

University Staff Members' Attitudes and Knowledge About Learning Disabilities and Disability Support Services

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Abstract

This investigation examined university staff members' attitudes towards students with learning disabilities (LD) at the postsecondary level. Although prior research has examined university faculty perceptions of students with LD, little is known about staff members' attitudes and perceptions. A survey instrument was administered to approximately 300 staff members at a large private university and resulted in 70 responses. The survey contained items pertaining to knowledge about LD, willingness to provide accommodations, understanding of available support services, and need for professional development. Findings indicated that staff generally had positive attitudes towards students with LD and were willing to provide accommodations. However, a substantial number of respondents indicated a need for training and professional development regarding students with LD in general as well as strategies to support students with LD in postsecondary settings. The implications of these findings are discussed.

An increasing number of students with learning disabilities (LD) have entered post-secondary educational environments in recent years. Although the overall numbers of youth with LD attending post-secondary schools continues to lag behind rates of attendance in the general population (Horn & Nevill, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 1999), these trends are promising and suggest that a greater number of students with LD are receiving access to this important post-high-school educational opportunity (Mull, Sitlington, & Alper, 2001). As increasing numbers of young adults with LD enter postsecondary settings, it is important to develop further understanding about contextual processes and supports within college and university environments (Madaus & Shaw, 2004). Disability support programs and services, as well as faculty attitudes, beliefs, and practices are two obvious sources of support. A growing body of research has focused on understanding how these services and supports can contribute to the success of students with LD in post-secondary settings (Dukes & Shaw, 1999; Finn, 1998).

Another potentially important source of support that has been neglected by researchers to this point is university staff. Staff members within colleges and universities play an important role in students' educational experiences. Many have frequent contact with students and are in positions that require them to provide instrumental support and guidance. In these roles, staff can potentially assist students with LD in adapting to the norms and requirements of postsecondary settings. For example, professional advisors assist students with course selection. University staff members within financial aid offices provide students with assistance in understanding and completing forms, paperwork and informational systems. Library staff members assist students in understanding databases, cataloging systems, and other library systems. Student organizations provide students with emotional and identity development opportunities. Public safety staff post notices, respond to phone queries, and provide students with direct assistance in solving problems. Staff members in the Career Center, advise students

on selecting career paths and conducting job searches. In these varied roles, staff members have numerous opportunities to interact with students, including students with LD. In order to provide staff with support in meeting the unique needs of students with LD, it is important to develop further understanding about how staff members view students with LD as well as their current understanding of accommodations and support services.

In addition to the importance of staff-student interactions, staff members within colleges and universities also make important contributions to the overall university culture. The overall culture and climate of any postsecondary setting is comprised of the shared values, goals, and actions of all its members including faculty, staff, administrators and students. Together, these individuals produce contexts that are supportive of individual diversity including learning difference, or contexts that can present roadblocks and challenges for students as well as other members of the university community. Thus, developing further understanding about staff members' attitudes and perceptions regarding students with LD is important because such information can provide insights regarding these individuals' understanding of students who have learning disabilities.

Although, to our knowledge, no researchers have examined university staff members' knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions about students with LD, corollary research focused on understanding university faculty attitudes and perceptions suggests that faculty may have lower academic expectations for students with LD than for students in general (Houck, Asselin, Troutman, & Arrington, 1992). This research also suggests that faculty members report being willing to provide students with LD with mild accommodations such as tape-recorded lectures or additional time during exams but are less willing to allow major accommodations such as reductions or alterations of major course assignments (Matthews, Anderson, & Skolnick, 1987; Nelson, Dodd, & Smith, 1990). Further, Bigaj, Shaw, and McGuire (1999) noted that prior in- or pre-service training related to learning disabilities was a strong predictor of community college faculty members' willingness to provide, and reported use of, teaching and exam accommodations.

This work suggests that faculty have both positive and negative views about students with LD in postsecondary settings and that prior training and professional development may contribute to these attitudes in positive or negative ways. These findings have led to an increased focus on faculty professional development

in university-based disability support programs as well as federal funds for such training through the Office of Postsecondary Education (Allsopp, Minskoff, & Bolt, 2005; Getzel, Briel, & McManus, 2003).

The current investigation was undertaken to examine university staff members' perceptions of students with LD. Gaining further understanding about staff perceptions is appropriate given the importance of university staff as a source of support for students and given the important role staff play in contributing to the overall culture and climate of universities. Specifically, we explored staff perceptions of students with LD, their willingness to make accommodations for students with LD, their understanding of support services, and their self-perceived interest and need for professional development related to learning disabilities.

Methods

Participants

Participants were selected from a large private university in the Midwestern United States. The university is located in a large urban environment and is primarily devoted to teaching and serving first generation college students. The university is one of a relatively small number that offer traditional disability support services to all students through the Office of Students with Disabilities (OSD) but also includes a program specifically for students with LD and/ or attention deficit-hyperactivity disorders. The latter program, called the Productive Learning Strategies (PLuS), was started in the early 1980s to meet the growing demand for support services for students with LD at this particular university.

A survey was sent to 300 exempt and non-exempt staff who worked in units that the researchers believed would have ongoing interactions with students, including students with LD (e.g., career services, library, student affairs). The decision to restrict the sampling to certain units on the campus was made by the lead author and the third author in consultation with the director of the disability support services program. Using a list of all the units within the university, we identified offices that we believed would have some contact with students. We then refined the list by identifying additional units that may have some interaction with students with disabilities. Based on this process, a total of the 300 surveys distributed.

