

Academic Learning Experiences and Challenges of Students With Disabilities in Higher Education

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Abstract

Students with disabilities are an increasing subpopulation in higher education. Recently, research has put an emphasis on students' voices to explore their academic learning experiences, as well as the learning strategies they use to overcome learning barriers. This study aimed to investigate the academic learning experiences of students with disabilities in college or graduate studies and the learning strategies they used when faced with insufficient or delayed support. This study used interpretative phenomenological analysis to gather data from three online focus groups, with a total of 10 participants. The results demonstrated three themes: experiences or issues related to university resources and accommodations, building influence through advocacy and education, and being an independent learner. Some participants continued to face academic learning challenges despite their active seeking of accommodations and support. Some participants utilized study strategies, especially when support was inadequate or not immediately provided. This study highlighted the urgent need for higher education institutions to establish support services and resources for all students. Related discussions and implications are presented.

Keywords: interpretative phenomenological analysis, university, self-advocacy, students with disabilities

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Academic Learning Experiences and Challenges of Students With Disabilities in Higher Education

Students with disabilities are an increasing subpopulation in college and graduate studies. Nearly 20% of undergraduate and 12% of graduate students in the United States reported having a disability in the 2015–2016 academic year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018), and this population is growing. However, students with disabilities tend to graduate from college at lower rates than students without disabilities (Carroll et al., 2020). Approximately 20% of 25–34-year-olds with disabilities held a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to an estimated 41% of the same population without disabilities (Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Disability Statistics and Demographics, 2023). These statistics suggest that people with disabilities either encounter challenges in completing and succeeding in college or face difficulty starting college in the first place. Similarly, Ball and Traxler (2023) emphasized that, with the increasing number of people with disabilities attending graduate school, it is crucial to understand how graduate education programs support students with disabilities.

Compared to secondary education environments, students in college have much more freedom to select their activities and course schedules (Gil, 2007). They also have more opportunities to engage in a variety of extracurricular activities. Nevertheless, the expectations for reading and assignments escalate in college, increasing further in graduate studies, which require a higher level of self-discipline and self-management. Thus, students in both college and graduate studies must assume responsibility for time management, decision making, and taking the initiative in their own learning, including advocating for their academic needs (Morgan & Riesen, 2016). Despite these expectations, students, particularly those with disabilities, may encounter challenges in managing their learning and advocating for their needs (Heward et al., 2017). Academic challenges, if not addressed, may lead to negative consequences, such as loss of scholarships (Connor, 2012). Because students with disabilities face a greater range of challenges, to help them succeed in learning, higher education institutions offer support by providing accommodations and resources (Pearson & Boskovich, 2019).

The Office for Civil Rights (2011) has provided students with disabilities specific guidance about their rights and responsibilities in college. The guidance explicitly details academic adjustments or accommodations that disability services may provide if students self-disclose their disabilities. Students are advised to initiate the accommodation process with on-campus disability services by disclosing disabilities. For graduate students with disabilities, since the goal of graduate school is to assist students in becoming an expert in a chosen field, the expectations of coursework increase. The University of Washington has developed a helpful guide for students with disabilities who are transitioning to a graduate program. In addition to using accommodations provided by disabilities services, the guide includes practical tips and reminders for graduate students with disabilities, such as determining a career goal with an advanced

degree, assessing a lifestyle in a graduate program, and developing an application plan and timeline (University of Washington, 2018).

Despite there being potentially robust support, the process of seeking accommodations from on-campus disability services could put students with disabilities at a disadvantage. Students with disabilities may opt not to disclose their disabilities for various reasons, such as stigmatization and fear of discrimination (Ball & Traxler, 2023; Pearson & Boskovich, 2019). Therefore, students who decide not to disclose their disabilities need to develop their own strategies to achieve successful learning outcomes. These strategies may include meeting with instructors on an as-needed basis, practicing self-management, highlighting the text, and engaging in notetaking (Connor, 2012). Understanding how students with disabilities navigate college—both undergraduate and graduate studies—is crucial to providing tips for future college and graduate students with disabilities. Additionally, it is also essential for relevant stakeholders in higher education to explore how universities can enhance support for students with disabilities (Grimes et al., 2021).

Literature Review

In recent years, research has placed greater emphasis on student voices and has directed attention towards student experiences in the field of higher education. Quaglia and Corso (2014) considered students' voices to be useful feedback for the education they received. Similarly, Lubelfeld et al. (2018) argued that students should be part of conversations, especially conversations related to their educational support and accommodations. Several studies have paid specific attention to students with disabilities and have used personal narratives as a tool to examine their experiences in higher education and the effectiveness of accommodations (e.g., Cai & Richdale, 2016; Connor, 2012; Terras et al., 2015). This body of research is critical to understanding how higher education can better accommodate students with disabilities.

Among students with disabilities receiving accommodations, research has shown that there is inconsistent reporting, and not all students report being fully satisfied with their accommodations. Terras et al. (2015) interviewed 11 graduate students to explore their experiences with disability accommodations in online courses. The findings showed that all participants in the study experienced fears of academic failure. Due to the nature of their disabilities, they worried they could not keep up with the coursework. They needed extended time for reading. Another issue identified was concentration; the inability to concentrate led to a need for extended time on assignments and tests. Despite these challenges, every participant actively sought accommodations and considered their accommodation experience a success, which they attributed to the collective efforts of students, instructors, and the institution. On the contrary, Bitman and Yabo (2023) posited that graduate students with disabilities may sometimes receive accommodations that are not sufficiently helpful. Bitman and Yabo utilized autoethnography to conduct

an introspective examination of the obstacles they faced in their academic learning. Their research revealed a variety of complex barriers they encountered during their doctoral training. Both researchers stated that they received accommodations required to support them in various tasks, including teaching, researching, and conference presentations. However, at times, these accommodations were inadequate.

