

# Barriers to Accommodations for Students with Disabilities in Higher Education: A Literature Review

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## Abstract

In higher education, students with disabilities play an active role in securing and utilizing academic accommodations. Numerous studies have explored different aspects of the accommodations provision process and have addressed various barriers found to prevent the full implementation of these accommodations for students with disabilities. The present review explored these studies, in an attempt to discern common themes within this area of the literature. The review identified several themes that emerged across 23 empirical research studies. Barriers to accommodations were found in the lack of student knowledge or awareness of campus resources, the inability to provide appropriate documentation of a disability or receive accommodations students found useful, and the negative reactions of peers and faculty members that students experienced upon their disclosure of a disability or their request to implement accommodations. The review concludes by addressing the limitations of the study, offering recommendations for future research, and identifying ways in which disability resource offices may work to remove or reduce the impact of the barriers identified. Upon consideration of the breadth and depth of barriers to accommodations found in the literature, a shift towards *Universal Design for Learning* is presented as one potential way to mitigate these barriers.

*Keywords: disability accommodations, higher education, literature review*

The number of students with disabilities in postsecondary education in the United States has risen in recent decades. Data from 2007-2008 and 2011-2012 indicated that 11% of undergraduates were students with disabilities (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2016). However, an achievement gap at four-year institutions, as compared to their non-disabled peers continues to exist (Newman et al., 2011). The continued enrollment of students with disabilities in higher education, along with data on their success and persistence in higher education highlights the importance of research related to disability and higher education. Much improvement stands to be made in creating educational experiences that are inclusive, equitable, and promote the success of students with disabilities. Postsecondary education is very different from K-12 in terms of disability-related services and supports. The higher education environment is one in which students with disabilities are responsible for self-identifying, registering with the disability resource office on their campus, and requesting

and utilizing accommodations. Institutions are responsible for verifying documented disabilities, and providing reasonable accommodations (Dean, 2009). The elective nature of disability support in the form of accommodations in higher education heightens the need for continued research and improvement in this area, as it is likely that the actual numbers of students with disabilities is even greater than reported, due to the option for students to choose not to disclose this information to their college or university.

The present literature review seeks to gather and analyze the research related to challenges presented in the higher education disability accommodations process. Specifically, the review is focused on barriers to the successful provision of accommodations that are encountered by students with disabilities. There are multiple purposes for this review. First, an analysis of the varied studies on barriers to accommodations may allow for considerations not readily apparent in single studies alone. The identification of themes found in such an analysis may highlight gaps

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for future research and provide insights for disability resource administrators, which may lead to improved services for the students with whom they work. Second, a more complete understanding of the accommodations experiences of students with disabilities may serve to inform larger conversations about the nature of disability in higher education. Such conversations may be instructive in working with students with disabilities who choose not to disclose or seek support from their colleges or universities. Lastly, the review seeks to understand student experiences under the current accommodations model, which stands to be a crucial component in disability studies conversations that may question the model or propose future alternatives.

### Methodology

The author conducted a broad review of the literature related to the provision of accommodations and barriers to accommodations for students with disabilities in postsecondary education. For this review, barrier was broadly defined, as something that may prevent or dissuade a student from seeking or ultimately making use of a disability related accommodation, presently, or in the future. As many of the barriers found in the research are based on student experiences and perceptions, it is worth noting that the review aims to seek a better understanding of these experiences and perceptions – not to make value judgements of the decisions made from them. For example, Marshak, Van Wieren, Ferrell, Swiss, and Dugan (2012) found that students identified a desire for self-sufficiency as a barrier to the use of accommodations. The purpose of this review is not to suggest that self-sufficiency is, or is not, a positive characteristic that should, or should not, be pursued by not utilizing accommodations. Such questions are beyond the scope of this review. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge the diverse types of barriers considered in this review. A knowledge-based barrier, such as a student's lack of awareness of the resources offered by a disability resource office is a different type of barrier than what is experienced by a student who is told by a faculty member that they will not be granted a requested accommodation. The broad definition of barriers in this review limits the detail with which any specific type of barrier may be attended. However, utilizing a broad definition of barrier better allows for an examination of the way that different barriers may intersect to impact the lived campus experiences for students with disabilities.

One overlapping research area that was excluded from this review was that of transition-related barriers.

Researchers have explored barriers that exist in transitions from secondary to postsecondary education, from two- to four-year institutions, and out of postsecondary education. The decision to exclude these studies was made in order to support a clearer understanding of barriers to accommodations by eliminating the complicating factor of multiple institutions, with varying policies, procedures, and academic cultures. The review was also limited to research that involved institutions in the United States. Research has been conducted beyond that United States that addresses students with disabilities and accommodations (e.g., Hill, 1996). However, a decision to limit this review to the United States was made in the interest of producing an analysis that might be instructive in ongoing policy discussions related to the provision of accommodations – as dictated by national regulations.

Another related area of research regarding barriers to accommodations is that of faculty or staff attitudes, actions, or perspectives related to students with disabilities. A preliminary review of the research on disability and accommodations in higher education revealed several faculty studies that directly address accommodations (e.g. Becker, Martin, Wajeeh, Ward, & Shern, 2002; LaRocco & Wilken, 2013; Lombardi & Murray, 2011; Love et al., 2015; Sniatecki, Perry, & Snell, 2015). In the interest of drawing a focus on student experiences, these studies were not included in the body of research this review attempted to analyze. However, given the relevance of this literature, such studies are referenced in this review, to the extent that they stand to inform or corroborate themes and findings that emerged from the included studies.

