

Faculty and Student Views of Accommodations: Does the Diagnosis Make a Difference?

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Abstract

Research indicates that disability accommodations are positively associated with student test scores, retention, and graduation rates (Blasey et al., 2023; Cole & Cawthorn, 2015). However, barriers exist to the successful implementation of accommodation policies. First, students and faculty need to be aware that accommodations are available and know where and how to access services. Secondly, students must self-identify as having a disability and be able to provide the required documentation. Finally, students must be willing to seek services. Broader social values stigmatizing disability have been shown to decrease students' willingness to establish accommodations (Condra et al, 2015; Mamboleo et al, 2020). The aim of the current study was to examine the perceptions of faculty and undergraduate students on the fairness and competence of students who utilize accommodations. Additionally, students were asked to report their comfort level requesting accommodations. Our results found that students were less willing to ask for accommodations for mental illness or learning disabilities than for physical disabilities. In addition, both faculty members and students were more likely to report that students with physical disabilities are as capable as students without disabilities compared to students with mental illness or learning disabilities. This suggests that barriers to establishing services and student and faculty views of academic potential vary based on disability type.

Keywords: college students, faculty, accommodation policies

Introduction

The Americans with Disabilities Act, passed in 1990, requires postsecondary educational institutions to make reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities to allow them to equally participate in course and degree requirements. Accommodation policies in higher education are designed to provide equal academic opportunities for all students, particularly those who might otherwise be disadvantaged in a traditional learning environment. These policies typically address needs related to disabilities, learning differences, and mental health conditions, among others. These policies are rooted in the principles of equity, diversity & inclusion, aiming to remove barriers that prevent students from achieving their academic potential.

Increasing Number of Students with Disabilities Enrolling in Higher Education

The number of students with disabilities in higher education has increased considerably in the past several decades. While less than 3% of undergraduate students had a documented disability in 1978, that number increased to 9% in 1996, 11% in 2012, and rose to 21% in 2020 (U.S. Department of Education, 2023; U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

One likely reason for this large increase in reported disabilities among undergraduate students is mental health conditions. During the 2020-2021 school year, in the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic, 60% of college students met the criteria for at least one mental health diagnosis (Lipson et al, 2022). In 2023, over one-third of undergraduate students surveyed in a large, nationally representative study reported an anxiety diagnosis with nearly as many having depression (Venable & Pietrucha, 2023). These mental health conditions may negatively impact learning and academic performance by inhibiting the ability to focus and prioritize tasks.

Outside of mental health concerns, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) emerged as the most reported disability among undergraduates, affecting just under 16% of students (American College Health Association, 2023). Students with ADHD often face challenges in maintaining concentration, prioritizing tasks, and managing time efficiently – skills that are crucial for success in undergraduate classrooms.

Following ADHD, about 5% of students reported having a learning disability (American College Health Association, 2023). Learning disabilities are varied and may present hurdles with reading comprehension, information processing, and expression. What would otherwise be a straightforward task can be made burdensome, requiring additional time and specialized support to complete, for students who are neurodivergent.

Vision impairment is experienced by 4% of the undergraduate population, presenting obstacles in accessing the visual curriculum such as textbooks and lecture slides. Another 4% of students reported an autism diagnosis, which can affect their social interactions and communication (American College Health Association, 2023). The unstructured and sensory-rich environments of college campuses may present a particular challenge for autistic students.

These statistics highlight not only the prevalence of disabilities among undergraduate students, but also the critical need for effective accommodation policies. Such accommodation policies are not just academic aids; they allow for the diverse learning styles and needs of individual students, ensuring that all students have equitable opportunities to succeed. The recognition of these diverse needs and abilities help foster greater inclusion in the academic environment, promoting dialogue about accessibility and campus resources, thereby enhancing the educational environment for all students.

Types of Accommodations in Higher Education

Accommodations in undergraduate education are designed to meet individual needs and can take many forms. However, there are a number that are more common than others and those are described briefly below.

1. **Extended time:** Students with anxiety or specific learning disabilities frequently receive extra time to complete assignments and exams.
2. **Flexible attendance policies:** Students with chronic health conditions may receive leniency in attendance policies to allow for the days that their symptoms prohibit their class attendance.
3. **Note-taking assistance:** This can include providing students with copies of lecture notes or access to lecture recordings.
4. **Assistive technology:** Tools such as speech-to-text software can help students with various needs engage with course content.
5. **Communication support:** Students who are deaf or hard of hearing may benefit from sign language interpreters or real-time captioning services.
6. **Physical accommodations:** Along with engaging with the course material, policies need to ensure accessible classroom locations and furniture for students with physical disabilities.

