

Breaking Barriers and Building Bridges: Understanding How a Student Organization Attends to the Social Integration of College Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

While scholars have indicated that social involvement is crucial to students' development and success in college life and beyond, very little empirical research investigates how students with disabilities become socially integrated in college settings. In response, this qualitative study examines the social experiences of five college students with physical disabilities who participate in LEVEL, a student organization that aims to create accessible social experiences for students of all abilities and educate students and the broader community about ableism. The key findings of this study revealed that participants experienced feelings of isolation prior to joining LEVEL, LEVEL provided an opportunity to dispel ableist assumptions and misconceptions, and LEVEL engendered the formation of friendships. These findings have direct significance in advancing the field of disability in higher education and aiding in the design of collegiate programs and organizations that raise ableism awareness and foster social integration between students of all abilities.

Keywords: Ableism, socialization, service delivery, physical disability

The stressors of college can pose a challenge for any individual, as students often report feeling overwhelmed and anxious when negotiating complex academic standards with their newly forged autonomy (Misra & McKean, 2000). Unfortunately, the difficulties that a person might encounter in this environment are compounded when he or she has a disability. As recently as 1970, students with documented disabilities could be rejected from colleges and universities across the United States solely on account of their disability status (Paul, 2000). While legislation such as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 mitigates this discrimination, college students with disabilities still maintain "disproportionally high course failure rates, low retention rates, and low graduation rates" (Murray, Lombardi, & Kosty, 2014, p. 31).

These statistics are especially salient for students with physical disabilities, as researchers (Dovidio, Pagotto, & Hebl, 2011; Krahe & Altwasser, 2006;

Read, Morton, & Ryan, 2015) found that they are stigmatized because they visibly fall outside of the range of what is considered normative. This stigma is rooted in ableism, "a pervasive system of discrimination and exclusion that oppresses people with disabilities" (Rauscher & McClintock, 1996, p. 198). Ultimately, ableism privileges those who are typically-abled (i.e., a person who possesses physical, social, emotional, and/or cognitive characteristics that align with what is perceived as normative) and devalues those who do not adhere to the norm. While some individuals with disabilities choose to "pass," or conceal social markers of their disability as to avoid stigma and align with what is socially construed as "normal," passing is difficult, if not impossible, for an individual with an apparent physical disability (Brune & Wilson, 2013).

Since typically-abled individuals can exhibit bias against or avoidance of people with physical disabilities, college students with physical disabilities face a unique set of challenges related to their integration

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into the university environment (Dovidio et al., 2011). More specifically, the stigma associated with disability has the potential to negatively affect a person with a disability, as one's collegiate experience can shape his or her belief system, self-concept, and identity (Matthews, Ly, & Goldberg, 2015; Read et al., 2015). In order to rectify these issues, Hadley (2011) has called for "cultural centers and student organizations for students with disabilities to support connections between students with disabilities and their allies on campus" (p. 80).

The current body of literature, however, lacks empirical work focused on university students with physical disabilities and their interaction in said social support systems. Of those studies that examine socialization between typically-abled college students and their peers with disabilities, the emphasis has primarily been on invisible disabilities such as autism spectrum disorder ([ASD]; Matthews et al., 2015), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder ([ADHD]; Meyer, Myers, Walmsley, & Laux, 2012) or intellectual disabilities (Griffin, Summer, McMillan, Day, & Hodapp, 2012). Moreover, the research that has addressed physical disability and collegiate socialization has explored the benefits of participation in athletics (Blinde & Taub, 1999; Huang & Brittain, 2006; Taub, Blinde, & Greer, 1999; Wessel, Wentz, & Marke, 2011) as opposed to group or club affiliations.

In response, this study focuses a lens on five college students with physical disabilities that participate in LEVEL, a student organization formed at a private, Mid-Atlantic university in 2011. LEVEL aims to create accessible social experiences for students of all abilities and educate students and the broader community about ableism. Thus, this qualitative study is premised on the question: *How are the social experiences of college students with disabilities affected by their participation in LEVEL?*

College Students with Disabilities: Integration, Accessibility, and Ableism

The theoretical framework used to guide this research melds Tinto's (1975, 1993) theory of university integration and retention with experiences specific to college students with disabilities. In addition, it addresses the ways in which ableism complicates the integration of college students with physical disabilities.

Retention, Matriculation, and Integration

In the United States, the number of individuals with disabilities who graduate from high school and pursue a postsecondary education is on the rise (Belch, 2004; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005). Wagner et al. (2005) found that 26% of people with disabilities participated in postsecondary education, in the form of either two-year (20%) or four year (6%) programs, after leaving high school. However, the retention of students with disabilities in both two- and four-year colleges remains an issue. Drawing on data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students Study ([BPS]; U.S. Department of Education, 2001), Steele and Wolanin (2004) noted that 41% of all college students with disabilities left school prior to graduation as compared to 33% of their typically-abled peers. According to the 2013 American Community Survey (ACS), only 31.6% of individuals with orthopedic impairments and 30.4% of individuals who identified as blind or visually impaired have attained college or associates degrees (Erickson, Lee, & von Schrader, 2015). As a result, individuals with disabilities, especially those with disabilities related to mobility or vision, are less likely to obtain a postsecondary degree (Wagner et al., 2005).

