

Experiences of College Students with Psychological Disabilities: The Impact of Perceptions of Faculty Characteristics on Academic Achievement

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Despite the increase of individuals with psychological disabilities (PD) attending college and universities, students with PD are less likely to complete their college programs than their non-disabled peers and peers with other disabilities. This qualitative study examined the perceptions and beliefs of individuals with PD attending a four year university regarding faculty characteristics and behaviors that promote academic achievement, as well as faculty behavior and characteristics that encourage disclosure and requests for accommodations or other supports. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with 16 participants and utilized grounded theory research methods to collect and analyze data. Various themes emerged from the study, including participants' considerations when asking for accommodations, faculty characteristics and behaviors identified as impacting academic achievement, and suggestions for faculty members to help students succeed in their coursework.

Psychological disabilities, including mood and anxiety disorders, represent one of the fastest growing populations at institutes in higher education (Belch, 2011). Furthermore, the prevalence rate of college students with psychological disabilities is beginning to surpass the rates of those of learning disability and attention deficit disorder combined (Kiuahara & Huefner, 2008). Research examining post-secondary outcomes found of the 73% of students with disabilities who enrolled in college, only 28% completed their programs, compared to 54% of their peers without disabilities (Wolanin & Steele, 2004). Furthermore, individuals with psychological disabilities withdraw from their programs at an even greater rate as compared to individuals with other disabilities or non-disabled students (Salzer, 2012). Failure to pursue or attain educational and vocational goals may lead to unemployment, underemployment, or underachievement. These poor outcomes result “not only into untapped talent and potential and unfulfilled dreams, but severely limits America’s preparation of today’s youth for full participation in tomorrow’s society” (National Council on Disability, 2000, p. 1).

There are multiple reasons for these challenges, including lack of support from colleges and community mental health systems, cognitive skill problems, perceived stigma, lack of opportunities, and the nature of the illness itself (Belch, 2011; Blacklock, Benson, & Johnson, 2003; Kiuahara & Huefner, 2008). Stigma and the fear of stigma is arguably the most difficult barrier for individuals with psychological disabilities to overcome: “Perhaps the greatest barrier for persons with a psychiatric disability to achieving psychosocial adaptation is not the disability, but rather the stigma attached to it by members of society” (McReynolds & Garske, 2003, p. 14). Moreover, professors may believe individuals with psychological disabilities may be

trying to manipulate them or the university system, particularly when it comes to excessive absences (Kiuahara & Huefner, 2008; Mowbray, Bybee, & Collins, 2001).

There is a growing body of literature examining issues related to students with psychological disabilities attending institutes of higher education. However, there is much more known regarding college students with learning disabilities or other disabilities. Furthermore, much of the research focusing on individuals with psychological disabilities attending college is quantitative, examining perceptions or attitudes of faculty members regarding psychological disabilities, as well as outcomes of this population. The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions and beliefs of individuals with psychological disabilities attending a four year university regarding faculty characteristics and behaviors that promote academic achievement, as well as faculty behavior and characteristics that encourage disclosure and requests for accommodations or other supports. Moreover, this study may give voice to individuals who have not had the opportunity to share their experiences and beliefs.

Method

The researcher utilized grounded theory research methods and followed systematic methods of recruiting participants, data collection, and data analysis, as delineated by Charmaz (2006). Grounded theory methods “consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing data to construct theories grounded in the data themselves” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 2). A study using grounded theory examines a process or action that occurs or develops over time, with the goal of developing a theory of the identified process (Creswell, 2013). According to Creswell (2013), a theory is “an explanation of

something or an understanding that the researcher develops” (p. 85). He further noted the goal of grounded theory methods is not to develop a “grand” theory, but a “substantive” level theory (p. 290), that is “a low-level theory applicable to immediate situations” (Creswell, 2013, p. 290) emerging from the examination of a phenomenon situated in a specific context (Creswell, 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The researcher chose grounded theory methods because she is interested in the process of individuals with psychological disabilities working towards their postsecondary goals and how their perceptions regarding faculty members impact their success.

