

A New Theoretical Approach to Postsecondary Student Disability: Disability-Diversity (Dis)Connect Model

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Abstract

Disability is often viewed as an obstacle to postsecondary inclusion, but not a characteristic of student diversity. Additionally, current theoretical frameworks isolate disability from other student diversity characteristics. In response, a new conceptual framework, the Disability-Diversity (Dis)Connect Model (DDDM), was created to address disability as a multifaceted aspect of student diversity.

Keywords: Student diversity, disability in higher education, conceptual framework

According to the United States Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (2013), approximately 11% of all students enrolled in postsecondary institutions have a self-identified disability. Although about one in ten college students have a documented disability affecting cognitive, physical, or psychological functioning, disability remains as a neglected component of the diversity spectrum (Davis, 2011; Olkin, 2002). As opposed to other areas of diversity, disability continues to be a haphazard, quasi-integrated characteristic of diversity within the higher education setting, often not accepted by other historically underrepresented minority groups (Gilson, DePoy, & MacDuffie, 2002). May and LaMont (2014) noted that, when establishing a framework to include learning disabilities within an understanding of diversity and multiculturalism, faculty perceived learning disabilities as a deficit and a negative characteristic of the student, rather than an accepted aspect of a student's overall identity. However, May (2012) found that students who enrolled in inclusive courses with students with an intellectual disability reported greater levels of acceptance towards various aspects of diversity, concluding that inclusion of student disability within the postsecondary setting "may foster positive attitudes about acceptance and diversity among students without such a disability" (p. 240).

Research has shown that stigmatization and discrimination can occur within the postsecondary setting for individuals with self-identifying disabilities (Holloway, 2001; Knis-Matthew, Bokara,

DeMeo, Lepore, & Mavus, 2007; Lechtenberger, Barnard-Brak, Sokolosky, & McCrary, 2012; Olney & Brockelman, 2003; Olney & Kim, 2001; Walker, 2008) and/or from historically underrepresented minority groups (Cabrera, 2012; Clayton, 2012; Hurtado, Alvarado, & Guillermo-Wann, 2015; Swift, 2013). However, disability is still frequently viewed as an identity of lesser value within a postsecondary diversity climate (Darling, 2013; Davis, 2011; Devlieger, Albrecht, & Hertz, 2007; Linton, 1998), with postsecondary experiences potentially varying for individuals depending of an individual's self-identified disability (e.g., apparent versus non-apparent). For instance, Haeger (2011) found that "the intersection of socioeconomic status and disability create an extreme form of stratification in college attendance for students with learning disabilities" (p. 8).

Enrollment and participation in higher education continues to increase for individuals with disabilities (Lovett & Lewandowski, 2006; Raue and Lewis, 2011; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, & Levine, 2005). Despite the growing presence in higher education, students with disabilities face additional challenges that other college students without disabilities may not encounter (Brockelman, Chadsey, & Loeb, 2006; Hadley, 2011; Hergenrather & Rhodes, 2007; May & Stone, 2010; Shackelford, 2009). The presence of a disability is traditionally viewed as a limitation for the individual with a self-identified disability (Barnes, 2006; Dudley-Marling, 2004; Quick, Lehmann &

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Deniston, 2003; Wax, 2014), and is often used as ground for discrimination and/or stigmatization (Green, 2007; Ryan, 2007; Trammell, 2009; Walker, 2008). The medical model of disability, which describes disability as an impairment and deficiency that must be fixed, has negatively impacted the perception of individuals with disabilities and has shaped public perception about disability (Artiles, 2013; Cole, 2009; Ong-Dean, 2005; Shaw, Chan, & McMahon, 2012; Watermeyer, 2013).

Establishing disability-diversity inclusion at the institutional level is key to fostering overall campus climate of acceptance and system-wide student inclusion. As noted in Wilson, Getzel, and Brown (2000), students with disabilities often do not feel welcome and supported in the postsecondary institutional climate. If students cannot fully feel accepted by the higher education community, and/or are not satisfied with their postsecondary experience, students with disabilities may not be able to experience full inclusion in this setting. Additionally, and similar to how other forms of diversity have been integrated and accepted within the postsecondary educational environment, student disability needs to be re-conceptualized as a form of student diversity rather than as impairment and a medical limitation.

