A Comparison of Success Trajectories Among Nontraditional Students with Varying Abilities

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Abstract

Graduate students with impairments achieve at lower rates than peers without impairments. A social model of disability perspective suggests that the disparity results from interactions between individual and situational traits rather than individual characteristics alone. This inquiry compared and contrasted experiences of overcoming academic disqualification among nontraditional post-baccalaureate participants with and without impairments. Comparisons occur within and across dyads: three participants with impairments were matched to participants without impairments and comparisons were made within their experiences and then across other dyads. Participants, regardless of impairments, wrestled with online learning and postponed assistance seeking, and relied on relationships as a source of support and learned to manage their time as a strategy for success. Those with learning needs used prescribed medication strategically and managed identity to avoid stigma or explore autonomy. The findings prioritize support for the agency of nontraditional graduate students for achieving degree completion.

Keywords: social model of disability, higher education, persistence, nontraditional students, graduate education

Students with impairments pursue higher education less often than those without impairments, and only a third of those with impairments complete their degrees (United States Department of Education, 2011). The disparity between completion rates of those with and without impairments implicates a cause beyond innate ability. A lack of degree completion within either population results in pervasive obstacles, including stagnant employment status and pay (Kim & Baker, 2014), lost lifetime earnings and national capital (Schneider & Yin, 2011), and social immobility for offspring (Monaghan, 2017). Supporting the degree aspirations of individuals with impairments not only mediates poor outcomes and improves quality of life, but also strengthens the workforce and increases social adaptiveness.

Graduate, nontraditional students with impairments have virtually no representation in published research. Ignoring the needs of graduate, nontraditional students with impairments informs the design of graduate classrooms that perpetuates their exclusion. Despite the benefit of eradicating barriers or developing supports, no efforts have yet materialized for graduate, nontraditional students with impairments. The following passages rely on a review of previous studies conducted amongst undergraduate populations.

Applying a Social Model of Disability Lens

Recently, inquiries exploring the success of higher education students with impairments have built upon the social model of disability framework (e.g., Connor, 2012; Morin, 2017). The social model emphasizes the role of context and circumstance in prescribing disability status. Moreover, the social model appreciates the capacity (i.e., agency) of individuals with impairments to orchestrate their direction and overcome or avoid impediments to an optimal life. The present inquiry assumed the social model framework by re-orienting from a deficit view of impairments that emphasizes resources applied to the individual and toward an actualizing perspective, emphasizing the individual’s self-enhancement. This inquiry explored commonalities and distinctions related to overcoming academic disqualification among individuals with and without impairments.

Needing in Context

Framing a narrative that characterizes students striving to overcome learning barriers rather than students receiving accommodations engenders a commiserate shift from a deficit-ridden view, that emphasizes fixing students, to a view that recognizes

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the situational factors that provoke need. Such a shift in conception epitomizes the social model of disability—emphasizing how impairments arise from an interaction between individuals and contexts.

Madriaga et al. (2010) contended against the ghettoization of students with impairments by demonstrating an overlap in the types of needs among students with and without impairments. Using a sample of matched participants, Madriaga et al. elicited self-reports of comparable needs that outnumbered the needs unique to one or the other group. In an analysis of 30 responsibilities and instructional strategies, the researchers found significant differences regarding eight expectations (e.g., writing, note-taking during class) but comparable benefits among 22 instructional strategies (especially those that aided comprehension and that provided more time to complete work). Madriaga et al. asserted that instructional interventions are “not the preserve of disabled students” (p. 656), but rather adaptive instructional supports that benefit a wider population of higher education students. One might contend that Madriaga et al.’s findings represent needs imbued by nature of the context—in this case, higher education.

The shared appreciation for instructional interventions (Madriaga et al., 2010) suggests that, despite the presence or lack of an impairment, higher education students equally benefit from certain approaches to instruction. That suggestion epitomizes the social model of disability by noting that the population’s (i.e., students’) context (i.e., higher education) fosters obstacles (demonstrated through reliance on instructional interventions in order to achieve expected outcomes). Such an observation also supports the importance of inclusive curricula. However, less support derives for Madriaga et al.’s mantra that everyone is impaired. Their findings warrant a more modest claim that appreciates a broader range of variables: the interaction of person and context yields impairments.