Participants

The researcher used purposeful sampling procedures for this study. Specifically, participants were selected based on certain criteria rather than availability or willingness to participate (Sandelowski, 1995). Participants were registered with the Disability Support Services (DSS) office at their university and were identified as having a psychological disability as either their primary or secondary disability; were receiving accommodations through DSS, or other supports provided by DSS, at the time of the study; and were currently enrolled in full time course work at their university, maintaining a 2.5 GPA or higher. All participants were enrolled at a regional public university in the Mid-Atlantic area of the United States, which served approximately 21,000 students.

The participants were undergraduate students, including one freshman, two sophomores, seven juniors, and six seniors. One student was earning a second bachelor’s degree. Ages ranged from 19 to 34, with a mean age of 25.6. The majority of participants were female ($n = 13$). Fourteen were Caucasian and two African-American. A variety of majors were represented; two students were double majors and two were undecided. Of the 16 participants, four had IEPs in elementary, middle, or high school, and three additional participants received accommodations through a Section 504 plan. Four students attended small private schools because they needed extra support, and they received accommodations without an IEP or Section 504 plan. Psychological disabilities included panic disorder, anxiety, bipolar 1 and 2, non-specified mood disorder, major depressive disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), agoraphobia, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Several participants identified themselves as having multiple diagnoses, including non-psychological disabilities such as dyslexia, processing disorders, and ADHD. Anxiety and mood disorders were the most common disabilities represented.

Data Collection

Intensive interviews, ranging from 45 to 125 minutes, were conducted with each participant. This method of collection was chosen because intensive interviewing allows for an in-depth exploration of a particular topic or experience and thus is a useful method for interpretive inquiry (Charmaz, 2006). The researcher used an interview protocol; however, questions sometimes varied depending on the responses of the participant. Follow-up interviews, which allowed for member checking and theme verification, ranged from 10 to 35 minutes, and they took place no later than two weeks after the initial interview. Consistent with grounded theory methods, the researcher collected data until saturation was reached (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Theoretical saturation occurs when no new or relevant data seem to emerge regarding a category, the category is well developed in terms of its properties and dimensions demonstrating variation, and the relationships among categories are well established and validated (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The researcher utilized a zigzag approach, going back and forth between data collection and analysis until categories emerged and reached saturation (Creswell, 2013).

Data Analysis

The researcher was guided by Charmaz’s (2006) framework for grounded theory analysis, engaging in three levels of coding: open, focused, and theoretical. Coding allows the researcher to stop and consider analytic questions of the gathered data (Charmaz, 2006). Initial or open coding involves studying segments of data for “analytic import” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 42). The second major phase, focused coding, requires the researcher to select the most useful initial codes and test them against the data. During the theoretical coding process, the researcher “weaves the fractured story back together” (Glaser, 1978, p. 72) by integrating the focused codes to form a coherent narrative. The researcher used N-VIVO 9 software throughout the coding process.

Results

Several core categories emerged from the participants’ descriptions of their experiences with faculty members and perceptions regarding how those experiences—including the characteristics and behaviors of their professors—impacted their academic achievement. Specifically, participants discussed considerations when asking for accommodations, specific faculty characteristics and behaviors identified as affecting student achievement, and suggestions for faculty members to help students succeed in their coursework.

Considerations Regarding Accommodations

In order to receive accommodations at their university, participants are required to present a letter from the DSS office to their professor. The letter states the student has a disability, but not the specific diagnosis, and identifies which accommodations the student is eligible to receive. Although participants stated they are eligible to receive accommodations in their courses, they do not always ask for accommodations or other assistance. Participants discussed many factors that influenced their decision to ask for accommodations or assistance in a course. Some said it depended on the course content and/or requirements. However, many stated the professor was a key element in determining whether to disclose they have a disability and seek assistance. When asked what encourages them to request accommodations, participant responses indicated instructor behavior and interactions made a difference. For instance, one student stated,

When a teacher syllabus puts more in the syllabus than what is required about accommodations, or just words it differently. I also found that teachers willing to talk after class than office hours are more helpful and have more commitment.

