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Life After Disability Diagnosis: The Impact of Special Education Labeling in Higher Education

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ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation, LIFE AFTER DISABILITY DIAGNOSIS: THE IMPACT OF SPECIAL EDUCATION LABELING IN HIGHER EDUCATION, by NATHAN JOSHUA CAMARA, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Education, Georgia State University.

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ABSTRACT

LIFE AFTER DISABILITY DIAGNOSIS: THE IMPACT
OF SPECIAL EDUCATION LABELING
IN HIGHER EDUCATION
by
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There has been an increasing number of students with learning disabilities attending colleges and universities over the past two decades. As a result of federal legislation, institutions of higher education are required through an office of student support services to provide accommodations and modifications for students with disabilities in order to receive federal monies. This semi-structured interview-based qualitative study seeks to understand how four higher education students with disabilities make the choice to "come out" as possessing a learning disability in order to seek academic assistance from the office of student support services. The foundation for this inquiry emerges out of the differences between the medical and social models of disabilities. The framework for the medical model places the individual with a disability as needing to be cured in order to have a normal life, while the social model of disabilities focuses on how society is constructed around able-bodied individuals without substantive consideration for individual differences – specifically disabilities. The data collected were analyzed using a cross-interview analysis of participants' responses to interview questions. Because little research has been conducted in this content area, the

research focused on themes relating to the stigma of disability labels, the choice to come out as possessing a disability, the role of the academic resource center to obtain accommodations and modifications, and the meaning of success for higher education students with disabilities. The stigma associated with possessing a disability while attending an institution of higher education can place additional anxiety on individuals who decide to come out as possessing a disability. The significance of this research to the fields of higher education and disability studies is to gain a better understanding of how the stigma that is associated with students with disabilities affects the manner in which they choose to access student support services and identify themselves as possessing a learning disability. By making the choice to be identified as possessing a disability, students can access academic accommodations and modifications to support academic success, yet the same choice has the potential to have a negative social consequence of being socially labeled as an othered individual. The outcomes for this research study can inform policies and practices relating to the self-identification that students with disabilities must adhere to in order to obtain accommodations and modifications.

LIFE AFTER DISABILITY DIAGNOSIS: THE IMPACT OF SPECIAL EDUCATION LABELING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

by

Nathan J. Camara

A Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the
Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
Social Foundations of Education
in
the Department of Educational Policy Studies
in
the College of Education
Georgia State University

Atlanta, GA
2011

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research would not have been possible without the guidance of my advisor, Susan Talburt, whose support from the beginning of my enrollment to the conclusion of my dissertation was exceptional without question. Thank you for understanding the connections between the work in Women's Studies and Disability Studies, which allowed me to dive into an area that many people do not feel or understand to be important for research. I also would like to thank, Deron Boyles, who taught me how to use Socratic Method to ask "why" and question the reasons for schools constantly doing the same tasks in education and expecting different results. Thank you Rick Lakes, who I have spent more time in academic situations than any other professor, your quiet demeanor has taught me that I have to think prior to answering questions.

I would like to express my appreciation to the director of the academic resource center and the individuals that participated in this research. Your struggles with maneuvering through the bureaucracy of receiving accommodations in higher education are the stories I hoped to convey within this work. Without your voices, the messages of disabilities in higher education would be silent.

Last, I would like to thank my family Benjamin, MaryKatharine, and Payton for your support and understanding that "Daddy" had to spend time working on his paper. And Suzan, your support and numerous editing of sections were invaluable to insuring that what I was writing made sense to others.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ADA	Americans with Disabilities Act
ADD	Attention Deficit Disorder
ARC	Academic Resource Center
GPA	Grade Point Average
IDEA	Individuals with Disability Education Act
IEP	Individual Education Plan
LD	Learning Disability
RA	Rehabilitation Act
SLD	Specific Learning Disability

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This research sought to understand student perspectives of the process that higher education students with specific learning disabilities go through to "out" themselves in order to access accommodations and modifications from campus academic resource centers (ARC). As an undergraduate student, I accessed my campus ARC to take tests. These testing modifications were afforded to me due to a traumatic brain injury that I suffered when I was a small child. The location of the office was in the dark, lower level of the library in an older and obscure section. I can remember that I was a little embarrassed to walk into the office so that I could take my tests in a different location than my peers and the traditional classroom. This was supposed to be college. I was supposed to be able to meet the high demands that all the other students met. Although I only used the ARC during my undergraduate years, the images continue to be vivid and unsettling in my mind. Because my experience with the ARC is not totally unique, I have chosen to study others' accounts of their experiences with accessing testing accommodations.

According to the United States Department of Education (The National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES] 2004; 2005), the number of students with disabilities graduating from American high schools and deciding to continue their education by

pursuing degrees from institutions of higher education increased from 9.1% in 1999-2000 to 12.8% in 2003-2004. The largest percentage category (45.7%) of students with disabilities in higher education is labeled under the category of specific learning disability (SLD) (NCES, 1998; Shelvin, Kenny, & McNeela, 2004). This means that their disability is specific to one area (e.g., reading and math or a "sub" area like reading comprehension or math computation). The established rights and protocols granted by special education legislation take on a different form or role as students with learning disabilities transition from public k-12 schools to institutions of higher education. The responsibility to identify students with disabilities and provide educational support services for those students transfers almost entirely from the school's responsibility to that of the individual student (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005; Hadley, 2006; McCormick, 2001). Higher education students with learning disabilities, who desire to continue receiving academic support, need to develop a plan with their institution's office of academic resources (Dolber, 1996; Hadley, 2006; Shapiro & Rich, 1999). For other students, entering higher education becomes a new beginning and a fresh start to escape the perceived stigma attached to possessing an intellectual disability (McCormick, 2001; Mooney & Cole, 2000; Quinn, 2001). As a result, they do not disclose their learning disabilities to others. However, some students relish the disability stigma and publicly announcing their disability. The announcement can become an identifier of difference for others and the disability can be used as a "secondary gain" or an excuse for a lack of success (Goffman, 1963, p. 10).

