ACCESSING DISABLED STUDENT SERVICES: STUDENTS’ PERSPECTIVES

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May 2014
Introduction

- It is estimated that approximately 54,000,000 people in the United States have a disability (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).
- This number is expected to double over the next 20 years as veterans return home and baby boomers age.
- Individuals living with disabilities are the fastest growing minority population in the United States.
- The purpose of this study was to explore how university students with disabilities access Disabled Student Services (DSS). Specifically, this study explored the following questions: What factors contribute to or deter students with disabilities from accessing DSS (e.g., self-determination, stigma, fear of disclosure, lack of qualifying documentation, lack of knowledge, and/or not having a current Individualized Education Plan [IEP])? At what point in their academic career do they make the decision to access services? In addition, the study compared the above variables between students with learning disabilities and mental health disabilities versus other types of disabilities. Finally, the study examined students’ perceptions of services and accommodations designed to enhance their academic success.
Social Work Relevance

- Throughout a social workers career they will engage in the provision of services to individuals with disabilities either directly or indirectly on both micro and macro levels (Miley, O’Melia, & DuBois, 2013).

- Social workers can assist individuals with disabilities by providing services that can include reducing the stigma associated with having a disability. Social workers can be instrumental in enriching the lives of individuals living with disabilities by helping them obtain needed services such as behavioral, cognitive, music, occupational, physical, sensory integration, and speech and language therapies.

- According to the National Association of Social Workers (2011) *Code of Ethics*, one of the core values of social workers is to promote dignity and self-worth. Individuals with disabilities have unique strengths, skills, abilities, and talents. The focus of interventions needs to shift from what is wrong with the individual to what we can change within the individual’s environment, thus empowering those with disabilities to reach their full human potential (Miley et al., 2013).
According to Erickson, von Schrader, and Lee (2012), 12.1 % of individuals living in the United States are living with a disability.

The prevalence of individuals with disabilities living in the United States ages 21 to 64 represents 12.9% females, and 11.0% males.

Of these individuals, 18.0% are Native Americans, 14.2% are African Americans/Black, 10.3% European/White, 4.1% Asian and 9.5% was represented by other race(s).
Methods

- This quantitative research used a descriptive and exploratory design utilizing a self-administered survey. The results describe the perceptions of students with disabilities regarding the process of accessing the DSS office on campus and explored differences between students with learning disabilities and mental health disabilities versus other students with other types of disabilities. An advantage of this research design was that it allowed the researcher to measure the students' perceptions with precision. A disadvantage of this quantitative research was that it did not provide an in-depth view of the students' actual experiences.

- The sample consisted of 36 California State University, Long Beach students who self-identified as having a disability. Specifically, 14 students self-identified as having a mental health disability and 13 reported a learning disability. The study used a sampling plan based on availability and convenience. Students were recruited as they accessed the Accessible Instructional Materials Center (AIM) or DSS offices.

- The instrument was designed by the researcher based upon a thorough review of the literature. Reliability and validity were unknown. The instrument consisted of four sections:

  - In section 1, students were asked to answer 17 questions using a Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Participants used the rating that best described their feelings regarding the impact of their disability on their daily lives in the areas of disclosure, knowledge of disability, self-determination, stigma, and support.

  - In section 2, students were asked to answer 11 questions using the same Likert-type scale to best describe their feelings about why they chose to access DSS. Participants used the rating that best described their feelings regarding their knowledge of their disability, services and accommodations, fears, and support.

  - In section 3, students were asked to answer 19 questions using the same Likert-type scale to describe their feelings regarding why they choose to delay accessing DSS. Participants used the rating that best described their feelings regarding disclosure, knowledge of disability, knowledge of DSS, self-determination, and stigma.
Methods (continued)

- Section 4 consisted of 12 demographic questions (i.e., gender, age, ethnicity, transfer status, enrollment status, GPA, campus integration and support, disability, and age at diagnosis).

- Participation was voluntary and confidential. The parameters of the research process were explained to the participants in a written consent letter when they received the questionnaire. Participants were informed of the risks and benefits of participating in the research project.

- A flier was posted in both offices to inform prospective participants of the study. Students were able to pick up a set of instructions and study materials in both offices. Participants received an envelope that consisted of the following: (a) a set of instructions, (b) two envelopes labeled “Consent” and “Survey,” respectively, (c) two consent forms (the first one was for their records and the second one was placed in the designated sealed envelope), and (d) the survey (which was completed and placed in the designated sealed envelope). Both envelopes were placed in separately labeled boxes.

- Two sealed envelopes and boxes were used to ensure that confidentiality was maintained. All consents and surveys were stored in a safe locked location to insure confidentiality further.

- Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were used to analyze univariate data. Aggregated scales were created to reflect overall disclosure, comfort regarding disability, knowledge of disability, self-determination, stigma, and support.