Many participants discussed not only how the professor treated them, but how they treated all students as a determining factor on whether to disclose they have a disability and request accommodations: “Most professors I’ve had have shown a great deal of respect towards students. I feel like I can disclose my issues to them and everything will be on a professional level, and that’s very good.” Several students suggested they also considered the professor’s non-verbal cues, which they believed conveyed whether or not the professor would be understanding, such as one student noted in the following:

I’m huge on eye contact and body language because it tells me if people understand. If they stop what they are doing, and look at me, that definitely helps. Sometimes they blow you off a bit, which is not a good thing.

The majority of participants reported most of their professors are receptive when they do ask for accommodations. For example, “I’ve definitely had teachers that are very helpful in that regard,” and, “Most professors are encouraging and want to help.”

Although participants reported most professors are amenable to providing accommodations and other assistance, they do not always ask for their accommodations, even if they think they will need them for that course. Sometimes, the perception or fear of

how the professor will react discourages them. One student explained, “I’m afraid they’ll judge, like one teacher I had who made me feel stupid.” Another student stated, “I don’t ask when there is a professor that I don’t think would have a good response.” Participants also described negative experiences when they requested accommodations:

Another negative thing is if I were to walk up to a professor and try to get their attention, and they say “go sit down,” and don’t even give me a chance. Also, a lot of professors don’t get there on time, and that’s not good either.

Even when students did ask for accommodations, they were at times discouraged from seeking additional assistance or did not receive their accommodations consistently throughout the semester: “One of them is kind of harsh with students and says he doesn’t have patience to wait for the slow ones. So I’m discouraged from asking for help from him.” According to another participant,

To some, it’s an excuse to get out of work. They take longer to get notes, respond to requests. One professor had the phrase when it came to absences, “If I have to be there, you have to be there, there is no excuse.”

Faculty Characteristics and Behaviors

When asked to describe classes in which they did well and how professors may have contributed to that success, participants discussed a variety of faculty behaviors, including providing accommodations in an efficient and confidential manner, effective teaching behaviors, availability, and personality characteristics. Conversely, participants described experiences with their instructors that they believed had a negative impact on their achievement. These included not receiving accommodations even when presented with official documentation, professors lacking knowledge regarding DSS and disabilities, lack of communication, and negative interactions with their professors. Not surprisingly, participants stated that they typically performed well when professors ensured they received the appropriate accommodations, particularly in an efficient and confidential manner. For instance, one student explained:

The ones who understand are actually very good about it. They give you the option of talking with confidentiality in their office if you need additional help and make sure you get the accommodations you need. E-mailing has also been helpful because it’s confidential.

In addition to providing accommodations in a timely and efficient manner, participants also identified specific instructional approaches that assisted them in their coursework. These teaching behaviors included providing clear expectations, demonstrating knowledge of the subject, explaining material clearly or in a variety of ways, and allowing students to interact and engage with each other and the material. Most participants preferred discussion-based courses in which they and other students could actively engage in the material:

If I had any questions, he really answered them. He also let other students explain, so they'd explain it to me. Multiple explanations helped. And I was able to explain things sometimes too, so I was able to practice.

Participants also stated they were most successful in courses in which the instructor was enthusiastic about the course and "really wanted to be there."

The most frequently mentioned characteristic that promoted achievement was instructor availability and communication. One participant explained, "What helps the most was being available if I had questions, explaining things well, putting up a lot of things on Blackboard." Another participant stated they did the best in classes where instructors "are available and willing to help students. Some teachers just come in, lecture, and good bye. Some encourage you to come see them during office hours or e-mail; they're quick to get back to you. That works better." Being able to see professors during office hours made a difference to many participants, as it gave them an opportunity to ask questions and get further explanations in a confidential manner (e.g., "Being able to go in during office hours really helps").