Hiding a learning disability is possible because of the invisibility of many intellectual disabilities; they do not manifest themselves on the physical body (Dolber,

1996). The corporal nature of physical disabilities, as opposed to intellectual disabilities, makes physical disabilities, which manifest themselves on the body, more difficult to hide (Dolber, 1996). Some people do not recognize their learning disabilities until after high school graduation, but rather discover them later in life during adulthood and/or postsecondary endeavors (Shapiro & Rich, 1999). For others, a traumatic accident or acquisition of a disease brings on a disability. And still, the very act of ageing becomes disabling.

By seeking academic help for a learning disability, students choose to identify themselves as having a disability, and by forgoing help, students choose to identify themselves as nondisabled (free from possessing a disability), giving the perception of not having a disability at all (Swain & Camerion, 1999). The labels associated with ability and disability are signifying factors that identify and categorize students as able or unable to complete the more intensive academic work at the collegiate level. These labels carry cultural weight (Linton, 1998) and living in a disable-phobic culture can be traumatic (Sherry, 2004). With a disability label, a student is able to receive additional academic support from his/her institution of higher education, and without a disability label, the institution does not have to provide additional educational support. Identifying one's self with a disability is the key to additional support. The quagmire is that seeking out academic support for a learning disability in higher education causes students to "out" themselves in order to receive the academic support that may be necessary for success (Corker & French, 1999; Sherry, 2004). Other students who do not disclose their disability may neglect to seek and receive the needed academic support, which could limit academic success and/or lead to failure (McCormick, 2001). So, two general types

of students with intellectual disabilities in higher education emerge: those who seek out additional academic support and those who do not seek academic support.

The dimensions of disabilities are as vast and as widespread as the individuals themselves. The specific language used to identify able-bodies and disable-bodies within culture are so conflated that the meanings merge together. Terminology, like disability, disabled, and learning disability (to name a few), are used to identify a similar notion - one that signifies that something is wrong with an individual (Kleijn-de Vrankrijker, Heerkens, & Ravensberg, 1998). Each individual with a disability has their own interpretation of how the language of disabilities is used as an identifier of self. I conceptualize general views for individuals to use the language of disabilities as identifiers. For many people to identify him/herself as disabled, each individual in some way believes that the disability is part of him/her and internalizes the idea. In other words, the disability is part of who they are as a person and becomes an identifier of self. For some others, disability is a secondary identifier of self - one that does not become a large aspect of self. And yet for some others, disability is not in the forefront of their identity at all. The disability does not need to consume their entire life, but in different ways for each individual, even if it is in minute ways, does play a role in how life is structured. For example, someone who is unable to walk and uses a wheelchair to move from place to place compensates for body movements that involve the physical space of the wheelchair. The dilemma becomes being recognized solely for the disability and not wholly as an individual human being. For individuals with learning disabilities, the ability to hide their disability allows them to be known as an individual prior to revealing their disability, if they so desire to reveal their disability at all. Hiding a disability is

synonymous with passing as not possessing a disability. The reasons for passing are unique to each individual, but according to Rodis (2000) a definition of passing must meet two criteria. The first is that the characteristic must be "socially salient or linked to social status" (p. 217). The status of not possessing a disability in higher education is more valuable than possessing one. The second characteristic of passing is that the person "must be consciously engaged in the concealment" (Rodis, 2000, p. 217). There is a personal reason for not disclosing a learning disability while attending a college or university.

The emphasis, for society, is placed on the disability rather than the ability (Murphy, 1990). Pantich and Park (1998) caution about putting too much emphasis on the specific disability label: "the person's disability does not determine how much or what that individual can learn, but it is relevant in determining what supports are needed to teach a particular skill" (pp. 73-74). However, because so much emphasis is placed on the disability, "coming out" as being learning disabled is a process that has the potential to change identity – one from intellectually able to intellectually disable. The term "coming out" is most commonly associated with gay and lesbian identity, but the term has also become associated with individuals with disabilities (Corbett, 1994). Swain and Camerion (1999) call the process of coming out as possessing a disability "a declaration of identity outside the norm" (p. 68). In other words, possessing a disability is considered to be abnormal. For a person with a disability, claiming status as such lessens the emotional consequences that come from hiding a disability (Dolber, 1996; Linton, 1998). By coming out as being disabled, a person is allowing others to identify him/her with the disability.

Discovering students with learning disabilities who do not want to be identified as such is an impossible feat to undertake. Therefore, the focus of this research is on higher education students who have self-identified as having a learning disability and seek academic support through modifications and accommodations for their disability in an attempt to be academically successful at the collegiate level. The purpose of this research is to investigate how higher education students with learning disabilities choose to associate with disability labels in order to access campus ARCs. What are the effects of disability labels on higher education students? How do higher education students with specific learning disabilities negotiate identity?

Statement of the Problem

Students with disabilities who are accepted and attend institutions of higher education are caught in a dilemma. By outing themselves as possessing a disability, they are able to access support services in an effort to become academically successful. However, through exposing their disability and receiving additional support, there is a potential for others to attach negative labels (Sherry, 2004). Students with disabilities need to choose between outing themselves and accepting the disability labels or hiding their disability and passing as able-bodied, forgoing academic support. The issue of association and identification with disabilities becomes a problematic dichotomy. On one hand, students can choose to accept the disability label, be allowed to access academic support through appropriate accommodations and modifications, and negotiate the consequences of the choice. On the other hand, students can neglect to accept the label,

refrain from accessing accommodations and modifications, and then negotiate their academics alone.

Higher education is considered to be a proving ground for the best and the brightest students who have completed high school. Public k-12 education is provided to students through comprehensive attendance laws and funded through tax dollars. It is a right provided to the children of the United States. Higher education is considered a privilege and not a right. Despite growing attendance, individuals are not guaranteed acceptance or access to it. Thus, it is a way to sort students with the most potential for completing a higher education degree and to add economic value.