- t-Tests were used to compare scale scores between students with learning disabilities and mental health disabilities versus students with other types of disabilities.
Results

- This study found that students with disabilities tended to be highly motivated to stay in school and meet their educational goals. Most increased their support system while attending California State University, Long Beach, and had at least one person to whom they could go for support. This study also found that students with disabilities tended to be interconnected to the university. Many reported participating in on-campus activities and off-campus activities, such as school sports, government, and clubs. These findings are supported by Orr and Goodman (2010) who found that interpersonal relationships and social connectedness were important for students with disabilities who found it beneficial to be involved in extracurricular activities. Almost three-fourths of the participants reported a GPA of 3.00 or higher and nearly all utilized accommodations. These findings are supported by the research of Trammell and Hathaway (2007) who found that the utilization of accommodations increased students' success. A little less than half of the participants had received a disability diagnosis at age 18 and older. This is consistent with Branker's (2009) report of an increase in the number of veterans returning with combat-related injuries and pursuing postsecondary education. This makes it imperative that postsecondary institutions enhance awareness of the programs and services that are available to those who have not been exposed to special education earlier in their lives.

- The present study found that students with disabilities typically use DSS to access accommodations and to learn more about services that can help them succeed. Many also seek services because they are fearful of failing. They strive to gain a better understanding of their disabilities and to access adaptive equipment and assisted technology. This serves to ensure that they acquire alternative adaptive strategies to lead to their success. This is consistent with the work of Lightner et al. (2012) who found that individuals sought DSS due to academic problems. The present findings are also supported by the research of Marshak et al. (2010) who found that students with disability issues have a strong desire to be seen as self-sufficient and experience barriers to services because they have a lack of knowledge about the services that are available.

- The present study found that many students reported delays in accessing DSS because they wanted a fresh start in college, feared negative reactions from non-disabled students, did not want to be singled out because they had a disability, did not know if they had a qualifying disability, and were concerned about confidentiality with respect to the use of services. This is consistent with the work of Marshak et al. (2010) who also found that students did not access services and accommodations because they wanted to become more self-sufficient, had a history of stigma, reported identity issues, feared negative peer and faculty reactions, and were concerned that confidentiality would not be maintained.
The present findings are similarly consistent with the work of Connor (2012) who found that students choose not to seek services due to their fear of being stigmatized. The current research is further supported by the research of Lightner et al. (2010) who found students did not seek services because they had a lack of knowledge of the services that were offered at DSS, feared stigma, and believed that things were going well.

The present study found that students with mental health impairments were less likely to experience self-determination compared to students with other types of disabilities. They were also more likely to experience stigma and less likely to receive support. Similarly, individuals with learning disabilities, another form of hidden disability, were less likely to feel comfortable about their condition when compared to individuals with other types of disabilities, while a nearly significant difference indicated that they were less likely to receive support. This is consistent with the research of Gerber (2011) who found that living with a learning disability is multidimensional, affecting some areas of life and not others and variable depending on the individual. Lambie and Milsom (2012) also found that students with learning disabilities often feel isolated and ashamed, as well as suffer from depression.

Majority (80.6%) reported using test accommodations. Half (50.0%) reported using student support services, followed by counseling services (41.7%) and writing and tutoring assistance (41.7%). One third (36.1%) used assistive technology. Only 8.3% of the participants reported that they had a disability and had not yet accessed DSS services.

Participants’ views of the school environment: Most (72.2%) reported that their support system had increased while attending California State University, Long Beach. Although mental health counseling is offered on campus, fewer than 22.2% accessed counseling services. More than half (52.8%) of the participants reported participating in social activities off campus, while about one third reported participating in social activities on campus (38.9%) and/or in school clubs, student government, and/or sports (33.3%). One third (33.3%) of the participants reported currently using Department of Rehabilitation services.

Participants’ views regarding how their disability impacts their daily life: To summarize attitudinal factors, students responded to the following categories (self-determination, knowledge of disability, comfort with disability, support, disclosure, and stigma). The majority of the participants reported relatively high levels of self-determination. Almost all of the participants (97.1%) were motivated to stay in school and 88.6% felt as if they were a part of California State University, Long Beach. Self-determination attained the highest scale score ($M = 3.49$).
Discussion/Implications for Social Work

- This study provides an important contribution to our understanding of the perceptions of students with disabilities. Based on the finding that almost half of the participants were diagnosed at age 18 and older, this study gives social workers a greater awareness of the needs of students who were diagnosed as adults and were thus not exposed to special education and/or DSS in a secondary setting.

- The findings also indicated that students with disabilities are highly motivated and want to gain a better understanding of their condition. It is recommended that social workers should assist students with disabilities attain academic success by gaining a better understanding of the programs and services that are available on and off campus to enrich their lives.

- The present results indicated that students with mental health disabilities were significantly less likely to experience self-determination and support. They experience significantly higher levels of stigma associated with having a disability. Students with learning disabilities were significantly less likely to feel comfortable with their disability. Thus, it is recommended that social workers and policy makers gain a better understanding of the perceptions of students with these and other types of hidden disabilities.

- In general, these results can serve to assist the social work profession and policy makers in gaining a greater understanding of the unique needs and challenges individuals with disabilities encounter as they become the fastest growing minority population in the United States. This will help to ensure that individuals with disabilities have access to the programs and services that can be instrumental in enriching their daily lives and reaching their full human potential.
References


