

A Campus Survey of Faculty and Student Perceptions of Persons with Disabilities

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Abstract

A positive classroom climate is essential to the success of students with disabilities in higher education. In a study of 268 students and 76 faculty members at a small liberal arts women's college in eastern Pennsylvania, participants responded to statements about students with disabilities. Findings indicate that faculty and students perceive the classroom climate differently, with faculty members describing the campus as more welcoming, inclusive, and supportive than students. Faculty and students agree that students with disabilities are capable of achieving success in the classroom and that faculty members are willing to provide classroom accommodations. Students indicate discomfort with sharing their disabilities with faculty members, however, indicating a need for increased and ongoing faculty development in best practices for creating a supportive classroom climate for students with disabilities.

Keywords: Disabilities, classroom climate, higher education, perceptions

Students with disabilities are increasing in numbers in higher education. The implementation of federal legislation and factors such as a demand for a better educated workforce and improved overall conditions to accommodate students are attributed as factors in these growing numbers (Hergenrather & Rhodes, 2007; Kiuvara & Huefner, 2008). Subsequently, faculty and students are challenged to provide an atmosphere that is supportive and encourages academic success. However, there is still some concern that faculty may hold preconceived stereotypes that can be a barrier to a student's success. The label of disability may influence faculty members' expectations of students and there may be a general lack of sensitivity to the needs of students identified as having a disability (Houck, Asseline, Troutmer & Arrington, 1992). Although the research has suggested that faculty members are supporters of students with disabilities, there is much to understand in terms of the overall climate at the college level. The prevailing characteristics of the environment (climate), particularly in the classroom, affect students' success, especially for students with

disabilities (Hall & Sandler, 1999). The area of sensitive and supportive environments needs to be further explored as the academic progress of students with disabilities is significantly affected by the attitudes of faculty and their willingness to provide accommodations, both of which contribute to classroom climate (Wolman, Suarez McCrink, Figueroa Rodriguez, & Harris-Looby, 2004).

College and university settings are the primary ways for students to gain access to knowledge and faculty are directly responsible for understanding this student population. Students may question the need to disclose their disability in order to receive accommodations if the classroom climate is not viewed as a favorable one (Kiuvara & Huefner, 2008). Academic success for students with disabilities is therefore significantly affected by the attitudes of faculty and their willingness to provide accommodations (Wolman et al., 2004). Further, students' perceptions of their fellow classmates and subsequent acceptance and support of those who are different from themselves are important to their satisfaction with and success in the college environment.

Review of the Literature

The classroom climate and student success are strongly influenced by faculty members' willingness to provide accommodations for students with disabilities (Baggett, 1994; Fonosche & Schwab, 1981). Consistently, research demonstrates that faculty members are willing to provide teaching accommodations such as permission to record lectures, extended time for projects and assignments, and extended test time (Houck et al., 1992; Mathews, Anderson, & Skolnick, 1987; Vogel et al., 1999). However, faculty members are less willing to provide classroom accommodations such as copies of lecture notes, alternative assignments, and extra credit, and are unwilling to make exceptions for poor spelling and grammar on exams or provide an alternate form of an exam (Houck et al., 1992; Mathews et al., 1987; Vogel, Leyser, Wyland, & Brulle, 1999). Students have reported that faculty members are often unreceptive to requests for accommodations and lack information about the impact of disabilities in the classroom, both of which influence the overall climate for students with disabilities (Farone, Hall, & Costello, 1998; Houck et al., 1992).

The classroom climate is further compromised for students with disabilities when the obstacles they face in the accommodations process is the result of a lack of faculty knowledge regarding disability law. Dowrick, Anderson, Heyer, and Acosta (2005) found that students experience difficulty in securing basic accommodations such as room changes for students who use wheelchairs and appropriate text formats for students with low vision as a correlate to low faculty knowledge about legal requirements for disability accommodations. Importantly, student perceptions of faculty knowledge of disabilities and receptiveness to disability accommodations are significant factors in influencing students to seek the additional disability support that could improve their achievement and degree completion. In fact, negative interactions with faculty resulted in students' unwillingness to pursue support in a study by Harman-Hall and Hagga (2002), while positive reactions from faculty inspired students to seek out resources. In the same study, peer reactions/interactions were found to have no effect on student decision-making related to accessing additional disability support. This finding indicated that the nature of student/faculty interaction is a significant factor in students' decisions to secure additional support for a disability as well as an important factor in classroom climate for students with disabilities.

The tenor of the interaction between students and faculty can be affected by the nature of students' disabilities, as faculty reported more negative attitudes toward accommodating students with psychiatric and attention disorders than toward students with obvious physical or learning disabilities (Hindes & Mather, 2007). In the same study, faculty members report that providing accommodations for students adds an extra layer of responsibility to their heavy loads and potentially compromises the quality of the learning environment. Faculty members' willingness to provide accommodations to all students with documented disabilities contributes to a positive classroom climate, as does student perception of such willingness.

Classroom climate is affected by faculty expectations as well. Houck et al. (1992) reported on faculty members' belief that a learning disability can limit a student's pursuit of certain majors and probability of degree completion. In nursing, faculty members express low expectations that students with learning disabilities will become successful nurses, often citing patient safety as a concern despite the lack of evidence that patient safety has ever been jeopardized by a nurse with a disability (Sowers & Smith, 2004). Low expectations often result in low student performance and are a barrier to success (Dorwick et al., 2005). Expecting high achievement and quality work from all students are ways to improve the classroom climate for students with disabilities.

Faculty disposition toward students with disabilities is another important factor in the overall classroom climate, and according to several studies, most faculty members demonstrate a positive attitude toward students with disabilities (Fonosch & Schwab, 1981; Hengst, 2003; Kelly, 1984). It should be noted that one study by Minner and Prater (1984) reported that faculty viewed students with disabilities unfavorably when compared with students without disabilities. In some studies, faculty exhibited behaviors that can compromise the classroom climate for students with disabilities, such as directing negative statements toward students about their disabilities and accommodations or questioning the legitimacy of the student's request for accommodations (Beilke, 1999; Jensen, McCrary, Krampe, & Cooper, 2004; Kurth & Mellard, 2006).

It can be surmised that faculty members' views of students are influenced by their knowledge of disability issues and familiarity with people with disabilities. Faculty report a desire for more information on the im-

pact of disabilities in the classroom (Houck et al., 1992). Many faculty report limited training in and exposure to issues related to disabilities in higher education (Leysner et al., 2000). Backels and Wheeler (2001) report that faculty members are unsure of their options related to extending flexibility and making referrals for students with mental health issues. Sowers and Smith (2004) also indicate that faculty members likely find working with students' hidden disabilities such as mental health, learning, and attention disabilities more challenging than working with more apparent physical disabilities. Additionally, when faculty members feel supported by their departments in their teaching of students with disabilities, they report feeling that accommodations are typically easy to implement, thus improving overall classroom climate (Bourke, Strehorn, & Silver, 2000).

Institutional support for faculty members teaching students with disabilities is imperative in improving the classroom climate for students with disabilities, and ongoing training is a significant piece of that support. In fact, research demonstrates that educating faculty members on disability issues increases their knowledge of disability law, awareness of the impact of disabilities, and willingness to provide accommodations (Bigaj, Shaw, & McGuire, 1999; Murray, Lombardi, Wren, & Keys, 2009; Sowers & Smith, 2004). Increasing faculty education and awareness clearly leads to an improved classroom climate for students with disabilities.

