disabilities.

Students may also report varied experiences because their accommodations represent a wide variety of needs. Some accommodations are more easily met than others, so faculty reaction to accommodating may differ, and some students may feel more satisfaction in their needs being met than others. Furthermore, prior experiences impact both the students and the faculty. The student's prior experiences influence their assertiveness and sensitivity to faculty attitudes and responses. The faculty's prior experiences also impact their current perceptions, as evidenced by the reported skepticism that some professors have concerning the legitimacy and fairness of accommodations.

Participants reported that disability issues were discussed minimally, if at all, in coursework. Surprisingly, even graduate students within the School of Social Work and the Christian Ethics programs reported that disability awareness was rarely covered. The lack of attention to disability issues suggests that LUC does not rank this issue as a priority. Of particular interest to us as social workers was the finding that a number of students with disabilities at LUC do not feel a sense of belonging or acceptance. They report a feeling of

“other,” and some experience loneliness, isolation, and low self-esteem. Some report blatantly negative and discriminatory remarks from faculty:

“Everyone has some type of learning disability,”
(Loyola professor to her student with a learning disability, belittling her need for accommodation).

“I actually had one professor ask me if I thought I could ‘survive’ her class,” (from a Loyola student who is blind).

Participants showed interest in a networking/support group with other students with disabilities that could provide them with needed support and a sense of belonging. Six of the participants said they were interested in such a group, four said they may be interested, one said she/he was not interested and two did not respond to the question.

While there was a wide range of experiences reported by students, a recurring theme was that students’ negative experiences outweighed positive experiences. Twenty-seven positive experiences were reported as compared to forty-five negative experiences. This suggests that there is substantial room for improvement in serving students with disabilities at LUC. Collaboration between university officials and students with disabilities could have a significant impact on the educational and emotional experiences of the students in our study.

Though the predominant findings were that students’ experiences were often negative, some students did report that they were pleased with the services provided and had no complaints. In an effort to make the learning experience for all students satisfactory, the narratives of students with disabilities warrant a closer look so that what has been beneficial and effective for some can be applied to other students and situations. The following are some statements of positive experiences at LUC.

“Staff has been very, very helpful . . . they’ll go that extra yard as well.”

“I am highly satisfied with the services I’ve received from learning assistance at Loyola.”

The students interviewed made the following recommendations for LUC and for other students with disabilities: increasing the amount of time spent in coursework on disability issues, development of a networking/support group for students with disabilities, and education and training of faculty and staff on how to best educate and interact with students with

disabilities. A poignant piece of advice to other students with disabilities from one student we interviewed was, “If you have a problem, seek help. Don’t be afraid or feel ashamed like I did. You can’t get help until you seek it.”

Our findings were very consistent with what we found in the literature. The issues and difficulties that LUC students reported represent the particular challenges that this population of students in higher education face. This study demonstrates the need to educate faculty and staff on disabilities awareness issues and to promote a more welcoming and engaging environment for all students. This study sheds light on some areas that need additional research; for instance, why students’ experiences are so varied, the correlation between a teacher’s understanding of disability issues and the manner in which they treat these students, what support services are helpful to students with disabilities, and why there are so few students at LUC registered with the Office for Students with Disabilities are just a few of the possible focuses for future research.

Limitations

Relevant limitations to this study are addressed in previous sections where appropriate; additional limitations will be addressed here. Confidentiality was a concern for a number of possible participants. Respondents may have censored their answers due to confidentiality concerns. Additionally, due to confidentiality it is impossible to obtain information regarding students who chose not to participate in this study. This information would have been helpful in characterizing the students at Loyola who claim a disability. Without this information the study is only able to report information about the students who consented to participate. The study is also unable to explain why these students did not wish to contribute. This information could have provided important data to this research study.

Many of the respondents had a great deal to say during the interview, but it is important to remember that interviews are verbal reports and therefore subject to problems of bias, poor recall, and poor or inaccurate articulation. Finally, the institution in which the research was conducted may have also posed a limitation. This study was conducted at a private institution, which is not accountable to the same standards at public institutions. A public school may have varying guidelines and regulations, which may produce very different experiences in students with disabilities.

