

Meeting the needs of students with disabilities at Southern Texas University from a faculty perspective

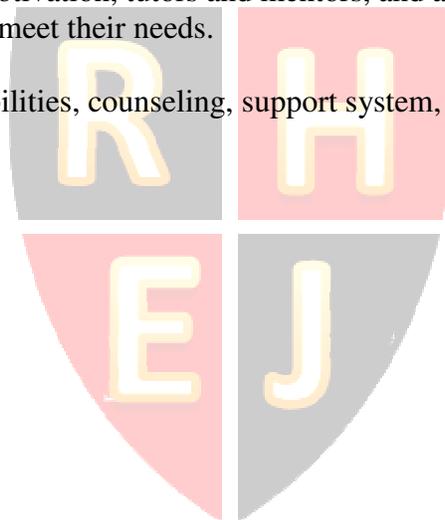
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ABSTRACT

The lack of self-advocacy for students with disabilities in higher education is a concern (Becker & Palladino, 2016). A recent influx of students with disabilities has prompted higher education institutions to take a closer look at their previous practices in an effort to reach these students. This qualitative research study examines faculty perspectives with regard to best meeting the needs of these students. Findings reveal that students with disabilities need student support services and student motivation, tutors and mentors, and a counseling support system that is specifically designed to meet their needs.

Keywords: Students with disabilities, counseling, support system, student motivation, tutors, mentors



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PROBLEM STATEMENT

The lack of self-advocacy for students with disabilities in higher education is a concern (Becker & Palladino, 2016). Students with disabilities are not declaring their disabilities at higher education institutions at the same rate as they are required to in high school (Sachs and Schreuder, 2011). This problem impacts students with impairments because they are not receiving the modifications and accommodations needed (Becker & Palladino, 2016).

There are many possible factors contributing to this problem, among which includes a lack of student understanding regarding the process of registering their disability (Becker & Palladino, 2016), they are ashamed of their disability (Sachs & Schreuer, 2011), and/or they do not want to be labeled as a person with disabilities (Liasidou, 2014). This study will contribute to the body of knowledge needed to address this current dilemma.

PURPOSE STATEMENT

This paper will examine faculty perceptions regarding addressing the needs of students with disabilities at one higher education institution in South Texas.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In a 2013 study, students with disabilities represent 10.5% of the unemployed population (Schifter, 2016). Students with disabilities in higher education are underrepresented and have the highest dropout rate of any class of student in higher education. The presence and treatment of these students in higher education make disability a civil rights issue as well as a social justice issue (Liasidou, 2014).

Legislation

Over the last fifty years, higher education institutions have been urged either by legislation or their own inner policies to retain and graduate students with disabilities (Leake & Stodden, 2014). The downside of this legislation is that it mentions little about the requirements and needs of the importance of social interaction for students in higher education to be successful (Leake & Stodden, 2014). Although section 504 and ADA address the legal regulations for institutions with students with disabilities, it does not encompass the social and cultural needs for people with disabilities (Shallish, 2015).

There has been considerable research conducted on diversity in higher education, little has been shown to establish disability as a form of diversity (Shallish, 2015). Most research conducted is on sexual orientation, ethnicity, and nationality (Shallish, 2015). Little has shown that a disability is a cultural identity as well as social and political identity (Shallish, 2015). Research shows that often students with disabilities have low social skills but their problem behaviors are above average. The more aide that a student with disability needs, the lower the social skills (Lyons, Huber, Carter, Rui, & Asmus, 2016). Some of the disabilities noted are accessibility, time constraints, lack of services, and financial constraints (Sachs & Schreuer, 2011).

Faculty Attitudes and Motivation

Students with disabilities should be encouraged to take affirmative action and seek out their support systems (Lechtenberger, Brak, Sokolosky, & McCrary, 2012). Students with disabilities are now attending college at a higher rate than ever before (Walker, 2016). Increased awareness among faculty and administration translates into more success for students with disabilities (Walker, 2016). Support Services are very important at the collegiate level (Walker, 2016). Couzens et al. (2015) maintains there should be more support for students with disabilities in higher education. Research shows that higher education support staff feel more valued and have more confidence if they are involved in the faculty developments (McLachlan & Davis, 2013).

Although there has been a change and the focus on equality for students with disabilities has increased, there are still obstacles that these students face in their quest for a college education (Couzens et al., 2015). Students with hidden disabilities are increasing in number in higher education and the can be developmental or required (Couzens et al., 2015).