Adding to the existing body of research on classroom climate for students with disabilities, the present study was conducted to examine attitudes and perceptions of persons with disabilities on a college campus. It was expected that faculty and students would differ in their perceptions of persons with disabilities, wherein faculty would be accepting and accommodating while other students would not be as accepting of others unlike themselves. Further, responses from students with disabilities were expected to provide insight into their life on a college campus. Specifically, the three major hypotheses of the study were as follows:

1. There is no difference in faculty and student perceptions of persons with disabilities.
2. There is no difference in faculty and student perceptions of students with disabilities in the collegiate classroom.
3. Students with disabilities do not perceive different treatment by faculty and other students in the collegiate classroom.

Method

Participants

In Fall 2009, a convenience sample of approximately 400 faculty and college students from a small liberal arts women's college in eastern Pennsylvania participated in this study. All college faculty and students received an email that introduced and explained the purpose of the study. To participate, everyone was invited to complete an online survey. They were told their participation was voluntary, their responses were confidential and anonymous, and that the survey was approved by the College's Institutional Review Board. Two follow-up reminder emails were sent to the campus community.

There was a 75% response rate for faculty and a 22% response rate for students. Of the 76 faculty who responded to the demographic questions on the survey, 70% were females, 60% taught at the college for six or more years, 69% taught full-time, and 26% had tenured status. Approximately 31% of the faculty taught in the natural sciences, 26% taught in professional certification programs (i.e., Nursing, Social Work, Nutrition, Education), 17% taught in the social sciences, and approximately 26% taught in either the arts and performing arts area or humanities area. Not all of the student respondents answered the demographic questions on the survey. Of the 268 students who did respond to the demographic questions, 62% were traditional students (ages 18-22 years) and 38% were lifelong learning students (ages 23 and above years). Approximately 96% of the student respondents were females, and 83% were Caucasians. The breakdown by class was 15% freshmen, 15% sophomore, 31% junior, 34% senior, and 5% graduate. These students majored in a variety of programs, 54% lived off campus, and 62% took over 13 credits that semester. Of 232 students who responded to the disability question, 53 (22.8%) reported having some sort of disability which is representative of the 55 registered students with disabilities at the college. However, no attempt was made to identify the students with disabilities prior to the administration of the survey.

Materials

There were two different versions of an online survey; one for faculty and one for students. In both versions, many of the same questions were asked of both populations so that direct comparisons could be

made. The first question for both populations asked their opinion on the overall climate at the college for students with disabilities. The second section for both populations contained 10 items on their beliefs about students with disabilities that were rated on a 5-point Likert scale where 1 equaled “strongly disagree” and 5 equaled “strongly agree” and identical versions of the questions were used in almost all sections described in this paragraph. Examples of items in this section included, “I think that all students with disabilities have learning problems” and “All students with disabilities receive accommodations to meet their needs in the classroom.” The third section focused on inclusion in the classroom and contained seven items. An example item from this section is, “Teachers focus more on students with disabilities than the rest of the class.” The fourth section, containing two items, focused on capabilities. An item such as, “How capable are students with disabilities of meeting the demands of your academic major?” was found in this section. The fifth section, that was common to both populations, contained seven items focusing on student reactions to those with disabilities. Respondents used the same 5-point Likert scale to respond to items such as, “Other students think that students with disabilities receive more than their fair share of college provided services.” The last section asked about respondents’ familiarity with people with disabilities.

In the faculty survey, there was also a separate section designed to gather beliefs about students with disabilities, willingness to make accommodations, and related issues. All of these items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale where 1 equaled “strongly disagree” and 5 equaled “strongly agree.” It should be noted that the survey was not designed to assess faculty members with disabilities, due to the low number of available individuals on campus who would fit that category.

In the student survey, however, a separate section was designed to gather information and opinions from the sizable number of students with disabilities. Those who did not have a disability did not continue with these items. The online survey website was tested for accessibility for these students and was found to be user friendly for everyone.

The survey was developed in several steps. First, prior research was reviewed on faculty knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes related to students with disabilities (e.g. Brockelman, Chadsey, & Loeb, 2006; Sowers & Smith, 2004). This review yielded several themes, such

as knowledge about federal anti-discrimination laws, faculty attitudes toward students with disabilities, faculty understanding of and willingness to accommodate students, and other related issues. Next, prior published instruments were reviewed to assess faculty perceptions and served as a major source for item generation. For example, approximately 25 items developed by Houck et al. (1992), Wolman et al. (2004) and Murray, Wren, and Keys (2008) were adapted and incorporated into this survey instrument. Items were also developed based on specific data needs for a project sponsored by the college’s Academic Services Department.

The initial draft of the survey was divided into sections based on themes identified in this article’s review of the literature. Those themes, which were included in both the faculty and student surveys, included overall climate, beliefs about students with disabilities, inclusion in the classroom (including classroom question), capabilities of students with disabilities, reactions to such students, and familiarity with persons with disabilities. Faculty also were asked questions pertaining to related campus services, related professional development opportunities, the willingness to accommodate students with disabilities, and their knowledge about disability-related laws and information. Students were also asked questions pertaining to self-identification of a disability, disclosure, and subsequent treatment by others.

To evaluate the content validity of the survey instrument, the director of academic services and a small group of faculty and staff who are knowledgeable in this area reviewed the survey. These individuals revised the survey by adding missing content items and editing items for clarity, as well as adjusting rating scales. In addition, some of the items in the survey were negatively worded (and later reverse coded for scoring) to minimize extreme response bias and acquiescent bias.

Upon review of the literature, a pilot test of the survey was completed using a small sample of students and faculty. This group provided feedback on the instructions and items, and the time it took to complete the instrument. Their suggestions or changes were incorporated into the final survey.

Procedure

All participants completed the survey online using a survey website host. Faculty and students were recruited using a campus-wide email announcement inviting them to participate in the survey. They were told their participation was completely anonymous and voluntary.

Those faculty members and students who volunteered were asked to read an Informed Consent Form explaining the purpose of the study, which was an exploration of how faculty and students, both with and without disabilities, perceived the college environment. They then provided demographic information which was collected for reporting purposes only and confidentiality of their responses was guaranteed. Participants completed the survey in approximately 20 minutes.

Results

To address the primary hypotheses of interest in relation to the comparison of faculty and student perceptions of students with disabilities on campus, a series of independent t-tests (two-tailed) was conducted to compare survey responses from those two populations (faculty versus students with and without disabilities). Both of the student response categories were combined since the students with disabilities category was small. If significant differences resulted, analyses of variance (ANOVA) and post-hoc Tukey tests were used to further differentiate between students with and without disabilities.

This section will first focus on the comparison of those questions asked of both faculty members and students. The second part of the results section describes questions and responses specific to faculty members. The third section describes questions and responses specific to those students who self-identified as disabled.

Analyses contained different numbers of respondents due to missing data among the final participants. That is, survey sample sizes for each group varied for each item; faculty sample size ranged from 75 to 108, student sample size ranged from 253 to 366, and the students with disabilities sample ranged from 46 to 53. Two types of comparisons were made on the survey items that were common to both the student and faculty populations. The first comparison was between faculty and all students and the second comparison was between faculty, students with disabilities, and students without disabilities. It should be noted that the determination of students with disabilities was based on self-identification and voluntary disclosure.

Faculty and Student Comparisons

Descriptive statistics were computed for all of the survey items. For purposes of simplicity (due to small sample sizes in some response categories and no sig-

nificant differences), the response categories “strongly agree” and “agree” are combined, as are the categories “strongly disagree” and “disagree.” All of the frequencies below are provided for the combined agree and strongly agree categories. All of the survey items were also analyzed with independent t-tests to make comparisons between the views for both populations (faculty members vs. all students). Only t-test analyses and one-way ANOVA that resulted in significant differences between the means are presented.