Other studies have indicated that students with disabilities experience challenges in asking for accommodations. Kreider et al. (2015) interviewed students with disabilities to explore disability-related experiences in higher education. The results revealed that students with disabilities faced challenges in determining when to seek accommodations. Moreover, students with disabilities reported challenges in communicating with unsympathetic professors regarding accommodations. Knott and Taylor (2014) invited students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and staff to participate in focus group discussions exploring the academic challenges facing such students in higher education. One of the findings highlighted discrepancies between staff and student perceptions of the academic challenges. Specifically, staff seemed unaware of how a disability affects a student's ability to meet deadlines or work effectively. Likewise, Cai and Richdale (2016) employed the use of focus groups to gauge the university experiences of 23 students with ASD and their family members. The focus group discussions centered on several educational issues, such as course selection, disclosure process, and disability support. This study revealed that students with ASD may opt not to disclose their conditions for a variety of reasons.

As was found in Cai and Richdale's (2016) study, some students may opt to not disclose their disability status. Ball and Traxler (2023) demonstrated that concern about stigma was a common barrier to disclosure by analyzing 173 public Twitter posts related to disability disclosure from graduate students with disabilities. Nevertheless, some graduate students with disabilities have expressed that whether they encounter stigma or not is a crucial factor in determining whether the program is suitable for them. Students also reported having a strategic plan to determine the best timing for disclosing their disabilities. These findings raise concerns because they highlight that social stigmas and other barriers may be preventing students from accessing necessary accommodations.

Other similar research has not only explored academic learning challenges but has also showed that students with disabilities used strategies to overcome the learning barriers. For example, Garrison-Wade (2012) interviewed 59 students with disabilities in college and six disability service coordinators. The study results demonstrated that barriers were transformed, becoming motivators for students with disabilities to develop self-determination skills (e.g., self-advocacy, independence). From a special education perspective, Connor (2012) observed that excessive adherence to positivism in special education research could be problematic. Connor advocated that educators and researchers should investigate education-related issues through students' perspectives and, therefore, used a narrative methodology informed by a disability studies theoretical framework to explore how students with learning disabilities navigated the

transition into college. The study found that when students shared how they used strategies to support their study, they were active agents of their own learning. When students use strategies to monitor and manage their own learning, they are seen as controlling their own behavior (Zhang et al., 2020). Terras et al. (2015) also found that students with disabilities in graduate studies used strategies to overcome the learning barriers. Students with disabilities must act as self-regulated learners to succeed in higher education (Faggella-Luby et al., 2019). Using learning strategies is crucial for students with disabilities to overcome barriers in higher education.

This body of research is critical to understanding how current students with disabilities experience specific academic challenges that are not necessarily alleviated by their accommodations. Despite these challenges, they may choose not to disclose their disabilities due to different reasons. Other research has not only delved into academic learning challenges but has also demonstrated that students with disabilities use strategies to overcome these barriers. These findings support the need for further research in this area to understand how students with disabilities can be better accommodated and how students with disabilities use strategies when accommodations or supports are not adequate (Madaus et al., 2018). In addition, Pearson and Boskovich (2019) noted that research on the experiences of graduate students with disabilities regarding disability disclosure is limited. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the academic learning experiences of students with disabilities in college and graduate studies and whether they used strategies to tackle academic challenges when support is not adequate or immediately provided. Their strategies can inform practices for supporting future students with disabilities in postsecondary education. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do students with disabilities describe their academic learning experiences at the university?
2. Do students with disabilities describe using any strategies in their learning when support is not adequate or immediately provided?

Method

Research Design

We used a qualitative research methodology, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), to conduct this study. IPA has been defined as “a qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 1). We used IPA to closely examine participants’ narratives, paying particular attention to what participants experienced at the university. In addition, the three principles of IPA—phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography—guided us to examine participants’ experiences thoroughly (Smith et al., 2009).

Phenomenology means that real-life and experiential phenomena are the focus of examination. In the present study, participants were invited to describe and reflect on their experiences during college or graduate studies. The process required participants to interpret and transform the experience into consciousness.

Hermeneutics means that the theory of interpretation and the art of understanding is crucial for data analysis. We analyzed the data by making sense of how the participant made sense of their own experiences. The double hermeneutic involves understanding the participants' perspectives and exploring their personal interpretation of their experiences, such as why something happened and how they felt about it.

Ideography emphasizes the fact that the individuals' experiences are unique and independent. Ideography helped us to explore insights into how an individual, within a specific context, interprets a given situation. Through use of the IPA research methodology, taking these principles together, subjective experiences are privileged. Since IPA involved two-stage coding (phenomenological coding and interpretative coding), we were able to constantly interpret the experiences of the participants from data collection through data analysis (see the Data Analysis section).