Of the total number of surveys distributed, we received 70 responses, yielding a response rate of 23%. Although not ideal, this response rate is consistent with those of similar research conducted on faculty

perceptions (Bourke et al., 2000). Responses were received from staff in 30 units and offices throughout the university. Offices such as career services, library, university counseling, student affairs, financial aid, student life, the legal clinic, and student accounts were represented. To illustrate the diversity of respondents, Table 1 presents a breakdown of respondents by home unit. Approximately 29% of respondents reported that

they were in non-exempt positions, whereas 71% reported that they were in exempt positions. Generally, within this university staff in exempt positions are salaried, whereas non-exempt staff are in hourly rate positions. Fifty-six percent of respondents reported that they were female, 43% were male, and 1% did not respond to the gender item.

Table 1:

Home Unit Identified by Participants

<i>Unit</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Valid Percent</i>
Career Services	1	1.4	1.9
Library	7	9.7	13.5
Career Center	3	4.2	5.8
Office of Financial Aid	2	2.8	3.8
Marketing	2	2.8	3.8
Music	1	1.4	1.9
Accountancy/MIS	1	1.4	1.9
Office of Admissions	3	4.2	5.8
Public Safety	3	4.2	5.8
Student Center	1	1.4	1.9
Residential	2	2.8	3.8
Cashier's Office	1	1.4	1.9
University Counseling Services	1	1.4	1.9
Enrollment Management	3	4.2	5.8
Administrative	1	1.4	1.9
Information Services	3	4.2	5.8
Student Life	2	2.8	3.8
Suburban Campuses	2	2.8	3.8
Student Affairs	1	1.4	1.9
University Ministry	2	2.8	3.8
Continuing and Professional Education	1	1.4	1.9
Office of Institutional Planning and Research	1	1.4	1.9
Missions and Values	1	1.4	1.9
Scholar's Program	1	1.4	1.9
Office of Multicultural Student Affairs	1	1.4	1.9
Public Services/Relation Services	1	1.4	1.9
Office of the President	1	1.4	1.9
Conference Services	1	1.4	1.9
Legal Clinic	1	1.4	1.9
Student Financial Accounts	1	1.4	1.9
Total	52	74.3	100.0
Did Not Indicate Unit	18	25.7	
Total	70	100.0	

Measure

The survey was designed by the researchers to assess staff knowledge about learning disabilities, their willingness to provide various accommodations, their understanding of support services available within the university, and their need for training and support. In conceptualizing the constructs and items we consulted with the director of the support program for students with LD and ADHD at the university where the survey was administered, an expert in the area of postsecondary education and disability at another university, and the literature relating to faculty attitudes (Bourke et al., 2000; Houck et al., 1992; Nelson et al., 1990). The instrument contains 3 demographic items pertaining to gender, university status, and academic unit as well as 34 items related to knowledge and attitudes about LD and university supports (see Appendix A). Responses to the survey items are based on a six-point scale: *1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree, and 6 = No Basis for Judgment.*

The first category, *General Knowledge*, consists of 10 items pertaining to staff members' general knowledge about LD (e.g., "I know what the term learning disabilities means"). The second category, *Willingness to Provide Accommodations*, contained 10 items designed to assess the extent to which staff members were willing to provide accommodations and supports to students with LD (e.g., "I am willing to spend extra time meeting with students with verified learning disabilities to provide them with additional assistance as needed"). The third category, *Willingness to Advocate*, contained three items designed to assess the extent to which staff members were willing to advocate for students with LD within their units (e.g., "I am willing to be an advocate for a student with LD and help them solve problems they may encounter when dealing with my office"). The fourth category, *Knowledge of Services*, contained four items, some of which were positively worded (e.g., "I am familiar with the PLuS program") whereas others were negatively worded (e.g., "When students with learning disabilities are having difficulties, I am uncertain about where I can find additional support at this university"). The last category included seven items designed to assess staff members' interest and need for professional development. These items asked staff to report on their perceived interest in and need for professional development (e.g., "I would be interested in attending staff development sessions related to the needs of students with learning disabilities").

Procedures

All surveys were distributed in a hard-copy format and sent to each potential respondent individually. A description of the study and study assent form were sent as a cover letter. A postage-paid return envelope was also included. All surveys were distributed during February and two follow-up reminders were sent to each staff member requesting that they complete and return the survey. The follow-up reminders were sent by e-mail and included a description of the importance of the information being gathered and a request to complete the survey based on willingness to participate in the study.

Returned surveys were entered into an SPSS database by the lead author and a graduate assistant. The reliability of the data entry process was evaluated by the lead researchers, who compared hard-copy responses to data in the SPSS data field for 20 randomly selected cases. This process indicated that 100% of the data points in the SPSS data field matched the hard-copy surveys.

Results

Results are presented in Figures 1-5. In an effort to provide an efficient overview of responses, item descriptions are abbreviated. (The full item wording is provided in the survey in Appendix A.) The "strongly agree" and "agree" categories were collapsed into one category, as were the "strongly disagree" and "disagree" responses. Responses of "neutral" and "no basis for judgment" are also reported in the figures. In each bar graph, the bottom portion of the graph (i.e., white) indicates the proportion of staff reporting "strongly disagree or disagree." The next highest section represents the proportion who indicated "neutral." The next highest contains the proportion of staff who marked either "agree or strongly agree," and the highest section (i.e., black) indicates the proportion of respondents who marked "no basis for judgment," respectively.