Active Agents

Students with impairments engineer and implement their own strategies to overcome barriers to success in higher education (Connor, 2012; Hadley, 2017; Moriña, 2017). Connor (2012) discovered that students with impairments independently decided to and modified their use of prescription medication, course load, institution of enrollment, and social interactions. Modifications responded to the interaction between their needs and the demands of higher education. The modifications that Connor found reflect an adaptive and proactive exploration of individual capacity rather than passive receipt of assistance.

Participants in Moriña’s (2017) study demonstrated agency like those in Connor’s (2012) study. However, participants in Moriña’s study also implied a preference for their own agency over support from the university. For example, one student “sought out strategies to overcome [barriers], without waiting for others to eliminate them” (p. 220). The distinction evoked from Moriña’s study, however, may reflect dissatisfaction with university services (Hadley, 2012; Vickerman & Blundell, 2010) rather than an innate predisposition.

However, Ben-Naim et al. (2017) found a reason to worry about students’ self-reliance. In a study of 438 college students (149 of whom declared they had impairments), agency related negatively to having an impairment. In other words, those with impairments reported less agency and faced less favorable academic outcomes than their peers. Personal resources (or a lack thereof) compounded the negative association, pointing to direct and indirect ways that impairments impact academic self-efficacy.

Exploring ability and managing identity. Students with impairments wield their agency in part by subscribing publicly (or not) to the categorization of disabled. Students vary in the degree to which they refrained from or informed others of their impairments. They choose to pass, disclose to select peers, use disclosure in negotiations with instructors, or generally disclose information about their impairments (Connor, 2012; Hadley, 2017; Moriña, 2017).

An unwillingness to disclose might reflect nontraditional students’ “need to know oneself in terms of the disability and how to explain it” (Moriña, 2017, p. 219). Students’ need for self-knowledge may manifest as a desire to—at least temporarily—forfeit supports in order to gauge their academic potential.

That students postpone disclosure while pursuing self-knowing finds explanation in Connor’s (2012) argument that impairment manifests differently across students. If, as Connor concludes, having an impairment fails to elucidate a singular prognosis, then students—like those in Moriña’s study—will set out to understand how their ability fits (or does not) within the context of higher education. Then the exploration represents self- and group-identity exploration—determining the extent to which certain labels and stereotypes apply to oneself.

Moriña’s (2017) participants also attributed their reticence to disclose to instructors’ doubt about the veracity of invisible needs (i.e., those needs that lacked easily observed sources). Those participants suggested that lacking physical indicators of a need for accommodation imposed a persistent obligation for students to prove their need. Students who en-
counter insufficient affirmations, such as Moriña’s participants, might predictably forfeit accommodations in light of a barrage of psychological and emotional affronts. As a result of such affronts, they might pursue alternative solutions.

**Dynamism and negotiation.** That students with impairments forfeited accommodations (Moriña, 2017) or disclosed selectively (Connor, 2012; Hadley, 2017) suggests that students not only acted as agents but did so dynamically. Their agency manifested over the duration of their degree pursuit and as they responded to varying situations. When encountering a lecturer who doubted their need for accommodation, students procured evidence or investigated pathways to success that negated their reliance on the lecturer. Students also varied the extent of their personal investment in the degree pursuit (Moriña, 2017), use of prescription medication, living arrangements, and social networks (Connor, 2012). Students demonstrated dynamic agency as needs fluctuated. Students wielded disclosure of their ability status as a means of managing relationships with peers (Connor, 2012; Hadley, 2017).

Some variance in the ways of navigating higher education demonstrated *transitional* work—a one-and-done adjustment to the demands of a new context. However, *transitional* work did not account for all the variance among students in Connor’s (2012) study. Two participants described varying their prescription medication use as an ongoing practice and in response to the modulating demands of their degree pursuits. Both participants described strict compliance to a prescribed dosage during times of heightened academic demands. They reported diminished compliance during less demanding intervals. Connor alludes to the varying of behaviors among students with impairments as *strategizing*.

