

# What Keeps Students with Disabilities from Using Accommodations in Postsecondary Education? A Qualitative Review

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## Abstract

Past research has shown that students with disabilities (SWD) at the postsecondary level who use accommodations demonstrate greater academic achievement and higher graduation rates. Only limited research has been conducted to identify the barriers they face in using accommodations, and that research has not sampled a population specifically identified as having faced such barriers. Through interviews with SWD identified as having faced barriers to using accommodations, this study identified six themes; four were considered complex, as they contained subthemes. The four were a desire for self-sufficiency, a desire to avoid negative social reactions, insufficient knowledge, and the quality and usefulness of disability student services and accommodations. The two straightforward themes were negative experiences with professors and fear of future ramifications. It is hoped that these findings help disability student services providers and SWD make better and more informed decisions regarding the use of effective accommodations.

Keywords: *Students with disabilities, college students, accommodations, disability support services, barriers*

Research has shown that a postsecondary education increases earning potential over the course of an individual's life (Day & Newburger, 2002); this holds true for individuals with and without disabilities. Individuals with disabilities who have a college education are employed at a greater rate (Hennessey, Roessler, Cook, Unger, & Rumrill, 2006) and earn wages comparable to their peers without disabilities (Walters, 2000), but they enroll in college at half the rate of people without disabilities (Dowrick, Anderson, & Acosta, 2005) and graduate at a lower rate (Houtenville, 2003; National Center for Education Statistics, 1996). These low enrollment and graduation rates partly explain why individuals with disabilities often have less economic success. They also are often underemployed and paid lower wages (Hughes & Avoke, 2010), and 26% live below the poverty level, compared with only 9% of individuals without disabilities (National Organization on Disability, 2004).

In a more positive light, the number of postsecondary students with disabilities (SWD) is increasing (Horn, Peter, & Rooney, 2002). The National Center for Education Statistics (2006) estimated that in 2003-2004 11.3% of postsecondary students reported having a disability, which compares to only 2.6% in 1978 (Henderson, 1999). This significant increase in SWD's college attendance can be traced in part to key legislation that has been passed in support of individuals with disabilities (Yell, Rogers, & Rogers, 1998).

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, which was passed in 1973, was the first piece of legislation that specifically provided protection for individuals with disabilities. It stated that any institution that receives federal funds must provide equal access for individuals with physical or mental impairments (Rehabilitation Act of 1973). Although the act did not specifically mention institutions of higher education, it applied to the many postsecondary institutions that received federal

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funds. One shortcoming of the Rehabilitation Act was that it did not provide civil or criminal penalties for colleges that did not comply, making it less effective than it could have been (Yell et al., 1998). The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 corrected some of these shortcomings, specifically stating that it applied to postsecondary institutions, and it included penalties for noncompliance. The Rehabilitation Act and the ADA have played a large part in providing SWD with access to postsecondary education (Cope, 2005; Zuriff, 1996).

At the postsecondary level, a large portion of the responsibility to comply with disability legislation has been carried by disabled student services (DSS) offices (Szymanski, Hewitt, Watson, & Swett, 1999). Stodden (2001) reported that the majority of postsecondary institutions in the United States have a DSS. Once a SWD has disclosed and provided documentation of their disability, a disability services professional and the student identify the need for reasonable accommodations. This is done on a case-by-case basis (Frank & Wade 1993) in accordance with the student's functional limitations (Ofiesh, 2007). The primary means DSS professionals have to provide services to SWD are accommodations (Baker, 2006), which can be defined as "the provision of any educational support that is needed for the person with a disability to access, learn, and benefit from educational services alongside college peers without disability" (Upton, 2000, p. 10).

Even with disability legislation and accommodations provided by DSS, SWD are still graduating at a lower rate than their peers without disabilities. This trend has led researchers to question the effectiveness of DSS and the accommodations they provide (Mull, Sitlington, & Alper, 2001). They have approached this topic in a number of ways. Those who conducted experimental (Alster, 1997; Zuriff, 2000), quasi-experimental (Keim, McWhirter, & Bernstein, 1996; Vogel & Adelman, 1990), and self-report survey studies (Berry & Mellard, 2002; Sharpe, Johnson, Izzo, & Murray, 2005) suggested that accommodations are beneficial to SWD. Others (e.g., Salzer, Wick, & Rogers, 2008) came to a similar conclusion through a review of the literature, stating that "students with disabilities are as academically successful as students without disabilities when person-specific supports are provided" (p. 371).

Even though the literature suggests that DSS and the accommodations they provide are beneficial to SWD and boost graduation rates (Salzer et al., 2008; Vogel & Adelman, 1990), there is evidence that these services are not being fully utilized. Barnett and Li (1997) reported the results of a national survey of community colleges that found approximately 8 percent of

community college students report having a disability, but only about half of them register for accommodative services. Moreover, the National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 found that only 40% of postsecondary SWD who had used special education services in high school had informed their colleges of their disability (a necessary requirement to receive services), and that only 35% of all SWD received accommodations (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005).

The large percentage of postsecondary SWD who do not choose to seek eligibility for accommodations through a DSS office suggest that barriers may complicate some students' use of this campus resource. Barriers can be thought of as factors that prevent SWD from seeking or making regular use of the accommodations available to them (Marshak, Van Wieren, Ferrell, Swiss, & Dugan, 2010). Research on the barriers to using accommodations is limited, but what studies there are have identified the following: feelings of social disconnection, a discriminatory attitude from other students and faculty, subpar DSS practices, ineffective accommodations, unavailable accommodations, accommodations that reduce independence, a possible lack of assistance-seeking behaviors, a stigma attached to disabilities, and insufficient knowledge among SWD about their disability (Dowrick et al., 2005; Kurth & Mellard, 2006; Marshak et al., 2010; Trammell & Hathaway, 2007; West, Kregel, Getzel, & Zhu, 1993). Many of these studies did not directly study barriers specifically but identified them as part of a broader set of research questions. Moreover, many of the studies used methods such as surveys that did not allow the participants to fully explain or elaborate on their experiences.