A disconnect between disability and diversity is documented throughout the literature (Darling, 2013; Davis, 2011; Devlieger et al., 2007; King, 2009; Schlemper & Monk, 2011) and research has suggested that better inclusion and equity is needed for increased integration and success for students with disabilities in higher education (Garrison-Wade, 2012; Getzel, 2008; Grigal, Hart, & Weir, 2012; Huger, 2011; Kurth & Mellard, 2006). As noted by Berry (1997) when discussing the formation of acculturation, “integration can only be ‘freely’ chosen and successfully pursued by non-dominant groups when the dominant society is open and inclusive in its orientation towards cultural diversity” (p. 10). Similar to acculturation, students with disabilities must have the opportunity to incorporate the concept of disability within the diversity landscape, establishing the opportunity to bridge disability into diversity (Olkin, 2016). Although conceptualizations of complex, multifaceted influences on identity can be found in other fields (Hays, 2008; Sue, 2010), the lack of frameworks within postsecondary literature that approach disability as a component of diversity support the need to create a conceptual framework that redefines disability within the higher education environment.

Students’ Self-Perception of Disability Within the Postsecondary Setting

Possessing a disability does not assume all students will share the same postsecondary encounter. Whether it is the student’s specific type of disability, institutional environment, socio-academic inclusion, or overall self-identity, students with disabilities undergo various transitions within the higher education setting, influencing their academic achievement and overall experience. Limited social opportunities and underutilization of accommodations and support services contribute to a large percentage of students with disabilities not completing degree requirements and leaving college early (Quick et al., 2003).

To better understand students with disabilities and the potential stigma and exclusion they may face, it is vital to learn first-hand accounts of what they may endure. Troiano (2003) interviewed college-level students with learning disabilities regarding their postsecondary experiences and understanding of their diagnosis and found that the students interviewed had, over a period of time, established reactions to and opinions of their learning disability developed, in part, by their college experiences and noted that “students discovered that the more they understood about their learning disability and their individual needs, the easier it would be to communicate those needs to others” (Troiano, 2003, p. 408). One of the responses to potential stigmatization experienced directly related to the disability, highlighted how an individual may construct and identify various levels of one’s identity, with disability serving as a negative contribution:

Perhaps the most moving account of feeling stigmatized came from Shawna. She described her father’s initial reaction to her learning disability diagnosis: My father, he told me this and I believe it, that you should try not to let people put that label on you, that label of a learning disability. He said you already have a label as a woman, and then as a Black woman. Don’t let people put one more label on you that is going to hold you from succeeding and that is going to make people expect less from you. (Troiano, 2003, p. 413)

This case highlights that individuals with a disability, and those around them, can understand various components of their overall identity (e.g., gender, ethnicity, etc.), yet still conceptualize disability as a ‘lesser than’ aspect of who they are.

Promoting Impairment Instead of Ability: Medical Model of Disability

As currently defined by the World Health Organization's International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF), disability is understood as a term for "impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions. Disability is the interaction between individuals with a health condition . . . and personal and environmental factors (e.g. negative attitudes, inaccessible transportation and public buildings, and limited social supports)" (World Health Organization, 2013, para. 1). Prior to the redefined interpretation of disability at the beginning of the 21st century, the World Health Organization (WHO) promoted their initial definition of disability. Created in 1980, the definition was medically-focused and viewed disability apart from a human experience. *In the International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities, and Handicaps*, the WHO (1980) established three influential interpretations of the concept of disability including, (1) impairment - "any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological, or anatomical structure of function" (p. 27), (2) disability- "any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being" (p. 28), and (3) handicap - "a disadvantage for a given individual, resulting from an impairment or a disability, that limits or prevents the fulfillment of a role that is normal (depending on age, sex, and social and cultural factors) for that individual" (p. 29).