As a researcher who has accessed a campus ARC, I have been especially interested in how students with specific learning disabilities "come out" and reveal their disabilities in order to be able to access ARCs. The growth in the number of students with disabilities attending colleges and universities has become an increasing area for financial revenues to schools (Shapiro & Rich, 1999) – an important source of additional revenue during hard economic conditions. On average, students with disabilities take longer to complete degrees than their peers without disabilities (Dolber, 1996). Some schools aggressively recruit students with disabilities by marketing programs and services in their recruitment brochures. In order for recruitment to occur, schools need to have ARCs that are able to accommodate large numbers of students with disabilities, and students need to be willing to reveal their learning disability prior to initial enrollment. Little is known about the experience of students with learning disabilities in higher education (Shapiro & Rich, 1999; Shelvin, Kenny, & McNeela, 2004). This research

study can lend greater insight into an area that is lacking research and has the potential to improve the experiences for higher education individuals with disabilities.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this research study is to better understand how students with hidden disabilities or specific learning disabilities in higher education decide to reveal their disabilities to others through seeking accommodations and modifications via campus ARCs. I want to give voice to the stories of how students with specific learning disabilities decide to expose their disabilities by seeking academic support. From these stories, I will analyze how current disability policies and practices in higher education at one university affect students' decisions to seek accommodations and modifications from the ARC. This evaluation has the potential to inform our thinking about the current protocol for higher education students to self-identify with learning disabilities prior to receiving academic support. The study utilized multiple data sources including student interviews and analysis of university-related materials such as policy statements and protocol for accessing the campus ARC. In short, this study will provide a clearer understanding of the process of "coming out" for higher education students with learning disabilities by giving voice to an underrepresented population and suggesting policy changes.

Research Questions

In order to understand students' decisions to "come out" with their disabilities or not, the guiding questions for this study are:

1) How do higher education students choose to identify with specific learning disabilities?

2) How do students with specific learning disabilities in higher education describe their experiences seeking academic support?

3) How do students describe the experience of being labeled disabled?

Significance of the Study

The majority of research about specific learning disability is primarily focused on k-12 settings. As a result, there is a lack of research on the college student with specific learning disabilities (Shelvin, Kenny, & McNeela, 2004). In addition to this lack of research at the higher education level, there is specifically a lack of narrative research involving students with disabilities first hand (Hurst, 1996; Linton, 1998; Oliver, 1996). Their stories are missing except for the occasional triumph over adversity story (e.g., Christopher Reeves and Helen Keller). Hopefully, this trend will stop because of the increase in the number of students with disabilities in higher education. The experiences of people with disabilities are often "background features" unnoticed and kept from being part of the dialogue about the daily life issues relating to their disabilities (Titchkosky, 2003, p. 19). This research is one step toward understanding students' experiences of their learning disabilities in a larger context in order to create a new dialogue about United States disability policy in higher education.

Overview of the Study

The second chapter of this research will provide an overview of the historical nature of disabilities and end with a description of the embedded nature of disabilities in the United States. The theoretical framework for this research emerges out of two different views or models (medical model and social model) of how disabilities are portrayed and understood in society. The central focuses of these two disability models will be described including a brief explanation about the different and unique locations that encompass disabilities, the stigma of disabilities, and how some individuals with disabilities attempt to pass as non-disabled because of hidden disabilities. The third chapter will explicate the methodology including the research design, site selection, and introduce the participants. The students who participated in this study have a medium to voice their stories about how disabilities have affected their lives in higher education. The fourth chapter reveals the research data and delves into each participant's understanding of disability identity as similar experiences emerged into themes that portrayed their struggle with disability in higher education. The four themes that emerged from the research are the stigma of disabilities, the resources that higher education students with disabilities access, the time commitment that is needed to devote to schooling, and the meaning of success. The final chapter will analyze the themes that have developed from the participants' stories and elucidate their importance.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

History of Disabilities – Physical and Intellectual

The history of disabilities does not follow one single trajectory; rather, it zigzags a path based on the surrounding culture and whether the disabilities are identified as physical or intellectual. The distinct histories of physical and intellectual disabilities directly represent different immediate barriers and individual concerns that people encounter in their daily lives and routines. People across all types of disabilities find it difficult to achieve certain goals that are grounded in their specific circumstances (Funk, 1987; O'Brien, 2001). The vagueness in this statement is due to the vast continuum of disabilities and the fact that people experience disabilities differently based on many social, political, and cultural factors. Also, a stigma becomes associated with a label of disability in most societies, which limits opportunities (Wendell, 1996). In other words, possessing a disability makes an individual less valuable. So, tracing the history of disabilities is very difficult not only due to its monumental scope, but also because people avoid association with disabilities. The goal of this research is to narrow the scope to the United States with individuals who have learning disabilities in higher education. The embedded nature of disabilities within culture materializes with some brief, but relevant historical examples. The purpose of these examples is to demonstrate the magnitude of

the entrenching dichotomy between the able-body versus the disable-body, clean versus unclean, productive versus unproductive, and good versus evil that occurs in many societies and cultures throughout history. The entrenchment of the disability dichotomy is not only isolated to the events of the past, but continues today and is very prevalent in US culture.

Fears in Ancient Greece and Europe

The concept of disability dates back over 2000 years to the Greek philosopher, Aristotle. The idea that death is a better choice than living life with a disability is seen in *The Politics,* with the words, "let there be a law that no deformed child shall live" (Aristotle, 1885, p. 240). Aristotle believed that death was the preferred method to spare the child and its parents from facing social rejection. Governmental control over social hygiene surfaced as a way to protect disabilities from spreading among a country's regions. Disabilities became greatly feared like a plague that quickly spreads without a way to prevent it from consuming everyone in its path.