Also of note in this research is the distinction between barriers as conceptualized in the "medical model" of disability, which focuses on the physical or mental impairment of the individual and how it can be "corrected" or accommodated, and a "social model" of disability that focuses on society's shortcomings in its approach to inclusiveness for individuals with disabilities. Barriers as conceptualized in the medical model focus on what the SWD can address in his/her own behavior to convince them to use accommodations, while barriers in the social model focus on more macro-level concerns in society's treatment of SWD that discourage autonomy (Shakespeare, 2013).

Marshak et al. (2010) interviewed 16 SWD who were registered with their school's DSS. The researchers focused on intra-individual traits and used semi-structured interviews to allow participants to explain their experiences with accommodation use in postsecondary education. From the interview data they identified five main themes: identity issues, a

desire to avoid negative social reactions, insufficient knowledge among SWD about disability issues, SWD's perceptions of the quality and usefulness of services, and negative experiences SWD had with professors.

This research (Marshak et al., 2010) provided valuable insights into SWD's experiences accessing and using accommodations, but it makes no mention of whether the participating students had actually encountered barriers to seeking or using accommodations. While most SWD have faced barriers of some kind, not all report facing barriers to postsecondary education (West et al., 1993). The data for Marshak et al.'s (2010) study was part of a larger body of data that examined more general issues related to SWD, thus it makes sense that the participants would all be SWD. A more ideal population for studying barriers to seeking or using accommodations would be SWD who have specifically encountered such barriers.

### Statement of Purpose

Building on the work of Marshak et al. (2010), the current study was designed to examine the experiences of SWD more fully by specifically interviewing individuals who had faced barriers to their use of accommodations.

### Method

The present study employed a hermeneutic qualitative research strategy based on semi-structured interviews of participants. Hermeneutic inquiry, which is based on a relational ontology, seeks to find greater meaning and understanding of people's lived experiences through an interpretation of their given account (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This strategy addressed the research question by understanding participants' ideas, views, perceptions, reactions, attitudes, opinions, thoughts, and experiences (Jensen, 2006). As Denzin and Lincoln (1994) stated, "Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (p. 3).

Qualitative research is ideal for studying people and experiences as they naturally occur (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). The current study investigated SWD's naturally occurring experiences in terms of barriers to access in college. The study used semi-structured interviews that were analyzed using a hermeneutic circle, as informed by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009). In this method, several broad and unfocused reviews of the transcripts are used to identify initial themes (Jackson & Patton, 1992). The text is then reviewed at increasingly deeper levels through succes-

sive readings. As themes are identified, the researcher circles back to the text looking for confirming and disconfirming evidence. This process is used to foster a deeper understanding of the meaning of the interviews.

The philosophical foundation of this study was relational ontology (Schwandt, 2000), which assumes that relationships are primary and necessary in understanding human experience (Jackson, Smith, & Hill, 2003). The epistemology of this study was hermeneutic and dialectic (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). An important tenet of this epistemology is that "understanding is something that is *produced* in dialogue, not something *reproduced* by an interpreter through an analysis" (Schwandt, 2000, p. 195, italics in original). In keeping with these philosophical foundations, this study used an approach suggested by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) that attempts to understand and interpret the meaning of the everyday "life world" of the interviewee with sensitivity and openness toward new and unexpected knowledge.

### Participants

Sixteen interviews were conducted for this study. The participants were SWD who had registered with DSS at a large, private religious university whose students are predominantly White/Caucasian. They ranged in age from 20 to 43, with a mean of 25.7 and a median of 23. Nine were male and seven were female (see Table 1). Each participant was paid \$40 for their time and participation. The participants were identified through a DSS list of students who had been approved for accommodations but did not use some (or any) of them during the 2010-2011 school year. A total of 42 students were identified and contacted by e-mail. Participants' self-reported disabilities included depression, anxiety, severe mental health disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, learning disabilities, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, Asperger's syndrome, neurological disability, back injury, type 1 diabetes, endocrine disease, autoimmune disease, and visual impairment.

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) suggest that the researcher should "interview as many subjects as necessary to find out what you need to know" (p. 113). The common qualitative interview design tends to use around 15 interviews, plus or minus 10 (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Lastly, Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) warn against the commonly misunderstood presupposition that "the more interviews, the more scientific" (p. 113). The current study followed these guidelines in determining an appropriate number of participants. At around 12 interviews, the primary researcher noticed that the data being gathered seemed

redundant. A few more interviews were conducted, for a total of 16, to make sure that a point of saturation and redundancy had been reached.

All participants met the following criteria. Each had been enrolled in at least one semester or term during the 2010-2011 school year, and had been approved for one or more accommodations but had not used one or more of them. Those who did not use one or more of their approved accommodations were identified by their decision to not pick up their DSS letters that inform professors and the campus testing center of a student's eligibility for accommodations.

### **Procedures**

After obtaining approval from the institutional review board, a DSS provider sent out e-mails to students who met the criteria mentioned previously. All interested participants were given further information, including the interview procedures, expected length of the interview, and the nature and purpose of the study. Those who agreed to participate were asked to provide their informed consent. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and all identifying information was removed or changed. Once the research was completed and written up, all audio recordings were erased, leaving only the transcripts that had been stripped of all identifying information (i.e., participant names and towns, school names, etc.).