Overall Climate. In the first section of the survey, an independent t-test was conducted to examine differences in perceptions of the classroom climate for people with disabilities between faculty and students. Respondents used a 5-point rating scale, where 1 equaled very unfavorable, 3 equaled neutral and 5 equaled very favorable. Mean item ratings are shown in Figure 1. About 56.4% of the faculty versus 30.6% of the students rated the overall climate as being favorable or very favorable for people with disabilities. Results showed a significant difference in the perceptions of both populations ($t(472)=4.42, p<.001$). Faculty viewed the climate at the college for students with disabilities higher ($M=3.44$) than the students ($M=2.95$), although it should be noted that based on the rating scale, both populations viewed the climate as being neutral on the issue.

When the data separated out those students who had a disability, a one-way ANOVA also showed a significant difference in perceptions ($F(2, 471)=9.98, p<.001$). Tukey’s HSD post-hoc test indicated that students without disabilities ($M=2.93$) and students with disabilities ($M=3.04$) had similar views, but those views were significantly different from those of the faculty ($M=3.44$).

Beliefs about Students with Disabilities. For this section, respondents used a 5-point rating scale, where 1 equaled “strongly disagree” and 5 equaled “strongly agree.” Mean item ratings are presented in Figures 2 and 3. When asked to respond to the statement, “All students with disabilities receive accommodations to meet their needs in the classroom,” 67.3% of the faculty and 41.6% of the students agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. The t-test analysis ($t(401)=3.43, p<.001$) resulted in a significant difference, such that more faculty ($M=3.64$) than students ($M=3.28$) agreed with this statement. A significant ANOVA ($F(2,400)=7.76, p<.001$) showed that the faculty ($M=3.64$) and students with disabilities ($M=3.51$) felt

more similarly than students in general ($M=3.24$). Over half of the faculty (59%) said they know which students have disabilities, as compared to only 23.4% of the students. Significant t-test results ($t(401)=6.74$, $p<.001$) indicate a higher mean of 3.46 for faculty than for students ($M=2.63$). The ANOVA ($F(2,400)=25.19$, $p<.001$) showed that the students ($M=3.24$) and students with disabilities ($M=3.51$) felt more similarly than faculty ($M=3.64$).

Similar but low percentages of faculty (10.8%) and students (12.3%) felt that students with disabilities are treated differently by classmates. When asked if students with disabilities are treated differently by faculty, again few faculty (18.3%) and students (12.3%) agreed with this statement. Low percentages of faculty (7.3%) and students (10.7%) felt that it is obvious to others if a student has a disability. Significant t-test results ($t(402)=3.37$, $p<.001$) indicate a lower mean of 2.18 for faculty than for students ($M=2.51$). The ANOVA ($F(2,402)=6.14$, $p<.01$) showed that the students ($M=2.50$) and students with disabilities ($M=2.53$) felt more similarly than faculty ($M=2.17$). Equivalent amounts of both populations (25% faculty and 25.2% of students) say they choose their words carefully if students with disabilities are in their presence. More faculty (25%) than students (4.5%) think that students with disabilities have learning problems. Significant t-test results ($t(402)=2.17$, $p<.05$) indicate a significantly higher mean of 2.09 for faculty than for students ($M=1.87$). About a quarter of the faculty (29.5%) and students (24.5%) think that students with disabilities are satisfied with their campus experience. Very few faculty (1.1%) or students (4.2%) reported that sitting next to a student with a disability causes anxiety. Similarly, very few faculty (3.2%) and students (3.8%) felt that students with disabilities are overly sensitive.

Inclusion in the Classroom. The first question asked respondents how often they have had students with disabilities in the classroom with them. Few (3.4%) of the faculty said all of the time, 61.8% said frequently, 32.6% said seldom, and 2.2% of the faculty said they have never had students with disabilities in their classroom. Few (4.4%) of the students said all of the time, 12.2% said frequently, 59% said seldom, and 24.4% of the students said they never had students with disabilities in their classroom. An independent t-test ($t(382)=8.18$, $p<.001$) found significantly different means between the faculty ($M=2.66$) and students ($M=1.97$).

For the remaining items in this section, respondents used a 5-point rating scale, where one equaled “strongly disagree” and 5 equaled “strongly agree.” Mean item ratings are presented in Figure 4. There were no statistically significant differences between the means for faculty and students on any of these items. For the statement, “Teachers focus more on disabled students than the rest of the class,” 81% of the faculty and 75% of the students disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. Mean ratings were 1.97 for faculty, compared to 2.07 for students, and were not significantly different. Twenty-four percent of faculty and 16.3% of students felt it is harder for students with disabilities to concentrate on lessons. A one-way ANOVA showed a significant difference for this item ($F(2,381)=5.74$, $p<.01$), where students with disabilities felt it was significantly harder to concentrate ($M=2.98$) than faculty ($M=2.78$) or students in general ($M=2.53$). Very few faculty (3.3%) and students (7.1%) said it was distracting when students with disabilities are in the classroom. Similarly, very few faculty (5.5%) and students (1%) said that having students with disabilities in the classroom creates discipline problems. On the other hand, a large number of faculty (74.4%) and students (72.9%) felt that seeing students with disabilities teaches other students that being different is okay. Similarly, 76.7% of faculty and 78.7% of students said that seeing students with disabilities helps students to be more accepting of others.

Capabilities. Two questions asked respondents about the capabilities of students with disabilities outside of the classroom, using a 3-point scale where 1 equaled “less capable,” 2 equaled “just as capable,” and 3 equaled “more capable.” For the first question, 73.6% of the faculty and 86.8% of students reported that students with disabilities are just as capable as non-disabled students at meeting the demands of their academic program or major. Significant t-test results ($t(366)=2.42$, $p<.05$) showed the mean for faculty ($M=1.76$) versus students ($M=1.87$) shows that faculty felt that some students are a little less capable of meeting program demands. Significant ANOVA results ($F(2,365)=3.02$, $p<.05$) showed similar results, and the Tukey test revealed that students in general ($M=1.87$) and the students with disabilities group ($M=1.85$) felt significantly different than the faculty ($M=1.66$). For the second question, 67% of the faculty and 75.5% of the students reported that students with disabilities are just as capable as non-disabled students at meeting the

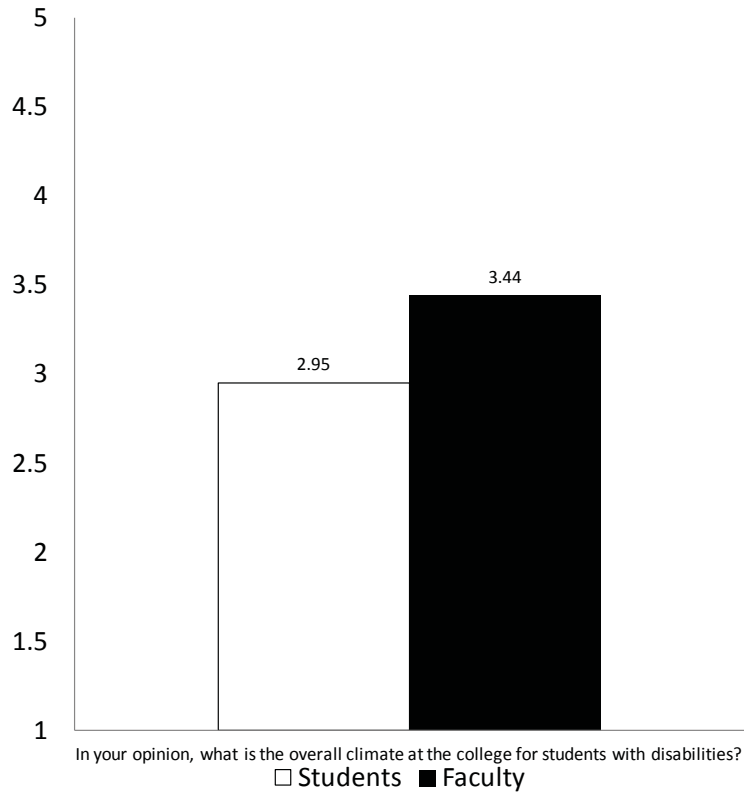


Figure 1. Overall climate for students with disabilities.
 Note: 1=Very Unfavorable to 5=Very Favorable; *p<.001