Tinto's (1975) seminal work on the processes that lead individuals to drop out of institutions of higher education provides a robust theoretical frame for examining the aforementioned statistics. Drawing on the work of Durkheim (1961) and Spady (1970), Tinto (1975) argued that persistence in college is the result of myriad interactions between an individual and the academic and social systems within his or her institution. As such, he has identified two major factors—academic and social integration—as having an effect on issues of college student retention. The higher the degree of integration, the more likely it is that an individual persists in college.

Academic Integration and Physical Disabilities

From an academic standpoint, integration relates to grade performance (i.e., the ability to meet academic standards) and intellectual development (i.e., one's identification with the norms of the given academic system). In order to integrate academically an individual is able to find congruence between himself or herself and the "intellectual climate" of the college or university. Additionally, that person must be able to perform at or above a desired academic level (Tinto, 1975).

Academically, many college students with physical disabilities require accommodations, such as extended time or use of readers or transcribers, in order to fairly and fully participate in the postsecondary environment. Unfortunately, accommodations are not always easy to apply for, and some students with disabilities avoid seeking these supports because of the level of self-exposure that this process can entail (Marshak, Van Wieren, Ferrell, Swiss, & Dugan, 2010; Murray et al., 2014; Paul, 2000). In their exploratory study of the barriers that prevent students with disabilities from seeking and utilizing these support services in college, Marshak et al. (2010) identified five issues as most salient: identity concerns, desire to avoid negative social reaction, insufficient knowledge regarding how to apply for an accommodation, perceived quality and usefulness of services, and negative experiences with professors. Ultimately, failure to pursue or receive necessary supports has the potential to jeopardize one's grade performance (Pingry O'Neill, Markward, & French, 2012), which Tinto (1975) identified as critical to one's academic integration.

Academic service delivery is another key consideration for college students with physical disabilities. Since the delivery of accommodations is often enacted by faculty or a member of the campus's Office of Disability Services (ODS), many college students with disabilities end up spending the majority of their time with adults rather than their same-aged peers (Marshak, et al., 2010; Morris, 2001; Paul, 2000). While this can prove academically beneficial to the student, these interactions have the potential to limit the development of peer-to-peer relationships (Morris, 2001).

Social Integration and Physical Disabilities

According to Tinto's (1975) framework, social integration is comprised of three main elements. First, he notes the importance of *interaction with faculty and administrative personnel within the college*, as faculty mentors can provide much needed support for college students as they transition into higher education. Of equal importance are *semi-formal extracurricular activities*, which consist of structured social engagements such as university clubs, organizations, or Greek life. Finally, *informal peer group associations* represent the friendships that form outside of, and often as a result of, semi-formal extracurricular activities.

While social integration is critical for any student at the postsecondary level (Tinto, 1975), it is partic-

ularly important to consider in relation to physical disability, as it has been shown to foster competence, autonomy, and the formation of a healthy self-identity (Belch, 2004; Hadley, 2011; Morris, 2001; Wessel et al., 2011). However, few students with disabilities actually participate in social groups and organizations due to the existence of physical barriers (e.g., lack of accessibility within the environment itself) or the attitudinal barriers of their typically-abled classmates (Dovidio et al., 2011).

Although colleges and universities are required to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), issues related to ease of physical accessibility, both within the classroom and across the campus at large, still abound. In fact, researchers (Rimmer, Riley, Wang, Rauworth, & Jurkowski, 2004; Simonson, Glick, & Nobe, 2013) found that students' perceptions of campus accessibility directly inform their engagement at that institution. For these reasons, the physical environment of a college campus plays into a student's sense of belonging, as ease of accessibility engenders his or her feelings of inclusivity.

Peer attitudes prove equally important. Scholars have revealed that many college students experience issues with peers and related social integration largely as the result of subtle or overt forms of ableism (Belch, 2004; Dovidio et al., 2011; Hadley, 2011). Ableism separates individuals with disabilities from those who are typically-abled by valuing what is considered socially normative. As Hehir (2007) explained, this can mean "assert[ing] that it is preferable for a child to read print rather than Braille, walk rather than use a wheelchair, spell independently rather than use a spell-checker, [and] read written text rather than listen to a book on tape" (p. 9). Ableism is particularly problematic at the collegiate level. For example, a typically-abled student might exercise implicit ableism toward a peer with a physical disability by hosting a social event off-campus without considering the accessibility of the venue, or display overt ableism, such as avoiding contact with a peer with a disability because he is non-verbal. In fact, research (Dovidio et al., 2011; Read et al., 2015) has shown that many typically-abled college students actively choose not to interact with peers with disabilities because they are unsure of how to navigate the relationship.