For the past two decades, this widely accepted understanding of disability fails to distinguish between various types of disability, identify additional components to assist with accommodation supports, and frame disability as a mainstreamed, universal experience (Accessing Safety, 2010). The 1980 WHO definition served as the structure for the medical model of disability that was used in subsequent disability policy and initiative governance. The medical model of disability conceptualizes disability as a pathology, rooting disability within stigmatization (Cole, 2009; Shaw et al., 2012). According to Artiles (2013), "the medical model's defining characteristic is the assumption that disability is located in biological impairments . . . implicit in the 'damaged body' trope of the medical model are uninterrogated assumptions about the normal body" (p. 334). The model is driven by addressing an individual's disability as a mode for eventual change and improvement (Watermeyer, 2013), viewing

disability not as a component of one's overall identity but a problem to be remediated through supportive services. While the model provides a foundation for policies and overarching legalities, the medical model of disability establishes a distinct separation between disability and all other demographic factors (e.g., ethnicity, social class, gender, etc.), thus increasing the potential for disintegration between disability and other identity memberships (Artiles, 2013). This criticism serves as the impetus for redefining how disability is interpreted in the academic and professional sectors, and account for the current, stigmatized identity of disability (Ong-Dean, 2005).

Connecting Disability to Diversity: Theoretical Frameworks

A response to the medical model of disability and its focus on disability as a debilitating limitation in an individual's life, the social model of disability defines disability as a component of social construction, placing the idea of disability within society, not within the individual (Artiles, 2013). Viewing disability as a potentially excluded element of the social environment (i.e., social perception disabling the individual rather than the actual diagnosis), the social model of disability seeks to eliminate the current segregation between individuals with and without disabilities (Shakespeare, 2006). This social constructionist approach highlights how the current undermining of one's disability status stems from the medical management of disability, creating the deep-seated stigmatization of disability, the medical community assuming the need to "fix" or "cure" disability, and the inaccurate categorization and labeling of disability (Barnes, 1991; Oliver, 1990; Oliver & Barnes, 1993). This understanding of how disability is perceived (not as a limitation but a socially-produced mindset) increases the accountability of the environment around the individual with a disability and attempts to decrease the stigmatization of disability.

Similar to the social model of disability, the minority group model, a framework structured on the "sociopolitical definition of disability" (Hahn, 1996, p. 41), explains the current construct of disability as a stigmatizing and oppressive discriminatory characteristic. This stigmatization acts as the most significant, and impinging, component of an individual's disability (Hahn, 1985). Hahn (1986) structured the paradigm on three overarching postulates including that

individuals with disabilities experience the majority of disability-related obstacles through the negative perception of disability and how their functioning (or lack thereof) is viewed (even if their overall functionality is incorrectly assumed), that societal perception of disability is rooted in how policy conceptualizes and organizes disability within society, and that there is a cyclical effect between the social perception of disability and the creation and implementation of disability policy. Although public perception is influenced by enacted policies, societal views of disability prejudices how policy is structured and subsequently instituted (Hahn, 1986).

Acknowledging that the current lack of equity for individuals with disabilities promotes the idea of impairment instead of equality, this model calls for the need to improve rights for individuals with disabilities (Hahn, 1983; Hahn, 1987; Shapiro, 1993). Hahn (1996) noted that disability is stereotypically viewed as a limiting, sympathy-induced personal hardship, causing pity instead of empowerment (the latter often created through other minority-focused movements). However, the model lays a foundation for individuals with disabilities by framing disability as a unifying, minority-group community-building characteristic, and acknowledging disability as an oppressed minority group identity (Landsman, 2005). Although this framework highlights a vital component of disability (identity oppression creating a minority status), it does not consider how disability as a minority status is included within an academic environment.