General Knowledge

Figure 1 provides an overview of responses to items pertaining to staff members' general knowledge about students with LD. A majority of staff indicated that they were not familiar with Section 504 or the Americans with Disabilities Act, as indicated by the proportion marking strongly disagree or disagree to the first two questions (67% and 56%, respectively). However, the majority of respondents did report knowledge about what a learning disability is, with

Figure 1: General Knowledge

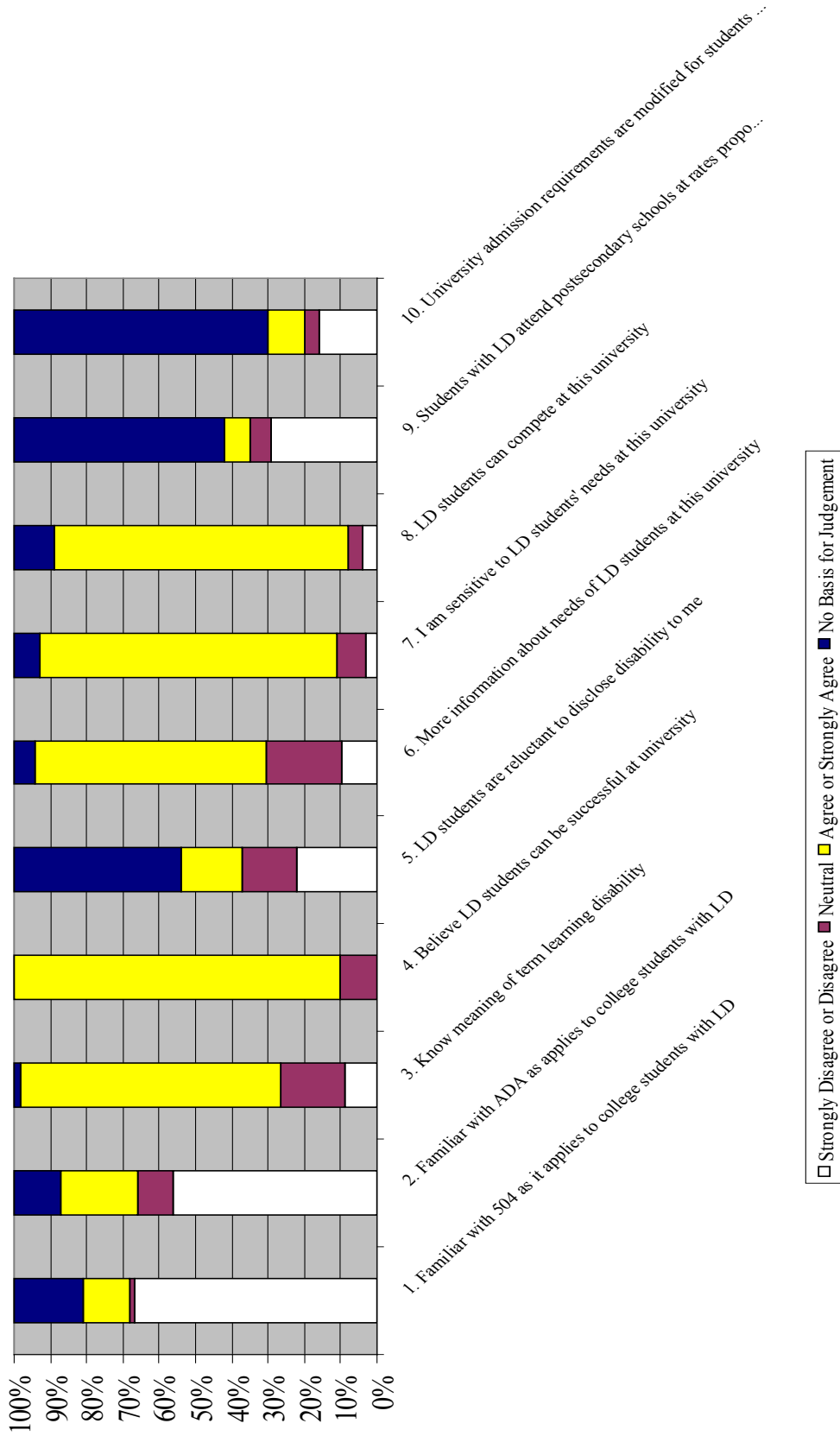
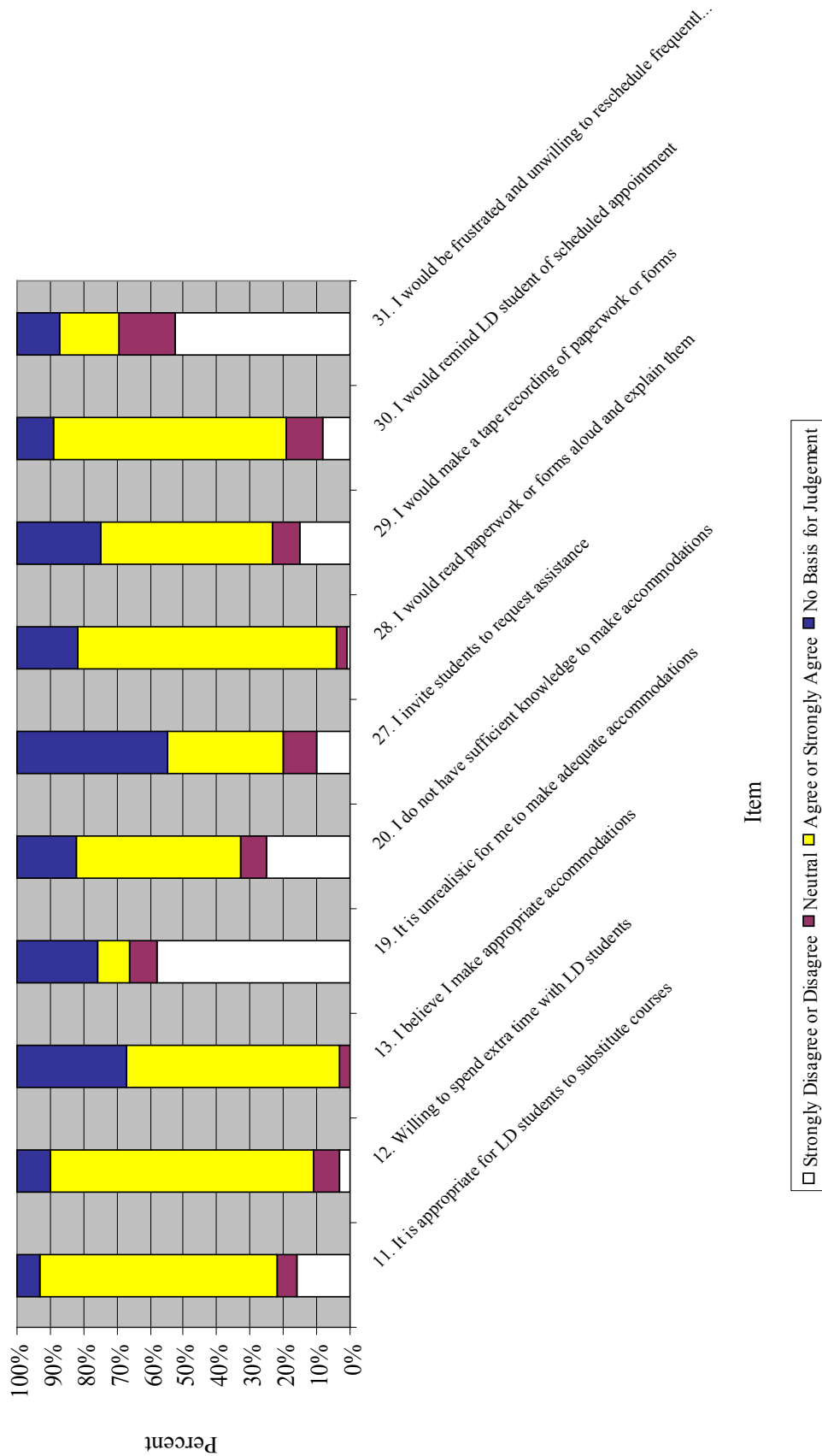