Since the often negative attitudes of typically-abled peers can affect the emotional well-being (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; Lombardi, Murray, & Gerdes, 2011; Murray et al., 2014; Paul, 2000; Stein, 2014) and reten-

tion (Belch, 2004; Matthews et al., 2015) of students with disabilities, integration into semi-formal extracurricular activities, such as clubs or student groups, is critical. As Hadley (2011) explained:

If successful integration and involvement does not happen, there will be a greater chance for at-risk students to feel isolated and withdraw. This is certainly applicable to students with disabilities, whose disabilities may require additional time to do daily collegiate tasks (e.g., homework, getting around campus) or their ability to interact with others, academically and socially. (p. 79)

Thus, an individual's capacity to accomplish collegiate tasks and interact with peers is directly informed by his or her ability to integrate, which ultimately influences that person's college trajectory.

In addition to being able to integrate into student organizations, an individual with a disability must be provided with opportunities to form meaningful personal relationships with campus peers. Belch (2004) contended that doing so "permits individuals to feel noticed, feel important enough to be cared about, feel empathy from others, and feel appreciated for one's efforts and contributions" (p. 9). In line with Tinto's (1975) theory of college persistence, these peer group associations are essential to students' well-being, retention, and success in higher education. While interpersonal relationships may occur informally (i.e., through typical day-to-day interaction between students on campus), interactions via extracurricular activities often engender friendship (Tinto, 1993).

Since individuals with disabilities can encounter ableism as related to their perceived differences, it is of paramount importance that they engage in programs that facilitate social inclusion (de Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2012). However, there are few on-campus organizations or groups that offer meaningful, positive social interaction between individuals with physical disabilities and their typically-abled peers. Moreover, while studies (Patrick & Wessel, 2013) have investigated the effects of faculty mentorship on the transition experiences of college students with disabilities, very little empirical research examines how students with physical disabilities experience social integration with their university peers. Thus, the purpose of this study was to understand how LEVEL, a student organization associated with the ODS, affected the social experiences of college students with physical disabilities.

Methods

Qualitative methodology was selected to gain a better understanding of the shared experiences of five participants engaging in LEVEL during the 2013-2014 academic year (Creswell & Creswell, 2007). As such, pre- and post-program interviews shed light on the ways in which the social experiences of participants were affected by their involvement in LEVEL.

Research Context

LEVEL is an on-campus, student organization formed at a private, Mid-Atlantic university in 2011. LEVEL aims to create accessible social experiences for students of all abilities and educate students and the broader community about ableism. As such, the linguistic choice of a palindrome, "level," versus an acronym, is intended to capture the reciprocal nature of the partnership forged between individuals with disabilities and their typically-abled peers. LEVEL was founded by a university student and is currently run by an executive board of students who oversee scheduling, financial operations, and public relations. As a student organization, it is affiliated with the ODS on the university's campus. Several members of the executive board self-identify as having a disability.

As means of directly facilitating socialization, LEVEL hosts bi-weekly meetings and several fully accessible on- and off-campus social events that include trips to sporting events, music venues, museums, and other local attractions. In addition, the yearly retreat is held at a fully accessible outdoor ropes course. In planning fully accessible social events, the organization aims to promote ableism awareness by calling students' attention to the inaccessibility of many popular social events and destinations for students, such as many local bars, restaurants, and even some campus dormitories. LEVEL members also plan events that are specifically intended to raise ableism awareness more broadly across campus, as they conduct panels, bring in guest speakers, and host an annual on-campus fundraiser. These events are attended by students of all abilities.

Additionally, members of LEVEL work collaboratively to complete what are referred to as "LEVEL hours." During these hours, students with disabilities complete academic assignments alongside university peers; these peers can function as their scribes, take notes, or otherwise facilitate accommodations that would have been previously provided by an aide or an individual associated with the ODS. While the hours

usually involve a typically-abled student providing accommodations to a peer with a disability, individuals with disabilities also perform this function. In all cases, these partnerships are unique, as they replace the student-adult dyad and offer a point of interaction between same-aged peers. Although these hours contain an academic component, the intention is to facilitate social connections between students within LEVEL.

At the time of this study, 32 individuals were actively participating in LEVEL; 27 students were providing LEVEL hours to five peers with physical disabilities. One student with a physical disability both received and provided LEVEL hours. Members of LEVEL join voluntarily and do not receive compensation. While some students are involved for only one semester, others participate for the duration of their college experience. Although only four years have transpired since its inception, LEVEL has gained significant momentum on the university campus. As of 2014, university students have provided over 1,500 LEVEL hours. Given this description, LEVEL appears to represent what Tinto referred to as “a semi-formal extracurricular activity,” as it is a student organization that occurs within the social system of the university (Tinto 1975, 1993).

Participants

Five college students with physical disabilities agreed to participate in this research; at the time of this study, these were the only individuals receiving LEVEL hours. The participants all self-identified as having disabilities and were registered with the ODS on the university’s campus. Additionally, all participants self-identified as White. Four participants used motorized wheelchairs, and one participant self-identified as blind and worked with a service dog. One of the five participants was non-verbal and communicated through use of a laminated sheet containing an alphabet, numbers, and high-frequency words or by utilizing a Dynavox, a form of assistive technology for speech. Table 1 provides additional demographic information.