The author conducted a digital keyword search of the ERIC, Academic Search Premier, and PsycINFO databases. These databases were selected because they provided extensive coverage of both education and disability-focused academic journals. A Boolean search was conducted for *students with disabilities AND accommodations AND barriers AND college or university or postsecondary education or higher education*. No publication date range was applied. The initial search was conducted in October of 2017 and did not include a publication date limiter. A date range was not identified so as to allow for consideration of whether the accommodations experiences in higher education have shifted over time. The search produced 77 peer-reviewed journal articles, 26 of which were reports of empirical research. Of these results, four studies were excluded due to a focus on secondary education and/or transitions, as were eight studies that had an international focus. Six studies that involved American higher education but were beyond

the scope of the present review were removed. Five of these studies focused on faculty, while the sixth focused on career planning. Finally, the author reviewed the references of the remaining studies, adding other relevant research not captured by the original database search. Upon this addition, a total of 23 studies were identified for this review. Table 1 provides a list of the authors, publication years, research type, and sample size of these studies.

After the research studies were identified, and the study characteristics were compiled, the author used an inductive approach to search through the studies and identify common themes (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The author read through the studies multiple times, looking for commonalities in the findings. The themes that appeared with the greatest consistency across the literature are presented in the following section.

### **Emergent Themes**

Barriers to accommodations were addressed in a variety of ways and to a variety of degrees in the literature reviewed. For example, one study, by Lyman et al. (2016) focused explicitly on the reasons that students with disabilities reported for deciding not to utilize accommodations. Meanwhile, studies conducted by Hong (2015), and Lund, Andrews, and Holt (2014) identified barriers to accommodations as one of many challenges encountered by students with disabilities within the higher education environment. Across the literature, there was a great deal of variation regarding what constituted a barrier. Generally, the research identified barriers of knowledge, function, or attitude. For example, Lyman et al. (2016) treated student lack of knowledge about disability support services on campus as a barrier to accommodation. Likewise, Salzer, Wick, and Rogers (2008) discussed challenges in disability documentation as a functional barrier to accommodations, while Hong, (2015) addressed student perceptions and assessments of stigma as an attitudinal barrier. These varied types of barriers appeared in the literature in intersecting ways that highlight the complexity of the experiences of students with disabilities on college and university campuses. The themes are discussed in an order that generally follows the steps taken to secure accommodations in higher education. Themes more commonly reported in registering for accommodations are presented first, followed by themes related to the granting of accommodations and accommodations functionality, and finally, themes related to the utilization of accommodations.

### **Awareness of Accommodations Resources**

In elementary and secondary educational environments, schools identify students with disabilities and facilitate educational achievement through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1997). However, in the postsecondary environment, students are responsible for securing access to education by seeking accommodations for qualifying disabilities (Office for Civil Rights, 2011). Given the shift students with disabilities experience upon enrolling in postsecondary education, from an institutional-initiated process to a student-initiated one, it is not surprising that one of the themes found in the literature on barriers to accommodations is a lack of knowledge or awareness of services (e.g., Finn, 1999; Lyman et al., 2016; Marshak et al., 2010).

Several studies (e.g., Finn, 1999; Hong, 2015; Lyman et al., 2016) have examined the barriers to accommodations that may exist for students with disabilities with regard to registering with their college or university disability resource office. A common theme found in four of these studies is a lack of awareness on the part of students with disabilities regarding the existence of available accommodations, or the disability resource office (Finn, 1999; Greenbaum, Graham, & Scales, 1995; Lyman et al., 2016; West et al., 1993). One study was conducted by West et al. (1993). Of the 761 students with disabilities who responded to a survey administered through the disability resource offices at 57 different public and private two- and four-year institutions in Virginia, over 86% reported that they experienced disability-related barriers to their education. The survey allowed students to describe the barriers that they encountered, and as West et al. noted, “many students wrote that they were unaware of the services to which they were entitled or which were available” (p. 461). Similar experiences were also reported among students with learning disabilities, when asked to discuss the disability resource services they found be least helpful (Greenbaum et al., 1995). A lack of awareness regarding disability resources and accommodations was also identified by Lyman et al. (2016) as a factor that kept students with disabilities from utilizing accommodations.

Additionally, research by Finn (1999) found that this lack of awareness is at times only addressed after students demonstrated performance-related indications of their disabilities. In a focus group study, students with learning disabilities from a public four-year institution in the Midwest indicated that they were only told about the disability resource office by their professors “after failing several tests” (p. 635). These responses suggested that faculty at this institution provided students with disability-related infor-

mation, after discerning which students might benefit from disability resources following poor exam performance. While such a reactive response may be more preferable than no response at all, it disadvantages students whose disabilities faculty members are less able to readily identify, as these students are not as quickly referred to disability resource offices as compared to students with more readily apparent disabilities. Further, faculty referral alone might not fully remedy this lack of awareness, as suggested by the finding from Lyman et al. (2016) that indicated that a continued lack of awareness appeared to exist for some students, even after they learned about the disability resource office on their campus.