Lastly, and of particular importance, the theory of intersectionality establishes the vital junctures needed in bridging disability within the diversity milieu, promoting the identification of multiple diversity memberships. Developed by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991), *intersectionality*, identifies the experiences of “subgroups without a larger identity category are marginalized, through understanding the cultural construction of identities within and across individuals, and uncovering how social, institutional, and political structures shape and reinforce identity formation, and influence identity salience across contexts” (Garcia & Ortiz, 2013, p. 37). The concept of intersectionality was originally created for, and applied to, critical scholarship focused on inequality and concerns related to gender and ethnicity. However, it has evolved into a more frequently used application, thoroughly exploring the function and dispersal of justice and equity for various groups and identities (Hancock, 2007). According to Cole (2009), intersectionality

makes meaning of the potential junctions and obstacles created by an individual’s membership and identification of multiple identities. Identity intersections may affect individuals uniquely, with the potential for increased discrimination due to the additional diversity identity components (memberships) they are identifying with (Purdie-Vaughns, & Eibach, 2008).

An individual may possess multiple identities (e.g., disability, specific racial/ethnic status, sexual orientation, etc.), allowing specific identities to be more salient than others (Erevelles & Minear, 2010). Moreover, Erevelles and Minear (2010) noted intersectionality can occur within three distinct framework categories: anticategorical (intersections are social constructs), intracategorical (intersections are due to layered stigmas), and constitutive (intersections are conditional and occur within specific contexts). Regardless of the specific lens of the intersectionality framework, the theoretical concept highlights the probability and frequency of establishing and identifying with multiple memberships.

Though it was not initially included, disability serves as a vital component of the intersectionality framework. Disability intersects with racial or ethnic background, gender, sexual orientation, and/or religious affiliation. However, disability has been considered to be a limiting, “lesser than” membership among other diversity characteristics (Hirschmann, 2013). Although numerous groups can experience similar marginalization, disability endures as one of the most significant and debilitating membership categories affected by discriminatory social perception (Stanley, Buenavista, Masequesmay, & Uba, 2013). As noted by Erevelles and Minear (2010), the “omission of disability . . . [in] intersectionality has disastrous and sometimes deadly consequences for disabled people of color caught at the violent interstices of multiple differences” (p. 128). Including disability is necessary to diminish the historical stigmatization faced by this population and assist in better integrating individuals with disabilities within the higher education environment.

Traditionally, diversity has been narrowly defined and has not fully applied to varying and multiple social identities (Artiles, 2003). Research focused on disability often focuses on outside support (e.g., role of family, community) and logistics (e.g., policy, service availability); however, there has been limited research investigating how multiple identities and institutional climate intersect with students’ disabilities and influence overall academic success (Garcia

& Ortiz, 2008). Additionally, other diversity memberships have diminished the connection and perceptual similarities between ethnicity, gender, and disability. As noted in Erevelles and Minear (2010), associating disability with ethnicity, specifically African Americanism, has been “detrimental” (p. 132) to individuals of color within the diversity landscape in the United States, thus promoting disability as a separate, medical abnormality. For other identity memberships, it has been perceived that associations with disability decrease the empowerment and increased equity fought for (Artiles, 2011). Exploring the impact of disability on Asian Americans through the use of the National Latino and Asian American Study dataset, Mereish (2012) found that Asian Americans with disabilities experience more discrimination, distress, and oppression than those not identifying with a disability. To note, of the 2,095 Asian Americans included within the sample, 15.8% identified as having a disability, which is reflective and proportionally appropriate to the 19% of U.S. civilian non-institutionalized population living with a disability (United States Census Bureau, 2010). Although the effect sizes of the author’s findings were small, this study highlights that despite the potential for stigmatization and oppression due to racial/ ethnic membership, the presence of a disability increases experienced stigmatization and discrimination.

The intersectionality framework provides an important and suitable foundation for exploring the connections and divergences occurring for individuals with disabilities and the complexities of possessing additional cultural-social identities (Mereish, 2012). When exploring the intersectionality of disability, age, gender, and ethnicity in harassment allegations, Shaw et al. (2012) found that possessing a behavioral disability and/or identifying with another minority status (e.g., female, racial minority background) increased individuals’ likelihood of experiencing disability harassment. Although Shaw et al.’s (2012) study explored disability harassment in the postsecondary employment setting, it can be inferred that presence of disability and impact of other identity memberships may yield similar experiences and potential harassment/ stigmatization occurrences within the higher education setting.