Setting and Participants

This study was conducted at a public university in central Texas. The university's disability services had a policy regarding accommodation requests for students with disabilities. To receive accommodations, students with disabilities must provide the appropriate documentation to support their accommodation requests. Once a student's accommodation request and supporting documentation has been reviewed, the student can further discuss and finalize the accommodation plan with an accommodation coordinator. If classroom or exam accommodations are required, the student is responsible for sharing their accommodations letters with instructors. Upon students' request, the disability services office can directly email accommodation letters to instructors. However, students are advised to meet their instructors to discuss specific accommodations and address any concerns.

The participant pool was derived from a prior online survey study. The online survey study measured the attitudes held by students with disabilities about universal design for learning (UDL) practices. The online survey was sent out twice through a campus-wide email—once each in early September and early November. To reach a broader pool of participants, the researchers also collaborated with the disability services office to distribute the online survey through emails to students with disabilities. Participants in the survey studies were students who self-identified as having disabilities. At the end of the survey, participants were asked if they would be interested in participating in a follow-up focus group to further discuss their academic learning experiences. If interested in a follow-up focus group, they could enter their email. A total of 10 participants had entered their email and expressed interest in participating in a remote focus group.

The remote focus groups aimed to explore attitudes of students with disabilities regarding UDL practices, as well as their academic learning experiences in college or graduate studies. This article presents the results regarding participants' academic learning experiences and what strategies they used to improve their learning outcomes. We conducted three focus groups with a total of 10 participants in October and November 2020. Participants were students who self-identified as having disabilities and as being willing to share their academic learning experiences in a 60–90-min focus group session. The participants reviewed and signed a consent form before they participated in a focus group. They also had time beforehand to review the focus group protocol.

Based on participants' time schedules, each joined one focus group, and each focus group comprised two, four, or four participants. The majority of participants were female ($n = 7$), White ($n = 7$), and enrolled as undergraduate students ($n = 7$). Participants pursued studies in different academic majors. Out of the participants, five pursued studies in the field of science and engineering, two focused on arts and humanities, two focused on business, and one pursued studies in the field of medicine. For their disabilities, three participants reported having a learning disability, three participants had ASD, two had a mental disorder, one had a speech impairment, and one had low vision. Although they came from a variety of academic majors and had different disabilities, participants were able to share common disability-related experiences across fields.

Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. The consent form informed participants that the focus group discussions would be recorded. To protect participant confidentiality, we also informed participants that different strategies would be used to keep their information confidential. For example, participants could use a fictitious name before they joined a remote focus group session on Zoom. By doing so, only the two focus group moderators knew participants' real names.

Data Collection Method

As this study was conducted during a global pandemic, we chose to use remote focus groups to collect data through Zoom videoconferencing. We used focus groups to collect data as the group dynamics often encourage participants to share their experiences more openly. Prior to the focus groups, we conducted a pilot in-depth interview with a college student with a disability. During the pilot interview, we observed that the participant was hesitant to speak freely. While the interview had the potential to provide profound insights, the participant was nervous and could not speak freely. The pilot interview led us to believe that focus groups might be a more effective method for data collection in this context.

We used a focus group protocol to facilitate the focus group discussion. We consulted relevant sources in the literature in creating the focus group protocol (e.g., Griful-Freixenet et al., 2017; Lyman et al., 2016). The results of the pilot interview suggested

that additional follow-up questions should be added to the protocol, and these questions were used to guide participants to share their common experiences. The protocol was designed using the funnel approach, with broad and general questions discussed first, followed by specific questions on certain issues (Smith et al., 2009). This study addressed participants' academic learning experiences at the university. Participants were asked general questions about their overall university experiences (e.g., How were your overall experiences studying at the university?), and we invited them to share how their disabilities impacted their learning along with the strategies they used to improve learning outcomes and overcome learning barriers (e.g., Has your disability affected your learning at the university? What strategies have you used to accommodate your learning needs?). The first and third authors took moderator roles to facilitate the focus group discussions. Before the discussions began, the moderators revealed their identities to participants and shared their experiences working with individuals with disabilities.

Data Analysis

We followed the standard IPA analysis steps to complete the data analysis (Sullivan & Forrester, 2019). A software program, Dedoose, was used to analyze the qualitative data. All focus group transcripts were uploaded to and stored in Dedoose. Each of the researchers independently coded a focus group transcript in Dedoose by creating a note or initial theme, and then we discussed coding consensus as a team through weekly or biweekly research meetings. Per standard IPA analysis steps, we started from a two-stage coding process. The first stage was phenomenological coding, or summary coding. We independently wrote descriptive summaries of participants' narratives, as expressed in the focus group discussions, and put the summaries into the "Memo" in Dedoose. After the phenomenological coding, we then completed the interpretative coding. We reviewed the memos and together came up with an interpretative coding by creating an initial theme to interpret participants' narratives. The two-stage coding process ensured that the data analysis process was data-driven and inductive.

The process of two-stage coding was repeated for the next two transcripts. The only difference was that the initial themes created in the first focus group could be used in the analysis for the second and third focus group transcripts. When analyzing the next two transcripts, if we encountered a narrative that could not be interpreted by using the existing initial themes, we created other initial themes.