Another awareness-related challenge found in the literature was that students with disabilities reported difficulty identifying the accommodations that they needed. Salzer et al., (2008) found in a survey of postsecondary students with disabilities, over one-third of the respondents indicated that they encountered problems identifying which accommodations were appropriate or reasonable. Similarly, in a study conducted by Hong (2015), a student described through reflective journaling an experience in which a disability resource staff member expected the student to know what accommodations were needed. Considering the potential positive impact self-advocacy skills may have for students with disabilities in higher education (Fleming, Oertle, Plotner, & Hakun, 2017), and criticism from students with disabilities that sometimes accommodations are not adequately individualized (Dowrick, Anderson, Heyer, & Acosta, 2005), it seems plausible that some disability resource offices may aim for individualization and improved self-advocacy, while ultimately creating barriers for students by shouldering them with too great a burden for accommodations identification. Additional research into a possible perceptual difference between students with disabilities and disability services staff members regarding the development of self-advocacy skills may contribute to a better understanding of this barrier.

### **Ability to Secure Accommodations**

Another theme identified in the literature involved barriers students with disabilities encountered while attempting to secure accommodations. Aspects of this theme included the process of registering with disability resource offices and the availability of particular accommodations. In compliance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), postsecondary institutions must provide accommodations to students with documented disabilities (Office for Civil

Rights, 2011; Rothstein, 2015). One issue that stems from this requirement is the question of how qualifying disabilities are verified. Discussion of sufficient documentation appeared in the rules established for the implementation of the 2008 amendments to the ADA (2010), as well as in recent guidance offered by the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD; 2012). In the literature reviewed, concerns regarding appropriate documentation included the experience of the assessment process required for diagnostic evaluation (Denhart, 2008), and the ability of students to secure such evaluation (Lehmann, Davies, & Laurin, 2000). In Denhart's 2008 study on the perceptions of students with learning disabilities, five of the 11 students interviewed "reported strong negative reactions to assessment testing" (p. 491). Students previously assessed in high school may also face challenges with documentation requirements. Lehmann et al. (2000) found that in focus group interviews of 35 college students with varying disabilities, many reported encountering challenges related to documentation including not being able to obtain high school service records and limited opportunity for assessment at the postsecondary level. Similarly, students in a study conducted by Salzer et al. (2008) also identified challenges related to appropriate documentation. Of 382 students surveyed who obtained academic support for a disability, 102 "reported challenges in obtaining proper documentation" as one of the barriers they faced (p. 373).

In addition to challenges students with disabilities faced regarding the documentation of their qualifying disability, a theme also emerged regarding student difficulties in working with disability resource offices to obtain accommodations. For some students, the challenge appeared to stem from issues of staff availability. Findings by Dowrick et al. (2005) included that "many students reported that the student disability service offices are understaffed and can therefore assist only those students with the most urgent needs" (p. 44). The information collected by Dowrick et al. appeared consistent with an earlier finding by Finn (1999) who reported that many students, despite having generally positive comments about disability staff, noted the lack of time that staff were available. A similar finding was also noted by Marshak et al. (2010), who reported that students encountered challenges regarding the timeline along which approved accommodations were made available. For other students, challenges appeared to stem from their interactions with disability resource staff. Lyman et al. (2016) presented an account from one student in their focus group study who described the difficulty of scheduling a meeting with a disability staff mem-

ber as part of the complicated process necessary in order to receive an accommodation. They also reported that students experienced staff who “discouraged them from using accommodation[s]” (p. 129). A final barrier they found related to securing accommodations, was experienced when students realized that a particular accommodation they hoped would be provided was unavailable. Lastly, although it was not reported with a degree of specificity sufficient to locate the specific aspect of this barrier that was involved, a study by Lund et al. (2014) indicated that the denial of accommodations may have been a factor for the 14 students in their study who had disabilities but did not receive any accommodations during their psychology graduate training.

### Barriers to Implementation of Accommodations

**Faculty refusals to implement.** After students with disabilities register with disability resource offices and work with staff to identify accommodations, those accommodations must be implemented in the academic environment. Several studies (e.g., Dowrick et al., 2005; Perry & Franklin, 2006) referenced that this is frequently accomplished via letters that disability resource offices provide to students with disabilities. These letters detail the accommodation(s) a student has been granted, and the student provides the letter to faculty members in order to obtain the accommodation (Perry & Franklin, 2006). However, a common theme found in multiple articles was that students with disabilities encountered faculty who were reportedly unable or unwilling to provide the accommodations students had been granted (Beilke & Yssel, 1999; Dowrick et al., 2005). Houck, Asselin, Troutman, and Arrington (1992) also found a small number of students who identified a similar challenge. In Houck et al.’s interviews with 46 students with disabilities, at a large land-grant university, three students identified “professors’ unwillingness to make accommodations” as “their greatest concern about the campus environment” (p. 682). Similar concerns were captured in results from Lyman et al. (2016). In their discussion of *negative experiences with professors*, they noted that many of the students with disabilities they interviewed had experienced a professor who did not honor the accommodations for which they had been approved.