Fear of disabilities in Europe is supported by scientific traditions. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the Eugenics Movement was proving itself as a powerful scientific force in Europe. The Eugenics Movement was made possible by the ideas put forward in Charles Darwin's text, *The Origin of Species* (Pfeiffer, 1994). Broadly defined, Baker (2002) writes,

> [Eugenics] refers at the broadest level to a belief in the necessity of 'racial' or 'national' improvement through the control of populational reproduction. This is understood…as a code for promoting through scientific, medical, psychological, educational, and welfare…a belief in a hierarchy of human races/nations and characteristics, with the pinnacle of racial/national evolution at that time being the presumed qualities of Anglo-Saxon or Teutonic groups primarily of northern and

> western Europe and North America…Within this general understanding of eugenics as *constructing* and privileging certain kinds of whiteness over certain kinds of color, certain kinds of masculinity over certain kinds of femininity, certain kinds of ability over certain kinds of "corporeally anomalous" body-minds, and tolerating only narrow versions of heteronormativity and religious devotion, eugenics becomes somewhat swamped. (p. 665, *original emphasis*)

Baker contends that white, masculine, and able-bodies are the narrow standard to compare all other bodies. The goal for science becomes to manipulate humans so that disabilities become extinct, creating a perfect, able-bodied society. The problem arises of what version of able-bodiness to use as the standard to compare all bodies.

Sterilization was one method used on individuals who were considered disabled, feebleminded, unfit, and/or menaces to society. It was used as an effort to stop those individuals from producing offspring (Pfeiffer, 1994). According to Darwin's theory, these individuals would only produce undesirable children who were similar to their parents. In addition to control over reproduction, the mantras of economic value and social hygiene both contributed to the murdering of more than 275,000 people with disabilities under Adolf Hitler and the Nazi era. Control over which citizens of a country would be able to reproduce and add economic value was legitimized and rationalized as "courageous and progressive" rather than "barbaric" (Baker, 2002, p. 667). The rationale for eugenics was based on scientific proof and questions as to "why" were infrequently asked. Versions of eugenics were and are found all over the world and traces of it continue through the present day.

Disabilities in the United States

The history of disabilities in the United States is divided into specific eras. Although historians and disability scholars do not agree on the specific dates, the eras can

be generalized into four categories (Funk, 1987; Hallahan & Mock, 2003, Longmore & Umansky, 2001; Taylor & Searl, 2002). One disability scholar, Robert Funk (1987), describes and names four phases of disabilities in the United States: (1) 1700-1920: From the Attic to the Warehouse, (2) 1920-1960: Segregation and Charitable Care, (3) 1960-1975: Social Movements and Civil Rights, and (4) A Changing Society: 1976-1985. The significance of these phases and dates are that they center on national events. Phase 1 moves from the Industrial Revolution and westward expansion, phase 2 through World Wars I and II and the discovery of penicillin, phase 3 to the Civil Rights era, and phase 4 to legislation specifically targeting the needs of people with disabilities.

During phase 1 (1700-1920) the United States was primarily a split society of self-sufficient, single-family farms and the beginning of a large urban society. In the early part of phase 1, the responsibility of a disabled person was that of the family (Taylor & Searl, 2001). This means that the disabled person was confined to the house and helped with domestic work when possible. Domestic work was synonymous with women's work and menial tasks that did not require a lot of thought. Some individuals with disabilities were able to complete tasks that helped on the primarily family-operated farms of the early United States. Formal schooling was not readily available to isolated rural communities and when it was available, the needs of the farm and family often took precedence over education. Within this phase, full-time care institutions developed and included separate institutions for the "feebleminded" (Taylor & Searl, 2001, p. 19). According to Braddock and Parish (2002), full-time institutions for people with disabilities became common during the Jacksonian era of the 1820s. Furthermore, with the influx of immigrants later in the century "institutional solutions for social problems

were sought for the first time in the United States" (Braddock & Parish, 2002, p. 21.) Those families that could afford institutional care would do so and the communities of individuals who were either paupers or without a family became responsible for providing care. Later in this phase, specialized institutions emerged to provide care for the blind or deaf; however, the majority of those considered disabled had physical disabilities and not intellectual. One of the reasons attributed to the limited range of disabilities was due to a lack of formal psychological standardized testing, which was not developed until the 1920s. Essentially, people were not aware of the wide spectrum of intellectual disabilities named today, except for those that were extreme and obvious in nature. These initial specialized institutions were mainly for individuals who were deemed "deserving," like war-injured veterans and survivors of industrial-related accidents.

The 19th Century entertainment industry aided in the creation of society's attitudes about people with disabilities being abnormal (Thomson, 1996). The traveling freak shows from 1835-1940 made famous by P.T. Barnum displayed human anomalies on stage for people to witness for a small entrance fee. The individuals on-stage were taken out of their cultural context and simplified to one identifying physical characteristic. The pitchman told luring, grandiose stories of how the specimen came into existence. The audience was then asked the question, "What is it?" (Cook, 1996). This allowed individuals to make comparisons between their own existence and that of the individual on-stage. The show organizers set the stage, so to speak, for the comparison of normal versus abnormal (Thomson, 1996). The U.S. freak shows served to institutionalize

disability as the ultimate human deviance, one that no normal individual would want to become or live such a horrible life.

The Eugenics Movement was not isolated to Europe and spread to the U.S., but instead of euthanasia of individuals with disabilities, two other answers prevailed - segregation and sterilization. In the United States, the science of eugenics supported sterilization as a remedy for "feeblemindedness" – a medical phenomenon used to control people with disabilities during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Carey, 2003; Pfeiffer, 1994). Control over reproduction, marriage, and isolation from the able-bodied and worthy population were acceptable solutions to the problem of disability.

During phase 2, the Segregation and Charitable Care Phase (1920-1960), there was an increased number of people placed in full-time care facilities due to the rapid growth in medical and scientific technologies causing people to live longer, specifically the discovery of the antibiotic, penicillin. Not only were more individuals surviving industrial accidents, but also there were an increased number of wounded war-veterans from two wars, WW II and the Korean War. Wounded soldiers were considered to be worthy of their disability and given pity for how they bravely gave of their self to protect and fight for freedom. Due to this sentiment of responsibility, the federal government started to offer greater resources in the form of rehabilitation services in an attempt to return productivity and decrease government subsidies (Scotch, 2001). Also, charity organizations like the Easter Seal Society and Muscular Dystrophy Association were established in 1934 and 1950 respectively and their goals were to end disabling diseases. Through advances in science and technology, a softened version of the Eugenics

Movement was thought to have the potential to cure and/or prevent many disabilities (Pfeiffer, 1994).