Moriña’s (2017) participants also strategized in response to obstacles. Moriña clustered participant interview data according to seven tasks or decisions, each demonstrating agency. Tasks or decisions included whether to:

- disclose or pass,
- become aware of one’s own possibilities and personal limitations,
- exert additional effort in order to achieve goals,
- define oneself as a student,
- become resilient, and
- recognize the university as a chance for social inclusion.

The decisions to *disclose or pass* and to become *resilient* varied over the duration of the students’ higher education experience, modulating in response to the needs of a particular situation.

Hadley (2017) followed the college and early-career experience of a student with several accommodation needs and, like Connor (2012), noted that the student autonomously modified his behavior situationally. Hadley indicated that modifications such as memorizing class lectures rather than taking notes, planning to complete activity-based rather than writing tasks when collaborating with a group, and planning the amount of writing time to avoid pain associated with his dysgraphia developed into a predictable regimen of modifications.

**Research Question**

The larger study from which this additional analysis derives (Jones, 2019) explored the phenomenon of personal, professional, and academic changes that graduate, nontraditional students enacted in light of academic disqualification and that led to successful continuance or completion of degree pursuits. This subsequent analysis explored *if* and *how* such experiences in overcoming disqualification varied according to the presence of an impairment.

In comparing the needs and challenges of higher education students with impairments against those without impairments, Madriaga et al. (2010) advanced the sophistication of research steeped in a social model of disability framework. Those researchers included students without impairments as a way to elaborate the meaning of experiences among students with impairments. The current inquiry, drawn from a subset of data collected during a larger study on student persistence (Jones, 2019), sought to imitate Madriaga et al.’s exploration of similarities and differences using matched participants. This inquiry compared the attributions that students with and without impairments made for academic disqualifications, as well as strategies they enacted to persevere. Sets of responses from matched participants were extracted from a prior study of nontraditional post-baccalaureate students.

**Method**

**Methodologies Reflecting the Tenet of Agency**

The social model of disability stresses the ability of those with impairments to act as their own agents. A research methodology allegiant to the social model validates and empowers the voices of those with impairments. An incongruent methodology facilitates the imposition of the researcher’s values on and inter-
pretations of participant experiences. Methodologies that convey participant voices manifest as qualitative subtypes and the researchers may explicitly attest to preserving participants’ voices.

Connor (2012) and Moriña (2017) selected qualitative methodologies that esteemed participant voices. Additionally, each researcher attested to the value of the methodology for preserving participant voices. Connor (2012) stated that personal narratives “foreground individual experiences that are recognized as the source of information” (p. 1008), stressing the value of the participant’s narrative as the primary (as in foregrounded) unit of consideration. Connor also remarked that such an approach leaves the management of the individual’s representation significantly under the individual’s control. Moriña provided a similar rationale: the biographical narrative “methodology is conceived as an ideal tool to give voice to groups of people who are usually silenced, as in the case of students with [impairments]” (p. 217). Connor and Moriña thereby aligned their methodological decisions to the social model framework.

This inquiry employed a phenomenological framework, obligating the researcher to perpetually re-visit participants’ experiences. Re-visiting participant descriptions and setting aside researcher assumptions and values—through the process of bracketing—foregrounds participants’ voices and thereby aligns to a tenet of the social model of disability. Phenomenology recruits individual experience to distill meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018), a feature which aligns to the emphasis that disability studies places on meaning-making through lived experience with impairments. Furthermore, phenomenology’s emphasis on the development of descriptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018) serves to favor the voices of those with impairments rather than the researcher’s. The methodology inquires after a single phenomenon (in this case change) shared by a group of individuals (i.e., the participants). In endeavoring to procure rich, shared insight into individuals’ experiences, the methodology foregoes generating data of a generalizable kind but aspires to depict universal experiences.