Conceptual Framework: Disability-Diversity (Dis)Connect Model

Although disability, specifically within the academic environment, has been explored, little research has documented the importance of its inclusion in diversity literature. The Disability-Diversity (Dis) Connect Model (DDDM), a new conceptual framework, approaches disability as a multifaceted aspect of campus diversity. It is hypothesized that the current institutional climate is limited in its knowledge and understanding of student disability within a higher education setting due to minimal exposure and awareness of disability. This environment then perpetuates the continued lack of awareness and misunderstanding of student disability. Drawing upon theoretical underpinnings rooted in the social model of disability (Oliver, 1996), minority group model (Hahn, 1986), and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Hirschmann, 2013), in the DDDM, it is postulated that the role of postsecondary student disability is structured through the student’s own acknowledgement of disability. This understanding of disability can then enable students with disabilities to recognize past stigmatization, develop resiliency, and move toward a greater understanding of postsecondary student diversity.

Model Postulates

The DDDM framework is predicated on seven tenets related both to the experiences of students with disabilities as well as postsecondary community members’ perception of disability within the higher education environment. Disability is often a minimal aspect of postsecondary diversity with limited opportunities to increase student empowerment and campus-based awareness (Davis, 2011). Disability must not only be viewed as a component of diversity but also be acknowledged as unique student characteristic. Students with disabilities “cross all racial, gender, educational, socioeconomic, and organizational lines” (Disabled World, 2014, para. 1) and serve as the largest multicultural minority (Anderson, 2006).

The DDDM framework is grounded on the following tenets:

1. Disability is influenced by social constructs (Oliver, 1996; Shakespeare, 2006) the medical definition of disability (Artiles, 2013; Cole, 2009; Shaw et al., 2012), as well as the legal definition of disability. Within the postsecondary environment, this can be instru-

mental in guiding students' accommodation plan process and structure their postsecondary experience. Possessing a disability within the postsecondary educational environment can be viewed as a multifaceted component of diversity with socially, medically, and legally structured features, allowing the opportunity for disability to be a part of the student's identity.

2. Self-identification and accommodation plan development may create stigma within an education environment, with students and faculty not fully aware of what a disability truly means (Hadley, 2009; May & Stone, 2010; Milsom & Hartley, 2005). When a student self-identifies and establishes an accommodation plan, it is a voluntary commitment a student participates in. Despite this voluntary commitment for accommodation support, members of the postsecondary community should not discriminate or judge as they may also participate in voluntary commitments within the higher education environment similar to disability service support (i.e., scheduling coursework to accommodate personal needs).
3. Disability within a postsecondary dynamic is often indicative of student stigmatization (Holloway, 2001; Olney & Brockelman, 2003; Olney & Kim, 2001). Students with disabilities may experience social exclusion from their peers and/or feel unacknowledged in campus activity programming and diversity-based coursework. Because of this unique experience, disability could be considered a postsecondary minority status (Hahn, 1985; Hahn, 1996), similar to minority categories including ethnicity, thus an essential component of diversity.
4. Students with disabilities can identify as a member of their postsecondary student diversity system because of their disability or a combination of their disability and another diversity categorization (Hirschmann, 2013). "Disability-diversity" is the understanding of disability as an equal, non-stigmatized characteristic of student diversity and is created through understanding one's own disability and how perception of disability within the socio-academic environment plays in overall identity formation. Impact of disability with-

in a student's "disability-diversity" identity can vary among individuals.