These accommodations aim to remove barriers in the academic environment, both built and experiential, allowing students to perform to the best of their abilities and ensuring an equitable educational experience.

Barriers to Establishing Accommodations

There is a discrepancy between the rate of students reporting having a disability, and the rate of students registering with their campus disability office. In 2019-20, on average, 8% of students registered as having a disability with their institution (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2023). This is less than half of the 21% of undergraduates who reported having a disability those same years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). This suggests that many students are experiencing barriers, impeding their ability to access and navigate the accommodation process.

Faculty may not be fully aware of the types of accommodations available or the processes for requesting them, even though most faculty members engage with students with disabilities on a regular basis. A survey at a large urban university found that only one in four faculty members felt they were very informed about types of accommodation services offered (Vogal, 2008). Other studies have identified gaps in knowledge regarding the services provided by the campus disability office and the process through which students qualify for accommodations (Benkohila et al, 2020; Sniatecki et al., 2015, Toutain, 2019). While faculty have been found to be largely supportive of students utilizing necessary accommodations, there is some indication of resistance to implementing services, especially for students with intellectual or mental health disabilities (Gibbons et al, 2015; Vogal, 2008).

Stigma surrounding disabilities may discourage students from registering with disability services or advocating for themselves. There are both external and internal sources of stigma. External stigma refers to the negative perceptions and biased beliefs held by others, including peers. Researchers have found that students with disabilities are less likely to pursue accommodations when they sense a campus culture that stigmatizes disability (Belch, 2011; Kranke et al., 2013, Toutain, 2019).

Internal stigma occurs when students internalize societal attitudes and develop negative self-perceptions about their own disabilities. Students may fear being labelled as “disabled” or viewed as incapable, deterring them from seeking accommodations. This stigma has been shown to result in students denying their own needs, desiring to establish an identity which ignores their disability status (Lightner et al., 2012; Marshak et al., 2010). This denial can delay or prevent the receipt of critical supports, impacting academic performance and overall well-being. Recent research found, in a nationally-representative sample, that students with ADHD, bipolar disorder, eating disorders, personality disorders, and other psychological disorders were less willing to register for accommodations than students with other types of diagnoses (Barnard-Brak & Kudesev, 2022). This reluctance is largely due to internal stigma associated with these mental health conditions.

In sum, although colleges and universities are enrolling more and more students with documented disabilities, many face barriers to accessing necessary accommodations for reasons including a lack of knowledge of services and an unwillingness to disclose their disability status. This study builds on the existing literature by exploring both faculty and student knowledge of the accommodation process and available services as well as views on the utilization of accommodations by students with diverse disabilities.

Method

The research project was conducted at a public, four-year university in the Midwestern United States. The population for the study was all enrolled undergraduate students and faculty at the university. A web-based survey assessing knowledge and beliefs was emailed to 300 randomly selected students and all faculty. The surveys took approximately three minutes to complete, and no personally identifiable information was associated with the responses. Respondents were informed that clicking on the link to the survey gave consent to participate and all respondents were nineteen years of age or older. Surveys were completed by 187 undergraduate students and 159 faculty.

There were two sections to the faculty survey. The first assessed demographic information including gender, past training about disability accommodations, and experience establishing accommodation plans with students. The second section consisted of statements where respondents indicated their level of agreement on a 5-point scale, from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Specific questions explored views on accommodations and capabilities of students with disabilities.

Similar to the faculty survey, there were two sections to the survey completed by students. The first section asked about gender and year in school as well as personal experiences with disability and accommodation. The second section, utilizing a Likert response scale, asked about comfort level with setting up accommodations as well as views of the equity of accommodations and the overall ability of students with disabilities. The majority of students did not report a disability; rather, they were asked to consider their comfort level in the case where accommodations were needed.

Results

Faculty Survey

One-hundred forty-four full-time and 15 adjunct faculty members completed the online Qualtrics survey. Respondents were closely divided between male (48%) and female (52%). Slightly over half (53%) reported receiving training about student disability accommodations, and almost all (96%) knew where to go if they had questions about disability services or accommodations. A significant majority of faculty members, approximately 82%, had been approached by students with documentation for accommodations from Disability Services. Furthermore, 74% of faculty had actively encouraged students to seek support from the Disability Services Office. These findings suggest awareness and proactive involvement among faculty in supporting students with disabilities in the academic environment.