**Procedure**

A university-based institutional review board approved the recruitment of participants for this study after a careful appraisal of the study’s design and purpose. Participants’ rights were protected throughout the duration of the study. Participants were recruited through a university database after a review of their characteristics. Inclusion criteria for participation included the following:

- appealed academic disqualification in previous year,
- academic disqualification in the context of post-baccalaureate studies,
- nontraditional student,
- returned to program, and
- succeeded in ensuing coursework (defined as no grades lower than C or as completion of academic program).

Twelve participants met all the criteria. Nine participants responded to invitations sent by email and phone (75% response rate) and participated in individual, unstructured interviews with the researcher. In their individual interviews, participants described changes they experienced socially, personally, or professionally in the time leading up to, during, and after their academic disqualification. Follow up questions to the initial prompt intended to elicit deeper reflections or re-visit nuances of the original prompt. Such questions included the following:

- What changes occurred between the time you experienced failures in your degree program and the time your performance improved in the program?
- Are there contrasts in the way you interacted with others or they interacted with you when you experienced failures and when you experienced improvements in your degree program?
- How did you decide on or learn what you needed to do in order to improve your academic performance?

Results from six of those interviews appear in this analysis. Experiences from the excluded participants remain in the discussion of the larger study (Jones, 2019) but do not appear here as the characteristics of those three participants could not be matched within a dyad. Participants selected the location and time for their interview. Of the six included in this analysis, four participants (66%) opted to interview via video conference. One participant interviewed in person. The sixth participant interviewed via email to accommodate his impairments.

**Participants**

The inquiry employed dissimilarity sampling. Rubin and Rubin (2012) suggested an approach to qualitative inquiry that relied on choosing “cases that differ as much as possible on whatever characteristics you are looking at” (p. 74). Thus, in order to compare responses about the experience of overcom-
Sampling. The larger study from which this analysis stems included graduate, nontraditional students from one private institution of higher education along the United States’ West Coast. Invited students (i) had characteristics that qualified them as nontraditional students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015), (ii) received and appealed an academic disqualification, and (iii) achieved thereafter (defined as demonstrating clear academic participation resulting in predominantly A to B- grades, few or no C grades, and no failing grades). In some cases, successful continuance culminated in the completion of the degree program.

Comparing groups. This inquiry drew from data collected during a larger study of student retention that explored the experiences of higher education students who experienced academic disqualification and who had modified their approaches in order to achieve (Jones, 2019). Nine participants participated in the larger study. Six demonstrated suitable matches, based on personal and demographic characteristics, to a single participant in the complementary group. Two groups resulted: one group of three individuals with impairments and another group of three without impairments. The number of participants represents an apt group for the implementation of a phenomenological study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In their interviews, students with impairments demonstrated sufficient and nuanced understanding of the process of applying for, receiving, and continuing to receive accommodations from the university. Participants’ familiarity with the process of securing accommodations served to validate the presence of their impairment. Additionally, the use of the term need for learning accommodation is one that represents the researcher’s understanding (based on students’ disclosures and articulation, and verified through member checking) that the impairment directly interfered with learning.

Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and compared against the original recording to ensure accuracy. The researcher enlisted research assistants—student success personnel—to participate in concurrent in vivo and descriptive coding, which served to distill the meaning of participants’ narratives (Creswell, 2014). Phenomenological analysis involves scrutiny of narrow units (i.e., specific expressions) and broader ones (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The analysis of narrow units or specific expressions involves horizontalization, by which all statements describing the experience receive comparable regard. This analysis proceeded with both units simultaneously but separately, followed by cross-analyses between the two units. The analysis culminated in a textural description, which emphasizes what participants experienced. Participants provided member checking via emailed correspondence. Results of the interviews underwent a final stage of analysis, a comparison of experiences within and across matched dyads. Thus, themes and experiences from members of each dyad were compared to the other member of the dyad to explore convergences and divergences. In a second step, such similarities were compared to the convergences and divergences across other dyads.

Results

Participants and their characteristics appear in table 1. Note that adjacent rows demonstrate matched dyads. The table represents three participants who have impairments—Anna, Hillary, and Ian. The former two need learning accommodations not related to noticeable physical impairments. Ian’s need for accommodation results from observable physical impairments being that he is both deaf and blind.