As we completed the two-stage coding process for all transcripts, we tried to cluster and group initial themes. We then named and defined themes and added data excerpts to the themes. The data analysis steps in this study constituted an iterative and gradual process to ensure we interpreted participants' experiences precisely. In addition to the iterative coding process, we also used a reflexive journal to process participants' experiences and to examine bias. The reflexive journal also aided in the process of clustering and grouping initial themes.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

We made multiple efforts to confirm credibility and trustworthiness for this study. First, the first author used a research note to document the steps for data collection and analysis process. Second, the first author used a reflexive journal to monitor her awareness of personal biases and perspectives. Other team members had the opportunity to review and make notes on the journal as well. Third, we independently coded the data and collaborated to reach a consensus on coding. Additionally, we utilized the code spreadsheet, research notes, and reflexive journal as means of communication and feedback exchange. Fourth, we invited a researcher, who was blind to the data, to provide peer debriefing. The researcher reviewed and assessed our methodology and findings, carefully examining the final set of themes.

Results

The research findings are presented on the basis of the three themes: experiences or issues related to university resources and accommodations, building influence through advocacy and education, and being an independent learner. We describe the subthemes that emerged from each of these themes. The theme and subtheme definitions are displayed in Table 1.

Experiences or Issues Related to University

Resources and Accommodations

Two subthemes were grouped under this theme: (a) *using university resources* ($n = 9$) and (b) *struggling with accommodation issues* ($n = 10$). Related to each of these subthemes, participants described specific experiences related to disability and university resources they encountered during their college or graduate studies. Finally, while some participants discussed disclosing their disabilities to obtain accommodations, a few opted not to disclose their disabilities.

Using University Resources

Participants used a variety of on-campus resources. Not all of these resources were directly obtained from the campus disability services. Many participants also benefited from supplemental instruction or tutoring available through academic services on campus. As for the accommodations, one of the participants, Aggie, described a testing accommodation she received:

So, my accommodations I received from the disability center have helped so much. It gives me time to calm down and be able to understand I do have time to calm myself down and then get my knowledge out that I do now.

Another participant, Matt, thought about applying for accommodations but then decided against it; he was, however, able to gain support from supplemental instruction.

Table 1. Theme Definitions

Theme	Subtheme	Definition
Experiences or issues related to university resources and accommodations	Using university resources	Participants used university resources from disability services or other on-campus resources or services. The resources can be for students only or the public/community.
	Struggling with accommodation issues	Participants shared their difficulties or challenges in requesting accommodations or disclosing their disabilities.
Building influence through advocacy and education	Building influence through advocacy	Participants spoke up for themselves about accommodation or disability issues and demonstrated they accepted their disability identities.
	Building influence through education	Participants demonstrated a willingness to share their disability experiences with others by speaking up so people can learn from them.
Being an independent learner	Embracing and enduring	Participants demonstrated endurance when faced with an unpleasant situation or challenge.
	Using study strategies	Participants expressed that they used strategies to study, such as textbooks, online resources, or notetaking.
	Understanding learning preferences or strengths	Participants had awareness of their preferred learning methods and/or strengths.

Supplemental instruction sessions were available to all students in specific courses. Matt stated he utilized supplemental instruction to support his learning:

Definitely, the thing with the SI [supplemental instruction] sessions, those . . . I'm also a biology major like most people here are. And yeah, basically, very much SI sessions are necessary for many cases. And we're certainly not used to that at all, and I'm really grateful to have these kinds of things.

Participants also sought support from course instructors. Instructors provided resources and additional support for students who were struggling academically. For example, Toby described the process of how he asked for help from a professor:

I had to make the documentation with the services, and all I had to do was to write a letter and just print them out and just hand them to my professors. They'd [the professors] take the paper, and they were asking me questions. They were asking for what to do and I say, "Just don't call my name because I can't be caught on just by random. I need time to prepare my answer." And the same for presentations like, "Oh, can I present first or last? I just need time to prepare."

Participants' descriptions indicated that they were able to use a variety of on-campus resources to improve their academic performance.

Struggling With Accommodation Issues

All the participants struggled with issues related to accommodations. The following narratives demonstrated participants' experiential accounts about their challenges of using accommodations. Rachel described an awkward experience when she and other students with disabilities were singled out to leave a class for a test accommodation:

One of my professors was my business initiative class for freshmen. Whenever we had a quiz, before we started, he'd be like, "Okay anybody with a disability get up and go outside and take the quiz." And so, it was so uncomfortable to exit the classroom, and everybody around me knew . . . I just need extended time I don't know why. I wouldn't have to deal with the consequences of how the professor handles that type of situation.

Rachel's experience shows that the professor's approach to accommodation made her uncomfortable. She experienced being singled out when utilizing her extended testing time. This approach indirectly informed other students which individuals might have a disability whenever a student stepped outside for the quiz. Rachel went on, saying,

At the moment I didn't realize, like this is actually making it harder for me to succeed in this course. It was me and two other students who left the class. It's like so insignificant. None of the other students seem to have a problem with it so it's probably just normal. The idea that I'm like it's myself, it's only me that has a problem.

Students with disabilities may have misconceptions about how an accommodation should properly be implemented if they are treated inappropriately in the classroom. Since the professor's approach to accommodation was not fully appropriate, Rachel mistakenly believed this was her issue rather than recognizing it as an irregular practice.

When asked about their experiences in requesting accommodations, Alias indicated that seeking accommodations can be a terrifying experience due to others' attitudinal barriers:

Some of the attitudes expressed by the coordinator for the medical school was a little bit—it felt not super-supportive or respectful. And so, for example, I didn't ask for accommodations a couple of times because I was so nervous about what the repercussions would be. So that was really stressful, and I think that they don't talk about the accommodations process.