### **Data Collection**

All interviews were conducted one-on-one. Fourteen interviews were conducted in person, and two were conducted over the phone with participants who were geographically distant from the researcher. Interviews ranged from 23 to 64 minutes, with a mean of 41.1 minutes. Each interview began by asking for demographic information, followed by a briefing that described the purpose of the interview, gave the interviewee a chance to consent to being recorded, and addressed any general questions about the interview. Following the interview, participants were debriefed, which provided an opportunity to discuss any questions the interviewee had, address issues or anxiety that came up during the interview, and receive feedback or clarification related to the interview (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

This study utilized a semi-structured interview format, which "is defined as an interview with the purpose of obtaining description of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 3). The researcher used a list of possible questions (see Appendix A) that informed the interview and helped

ensure that important topics and aspects of the intended research question were not neglected. It is also important to note that the list of questions was not simply read sequentially and verbatim in each interview. As Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) describe, "it is neither an open everyday conversation nor a closed questionnaire" (p. 27).

### **Data Analysis**

The analysis of the transcribed interviews followed the same philosophical and theoretical assumptions that were used in conducting the interviews. The analysis was not a one-time event that happened solely at the end of the research process but was instead conducted throughout the research process. During the interviews, participants' responses were interpreted and further questions were formulated relative to the analysis or interpretation (Seidman, 1998).

For example, initially no questions were asked about fears associated with the impact using accommodations could have on a student's future. However, during several interviews the participants said they were anxious about the potential consequences of asking for and using their approved accommodations. These responses led us to develop the theme of "fear of future ramifications" and shaped subsequent interviews. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) noted that "the ideal interview is already analyzed by the time the sound recorder is turned off" (p. 190).

Once all the interviews were transcribed, a post-transcription analysis was conducted using the hermeneutic circle methodology described above. The themes identified were continually taken back to the transcripts and reexamined for evidence that both confirmed and disconfirmed them. Themes that continued to be confirmed were retained, while themes that were not broadly supported were removed. An auditor then evaluated the analysis process and the themes that were retained. Only themes the principle researcher and the auditor agreed on were included.

For example, the theme of "Insufficient knowledge" initially had two subthemes, "Question of fairness of accommodations" and "Lack of awareness of DSS and available accommodations." While reexamining the transcripts to confirm/disconfirm the subtheme of fairness, several statements from students who were concerned that they were not disabled enough to warrant accommodations seemed significant. Subsequent reviews of the transcripts demonstrated that "Question of being disabled enough" was, indeed, a distinct subtheme.

As an additional validity check, the confirmed themes were e-mailed to all the original participants to get their feedback as to whether the interpretations

matched their experiences and intended meanings. Feedback from the participants was then taken back to the text to examine whether or not the feedback was broadly supported.

## Results

Analysis of the interviews revealed six main themes related to barriers SWD face in accessing and using accommodations (see Figure 1 for an overview of all findings). Four of the identified themes contained subthemes and thus were considered complex, while the other two were more straightforward and contained no subthemes. The four complex themes were Desire for Self-Sufficiency, Desire to Avoid Negative Social Reactions, Insufficient Knowledge, and Quality and Usefulness of DSS and Accommodations. The two more straightforward themes were Negative Experiences with Professors and Fear of Future Ramifications.

### Theme #1: Desire for Self-Sufficiency

Throughout the course of the interviews, many of the participants (all names are pseudonyms) commented on the importance of being self-sufficient, while others alluded to it as they discussed the great pains they had taken to maintain self-sufficiency.

Many participants reported working extraordinarily hard to achieve academically without having to use accommodations. However, Betty (a 27-year-old White female graduate student with attention and learning disabilities) explained that putting forth so much effort to be self-sufficient “sometimes...takes a toll.” The subthemes of this theme were the importance of being independent, being self-accommodating, and using accommodations as a backup.

**Importance of being independent.** Many of the participants talked at length about the value they placed on independence. In doing so, they explained how they intentionally did not use approved accommodations in an effort to be independent. A number of participants mentioned that this decision was due in part to a sense of pride, and that pride often stood in the way of asking for and receiving help. In general, independence seemed to be a large factor in deciding whether or not to use accommodations. Steve (a 25-year-old White male junior with an emotional disability) explained:

In a few classes I haven't used them at all. I really want to test myself to see if I can compete at the level of everyone else with the same standards as everyone else and I kind of do it as a test of my own abilities to see if I can do it...I mean eventu-

ally I would like to get to a place where I don't need such accommodations anymore; that's my ultimate goal.

**Being self-accommodating.** Several participants suggested that self-sufficiency was important to them as they discussed efforts to self-accommodate. One form of self-accommodating involved going directly to professors or classmates and asking for help instead of requesting accommodations through DSS. Other self-accommodation involved participants having insights on how to work with their disability more effectively and then using that insight to act in ways that leveled the playing field. Peter (a 23-year-old White male senior with learning, attention, and emotional disabilities) explained:

I just feel like the most important for me when obtaining a grade...is how to approach teachers, how to win teachers over, and have teachers really like you so you can share with them your goals and have them help you achieve those goals...I tend to talk to them first and then, and as time goes on I share with them some of my problems that I am facing and the things that are going wrong and the frustrations I have with being a disabled student and that seems to allow them to have more compassion my way... [It] really helped me... That's exactly why I think I haven't utilized [DSS] so much because I have figured out myself.