In addition to specific behaviors such as teaching approaches and availability, participants identified personality characteristics such as approachability, understanding, and professionalism as contributing to their success. For example, "The teacher cared and was really understanding. He was very patient and never seemed annoyed or frustrated when I kept raising my hand, asking questions." Another participant described a professor who contributed to her success as "approachable and very funny. She was also very knowledgeable, about the subject and disabilities." Students reported that they performed better when the professor was "professional," and they defined professionalism as being prepared for class, knowing the content area, and interacting with all students positively and fairly.

Participants also reported performing well in courses in which they felt the professor cared about their academic achievement (e.g., "He was just very kind, and trying to help me succeed. And doing

everything he could to help me succeed"). Many participants described professors who provided additional academic help. For instance, one participant noted, "I e-mailed the teacher about my disability and met with him, and he offered to meet with me once a week to go over the material, which helped a lot in class so I fully understood it." Participants also shared experiences in which professors went above and beyond their expected roles in order to assist students. For instance:

Actually at the end of the semester was when I was getting manic and was off the medication for a while. One day I just didn't feel comfortable leaving the class, so we just sat there and he talked to me until I calmed down, which was really nice because not a lot of professors would stay past their class time and help the student calm down.

It was clear by the participants' responses that establishing positive relationships with their instructors and believing their instructors wanted students to be successful were influential factors in the students' academic performance.

All participants stated that the majority of their professors were helpful and provided the appropriate accommodations as well as additional assistance when requested. However, all had at least one or two negative experiences with their instructors. The most frequently mentioned challenge involved professors not providing accommodations, even when students provided the appropriate documentation. One student explained, "I had one professor that just never could get the test [at the testing center] for some reason. I'd tell him a week ahead of time, call him; he couldn't remember." Many participants described difficulty with testing accommodations in particular, such as the instructor losing the testing form, not faxing the test correctly, or forgetting to send the test, "no matter how many times I would remind him." Some participants believed the professors thought they just wanted "an excuse" or did not want to provide the accommodations, such as one student's response indicates:

He kind of gave me an attitude. He was very difficult about letting me do [take the exam] in the testing center. He had to curve that test because everyone did so bad on it. He was very difficult about the whole thing.

In addition to testing accommodations, participants expressed difficulty obtaining adequate notes (e.g., "There were many times I [would] have to remind [professors] 20 times to get the notes"). Participants described the note taking process as "confusing" to their instructors and classmates. For instance, "They

don't understand how the process works, . . . maybe they need more information.”

Another common concern focused on faculty knowledge regarding DSS rules and procedures as well as disabilities, particularly psychological disabilities. In regards to DSS and accommodations, many participants stated their professors did not understand the procedures or what was expected of them: “Some aren't really knowledgeable. Like someone will look at the [DSS] letter and try to hand it back, and I'm like, 'no you really have to keep that.' Or they won't look at it or they lose it.” Several students believed the instructors may not follow through with providing accommodations because they did not understand the process or requirements, for example:

I had one professor that seemed really confused. She was convinced that it wasn't the real memo, and in my geography class, I gave the paper to the teacher and nothing happened. She didn't even know what to do with [the letter from DSS].

Not all participants disclosed the specific nature of their disabilities, but those that did reported many professors did not have adequate knowledge regarding psychological disabilities. For instance, one participant noted, “Some faculty don't understand or have misconceptions about mental illness.” Another participant stated, “Some seem to have a clue about a mood disorder and how that might impact learning, but I've had difficulty with others. One professor told me, 'everybody has problems.' It was really frustrating.” Many students felt the professor's lack of knowledge or understanding regarding disabilities affected their performance in the course:

The teacher was so close-minded to the idea of a mental illness, I couldn't make a bridge. Another teacher, . . . she didn't understand what was going on. She was struggling to understand me as much as I was trying to understand the class.