Another participant, Ann, described her experience of seeking accommodations from professors. The responses she received from professors were mixed. She said,

I had pretty good responses from most professors. I had a couple of professors that I felt like we had a language barrier to some degree or maybe it was

cultural. The one was a finance class, and then I had a math business math class that, you know, I got no feedback from the professor. And it felt like they were almost, especially with the finance professor, it was a hassle to deal with me.

Participants' experiences indicate that attitudinal barriers or a lack of disability awareness could create difficulties or challenges for individuals with disabilities in the use of accommodations in classrooms. These barriers could come from incorrect assumptions or misunderstandings.

When asked about their disability disclosure experiences, participants discussed self-advocacy. They referred to self-advocacy as speaking for themselves and explaining what they need for learning. Four participants opted not to disclose their disabilities for various reasons. Rob said, "I'm really not good at [self-advocacy]. I was taught that was selfish." Rob said it was challenging for him to advocate for himself because he equated self-advocacy with being selfish. He went on to explain why he chose not to disclose his disability for accommodation:

I'm truly don't talk much about my disability. Growing up, I wasn't diagnosed with Asperger's until I was an adult, so I grew up having to act normal due to no diagnoses. The other thing was growing up, I saw other people that had learning disabilities or autism, that being identified as such as opposed to being a person with that they were that [disability]. And I don't want to *be Asperger's, I have it*. So, I really don't talk about it much.

Rob indicated that he did not receive the diagnosis until he was an adult. He did not want the disability to define who he is as a person. Therefore, he did not seek accommodations. Matt echoed a similar reason for not discussing or disclosing his disability. Matt said,

I'm terrified of using my own accommodations or write them to anybody because I'm afraid of those exact responses. I know it's part of my condition, but at least in my case sometimes, it was very stigmatized and was looked very badly upon, so I did not want anybody associating me with it. That's a huge struggle I still face today. And it's something that I'm definitely improving upon, but I'm still terrified with these things.

Based on Rob's and Matt's experiences, students with disabilities do not want to be seen only through their disabilities. Stigma surrounding disabilities can lead to negative experiences of others associating the person with a disability. Matt went on to explain he felt that self-advocacy set him apart from his peers. He said, "I guess I just don't want to stick out because I guess in those terms, I have zero self-advocacy, which is a huge problem for me." Matt experienced a fear of standing out or being perceived as different when discussing self-advocacy.

Alias described another example of why students with disabilities might be hesitant to disclose their disabilities and request accommodations. She said, "I didn't ask for

accommodations a couple of times because I was so nervous about what the repercussions would be.” Rachel indicated a different reason why she chose not to self-advocate:

I think the reason that I don’t advocate for myself that much is because I also want to feel like I can meet their expectations, so I don’t want to go and change things again. I don’t want to feel like I can’t do what they expected from me.

Rachel indicated a completely different perspective toward self-advocacy. She valued independence and meeting expectations over self-advocacy. While self-advocacy plays a crucial role in student success, understanding students’ perspectives on it and their reasons for not disclosing their disabilities is equally important.

Building Influence Through Advocacy and Education

Two subthemes were grouped under this theme: (a) *building influence through advocacy* ($n = 9$) and (b) *building influence through education* ($n = 5$). Building on the prior theme, when asked about their disclosure experiences, participants discussed self-advocacy.

Some participants not only detailed their use of self-advocacy to seek accommodations but also discussed how they used it to educate others about their disabilities and the accommodations they needed.

Building Influence Through Advocacy

Participants were adamant that self-advocacy supported them to communicate what they needed to others. This subtheme revealed that participants were able to influence others by advocating for themselves. After the experience of being singled out, Rachel shared that she explained her disability to friends:

I like talking about those things [disability and accommodations]. I do talk about it with my friends but normally I have to feel pretty comfortable, because I know that I’ll receive some questions that I have to explain myself and like, “What, you’re smart”; I’m like, that’s not what it’s for. It’s not for that kind of ability.

Rachel revealed that key elements of self-advocacy are the abilities to prepare and to plan. Before she shared about her disability and accommodations, she needed to be well-prepared for answering questions from her friends, although some questions may have made her uncomfortable.

Another participant, Cassie, also used self-advocacy skills to communicate about her disability and accommodations with professors:

I am pretty vocal about my disability, so I don’t mind sharing. Normally, when I send an email at the beginning, I’ve never told a professor about the dissociative identity disorder. I mentioned the bipolar disorder. That’s normally what we talked about is email professors and will be like, “Hey we

have this and makes learning difficult sometimes because we're not able to attend class. We're going through an episode; it's extremely difficult to get things done."

Cassie used self-advocacy skills strategically. She chose not to mention her dissociative identity disorder; instead, she gave an explicit explanation about why she needed a specific accommodation in order to succeed in class. In this way, she protected herself from being hurt, because people might refuse to believe her situation. Another participant, Toby, was a military student. He shared how he advocated for himself in an educational setting, specifically within a rigorous military learning environment.

It's really hard for me to speak fluently, and they want us to be perfect in every possible, the way we look, the way we walk, and the way we talk. Whenever I see someone looking at me or even, I hear them talking about me, "Hey, why is he talking that way?" I go talk to them or I message them on text or something and say, "Hey, what you did is not right. I've stuttered."

Toby's description demonstrates that he has accepted his disability identity. Although it can be difficult for an individual to explain themselves, Toby's experience is an example of courage and self-determination.