Not only did society allow for the physical segregation of people with disabilities, but also laws were created prohibiting marriages and sterilization so that disabilities would not spread (Braddock & Parish, 2002). In 1927, the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Buck v. Bell* supported states' right to sterilize people with intellectual disabilities. Limited knowledge about the causes of disabilities ensued to secure society's goal to control the spread and cure those who suffer from disabilities. Up to this point in the U.S. disability history, the medical model of disabilities was the only lens through which people with disabilities were viewed. Due to its continuing importance, the medical model of disabilities will be expanded upon in the theoretical discussion.

Despite all states passing laws by 1918 requiring compulsory education for all children (Hallahan & Mock, 2003), exclusion from public educational settings for people with disabilities was common up to and through the 1960s (Martin, 2001). The struggles for access to education become aligned with the struggles that African American and other minorities faced. For minority students, the Supreme Court ruling of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 was the precedent that dictated the exclusion and segregation of minorities as well as people with disabilities. The *Plessy* ruling allowed for separate but equal education. As long as there were "separate and equal" educational settings, then segregation was permissible. The precedent established by the *Plessy* verdict was changed in 1954 by the Supreme Court with the *Brown v. Board of Education* - Topeka, Kansas case. The overriding idea that separate education cannot be equal was established. Even though both of the *Plessy* and *Brown* cases were Civil Rights-related,

advocates against the separation of students for any reason including disabilities were able to apply their rulings to include all students who were considered different based on ethnicity, skin color, and disability. Although the details to integrate all students in public education took several years to fully develop, the next phase of disability history used the *Brown* ruling as a foundation to gain greater access to public education.

From 1960-1975, phase 3 (Social Movements and Civil Rights) aligns itself with Civil Rights issues of the 1960s and early 1970s. People with disabilities began to claim status as a minority and as an underrepresented group, arguing that they faced similar issues to African Americans. Social and physical constraints to public spaces (e.g., buildings without wheelchair ramps, inadequate public transportation, and separate school facilities) prevented full access to rights other citizens without disabilities received. In 1962, President Kennedy appointed the President's Panel on Mental Retardation. One of the 95 recommendations was to expand community services for people with disabilities and reduce full-care institutional facilities. This was an enormous shift in how people with disabilities were viewed. An advocacy organization, American Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities, was founded in 1974 and lobbied Congress and other politicians for equal rights in employment and education. Congress passed *The Rehabilitation Act of 1973* providing funds for vocational training for people with disabilities and prohibiting discrimination in employment practices. The key area to the *Rehabilitation Act* was *Section 504*. This section prohibited any form of discrimination against people with disabilities by organizations that received federal funding. In addition, *Section 504* mandated new construction to be barrier-free and for existing buildings to become accessible to people with disabilities. For education, *Section 504*

included terminology that supported reasonable accommodations that included higher education students. *Section 504* says, "no otherwise qualified individual with a disability…shall, solely by reason of her or his disability, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program receiving Federal financial assistance" (29 U.S. C. Section 794). The limited scope of the *Rehabilitation Act* was only to federal organizations and those receiving federal monies; it did not stretch into the private sector. As a result, private schools, businesses, and organizations were able to continue business as usual.

In 1975, the culminating event was when Congress passed Public Law 94-142 (*Education for All Handicapped Children Act*). This law established free and appropriate public k-12 education for all children with disabilities in the "least restrictive environment." However, enforcement of free and appropriate education became a major obstacle, with many lawsuits and court cases that attempted to block access to education for students with disabilities. Parents, teachers, students, and the community were afraid of the disabled body and did not want any form of integration. Although the reach of PL 94-142 was isolated to k-12 schools, graduation rates of students with disabilities have historically increased. Looking backwards, concerns pertaining to higher education were inevitable.

Phase 4 – A Changing Society (1976–present), the final phase, is the beginning of special education within public k-12 schools and higher education. During this time, judicial rulings were common to resolve interpretation conflicts of legislation and educational services (e.g., *Board of Ed. Of Hendrick Hudson Central School Dist. v. Rowley* 458 U.S. 176 - 1982). The furthest reaching legislation for public k-12 schools

occurred in 1990 with the reauthorization and renaming of PL 94-142. The new name was the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA). This guaranteed the education of students with disabilities between the ages of three and twenty-one (preschool through the completion of high school) and created specific categories of disabilities such as Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD), Other Health Impairments (OHI), Emotional Behavior Disabilities (EBD), and Mental Retardation (MR). Parents and guardians were encouraged to have greater involvement in the educational process with the school being required to obtain consent prior to evaluation and services. IDEA was reauthorized in 1997 and 2005. The provisions that were added in the reauthorizations are additional categories of disabilities, which included splitting MR into four categories (Mildly Intellectually Disabled [MID], Moderate Intellectually Disabled and Severely Disabled and Profoundly Disabled) and greater parental rights. Again, Congress was focused on public k-12 education.

To rectify the limitations of the *Rehabilitation Act*, Congress passed *The Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990* (ADA). The goal of ADA was to end discrimination in the areas that the *Rehabilitation Act* did not reach, primarily non-government sectors. The ADA bars discrimination against people with disabilities in areas like employment and governmental services. ADA states, "no qualified individual with a disability shall, by reason of such disability, be excluded from participation in or be denied the benefits of the services, programs, or activities of a public entity, or be subjected to discrimination by any such entity" (p. 9). Public entity means any area or organization that is available or open to the general public.

Under IDEA, a student with a disability must have a transition plan in their Individual Education Plan (IEP) prior to turning sixteen years of age and preferably at the age of fourteen. An IEP is an educational outline for a specific student. The IEP includes the current eligibility of the disability (the label or category); how the disability affects the student's education; the service model(s) used to best meet the student's goal(s); and the academic, social, and/or behavioral goals that are to be addressed during the school year. This transition plan establishes the next steps the student will take after high school graduation. The range of possibilities could be for a student to receive no additional services, and go directly into the workforce or for the student to receive specific services during the next level of education (e.g., college or technical school). Also, it addresses the skills that are needed in order to achieve their post-secondary goal(s). Although the IDEA legislation establishes a transition plan between high school and postsecondary schools, IDEA is limited in its role to k-12 education (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005). It does not continue with the student through college. Once a student transitions from high school to college, IDEA ends its reach and the *Rehabilitation Act* and ADA take primary jurisdiction (DePoy & Gilson, 2004). In actuality, the *Rehabilitation Act* and the *Americans with Disability Act* are not even specific to special education; rather, they are anti-discrimination legislations.