Several participants felt they were treated like they were “dumb” or “slow.” When discussing these instructors, participants used words such as “unprofessional,” “sarcastic,” and “uncaring.” They also stated the professors displayed these behaviors with most of the class. Several stated that they withdrew because of these interactions (e.g., “His philosophy was you get with it or you withdraw. I don't know if it was because I gave up or what, but I withdrew pretty quickly”).

Suggestions

Participants made several suggestions regarding how faculty and staff could assist them as they work

towards their academic goals, including professional development for faculty regarding disabilities, more communication between DSS and professors, and providing accommodations when requested.

As stated previously, many participants felt their instructors possessed inadequate knowledge of DSS and the accommodations process. For example, “I just feel there should be more awareness because I feel like all the teachers aren't really aware of what's going on; they just get the papers. So I would just provide more information about the whole program.” Furthermore, participants believed professors needed more awareness regarding psychological disabilities. One student explained, “I think the education of faculty could help a lot. They should be able to say, 'I've got a student with this issue, this is what I need to do.’” According to another participant, “professional development would be helpful for all faculty members, to learn how to work with students with disabilities, especially hidden disabilities; just requiring them to put a sentence in their syllabus isn't enough.”

A closely related recommendation was increased communication between faculty and DSS staff. Like faculty development, this recommendation is in response to concerns regarding faculty knowledge, “Having an advocate, someone who can be more articulate would be helpful. Someone who knows how to deal with it when somebody looks at me, and says 'oh, wow,' that would be really helpful.” Most participants agreed that even if the professor did not meet the DSS counselor in person, it would be beneficial if there were more communication between DSS staff and instructors. A student noted, “I just wish they could be more connected to the specialist and understand what my needs are as a student.”

Participants also offered suggestions regarding faculty attitudes and behaviors, such as being more understanding and following through with accommodations. As previously discussed, students stated they performed better when they believed the teacher cared and treated them with respect:

The teachers need to be more willing to work with us, really just to be more understanding and more respectful. We're humans too. A lot of times they downgrade us or reject us because we have a disability. It's hurtful and I'm just like “okay, I'm trying here.”

Participants also expressed the need for professors to be consistent with providing accommodations throughout the semester: “They need to remember that we have that form because I think throughout the semester they teach so many people I think they forget who has disabilities.”

Discussion

This study explored the perceptions and beliefs of individuals with psychological disabilities attending a four year university regarding faculty characteristics and behaviors that promote academic achievement, as well as faculty behavior and characteristics that encourage disclosure and requests for accommodations or other supports. Although students with a psychological disability complete their postsecondary academic programs at a lower rate than their non-disabled peers or peers with other disabilities (Salzer, 2012), the participants in this study are working towards their academic goals and maintaining at least a 2.5 GPA. Furthermore, many of them were close to completing their programs at the time of this study. The pertinent categories or themes that emerged from the data of this study are consistent with, and expand on, much of the literature examining issues regarding students with disabilities attending institutes of higher education. Specifically, this study illuminated the perceptions of individuals with psychological disabilities, which extends the research focused on learning disabilities and other disabilities.

The participants' narratives revealed the impact of faculty members on their academic achievement. When asked to describe courses in which they were or were not successful, the responses often involved the instructor. Faculty behaviors such as availability, having knowledge regarding disabilities, and being understanding or supportive were factors listed as beneficial to student success. Participants were less successful in courses when they felt the instructors were not knowledgeable regarding disabilities or were not understanding. This is consistent with research that has found an identified relationship between the perception of students with learning disabilities regarding faculty support and their academic achievement (Allsopp, Minskoff, & Bolt, 2005; Erten, 2003; Troiano, 2003). According to Hong and Himmel (2009), numerous students have "identified faculty attitudes as the key contributor to the success of students with disabilities" (p. 6). Wilson (2006), in a study involving students with or without disabilities, found that students' perceptions of their instructors' attitudes towards them, such as showing concern and a desire for students to achieve success, positively affected student motivation and course appreciation. It is clear that participants felt professors had a major impact on their academic performance, whether it was positive or negative.

