Disability Accommodation Requests:
Prevalence and Preference of Review Processes at
Postsecondary Institutions in the United States

Sydney Miller[1]
Ryan Zayac[1]
Amber Paulk[1]
Stacy Lee[1]

Abstract

As the number of students with disabilities attending college in the United States continues to rise, the workload of Disability Support Services (DSS) offices has also increased. No study to date has examined the primary method (e.g., individual office member, accommodations committee) for reviewing disability accommodation requests. The purpose of the current investigation was to determine the prevalence and preference of review processes for accommodation requests at postsecondary institutions in the U.S. A total of 98 DSS professionals from U.S. institutions participated in an online survey. The findings indicate the majority of accommodation requests are reviewed by a single individual within the DSS office. This study indicated that 59% of requests were reviewed by the DSS director/coordinator and 21% were reviewed by a single DSS staff member. DSS offices that served fewer than 250 students were more likely to use directors/coordinators as reviewers, while offices that assisted more than 250 students were more likely to use department/office staff members. The majority of respondents were satisfied with their current review process and noted efficiency as the primary advantage of having a single individual review accommodation requests. Respondents who indicated they were dissatisfied noted the single reviewer process may contribute to employee burnout.

Keywords: accommodation reviews; disability support services; postsecondary education; accommodation requests

The National Center for Education Statistics estimates that approximately 11% of college students in the United States report having one or more disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016), which is a dramatic increase from the 1970s when individuals with disabilities represented approximately 2-3% of the student population in U.S. postsecondary education (National Council on Disability, 2015). The rise of college attendance among individuals with disabilities has been largely attributed to two pieces of U.S. legislation (Hart, Grigal, & Weir, 2010; Konur, 2006; Madaus, Kowitt, & Lalor, 2012; Madaus & Shaw, 2006). Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act was passed in 1973 and required any institution receiving federal funds to grant equal access to individuals with disabilities. The rights to individuals with disabilities in postsecondary education were expanded in the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and amended in 2008 (ADA Amendments Act [ADAAA]), which required institutions to provide reasonable adjustments to the physical and educational environment, or accommodations, and imposed penalties on institutions for noncompliance.

To ensure compliance with ADA standards, most postsecondary education institutions in the United States have Disability Support Services (DSS) offices (Stodden, Whelley, Chang, & Harding, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2011). DSS offices are responsible for enforcing inclusive policies and facilitating students' access to reasonable accommodations (Scott, Markle, Wessel, & Desmond, 2016). In accordance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the ADAAA (2008), reasonable accommodations are any necessary means of assistance (e.g., special equipment, extra time on

tests) that will aid students with disabilities in meeting course requirements without fundamentally altering the academic standards of the course (Hartman, 1993; U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2011). These accommodations must be provided to any student who possesses a qualifying disability, which is defined in the ADAAA (2008) as an impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a record of such an impairment, or being regarded as having such an impairment.

While the timeline and process of requesting and receiving accommodations varies from institution to institution (Cory, 2011), accommodation requests always involve the student self-reporting, an interactive process between the student and DSS office (e.g., interview/assessment), and review of documentation. A more detailed overview of what the process may entail is provided below. To receive accommodations, students must first submit a request for accommodation to their institution's DSS office. Once the request has been submitted, students schedule an initial assessment with a DSS professional. During this assessment students provide a written report describing the functional limitations of their disability and their educational accommodation history. A DSS professional may then discuss this report with the student, using the meeting as an opportunity to make behavioral observations of the student and obtain more detailed information regarding their disability. Following the assessment, the student may be asked to provide additional documentation from a licensed clinical professional who is familiar with the functional implications of their respective disability. This clinical professional should be qualified to make judgements regarding the specific disability (e.g., a psychologist verifies depression), as documentation requirements vary between different types of disabilities. Although third-party documentation of students' disabilities can be helpful in allowing DSS professionals to determine appropriate accommodations (Banerjee, Madaus, Gelbar, 2015), prior research suggests the validity of clinical professionals' diagnoses and recommended accommodations may be questionable (Sparks & Lovett, 2009; Sparks & Lovett, 2013; Weis, Dean & Osborne, 2016). Ultimately, DSS professionals must determine what information and documentation (e.g., student reports, objective data, clinicians' reports) is necessary for them to make an informed decision. Therefore, students who are seeking accommodations are expected to familiarize themselves with their institution's guidelines in order to ensure adequate documentation is provided in a timely manner.