The value of considering these studies together is not to generalize the campus experience for all, or even most students with disabilities. Many of the negative experiences gathered in these studies were not expressed by a majority of students surveyed. Marshak et al. (2010) also addressed faculty unwillingness to provide accommodations. These researchers

found that at one medium-sized state university, “despite the fact that faculty members receive confidential letters that address specific accommodations are to be provided or allowed, some faculty do not follow through” (p. 158). As noted by Houck et al. (1992), only a small number of students reported an experience with faculty who were unwilling to facilitate an accommodation. While the literature suggested that the frequency of such experiences may be low, they nonetheless appear with consistency. For example, Lyman et al. (2016) found that overall “many participants mentioned that most of their experiences with professors were positive” (p. 130). However, these researchers also noted, “almost all of them could recount, often with great details and passion, a negative experience” (p. 130).

Although there appears to be a trend in the research to suggest that students with disabilities at times encounter faculty who are unwilling to provide or facilitate accommodations, additional research is needed in this area to better understand the conditions under which these experiences occur. An article by West et al. (1993) highlighted the potentially complicated nature of the way in which requests for accommodations are made, responded to, and perceived by those involved. While discussing barriers experienced by students with disabilities, West et al. suggested that their results included accounts from students that “if accurate, seem to show not only an insensitivity to Section 504 regulations, but also a direct violation of them” (p. 462). The authors then proceeded to provide examples of student described barriers. These barriers included “professors that would not give me oral tests” (p. 462). Another barrier the researchers identified was that “sometimes the instructors would not allow taping in their classrooms” (p. 462). Both examples highlighted negative faculty responses, which alone would reasonably contribute to barriers for students with disabilities based on attitudes and social stigma. However, the suggestion by West et al. of a violation of law relies on additional conditions that were not addressed in their research. The study did not appear to have any mechanism to account for whether the requests the students had made to faculty were for accommodations they had been granted for documented disabilities, or whether the interactions were instances in which students had made requests not connected to approved accommodations. Again, the negative response of a faculty member to a student who is asking for something they need in order to succeed academically is troubling. Yet, clarity regarding the conditions under which such denials occur will support more appropriate intervention and training, for faculty in order to attend to this barrier.

**Accommodations found not functional or not helpful.** Another theme that emerged in the literature regarding why students with disabilities did not use accommodations that had been granted was because they were found to be unhelpful or non-functional. Marshak et al. (2010) found that many students with disabilities who had secured accommodations reported challenges with implementation. Specifically, the researchers highlighted accounts from a student who encountered challenges making effective use of books on tape, and another student who after taking an exam outside the classroom, realized she had missed out on exam assistance the faculty member had provided while administering the exam to the rest of the class.

Black, Weinberg, and Brodwin (2015) also found students with disabilities who reported functional challenges with the accommodations they had been provided. The study included the account of a student who had been provided a human reader. The student reported experiencing a degree of discomfort with the human reader, such that it created an added distraction. A similar negative experience was found by Greenbaum et al. (1995). Much like the difficulty of navigating the human component of a reader, in this study some students who had received note taker accommodations reported that it was challenging to “interpret someone else’s notes” (para. 30). Beyond matters of interpretation, Kurth and Mellard (2006) reported an experience from a student in their focus groups, who found the notes they received to be illegible.

The functionality of accommodations is a complex theme in part due to the variety of ways in which students appeared to experience certain types of accommodations. For example, the challenge experienced by the student in Marshak et al.’s (2010) study with books on tape was one rooted in an unfamiliarity with accessing books in audio format. A different challenge involving the same accommodation was addressed by Finn (1999), who reported that students in focus groups discussed challenges due to books on tape that contained incorrectly pronounced words and “readers [who] were sometimes difficult to understand” (p. 632). Accommodations functionality also appears to be an area that would benefit from additional research. For example, Lyman et al. (2016), reported that students found accommodations ineffective, but did not clearly address what was found to create that ineffectiveness, or how it might be mitigated.

**Desire to utilize accommodations.** The most common barrier to accommodations addressed in the literature for students with disabilities in higher education was found in the reasons why students who have (or have had) accommodations – not otherwise

complicated by the implementation barriers previously discussed – elected not to use them. Varied aspects of this theme were found in 19 of the studies reviewed. Issues of personal belief, faculty attitude and reaction, and social stigma all contributed to this theme. Within this area of the literature, three subthemes emerged: (a) student issues of independence and self-sufficiency, (b) concerns regarding faculty reaction, and (c) a desire to avoid social stigma or labeling.

**Independence and self-sufficiency.** One common subtheme found in the literature for why students with disabilities may be reluctant to utilize accommodations is based on their own understanding of themselves and the implications for how they view themselves if they choose to use accommodations. The desire for students with disabilities to be independent and self-sufficient was found in several studies (Black et al., 2015; Lyman et al., 2016; Marshak et al., 2010; Perry & Franklin, 2006). Black et al. (2015) posited that for the students they interviewed, this desire was at times in conflict with the utilization of accommodations, particularly those accommodations that included direct assistance from others. Marshak et al. (2010) found similar desires. These researchers identified student interest in self-sufficiency as a component of a larger theme of identity issues that they found presented “the most frequent barriers that students reported kept them from choosing to seek the services and accommodations available to them” (p. 154). It was found in this study that the desire for self-sufficiency for some students was so great that it “frequently took precedence over expediency” (p. 154). A similar desire was also found by Lyman et al. (2016). These authors reported that students wanted to be as self-sufficient and independent as possible, and that one of the ways they attempted to maintain independence was by only utilizing accommodations as a backup strategy. In addition to the immediate concerns for independence discussed by students in these studies, Perry and Franklin (2006) also addressed student reported long-term concerns regarding self-sufficiency. In their study of students diagnosed with ADHD, one student described a desire for long-term independence as a reason to not utilize accommodations. The student explained a belief that similar accommodations would not be made in the world beyond college, so the best course of action would be to learn to function without them.