Furthermore, a significant number of participants reported being reluctant to ask for accommodations when they felt they would not get a positive response from their instructor. According to Murray, Wren, and Keys (2008), "negative attitudes and perceptions among faculty can have detrimental effects on students'

motivation to seek additional support for their disability" (p. 88). Hartman-Hall and Haaga (2002) also found that faculty reactions to requests for accommodations influenced student decisions to ask for assistance in the future. When asked what encouraged them to seek assistance, participant responses indicated the need for some type of reassurance of an encouraging reaction to the request, such as positive interactions with other students, additional information regarding disabilities in the syllabus, eye contact, or other encouraging interactions.

Although the majority of these studies focused on learning disabilities or non-specified disabilities (e.g., Allsopp et al., 2005; Benson, Cohen, & Buskist, 2005; Erten, 2003; Hartman-Hall & Haaga, 2002; Hong & Himmel, 2009; Murray et al., 2008), the impact of faculty attitudes and support may be even more significant for individuals with psychological disabilities, as there is often greater stigma attached to this population (Belch, 2011). A University of Utah survey of students identified as having psychological disabilities revealed participant fears and concerns regarding stigma associated with psychological disabilities in university settings (University of Utah Survey, 2006). Furthermore, stigma and negative stereotypes are perhaps the most frequently cited barrier in the literature (Becker, Martin, Wajeeh, Ward, & Shern, 2002; Cleary, Walter, & Jackson, 2011; Sharpe, Bruininks, Blacklock, Benson, & Johnson, 2004). Belch (2011) summarized research regarding faculty perceptions of students with psychological disabilities accordingly: "[S]ome faculty reported a willingness to accommodate students, yet others refused to acknowledge the disability, harbored feelings of anger toward them, viewed these students as less competent, and believed they should not be on campus" (p. 83). Participants in the current study revealed fears and concerns regarding stigma and being "judged." Several students reported feeling that some of their professors thought they were "lazy" or were looking for "an easy way out." They reported feeling more comfortable and experiencing more success with professors who were understanding and "don't have a judgment about it."

Much of the stigma regarding psychological disabilities stems from a lack of training and awareness (Belch & Marshak, 2006; Collins & Mowbray, 2008; Olney & Brockelman, 2003). Indeed, the need for increased faculty knowledge regarding psychological disabilities was another salient theme in the participants' descriptions of their experiences and interactions with professors. According to participants, instructors who were knowledgeable and understanding were more likely to provide assistance and follow through with accommodations, and conversely, professors who were less knowledgeable were less likely to be supportive or provide accommodations. Many participants believed

their professors did not have adequate knowledge of DSS, the accommodations process or psychological disabilities, and that this lack of knowledge adversely affected their educational performance. In addition, faculty members have also reported having inadequate knowledge regarding the needs of students with psychological disabilities and have identified the need for more resources and information (Brockleman, Chadsey, & Loeb, 2006). Furthermore, professors with personal experience with psychological disabilities are less likely to support discrimination and stigma, and they are more likely to feel comfortable working with this population (Belch, 2011; Brockelman et al., 2006). Throughout their interviews, participants expressed frustration regarding the lack of knowledge of faculty regarding accommodations and psychological disabilities. Many felt professors “just don’t know what to do” when they have students with disabilities, particularly students with psychological disabilities. Clearly, more faculty training and education is needed regarding psychological disabilities specifically, as these students may experience different stressors and may require different accommodations and supports. As previously stated, individuals with psychological disabilities are attending institutes of higher education in increasing rates, and the ability to achieve postsecondary goals is crucial to postsecondary success.