Researchers

The research team was comprised of four members: one female professor, who served as the Primary Investigator (PI); one female graduate research assistant; one undergraduate female research assistant; and one male staff member, who works as the Assistant

Director of ODS at the university. All members of the research team engaged in aspects of the data collection and analysis for this study. All researchers were affiliated with the university at the time of the study and self-identified as White and typically-abled. The professor teaches in the education program at the university and has prior experience as a secondary special educator. At the time of the study, the undergraduate research assistant was a senior Human Services major who provided LEVEL hours from her sophomore through senior years, and the graduate research assistant was a second-year Master’s student in the Clinical Counseling program.

The PI and graduate research assistant were involved in interviewing, transcribing, de-identifying, and analyzing participant data. Since the undergraduate research assistant and the Assistant Director of ODS had significant personal and professional relationships with participants, they worked with de-identified data during the data analysis process; this was intended to lessen the pressure participants might have felt to give socially desirable answers to these individuals.

Data Collection

The research team utilized pre- and post-program interviews in order to get a sense of how the participants’ social experiences were affected by LEVEL. Per the data collection schedule, pre-program interviews were conducted and collected between September and October of 2013, and post-program interviews occurred between April and May of 2014. The pre- and post-program interviews each lasted approximately one hour. During this time, participants were interviewed in-person by one of the members of the research team using a semi-structured interview format. In line with the purpose of the study and its research design, both interview protocols contained questions related to understanding participants’ social experiences in LEVEL. For example, we asked, “What role has LEVEL played in your collegiate social experience?” and “Describe the challenges and successes you are having/have had through participation in LEVEL.” To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, we assigned each participant a pseudonym.

Data Analysis

In order to identify, analyze, and report themes, the transcribed interviews were analyzed using Miles,

Huberman, and Saldana's (2014) methods for qualitative data analysis. We selected this process because it allowed us to identify the core meanings evident in the data as related to our research objective. Pre- and post-interviews were looked at as a whole. Throughout the coding process, we used ATLAS.ti, a PC based data analysis program. During the first cycle of data analysis, we utilized deductive and inductive coding procedures. Deductive codes were determined prior to the study; in this case, we looked for instances where participants described "LEVEL's effect on social experience" and "role of social experience in college." These *a priori* codes were based on our research question: *How are the social experiences of college students with disabilities affected by their participation in LEVEL?*

Next, we looked for inductive, in vivo codes across the data. In vivo codes draw on the emic words and phrases offered by study participants, and they are particularly appropriate for "studies that prioritize and honor the participant's voice" (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014, p. 74). Given that voice—especially the voices of individuals with disabilities—is critical to this study both methodologically and fundamentally, providing a space for emic language to emerge within the analysis process was key. Several in vivo codes emerged during this data analysis process, which included the phrases "used to feel alone" and "people avoided me" when describing experiences prior to LEVEL and "real friends" and "never could have imagined this" after joining.

During the second round of coding, we grouped the initial inductive and deductive codes into themes. The first theme, "isolation prior to LEVEL," emerged after reading through the initial codes and noting the places where participants spoke of struggling with socialization during their K-12 experience as well as upon entering the university. The next theme was "navigating ableism in college." Data appeared to indicate that ableism existed within and outside of LEVEL. However, it seemed that participants' navigation of ableist encounters differed according to group in question (i.e., the university on the whole or LEVEL as a smaller sub-set of the university population), as they appeared much more comfortable addressing ableism within LEVEL. Finally, "friendship" surfaced as a salient theme; in all cases, participants spoke of forming meaningful relationships as a result of their involvement in LEVEL. This process resulted in an overall description of how the social experienc-

es of college students with disabilities were affected by their participation in LEVEL (Olivant, 2015).

Trustworthiness

This study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board in August 2013, and participants were required to complete the Informed Consent Form to take part in the research project. The researchers also utilized several reliability procedures as a means of validating research findings (Gibbs, 2007). First, the researchers established a code book, which helped mitigate the possibility that researchers would interpret the meanings of codes in different ways. The researchers also employed inter-coder agreement 95% of the time, whereby it was determined that they agreed upon codes when reviewing the same sections of data. In the 5% of cases where researchers coded data differently, there was an open discussion regarding code selection; the researchers conferred until agreement was reached.

Researchers engaged in member checking with two participants in order to verify the themes identified by the researchers and to give participants an opportunity to adjust inaccurate themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). During the transcription process, participant identities were immediately coded. The researchers also attempted to bracket their personal experiences with disability as well as their personal assumptions throughout the research design, data collection, and data analysis stages (Creswell & Creswell, 2007). This was addressed through reflexive journaling, which allowed researchers to identify their presuppositions regarding the research project (Zenobia, Chan, & Chien, 2013). Finally, in order to increase transferability, we offer detailed background data and description of the experience to establish the context of this study and allow comparisons to be made (Creswell & Creswell, 2007; Shenton, 2004).

Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand how LEVEL, a student organization associated with the ODS, affected the social experiences of college students with physical disabilities. Findings from this study were divided into three themes: (a) participants experienced social isolation prior to LEVEL, (b) LEVEL provided an opportunity to dispel ableist assumptions and misconceptions, and (c) LEVEL engendered friendship. These themes revealed that the

LEVEL experience was largely positive for each of the five participants, as they noted the ways that LEVEL increased their social integration and related feelings of inclusivity.