5. The intersection of identities (e.g., presence of disability, gender, racial background, sexual orientation, etc.) is interpreted and understood uniquely by each individual (Crenshaw, 1991; Hirschmann, 2013). Interpretation of various memberships and their impact on a student's life can evolve with new life experiences (e.g., beginning college).
6. The idea of disability within the postsecondary environment continues to evolve (Shallish, 2015). Minimal exposure within a campus setting and frequent exclusion from diversity-based activities forces students with disabilities to perceive their disability as an unaccepted component of higher education diversity. As disability becomes a consistent, ongoing aspect of student diversity, students will view disability not so much as a medical impairment but as a vital and accepted component of higher education diversity.
7. Disability is not static and includes physical, emotional, intellectual disabilities or a combination of multiple disability categorizations. There are many types of disabilities that should not be viewed as a singular entity (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014; Raue & Lewis, 2011; World Health Organization, 2011). To be truly accepted as a component of diversity, disability must be understood as a multifaceted, multifunctioning concept contributing to the individual's overall identity. For example, level of functioning, type of disability, and the disability visibility (e.g., wheelchair use, use of adaptive technology) all contributes to understanding diversity within student disability as well.

Defining the Disability-Diversity (Dis)Connect Model

Considered a groundbreaking higher education-based theoretical framework, Tinto's (1975) model of students' persistence investigated the importance and impact of students' social integration within the campus environment on their retention and commitment to graduate. However, as noted in Hurtado and Carter (1997), the framework did not address students' sense of belonging within the higher education environment for student groups who are considered racially or ethnically diverse. When using the term 'integration,' negative connotations may be associat-

ed with the understanding of this term under Tinto's original theoretical framework and that "integration can mean something completely different to student groups who have been historically marginalized in higher education" (Hurtado & Carter, 1997, p. 326).

Research notes that, although not included in literature exploring the marginalization of student of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, students with disabilities also endure stigmatization and marginalization within the educational setting (Herrick, 2011; McCune, 2001; Wilson et al., 2000). Students with disabilities may have similarly unique postsecondary integration experiences as students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds and, therefore, the use of 'integration' can be argued as a justified term for this model and can be considered what Hurtado and Carter (1997) termed "a subjective sense of integration" (p. 341). Therefore, the DDDM will use the terms "inclusion" and "integration" interchangeably, where both encapsulate students' sense of belonging, peer interactions, and acceptance in social and academic experiences in a higher education setting and is aware of the critique made of the original idea of student integration and will present evidence that students with disabilities are also within the marginalized interpretation of integration as well.

Miller, Parker, and Fillinson (2004) argued that a new, overarching label could assist in diminishing stigma associated with disability. However, current frameworks and social perception of disability make this a challenging task (Waterstone & Stein, 2008). As indicated in Figure 1, student disability is frequently influenced by the medical model of disability and the traditional understanding of student diversity, negatively impacting disabled students' opportunity to integrate without stigmatization from others (Artiles, 2011; Artiles, 2013; Davis, 2011; Linton, 1998). The DDDM framework serves as a foundation in restructuring the role of student disability within a postsecondary setting. Including disability into the postsecondary diversity is multifaceted and students, faculty, and staff must all contribute to realigning the disability-diversity disconnect. The amalgamation of social and medical theoretical concepts and the incorporation of resiliency and identity development allow for holistic and positive approach to student disability. The crux of the DDDM framework is rooted in the advocacy of equal acceptance and inclusion in a diverse college setting. Jones and McEwen (2000) noted the importance of an individual's understanding oneself as possessing multiple identities, transcending

identity development beyond a single component of "self." If individuals understand disability as an equal component of diversity, increased inclusion of students with disabilities within the postsecondary environment can occur.

Within the Disability-Diversity (Dis)Connect Model, two modes of disability – diversity emerge in college environments, presenting the ability, or inability, for students with disabilities to be included and confront similar issues as students identifying with other diversity memberships. Each disability – diversity experience relates to both the students' perception of the role their disability plays in their life and the postsecondary environment.