Although the need for faculty education and increased knowledge regarding psychological disabilities is significant, the ability for students to advocate for themselves is also important to academic success. Unfortunately, some individuals will continue to hold on to negative attitudes and perceptions regarding psychological disabilities despite increased awareness and knowledge. Test, Fowler, Wood, Brewer, and Eddy (2005) defined self-advocacy as knowing one’s self and one’s rights, leadership, and communication. It also involves the ability to speak on one’s own behalf. In college, this is manifested in students knowing their legal rights regarding accommodations, requesting accommodations for which they are eligible from their professors, and following up with professors when they do not receive these supports. The participants’ descriptions revealed two issues related to self-advocacy. First, they sometimes did not disclose their disability and request accommodations when they felt they would not receive a positive response from the instructor. Second, many suggested the need for an advocate, such as a DSS staff member, who could explain their disability to their professors and help them get their accommodations. Although DSS staff do often act as advocates, it is important for students to be able to articulate their needs and rights and advocate for themselves, as they will not always have access to someone who can intercede for them.

Finally, the notion of care in the classroom is another pertinent issue to this study. When asked to describe the characteristics of professors who they felt contributed to their academic achievement, a prevalent descriptor was “caring,” or “knowing the professor cared.” They operationalized caring with behaviors such as providing encouraging statements, responding to e-mails and requests for assistance in a timely manner, availability during office hours, and providing accommodations with or without reminders. They also provided examples of instructors going above and beyond their roles. Defining care, and what it looks like in a classroom, is a complicated task, as “caring is one of those elusive notions that is difficult to give shape” (McBee, 2007, p. 33). McBee (2007) surveyed 144 teacher candidates, experienced K-12 teachers, and college teacher educators to “uncover how it is that teachers in different contexts and at different stages of their careers conceptualize and actualize caring” (p. 34). The most frequently cited examples were offering help, showing compassion, showing interest, caring about the individual, giving time, listening, and getting to know students (McBee, 2007).

Although many discussions of care in the classroom focus on K-12 settings, it is also an important concept in higher education. Jones’s (2009) MUSIC Model of Academic Motivation reinforces the importance of caring in higher education, particularly as it relates to motivation and engagement. His model encompasses five components to help guide instructors as they design and carry out instruction: empowerment, usefulness, success, interest, and caring (Jones, 2009). Jones (2009) asserted that caring is manifested when students believe their instructor cares about their well-being and their learning, rather than being “buddies” with their students (p. 279). He further stated that well-being “usually becomes relevant only when an issue related to a student’s personal life interferes with course requirements” (Jones, 2009, p. 279). This notion is particularly relevant to the findings of this study, as participants’ functional limitations due to their psychological disabilities often affect their ability to perform in their courses. As previously stated, the majority of participants believed they performed better in classes where the instructor demonstrated they cared about the students’ academic success and well-being.

Other research has also emphasized the importance of interpersonal relationships in the college classroom as an integral part of teaching and learning (e.g., Benson et al., 2005; Wilson, 2006; Witt, Wheelless, & Allen, 2004). Meyers (2009) addressed caring as an “important dimension of effective college teaching” (p. 205) that enhances individual relationships between students and faculty and reduces classroom conflicts.

Although students appear to value caring in the college classroom, some professors do not prioritize caring in the same manner; they may feel it is difficult to create caring relationships, that it is not part of their job, or that students will view them as too easy or permissive (Meyers, 2009). However, given the importance students place on care, and the impact of student perceptions of faculty support, it may be beneficial for institutes of higher education to consider the notion of care and seek ways to promote it in the classroom. According to Schmier (1997), “professors must persist despite frustrations and setbacks, tolerate feelings of vulnerability that sometimes occur when emotion is evident or addressed, and focus more on students than on subject matter at times” (as cited in Meyers, 2009, p. 209). As previously stated, this may be of even more significance for individuals with psychological disabilities, given the stigma surrounding their disabilities and the nature of the disability itself.

The findings of this study are also consistent with Chickering and Gamson’s (1987) seven principles of effective practice in undergraduate education: (a) encouraging contact between students and faculty, (b) developing reciprocity and cooperation among students, (c) encouraging active learning, (d) providing prompt feedback, (e) emphasizing time on task, (f) communicating high expectations, and (g) respecting diverse talents and ways of learning. Wilson (2004) revisited these principles and applied them to teaching the millennial generation, asserting these practices will enhance teaching effectiveness with this new group of students. The participants’ narratives are also consistent with Umbach and Wawrzynski’s (2005) findings suggesting students reported higher levels of learning when their instructors utilize collaborative and active learning techniques, interact with students and engage students in the learning process.