Joe (a 36-year-old White male senior with an emotional disability) also spoke about this approach:

I try to always do what's effective for me. I have to sit exactly where I need to sit and I get to class not too early but not too late. If I get there too early then I am just sitting there, and yeah that's bad for the social anxiety disorder...I do what I need to manage.

**Using accommodations as a backup.** Many of the participants wanted to address their needs on their own and only use accommodations as a backup. These participants emphasized that it was important to them to be as independent as possible, but at the same time they had the foresight that some circumstances required the use of accommodations. A few participants even talked about how having the accommodations as a safety net would lower their anxiety, thus minimizing their need for the accommodations. Amy (a 24-year-old White female senior with an emotional disability) illustrated this approach:

It actually helped decrease my anxiety and decrease my panic attacks, knowing that [accommodations] were available to me whether I used it or not and I did quite often...It helped me not need it as much actually.

### **Theme #2: Desire to Avoid Negative Social Reactions**

The interviews revealed that many participants had a strong desire to avoid negative social reactions related to their disabilities and accommodations. The participants' comments made it clear that accommodations are not used in isolation, and many of them seemed keenly aware of how their use of accommodations affected others and influenced others' perceptions of them. This concern focused mostly on professors and peers. The subthemes that emerged were not wanting to be viewed or treated differently, fear of suspicion from others for receiving special treatment, and not wanting to be a burden.

#### **Not wanting to be viewed or treated differently.**

Many of the participants reported concerns about being viewed or treated differently. This included a strong desire to not be singled out or have attention drawn to them. Also of note was the desire to not be labeled or categorized as "the disabled student" and thus treated as less competent or fragile. In general, participants reported that they worried about being perceived and treated differently if peers or professors learned about their disability and accommodations. Carol (a 22-year-old White senior female who is blind) expressed her feelings:

It's not something I am ashamed of or anything but at the same time I don't want everyone to know me as the legally blind girl...And I really don't want people to feel sorrow for me because there is no need to feel sorry for me as far as I am concerned.

Peter expressed similar concerns:

I used the note taking at the start but it's kind of... humiliating. I was told to go tell the teacher like that I need a note taker and I thought he was going to just say, "Hey we need someone to help [Peter] take notes." I thought he would confidentially say that but he said, "Hey we need this guy to have his notes taken because he has a disability."

**Fear of suspicion from others for receiving special treatment.** A number of the participants focused on being aware that others might think they were taking advantage of the system or receiving special treatment that they did not deserve. A large concern

involved peers' potential jealousy or suspicion of the accommodations. Many participants also said they felt like some professors questioned the legitimacy of accommodations. Several reported being careful to not give professors any further reason to be suspicious of them. William (a 30-year-old White male senior with a physical disability) expressed his concerns about other students' perceptions:

The only thing I remember ever having was other students on more than one occasion I would, a student would see me, you know parking in a handicap spot or in a faculty spot or something like that and say, "Gee how did you get such a great parking spot." And at first I'd say, "Oh yeah, it was wonderful. First I fell 75 feet off a cliff and spent 4 months in traction." Eventually I decided that was a little, maybe a little bitter, so you know I stopped saying that, but it just struck me as a weird thing to say to someone who clearly has a handicap tag on their car...

Amy reported similar concerns about her teachers' perceptions of her use of accommodations:

I think when the students have the letters, if you don't mention it to the teacher or get it to them right off the bat it's kind of too little too late. If you bring it in later for a lot of teachers it seems like they might roll their eyes or they might not really take it seriously or you are just bringing it in as an excuse...If I haven't taken them in the beginning of the semester, I usually just count my losses and just deal with it and get a lower score.

**Not wanting to be a burden.** The accommodation process at college involves many individuals, including DSS providers, administrators, and professors. Many participants commented that they were concerned they were being too much of a burden on others. At times participants would simply choose not to use accommodations that would have helped, rather than put an extra burden on others. Jane (a 21-year-old White female junior with an emotional disability) expressed that she would never ask for extra help "because I feel like it's asking too much, asking too much of professors, asking too much of the university, trying to make my life easier."

### **Theme #3: Insufficient Knowledge**

Many participants either did not know about available accommodations or did not use them because of incorrect or insufficient knowledge. Some of the participants' reported having insufficient knowledge related to their current situation, while others reported having insufficient knowledge earlier in their college

experience. The subthemes included questioning the fairness of accommodations, lacking awareness of DSS and available accommodations, and doubting whether one was “disabled enough.”

#### **Questioning the fairness of accommodations.**

Questioning the fairness of receiving accommodations was a common dilemma for many of the participants. This seemed to be an important moral dilemma that participants wrestled with again and again throughout their college experience. Many of the participants even struggled during the interview with whether accommodation use was fair or not. Questions of fairness often seemed to stem from participants’ lack of understanding about disability or the accommodations that are legally afforded them. Jane said, for example, “It just seems so unfair that...just because I am having a struggle in my life that I should get something that other people don’t get.” Many participants brought up this fairness issue in relation to their classmates. Jim (a 23-year-old White male graduate student with a chronic health disability) related the following:

There have been times when I have tests and I asked the teacher, Did the other guys finish? Because, if the other guys didn’t finish, I am going to feel bad if I took time and a half and could finish, and that’s been the same at law school and they dismissed it so now I don’t feel bad about taking the full time, but in the past it has been kind of a question because I don’t want an unfair advantage or unfair disadvantage.

#### **Lacking awareness of DSS or available accommodations.**

One of the guiding questions in the interview dealt with how the participants had learned about the services available to them due to their disabilities. Many of the answers included details about how at some point during college they had been unaware of DSS and accommodations. Some participants talked about how, even after registering with DSS and receiving accommodations, they still were not completely sure of what accommodations and services were available to them. A few of the interviewees also made suggestions about better advertising and visibility for DSS. Rachel (a 20-year-old White female senior with a chronic health disability) captured this lack of awareness: “I don’t think I’d heard of [DSS] at all...Maybe sending out e-mails to new students or something. Just maybe a mass e-mail. These are the services we can provide.”