Another motivational factor that appeared related to values of independence and self-sufficiency was the perceived impact of accommodations on academic value. Olney and Kim (2001) conducted focus groups with students at a large university in the

Midwest. The researchers posited that a western academic environment that privileges individual abilities contributes to conflict experienced by students with disabilities who “were learning and competing within a merit-based system, while relying on the help and accommodations of others” (p. 576). The authors’ suggestion explained why some students with disabilities “felt that achieving success with accommodations diluted or invalidated their successes” (p. 576). In a different study, Denhart (2008) found that a similar attitude was held by five of the 11 students interviewed, including one student who stated: “I feel like the less people utilize accommodations, the more valued their work is” (p. 492).

Further, the literature appeared to support that perceptions of reduced academic legitimacy, due to accommodations use, has a negative impact for students with disabilities beyond the academic domain of their postsecondary experiences. Vaccaro et al. (2015) studied college students with disabilities and their sense of belonging. They found that “for students with disabilities, being seen as a legitimate student was essential to a sense of belonging” (p. 679). The work of Vaccaro et al. underscores the impact of perceptions of academic legitimacy for students with disabilities. In addition to the qualitative data collected in these studies, Hartman-Hall and Haaga (2002) found that “students who were using formal services for their LD rated their own scholastic competence lower than did students not currently using services” (p. 272). While the authors entertained multiple plausible explanations of these data, one was that “students who are using services have a poorer perception of their scholastic abilities as a result of using services” (p. 272). Taken together, these studies suggest that some students with disabilities, by electing to utilize accommodations, may perceive that they are not only undercutting the value of their work, but by extension, delegitimizing their very belonging at their institution.

Another factor that must be discussed before leaving the topic of independence and self-sufficiency is the degree to which these desires might be motivated by social stigma and negative reactions from faculty, staff, and peers. In one study, Hong (2015) found that each of the 16 students who participated in reflective journaling, displayed “a deep desire for independence and being self-reliant” (p. 218). Hong suggested that these desires were motivated by student interests in managing their identities to avoid looking weak. An examination of negative reactions by peers and faculty towards students who seek or utilize accommodations will be addressed later in this review. However, it must be acknowledged that while these themes have

been separated for the sake of cogent explanation, they appeared in the literature in ways that seemed to overlap and impact each other.

**Faculty reactions.** Another theme that emerged from the literature as a barrier to the use of accommodations involved concern regarding faculty reactions to requests for accommodations; or reactions to the disability disclosure that is implicit in such a request. As previously discussed, accommodations in higher education are typically granted through a disability resource office. Next, the office provides a letter to faculty members – either directly, or through the student for whom accommodations have been granted. The letter indicates the accommodations that are to be provided. In such a system, knowledge of a granted accommodation is, then, knowledge that the student involved has a documented disability. Several studies have found that students have reported experiencing negative faculty reactions when notification or utilization of accommodations occurred (e.g. Denhart, 2008; Hong, 2015; Olney & Kim, 2001).

It must first be noted that the literature related to negative experiences surrounding disability disclosure is largely limited to experiences involving students with non-apparent disabilities. The reason for this seems to be that the research has framed disclosure as a choice: whether or not to disclose a disability (Olney & Kim, 2001). The construct of disability disclosure as a student’s choice requires that the student have an option of not disclosing a disability. The ability to be in control of disclosure regarding one’s disability identity is not as readily available to students with visible disabilities. Therefore, lack of literature that has addressed faculty reactions to disability disclosure and accommodations utilization pertaining to visible disability is not surprising.

The literature regarding student utilization of accommodations frequently highlights negative responses from faculty. These range from broad negative attitudinal responses, (Hong, 2015; Perry & Franklin, 2006) to refusals to provide approved accommodations (Beilke & Yssel, 1999). A common theme also emerged around attempts by faculty to counsel a student out of a particular course or program of study. In some cases this counseling came in the form of faculty questioning whether there was a need for a student to be in a particular course given their disability (Beilke & Yssel, 1999; da Silva Cardoso et al., 2016; Denhart, 2008). In studies by Barga (1996) and Beilke and Yssel (1999) it occurred at a broader level – such as faculty counseling students towards another major that might be easier. In apparent confirmation of such concerns reported by students with disabilities, a study by Sniatecki et al. (2015)

found faculty members who reported that they had engaged in these types of counseling-out-of-major discussions. The study found that 15 out of 123 faculty surveyed at a public liberal arts university reported having engaged in advising “a student to change his/her major due to limitations associated with disability” (p. 264). Finally, a most egregious instance was reported by a student in a study conducted by Olney and Kim (2001), who reported receiving oblique threats from a faculty member regarding continuation in a graduate program following disclosure of a disability. A similar threat was also reported by a student in an earlier study, conducted by West et al. (1993). While such examples were not frequently found in the literature, they serve to outline the broad range of negative experiences that students reported having encountered upon the disclosure of their disabilities. The dated nature of several of these studies presents a potential limitation to this subtheme. It is possible that faculty attitudes and behaviors have changed over time, and that this barrier is not as severe as it once was. Additional research into the current experiences of students with disabilities is needed to further assess whether or not that is the case.

