

Disability Services for Meeting the Needs of Students in Higher Education

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Introduction and Background

Institutes of higher education provide accommodations to students with disabilities. One study found that 85 percent of students with psychiatric disabilities drop out of college for reasons related to stigma (Porter, 2021). How Disability Services are delivered matters. Being equity-minded, analysis of Disability Services practices warrants attention, to eliminate barriers to education. This process ensures that students' voices are being heard and optimization of learning experiences occurs. The survey questions focused on the students' experiences with obtaining: access to disability services, interaction(s) with disability services staff, general feelings about accessibility across campus, follow-through from instructors of accommodation plans, and awareness of the variety of additional supports for students with disabilities.

Methods

- The researcher collected 19 closed and 3 open-ended responses from students about their experiences with Disability Services.
- Students' responses on the Survey Monkey link remained anonymous, via not having any identifiers on the survey.
- After respondents completed the survey, closed questions were analyzed to identify any trends, strengths, or challenges that students were having.
- The research also analyzed the 3 open-ended responses, looking for themes or stories of triumph and/or challenges in their educational experiences.

Themes

Closed-item response analysis

- There is a wide variety in the documentation students submitted to obtain accommodations plans (4 different types). Of the respondents, only students in the disability areas of OHI, EBD, and SLD are receiving services. Over half of the respondents are comfortable interacting with disability services, along with user-friendliness in how to access information about disability accommodations. A majority of the respondents, who identified as having another, often, marginalized identity (2SLGBTQIA, BIPOC, etc) felt supported in their experiences on campus. 44% of the respondents were unsure about mental health services for students. 88% were aware of tutoring options. 88% of respondents were not aware about whether or not accommodations for extracurricular events are offered. 55% created an Accommodations plan with ease. 44% of students agreed that faculty of their courses followed their accommodations plan; however 11% disagreed and 44% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Open-item themes

- The Accommodate system, for sending students' accommodations to instructors, is effective.
- The extended time and quiet testing spaces have been a positive experience for students with disabilities.
- Tutoring is available, but suggestions about working with a tutor who understands how to provide instruction for an individual(s) with disabilities was mentioned.
- Though Accommodate letters are effective, ensuring that instructors remember the students in their courses who have accommodations (i.e. following the plan) is needed.

Students' stories

- Desire for more equitable disability services for students that take classes online.
- Though the need for confidentiality is understood, an automated response for meeting to create an Accommodate letter doesn't feel supportive.
- I hope that the instructors that get my Accommodate letter actually understand. My freshman year I had an instructor that did not believe me. After I had to prove my case, my grade was changed to a withdrawal.
- I'd like to see more awareness of incoming students, since most students who have a disability don't really know what to do and what they can get on campus when it comes to their accommodations in their classes.
- I struggle and have never stopped trying, but it is exhausting and expensive to have all the issues I have and not the tools in place to meet my needs.
- My disabilities don't go away because I am at a University and neither should the caringness/understanding, accommodation support, and instructor support.

Discussion

Post data collection, the researcher engaged in a conversation with the Disability Services director, along with sharing results of the survey. In the discussion, an alliance was formed, between the director and researcher; in that, we are both dedicated to the success of ALL students in higher education. Mentor Collective was mentioned as a mentor training program to provide social support, along with conversations about the need to increase accessibility to campus events for students with disabilities. An Accessibility Form, through the 25 Live system, could be used to obtain a clearer picture of student needs. In addition, more transparency about who the campus' Americans with Disabilities Act Compliance Officer is was highlighted. Last, though the campus has gained momentum in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives, it was voiced that the overall feeling is that disability services often gets lost among all the other students from diverse backgrounds who are also requesting services and support.



Reflection

Students benefit from having their voices heard regarding the services and operations that are working for them, when utilizing Disability Services—and those that are not. The researcher, communicated the strengths and challenges, reported on the survey, with the Disability Services director, with hopes to improve existing systems. Further research should continue to ask the question, "How can we share the stories of students with disabilities on university campuses?" This important equity-based research, along with action steps for improvement, is valuable for retention and graduation of students with disabilities.

References and Acknowledgements