Student Survey

The student survey was completed by a total of 198 undergraduate students of the total number of 300 who received the survey, resulting in a response rate of 66%. The respondents were evenly divided by year (freshman-senior) and predominately female (73%). Most respondents reported knowing someone with a learning disability (70%), mental illness (73%), or physical disability (75%). However, a much smaller percentage reported being diagnosed themselves with either a learning disability (7%), mental illness (13%), or physical disability (4%). Eighty-eight percent had never had an accommodation plan.

The next section of questions asked students about their comfort level requesting accommodations. When presented with the statement, "I would feel comfortable setting up accommodations for (type of disability)", student responses utilized a Likert scale, where 1=strongly agree and 5= strongly disagreed. The descriptive statistics, including the mean, standard error, and standard deviation, are presented for each group in Table 1.

Table 1

Comfort Level Setting Up Accommodations by Type of Disability

Type of disability	N	Mean	SE	SD
Learning Disabilities	188	2.521	0.083	1.135
Physical Disabilities	188	2.043	0.069	0.947
Mental Illness	188	2.691	0.092	1.263

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare student comfort level requesting accommodations. Comparisons were made among physical disabilities, learning disabilities, and mental illness. There was a significant difference in comfort level among the types of disabilities at the $p < .001$ level for the three groups ($F(2, 561)=[16.896], p<.001$). Results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

One-Way Analyses of Variance in Comfort Level Requesting Accommodations

	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Between Groups	42.567	2	21.284	16.896	<.001
Within Groups	706.681	561	1.260		
Total	749.248	563			

Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that all three groups differed significantly at $p < .001$. Taken together, these results suggest that the type of disability influences students' comfort level in requesting accommodations. Specifically, students felt the most comfortable requesting accommodations for physical disabilities, followed by learning disabilities and then mental illness.

Comparison of Faculty and Student Survey Results

Both faculty and students were asked their views on the fairness of student accommodations and the academic performance of students with disabilities. Overall, both students and faculty felt that accommodations do not give students an unequitable advantage. Respondents expressed their level of agreement with the statement, "Students who receive accommodations have an unfair advantage over other students," with 1=strongly agree and 5=strongly disagree. The faculty and student responses displayed in table 3 show that the vast majority of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

Table 3

Comparison of Views on Fairness

	Student mean	Faculty mean	Sig.
Learning Disabilities	3.923	4.059	$p=0.217$
Physical Disabilities	4.011	4.423	$p<.001$
Mental Illness	4.011	4.144	$p=0.814$

However, there were some differences based on the type of disability as well as between faculty and students. Both faculty and students reported less agreement that accommodations create an unfair advantage for students with learning disabilities than students with mental illness or physical disabilities. A t-test was used to compare faculty and student mean on views of the fairness of accommodation plans. Regarding physical disabilities, there was a significant difference between the faculty and student scores. The student level of agreement averaged 4.01, lower than the faculty score of 4.42 ($p<.0001$). While both faculty and students felt accommodations for physical disabilities were as or less likely to create an unfair advantage than those received for mental illness or learning disabilities, faculty reported an even greater difference than that reported by students.

Faculty and students were asked their views on the ability of students with disabilities to perform as well as other students. Once again, responses ranged between 1 (strongly agree) and 5 (strongly disagree). The summary of faculty and student responses are shown in table 4.

Table 4

Comparison of Views on Performance

	Student mean	Faculty mean	Sig.
Learning Disabilities	2.563	2.402	$p=0.179$
Physical Disabilities	2.178	1.907	$p<.001$
Mental Illness	2.517	2.472	$p=0.698$

Scores closer to one indicate greater agreement with the statement that students with disabilities perform as well as other students. Both groups, faculty and students, expressed higher expectations for the ability of students with physical disabilities compared to those with learning disabilities or mental illness. A t-test was used to compare the faculty and student means on views of student ability. There was a significant difference between the means of faculty and students on their views on the performance of students with physical disabilities, indicating that faculty respondents view the abilities of students with physical disabilities higher than student respondents.

Discussion

This study explored students' comfort level in requesting accommodations as well as compared faculty and student views on issues of fairness and ability related to student accommodations. Results indicated that students are more comfortable requesting accommodations for physical disabilities than mental illness or learning disabilities. Potential reasons for this include the visibility of disabilities and societal attitudes.

Physical disabilities are typically more visible than learning disabilities or mental illness. Conditions such as mobility impairments, where a student may use a wheelchair, or sensory impairments, such as blindness, are apparent and generally better understood by society. The visibility of these disabilities can lead to a clearer pathway for accommodations as the needs are more obvious and there are established supports already in place. For instance, building ramps and braille included on signage are standard practices that have been implemented in most public buildings for decades.