It bears mentioning that even attributions those participants made for their academic disqualification demonstrated similarities within dyads. For instance, matched participants Anna and Felicia both cited competing responsibilities as distractors fostering their disqualification. Anna, though, added an accommodation-related topic on top of that attribution. Such an observation supports Connor’s (2012) claim that the higher education experience of those with accommodation needs is not an all-together-different trajectory, but rather one in which the “demands [of being successful in higher education] are magnified” (p. 1006) for students with impairments. Ian and Danny demonstrated shared clashes with cultural barriers enroute to underperformance. The nature of those clashes—the former relating to country differences and the other related to higher education experiences—warrants restraint in the extent to which they are equated and cited to support Connor’s (2012) earlier-referenced claim.

Other shared attributions for disqualifications included mastering online learning requirements and delays in securing assistance. Participants from both groups also discussed similar strategies for overcoming disqualification, such as capitalizing on relationships and learning to manage time. Only two participants, both with accommodation needs,
explored ability, coinciding with their fear of stigma and wish for autonomy. Additionally, only two participants with accommodation needs described medication regimens for regulating their academic performance.

Shared Themes

**Online learning.** All participants except Danny incurred academic disqualification in part through online learning. Within the two female dyads, difficulty engaging with online learning characterized only those without impairments. Felicia described difficulty devoting herself to large chunks of time to complete online coursework because her home setting lent too many distractions: “I have a very hard time with online courses. I need a little bit—I don’t know—that physical space that I have to be somewhere.” Giselle described online courses as poorly administered. She experienced difficulty identifying requirements and reaching instructors to gain their assistance: “He just wasn’t present….I’m working full-time, have my personal life, and on top of my personal life that includes going to school, and that person’s not there to make sure or answer questions.” Anna and Hillary made no reference to online learning in explaining their academic disqualification or enacting changes.

**Delays in securing assistance.** Members of both female dyads postponed seeking assistance to regulate their academic performance. Anna and Felicia, for example, approached their respective advisors only after a failing grade in their coursework appeared imminent and irreparable. Anna, for example, stated, “I didn’t turn in my paperwork until I started getting Cs [an insufficient grade in that particular program]…Once I was academically disqualified, then I made an appointment with [the program director] and I went to talk to him.

Members of the other female dyad, Hillary and Giselle, described attempts to navigate their respective expectations. Hillary explained this as her process of figuring things out, saying, “I learn by trial and error.” Giselle’s frustration with her failing grade, on the other hand, prompted her to seek perspective in order to avoid a repeated occurrence.

**Relationships.** Nearly all participants indicated that relationships served as a source of support in overcoming academic disqualification. Hillary demonstrated an exception to this observation as she felt alienated from her peers (“I feel out of place”) and deferred meaningful engagement with her advisor. For Anna and Felicia, relationships consisted of family—spouses and parents—who provided emotional support to continue in light of the academic disqualification. Anna iterated that she found her husband as a prominent source of support, stating, “My husband has been so supportive. He’s the next after God. My husband was so supportive.” Anna’s spouse provided insight about resources to accommodate her learning need. Felicia described her husband as “my number one fan.” Both Anna and Felicia identified a change in their relationship with the program advisor as an important tactic to overcoming disqualification. Anna’s change in relationship with the program advisor accelerated her pursuit of accommodations. Felicia’s relationship contributed accountability, which coalesced into an alternate pace for accomplishing her courses.

Ian and Danny identified peers in the classroom or in other local universities as supports for managing and clarifying requirements. Ian realized the function of social connections in bolstering his academic performance, stating that others “actually helped me…The social impact is always important in learning.” Danny alluded to his peers’ impact on his performance, stating that “They were definitely my resource” in clarifying expectations and meeting deadlines. Danny’s change in reliance on his peers stemmed in part from his dissatisfaction with the quality of interactions with instructors and advisors.