After appropriate documentation is received, students meet again with a DSS professional to discuss a potential accommodation plan. The accommodation plan is submitted as a formal request for accommodation, which is reviewed by either a DSS professional (i.e., office director, coordinator, or staff member) or by a committee composed of DSS members, various staff and faculty members at the institution, and/or professionals from outside the university. If the request is approved, students receive authorized documentation of the procedures necessary to meet their accommodation, which they present to each of their instructors throughout their educational career. Instructors are expected to provide accommodations to the fullest extent possible and must contact DSS if they are unable to do so without outside resources, such as specialized equipment (e.g., screen readers) or the assistance of a disability service professional (e.g., testing in a distraction reduced environment).

Research has consistently linked receipt of effective accommodations with increased academic performance and persistence to graduation in individuals with disabilities (Datta & Talukdar, 2017; Nolan, Gleeson, Treanor, & Madigan, 2015). However, pursuing accommodations at the college level is more difficult than the high school level, as students are expected to navigate through the unfamiliar territory of self-advocacy rather than having accommodations arranged by their guardians (Graham-Smith & Lafayette, 2004). The DSS staff helps to ease this transition into self-advocacy by serving as a caring and helpful support system, working to ensure that all students feel comfortable in the classroom environment and receive the most effective accommodations possible. Therefore, a great deal of research has been focused on various aspects of the effectiveness of DSS in postsecondary education. For example, numerous studies have examined the various types of services available to students (Stodden et al., 2001; Tagayuna, Stodden, Chang, Zeleznik, & Whelley, 2005), the likelihood of students reporting their disability and utilizing the available resources (Lyman et al., 2016; O'Shea & Meyer, 2016; Sparks & Lovett, 2009; White, Summers, Zhang, & Renault, 2014), and the use of documentation in the accommodation decision-making process (Banerjee et al., 2015; Lindstrom, 2007; Lovett, Nelson, & Lindstrom, 2015; Ofiesh, Hughes, & Scott, 2004; Shaw, 2012; Weis et al., 2016). However, no study to date has examined the primary method (e.g., individual office member, accommodations committee/panel) for reviewing accommodation requests, the advantages and disadvantages of each method, or the preferred review methods of DSS staff members.

Given the growing number of students seeking accommodations, it is essential that DSS offices utilize the most effective, accurate, and timely method(s) possible. The authors conducted a systematic literature review of articles listed in the Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC), Academic Search Complete, and PsycINFO databases using a combination of the following keywords "accommodation review," "accommodation decision making," "accommodation requests," "disability accommodation," "accommodation review process," and "postsecondary education." The authors were unable to locate any currently published articles that have examined the primary method for reviewing accommodation requests at postsecondary institutions. As the workload in DSS offices across the country continues to increase, research assessing the accommodation review process is necessary. Given the positive correlation between overall job satisfaction and overall job performance (Judge, Thoresen, Bono, & Patton, 2001), as well as the high rate of burnout from individuals working in the mental health field (Morse, Salyers, Rollins, Monroe-DeVita, & Pfahler, 2012) these data may be beneficial to administrators when developing office policies and making personnel decisions. Therefore, the purpose of the current investigation was to determine the prevalence and preference of various review processes for accommodation requests at postsecondary institutions in the United States.

Methods

Procedures and Materials

All protocols were approved by the university Institutional Review Board prior to data collection. DSS professionals at U.S. institutions were recruited to participate in an online survey. Participants were recruited at the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD)® conference through direct conversation and posted flyers. An email request for participation was also sent to the ADA Coordinators Listserv and the Disabled Student Services in Higher Education Listserv (DSSHE-L).