In contrast, and unfortunately, learning disabilities and mental illness often carry a heavier stigma and are less understood by the general public. Conditions such as dyslexia, ADHD, anxiety disorders or depression are often invisible, making them harder for peers and even faculty to recognize and understand. This invisibility can lead to misconceptions, such as believing that these conditions are not as serious as physical disabilities, or they can simply be overcome if the student tries hard enough. When asked to consider how they would feel requesting accommodations for a learning disability or mental illness, students may fear being judged as lazy or seeking undue advantage. Additionally, students may internalize societal stigma towards learning disabilities and mental illnesses. The thought of needing accommodations for these conditions may trigger shame or embarrassment, making them less willing to seek support services.

A second focus of this study examined the perspectives of students and faculty on the performance of students with disabilities as well as the role of accommodations. A strong consensus emerged, refuting that idea that accommodations lead to unfair advantages. This shared perspective supports a reduction of stigma associated with accommodations and a campus culture of inclusivity. Research shows that negative views about disability and accommodations can be internalized by the students who need them, creating a barrier to accessing services. While students were more reluctant to ask for accommodations for mental illness or learning disabilities, that did not apparently carry-over to a negative view of students who do seek accommodations for those reasons. Similarly, our results indicate that faculty and staff do not view accommodations as a leg up over other students, but rather a vital equalizer that allows all students to perform at the best of their abilities.

A disparity was found, however, regarding physical disabilities. The data revealed a significant difference in student and faculty views of accommodations for physical disabilities. While all respondents felt that the accommodations did not present an unfair advantage, the faculty's response was especially striking. It may be that faculty members' greater experience with student accommodations has allowed them to develop a deeper understanding of the value of accommodations for students with physical disabilities.

Students and faculty were asked their level of agreement with the statement that students with disabilities can perform as well as students without disabilities. Both students and faculty expressed stronger agreement about the performance of students with physical disabilities than those with learning disabilities or mental illness. There are potential social and psychological explanations for this difference. Physical disabilities might not be directly linked to cognitive functions and learning processes, which could lead faculty and students to believe that physical disabilities have less impact on academic ability. Conversely, the impact of learning disabilities and mental illness on learning and thought processes may not be clearly understood, contributing to misconceptions that these disabilities inherently limit a student's intelligence and academic potential.

There is too often stigma associated with learning disabilities and mental illness, which can result in negative perceptions of students with those diagnoses. This stigma can lead to biases that students with mental illness or learning disabilities are less capable. Learning disabilities are sometimes mistakenly perceived as reflecting a student's apathy or lack of intelligence, rather than recognized as neurological differences that require distinct learning strategies or accommodations.

The study's findings have practical implications for college faculty as well as disability services professionals. There is a need for increased awareness and education about non-physical disabilities. Disability services educators can develop workshops and training sessions aimed at destigmatizing these conditions and promoting an inclusive learning environment. Specialized training for faculty can assist them in better understanding how to support students with mental illnesses and learning disabilities effectively. Encouraging open dialogue between students and disability services will help create a supportive and accepting environment, reducing the hesitation students may feel requesting accommodations.

Furthermore, it is essential to ensure that the process for requesting accommodations is straightforward, transparent, and accessible. Simplifying the paperwork and providing clear guidelines can empower students to seek the help they need. Establishing a system for regular feedback from students can be instrumental in making ongoing improvements in the accommodation process. Finally, regular evaluation of accommodation policies is necessary to ensure they are inclusive and equitable, taking into account the unique challenges experienced by students with mental illness and learning disabilities. Through these measures, disability educators can help bridge the gap in perceptions of students with physical disabilities and those with mental illnesses or learning disabilities, fostering a more inclusive educational climate.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings of this research were encouraging. Students agreed that they would be comfortable asking for accommodations. Both students and faculty felt that accommodations did not provide an unfair advantage and that students with disabilities are able to perform as well as other students. However, there were some differences in mean scores based on disability type, suggesting that there is more stigma associated with mental illness or learning disabilities than with physical disabilities. This stigma can manifest in various ways, including negative perceptions, lesser understanding, and social exclusion, often because learning disabilities and mental illnesses are less visible and less understood by others. Future studies are needed to compare the experiences of college students with different types of disabilities to understand the root causes and symptoms of stigma. Research should prioritize the development of interventions to reduce stigma, particularly programs that educate peers and faculty about the nature of learning disabilities and mental illnesses. By addressing these areas, future research can contribute to the development of more inclusive educational environments that recognize and effectively support the needs of all students.

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