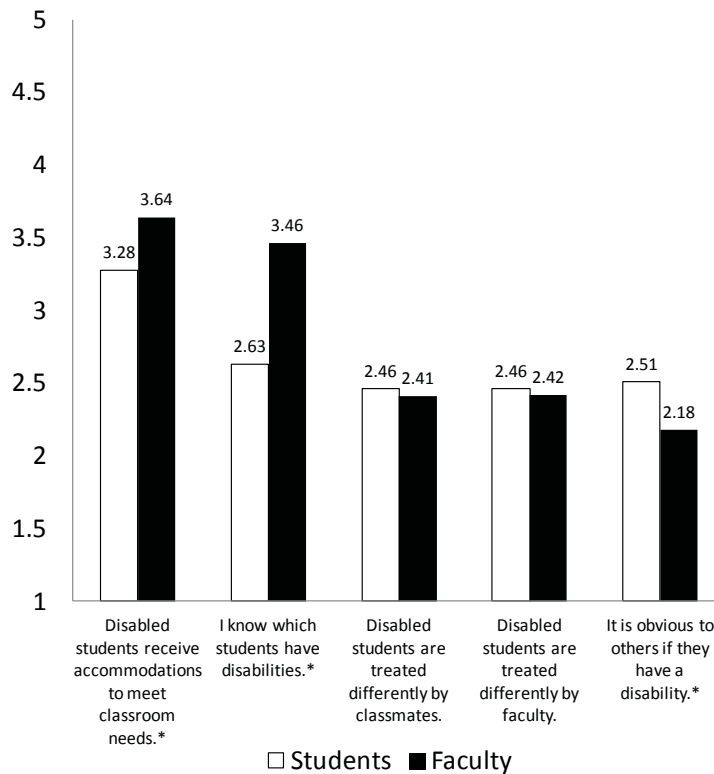


Figure 2. Beliefs about students with disabilities.
 Note: 1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree; *p<.001

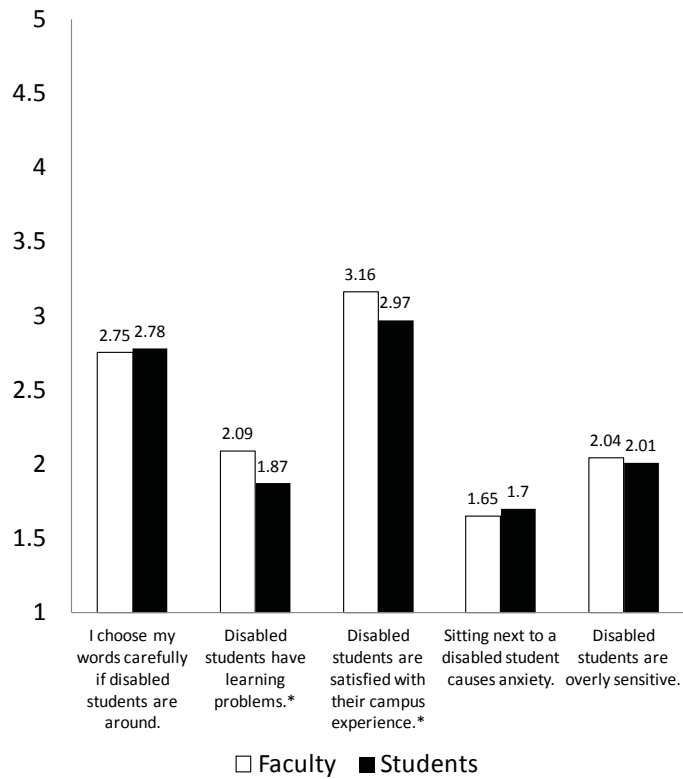


Figure 3. Beliefs about students with disabilities.
 Note: 1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree; *p<.05

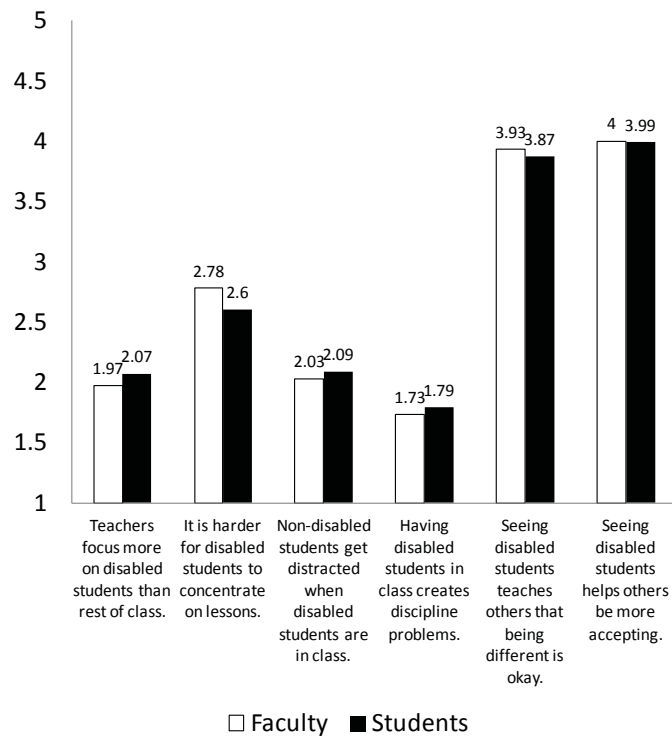


Figure 4. Inclusion in the classroom.
 Note: 1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree

demands of a job in their field. There was no significant difference between mean responses from both populations (see Figure 5).

Reactions. The first question in this section asked how other students respond when they find out about a disability. Faculty thought that only 1.3% would respond with rejection, 46.3% would respond in a supportive manner, and 52.5% would respond as if the disability did not matter. Similar percentages were reported by students with 4.7% responding with rejection, 46.6% responding in a supportive manner, and 48.7% responding as if the disability did not matter. T-test results indicated no significant difference between mean responses for faculty and students.

For the remaining items in this section, respondents used a 5-point rating scale, where one equaled “strongly disagree” and 5 equaled “strongly agree.” Mean item ratings are presented in Figure 6. The majority (74.2%) of faculty and students (65.6%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, “Other students seem to resent the accommodations disabled students receive.” Subsequently, 73.5% of faculty, but only 51.1% of students agreed or strongly agreed that other students are receptive to accommodations needed in the classroom. Significant t-test findings ($t(353)=2.42$, $p<.05$) showed higher means for faculty ($M=3.74$) than students ($M=3.51$). ANOVA and post-hoc tests showed that the mean for students with disabilities ($M=3.45$) was more similar to that of students in general. When asked if professors are receptive to such accommodations, 82.7% of faculty, but only 55.3% of the students agreed or strongly agreed. Significant t-test findings ($t(350)=3.98$, $p<.001$) showed higher means for faculty ($M=3.93$) than students ($M=3.53$). ANOVA and post-hoc results showed that the mean for students with disabilities ($M=3.62$) was more similar to that for the students in general. Few faculty (12.5%) and students (8.1%) said that other students think that students with disabilities receive more than their “fair share” of college-provided services. Similarly, few faculty (12.8%) and students (14.9%) felt that students with disabilities are viewed by others as having an unfair advantage in taking tests. Finally, only 7% of faculty and 14.9% of students felt that other students resent special parking spaces for disabled students.