After providing informed consent, participants were given a survey developed by the authors that asked a series of demographic questions (e.g., job title, years of experience); professional experience questions (e.g., How are requests reviewed at your institution?); and open-ended questions related to the disability accommodation request review process (e.g., Are there any advantages/disadvantages to the current review process utilized by your office?). Following the completion of the survey, a content analysis was conducted on the participants' responses to the open-ended questions. The primary author (a senior undergraduate psychology major) and two additional investigators (the interim DSS director at the authors' institution; a faculty member in the Department of Psychology with fifteen years of experience working with individuals with disabilities) first worked independently on identifying common themes between responses. The three investigators then met and collaboratively grouped similar responses in to categories. For example, when listing disadvantages of their current review process, a response of "too much work for one person" and a response of "overloaded staff members" would have been categorized under "employee burnout." In order to be placed into a category, all three investigators had to agree on the interpretation and categorization of the participant's response.

Participants

The recruitment process resulted in 98 (*N* = 98) individuals participating in the study. Eighty-five percent (85%) of the sample identified as female (*n* = 83) and 15% identified as male (*n* = 15). Most participants reported that they worked at a private, four-year institution (40%; *n* = 39) or public, four-year institution (36%; *n* = 35), while 18% reported that they worked at a community college (*n* = 18), and 6% reported working at a technical college (*n* = 6). Approximately 57% of the respondents (*n* = 56) indicated that they were a director/coordinator of disability services or a related office at their campus, with 42% (*n* = 41) of the participants identifying themselves as a disability service staff member or working in a related unit (e.g., academic resource center). One individual did not provide their job title.

Participants were asked to indicate the number of students served by their office and given the following ranges: less than 100; 100-250; 250-500; 500-1,000; or greater than 1,000. Eight individuals did not respond to this question, resulting in a total of 90 respondents. Twenty percent (20%) reported they served less than 100 students (*n* = 18); 31.1% reported that they served 100-250 students (*n* = 28); 8.9% reported that they served 250-500 students (*n* = 8); 21.1% reported that they served 500-1,000 students (*n* = 19); and 18.9% reported that they served over 1,000 students (*n* = 17). Participants were asked to indicate the number of years they had worked in Disability Support Services. Respondents' professional experience ranged from one to thirty-five years. The median number of years of professional experience was 9.00, with a mean of 10.46 years of service.

Results

The type of accommodation review process utilized by the sample and their preferred process of review is presented in Table 1. Approximately half of respondents served 250 or fewer students (51%) and approximately half served 250 or more (49%); these categories were collapsed so that respondents were distributed into one of those two categories. A significant association was found between the number of students served and who was responsible for reviewing requests, with institutions with less than 250 students being more likely to use directors/coordinators and institutions with more than 250 students being more likely to use department/office staff members, $\chi^2(3, n = 87) = 12.75, p = .005$. The effect size was small (Cramer's $v = .012$) but statistically significant. A significant association was also found between the number of students served and the preference for how requests are reviewed, $\chi^2(3, n = 88) = 7.88, p = .05$. Again, the effect size was small (Cramer's $v = .012$) but statistically significant. Respondents who served less than 250 students were more likely to prefer that the director/coordinator individually review requests, while respondents who served more than 250 students were more likely to prefer department/office staff members to review requests. A medium, positive correlation between the number of students served and the number of staff members working in the DSS office was found ($r = .53, p < .001$).

Participants were also asked if their institution utilized a collaborative approach between DSS staff and other constituencies when discussing individual accommodation requests. Of the individuals who responded to this question ($n = 84$), 69% indicated that a collaborative approach was utilized on a case-by-case basis. Table 2 provides the estimated percentage of cases that accommodation consultations/collaborations are utilized at the respondents' institutions. Respondents reported consulting with individuals from the following departments/units on an as-needed basis: housing and residential life, academic affairs (e.g., faculty with training in clinical psychology, school psychology, or special education), student counseling services, veterans affairs, food services, health services, and outside medical/psychological consultants.

A small number of participants (7.7%; $n = 7$) indicated that their institution currently uses a committee to make accommodation request decisions. Although the composition of this committee (e.g., residential life staff, student counseling services staff, faculty members) may look very similar to those individuals who are asked to consult on individual cases, members of this committee have a vote when determining students' accommodation requests.

When asked if they were satisfied with the current accommodation review process, 84% indicated they were and 16% reported they were not satisfied. Ninety-three percent (93%) of the participants who reported not being satisfied with their current review process ($n = 14$), indicated that their institution utilized a single reviewer method (Director/Coordinator, $n = 10$; Individual office member, $n = 3$). The remaining participant was not satisfied with their institution's use of an accommodation request committee.