Building Influence Through Education

Participants shared that they educated others about their disabilities and accommodations. Aggie described personal stories of how to educate others about her disability:

I'm not going to be too hard on myself about it, because I do know that there are others dealing with it. So, I feel like if I show that it's okay to be dealing with something like this, others will feel that they can share their experiences and seek help. I always talk about how much help the disability center has given me, and I hope by me speaking about that they'll go and seek help.

Some individuals with disabilities found it difficult to ask for help from disability services. By sharing her personal experiences, Aggie was able to encourage students with disabilities to use disability resources. Jessica provided an example of how she educated others about her disability and accommodations:

So, I know for me, I started the habit very early in high school of writing a letter to all of my teachers explaining my blindness because I think when people hear the term blind, they assume it's a very polar thing. So even though the disability services office would write me letters, I would make it a point to introduce myself to these professors and make sure they knew who I was. And then say, "Do you have any questions about how I use my tools, how I access material? Would you like me to show you how voiceover works, how my screen magnifier works?"

Jessica showed that she followed the steps to advocate for herself. First she introduced herself, then she explained her disability and accommodations. In this way, she helped promote disability awareness by using her experiences.

Being an Independent Learner

When asked if they used any strategies to accommodate their learning needs as a result of denial or delay of sufficient support, participants showed that they were independent learners by keeping a positive attitude toward learning and using effective strategies for study. The theme, being an independent learner, included three subthemes: (a) *embracing and enduring* ($n = 9$), (b) *using study strategies* ($n = 9$), and (c) *understanding learning preferences or strengths* ($n = 10$).

Embracing and Enduring

Participants demonstrated independence in overcoming the learning difficulties they encountered. Even if participants chose to endure an unpleasant situation, they demonstrated how they changed their perceptions when experiencing the situation. As Rachel shared that she was singled out to leave the classroom to take an exam, she said, “It didn’t feel very safe or comfortable, but for that I just dealt with it. I guess and I made it like, I just need extended time.” Rachel adjusted her perception in the negative situation by saying “just need extended time” to herself. Cassie also shared a difficult situation:

The biggest challenge for us has been exam time for an alter who doesn’t front very often will sometimes front and then they’ll have to take an exam that they haven’t prepared for it all and we can’t get an extension on that.

As previously mentioned, Cassie had a dissociative identity disorder. This posed a challenge when different alters were unable to get an exam extension because they faced difficulties in promptly switching to the appropriate alter that could effectively handle and complete the required task. When asked how to overcome the challenge, Cassie continued: “In that situation, we kind of bite the bullet and just go through and take the exam if the professor won’t work with us because sometimes they’re not willing to.” The phrase “bite the bullet” implies that they accepted the challenges and took the exam without assistance.

Mary demonstrated that students with disabilities should learn to adapt to learning challenges. She said, “You [professors] don’t have to do anything like special, and it’s also up to us. I think it’s up to us to figure out how to adapt.”

Using Study Strategies

Participants used study strategies to help themselves study more efficiently. Participants previously highlighted the use of university resources to improve their learning. Beyond just utilizing these resources, they also adopted independent study strategies, such as time management or building a study routine, to help them use the resources

more effectively. These study strategies helped participants to work on coursework and meet the deadline if they did not receive adequate or timely accommodations from disability services or instructors. One of the participants, Ann, had previously stated, “I got no feedback from the professor. And it felt like they were almost, especially with the finance professor, it was a hassle to deal with me.” Since she did not receive support from the course instructor, she actively sought additional support to enhance her learning, such as tutoring. She also emphasized the importance of consistency and starting early, indicating that she recognized the value of establishing a routine and dedicating time and effort to her studies.

I’m in a couple of different instances where there’s been student tutoring available, I took advantage of that. Bring on different subjects, being consistent with it, starting that early. You know, just as keep motivated to doing something that’s not really easy.

Ann effectively utilized campus resources by using time management skills that emphasized starting early and maintaining a consistent routine. Similarly, Cassie shared that she relied on good notes for different alters to study. She had previously noted that she was unable to obtain an exam extension, which led to difficulties in swiftly switching to the appropriate alter for exam preparation. Therefore, she relied on study notes to help different alters prepare for the exam. She said, “Yes, we take very diligent notes on everything that way. Whoever is taking the exam whoever’s studying for the exam has enough information accessible.”

Other participants also described that they counted on taking comprehensive notes for studying. As Jessica said, “I’ll do a combination of like rewriting my notes or taking my notes and formatting them into re-bulleted lists or tables.” Matt, who did not seek support from disability services due to stigma issues, also expressed how he made his notes as fun as possible to read: “My notes would look less like history textbook, and more like a classmate explaining it to you from one friend to another.” Both Jessica and Matt were actively engaged in their notetaking practices and developed personalized approaches that worked best for them.

Understanding Learning Preferences or Strengths

In this subtheme, while participants did not explicitly describe receiving inadequate support or being denied accommodations, they expressed that understanding their learning preferences or strengths was helpful in self-accommodating their learning needs. Participants understood their learning preferences or strengths, so they had more control over learning methods or schedules. For instance, Mary expressed that she found another chemistry course that suited her learning needs and decided to enroll in it.

I don’t really like my chemist, or my chemistry teacher, I just don’t like her lectures. I actually joined another chemistry person’s lectures, so I attend them every single day. So that’s been helpful. And I know I learned auditory

so the more I can hear it, the more I'm going to understand it. So, I emailed another professor and got his link.