**Time.** Participants in this study conceded the import of time but interpreted that commodity differently. Anna and Felicia shared a need for a revised timeline. However, the theme pertained to assignments for Anna but the entire program in Felicia’s case. Anna expressed the need to complete her degree program promptly in order to join the workforce and contribute to her family’s financial need. She eventually sought accommodations to ensure she had more time to complete assignments. Felicia, on the other hand, realized that she could not perform sufficiently unless she proceeded at a slower pace through the program, taking fewer courses over a longer period. Felicia also suggested that starting sooner on projects would mitigate the weight of the program. She suggested that, if she could speak to an earlier self, “I would even give myself that advice: start early.” It bears mentioning that Felicia held an internship related to her degree pursuit and contributed to her family’s financial standing while pursuing her degree. Anna did not work while pursuing her degree but devoted herself entirely to her studies.

Similarly, Hillary and Giselle conceived of time management differently. Hillary eventually sought and secured accommodations to allow her more time to complete assignments. Giselle, conversely,
managed time by seeking temporary hiatus from the program through interspersed, semester-long leaves. Unlike Felicia, who sought to establish an alternative pace to her program, Giselle returned from her leaves each time and resumed a typical course load.

Danny and Ian interacted with time in ways that diverged widely from each other. Ian suggested that more diligent time management might have staved off his experience with academic disqualification. “Set aside more time,” he advised. Danny, who felt undermined by several instructors, considered a transfer to another institution. However, he and his spouse agreed that doing so would delay his time to completion. In light of a potential delay, Danny decided to focus on minimizing his conflicts with instructors—accepting grades he believed under-represented his work—in order to achieve his degree as quickly as possible: “I didn’t really have time to go through to another year-and-a-half-long program... [T]he best option would be, ‘Put your head down, stick your nose somewhere, and deal with it.’”

Unique Themes

**Exploring ability.** All three individuals with impairments attributed their academic disqualification partly to their own delay in disclosing their ability status and/or securing accommodations. None of the matched participants (i.e., those without impairments) described an intentional delay but rather an evolving sense of self-understanding that delayed help seeking. For example, when Felicia realized that she could not keep pace with the program pace she negotiated an alternative timeline with her program director. Similarly, Giselle realized a more effective learning approach. Danny, too, learned to rely on his peers rather than instructors for information about expectations.

**Stigma and fear.** Two of the three individuals with impairments—Anna and Hillary—detailed turmoil as they decided to seek accommodations. For example, Anna described a fear of stigma despite lacking previous experience and despite her husband’s assurance. But Anna also described an interest in her own autonomy as a foundation for normalcy.

I wanted to feel like I am like everybody else... So, I guess kind of just embarrassed that I had that and turning in the paperwork would be like, “Yeah, I can’t do it by myself,” even though it’s just silly to think that. But that’s kind of how I felt. I was like, “I could do this on my own and then, if need be, I will take my Adderall.

Hillary conveyed feelings of guilt about requesting accommodations. She stated, “I’ll feel bad to even ask for that extra help because I feel like maybe I’m taking advantage of it...I feel like I’m a bother...I don’t want to take advantage of the program.” She iterated that the accommodations sufficiently helped her achieve and she provided no indication that she had misused the accommodation. But, despite noting the substantial improvement in her academic performance, her reluctance persisted: “I just feel like I’m taking advantage of it sometimes even if I know I need the help.”

**Wish for autonomy.** The above statement demonstrates Anna’s plan for responding to difficulties (“if need be”) which evinces her hope for autonomy conveyed in the statement, “I wanted to feel like I am like everybody else.” Hillary echoed the wish for autonomy in terms comparable to Anna’s, saying, “I want to do something on my own.

**Medication.** References to medication use to improve functioning arose solely from interviews with students who secured accommodations but had no observable impairments. Anna postponed using Adderall. Hillary used medication to regulate her sleeping, which improved her academic performance.

Table 2 summarizes the comparisons and differences elicited through coding of interview transcripts.