Participants Experienced Social Isolation Prior to LEVEL

Interviews revealed that all participants encountered issues related to socialization prior to their involvement in LEVEL. More specifically, they noted that the often-exclusive attitudes of typically-abled individuals, whether in the K-12 environment or in society at large, significantly influenced their feelings of social exclusion. Along these lines, they discussed many of the stereotypes associated with their disabilities, the ableist attitudes they encountered, as well as the ways in which these external attitudes influenced their social interactions.

When discussing her high school experience, Grace reflected, "People thought I had a cognitive disability and were shocked when I said intelligent things. I was the only one in my high school who was high functioning with a physical disability. People didn't really bother with me." Rather than taking steps to get to know Grace, it appeared that her peers avoided interaction and stigmatized her because of her physical difference. Similarly, Annie shared that:

A lot of my friends. . . in middle school and high school have said to me like "I would see you all the time around school, but I was always afraid to approach you," and I'm like "I'm glad we're friends now," but I wonder how many friendships I'm not having because people are afraid to approach me and say hello, and are afraid to ask questions about my blindness. So that definitely makes me sad sometimes that some people are afraid to approach me.

Although Annie forged friendships in her middle and high school years, these relationships were initially tempered by discomfort or avoidance on the part of her typically-abled peers. In line with Grace's experience, she considered the possibility that she missed out on potential friendships because her peers were hesitant to approach her and viewed her disability as a barrier to interaction.

For some participants, feelings of social isolation in college, prior to joining LEVEL, were just as prevalent. Evan, a senior at the time of this study, matricu-

lated to the university before the group's introduction. As he reflected, "coming into the university, I knew the academic load would take a little time to adjust to, but I was confident I could get through it. I was less sure of how I would make friends." Although this sentiment is likely shared by many individuals as they begin their first year of college, Evan revealed that his feelings of trepidation were compounded by his disability, as he stated that "the biggest misconception is the idea that cerebral palsy always comes with intellectual disability or cognitive delays. This affects how people, especially my peers, are willing to approach me." In line with Evan's experience, Ben found that when he did interact with others:

All people see is a wheelchair. I met some pretty cool people a couple weeks back, and this woman [said to them] "Oh aren't you guys nice?" As soon as the public sees people with a disabled person, it's like "Oh isn't it nice that they stopped and talked to the disabled person." It irks me to no end.

The idea that this group was being "nice" by taking the time to talk to Ben reinforced the ableist notion that he was less worthy of their time and any related interactions.

Jake also experienced university life before LEVEL. Like Evan, he felt confident in his ability to succeed academically, but "towards the end of freshman year into sophomore year I started feeling isolation a little more because people didn't understand what I was going through, and then LEVEL kind of came along." As he explained, connecting with peers proved initially difficult, as he felt that they did not try to understand his experience of having a disability on a university campus. Grace spoke of some of the invisible barriers that she encountered, as she acknowledged that prior to LEVEL, "I felt like people looked away or were hesitant to reach out to me, so it got difficult because some people wanted to reach out but they didn't know how."

LEVEL was established when Annie began college, which was not the case for the rest of the participants. However, her initial experiences at the university, namely the university orientation program and informal peer interactions, left her feeling isolated. As she noted:

The first semester I had a lot of trouble finding my group of friends. I did not feel that the orienta-

tion considered to my needs and my abilities. And because of that, it ostracized me from the other students, and that really shook my confidence. I was nervous about coming to college like any student is, but I was not extra nervous because of my disability. Orientation made me extra nervous because of my disability because of the way I was being perceived. Because it shook my confidence so much, I really ostracized myself more once classes started. College became something where I went to class, and I got good grades and that was the extent of it.

Thus, when LEVEL members reached out to her, Annie was resistant. In one instance, the President of LEVEL asked Annie to join her for an event. Annie reflected, “She was like, ‘Hey, do you want to walk with me?’ and I said ‘I can walk by myself,’ and I didn’t realize that she wasn’t questioning my ability, she just wanted to be a friend to me.” Annie’s experiences with social exclusion during the new student orientation program, which spanned her first four days on campus, led her to question the intentions of LEVEL. As these quotes revealed, she was not alone in her skepticism, nor was she the only participant to experience social isolation as a result of society’s widespread assumptions and misconceptions regarding disability.

LEVEL Provided a Safe Space to Dispel Ableist Assumptions and Misconceptions

While a central goal of LEVEL is to raise ableism awareness, participants noted that some members maintained ableist attitudes and misconceptions regarding their respective disabilities. Typically-abled students without prior experience with disability largely entered with misunderstandings related to their partner’s intellectual levels and their role in the relationship. Additionally, participants spoke of how it seemed that their partners were initially uncomfortable in the relationship because they were not sure how to appropriately and respectfully interact with their peers with disabilities.