According to *Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act*, institutions of higher education cannot discriminate against applicants based on disability. This means that if a prospective student has met the admission requirements for the college or university, the disability cannot be used against the student for determining admissions. Not only does *Section 504* require that post-secondary schools provide equal access to admissions, but it

extends to areas like financial aid, employment assistance, and nonacademic services such as campus housing and transportation. The issue of academic requirements for higher education students with disabilities develops when a disability affects the program's course outline.

The four phases of disability history represent a shift in how disabilities are perceived within the United States over time. Disabilities began as a personal and isolating trait for individuals and moved to greater protection under the law. Advancements in technology and education have opened up the possibilities for people with disabilities to obtain support and access to many spaces that were previously closed to them. However, the problem remains that individuals with disabilities continue to be othered in many aspects because of their disabilities. The choice remains for individuals with hidden disabilities to refrain from exposing their disabilities.

Transition from High School to Higher Education

The historical facts of disability do not tell the whole story about the experiences of college students with disabilities. During their high school enrollment, the school is the primary entity for ensuring academic success for students with disabilities. The responsibility for the student's education shifts from that of the school to that of the student upon high school graduation. Once arriving at college, a student with a disability must determine if he/she will self-identify him/herself as having a disability (Rothstein, 1998). Many students with disabilities are uncertain about disclosing their disabilities upon their arrival at college (Nadeau, 1994). They feel embarrassed that they cannot learn like their peers (Hadley, 2006). Starting a new life endeavor without a disability

label is appealing. However, for some students, revealing their disability to access academic resources may be crucial for their success in higher education (Nadeau, 1994; Rothstein, 1998). It is the student's responsibility to request accommodations and support services in higher education (Shapiro & Rich, 1999). Once the disability is revealed and supported by documentation, then the institution is required to provide reasonable accommodations (Vogel & Reder, 1998).

In an effort to ensure that institutions of higher education comply with the regulations under the *Rehabilitation Act,* the act requires a campus coordinator to oversee the implementation of accommodations. Most institutions of higher education house this coordinator in a general Office of Student Services that includes a coordinator of disability services (Aune, 1998; Nadeau, 1994; Quinn, 2001; Saucier & Gagliano, 1998). Specific terminology related to disability may be absent from the title to relate the idea that the office offers a general umbrella of services to all students. Prior to accessing any accommodations, students with disabilities must self-identify themselves.

Reasonable accommodations become a subject that is open to much interpretation. What is reasonable for one higher education student with a disability to be successful may be quite different from what another student with a disability needs to be successful. Individuality is the key to each accommodation. "Institutions struggle to balance a need to preserve the academic integrity of their programs while ensuring the equal opportunity for student with disabilities" (Saucier & Gagliano, 1998, p. 215). Decisions about what accommodations are allowed for each student with a disability are made on a case-by-case basis. Some examples of reasonable accommodations according to Quinn (2001) are priority scheduling, reduced course load, special arrangements

during testing, note takers, and tutors. The student and the school's designee in the Office of Student Services make the determination as to what accommodations are needed and incorporated. Generally speaking, most accommodations are provided without much discussion. However, the student must provide adequate supporting data, which may include doctor confirmation, previous IEP, and learning style inventories.

Shapiro and Rich (1999) describe two instances when institutions of higher education do not need to provide reasonable accommodations. The first is when it imposes undue financial burden on the institution. The second instance is when the safety of the student or others around the student is compromised. Both instances are open to determination on a case-by-case basis and accommodations that are considered reasonable at one institution of higher education may not be reasonable at another institution.

Summary

The brief history of disabilities and special education fails to provide a picture of the personal day-to-day struggles for individuals with disabilities in the United States. Greater access to public spaces and education only provides for the physical limitations outlined by legislation and scripted by society. A missing component is the accounts of students themselves, which must be understood within a theoretical framework that shows that the struggles people with disabilities face are daily events grounded in language and culture. Bringing these issues to light exposes how people with disabilities are currently administered in institutions of higher education.

Theoretical Framework

There are two theoretical frameworks that are most commonly used within the rhetoric about individuals with disabilities – the medical model and the social model (Llewellyn & Hogan, 2000; Oliver, 1990). Both models position people with disabilities differently. The medical model views disability as something that needs to be fixed via scientific medicine and once fixed or cured, the person can lead a so-called normal life again (Paterson & Hughes, 2000; Llewellyn & Hogan, 2000). The goal is normalcy. The social model understands disability as a social concept and not a result of the outcomes of physical or intellectual impairments. Rather, disability is as an effect of society's exclusions and discriminations towards human differences (Paterson & Hughes, 2000). The social model believes that disability is part of what it means to be a human being. Everyone is disabled in some way or will become disabled through aging as time progresses. Both models have well-established arguments, but the medical model is the dominant way of thinking in the United States. Only within the last two decades has the medical model faced challenges to its dominant position. Despite some of the valid arguments of the medical model, as a researcher, I side with the social model of disabilities. The theoretical approach that this research project takes emerges out of contradictions between the uses of the social and medical models of disability in educational policy and practice.

The Medical Model

Under the medical model of disabilities, people are labeled with a disability based on physical or psychological criteria (DePoy & Gilson, 2004; Oliver, 1990). The process for attaching a disability label begins with naming what human characteristics are

acceptable within a normal range of ability. Everything that does not neatly fit into this range becomes abnormal and needs to be corrected. Disabilities are named through medical diagnosis via observations and checklists based on the criteria of normal human ranges (Scotch, 2001). These observations and checklists are authoritative and power-filled in nature (Foucault, 1994), thus creating a benchmark or standard for all people to meet. Disability becomes viewed as a condition or problem that emphasizes "individual pathology and personal deficit" (Boxall, 2002, p. 210). Viewed this way, disability becomes understood as a personal tragedy (Oliver, 1990). Terminology, like average and bell-curve, emerge as ways to define a small range of normal and acceptable human characteristics.