Implications for Social Work

Our review of the literature and interviews of LUC students with disabilities has had a powerful impact on us as researchers. As we read the research and listened to the voices of students we developed a new awareness and sensitivity to issues of disability. We began to see that increased knowledge, awareness and sensitivity could greatly enhance the experience of students with disabilities, and positively impact our community as a whole.

One of the researchers in our group is a person with a disability. On a personal level, this student came to the realization that some difficulties that she had experienced in higher education were not so much personal issues as common issues of persons with disabilities. As our group as a whole began to understand some of these common issues, we developed increased empathy for persons with disabilities and could begin to see simple ways to include and accommodate. We also recognized the tremendous impact issues of ability/disability may have on the development of the self. We recognized that despite a strong emphasis on acceptance and encouragement of diversity in the field of social work, the reality is that knowledge, recognition and acceptance of differences in persons with disability are often ignored. We began to recognize ways that school policies and environments, including our own student and faculty communities, often fail to be sensitive to persons with disabilities.

We saw change occur within our own group. The student with a disability experienced understanding and acceptance on a level different from experiences with other students, and others in the group became ardent advocates for increasing the knowledge and awareness concerning how our society views and responds to persons with disability. The semester following the completion of our research project, our research colleague who has a disability took an opportunity to speak to the Dean of the School of Social Work about the student's personal experiences and the findings of our group. The Dean was very receptive and encouraging, and later asked this student to inform our group that he carefully considered our concerns, and that the school is developing disability awareness workshops for faculty and students for the upcoming school year. He also said that the curriculum committee was reviewing the overall curriculum to ensure the inclusion of issues of disability.

Our group was awed by the impact of our research. We had personally been influenced by our study and research, and we could see the potential of our project

to effect change for students with disabilities at LUC, and consequently to enhance the lives of not only students and faculty, but future clients of social work students as well. Through our research, we increased our personal knowledge, gave voice to students with disabilities, and shared our findings with people who have the power to make their lives better. Our group participated in a research project because it was a requirement in our course work, but we did not anticipate the project's potential for activating policy that would enhance the lives of individuals and our community. Our hope is to make our community at LUC increasingly aware of the needs and experiences of students with disabilities, to further increase the knowledge and awareness concerning how our society views and responds to persons with disability, and to become increasingly inclusive regarding persons with differences in ability. We hope these changes will have further impact on LUC as a whole, will foster a more welcoming and inclusive environment, will increase enrollment of students with disabilities and also increase the number of students who graduate from undergraduate and graduate programs.

As social workers, these findings also have clear implications for our work. Increasing the number of services to persons with disability and understanding their needs for acceptance and accommodation are a great concern for our profession. Advocacy for persons with disabilities, the organization of support and services, community awareness of disability issues, and individual adjustment to disability are just a few of the areas of concern. The social construction of normal/abnormal and the inclusion of disability in our concern for diversity is of great impact to persons with disabilities, and therefore of concern to social workers.

Social workers are trained to be sensitive to the issues of their clients. This research may contribute to this sensitivity in relation to practice and theory with students with disabilities. Acquiring professional education is important in many professions, and students with disabilities face a number of obstacles that are unique to this population. Social workers may engage in conducting training seminars for faculty, staff, and administration of colleges and universities. This type of training helps to facilitate awareness, which in turn affects the overall climate of the environment, and the experiences of individuals with disabilities.

Social workers are also involved in lobbying for changes in policy. Effective social policy regarding the rights of individuals with disabilities normalizes the experiences of those with disabilities. Three spheres of

policy can be affected via research. These spheres include university policy, social policy, and government policy. At the university level, the curriculum can be changed to include diversity education, which would include the experiences of individuals with disabilities. The three spheres represent circular causality because a change in one assists the change process in others, which impacts the experiences of this population. All three levels of policy can effect the treatment of this population and the accommodations they are given. Policy change helps to normalize experiences of individuals, but facilitating changes in policy is difficult without research.

The research presented lays the groundwork for additional research, as it just scratches the surface of the issues and obstacles experienced by individuals with disabilities. Additional research should be conducted in multiple universities that represent a cross-section of our society. Long-term studies will be beneficial in documenting the experiences of students through their college careers. Ultimately, if research can make a difference in university policy, the lives and experiences of individual students will improve.

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