As more and more students with disabilities attend higher education institutions it is important to prepare faculty to meet the needs of these students (Murray, Lombardi, & Wren, 2011). By providing a more proportionate number of faculty and staff with disabilities, students with disabilities would have role models, mentors, and advocates that could relate to them and create a sense of inclusiveness on the campus (Leake & Stodden, 2014). Certain teaching styles can improve students with disabilities learning by reaching their social needs (Black, Weinberg, & Brodwin, 2015). Students with disabilities in higher education in some studies show that to be as successful as other students alongside their same degree plan, they had to spend more time studying and participated in fewer extra-curricular activities.

In some cases, faculty are more uncertain than students when it comes to student modifications (Gibbons, Cihak, Mynatt, & Wilhoit, 2015). Faculty who participate in workshops that address students with disabilities have a more positive attitude towards students with disabilities than faculty who do not participate in a workshop (Murray et al., 2011). The more training a faculty member has on support services for students with disabilities, the better chance they will have buy in. Although faculty members are willing to embrace support services, they are concerned about the effects in the classroom (Gibbons et al, 2015).

Equality

The most important component of a higher education institutions with students with disabilities is that the institution is ultimately be there for the student. Everyone has the opportunity for an education (Kayhan et al, 2015). It is important for a university to identify the educational, scholarship, administrative, physical, accommodation, social, and other needs of the students with disabilities registered to higher education institutions and provide necessary support (Kayhan et al, 2015)

Students with disabilities are humans and must be recognized as equals to others that do not have disabilities. Research has shown that the academic achievements of students with disabilities that graduate from a higher educational institution are almost as high as students that do not have disabilities (Sachs & Schreuer, 2011). Without student support, students with disabilities are more likely to transfer to other universities which then affects their graduation

rate. By faculty, staff, and students communicating and working together for the success of all parties, stigmas can be eliminated and student success will be achieved. (Sachs & Schreuer, 2011).

METHODOLOGY

Role of the Researcher and Participant Selection

This qualitative naturalistic inquiry sought the perspectives of three faculty members within the Center for Student Success at a South Texas University. These three faculty members were chosen through the purposeful sampling as well as snowball sampling (Gall, Gall, and Borg, 2003). We purposefully chose females for this research. Their perspective on this matter is important because they predominately serve these students at this institution. The first interviewee, Sarah, was chosen through purposeful sampling because of her background, current role, and education in special education. From there she recommended Alexia and Isabella because of their current roles which interact with students with disabilities.

Site Selection

In selecting a site the researcher must make sure they have access to the site and can stay as much as needed, and the data will be present at the site (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 1993). This South Texas University's Center for Student Success was selected for several reasons. First, this initiative is responsible for the entire first year experience for all freshman. Secondly, this institution is a Hispanic serving institution with a mission to serve the students in the region. Third, this university was conveniently located to provide the research informants.

Data Collection

The data for this qualitative research study was collected through a series of semi-structured interviews conducted by the researcher as the instrument (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The interviewees were asked a series of structured questions. When interviewing, the informant used less structured conversation in order to ensure the comfort of the participants as well as "get them to talk" (Erlandson et al., 1993). The participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality (Bernard, 2002).

Data Analysis

The interview was taped with permission from the participants and transcribed verbatim. Probing was used in the interview process (Bernard, 2002). The researcher sought to ensure trustworthiness and avoided deception (Patton, 2002). After the transcriptions were completed, several rounds of coding were conducted using excel. After the third and final round of coding, one overarching theme was found along with three strong sub themes. One of the main focuses with naturalistic researchers is the internal validity, which means that the researcher is measuring what they originally set out to (Shenton, 2004).

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Trustworthiness and credibility were created through member checking. The interviewees were asked to verify their statements during and after their interviews. Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that the criteria for trustworthiness are, “internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity” (p.218). The purpose of member checks is, “not only to check for factual and interpretive accuracy but also provide for credibility” (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 375). Although the participants were asked the same questions, the constructed realities of no two humans are the same therefore, this was anticipated to contribute to the trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

PARTICIPANTS

The participants in this study were chosen because they all work with first year students, they are faculty at this Hispanic serving institution, and they are familiar with working with students with disabilities. The Participants in this study were Sarah, Alexia, and Isabella.

Sarah

Sarah was the first person interviewed. Sarah is an adjunct for the College of Education where she teaches diagnostician classes, the Assistant Director of the university’s tutoring and mentoring center, a diagnostician, and a first-year seminar lecturer. Sarah has K-12 teaching experience as well as college. Sarah had this to say about students with disabilities, “[Their] disabilities are not just of physical form, but it can be in a learning or intellectual form.”