The medical model presumes that the manner in which society is structured has no bearing on the individual with a disability. The condition or problem is isolated to the individual (Aune, 1998) and responsibility is placed on the individual for the cause and the outcomes of his/her disability. Boxall (2002) writes, "disability is an individual functional limitation (something the individual 'can't' do, or has 'wrong' with them) *which has a biological or physiological cause*" (p. 210, original emphasis). The focus of a disability is on what people cannot do rather than what they can do. The goal for this model then becomes to diagnose the problem and attempt to fix or cure the disability (Llewellyn & Hogan, 2000). Advances in technology are considered to be the savior for people with disabilities. If a person cannot walk, then give them a wheelchair; if a person cannot hear, then they can communicate with sign language. Yet despite technological improvements, society creates barriers of difference through the standard of normalcy.

Embedded in the medical model is the overriding goal to strive to be normal. But what about those people who do not fit the normal range of ability according to the medical standard? Those people who fall outside the range of this "normal" human condition are considered "abnormal." The normal/abnormal categories are absolute and rely on opposite meanings – an individual either is or is not disabled and not both or a variation of both (Edwards, 1997). The range for what is considered normal under the medical model is very narrowly defined (Davis, 1995). Many people who fall outside of what is considered to be normal begin to feel inferior and strive to become normal according to cultural standards. Immediately, a binary is created between normal and abnormal. Those people who fall into the normal category are permitted to participate in society and those who fall into the abnormal category are often limited or altogether forbidden from participation.

Special education falls under the medical model because it is a reaction to a social need and the rationale becomes to fix the student (DePoy & Gilson, 2004; Linton, 1998). Public k-12 schools are required to seek out students who do not fit within the normal range of academic or behavioral standards. In other words, schools need to pick out those who are different and do not fit the educational mold. Once a problem is suspected, these students are tested, usually through a battery of psychological tests and observation checklists. These diagnostic tools determine whether or not the student's abilities fall within a normal range of age appropriate abilities (Badley, 1998). Some of those who do fall within the normal range yet do not perform at acceptable academic levels in school are sometimes referred to as lazy and unmotivated or blame is placed on their parents (Kelly & Ramundo, 1993); however, other factors such as culture, socio-economic level,

and learning styles may be factors in poor performance. But those students who do not fall within the normal range of ability are marked with a disability label. These labels identify that something is wrong and needs to be fixed. The school begins to provide additional resources to the student through a variety of special classes, additional assistance, and/or alternative assignments. The continuum of services ranges from full inclusion in regular education classes with no support to full-time residential homes. The specific placement for each individual is the responsibility of the IEP committee, which determines the best placement and support system. Use of specific terminology, like special education and resource classroom, foster an "us versus them" separate education system that deters people from wanting to be associated with the "wrong" group.

The Social Model

The social model of disabilities views all human behavior and ability ranges as acceptable, normal human outcomes. This model believes that disability is a cultural construct and rejects the medical model's belief that disability is a dichotomous human feature – either one is totally able or disable and not both (DePoy & Gilson, 2004; Edwards, 1997; Gadacz, 1994; Titchkosky, 2003). The social model argues that the definition of what is considered a disability changes over times as each culture determines what ability ranges are acceptable or unacceptable. Therefore, if a change occurs in the dominant ruling culture, then the possibility for the definition of disability can change as well. The change may lead to the pathologization of what was considered to be normal (Wendell, 1996). In addition, the social model emphasizes that possessing a disability does not automatically mean total helplessness. Many individuals develop

strategies to compensate for their disabilities and they continue living despite their disability.

Under the social model framework, disability is redefined in terms of what barriers cause disabilities for individuals that are "built into the social fabric" in areas like culture, society, and architecture (Hughes & Paterson, 1997, p. 328). Viewed this way, the world becomes the handicapping force behind the obstacles people with disabilities face. The problem is not that there are people with different abilities (people with disabilities), as modern culture would contend, but that society does not allow for different abilities (Gadacz, 1994).

The oppression of people with disabilities is created through cultural traditions of exclusion and the construction of normal. Rosemarie Garland Thomson (1997) outlines the socially constructed idea of "normate," or what a normal human being should represent:

> The term *normate* usefully designates the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings. Normate, then, is the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them. If one attempts to define the normate position by peeling away all the marked traits within the social order at this historical moment, what emerges is a very narrowly defined profile that describes only a minority of actual people. (p. 8)

Using Thomson's version of a normal human being, or normate, and juxtaposing it to disabilities, a normate is a person who is able-bodied and free from the appearance of disability. One is either able-bodied or disabled-bodied based on outward appearance. Because disability is a part of life through the process of aging, then only a few individuals are able to reach the status of normate. Yet, society creates a continuum of acceptable levels of imperfect normates. Certain

disabilities are acceptable, while others are unacceptable. For example, wearing glasses is commonly acceptable because so many people wear corrective lens. It has become an acceptable disability. The attempt to name what is socially labeled as a normal human being or citizen creates a dichotomy of what is acceptable and unacceptable. New categories are only secured by placing one group against another, accepting and labeling one group as normal while rejecting and labeling the other group as abnormal (Swain & Camerion, 1999). Socially, a perception of deviance is created against an imaginary ideal and oppression follows. Therefore, when people with disabilities do not meet the expectation of the socially constructed idea of being a normal citizen, they are excluded from certain aspects and realms of society. People with disabilities have been pushed out of mainstream culture and restricted to the background of society.