Familiarity with Disabled Persons. The last section of the survey related to one’s familiarity with people with disabilities. Mean item ratings are shown in Figure 7. The first question asked how often respon-

dents interacted with an individual with a disability. Only 4.8% of faculty said they have never interacted, while 34.5% said sometimes, 48.2% said often, and 8.4% said they always interact with a disabled person. About 3.6% of faculty gave a neutral response. To compare to students, 6.3% said they have never interacted with a person with a disability. Yet, 50.6% of students said sometimes, 19% said often, and 9.1% said they always interact with a person with a disability. About 15% of students gave a neutral response. Significant t-test findings ($t(334)=3.26$, $p<.05$) showed higher means for faculty ($M=3.20$) than students ($M=2.74$), indicating greater amounts of interaction for faculty.

The second question asked respondents how familiar they are with people who have a disability. Of the faculty, 49.4% said they were extremely familiar with people who have disabilities since they or a close family member or friend is disabled, as compared to 40.4% of the students. About 32% of the faculty and 48% of the students said they were somewhat familiar with people who have disabilities since they have a distant family member or friend who is disabled. Approximately 18% of the faculty and 12% of the students said they were extremely unfamiliar with people who have disabilities since they do not know anyone directly who is disabled. The mean ratings for this question were not significantly different for these populations ($M=1.69$ for faculty, and $M=1.71$ for students).

Separate Faculty Section

Following the questions pertaining to both faculty and students, there was a series of questions designed to obtain additional information from faculty. Of the 88 faculty respondents to this part of the survey, 60 (68.2%) said they had limited experience with students with disabilities in the classroom. Twenty-four (27.3%) said they had a large amount of experience, while only four (4.5%) said they had no experience with students with disabilities in the classroom. Sixty-one or 71.1% of faculty members said they are familiar or very familiar with the services on campus which provide accommodations to students with disabilities, and 49 (56.3%) said they are satisfied or very satisfied with these services. When asked about professional development opportunities to learn how to work with students with disabilities, 15 (17.4%) said they have been offered such opportunities and did attend, 38 (44.2%) said they have been offered such services but could not attend, and 33 (38.4%) said those services have never been offered to them.

Willingness to Accommodate Students. Additionally, the survey contained 22 structured Likert-type items (where one equaled “strongly disagree” and 5 equaled “strongly agree”) concerning faculty members’ willingness to provide accommodations for those students with verified disabilities. Table 1 presents sample sizes, means, frequencies, and the percentages of responses for each item. Inspection of the means on this table shows that faculty in the sample *tended to agree* with 15 (68%) of the 22 items, were *neutral* on four (18%) of the items, and *tended to disagree* with three (14%) of the items. These results suggest that the majority of faculty are willing to provide various types of accommodations (e.g., record lectures, take proctored exams, use technology to complete tests) for students with verified disabilities.

Knowledge about Disabilities. The faculty survey also included 12 structured Likert-type items (where one equaled “strongly disagree” and 5 equaled “strongly agree”) concerning faculty members’ knowledge, history, and beliefs about students with disabilities. See Table 2 for the sample sizes, means, frequencies, and the percentages of responses for each item. For the two knowledge-related items [i.e., “I know what the term ‘disability’ means” and “I am familiar with section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), and the implications for students with disabilities in institutions of higher education”], inspection of the means on this table shows that faculty in the sample *tended to agree* or be *neutral* on those items. That is, they understood the term “disability” but did not have a lot of familiarity with the disability-related laws. For the remaining 10 items, faculty *tended to agree* with three (30%) of the items, were *neutral* on two (20%) of the items, and *tended to disagree* with five (50%) of the items. It should be noted, however, that several of these items were opinions and worded in the negative direction; thus, disagreeing with the item indicated a desired or positive response. Those items are indicated by an asterisk on Table 2. If those items are “reverse scored,” faculty responses indicate that their history with students with disabilities has prompted them to believe that, in general, these individuals exhibit behaviors that will facilitate their success in school.

Separate Section for Students with Disabilities

Following the questions pertaining to both faculty and students, there was a series of questions designed

to obtain information only from students with disabilities. Fifty-three student respondents reported having a disability.

Self-Identification. The percentages of the different types of disabilities in the student sample are shown in Figure 8. When asked in which area these students face the greatest obstacles, 50% said in the academic area, 28% in the physical, 6% in the social, and 16% in the psychological area. Almost three-quarters (74.5%) of the students said that they do not self-identify as having a disability to fellow classmates. About 61% said they do not self-identify as having a disability to their professors. Of those who do not self-identify, the following reasons were given: 5.7% perceive a hostile environment if they seek accommodations, 31.4% do not want to be labeled, 25.7% do not think accommodations would be helpful, 34.3% use compensatory techniques, 11.4% said they are not familiar with services offered at the college, and 37.1% gave “other” reasons. When asked if they talk to their professors to discuss their accommodations, approximately 44% said they never do at the beginning of the semester, while 64.4% said they sometimes or always do at some point during the semester.

Disclosure and Treatment. Students were asked additional questions related to their willingness to disclose their disability, using a 5-point “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” likert scale. Table 3 provides the sample sizes, means, frequencies, and the percentages of responses for these 6 additional items. Many of these items confirmed their responses to the simple yes/no questions they responded to earlier about disclosure. In addition, about a quarter of the students agree or strongly agree that they are hesitant and fearful of approaching a professor about accommodations, and about one-third agree that their professors will think differently of them. It is clear from the disclosure items on the surveys that a substantial number of students with disabilities sometimes feel uncomfortable disclosing their disability to others for a variety of reasons.

Finally, students who have a disability responded to 11 likert-type items regarding their opinions and beliefs about treatment from others. Table 4 provides the sample sizes, means, and frequencies and percentages of responses for these 11 additional items. Again, five of these items were worded in the negative direction and the means indicated that respondents tended to disagree with these items. Their responses showed

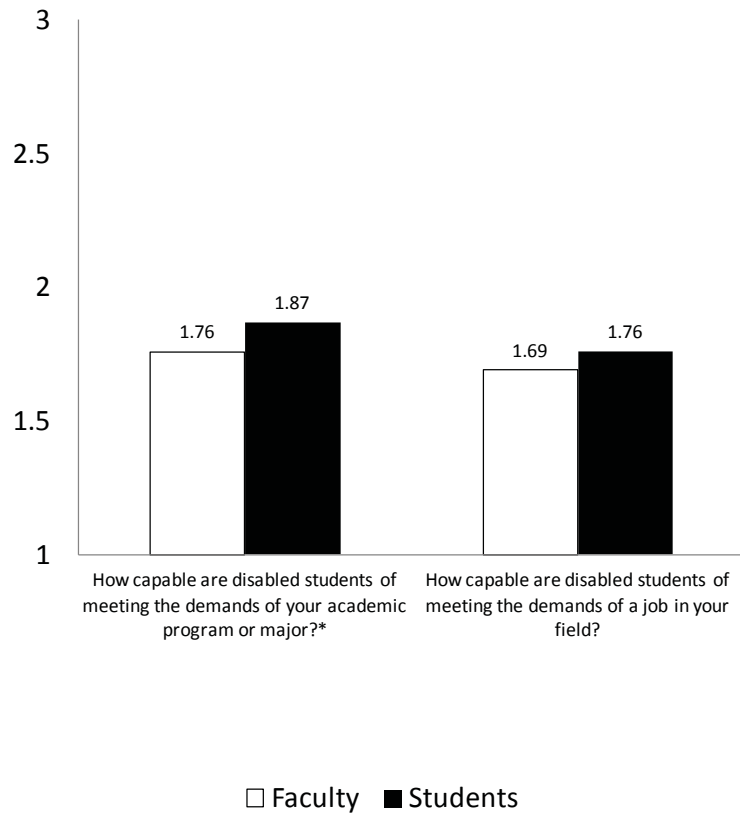


Figure 5. Capabilities.
 Note: 1=Less Capable, 2=Just as Capable, 3=More Capable; *p<.05