Alexia

Alexia was the second person interviewed. She works as an academic recovery advisor at this Texas University. In her role, she directly works with freshman students that are on academic probation. She has worked in this position for several years. Many of her academic recovery students are students with disabilities. Some of these disabilities are PTSD, Dyslexic, ADHD, and Learning Disabled. Alexia had this to say about students with disabilities interacting with their professor:

I think that some faculty members are reluctant to provide the accommodations that the students need because they think it's the college setting and that it's their right to teach however they want or instruct within it, and it is. However, when it comes to students with disabilities, it's the law that you must provide these accommodations and I think that there's a struggle there. I think students don't want to feel different and don't want to be difficult with their professor and so they might not push to have those accommodations, and that affects their grade and affects their motivation and their outlook on the class.

Isabella

Isabella was the third person interviewed. She is the Director of Peer Mentoring and Tutoring for the Center for Student Success at this South Texas University. In addition, she has

been a lecturer for the first-year seminar course for the past five years. Isabella works with students with disabilities daily either through her peer mentors or her tutoring center. Isabella had the following to say about students with disabilities facing the challenges of learning in higher education:

For students with learning disabilities I think the amount of reading is way above and beyond of what they're used to and what they're easily capable of keeping up with compared to other students, so I think that it's a huge deterrent for students who have any type of learning disability, it's just the sheer amount of reading that they're required to do.

FINDINGS/RESULTS

Three key areas of support for students were the emergent themes gleaned from the participant interview data. These themes included: the importance of peer mentors and tutors, the need for counseling as a support system, and the need for student motivation support.

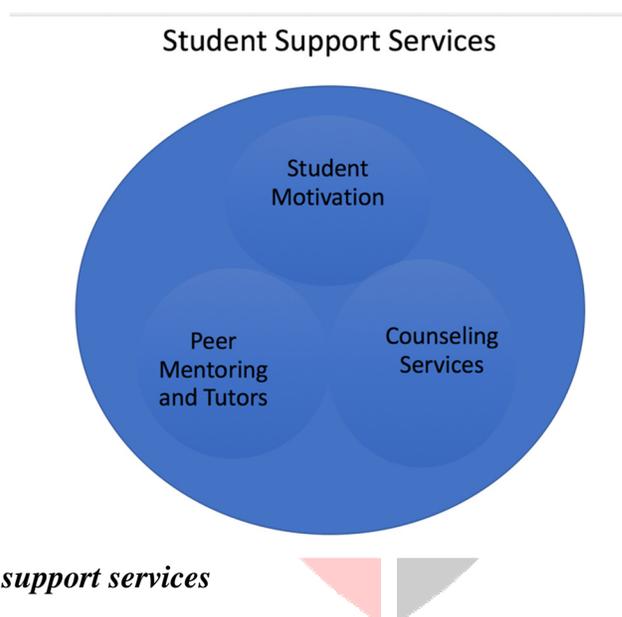


Figure 1. Student support services

The need for a support system for students with disabilities was the main reoccurring theme in this naturalistic research. This theme was present in all three interviews. Alexia stated that, "I think that's our mission to support students." Sarah stated, "I think what has surprised me the most is the growing population and maybe the lack of them not utilizing the resources that are provided to them." The introduction of the services that Sarah discussed were at freshman orientation. She stated:

I know that at freshman orientation, the department goes in parts of the orientation and kind of gives them an overview of what the department does and the process to turn in paperwork or anything like that. The main goal is to provide academic and social support, so regardless of anybody's situation, it's just-- everybody is addressed in a unique way, so whatever their needs are we can direct them to the proper resources.

She then stated, "I think what has surprised me the most is the growing population and maybe the lack of them not utilizing the resources that are provided to them." This brings up the question of why these students are not utilizing their resources. Sarah states that student might

not be utilizing their resources for, “the fear of being labeled” and that universities should be, “making sure that they have the academic, social support, and emotional support that they need.” Alexia described a student support system as someone saying:

You can do it, you're capable, let's take this one day at a time, let's take this one piece at a time, what is it that you're issues with? And rolling up their sleeves and assisting the students with it, because they're gonna be the first one to knock themselves down, we just need to make sure that we're building them up and as soon as they're taking a step back, push them forward again.

Importance of Tutors and Mentors

In addition to the overall main theme found in the research, there were three supporting themes. The first supporting theme was the importance of tutors and mentors. At this South Texas University, all freshman students are assigned a peer mentor and they are given the opportunity for free training. Sarah stated, “In the first year of college all our mentors are trained and equipped to work with students with the social and academic transition, so they're doing things from sense of community, sense of school pride and then them getting adjusted to dining hall, time management and those other components they need to have.” She goes on to state that by, “having that one person that they could go to for anything and on a routine basis could keep them going through and I think that would be a big factor on them actually succeeding and completing their degree.” Isabella stated in regards to peer mentoring and tutoring:

We train our tutors and our mentors to work with students with a variety of disabilities. They receive training from the health and wellness center from the office of disabilities on just kind of the basics of working with students with disabilities, and we also use student instructional methods through avid, to really reach a variety of learning styles and incorporate scaffolding and other things that are proven to help students with disabilities learn better.