Figure 2: Willingness to Provide Accommodations



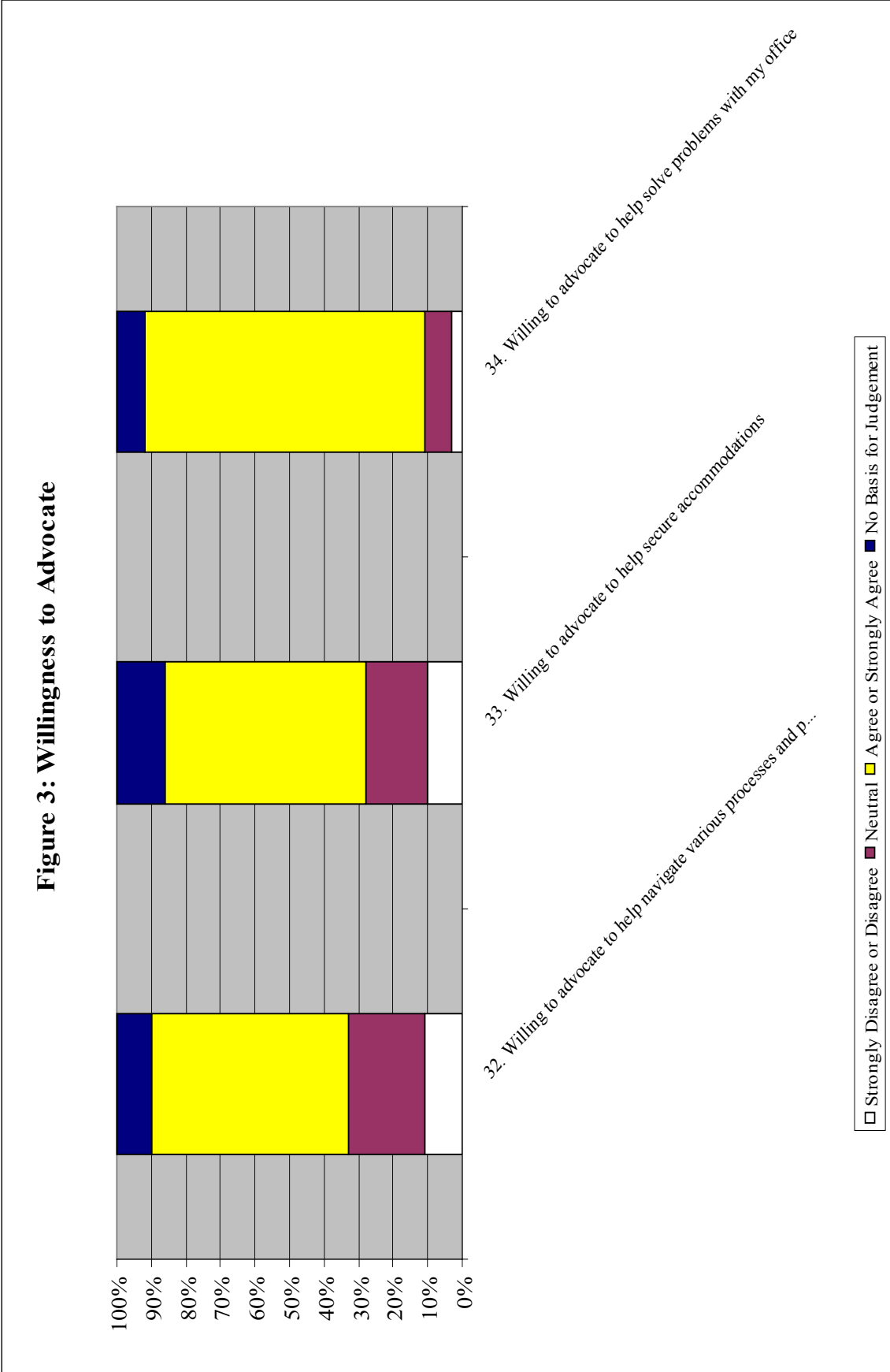