Of the participants who identified advantages of their institution's current review process ($n = 77$), a content analysis of these responses revealed that the major strengths were a timely review process (44%), decisions being made by qualified DSS professionals (31%), and access to consultants (e.g., housing director, psychiatrist) as needed (25%). Comments from several participants are provided below that are representative of these strengths.

We are open enrollment, so requests come in all the time. We do have an established committee that is called upon when an accommodation is questionable – this is to get more perspectives. But when an accommodation is evident, we streamline it and avoid wasting time.

I strongly believe that the individuals who should be determining disability status and reasonable accommodation are the disability services staff. Although others on campus may have some knowledge of mental or physical conditions, the DSS staff are the only people on campus that have specific training in interpreting the ADA and its application to higher education.

We recently switched from individuals reviewing accommodation requests to a DS panel review. We meet once a week to review files and then schedule an appointment with the student to finalize. Thus far, this takes longer than when I just reviewed files on my own. I did not (nor did the student) have to wait for our group to review and then schedule an appointment.

Common disadvantages that were noted by participants about their institutions' current review process included employee burnout (37%), increased responsibility as a sole reviewer (18%), and inconsistencies across reviewers (14%). Comments from several respondents are provided below that highlight these concerns.

It is difficult being the only person to make decisions when there are complicated cases. I am overworked and have no time to focus on development or campus awareness.

We consult as a two person team for student requests whenever possible, but due to time constraints of having a heavy caseload we can't always consult on all students' accommodation plans. This can create situations where a student may have a more comprehensive plan if they meet with one staff member over another.

It is a lot of responsibility to place on one person. Having a committee might allow me to come up with creative alternatives that had never occurred to me, and having a faculty member involved might help faculty feel more included and open to universal design.

Discussion

The purpose of the current investigation was to determine the prevalence and preference of various review processes for accommodation requests at postsecondary institutions in the United States. The findings indicate that most accommodation requests are reviewed by a single individual within a DSS office (80%; *n* = 72). A significant association was found between the number of students served and who was responsible for reviewing requests, with institutions with less than 250 students being more likely to use directors/coordinators and institutions with more than 250 students being more likely to use department/office staff members.

Fortunately, the vast majority of respondents (84%) indicated that they were satisfied with their current review process. However, a number of respondents (16%) indicated a dissatisfaction with their current structure in large part due to the occupational stress of serving as a lone reviewer of requests and the high workload contributing to feelings of burnout . This feeling of burnout is not uncommon for individuals working for non-profit organizations (Licht, 2000), especially in a mental health field (Morse et al., 2012). For those institutions that utilize a single reviewer process and are concerned about employee burnout, a brief discussion of other review options is discussed below.

Contingent upon sufficient staffing in the DSS office, institutions may consider having two members of the office review accommodation requests. For situations in which there is a disagreement, a third staff member or the director may serve as the tie breaker.

Several respondents noted that this two member approach was beneficial in allowing for a timely review while simultaneously hearing other DSS professionals' perspectives.

By having two DSS professional staff members review requests, we are able to have a thorough review by utilizing various areas of expertise. It also allows for consistency and discussion when it comes to more complicated requests.

Being a relatively 'green' staff member, our collaborative approach [two-person review team] provides me an opportunity to learn from other colleagues while still allowing for a timely review process.

Respondents also recommended that for any situation where one of the reviewers has concerns about the student's request/documentation, the case be sent for a full committee review that includes all relevant constituencies (e.g., faculty, student counseling services).

Another way to potentially reduce the occupational stress on these employees would be to implement an advisory committee that includes key stakeholders (i.e., faculty members, residential life staff, student counseling services staff) that can be consulted on an *as-needed* basis. Collaboration between faculty and DSS staff has been shown to improve accommodation services, create a broader campus support for students with disabilities, and enhance students' educational experiences (Scott et al., 2016). One such case study is Ball State University, where faculty members and DSS staff members have collaborated to reform their practices and develop innovative services for students on their campus through partnering on various research projects (Scott et al., 2016). Similarly, Beyer, Moore, and Totino (2016) describe the utilization of a focus group of administrators, faculty, staff, and students with disabilities to identify policies, procedures, and services in need of change at individual unit/departmental levels and institution-wide.