**Doubting whether one is “disabled enough.”** A common belief or misconception among many of the participants was that they were not disabled enough

to use DSS or accommodations. The participants who endorsed this misconception often were students with emotional or learning disabilities. They frequently compared themselves to students with physical disabilities and deemed themselves not disabled enough. One participant even expressed concern about not being disabled enough to participate in this study. Amy related the following:

And at first with [DSS], I felt insecure going to them ’cause I was like, I don’t have a disability. I just have panic attacks. I’m not in a wheelchair. I don’t have a disease or anything like that, and that was really hard at first...helping them [students] understand that [DSS] is not just for physical disabilities would probably be helpful.

#### **Theme #4: Quality and Usefulness of DSS and Accommodations**

The quality and usefulness of DSS and the accommodations they provide were also mentioned as major barriers to the use of accommodations. This includes problems working with DSS and the process of setting up accommodations. Participants also talked about accommodations that might have helped them with their disabilities but were unavailable. Finally, a number of participants mentioned that some accommodations were not effective and in some instances were even detrimental to learning. The subthemes of this theme were the process of requesting and receiving accommodations, certain accommodations are not available, and accommodations are not effective.

#### **Process of requesting and receiving accommodations.**

The process of requesting and receiving accommodations included the participants’ experience first approaching DSS, meeting with a DSS provider, having ongoing contact with DSS, and implementing the accommodations. A few of the participants spoke about negative experiences with the DSS and its staff that discouraged them from using accommodation. Jane said, for example, “I saw [a DSS provider] and I kind of felt like he was working against me a little bit. I felt like I had to sit there and say no, really, I need help [and] like you are not listening to me...I just didn’t feel like he was going to do anything about it.”

Sometimes a student never received the requested accommodations, while at other times the inefficient process discouraged the participant from using accommodations later on. Jennifer (a 43-year-old White female senior with chronic health and emotional disabilities) and William noted the different ways the difficulty of the process discouraged their use of accommodations:

*Jennifer:* The same thing with the testing center...I can't walk very well and they said, well you need to go up there and get your test and then go down to the accessible rooms. And so then I walked here and here and then here and I walked down and then I went back up and went back down and then I went over to [a DSS provider] and said that was dumb. I can't walk that much.

*William:* I do remember that it was kind of hard to find, like hard to get on the schedule...After I met with her she had, kind of, to write up the accommodation letters and then wait for someone to print it, and then they had to wait for her to sign, so it was like a month between when I finally met with her and when I actually had the accommodation letters in my hands.

**Certain accommodations are not available.** All of the participants in this study had been approved for at least one accommodation through DSS, and many noted other accommodations that might have been helpful but were not available. Sometimes participants were not sure if certain accommodations were available, they just knew they were not currently available to them. A few students had attended other universities or community colleges and had used helpful accommodations that were not available at their current university. Dwayne (a 29-year-old White male senior with an emotional disability) reported, "I have trouble getting up in the morning because of my medications, and I tried to get support for going to school late but I didn't really get support for that."

Peter expressed feeling that he had more interaction and a more personal relationship with DSS providers at the community college level. He said, "So I just felt like the [DSS], it was lacking in a lot of the things I needed in comparison to [community college]... Whereas, [the local] community college they would sit you down and they'd even call you."

**Accommodations are not effective or helpful.** Participants described some accommodations as ineffective and often had stopped using those they did not find useful. In some cases, participants said they felt like some accommodations might even put them further behind in their classes. Joe expressed the following:

If I have to ask for something like exam due date extension then I do have to get a letter and a lot of the time I do feel like it's just a kind of a hopeless thing. There's a lot of hopelessness in being a disabled person. It's like if you ask for an extension on your exam due date you are just going to get

behind in your next exam,...you are starting old stuff while everyone is starting the new stuff and so it's kind of a self-defeating thing to ask for a letter.

### **Theme #5: Negative Experiences with Professors**

Negative experiences with professors in relation to the use of accommodations seemed to be a major barrier. While many participants mentioned that most of their experiences with professors were positive, almost all of them could recount, often with great detail and passion, a negative experience. In many cases a professor simply did not honor the accommodations the participant had been approved for. While other professors did not necessarily deny accommodations outright, a negative experience often made a participant question whether to use accommodations in the future. Betty, for example, recounted the following experience:

I talked to [a DSS provider] and he said, "Yeah, I think it is legit, and so he talked to [another DSS provider] who also agreed, and so I called the professor back and at this point he was at a conference and he didn't seem very happy that I was continuing to pursue this, but he said he wasn't going to give me time and a half but he was going to give me time and a quarter instead of time and a half, and so I was like okay, but then when I hung up I felt upset that he wouldn't just give me that extra quarter.

### **Theme #6: Fear of Future Ramifications**

Many participants worried about how accommodations might disadvantage them in the future. Potential disadvantages ranged from professors writing less positive letters of recommendation to fewer job opportunities. Joe related the following example:

I guess we're supposed to, as part of the academic process, develop relationships with professors, and a good way to destroy that is to always have to ask for accommodations...I didn't know if [having a disability] was going to go on my transcript.

Peter expressed fear that his current use of accommodations could affect his ability to obtain them in the future. He said, "I fear if I keep going into [DSS] and they see that I have good grades, they are going to take away some of the things they've given me."