Participants responded to this discomfort in a variety of ways. For Ben, this meant having to show that he is just like anyone else. As he explained, “I feel like I always have to prove something because the first thing they see is the wheelchair, but any sensible person, within ten minutes, will realize that I’m just a regular guy.” Like Ben, Evan shared:

The best way to change perspectives is to have every day interactions with people with disabilities. Whether you talk sports or work on a project, the fact that people with disabilities can have the same thoughts, feelings, and emotions that you have will open your eyes. And I think that is why LEVEL is so important.

Grace referred to the act of pushing back as “breaking [peers] of the porcelain China Doll Syndrome,” which she did by “just acting like a normal 21 year old.” When deconstructing the China Doll Syndrome, she explained:

Well, you get two types of people. The people that avoid me like the plague because they don’t know what to say or do. Or you get the people, which my mother and I affectionately term as [having] “porcelain China Doll Syndrome,” meaning that [they believe] if you touch me, I’m going to break, so they see me and they will speak to me like I’m a preschooler, and I’m 21 years old.

As a means of “breaking” her typically-abled partners of this complex, she offered:

Depending on how comfortable or uncomfortable they may seem, I will consciously put a jacket on or something like that. So that they see that I’m not going to break. Or I’ll curse, I’ll talk about all of those sorts of things, I’ll make fun of myself, anything of that realm. It depends on my comfortability with them [if I am] going to let them see the difficulty of putting a jacket on. How ready are they to break out of it that they can do this without having a panic attack? The other thing that normally breaks them out of it is when they see that I can dictate a paper without looking at it.

As these quotes revealed, LEVEL members held misconceptions about what it means to have a disability. However, participants found that LEVEL offered both a critical point of contact and a safe space to constructively push back at their typically-abled peers’ perceptions of disability.

LEVEL appeared to be unique in that it functioned as a place where typically-abled members were willing to learn about their classmates’ experiences with

disability and, in response, their peers with physical disabilities were willing to have these honest conversations. Participants also noted that they played a significant role in this process. Annie went on to explain her role in facilitating relationships within LEVEL that engendered acceptance:

I try to make people understand that it's okay to ask questions [about disability] and be curious [because] at the core of it that's what you have to do. A pamphlet can't teach you everything you need to know about it. It can give you advice and try to make you more comfortable, but the only way you're going to be able to fully understand it in the best way that you can is by talking to somebody [with a disability] because who is the best expert about disabilities? People with disabilities.

As these quotes revealed, LEVEL appeared to offer a safe, supportive environment where participants could engage in conversations that dispel ableist assumptions and allow them to feel included.

Participants did speak of the ways that feelings of inclusivity and honest conversation were not always reflected in their experiences with peers outside of LEVEL. Jake noted that acceptance "is kind of just confined to the group." Annie also highlighted this juxtaposition:

When I started on campus, people [in LEVEL] were already asking me to get lunch or do this, and it was just a really open environment. My freshman class peers were not doing that. LEVEL was just easy—it was effortless. People weren't afraid of me. People weren't afraid to know me outside of my disability. I definitely have friends outside of LEVEL, but you know, I would say for the most part, I can definitely be more accepted [in LEVEL] than I would anywhere else.

On the whole, participants found that typically-abled individuals who participated in LEVEL were more likely to view them as equals than those on campus who are not affiliated with the group. These data indicated that LEVEL members were more open and accepting than others on campus or society at large. As a result, LEVEL appeared to offer a space for participants to feel valued and socially included.

LEVEL Engendered Friendship

None of the participants spoke of encountering any difficulty with the rigor or demands of collegiate academics, though they expressed that socialization was an issue prior to joining LEVEL. Although academics and socialization are often conceived of as two distinct entities, findings revealed, in this case, that academic contact, namely through LEVEL hours, acted as a conduit for friendship. Grace noted that "some of my best friends have come through LEVEL hours," and Evan echoed that through LEVEL, he was able "to foster friendships with my peers in ways I have never before. [LEVEL hours] where you work on papers have turned into time spent hanging out with some of my greatest friends." Thus, LEVEL hours were not only helpful in a practical way, but more importantly, they often facilitated the formation of friendships.

What was perhaps most unique about LEVEL hours were that some partners who provided these hours self-identified as having a disability. Annie, who provided hours to Grace, explained that their relationship grew as a result of these consistent weekly exchanges:

And again Grace was somebody who I talked to and knew, but without doing my LEVEL hours, I know I would have not reached out to her. Just because of time and life you know? I'm so glad that LEVEL has brought us together. Even if I don't do hours with her next semester, I know that I would reach out to her because we're friends and we have a relationship. I've gotten to know her. We really benefit each other especially as women with disabilities...it's a very strong relationship that we need to have.

In this quote, Annie directly addressed the importance of her friendship with Grace, which she felt was ultimately facilitated through LEVEL hours. While the development of friendships proved important for all participants, this relationship appeared to allow Annie and Grace to support each other as women with disabilities. In addition, the act of a student with a disability providing accommodations to a peer with a disability worked to dispel stereotypes regarding ability.