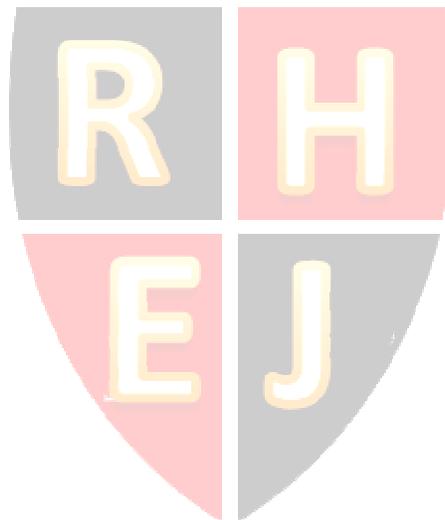
Isabella also stated, “having a tutor that they're familiar with and understands what their struggles give them motivation and encouragement through the process of accommodating to college.” Alexia stated that she tells students that are struggling academically to try “tutoring first” before getting frustrated. Alexia described tutoring and mentoring as the first lines of defense with a student who is struggling academically. She described her students as sometimes scared, and they do not want to go to the professor because “The teacher's going to think that they are stupid.”

Counseling as a Support System

The second supporting theme was the need for counseling as a support system. Counseling is an important part of the support system for students with disabilities. Alexia describes trying to encourage students with disabilities to attend counseling. “They get very uncomfortable, like, “I don't wanna talk to anybody about it,” they start to shut down, and I just encourage them, like they're not gonna ask you about that.” Alexia went on to say, “we try not to lose them so much. Like I said, the academic counseling, they're really good over there.”

Isabella described when an intervention is necessary, “we know that it's not what's in the classroom, something's happening in their personal life and we try to get them help.” Alexia described potential reasons for an intervention would be, “family, it's a relationship issue, it's

personal or we just try to get them help, depression anxiety, sometimes suicidal, so it's those issues that are not making them successful in their classroom so, again, we pull the Wellness Center in and along with myself and we try to address them.”



Student Motivation

The third supporting theme for this research was the need for student motivation support. Sarah stated it as “the biggest obstacle that a student with disabilities probably faces.” Student motivation is depending on the person. She went on to state, “It's really funny though, what is driving that person, what is their goal and then making sure to have a plan of action to reach that goal.” Alexia stated, “I think it [motivation] starts at home, and I have this issue a lot, if the flame is not on inside the student - it's on in me cuz that's my passion that it's . . . I see that too often, it's not on in the student.” Constant reinforcement for SWD is a need in higher education. Alexia said, “if their motivation is low, they're unsure, they're insecure, then it's gonna be difficult to push them along and say, “No, come on, you can do it,” they have to want it.”

DISCUSSION

Throughout this research, the findings supported the literature. The overarching theme, the need of support services for students with disabilities in college, is reflected in research conducted by Walker (2016). In his research, Walker (2016), discusses the need of student support systems in higher education. In the same way, Lechtenberger et al. (2012) discusses the need for students with disabilities to seek out their own support system and Couzins et al (2015) states that there should be more support for students with disabilities in higher education. Kayhan, Sen, and Akcamete (2015), argue that the most important thing that an institution can do for a student with disabilities is support them. Kayhen et al. (2015) goes on to say that all needs of students with disabilities should be identified.

This research contributes to the literature. The research conducted was from the faculty perspective. No students were interviewed, only faculty that directly worked with students with disabilities in the first-year experience were interviewed. This research was conducted in a rural South Texas Hispanic serving institution in which there had not been research conducted on this specific population in this capacity. In addition, the research findings discuss all the needs of students with disabilities, not just their accommodations and modifications.

SUMMARY/CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

The participants in this study were chosen because they all work with first year students, they are faculty at this Hispanic serving institution, and they are familiar with working with students with disabilities. By looking through the lens of these participants, the overarching theme of this study concluded that students with disabilities need support services to be successful at this South Texas University. Throughout this study three supporting themes, student motivation, peer tutoring and mentoring, and counseling services were identified. In the future, the research could be expanded by examining other Hispanic serving institutions in South Texas to see whether any additional themes/needs emerge.

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