Students expressed the more personal concern that accommodations might act as a crutch and limit the benefit and skills they otherwise might gain during their college education. Ralph (a 22-year-old White male freshman with a learning disability) related the following:



One of the accommodations that I qualified for is a microphone that you talk into that types for you...But if you are not a very good typist and you use that all the time, you will never be good at typing...I feel like using those accommodations could cripple me in a way.

### **Discussion**

The current study builds on past research, especially Marshak et al. (2010), by contributing new perspectives from a population that has not been studied previously. The current study specifically identified a student population that had been approved for accommodations and then did not use at least one of those accommodations. This study also focused on the intra-personal experiences of students using accommodations. Since the study participants were specifically identified as having faced barriers to using accommodations, they provided new and unique insights about those barriers.

Through our analysis of the interviews, we found themes similar to those of Marshak et al. (2010), as well as some that differed (see Table 2 for more detailed information about these similarities and differences). Our results provide novel insights (i.e., subthemes) into previously reported reasons (i.e., themes) SWD may not use approved accommodations. The SWD in our sample reported having a strong need to feel independent, wanting to be self-accommodating, and wanting to use accommodations only as a “back-up.” They also shared strong feelings about not wanting to burden others because of their accommodation use and expressed fears that they were “not disabled enough.” Our findings also showed that students sometimes felt that “accommodations were not effective.”

Theme #6: Fear of Future Ramifications has not been identified previously in the literature. Some SWD reported fears that resulted from a lack of information, such as that their disability status may be indicated on their transcript or that accommodations would be taken away if they showed a positive academic performance. Other concerns were that professors would not write strong letters of recommendation and that accommodations might hinder their ability to develop skills (e.g., writing, reading, and typing). For many participants, the future ramifications were important considerations in deciding whether or not to use DSS and accommodations.

Theme 6 raises the question of whether SWD should always be encouraged to use accommodations. Previous research on barriers to accommodation use often approached the topic in a way that implied that

the ultimate goal should be to identify and eliminate barriers. Research has shown that when SWD use accommodations they are more successful academically (Salzer et al., 2008) and ultimately have higher graduation rates (Vogel & Adelman, 1990). While students in our study reported some significant benefits from using accommodations, they also identified multiple difficulties they experienced within themselves when using them (e.g., self-consciousness, a desire not to burden others, fear of retribution).

### **Implications**

Our findings offer faculty, administrators, and DSS providers valuable insights into the barriers SWD face in accessing and using accommodations. The increased emphasis our participants put on self-sufficiency suggests that DSS providers should seriously consider SWD’s desire to be independent and understand the ways they strive to be so. Honest conversations between DSS providers and SWD about how the students’ needs can be met without sacrificing independence may encourage SWD to use beneficial accommodations.

The newly identified subtheme of not wanting to be a burden also has possible implications and applications. Many participants mentioned that, rather than burden professors and DSS providers, they sometimes did not use accommodations. An increased effort from professors and DSS providers to welcome and encourage SWD may help decrease the students’ concern about being a burden. One student mentioned that when she was working with a DSS provider he appeared to be extremely busy and overburdened. It may be useful to conduct further research to examine whether DSS providers are overworked/overburdened and whether this is creating a barrier to students seeking accommodations. If this is indeed the case, further discussion about increasing resources and personnel for DSS is warranted.

This study also identified the new subtheme of SWD questioning whether they are disabled enough, which suggests certain implications regarding disability type. This subtheme was primarily expressed by students with emotional and learning disabilities, who reported that they felt they should not receive accommodations because they were not as disabled as students with physical disabilities. DSS providers can play an important role in helping this group of students understand that they too deserve accommodations and equal access. As one student stated, “[a DSS provider] even made a comment like, even though your disability is not as visible, it’s still just as important as anyone else’s to take care of and so that helps.” Increased information about who is eligible to receive services at

DSS also may be helpful, as many participants reported that they used to think DSS was just for students with physical disabilities.

Another new subtheme identified in this study is that some accommodations are not effective. Some participants mentioned that the accommodations were not helpful or efficient and sometimes even put them further behind in their classes. It is important for DSS providers to make sure SWD are getting the most benefit out of the accommodations they are using. The interviews also indicated that when some accommodations were not effective the participants were less likely to use others. Conversely, if accommodations were beneficial their use was likely to increase. One student mentioned that it would be helpful if DSS providers monitored students' progress and the effectiveness of the accommodations they were using more closely. While this may be beyond the scope of what DSS providers are able to provide, a closer look at accommodations' effectiveness could prove valuable for SWD.

Other implications from this study stem from the newly identified theme, fear of future ramifications, which suggests that a new way of conceptualizing the non-use of accommodations may be in order. Instead of looking at this simply as another barrier that must be eliminated, it may be helpful to consider that, depending on context, use of accommodations sometimes may be detrimental. This suggests that DSS providers may be more effective if they take the student's contextual factors into account and involve the student more in the discussion of whether an accommodation may be helpful for their situation. This falls in line with previous researchers' recommendation that accommodations should be considered on a case-by-case basis (Frank & Wade, 1993; Salzer et al., 2008) rather than taking a one-size-fits-all approach.

In general, these findings have implications for educating college faculty, administrators, and students with and without disabilities more effectively. It seems that the high number of negative experiences participants reported having with faculty could be largely reduced by developing programs aimed at educating faculty about disability legislation, SWD, and accommodations. If faculty are made more aware of the ways they create barriers and what they can do to change that, SWD may be more likely to contact them about their needs and use the accommodations they are entitled to. Similar efforts could target college administrators and students without disabilities. In addition to making them more aware of and able to reduce barriers, the study findings may help all people in college settings be more curious about SWD's experiences and

encourage them to ask what barriers might be standing in the way of these students' college success. Finally, educating SWD about these findings may help them put language to their experiences and to advocate more effectively for useful accommodations, despite the barriers they face.