A more recent example of the benefits of collaborative decision-making between faculty and DSS professionals can be seen in a case study at the University of the Pacific (Hsiao, Zeiser, Nuss, & Hatschek, 2018). Hsiao and her colleagues provide insight into the challenges of providing effective accommodations when members in DSS and faculty members have a lack of knowledge in each other's respective areas of expertise. By utilizing a collaborative decision-making model, information was shared amongst stakeholders (e.g., DSS professionals, faculty, the student) related to: (1) disability awareness, (2) es-

sential functions/technical standards/foundational skills (Roush & Sharby, 2009) of the faculties' discipline, and (3) specific learning activities and outcomes of the course. The sharing of this information in a collaborative manner allowed for the student's discipline/course-specific challenges to be identified, and for DSS staff to suggest reasonable accommodations that ultimately proved to be successful.

As recommended in the AHEAD Program Standards and Professional Indicators (AHEAD, n.d.), departmental collaborations that involve various faculty members in the disability accommodation process enable institutions to better meet the needs of students with disabilities, promote research into best practices, and establish an academic environment that is conducive to student success. Furthermore, implementing an advisory committee on an *as-needed* basis may improve the accommodation request review process by ensuring the efficacy of accommodation decisions, as studies have indicated that decisions made by committees are superior to decisions made by individuals (Chalos, 1985; Lombardelli, Proudman, & Talbot, 2002). Committees that are strategically composed of key stakeholders can offer a more well-rounded bank of knowledge than individuals (Altisent, Martin-Espildora, & Delgado-Marroquin, 2013; Bates, 2014) and previous studies have found that the accuracy of committee decision making has been beneficial in a variety of disciplines, ranging from health care ethics (Altisent et al., 2013), to monetary policy (Lombardelli et al., 2002). Collectively, these findings suggest that the use of an advisory committee could increase the likelihood that student requests are sufficiently vetted, while also eliminating inconsistencies across reviewers and some of the other disadvantages (e.g., responsibility as a sole reviewer) noted by respondents in the current study.

Nevertheless, the potential benefits of using an advisory committee as outlined above appear to be largely underutilized, as 31% of the current study's respondents indicated that their institutions do not use any form of consultation when making accommodation decisions. Furthermore, of those institutions that do use a collaborative approach, the vast majority (72.4%) use this approach on less than 10% of their cases (see Table 2). As evidenced by the sample comments from participants, this may be in part due to the time and resource constraints of committees potentially outweighing the benefits, making them less efficient than alternative procedures (Yuker, Holmes, & Davidovicz, 1972). Other studies also indicate that utilizing individual decision makers allows for increased flexibility and privacy (Altisent et al., 2013). Of course, it is also possible that the majority of ac-

commodation requests are straightforward and would not substantially benefit from a collaborative decision-making process.

When deciding what type of accommodation review process to utilize, another issue to consider is the amount of power and personal responsibility given to disability accommodation request reviewers. As the current study's respondents noted, a downside to utilizing individual reviewers is the burden of sole responsibility, whereas an advisory committee can solve this issue by dispersing responsibility among members (Lombardelli et al., 2002). As Bates (2014) noted, the use of a committee in higher education allows individuals to work towards a common goal and accomplish crucial tasks while avoiding sole responsibility.

Despite such advantages, the sharing of power and responsibility amongst a diverse committee does present additional challenges related to communication between office staff members and faculty of various disciplines. The establishment of an advisory committee may offer less power to disability service professionals and more control to faculty members – a dynamic that may create issues related to conflicting motivations, as faculty members' decisions may be affected by bias related to their own curriculum and classroom settings (Bates, 2014). For example, professors who must incorporate specialized equipment to accommodate students may be more reluctant to speak in favor of accommodation requests if they view the accommodations as inconvenient or cumbersome.

Efficiency, workload, accuracy, and maintaining balanced power and responsibility are all issues to be taken into consideration when choosing which process to utilize when reviewing disability accommodation requests. Based on the current study, the majority of DSS staff members believe that their office is operating efficiently and contributing greatly to student success. Although most respondents indicated that they prefer their current method of review, definitive conclusions cannot be drawn yet regarding which review process is the most beneficial.