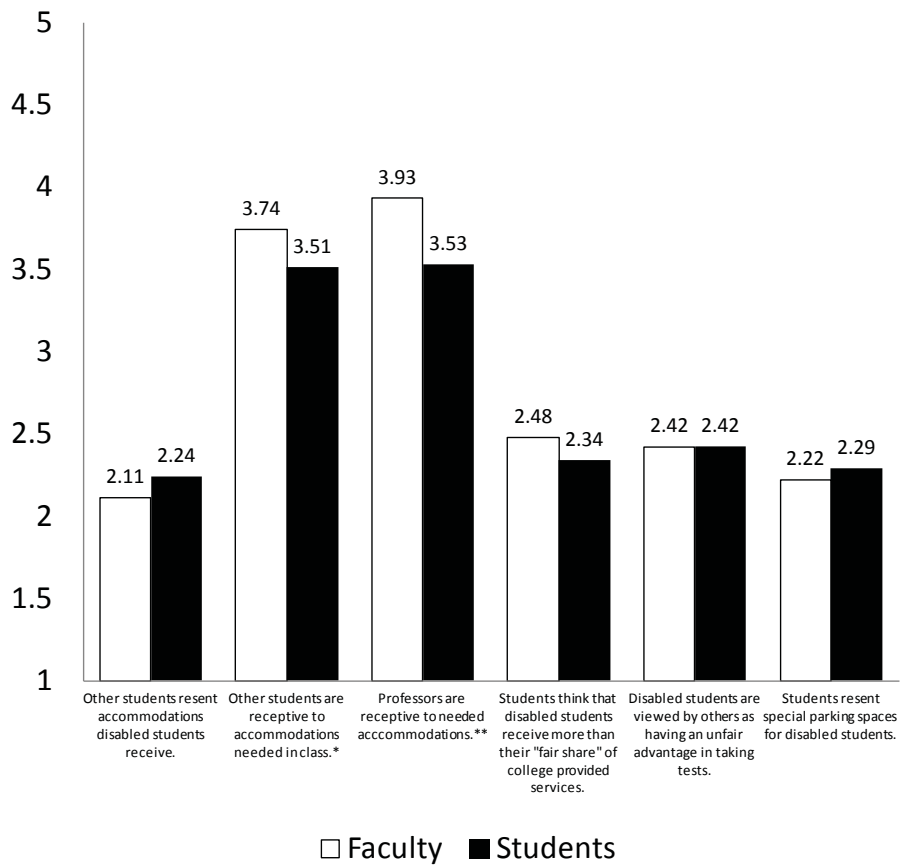


Figure 6. Reactions to Students with Disabilities.
 Note: 1= Strongly Disagree to 5= Strongly Agree; *p<.05, **p<.001.

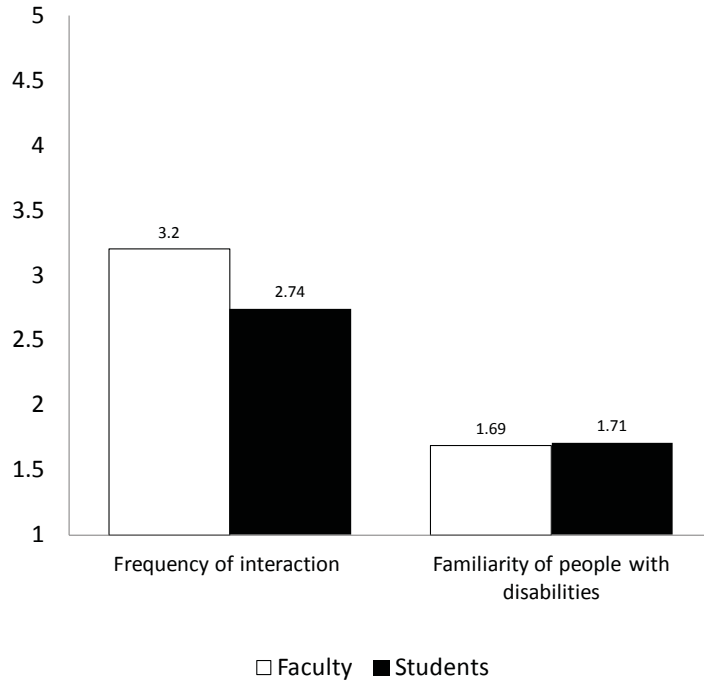


Figure 7. Familiarity with disabled persons.
 Note: Frequency of Interaction 1=Never to 5=Always;
 Familiarity of Persons 1=Extremely Unfamiliar to 3=Extremely Familiar; *p<.05

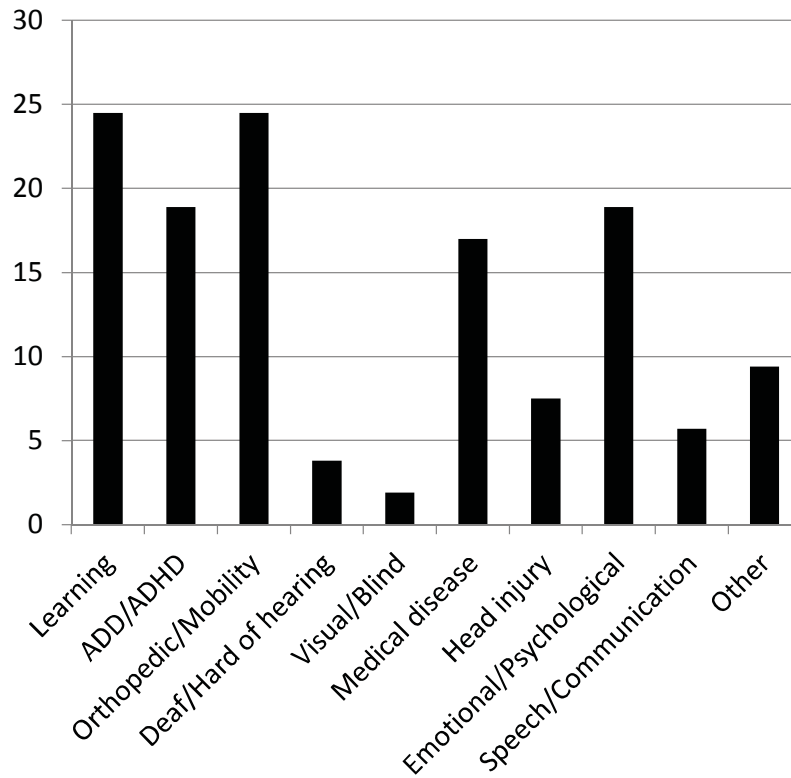


Figure 8. Type of disability (percentage of sample size 53).