Further research is needed in several areas. The subtheme of not being disabled enough seemed to depend more on disability type than the other themes and subthemes identified, and to be expressed primarily by participants with emotional or learning disabilities rather than physical disabilities. This suggests that there may be other instances where barriers to accommodation use are a result of disability type.

Potentially rich information about barriers to accommodation use could be gained from studying a population of SWD who are not registered with DSS. Such research could reveal barriers that are simply not part of the experience of students who are aware of and have used DSS.

The results of this study also suggest that it could be beneficial to look at barriers to accommodation use with more complexity and specificity. Future research might focus on determining more specifically when accommodation use would be beneficial and when it truly is not needed or is even detrimental. Conducting such a study could prove difficult, as it would require a closer examination of numerous contextual variables (e.g., disability type, fluctuation of disability condition, choice of classes, accommodation effectiveness, students' future plans and aspirations, etc.). Nevertheless, it could provide DSS providers and SWD with invaluable information that would help them decide if and when to use accommodations.

Another area that should be investigated in future research is the degree to which the "medical model" of disability contributes to SWD's reluctance to use accommodations. While this study focused mostly on intra-personal factors in the decision to not use accommodations, additional research on systemic discrimination and barriers would help to paint a fuller picture of the situations SWD face in postsecondary settings and how negative cultural attitudes impact their decision-making relative to using supports.

### **Limitations**

The students in our sample were attending a large, private, religion-oriented university; were older than the typical college-age undergraduate; and did not include any ethnic minorities, which may affect the generalizability of these results. An example of how the unique characteristics of our sample may have impacted our findings is that many expressed fears about

appearing to be asking for “too much.” While this may be generalizable to other SWD, it also could be attributable to our participants’ religious background. Again, while our participants’ responses may be representative of college students in general, older students may be more willing to ask for accommodations, having had more life experience in doing so. Given that our results come only from the experiences of White students, the unique barriers faced by students of diverse ethnic backgrounds are likely not represented. There is no way to know how much White privilege impacted our participants’ responses. Additional research is needed to better understand the experiences and needs of students from various backgrounds.

Another limitation is the lack of information obtained about our participants’ experiences using accommodations during high school. Without this information, it is difficult to know how much of their reported barriers to accommodation use result from the potentially difficult transition from high school (Section 504/IDEA; goal of success) to college (ADA; goal of access), which requires students to self-advocate.

Although the principle investigator involved professionals and researchers with a background in and knowledge of disability support issues in designing and conducting this study, SWD were not directly involved, which may have left out unique perspectives on students’ accommodation use. There may have been some limitations in the procedure for conducting and analyzing interviews. The primary investigator conducted all of the interviews, analyzed the interviews, and generated themes.

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Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

NAME (PSEUDONYM)	AGE	GENDER	RACE/ ETHNICITY	DISABILITY TYPE	YEAR IN SCHOOL
Jane	21	F	White/ Caucasian	Emotional (Depression)	Junior
Joe	36	M	White/ Caucasian	Emotional (Anxiety)	Senior
Steve	25	M	White/ Caucasian	Emotional (Depression, Anxiety)	Junior
William	30	M	White/ Caucasian	Physical (Back Injury, Pain, Mobility)	Senior
Rachel	20	F	White/ Caucasian	Chronic Health (Type I Diabetes, Addison's)	Senior
Richard	21	M	White/ Caucasian	Asperger's Syndrome	Senior
Peter	23	M	White/ Caucasian	Learning/Attention/ Emotional (ADHD, Reading, Anxiety)	Senior
Albert	22	M	White/ Caucasian	Emotional (Bipolar, Schizophrenia)	Sophomore
Jennifer	43	F	White/ Caucasian	Chronic Health/Emotional (Fibromyalgia, Anxiety, Depression)	Senior
Jim	23	M	White/ Caucasian	Chronic Health (Cerebral Palsy)	Graduate Student
Ralph	22	M	White/ Caucasian	Learning (Dyslexia)	Freshman
Amy	24	F	White/ Caucasian	Emotional (PTSD)	Senior
Betty	27	F	White/ Caucasian	Attention/Learning (ADHD, Processing Speed)	Graduate Student
Carol	22	F	White/ Caucasian	Physical (Blind)	Senior
Michelle	23	F	White/ Caucasian	Chronic Health (Liver Disease, Hepatitis)	Junior
Dwayne	29	M	White/ Caucasian	Emotional (Bipolar)	Senior

*Note.* PTSD=post-traumatic stress disorder; ADHD=attention deficit hyperactivity disorder