Evan drew a parallel between the friendships that he formed through LEVEL and the trajectory of his college experience, as he offered, "as my social life started to get better, my outlook on my entire college experience got better." He also shed light on the ways in which LEVEL engendered these friendships:

I hang out with my LEVEL partners outside of our hours all of the time. Once we get comfortable with each other, we will often start to hang out socially. This often starts with getting a bite to eat after our hour. Many of my former or current LEVEL partners live in my building or on campus, and they will just come over to watch movies, or games, or to just hang out in my room. I go to their rooms or apartments too, and we do stuff off campus together like grab dinner or go to various events.

This quote illustrated that there was no particular magic involved in the formulation of these friendships, as they seemed to be premised on common interests and mutual affection. In line with this, Grace shared, “I have more nicknames in the LEVEL than anywhere else, but not one of them has to do with my ability level.” Like Evan, Grace felt that the friends she made through LEVEL saw her for who she was rather than focusing on her disability.

Highlighting the importance of socialization and related friendships, Ben asserted that “college is supposed to be about meeting other people and being in new situations, and LEVEL is a really big proponent of that.” Similarly, Annie contended:

The social aspect [of college] is so important. It fuels your self-esteem, it fuels your self-confidence, it fuels fun truthfully. That is key to success in college and success in life. If you can find a balance between social, academics, school work, and extracurriculars, then that’s going to benefit you for the rest of your life. It gives you the confidence to start new things. [LEVEL has also been] a support system in general...of people that understand disability or want to understand disability.

Annie both recognized the role that socialization played in her college experience and connected this to the role that LEVEL played in fostering friendships. As a result of her participation in LEVEL, she spoke of an increase in her confidence and of finding a place where she felt understood and supported.

It is interesting that Evan and Ben, two participants who matriculated to the university prior to the formation of LEVEL, reflected that they never anticipated the way that LEVEL would affect them socially. Looking back, Evan asserted “if you asked me freshman year if I would have friends from college

visit me in the summer or for Thanksgiving, I’d probably have said no. But now, I have developed lifelong friendships.” Ben also shared this sentiment, as he offered, “if you told me I [would go] to my first formal last year, I would have told you, ‘You’re absolutely nuts.’” These statements highlight the way that LEVEL informed Evan and Ben’s respective experiences and exceeded their expectations.

These findings indicate that LEVEL provided participants with the opportunity to form meaningful relationships, which was reiterated across participant interviews. It is important to note that participants were wholly capable of forming friendships both inside and outside of LEVEL; the issue was that they were often deprived of the chance to do so because of the ableist attitudes of many individuals. Since LEVEL allowed for the formation of friendships, it also appeared to offer participants a more positive college experience.

Discussion and Implications

The results of this study provide insight into ways that LEVEL affects the social experiences of five college students with disabilities. Findings reveal that participants felt misunderstood and socially isolated on the college campus prior to their matriculation into LEVEL. Upon joining LEVEL, participants felt included and were able to form meaningful relationships with same-aged peers. These findings also confirm Tinto’s (1975) theory of social integration, as they indicate that LEVEL facilitated positive socialization in myriad ways. LEVEL events and hours represent the type of semi-formal extracurricular activities that Tinto identified as critical to student retention. Furthermore, these interactions engendered key informal peer group associations, as friendships resulted from these more structured engagements.

These findings are significant in several ways. First, they highlight the social and attitudinal barriers that students with disabilities often face in post-secondary settings. In addition, they address ways in which this discrimination and related sense of isolation might be mitigated. Finally, these findings offer insight into one program aimed to create accessible social experiences for students of all abilities and educate students and the broader community about ableism. On the whole, the data revealed that this organization played a critical role in the social integration of university students with disabilities.

Several participants noted that they were initially skeptical when LEVEL was introduced on the university's campus. This seems to be, at least in part, due to their prior experiences with ableism and exclusion. They wondered if LEVEL would patronize or further stigmatize them. This presupposition aligns with research (Dovidio et al., 2011) regarding attitudes toward college students with disabilities. These studies have shown that many individuals with disabilities experienced increased avoidance by typically-abled peers and, in direct relation, decreased opportunity for socialization. Annie's negative experience with new student orientation, which was essentially her first encounter with an on-campus, semi-formal extracurricular program, confirms this line of research, as orientation did not appear to be receptive to her needs and left her feeling ostracized. Moreover, since research has indicated that most college students with physical disabilities have their services provided by the ODS (Marshak et al., 2010; Morris, 2001; Paul, 2000), it is not surprising that participants involved in this research project who entered the university prior to the implementation of LEVEL spoke of feeling socially isolated before their involvement in the organization.

It is also important to note that academic integration did not appear to pose a problem for participants. In fact, most all participants spoke of their academic competence and confidence. This data further supports Tinto's (1975, 1993) claim that "a person may perform more than adequately in the academic domain of the college and still come to leave because of insufficient integration into its social life" (Tinto, 1993, p. 107). As the data revealed, LEVEL hours expressly addressed issues of social separation. By replacing time that might have been spent with adults and/or aides with peer-to-peer contact, these LEVEL hours offered a recurring point of contact between students of all abilities. Although these hours were premised on accommodations, it appeared that they served a larger social function. In fact, all of the participants stated that the hours influenced the development of their most significant friendships. These friendships allowed them a sense of belonging, or a place where they felt valued, included, and respected. This is critical for students with disabilities, as Belch (2004) found that:

When a sense of belonging and inclusion are accomplished, a student believes there is a place for him or her. This true sense of belonging in-

vites engagement with the others in the environment in the pursuit of learning, development, and growth. (p. 9)

Participant responses echoed this statement, as they spoke of the ways that LEVEL provided them with a college experience that exceeded their initial expectations and allowed them to feel included and invested. In addition to supporting Tinto's (1993) assertion that participation in extracurricular activities often engenders friendships that transcend the formal group structure, this finding was extremely significant, as it shed light on the ways that academic encounters might also work to facilitate meaningful social interaction.