Figure 4: Knowledge of Services

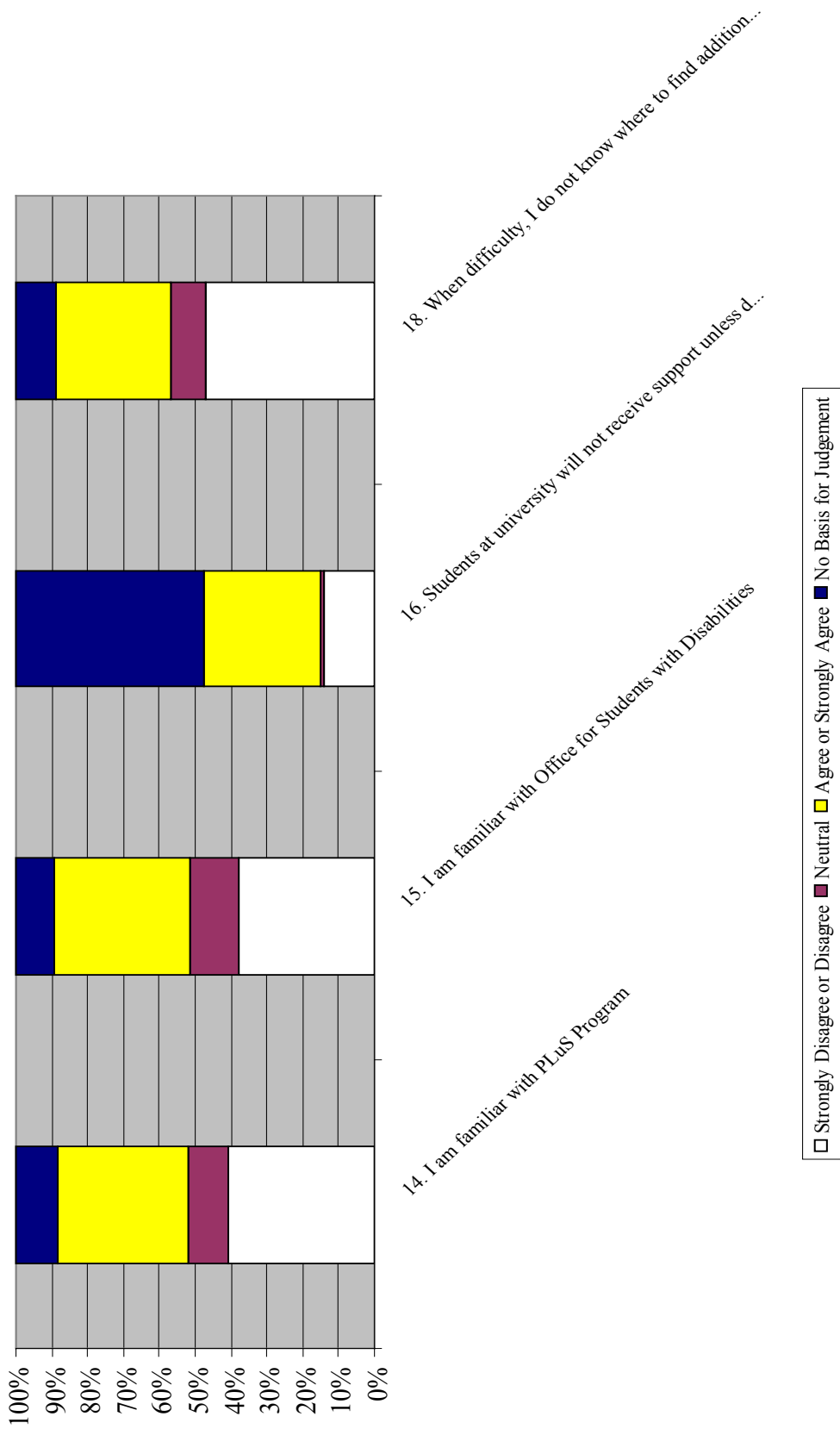
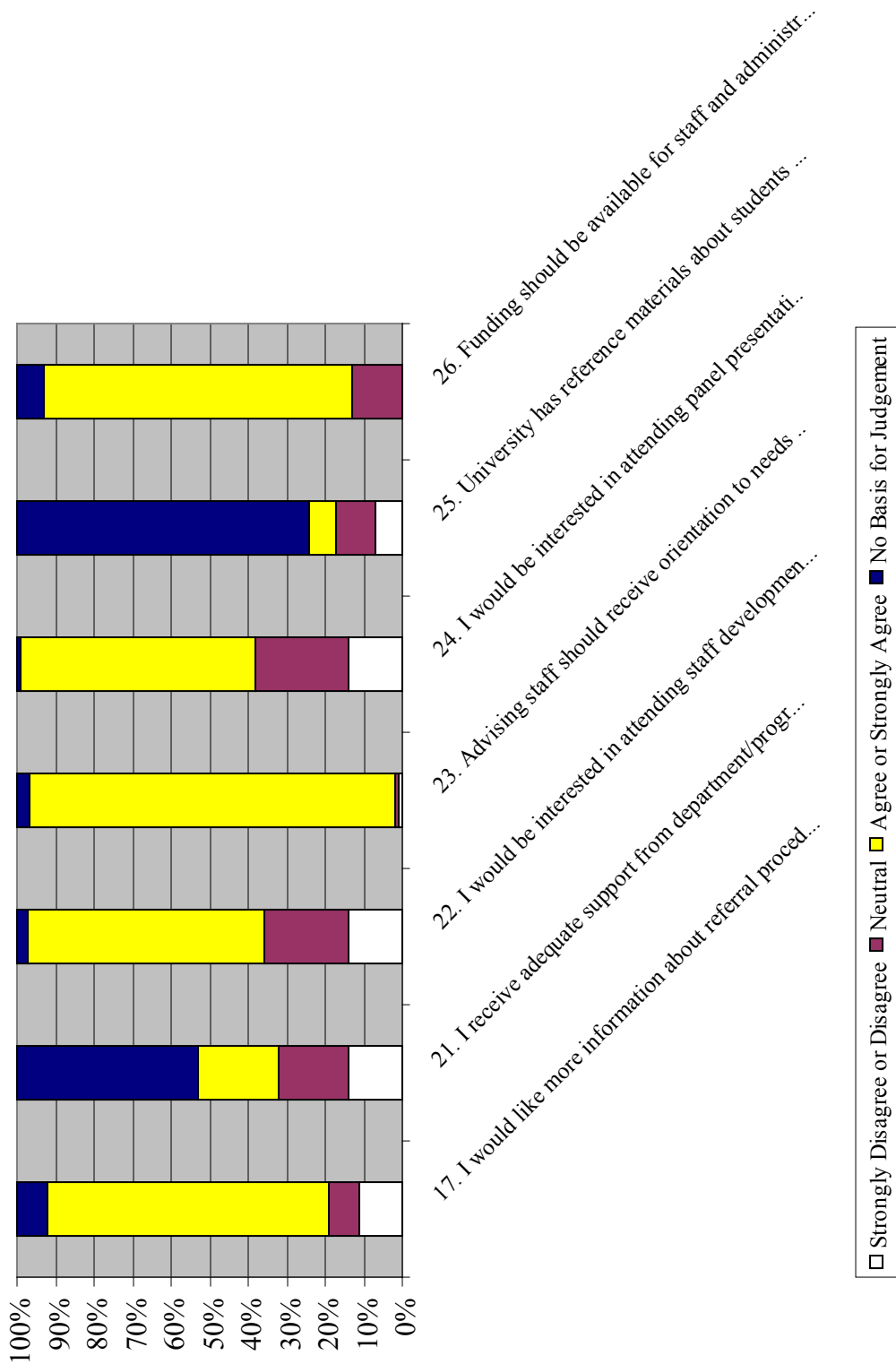