Implications for Teaching

The participants’ narratives indicate several implications for supporting college students with psychological disabilities. Specifically, this study indicated the need for increased knowledge and awareness regarding accommodations and the needs and characteristics of college students with psychological disabilities, the import of faculty interactions and effective teaching behaviors, and the significance of the notion of care in higher education settings.

This study clearly indicated the need for increased faculty awareness regarding the challenges and needs of students with psychological disabilities. Faculty need to understand, if they do not already, that the vast majority of individuals with psychological disabilities do not pose a threat to them or other students, and these

individuals have the ability to be successful, and thrive, in postsecondary educational settings when given the appropriate supports. It is also important for faculty and students to recognize that psychological disabilities are real and students with these disabilities are not merely providing excuses when they have difficulties. Furthermore, faculty members need to be aware of federal requirements regarding accommodations, as well as their university’s DSS office policies and procedures regarding the accommodations process. Many faculty members could benefit from professional development regarding accommodations, characteristics of individuals with psychological disabilities, and ways to assist this population. Furthermore, utilizing technology such as wikis, online platforms such as Blackboard, and online training modules may be an effective way to disseminate this information.

The significance of effective teaching behaviors and interactions with students on academic achievement was another salient theme. Therefore, it is important that faculty members are knowledgeable of, and implement, effective teaching practices, such as providing clear expectations, demonstrating knowledge of the subject, and explaining material. Because not all college instructors receive training in pedagogy, it would be beneficial for colleges and universities to provide education regarding effective teaching methods and best practices through forums such as online training modules, teaching excellence centers, and faculty orientation, or other professional development opportunities (Belch, 2011).

This study also revealed that students felt they were more academically successful in courses where instructors not only utilized effective teaching methods, but also interacted with students in a positive and caring manner. Many individuals in higher education believe their sole responsibility is to impart academic knowledge. However, this study, as well as additional research, has demonstrated the importance of developing relationships with students, interacting with students in a positive manner, and showing students they care about their academic achievement. This issue may require a paradigm shift for many faculty members, and others may need more guidance regarding how to establish a positive learning environment. Therefore, increased awareness and education regarding the importance of care and positive relationships in the college classroom is needed.

Further Research

There are several implications for further research. For example, it would be beneficial to explore the experiences of individuals with psychological disabilities attending postsecondary institutions that do not seek formal accommodations or other assistance

from DSS. Do they seek accommodations informally, and if so, how do their professors respond? It may also be beneficial to conduct additional studies—particularly qualitative studies—examining the beliefs and attitudes of faculty members regarding students with psychological disabilities. Much of the research on faculty attitudes and perceptions regarding disabilities is quantitative in nature and/or does not specifically address psychological disabilities. Also, several key studies are fairly dated (e.g., Becker et al., 2002; Preece, Beecher, Martinelli, & Roberts, 2005; Rickerson, Souma, & Burgstahler, 2004; Unger & Pardee, 2002; Weiner, 1999). It may be informative to explore how attitudes regarding psychological disabilities, and the presence of individuals with this disability, have changed over time. Furthermore, more studies examining the concept of care in higher education settings may reveal ways college faculty can enhance academic achievement for all students.

Conclusion

Despite the increase of individuals with psychological disabilities attending institutes of higher education, these students are still completing their academic programs at a much lower rate than individuals with other disabilities or their non-disabled peers. The participants' discussion illuminated the impact of faculty behaviors, such as availability, caring and understanding, on academic achievement.

In addition to the behaviors that promoted their academic achievement, participants also described instances in which they did not do as well as expected or withdrew from the class because they were failing the course. These findings suggest a need for increased awareness regarding psychological disabilities and legal requirements regarding accommodations, as well as the need for self-advocacy training for students with psychological disabilities.

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