Mary understood her learning preference for auditory learning. This understanding prompted her to reach out to another professor. She used a proactive approach to finding a learning environment that suited her needs better. Similarly, Alias shared that understanding of her personal learning preferences and strengths helped her gain more control over her learning:

One thing that has helped me a lot is just making sure I'm in a quiet place to study without distractions. That's one thing that has helped, and having a very consistent, steady routine. I think for me, writing things over by hand, especially within 24 hours, copying my notes within 24 hours of lecture helps me to remember it really well. And I take the quizzes. So, I do practice questions. I also like to read the textbook if it's a good textbook.

Another example was shared by Cassie: "Sometimes if a professor does post a lecture we will go back and re-watch it or use it to take the exam." This demonstrated Cassie had an understanding of her learning preferences, and she used that understanding to take advantage of the class resources. She mentioned going back to rewatch recorded lectures and using them to prepare for exams, which demonstrated self-accommodation for her preferred learning style. This learning method helped her to learn the course content well.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore how students with disabilities described their academic learning experiences through the use of focus groups. We also invited participants to describe study strategies they used when support was not adequate or immediately provided. We conducted remote focus groups to facilitate open and free discussion. One advantage of using focus groups is group dynamics which allowed participants to communicate clearly and coconstitute accounts of a single experience. For example, Rachel mentioned her "being singled out" experience. After she shared that experience, another participant, Mary, made an immediate shift in tone by saying that "being singled out" happened to her a lot in high school. In this case, Rachel and Mary shared the experience. As Palmer et al. (2010) stated, focus groups can be utilized to collect data through an interpretative phenomenological analysis. The participants in the focus groups shared their experiences freely. They also engaged with and responded to each other's ideas. In addition, the first author documented and reflected on the interactions with participants in a reflexive journal. As Shaw (2010) observed, a reflexive journal helps researchers to interrogate their own presuppositions and move beyond those in their interpretations of participants' experiences. The reflexive journal helped the researchers to group codes and observe the emerging themes.

The study results showed highly recurrent themes emerging from the analysis. The highly recurrent themes mean that the participants shared a common experience, such as using university resources and challenges in using accommodations. Some findings of this present study are aligned with previous studies. For example, Connor (2012) revealed that students with disabilities used multiple self-directed actions to help themselves achieve academic success. In the present study, participants also took self-directed actions, such as utilizing on-campus resources, discovering learning strengths and preferences, and applying study strategies. These strategies supported participants in their efforts to be self-regulated learners. Participants were active agents in navigating their learning journeys at the university. Faggella-Luby et al. (2019) demonstrated that students with disabilities used learning strategies to persist through college. The current study confirms that using strategies is a key not only to college completion but also to academic success (Zhang et al., 2020). Moreover, some participants used strategies to disclose their disabilities and request accommodations. As Ball and Traxler (2023) reported, students with disabilities used a strategic plan to determine the best timing for disclosing their disabilities. In the present study, Jessica first explained her blindness and then introduced the tools she used for accommodations. Cassie had a strategic plan to ask for accommodations but opted not to mention her dissociative identity disorder. Instead, she provided a detailed explanation of why a specific accommodation was necessary for her success in the class.

The present study attempts to address research gaps and makes important contributions to the literature base. First, as previously mentioned, there is limited research exploring the academic learning experiences of graduate students with disabilities. Graduate study, such as master's and doctoral students, necessitates higher academic rigor, so it is important to explore the services and education students receive to ensure resources and disability-related support keeps up. Three participants in this study—Ann, Jessica, and Alias—were graduate students at the time of investigation. Ann and Alias described their challenges in requesting accommodations; however, Jessica began using self-advocacy skills early in high school. As a result, she continued to use these skills not only to request accommodations but also to educate others about her accommodations. This indicates graduate students with disabilities encounter varying levels of challenges when requesting accommodations. Although previous research suggested that actively seeking accommodations and support is a key for academic success (Terras et al., 2015), this current study demonstrated that some students with disabilities continued to face these challenges despite their active seeking of accommodations and support. As a result, education programs should pay attention to students' needs and provide additional resources and support for students with disabilities.

Second, although self-advocacy is a critical skill for students with disabilities to succeed in higher education, some students may choose not to use self-advocacy. In addition to stigma and discrimination issues, this study revealed that four students with disabilities opted not to use self-advocacy for different reasons, such as a desire for independence to meet expectations and a desire to be considered normal. West et al. (2016) reported that students with disabilities frequently choose not to advocate for

themselves. This present study further demonstrated that it is crucial to understand students' concerns about disclosing disabilities and requesting accommodations even though these accommodations are designed to ensure equal opportunities for success. This finding also underscores the importance of using inclusive teaching strategies to support all students. Grimes et al. (2021) found that many nondisclosed students reported lower academic achievement, which highlights the urgent need to establish support services and resources for all students.

Third, previous studies have shown that students with disabilities consider academic challenges as excellent opportunities for learning and improvement (Garrison-Wade, 2012). This study further demonstrates that students with disabilities utilize study strategies, especially when support is inadequate or not immediately provided. For instance, Cassie mentioned that instructors did not grant her extended time on exams. In this situation, she had to persevere and rely on diligent notetaking to help her prepare for exams. Her experience not only highlighted her use of study strategies but also demonstrated her resilience and the development of self-accommodation techniques. This illustrates how challenges can be transformed into motivators for students with disabilities, driving them to develop strategies for academic success. This finding can inform practices for future undergraduate and graduate studies. Relevant stakeholders in higher education also need to explore the practices or strategies used by students with disabilities for self-accommodation so that they can formulate better approaches for accommodating future undergraduate and graduate studies.