Figure 5: Interest/Need for Professional Development



approximately 72% of staff indicating that they agreed or strongly agreed with the third item. Further, a large proportion (i.e., approximately 90%) indicated that they believed that students with LD could be successful in a postsecondary environment (item 4), that students with LD could compete at postsecondary levels (81% agree/strongly agree, item 8), and that they themselves were sensitive to the needs of students with LD (82% agree/strongly agree, item 7). Despite these positive views, a large portion of the staff expressed uncertainty about the actual attendance rates of students with LD (58% no basis for judgment, item 9) and about the criteria used to admit students with LD (70% no basis for judgment, item 10).

Willingness to Provide Accommodations

As shown in Figure 2, staff expressed a willingness to provide various types of accommodations and supports to students with LD. The vast majority (72%) indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed that it would be appropriate for students with LD to substitute courses (item 11), that they would be willing to spend extra time with students (79% agree/strongly agree, item 12), that they make appropriate accommodations for students (64% agree/strongly agree, item 13), and that they would be willing to read paperwork and forms to students (77% agree/strongly agree, item 28) and remind students of scheduled appointments (70% agree/strongly agree, item 30). Approximately 50% of respondents indicated that they would be willing to prepare a tape-recorded version of paperwork or forms for students (item 29). The majority of respondents indicated disagreement with negatively worded items such as “It is unrealistic for me to make accommodations” (58% disagree/strongly disagree, item 19) and “I would be frustrated and unwilling to reschedule frequently missed appointments” (53% disagree/strongly disagree, item 31). Interestingly, although staff generally expressed positive views about their willingness to provide students with LD support and accommodations, a large percentage (49% agree/strongly agree) indicated that they did not have sufficient knowledge to make accommodations (item 20).

Willingness to Advocate

In addition to items related to willingness to provide accommodations, we asked several questions about staff members’ willingness to advocate for students within their units (see Figure 3). The majority of staff (between 57% and 81%) indicated that they were willing to advocate for students to help them navigate processes and procedures, secure accommodations,

and solve problems within their respective offices. A minority of respondents (between 3% and 11%) indicated that they did not agree with the statements regarding advocacy.