Table 1

Willingness to Provide Major Accommodations

Item	Sample Size	Strongly Disagree or Disagree	Neutral	Strongly Agree or Agree	Mean
I am willing to reduce the overall course reading load for a student with a verified disability.	71	52 (73.2%)	10 (41.1%)	9 (12.7%)	2.15
I am willing to allow a student with a verified learning disability to complete "extra credit" assignments.	76	40 (52.6%)	14 (18.4%)	22 (28.9%)	2.61
I am willing to allow a student to have a note taker or tape record lectures.	77	0 (0%)	0 (%)	77 (100%)	4.52
I am willing to grade students with verified learning disabilities on a different curve.	77	57 (74.1%)	11 (14.3%)	9 (11.7%)	2.06
I think it would be appropriate to allow a student with a verified disability to substitute an alternative course for a required course.	79	45 (57.0%)	17 (21.5%)	17 (21.6%)	2.46
I am willing to allow students with a verified disability to take proctored exams in a supervised location.	76	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	76 (100%)	4.53
I am willing to arrange extended time exams for students who have verified disabilities.	76	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	76 (100%)	4.50
I am willing to change the method of responding to exams for students with verified disabilities.	74	10 (13.5%)	11 (14.9%)	53 (71.6%)	3.80
I am willing to allow students with verified disabilities to use technology (e.g., laptop, calculator, spell checker) to complete tests even when such technologies are not permitted for use during testing.	77	16 (20.8%)	15 (19.5%)	46 (59.8%)	3.52
I am willing to allow students with verified disabilities to tape record lectures.	77	2 (2.6%)	1 (1.3%)	74 (96.2%)	4.39

(Table 1, Continued)

Providing testing or teaching accommodations to students with verified disabilities is unfair to students without disabilities.	79	61 (77.2%)	11 (13.9%)	7 (8.9%)	1.94
I am willing to spend extra time (in addition to normal office hours) helping a student prepare for an exam.	78	2 (2.6%)	9 (11.5%)	67 (85.9%)	4.12
I am willing to spend extra time meeting with students with disabilities to clarify and/or review course related content.	77	2 (2.6%)	5 (6.5%)	70 (90.9%)	4.19
I am willing to provide students with verified disabilities with copies of my overheads and/or presentations.	75	6 (8.0%)	9 (12.0%)	60 (80.0%)	4.04
I am willing to provide students with verified disabilities copies of my lecture notes or outlines.	76	17 (22.4%)	15 (19.7%)	44 (57.9%)	3.47
I am willing to provide students with verified disabilities with additional time to complete assignments.	75	11 (14.6%)	5 (6.7%)	59 (78.6%)	3.84
Making adequate teaching accommodations for students with verified disabilities in my courses is unrealistic given time constraints and other job demands.*	77	56 (72.8%)	14 (18.2%)	7 (9.1%)	2.12
I believe that I make individual accommodations for students as necessary who have disclosed.	74	3 (4.1%)	4 (5.4%)	67 (90.5%)	4.26
I am willing to extend the "due dates" of assignments to accommodate the needs of students with verified disabilities.	75	20 (26.7%)	16 (21.3%)	39 (52.0%)	3.32
Making adequate testing accommodations for students with verified disabilities in my courses is unrealistic given time constraints and other job demands.*	76	66 (86.8%)	6 (7.9%)	4 (5.2%)	1.92
I make a statement in class inviting students with disabilities to discuss accommodations with me.	74	25 (33.8%)	18 (24.3%)	31 (41.9%)	3.20
I include a statement in my syllabus inviting students to discuss accommodations with me.	73	17 (23.2%)	9 (12.3%)	47 (64.3%)	3.73

*These items were reverse coded for subsequent reporting purposes so that all items were worded in the positive direction

Table 2

Knowledge, History, and Beliefs of Faculty about Disabled Students

Item	Sample Size	Strongly Disagree or Disagree	Neutral	Strongly Agree or Agree	Mean
I am sensitive to the needs of students with disabilities.	76	1 (1.3%)	4 (5.3%)	71 (93.4%)	4.26
I know what the term "disability" means.	73	3 (4.1%)	8 (11.0%)	62 (84.9%)	4.14
I am familiar with section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), and the implications for students with disabilities in institutions of higher education.	77	24 (31.2%)	10 (13.0%)	43 (55.9%)	3.34
I think that some students are unaware that they have a disability.	72	8 (11.1%)	14 (19.5%)	50 (69.4%)	3.67
Disabled students are able to compete academically at the college level.	77	2 (2.6%)	6 (7.8%)	69 (89.6%)	4.16
Students use disabilities as an excuse when they are not doing well in my class.*	77	57 (74.1%)	15 (19.5%)	5 (6.5%)	2.04
I find that students with disabilities wait to talk to me until they are not doing well in the class and then I find it hard to believe that they really have a disability.*	74	48 (64.8%)	18 (24.3%)	8 (10.8%)	2.30
I find that students with disabilities wait to talk to me until they are not doing well in the class and then it's too late to provide appropriate accommodations.*	72	42 (58.4%)	14 (19.4%)	16 (22.2%)	2.51
I find that students with disabilities do not use all of the accommodations for which they are eligible.	76	10 (13.1%)	26 (34.2%)	40 (52.7%)	3.42
I think of students differently after they approach me about a need for accommodations.*	73	53 (72.6%)	10 (13.7%)	10 (13.7%)	2.19
Some students take advantage of their accommodations, and may not really need them.*	74	49 (66.2%)	18 (24.3%)	7 (9.5%)	2.26
I've had students ask for accommodations, without any documentation.	73	31 (42.5%)	6 (8.2%)	36 (49.3%)	2.96

*These items were reverse coded for subsequent reporting purposes so that all items were worded in the positive direction

Table 3

Willingness to Disclose Disability

Item	Sample Size	Strongly Disagree or Disagree	Neutral	Strongly Agree or Agree	Mean
I am reluctant to disclose the nature of my disability(ies).*	49	23 (47.0%)	13 (26.5%)	13 (26.5%)	2.76
I am hesitant and fearful of approaching a professor about my need for accommodations.*	49	29 (59.2%)	10 (20.4%)	10 (20.4%)	2.51
I'm afraid a professor will think differently of me if I tell him/her about my need for accommodations.*	49	25 (51.1%)	9 (18.4%)	15 (30.6%)	2.69
I don't tell any other students that I need accommodations.*	49	19 (38.8%)	14 (28.6%)	16 (32.7%)	2.88
I talk to the professor at the beginning of the semester.	49	23 (46.9%)	5 (10.2%)	21 (42.9%)	2.94
I disclose to my professor only if I have to.*	49	15 (30.6%)	7 (14.3%)	27 (55.1%)	3.22

*These items were reverse coded for subsequent reporting purposes so that all items were worded in the positive direction

that students with disabilities feel that other students generally treat them no differently than they would other students in the classroom. For the remaining items worded in the positive direction, respondents tended to agree or be neutral on the other five items. For example, over half felt that the accommodations they receive meet their needs in the classroom and over half were satisfied with their campus experience as a student with a disability. Almost half said that professors are familiar with referral procedures for students who need special help; similarly, half said that professors are willing to make course-related accommodations. See Table 4 for specific responses on each item.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that faculty and students have different perceptions of the classroom climate for students with disabilities. More than half of faculty members view the climate as positive for students with disabilities compared to 30.6% of students.

One factor that might influence students' perception of classroom climate is that many students in the collegiate setting do not self-identify or request academic accommodations for a disability and therefore do not receive the type of support from faculty and support staff that could improve their college experience. Students and faculty differ on their views of classroom accommodations as well. More faculty than students believe that all students receive accommodations that meet their needs in the classroom; students view faculty as less receptive to accommodations than faculty view themselves. Another difference in perception relates to the nature of disabilities. More faculty members than students think that students with disabilities have learning difficulties.