**Discussion**

These findings elaborate previous research first by extending the exploration of concerns for students with impairments into a graduate context and, secondly, by doing so in a way that appreciates comparative experiences (those with and without impairments) within a novel setting (graduate education). Furthermore, these results highlight the phenomenon of change within a graduate, nontraditional student sample.

The findings substantiate an application of the social model of disability to graduate education in that students, regardless of ability status, repurposed features of their educational context in order to overcome potential exclusion. Nontraditional graduate students achieved success in graduate contexts by changing the nature of their interaction within that context. Such modifications responded to barriers that characterized the graduate context. Agency and attributions sourced in the students’ context accentuate the suitability of the social model.

**Implications**

Anna and Hillary—whose impairments did not relate obviously to physical differences—rarely enacted esoteric changes in comparison to their peers. Such an observation lends support to Connor’s (2012) claim that the need for accommodations does
not necessitate a segregated pathway through higher education, only a more complex one. Then, instead of distinct pathways, perhaps one more accessible pathway portends greater success for graduate, nontraditional students.

Participants with accommodation needs not tied to observable impairments differed in their experience from the participant with physical impairments. This distinction challenges Connor’s (2012) and Moriña’s (2017) conclusions about the inability to generalize findings related to students with impairments. Both researchers suggested that individual differences in relating to ability status yielded different adaptations. The findings from this analysis disagree somewhat: two students with accommodation needs not associated with obvious impairments shared themes such as the need for more time on assignments, delayed assistance seeking, fear of stigma, and desire for autonomy. Most importantly, these findings demonstrate the recklessness of adopting either conclusion (i.e., to generalize or to not generalize) based solely on interviews with a small group of participants.

Other similarities cross ability status (presence or lack of impairments) as implied by each participant’s involvement in this study: they each succeeded in earlier (i.e., baccalaureate) experiences before encountering academic disqualification, responded to the disqualification by appealing the university’s decision, succeeded in their appeals, and continued or completed their respective programs. Regardless of their ability status, participants overcame academic disqualifications. In order to overcome their obstacles, students adapted to their context, thus demonstrating agency.

The participants with learning needs without physical impairments each had an additional thematic obstacle and recourse to support them in their degree pursuits. Anna and Hillary both described fears about being identified as disabled. Their fear impeded help seeking. They each described their use of prescription medication, which impacted their academic performance, a realization that may elicit protests that they held an unfair advantage over their peers rather than a realization that they faced greater barriers to functioning (Claiborne et al., 2011). However, the sum result of their medication usage and accommodation and other personal changes only served to reduce obstacles and put them on par with their classmates.

The finding regarding medication use to stabilize academic performance elaborates on previous findings—notably Connor’s (2012)—by distinguishing that practice as the sole purview of students with impairments not associated with physical differences. However, exploring the topic only among graduate, nontraditional students attending a university with a religious affiliation yielded a sample that likely under-represented abuse of prescription medication, or at least a sample more committed to hiding the fact that they abuse.

**Practice and Policy**

The findings of this analysis support Madriaga et al.’s (2017) conclusion that higher education students with impairments share more struggles with students without impairments than otherwise. The findings distilled from this analysis expand on Madriaga et al.’s work—not only reflecting the varied context (graduate education in this study as opposed to undergraduate education in Madriaga et al.’s), but also by demonstrating that attributions for disqualification and overcoming disqualification appear in the experiences of either group. However, two of the three students with impairments (specifically those with accommodation needs without noticeable impairments) also grappled with a fear of stigma, wished for autonomy, and used prescribed medication strategically.

This analysis is insufficient in offering accommodations based solely on the presence of a formal or recognized ability label. Determining accommodation needs require deeper consideration than the employment of a disabled/non-disabled label in light of the observation that need relies on competing demands and agency within a particular context. Participants in this study demonstrated comparable struggles with time, delays in help-seeking, and challenges in online learning. They reported earlier success in higher education, demonstrated resilience and commitment to success, and described relationships as a source of strength. Moreover, these students demonstrated agency and motivation to achieve. They lacked only in regard to the success that such agency and motivation warranted.