Limitations and Future Research

Although the results from the current study are interesting, they are limited. In relation to the total number of postsecondary Title IV degree-granting institutions in the United States (4,583; U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2018, Table 105.50), the current study has a very limited sample size and it is possible that these data do not represent the viewpoint of the larger DSS community. Of

the 98 individuals that completed the survey, approximately 60% of them report working at institutions that serve fewer than 500 students with disabilities. In fact, only 18.9% of respondents worked at institutions where more than 1,000 students were receiving services through their office. Therefore, caution must be used when interpreting the current data as the results are at least partially skewed towards smaller institutions. Future research is necessary to collect additional data, with a focus on data collection from universities with higher enrollments in order to provide a more representative sample. Additional data collection may also allow for a comparison between types of institutions (i.e., small liberal arts colleges, historically black colleges/universities, community colleges, for-profit colleges). Future studies should also focus on identifying which aspects of the accommodation review process contribute to positive gains in employee performance and satisfaction, as well as which methods provide the greatest benefit to students. Additional research that assesses students' perspectives regarding their DSS office's accommodation request review process may also be beneficial in providing a different viewpoint on the efficiency and ease of each method.

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About the Authors

Sydney Miller received her B.S. degree in psychology from the University of North Alabama. She is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Preventive Medicine/Health Behavior Research from the University of Southern California. Her research interests include obesity prevention, health behavior interventions, and public health policy. She can be reached by email at: sydneynm@usc.edu.

Dr. Ryan Zayac received his B.S. degree in psychology from Allegheny College and his M.S. and Ph.D. in experimental psychology with an emphasis in applied behavior analysis from Auburn University. He is a Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA-D), and is currently an associate professor and chair of the Department of Psychology at the University of North Alabama. He has over 15 years of experience working with individuals with developmental disabilities. His present research activities primarily focus on evidenced-based teaching methods and the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). He is also interested in the development of behavioral programming (e.g., social skills, daily living skills) for college students with developmental disabilities, strategies for developing better behavior analysts, and approaches to increasing students' intercultural competencies. He can be reached by email at: rzayac@una.edu.

Dr. Amber Paulk received her B.A. degree in psychology from Auburn University and her M.S. and Ph.D. in human development and family studies from Auburn University. Dr. Paulk is currently an associate professor in the Department of Sociology and Family Studies at the University of North Alabama. Her research interests include assessing the effectiveness of support services (e.g., Title IX, disability support services, etc.) in higher education and the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). She can be reached via email at apaulk@una.edu.

Stacy C. Lee received her B.A. degree in social work from the University of North Alabama, a M.A. in social work from the University of Alabama, and is currently pursuing a doctorate in higher education in leadership from Maryville University. Her experience includes working as a Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker for the State of Alabama at the Department of Human Resources and the Department of Public Health. She is currently a coordinator for disability support services at the University of North Alabama. Her research interests include transition programs for students with disabilities and faculty perceptions of students with disabilities and their use of accommodations. She can be reached by email at: slee9@una.edu.

Acknowledgement

Table 1

Prevalence and Preference of Disability Accommodation Request Review Processes

Number of Students Served	Current Method of Review		Preferred Method of Review	
	<250	>250	<250	>250
Director/Coordinator	73.9% *n=34*	43.2% *n=19*	63.0% *n=29*	43.2% *n=19*
Individual Office Member	8.7% *n=4*	34.1% *n=15*	8.7% *n=4*	31.8% *n=14*
Two Office Members	4.3% *n=2*	13.6% *n=6*	17.8% *n=8*	13.6% *n=6*
Committee	6.5% *n=3*	9.1% *n=4*	8.7% *n=4*	9.1% *n=4*
Other	6.5% *n=3*	NA	NA	NA

Note. Not applicable (NA).

Table 2

Estimated Percentage of Accommodation Requests that Utilize Consultations/Collaborations

Percentage of Requests	*n*	Valid %
Less than 5%	27	46.5
6-10%	15	25.9
11-15%	4	6.9
16-20%	3	5.2
21-25%	3	5.2
Greater than 25%	6	10.3