Participants recognized that LEVEL members generally engaged with the concept of disability differently than others on campus or in society at large. However, as was noted in the findings, participation in LEVEL did not eradicate all ableist attitudes or behaviors of typically-abled members. Participants noted that several of the members of this organization displayed ableist assumptions or misconceptions that were identical to the assumptions held by students outside of LEVEL. The difference appeared to be that, within LEVEL, participants felt comfortable speaking up and pushing back against these ableist attitudes when they arose, and their typically-abled peers were more willing to gain a more realistic understanding of their partners' experience with disability. As such, it appears that these hours also served an "ableism awareness" function.

Interestingly, while participants felt integrated into LEVEL, they did not always share this sentiment as related to their place in the campus at large. Data indicated that LEVEL provided a smaller group within a larger university context where students felt comfortable, safe, and supported. This type of integration facilitated feelings of social inclusion for students with disabilities (Belch, 2004; Darling, 2013). When considering participants' reactions to ableism within LEVEL, as opposed to outside of the organization, it appeared that participants' sense of integration dictated how comfortable they were in responding. Access to student organizations such as LEVEL "can help campuses feel more welcoming and provide safe places for students outside of disability services offices" (Hadley, 2011, p. 80). To this end, social integration was not necessarily universal across campus, as programs such as first year orientation left participants feeling isolated.

Since participants spoke of the difficulties they faced when socializing outside of LEVEL, future studies might investigate the accessibility and inclusivity of the programs that students encounter upon and after matriculation, such as new student orientation or residence life events. Based on the findings from this study, it would also be useful for future researchers to address the voices of typically-abled students involved in organizations such as LEVEL. In addition to providing critical insight into the ways in which participation affects their social integration, these data would also shed light on how student groups that address issues of ableism may challenge or reinforce their perceptions of disability.

From a practical standpoint, there are several important logistical questions that colleges and universities should consider if they are interested in designing and implementing a program similar to LEVEL. The first consideration pertains to the place on campus where the program will be housed. The location of the program dictates how it is overseen and maintained by faculty and/or staff as students enter into and graduate from the college or university. LEVEL is also a student-led organization. As such, students are responsible for organizing events, scheduling hours, maintaining a budget, and publicizing the organization. These students are elected onto an executive board by the larger group. It is important to think about how these students might be selected and or elected to these positions. Perhaps most importantly, this program should be driven by the interests and needs of individuals with disabilities on the college campus. Careful consideration must also be made when program leaders are seeking answers to the following questions: What are students on this campus—of all abilities—looking for from a physical, academic, and social standpoint? How might this program best function in order to facilitate the necessary changes outlined by the students and promote a “level” playing field on campus for all students?

Although the majority of research on college students with disabilities has focused on academic accommodations (Lombardi et al., 2011; Paul, 2000; Stein, 2014), social acceptance is equally critical to consider (de Boer et al., 2012; Mason, Pratt, Patel, Greydanus, & Yahya, 2004; Tinto, 1975, 1993). This research supports Tinto’s (1975, 1993) theory of college persistence by highlighting the ways in which one student organization provided a critical means of social integration for college students with phys-

ical disabilities. Additionally, this paper offers a novel way to consider what socialization can look like for this population of college students. Findings from this research have direct significance in advancing the field of disability in higher education and aiding in the design of collegiate programs and organizations that raise ableism awareness and foster social integration between students of all abilities. As this paper shows, LEVEL is a unique student organization that creates accessible social experiences for students of all abilities. It appears to bring issues of ableism awareness to light through facilitation of LEVEL hours and promotion of group and interpersonal relationships. By deliberately addressing the social integration of college students with disabilities, LEVEL offers a promising new way to think about how to meet the needs of an underserved population.

Limitations

The researchers note several limitations to this study. Since this study involved only one university, findings are likely not generalizable to all college contexts. In addition, this research is subject to key informant bias based on the number of participants. For this reason, there is no guarantee that the experiences of these students are typical (Maxwell, 2005). Transferability is also difficult in this study, as LEVEL is situated within a very specific university context. However, this research sheds light on the ways in which other students, faculty, administration, and/or institutions might make related considerations and construct programs, if they choose to create a student organization akin to LEVEL.

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Table 1

Participant Demographic Data

Name	Year	Self-Identified Sex	Self-Identified Disability
Evan	senior	male	cerebral palsy
Grace	junior	female	cerebral palsy
Ben	junior	male	cerebral palsy
Jake	junior	male	N/A
Annie	sophomore	female	blind