Faculty interaction and facilitation of accommodations also emerged as a distinct subtheme of faculty reactions. Olney and Brockelman (2003) interviewed a student who described experiencing negative reactions through the “transformation in the behavior and attitudes of professors” (p. 45) upon disability disclosure. Negative perceptions of the way in which accommodations were managed by faculty was also addressed by Lehmann et al. (2000). These researchers reported that students with disabilities perceived a general burden placed on them to alleviate faculty anxiety regarding accommodations provision. Several studies (Hong, 2015; Marshak et al., 2010; Perry & Franklin, 2006) also identified student confidentiality as a concern throughout the provision of accommodations. Hong (2015) found that a barrier existed for students when faculty compromised student confidentiality in the classroom by making adjustments without being discrete. Additionally, Perry and Franklin (2006) found that students experienced breeches in confidentiality while providing their accommodations letters to faculty. Similar concerns were also raised by students interviewed by Marshak et al. (2010) regarding having been identified in class as the student for whom a note taker was needed. These various aspects of confidentiality highlight the role that faculty play regarding the provision of accommodations, and the degree to which their actions may work for or against the desires of students with disabilities to remain anonymous.

*Social stigma and labeling.* Several studies found students with disabilities were generally hesitant to utilize accommodations due to stigma-related concerns (e.g., Denhart, 2008; Dowrick et al., 2005; Lehmann et al., 2000; Olney & Kim, 2001; Salzer et al., 2008). Olney and Kim (2001) found, “stigma was the reason that participants most often gave for not disclosing” (p. 573). Similarly, in a study by Salzer et al. (2008), 30% of students surveyed reported not requesting accommodations because they “were fearful of being stigmatized by teachers” (pp. 372-373). Denhart (2008) found that students with learning disabilities were reluctant to utilize accommodations because they did not want to be viewed as inferior. In an earlier study by Dowrick et al. (2005) stigma was identified as a factor that caused many students concern in disclosing their disabilities. Students in a study by Lehmann et al. (2000) discussed experiencing a general lack of understanding and acceptance regarding disability from both peers and faculty.

Further, students with disabilities appeared to be highly attuned to negative or uninformed responses of peers and faculty. Multiple studies noted that students appeared negatively impacted by not only explicit negative responses, but ambiguously negative responses as well (Bento, 1996; Hong, 2015). For example, Bento (1996) suggested that ambivalent responses by faculty to accommodations requests increased perceived attitudinal barriers. Similarly, Hong (2015) found that students had negative experiences with faculty members who displayed a lack of empathy, even as those faculty facilitated the requested accommodations. Student experiences of barriers based on faculty reactions underscores the importance of studies such as those conducted by Sniatecki et al. (2015), Vance and Weyandt (2008), and Zhang et al. (2010). While the focus of such studies on faculty attitudes and perceptions regarding students with disabilities is beyond the scope of this review, it is an area of the literature that is highly relevant to understandings of the experiences of students with disabilities.

One final aspect found in the literature related to stigma and disclosure involved the consideration by students with disabilities of future implications of disability disclosure or accommodation use. The concern was found regarding both immediate and long-term implications. More immediately, students reported not wanting to label themselves with a disability identity in college, after having shed the identity upon leaving high school (Kurth & Mellard, 2006; Marshak et al., 2010). Long-term implications were discussed by students interviewed by Lyman et al. (2016). These students expressed concerns that utilization of accommodations might harm relationships



with faculty members or inhibit the growth or development that they might achieve without the accommodations. Hong (2015) found “the most frequently cited barrier [students with disabilities reported] was related to how students think faculty would perceive them if they were to reveal that they needed accommodation” (p. 214).

Lastly, additional insights emerge when the topics of faculty responses to disclosure or accommodations requests, and the perceptions of stigma for students with disabilities, are intersected. Attending to this overlap is important, because the literature seems to indicate that many of the perceptions of stigma that students with disabilities have appear to be supported by faculty or non-disabled student actions, attitudes, or beliefs. Understanding these relationships is crucial, because it informs the path to continued support for students with disabilities in higher education.

Hartman-Hall and Haaga (2002) gathered quantitative data that indicated that faculty member reactions influenced the decision making of students with disabilities regarding whether or not to disclose and utilize accommodations. In this study, students with learning disabilities were presented with various hypothetical faculty reactions to student requests for accommodations or academic assistance for a learning disability. They found that students reported more willingness to seek help after reading about positive responses, and less willingness after reading negative responses. Their finding is consistent with previous studies that have found that students with disabilities often have their own analytical frameworks that they utilize in determining whether disclosure and the utilization of accommodations is “worth the risk,” (Hong, 2015, p. 215) or whether they can get by without it (Barga, 1996).