Faculty and students do perceive the classroom environment similarly in that few faculty and students felt students with disabilities are treated differently by classmates or faculty. Both faculty and students have been exposed to students with disabilities in the

Table 4

Opinions and Beliefs of Disabled Students

Item	Sample Size	Strongly Disagree or Disagree	Neutral	Strongly Agree or Agree	Mean
The accommodations I receive meet my needs in the classroom.	47	5 (10.6%)	16 (34.0%)	26 (55.3%)	3.62
Other students know about my disability.	46	11 (23.9%)	9 (19.6%)	26 (56.5%)	3.35
Other students treat me differently because of my disability.	47	26 (55.3%)	11 (23.4%)	10 (21.2%)	2.45
It is obvious to others that I have a disability.	47	25 (53.1%)	10 (21.3%)	12 (25.6%)	2.57
Other students choose their words carefully when they are in my presence.	47	36 (76.6%)	8 (17.0%)	3 (6.4%)	1.91
Other students think that students with disabilities have learning problems.	47	22 (46.8%)	13 (27.7%)	12 (25.6%)	2.62
I am satisfied with my campus experience as a disabled student.	47	11 (23.4%)	11 (23.4%)	25 (53.2%)	3.40
Sitting next to a student with a disability causes anxiety for other students.	47	34 (72.4%)	10 (21.3%)	3 (6.4%)	2.13
Other students think that students with disabilities are overly sensitive.	47	23 (48.9%)	9 (19.1%)	15 (32.0%)	2.72
Professors are familiar with referral procedures for students with learning problems who need special help.	47	9 (19.2%)	16 (34.0%)	22 (46.9%)	3.26
Professors are willing to make course-related accommodations.	47	13 (27.6%)	11 (23.4%)	23 (49.0%)	3.34

*These items were reverse coded for subsequent reporting purposes so that all items were worded in the positive direction

classroom. Over three-quarters of students felt that instructors focus more on students with disabilities, yet very few faculty and students said it was distracting to have students with disabilities in class. About three-quarters of faculty and students felt that seeing students with disabilities teaches others about the benefits of difference and helps students be more accepting of others. Further, faculty and students report that other students are not resentful of students with disabilities who receive accommodations for their disability. Very few faculty and students thought students with disabilities receive more than their “fair share” of services or have an unfair advantage.

Other similar perceptions related to classroom climate include the perception of student ability and overall satisfaction. Over three-quarters of faculty and students felt that students with disabilities are just as capable of meeting demands of academic program or major. The same number of faculty and students felt that students with disabilities are capable of meeting the demands of jobs in their field. Faculty and students also reported similarities in their perceptions of student satisfaction. Only about a quarter of both faculty and students think students with disabilities are satisfied with the campus experience.

Perceptions of Faculty

Approximately three-quarters of faculty are familiar with services on campus; approximately half are satisfied with those services. Fewer than 20% of faculty members have attended professional development opportunities but over half report the availability of opportunities on campus. Most faculty members are willing to provide various types of accommodations (e.g., recorded lectures, extended test time, use of technology to complete exams) for students with documented disabilities. It can be surmised that faculty understand their legal obligations to provide accommodations to student with disabilities, but most do not report familiarity with disability-related laws. Overall, faculty responses indicate that their history with students with disabilities has prompted them to believe that, in general, students with disabilities exhibit behaviors that will facilitate their success in school.

Perceptions of Students with Disabilities

It is clear from the disclosure items on the surveys that a substantial number of students sometimes feel uncomfortable disclosing their disability to others, for

a variety of reasons. Their responses showed that they feel that other students generally treat them no differently than they would other students in the classroom, but they express concern about faculty members’ perceptions. Over half felt that the accommodations they receive meet their needs in the classroom and over half were satisfied with their campus experience as a student with a disability. Almost half said that professors are familiar with referral procedures for students who need special help; similarly, half said that professors are willing to make course-related accommodations.

Perceptions of both faculty and students with disabilities support literature suggesting that faculty members are generally receptive to classroom accommodations such as recorded lectures and extended test time (Houck et al., 1992) but often lack knowledge about disability law (Dowrick et al., 2005). In contrast to previous research (Houck et al., 1992; Sowers & Smith, 2004), this study indicates that faculty members perceive students with disabilities to be just as capable as their peers.

The research has some important implications in regard to addressing the issues of students with disabilities in the college community. The difference between student and faculty perceptions of the climate for students with disabilities is significant in that faculty members are the primary influence on classroom climate. Increasing their awareness of the practices and behaviors that improve the climate for students with disabilities is essential. Because a full third of student respondents noted that they believe faculty members will think differently of them if they disclose a disability, providing faculty with specific guidance on navigating sensitive conversations is also appropriate. The data also suggest that an increased awareness of services available for those students with apparent and non-apparent disabilities is needed. Faculty members need support in understanding the impact of non-apparent disabilities, the resources available to assist students, and the specific practices that improve the climate for students with disabilities. Both faculty and students would benefit from increased development in the acceptance of others who are perceived as different from themselves. Students who feel accepted on campus will be more likely to persist in their studies and to seek help. This is important, given the finding that there needs to be an increased use of services by those students who need accommodations for existing disabilities. Additionally, there appears to be a need to

enhance the self-esteem of those who need accommodations in the classroom and perhaps gain assertiveness in advocating for themselves in the classroom. Ongoing education for faculty on disability laws is needed as well.

Limitations and Future Research

As with all survey research, the results of this study must be interpreted with caution. This study used a convenience sample of college students and faculty at a private women's college who volunteered to participate. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized beyond the parameters of the self-selected sample. Also, a survey based on self-report measures, despite being tested for content validity, may not have been sensitive enough to capture all of the perceptions among the respondents. In addition, some of the questions, such as the students' reasons for lack of disclosure to professors, were yes/no questions. Such close-ended questions inevitably shaped students' responses; open-ended questions may have provided further insight into their thinking and rationale for their behavior. An additional limitation recognizes that these results reflect participants' perceptions in one circumstance but not in all areas of interaction with individuals with disabilities. The study did not include any longitudinal data from a particular cohort of students with disabilities that could provide more information of perceptions throughout a student's college experience. However, the information obtained from this sample is important in understanding what shapes faculty and student perceptions of students with disabilities.

Future research could entail a similar study with a male student sample and a longitudinal study to assess students from freshman through senior year. Additional research should include the academic support staff that has more face-to-face contact with students with disabilities and use a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods to examine specific content areas as it relates to disabilities and accommodations. Research that includes questions to assess other groups of students such as international students and minority students would enhance the understanding of students' perceptions of "dissimilar" students on college campuses. The body of knowledge on students with disabilities could utilize a comparison in a study examining the actual use of services of students needing accommodations and trend these objective measures over time. Finally, comparing the responses of students with disabilities who choose not to access collegiate support services

to students with disabilities who do access services on the subject of classroom climate would round out the discussion of student experiences and perceptions.

Conclusion

The knowledge about and perceptions of students with disabilities remains an area with unlimited research potential. From this study the data suggest that students with disabilities are accepted in the classroom and viewed as capable of meeting the demands of an academic program. Faculty are willing to provide various types of accommodations to meet student needs but know very little about actual disability-related law or policy. Students indicate they feel a climate of acceptance from faculty yet can feel uncomfortable about disclosing their disability to others, but have indicated no difference in how other students treat them in a classroom setting. Faculty and academic support staff can serve as sources of accurate information and can support students in need of accommodations to be successful in college. With increased study of this student population, more positive steps can be taken to create a supportive campus climate for those students with disabilities.

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