Knowledge of Services

To examine staff knowledge about support services, we asked several questions about the support programs for students with disabilities at the participating university (see Figure 4). Approximately equal numbers of staff indicated that they were familiar with the support program specifically for students with LD (item 14, 35% agree/strongly agree) and the general disability services program (item 15, 38% agree/strongly agree) as staff who indicated that they were not familiar with these services by responding disagree or strongly disagree on the same items. Further, an additional 11% of staff indicated that they had no basis for making a judgment on these two items.

There also were two negatively worded items (items 16 & 18) in this category. On item 16, the majority of staff (52%) responded that they had no basis for making a judgment about when students were eligible for receiving services. Interestingly, however, approximately 32% of staff either agreed or strongly agreed on this item, indicating that they had knowledge about this process. Further, 47% of respondents disagreed with the item, indicating that they did not know how to find additional supports and services (item 18) whereas 32% indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed with that statement.

Interest/Need for Professional Development

The final category included items that were designed to assess staff members’ self-perceived interest in and need for professional development. As shown in Figure 5, approximately 72% of respondents indicated that they would like additional information about referral processes and procedures (item 17). The majority (61%) noted that they would be interested in attending training (item 22) and panel sessions (61% agree/strongly agree, item 24) about the needs of students with LD, and the majority (80%) felt that funds for such training should be made available (item 26). When asked about current departmental support, 47% responded that they had no basis for making a judgment about the adequacy of supports received. Similarly, the majority of respondents indicated that they had no basis for judging the availability of reference materials at the university.

Discussion

This investigation was designed to begin to gain further understanding about university staff perceptions regarding students with LD in postsecondary settings. As greater numbers of students with LD enter postsecondary educational settings, it will be increasingly important to develop further understanding about various types of supports available as well as the overall cultures and climates of postsecondary institutions. University staff plays a crucial role in supporting students with LD both through the provision of instrumental support and through their effect on institutional climate.

Our findings suggest that staff respondents at this large private university generally had positive attitudes towards students with LD, and they expressed a willingness to provide accommodations for and advocate for students with LD. These findings are similar to findings reported by researchers studying faculty perceptions, which also suggest that faculty have positive views about students with LD (Bourke et al., 2000; Houck et al., 1992). Together, these findings are promising because they suggest that faculty and staff at least report a willingness to be supportive of students with LD in university contexts.

Particularly positive findings observed here included overwhelming support for the provision of such accommodations as spending extra time with students and rescheduling missed appointments, and a willingness to read paperwork and forms to students. Thus, staff members were generally willing to provide extra assistance and support to students with LD who need such support. The staff in this study also expressed a strong willingness to advocate for students with LD by helping them navigate processes and solve problems within their particular offices. Together, these findings suggest that staff express a commitment to provide instrumental support and advocacy for students with LD, particularly in relation to issues and challenges that are directly related to the specific offices in which they work.

These positive findings could be useful to parents and students, and to personnel who work within disability support services programs. For parents and students the findings suggest that many university staff members are willing to provide additional support and advocacy if they are aware of specific student needs. Such information is also of value to personnel within disability support services programs because by suggesting that many staff members are willing to advocate for students with LD when provided with opportunities to do so.

Our findings also reveal gaps in the current knowledge base among university staff. For example, a substantial number of respondents indicated that they did not have sufficient knowledge about disability-related law, and a substantial portion indicated that they did not have sufficient knowledge to make accommodations for students. Further, a substantial proportion of our respondents indicated that they were not familiar with the two disability supports programs at their institution.

These findings suggest that it is important to find ways to provide professional development opportunities to staff. Such efforts might include the provision of information regarding students with LD and support services at new-hire orientations, easily accessible information on university websites specifically for staff, specific training for university staff provided by disability support program personnel, and federal funds directed towards university staff training and staff development. Given the stated willingness to support students with LD observed here, it seems critical to provide university staff with opportunities to further develop their skills in supporting students with LD.

Limitations and Conclusions

This investigation suffers from a number of limitations that must be considered with the findings. The first limitation is related to the response rate. Although we received responses from staff in a wide range of support service units (30 units), the overall response rate was low, and it is possible that staff that did respond were those with the most positive views of students with LD. These low numbers affect interpretation of the findings in several ways. First, they prevented us from conducting an exploratory factor analysis. Second, they limit generalizability of the findings. Generalizability of the findings is further hindered by the fact that the respondents were from one university and may have unique views regarding students with LD. Future research in this area is needed, and investigations that examine similar constructs among a larger number of staff from a greater number of colleges and universities would strengthen the patterns observed here.

Future research should also focus on the most effective manner of delivering content to staff. In many ways the roles of faculty are similar regardless of academic discipline, whereas the roles of the support staff can vary widely. For example, someone in the registrar's office may see a student once for a short period of time whereas professional advisors or staff in the library or computer lab may see a student many times throughout their school career. Also, a student's

willingness and need to self-identify may vary across these different services and contexts. These differences might impact attitudes and perceptions among staff as well as the type and content of professional development for staff. Due to the limited response rate, we were unable to investigate such differences. Future investigations that examine the relationship between specific staff roles and variations in attitudes and perceptions would help to clarify potential differences in staff perceptions and would also be important for staff development efforts.

Finally, this study focused on staff perception and asked staff to indicate their responses on a Likert-type scale. Ratings such as these are susceptible to “social desirability” biases. Thus, more information is needed on the actual behaviors of staff and student perceptions of staff’s willingness to advocate on students behalf, and the actual provision of accommodations. Qualitative investigations that more directly document interactions between staff and students would help to provide verification of findings such as those reported here.