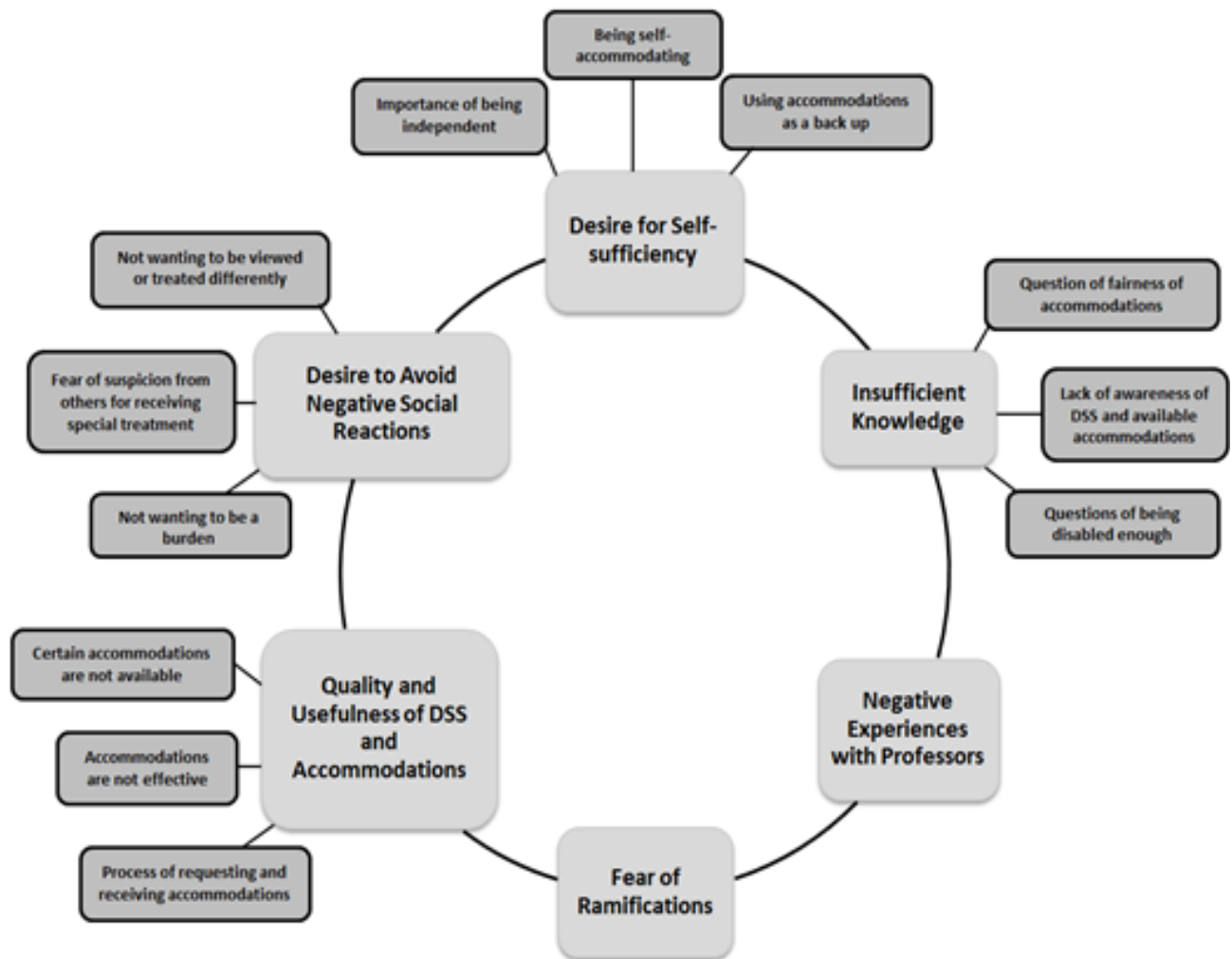
Table 2

*Comparison of Marshak et al. (2010) to the Current Study*

<b>Marshak et al. (2010)</b>	<b>Current Study</b>
1. Identity issues <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Desire to shed stigma of high school identity</li> <li>b. Desire to not integrate the presence of a disability into their identity</li> <li>c. Desire for self-sufficiency</li> </ol>	1. Desire for self-sufficiency <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Importance of being independent</li> <li>b. Being self-accommodating</li> <li>c. Using accommodations as a backup</li> </ol>
2. Desire to avoid negative social reactions <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Fear of resentment of other students for special treatment</li> <li>b. Not wanting to be singled out</li> </ol>	2. Desire to avoid negative social reactions <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Not wanting to be viewed or treated differently</li> <li>b. Fear of suspicion from others for receiving special treatment</li> <li>c. Not wanting to be a burden</li> </ol>
3. Insufficient knowledge <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Question of fairness of receiving accommodations</li> <li>b. Confusion about accessibility and DSS services</li> <li>c. Lack of training in how to explain their disability to others</li> </ol>	3. Insufficient knowledge <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Question of fairness of accommodations</li> <li>b. Lack of awareness of DSS and available accommodations</li> <li>c. Question of being disabled enough</li> </ol>
4. Perceived quality and usefulness of services <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Expediency of service delivery</li> <li>b. Lack of compatibility with accommodations</li> </ol>	4. Perceived quality and usefulness of DSS and accommodations <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Process of requesting and receiving accommodations</li> <li>b. Certain accommodations are not available</li> <li>c. Accommodations are not effective</li> </ol>
5. Negative experiences with professors	5. Negative experiences with professors 6. Fear of future ramifications



Figure 1. Accessing and utilizing accommodations themes and subthemes.



## Appendix

### Semi-Structured Guiding Questions

Will you please describe your overall experience at college?

How has your disability affected your experience at college?

Can you describe your experiences with contacting DSS and requesting accommodations?

What parts of this process were helpful or useful?

What parts of this process were not helpful or useful?

How have your experiences with faculty members been?

How have your experiences with other students been?

How have your experiences with DSS staff been?

Can you describe a specific experience where you felt like you didn't have access to services or accommodations that would have been helpful in your education?

I'm curious about your experience with getting approved for accommodations and then not using one or more of those accommodations. Can you describe this experience for me?

Why do you think other students might not seek out or use accommodations?

If you were in charge of DSS at the college, what would you do differently?

What would you do the same?

What advice would you give to a student with a similar disability, concerning accommodations and services at college?

What question should I have asked, but didn't?

What has this interview experience been like for you?