Such commonalities point to a three-fold strategy, including (i) bolstering the effective agency of students (Ben-Naim et al., 2017; Connor, 2012; Garrison-Wade, 2012), (ii) supporting faculty to fully implement accessible curricula and practices (Claiborne et al., 2011; Moriña, 2017; Vickerman & Blundell, 2010), and (iii) structuring university resources to be more succinct and tractable by students (Claiborne et al., 2011; Garrison-Wade, 2012; Hadley, 2017; Moriña, 2017; Vickerman & Blundell, 2010). Efforts to bolster the agency of students might serve best if those efforts emphasize the commonality of struggles among higher education students and elucidate how to navigate those situations rather than segregating stu-
dents into certain groups and suggesting that different students are served through different departments.

Moreover, implementing an accessible curriculum (e.g., Universal Design for Learning or UDL) aims to reach each occupant of a classroom. An accessible curriculum fails if it is wielded only for students who build up the nerve to request it. Knoll (2009) argued that neither accommodations nor UDL alone establishes accessibility. Only the collusion of both serve as they foster openness and interdependency. Efforts to foster access must also contend stigma associated with impairments and learning needs by unmasking myths of independence. Finally, embedding resources to accommodate students within contexts closer to the classroom (e.g., program advisors, program directors, course instructors) may reduce the distance between students who need and the accommodations they seek.

These findings raise a concern for needs-related research in higher education. Reticence to seek accommodations suggests that attempts to identify a population as non-disabled are doomed to include those who have an impairment but have refrained from disclosing. These findings imply the need for care when determining ability status among higher education students. Vickerman and Blundell (2010) found that 25% of respondents in their study who claimed an impairment had not disclosed that fact on their college application because they feared being barred from admission. Also, because post-secondary education operates on a non-compulsory basis, a broad view of failure and withdrawal—one that includes non-attendance or withdrawal—might reflect graduate, nontraditional students’ strategies for dealing with barriers.

**Future Research**

The themes distilled herein from interviews with graduate nontraditional students with impairments and those without impairments require broader measurement through quantitative means in order to clarify the extent of their generalizability. Quantitative measurement would aid in elaborating the applicability of the information presented here. Quantification risks undermining individual voices—a risk that threatens the tenets of the social model framework. Care in using multiple approaches will prevent the omission of voices of those with impairments in representing themselves. One recourse that appreciates the tenets of the social model framework may involve recruitment from a quantitative study for participation in qualitative study that accentuates voices (e.g., Vickerman & Blundell, 2010).

Future research might gauge the degree to which successful implementation of a fully accessible curriculum minimizes failure among those with and without impairments. The higher education community would benefit from the results of shifting the provision of an accommodation such as time from an esoteric to a universal offering. Such a shift would reflect an integration of the social model of disability and allow for further exploration of that framework’s tenets among graduate students.

**References**


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**About the Author**

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Table 1

**Participant Characteristics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Race-Ethnicity</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Year of Birth</th>
<th>Program Status</th>
<th>Attributions for Academic Disqualification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Completed</td>
<td>Difficulty juggling work and coursework; unwillingness to receive accommodations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felicia</td>
<td>Hispanic, White</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Completed</td>
<td>Difficulty juggling work and family demands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hillary</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Sep</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Active in Program</td>
<td>Strained mental health, medical/health issues; family emergency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giselle</td>
<td>Hispanic, White</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Active in Program</td>
<td>Family emergency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ian</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Completed</td>
<td>Refused accommodations to complete work; complications adjusting to new country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danny</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Completed</td>
<td>Difficulty acclimating to pedagogical styles; difficulty accessing advisor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

**Thematic Comparison by Dyad**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Dyad 1</th>
<th>Dyad 2</th>
<th>Dyad 3</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>Felicia</td>
<td>Hillary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
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<td>●</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time</td>
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<tr>
<td>Online Coursework</td>
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<td>●</td>
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<tr>
<td>Delays in Securing Assistance</td>
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<td>●</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exploring Ability</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stigma &amp; Fear</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wish for Autonomy</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
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<tr>
<td>Medication</td>
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