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APPENDIX A: STAFF SURVEY

RETURN ADDRESS:

RETURN DATE

RESPONDENT INFORMATION: Thank you in advance for your time. The data that we are gathering will be used to design and implement supports for faculty, staff, and students at this University. All responses are anonymous and will be held in strict confidence. Please return the survey in the attached envelope or to the address provided above.

a. Gender

Female Male

b. University Status

Non-Exempt
Exempt

c. Unit within University (List as many as needed)

College: _____

School: _____

Department: _____

Division: _____

Survey Directions: Please rate the following items to the best of your ability. If you feel that you have insufficient information to make a choice, mark "NB= No Basis for Judgment." Please reserve written comments and reflections for the open-ended questions. If your responses require additional space, please use the back of the page.

Response Format

1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neutral 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree NB= No Basis for Judgment

1. I am familiar with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act as it applies to student with LD in college..... 1 2 3 4 5 NB

1.b. Please briefly describe what it says:

2. I am familiar with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) as it applies to student with LD in college. 1 2 3 4 5 NB

2.b. Please briefly describe what it says:

3. I know what the term "learning disability" means..... 1 2 3 4 5 NB

3.b. Please briefly describe or define:

4. I believe that students with learning disabilities can be successful at the university level..... 1 2 3 4 5 NB

5. Students with learning disabilities are reluctant to disclose their disability to me..... 1 2 3 4 5 NB

6. I would like more information about the needs of students with learning disabilities at this University..... 1 2 3 4 5 NB

7. I am sensitive to the needs of students with learning disabilities at this university..... 1 2 3 4 5 NB

8. Students with learning disabilities are able to compete academically at the university level..... 1 2 3 4 5 NB

1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neutral 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree NB= No Basis for Judgment

9. Students with learning disabilities attend postsecondary schools at rates proportionate to the rates of postsecondary attendance among students who do not have disabilities..... 1 2 3 4 5 NB

10. University admission requirements are modified for students who have indicated that they have a learning disability..... 1 2 3 4 5 NB

11. I think it would be appropriate to allow a student with a verified learning disability to substitute an alternative course for a required course if the substitution did not dramatically alter the program requirements..... 1 2 3 4 5 NB

12. I am willing to spend *extra* time meeting with students with verified learning disabilities to provide them with additional assistance as needed..... 1 2 3 4 5 NB

13. I believe that I make appropriate individual accommodations for students who have disclosed their learning disability to me if needed..... 1 2 3 4 5 NB

14. I am familiar with the Productive Learning u Strategies (PLuS) program at this University..... 1 2 3 4 5 NB

14.b. Please briefly describe the services provided by PLuS:

15. I am familiar with the Office of Students with Disabilities (OSD) at this University..... 1 2 3 4 5 NB

21.b. Please briefly describe the services provided by OSD:

16. Students with learning disabilities will not receive any support services at this University unless they disclose their disability..... 1 2 3 4 5 NB

1 = *Strongly Disagree* 2 = *Disagree* 3 = *Neutral* 4 = *Agree* 5 = *Strongly Agree* NB= *No Basis for Judgment*

17. I would like more information about referral procedures for students with learning disabilities at this university... 1 2 3 4 5 NB
18. When students with learning disabilities are having difficulties, I am uncertain about where I can find additional support at this university..... 1 2 3 4 5 NB
19. Making adequate accommodations for students with verified learning disabilities in my position is unrealistic given time constraints and other job demands. 1 2 3 4 5 NB
20. Currently, in my role, I do not have sufficient knowledge to make adequate accommodations for students with learning disabilities..... 1 2 3 4 5 NB
21. I receive adequate support from my department/program/unit in working with students who have verified learning disabilities..... 1 2 3 4 5 NB
22. I would be interested in attending staff development sessions related to the needs of students with learning disabilities..... 1 2 3 4 5 NB
23. The advising staff for each school/college should receive an orientation to the needs of students with LD..... 1 2 3 4 5 NB
24. I would be interested in attending a panel presentation where students with LD share personal information about their LD and their experiences in college..... 1 2 3 4 5 NB
25. The university has an easily accessible collection of reference materials about students with LD..... 1 2 3 4 5 NB
26. Funding should be available for key staff and administrators to attend conferences of the Association on Higher Education and Disabilities..... 1 2 3 4 5 NB
27. When students have to complete paperwork or forms for my office, I invite every student to be sure to request assistance if needed..... 1 2 3 4 5 NB
28. I would be prepared to read paperwork or forms aloud and explain them, if requested..... 1 2 3 4 5 NB

29. I would be prepared to make a tape recording with an oral version of the paperwork or forms that would be available in my office..... 1 2 3 4 5 NB
30. If I were working with a student who had disclosed their LD to me, I would be willing to remind them more than once about a scheduled appointment..... 1 2 3 4 5 NB
31. If a student frequently missed appointments or was very late, I would be frustrated and not be willing to reschedule..... 1 2 3 4 5 NB
32. I am willing to be an advocate for a student with LD and help them navigate the various processes and procedures to secure financial aid, housing, library services, etc..... 1 2 3 4 5 NB
33. I am willing to be an advocate for a student with LD and help them secure needed accommodations..... 1 2 3 4 5 NB
34. I am willing to be an advocate for a student with LD and help them solve problems they may encounter when dealing with my office..... 1 2 3 4 5 NB

STOP--THANK YOU!!!!!!!