Unfortunately, such a framework is complicated by studies from Olney and Kim (2001) and Olney and Brockelman (2003). Both studies found that attempts by students with disabilities to utilize accommodations only when absolutely necessary were at times thwarted by unpredictable impacts of their disabilities – resulting in frustration due to disabilities impacting them differently in different situations, and to degrees they were unable to anticipate. Together, these factors result in situations in which students with disabilities may attempt to manage a class without accommodations, only to realize mid-way through the course that it might not be possible. West et al. (1993) found that many students with disabilities described the accommodations process as providing “too little, too late” (p. 461). Such feelings are likely exacerbated when students delay the utilization of services in attempts to determine the level of need they have for accom-

modations, or the receptiveness of professors to their potential disclosures.

## **Discussion**

In reviewing the literature on the provision of accommodations for students with disabilities in postsecondary education, several themes emerged. Barriers to accommodations appeared to exist throughout students’ paths towards securing and utilizing accommodations. The current review has gathered and presented those themes and drawn connections between them. The final section of this review will explore a broad level analysis of the limitations found in the literature, the limitations of this review, as well as the implications for future research and practice in higher education.

### **Limitations**

The present review is limited in a number of ways – many of which stem from the inclusion/exclusion criteria used in selecting the literature for review. For example, in an attempt to consider the broad range of experienced barriers to disability in higher education, disability type was not utilized in the selection of research. It is possible that a review that considered particular types of disability more specifically would have found different common experiences. Similarly, while this review sought to understand those disability barriers in the American higher education system, it failed to incorporate an international perspective. Such a perspective is undoubtedly significant and represents an area of important consideration in future research. Additionally, the number of studies included does not lend itself to strong statements of generalizability. Likewise, the review relied on many qualitative studies that featured relatively small samples sizes. As will be considered below, the individualistic nature of the experiences captured in these studies limit the extent to which this review is able to support definitive statements regarding the accommodations experiences of students with disabilities in higher education.

One common limitation in many of the studies examined was the institution-specific context in which they were conducted. Social stigma appeared in the literature as a considerable factor for students with disabilities, their peers, and their faculty and staff members. Stigma is socially constructed, and different social environments may construct it differently. The attitudes towards students with disabilities encountered by a student at one college or university may be quite different from those encountered at another. Therefore, while stigma appeared in seemingly

consistent ways in the literature, additional research on disability and stigma, particularly in postsecondary education, will continue to contribute to more complete understandings of socially constructed barriers for students with disabilities.

Another limitation existed in the manner in which students were identified for research participation. Frequently, as is seen in the description of participants by Lyman et al. (2016), students were primarily identified through disability resource offices, or other services provided by institutions for students with disabilities (da Silva et al., 2016). However, student utilization of such offices and services in postsecondary education is voluntary. Given the impact of negative perceptions regarding utilization of accommodations, it seems likely that studies that draw participants from disability offices or programs may miss students with disabilities who have elected to not utilize disability resources on their campus. Ongoing research in this area should explore opportunities for broader campus participation. Doing so may support a more complete understanding of various factors that impact accommodation-seeking decisions.

The amount of time that has passed since many of the studies identified in this review must also be considered as a limitation. Many of the barriers discussed in this review involve social interactions. These interactions are ones which may shift in nature or implication over time. Additionally, disability services offices operate in a landscape of legislation, case law, and professional best practices; all of which shape the accommodations process over time. For this reason, it seems likely that the reported experiences of students in some of the older studies (e.g., Hill, 1996; West et al., 1993) may be different from the experiences of current students with disabilities in higher education. Future research would be valuable in discerning whether and how barriers to accommodations have shifted over time.

Lastly, the positionality of the reviewer must be considered as a limitation. The nature of inductive theme identification in the review is such that different researchers might have arrived at different analyses of the same research. As such, while this review may contribute to a more complete understanding of the accommodation experiences of students with disabilities in higher education, it does not represent the only interpretation of the literature reviewed.

## **Recommendations**

Upon reviewing the perceptions and experiences of barriers to accommodations reported by students with disabilities, issues of communication and knowledge of disability emerged as potentially im-

portant areas for additional research and consideration. The ways in which individuals communicate about disability and accommodations appeared in the literature as a source of tension impacting many of the themes addressed in this review. One important area of future research regarding such tensions and communications involves exploring the models of disability that ground accommodation processes and the related experiences of students with disabilities in higher education.

The typical accommodations process, previously described in this review, is framed by a medical model of disability. The medical model assumes disability as individual deficit in need of treatment at the individual level. The model is frequently contrasted with the social model of disability, in which individuals have impairments, but it is society's response to those impairments that disables people (Davis, 2013). Some of the accommodations related barriers identified in this review, such as students' abilities to provide adequate medical documentation, or secure the provision of a particular accommodation from a faculty member, revolve around a medical model. Simultaneously, barriers rooted in social stigma or understandings of self-sufficiency or academic legitimacy are clearly dictated by social understandings of disability. Additional research into the intersection of the medical model of accommodations and the social understandings that implicate students' desires to engage in the accommodations process will support disability services offices in working to remove both individual and social barriers for students with disabilities.