The two student disability transitional types within the Disability-Diversity (Dis)Connect Model include:

- *Disability-Diversity Disconnect:* The student with a disability does not have the desire to fully (or intentionally) participate within the postsecondary environment and does not integrate due to difficulty incorporating disability into postsecondary environment and possessing dissimilar experiences from students identifying with other diversity memberships. Students within this type have negative experiences integrating within the higher education environment. The student does not view the college environment accepting of disability, specifically as a component of student diversity. The disability-diversity disconnect remains.
- *Disability-Diversity Connect:* The student with a disability perceives his/her disability as one of the many components within his/her overall identity and role within a postsecondary setting. Additionally, disability within the postsecondary environment may be viewed as a component of postsecondary diversity. The student believes that disability is fully incorporated into student diversity and an equally important characteristic within the postsecondary diversity milieu. Feelings of disability–diversity inclusion occur through positive experiences of self-development, desire to participate within the postsecondary community, and achievement of socioacademic goals. The disability – diversity disconnect no longer remains.

As cited in Clark, Middleton, Nguyen, and Zwick (2014), institutional integration “refers to a student’s ability to adapt to and assimilate into educational environments (p. 31) and organized into two specific types – academic integration and social integration (Tinto, 1975; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Astin, 1975). Although academic and social integration both occur within the same postsecondary environment, academic integration focuses on students’ academic performance, ability to endure educational demands, and achieve academic goals and social integration is students’ involvement with activities and developing social interactions and networks (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Astin, 1975, 1993). Although they are unique entities, research indicates a potential positive relationship between the two forms of integration that may impact the successful completion of postsecondary requirements (Pan, Guo, Alikonis, & Bai., 2008; Tinto, 1975; Ullah & Wilson, 2007).

Illustrated in Figure 2, students with disabilities can perceive their postsecondary experiences, and the construct of disability, is either positive and included (“Disability-Diversity Connect”) or negative and disconnected (“Disability-Diversity Disconnect”). At the point of enrollment, each student possesses specific characteristics that may lead to his or her postsecondary experience, including demographic characteristics (e.g., ethnicity, gender, disability type, etc.). In addition to one’s demographic features, a student’s choice of higher education institution (e.g., public/private, two-year/four-year, level of selectivity, etc.) may affect his or her overall experience of higher education. The unique combination of demographic and institutional characteristics lead to the overall diversity of the student and the postsecondary environment. Moreover, these characteristics may lead to students’ future academic and social opportunities within the higher education environment. Increased access to academic and social experiences within the postsecondary setting may impact the perceived level of academic and social integration (postsecondary inclusion) for students with disabilities; however, and most importantly, students with disabilities must perceive that disability is an included and accepted component of student diversity to perceive they are truly connected to their institutional setting.

The DDDM:

Bridging the Missing Link in Student Diversity

The DDDM introduces a new approach to understanding student disability within a higher education setting. Historically, student disability has been viewed under theoretical mindsets with a focus on impairment, stigma, and oppression. The DDDM establishes the importance for inclusion of disability within student diversity for greater student acceptance and inclusion within a higher education dynamic. Students with disabilities can have varying experiences that are influenced by their disability and its impact on their postsecondary experience. In order to redefine student diversity, students with disabilities and higher education institutions must begin to incorporate disability within diversity for better inclusion and overall acceptance. Additionally, for a student to understand disability as an important and equal component of his or her identity, intersecting with other identity characteristics, their perception of the disability and their understood role within the postsecondary education must be positive. When a student participates in academic and social environments on campus, his or her feelings of acceptance and perceived inclusion have a greater likelihood of occurrence. When a student feels accepted and integrated, he or she has a greater opportunity to understand the disability as another component of one’s identity and, therefore, blends more seamlessly with other diversity characteristics. This is when disability can truly intersect within diversity.

The significance of this new conceptual framework is to underscore the need for improved inclusion of disability within the diversity spectrum. Little research includes equal importance of disability within student diversity. Moreover, research does not always address the multidimensional construct of disability. Olney and Brockelman (2005) found that students with disabilities often interpret their disability differently depending on their gender and type of disability they possess. The DDDM framework lays a foundation for future research on the integration of student disability within the postsecondary diversity dynamic and the importance of personal interpretation of disability in relation to others in overall identity development. Reimagining the social and medical influences contributing to the current perception of disability in higher education can assist in identifying the current cyclical relationship between the stigmatization of student disability at the postsecondary level, student awareness of disability, and the socio-academic experiences of students with disabilities.

Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, and Allen (1998) noted that although the higher education environment cannot reverse historical exclusion of minority groups of specific racial backgrounds, it is vital to assess the current postsecondary landscape to ensure there are no longer segregating components of student diversity. Similar to historical assimilation and desegregation of other diversity categories (e.g., ethnicity, gender) within the postsecondary environment, disability must be reassessed for its importance of inclusion as part of the student diversity landscape. Confluence of the medical model of disability, social perception and confusion as to what constitutes disability and how it applies to the postsecondary setting continues to perpetuate ongoing stigmatization and results in the exclusion from its identification as a positive component of diversity membership. As noted earlier, research has shown that level of inclusion and postsecondary expectations may contribute to the understanding of student disability within a higher education environment. However, much more work needs to be done to better cognize if students identifying with other diversity memberships parallel similar experiences, creating comparable postsecondary experiences related to the overarching contribution of diversity within the higher education milieu. If disability remains disintegrated within the postsecondary setting, it can be assumed that the disability–diversity disconnect is present and perpetuated at a postsecondary level. Additionally, further investigation is required to establish if students identifying with both a disability and another diversity membership, exhibit more negative socio-academic experiences due to the presence of a disability than just with the other diversity membership alone.

Implications for the Field

Exploring the existence of a potential disability–diversity “disconnect” is critical to elucidating the current perception of whether or not disability is accepted as a part of student diversity in the higher education setting. Although the DDDM is theoretically based, higher education administrators can incorporate the model within institutional initiatives to ensure that students, faculty, and staff have a better awareness of disability as a form of diversity and increase accessibility and acceptance for students with disabilities in academic and social opportunities afforded to other diverse student populations. Additionally, accessibility specialists and disability support

staff may use the model to develop student activities and workshops rooted in expanding the current perception of student diversity to include all types of disabilities. Although federal policy calls for increased access for and prohibits discrimination against students with disabilities, disability within the higher education environment serves as the “last frontier” of student equality and inclusion. Due to the current perception of student disability as a form of impairment at the postsecondary level, rather than as a part of student diversity, understanding the role of disability in the campus climate and including students with disabilities into academic and social settings may be a challenging task for fellow students, faculty, and administrators; however, the DDDM may provide the foundation to expand the current postsecondary understanding of student diversity to include students with disabilities as well.

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Figure 1. Elements Influencing Student Disability Identity Development Within Higher Education. (Aquino, 2016)

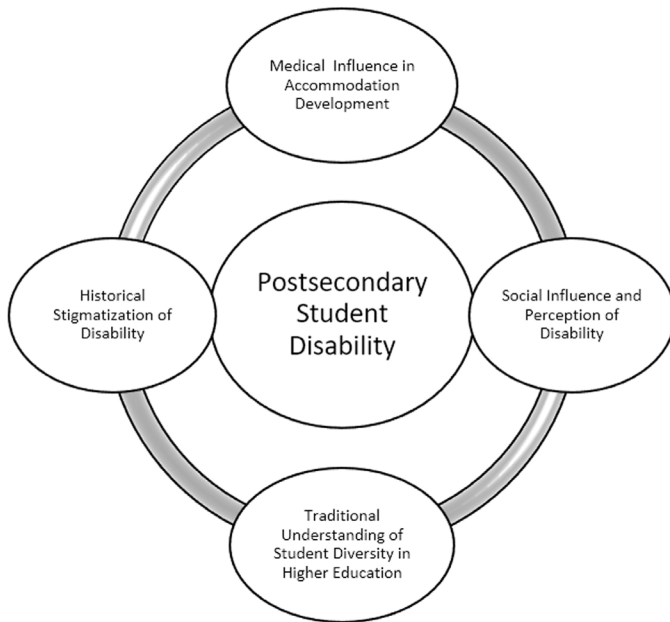


Figure 2. The Disability-Diversity (Dis)Connect Model. (Aquino, 2016)