Limitations

The current study had some limitations that invite opportunities for future research. First, in consideration of the global pandemic and certain time constraints, the study used remote focus groups to collect data. Future researchers could use in-depth interviews to capture direct, one-on-one conversations with individual participants. In this way, researchers could easily establish rapport with participants so that participants feel more comfortable about sharing their experiences. Second, because this study was conducted during the pandemic outbreak, we had a hard time recruiting participants. Although some potential participants expressed interest in participating in this study, they ultimately did not attend the focus groups as scheduled. Future researchers can approach this topic with a larger sample size. Third, this study only focused on degree-seeking students with disabilities. Recently, postsecondary education programs serving students with disabilities have been booming across the United States. The students in many of these programs are not seeking degrees. Students with disabilities enroll in these programs to learn skills to enhance their prospects for employment. Future researchers might focus on how such students use support or strategies to succeed in postsecondary education. Finally, for study credibility and trustworthiness, it is suggested that researchers use member checking or respondent validation. To use member checking, researchers will extend invitations to participants, asking for their

comments or feedback on the identified themes. Using member checking can help enhance the accuracy and credibility of study results. The current study did not use member checking to help improve accuracy. Future researchers could use member checking to validate study results.

Implications for Practice

This study offers implications that can be applied in practical settings. First, the study results can inform practices to support future students with disabilities. In the current study, participants described strategies they used to help them become independent learners. They used study strategies when support is not adequate or immediately provided. One of the study strategies participants often used is notetaking. It is important to observe that traditional lecture-based teaching has been a prevalent method. In many educational settings, lectures tend to take up a significant portion of class time. Actively taking notes can help students to organize the lecture content and understand the main concept. Boyle et al. (2015) suggested that instructors should help students with disabilities to become good note-takers so students can use notes to learn and review content from lectures. For example, instructors can write key lecture ideas or vocabulary words in the materials. Instructors can also provide an organizer, such as study guide, to help students improve their notetaking ability. Student academic assistance settings or disability services in higher education institutions can use opportunities to both provide instruction and disseminate knowledge about learning strategies and how the strategies can be used across different courses (Faggella-Luby et al., 2019).

Second, in the current study, participants described the challenges of requesting accommodations from disability services and instructors. Once students with disabilities disclosed their disabilities, we suggest that relevant stakeholders, such as disability service providers, instructors, or academic advisors, should establish relationships with students with disabilities and collaborate with them to understand their specific learning needs. Many students with disabilities have the knowledge and self-awareness necessary to identify the accommodations they require and use self-advocacy skills to request them. Service providers and instructors should respect the students' personal knowledge when making decisions (Anderson et al., 2023). Due to the more demanding nature of graduate studies, graduate education programs should constantly monitor students' progress and follow up with them regularly to determine their learning support needs. For instance, in the department of Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching at The University of Texas at San Antonio, the master's programs assign a faculty advisor to each master's student once they are enrolled in the programs. These faculty advisors not only provide recommendations for course selections but also assist students in navigating on-campus resources and services. We suggest that graduate education programs should have service providers, such as faculty advisors, to help graduate students with disabilities navigate the program and monitor their study progress.

Importantly, some students with disabilities may choose not to disclose their disabilities. Research also showed that students do not always know what support is available

within their institutions (Grimes et al., 2021). We suggest that instructors use inclusive teaching strategies, such as UDL, to support all students in classrooms. The UDL framework can guide instructors to use multiple ways to represent course materials, engage learners, and help learners express what they learn. UDL not only supports students with disabilities but also benefits other students with diverse backgrounds and learning needs.

Fourth, we suggest that service providers can help students with disabilities to build a learning community where they can share strategies and support one another effectively. While the participants did not explicitly mention the importance of a learning community with peers, the two moderators in the focus groups observed that when one participant described a study strategy, such as notetaking, others would join in and share similar experiences. This dynamic within the focus groups indicates that a learning community for students with disabilities could be instrumental in helping them support each other by sharing their learning experiences and strategies (Drysdales et al., 2022; Osborn et al., 2022).

Fifth, one of the issues participants faced pertained to faculty and service providers' disability and accommodation awareness. To address this issue effectively, it is imperative for universities to provide training opportunities for faculty and service providers to increase awareness of accommodations and inclusive teaching practices. The training can also help ensure instructors' compliance with accommodations (Anderson et al., 2023). Li et al. (2020) conducted a literature review regarding faculty attitudes toward inclusive teaching practices. The review demonstrated that some faculty had misconceptions about accommodations and inclusive teaching practices. Faculty and service providers can enhance their awareness of disabilities and accommodations through training opportunities.

In conclusion, the current study has contributed to the existing literature by further exploring how students with disabilities navigated their academic learning in college and graduate studies. Participants described the challenges they faced when requesting and utilizing accommodations, as well as how they used self-advocacy skills to request accommodations or explained why they chose not to use these skills. Furthermore, participants demonstrated how they used strategies when immediate support was unavailable. It is crucial for relevant stakeholders in higher education to understand the challenges that students with disabilities encounter in their academic journey, particularly the difficulties in requesting accommodations and the reasons why self-advocacy may not always be an option for these students. By doing so, they will be able to offer more considerate education strategies to support students with disabilities.

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