For disability services offices, this review similarly highlights multiple avenues by which to provide ongoing student support. At the individual level, this review makes clear the importance of individualized accommodations support, which aims to provide students with disabilities as much agency in the accommodations process as possible, without rendering the process overwhelming. It also highlights the importance of disability resources offices to gather student feedback, so that they may address common experiences that students may be having while interacting with their office or the accommodations process. While accommodations may be provided in a medical model framework, this review also underscores the importance of the social aspect of campus culture, and the opportunities for education and awareness raising that may benefit students with disabilities. If disability services offices are able to imbue knowledge of the available resources into their campus communities, students may less frequently miss out on needed accommodations. Such increased knowledge may be achieved through community outreach

and/or awareness raising through outreach to faculty, staff, and students during orientations. Similarly, encouraging faculty to address accommodations with discretion, and without what may be received by students as interrogation or suspicion, would be beneficial to a campus culture that students with disabilities would likely experience at both individual and social levels.

Lastly, it should be acknowledged that these campus culture-based recommendations are not easy solutions. Disability services offices likely find themselves increasingly taxed as the number of students with disabilities increases. The medical model of individual accommodation may not leave much time in the days of these administrators such that they would be able to engage in the work necessary beyond their offices in order to impact the campus culture regarding disability. For this reason, along with the previously discussed recommendations based on the themes of this review, a call for consideration of *Universal Design for Learning* (UDL) is crucial.

As the number of students who qualify for accommodations increases, some have called for a shift away from a reliance on the current accommodations model, to one in which they are not needed – through the implementation of UDL (LaRocco & Wilken, 2013; Lombardi & Murray, 2011). By minimizing the number of students who require and seek disability accommodations, a shift towards UDL might allow disability resource administrators to devote more time to community education and awareness. A reduction in the need for accommodations would also reduce the number of students who experience negative barriers related to the accommodations process. A shift towards UDL may also guide a reframing of disability within higher education away from a medical model, towards a social model, in which disability would be viewed as a component of campus diversity.

### Conclusion

The literature on barriers to accommodations for students with disabilities in higher education covers a broad range of topics. The studies considered in this review found barriers to exist across disability types and throughout the processes with which students engage in order to receive and make use of accommodations. The review found themes of awareness, documentation, functionality, and utilization of accommodations to all be implicated by these barriers. It also identified opportunities for additional research – particularly with regard to the interactional nature of the accommodations process.

Accommodations play a substantial role in the legal compliance framework of higher education (Rothstein, 2015). To that end, they may be thought of as the mandated floor for policy and procedure, as contrasted to an aspirational – and presently optional – ceiling that sees them as unnecessary in educational environments accessible and equitable without them. As the field continues to develop, additional research into accommodations will provide an important foundation from which discussions of inclusion, equity, and diversity regarding disability in higher education may expand.

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Table 1

*Summary of Reviewed Literature Methods and Samples*

<b>Author(s) &amp; Year</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Student Sample</b>
Barga, N. K. (1996)	Qualitative; interviews	9
Beilke, J. R., & Yssel, N. (1999)	Qualitative; interviews	10
Bento, R. F. (1996)	Qualitative; interviews	18
Black, R. D., Weinberg, L. A., Brodwin, M. G. (2015)	Qualitative; interviews	15
da Silva Cardoso, E., Phillips, B. N., Thompson, K., Ruiz, D., Tansey, T. N., Chan, F. (2016)	Qualitative; interviews	6
Denhart, H. (2008)	Qualitative; interviews	11
Dowrick, P. W., Anderson, J., Heyer, K., & Acosta, J. (2005)	Qualitative; focus groups	3-19/group
Finn, L. L. (1999)	Qualitative; focus groups	33
Greenbaum, B., Graham, S., & Scales, W. (1995)	Mixed; interviews & performance data	49
Hartman-Hall, H. M., & Haaga, D. F. (2002)	Quantitative; scenario response	86
Hong, B. S. (2015)	Qualitative; reflexive journaling	16
Houck, C. K., Asselin, S. B., Troutman, G. C., & Arrington, J. M. (1992)	Quantitative; interviews	46
Kurth, N., & Mellard, D. (2006)	Mixed; surveys & focus groups	108 (surveys) 104 (focus group students)
Lehmann, J. P., Davies, T. G., & Laurin, K. M. (2000)	Qualitative; focus groups	35
Lund, E. M., Andrews, E. E., & Holt, J. M. (2014)	Quantitative; survey	56
Lyman, M., Beecher, M. E., Griner, D., Brooks, M., Call, J., & Jackson, A. (2016)	Qualitative; interviews	16
Marshak, L., Van Wieren, T., Ferrell, D. R., Swiss, L., & Dugan, C. (2010)	Qualitative; interviews	16
Olney, M. F., & Brockelman, K. F. (2003)	Qualitative; interviews & focus groups	25
Olney, M. F., & Kim, A. (2001)	Qualitative; focus groups	16
Perry, S. N., & Franklin, K. K. (2006)	Qualitative; interviews	10
Salzer, M. S., Wick, L. C., & Rogers, J. A. (2008)	Quantitative; survey	508
Vaccaro, A., Daly-Cano, M., & Newman, B. M. (2015)	Qualitative; interviews	8
West, M., Kregel, J., Getzel, E. E., Zhu, M., Ipsen, S. M., Martin, E. D. (1993)	Quantitative; survey	761