Summary – Medical vs. Social

Viewing disabilities through the lenses of the medical and social models reveals two variations of understanding disability in the United States. The medical model attempts to discover the characteristics that are considered to be abnormal based on what medical culture defines as acceptable. The solution for disabilities becomes to cure or fix the condition and return the individual to a so-called normal state of being. The social model places culture in a critical position understanding that culture is the driving force behind the manner in which disabilities are conceptualized. The social model challenges culture's focus or emphasis on disability rather than ability. Because of the vast range of disabilities, the location of where individual disabilities manifest themselves becomes an area that needs to be expanded upon.

The Location of Disability – Physical and Intellectual

A general definition is integral to the disability discussion. While there are many definitions of disabilities, Covey (1998) broadly defines disability as "the consequences of an impairment…any restriction or lack of ability to perform an activity in the manner in which the range considered appropriate for nondisabled people" (p. 3). This definition implies a cultural component of normal ability and disability. Characteristics that are disabling in one culture may not be disabling in another culture. For an individual with a physical disability, the ability to walk and carry heavy containers more than a half a mile to access clean drinking water may be disabling for someone in a less developed nation, but not considered disabling in a developed country where clean drinking water is readily available in primary dwellings. The disparity is not isolated between developed or less developed countries. Even within developed countries, disabilities can present different obstacles depending on residency in rural or urban settings. The ability to access public transportation in an urban setting is readily available with regular schedules and multiple entry and exit sites and is not disabling for those who can maneuver short distances. However, in rural areas where public transportation is often not financially viable, this absence can be disabling for individuals who are unable to operate a motor vehicle or walk long distances. For an individual with an intellectual disability in a developed country, finding continuous and sufficient employment to earn enough income to provide for minimal living expenses can be difficult; however, in a less developed, agrarian country where self-sufficient or family farms are common, earning income may not be as crucial (Covey, 1998). The point is that disabilities are not identical, universal issues, but are culturally linked and individually specific to geographies and societies.

Societies view disabilities differently depending on their location in the body (Goffman, 1963). Disabilities that are located in the mind (hidden disabilities), those of an intellectual nature, are given a higher value and are less stigmatizing when compared to those that are located on the body (obvious/physical disabilities or marked traits) (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005). These culturally contrived values align with the notion of cultural normalcy in society (Davis, 1995). If someone is able to appear as if they were normal or like everyone else, as defined by cultural standards, then they are able to blend into the surroundings and become invisible even when an intellectual disability is present. Disabilities are more stigmatizing when they are related to the appearance of the physical body rather than the intellectual ability of the individual person (Murphy, 1990). The converse of that is also true. When someone has a physical disability, a lower value is given because the body - body image - is so important in American culture.

Physical disabilities, sometimes called physical deformities, are more obvious because they are often located in plain view on the body. For example, physical deformities consist of those present at birth, like a clubbed foot or a cleft pallet, as well as those that are developed or acquired later in life, like those resulting from diseases or accidents. While a physical disability may not affect the mind's cognitive functions, it can have an effect on self-esteem and on other people's perceptions due to the influence culture has on people to strive to be perceived as normal. Davis (1995) writes, "The body of the disabled person is seen as marked by the disability" (p. 2). For Davis, this mark of disability on the physical body becomes the focal point from which observers give meaning and cultural value. Rather than accepting the entire continuum of body potentials as normal, society narrowly defines normal. Through this narrow definition of

normal, the notion of an “ideal” body is created. This culturally contrived “ideal” body then becomes the goal for everyone to reach and obtain.

Intellectual disabilities are not always obvious in everyday contact because they are hidden from view (Charlton, 1998). A person with an intellectual disability can pass through the daily routines of life, while those who surround him/her will not know that an intellectual disability is present. It is possible for an individual to go through life without being aware of a personal intellectual disability, as well as the surrounding people not being aware of it. One of the reasons is because some intellectual disabilities can be compensated for in unnoticeable ways. Moreover, if a person is aware of a specific area of disability, then he/she may attempt to stress other areas of strength instead of areas of weakness. This is due to intellectual disabilities not being a noticeable manifestation on the physical body. For an individual to be diagnosed with an intellectual disability, a medical process that usually involves a psychologist or psychiatrist is conducted. An example of an individual with a specific learning disability in math who is able to face the day-to-day challenges of life would typically not be employed in a field that involves mathematics. Even if an individual knows he/she has a specific intellectual disability, the potential not to publicly disclose that information exists. This is directly associated with the stigma that having a disability carries (Wendell, 1996). Hiding a disability becomes part of a person’s everyday routine; it is an almost constant effort to hide the disability from those around him/her.

Stigma of Disability

Erving Goffman (1963) defines the term stigma as "an attribute that is deeply discrediting" in all social settings including intimate ones (p. 3). A stigmatizing trait has a negative effect on an individual that is grounded in social experiences. Both the one who possesses and the one who perceives an identifiable, stigmatizing trait or negative characteristic are affected. The stigma associated with possessing a disability "is neither an inherent characteristic of the person nor the environment, but is produced by their interaction. Both the immediate environment and the broader cultural context exert powerful influences on emotional behavioral reactions to disability" (Vash & Crewe, 2004, p. 23). The reactions for people with disabilities are feelings of being unworthy and valueless because they are supposedly unable to reach the cultural expectations of normal. Thus, the stigma is internalized.

Goffman (1963) describes the social construction of a stigma to be experienced in three areas - abominations of the body, blemishes of individual character, and tribal. Abominations of the body are the physical representation that outsiders come in contact with on a daily basis, the physical body (e.g., body tattoos, piercing, and physical deformities). Blemishes of individual characters are negative personal traits that are widely known, immoral characteristic traits of a specific person (e.g., being a liar, a thief, or an alcoholic). Tribal stigmas refer to those that are linked to family, nationality, and religious affiliations. The long side-burns or locks worn by men of Orthodox Jewish faith and the red markings worn by Hindu women are examples of tribal stigmas, which only become stigmas by how others read these markings. These traits are primarily revealed through physical/visual interactions. For those traits that are not noticeable,

individuals disclose these traits only when a person feels comfortable in his/her surroundings. Many of the tribal stigmas an individual does not have control over; however, people who experience stigmas often stay within a small group of intimates. All three types of stigma can discredit a person based on one trait, making all other credible traits unimportant: "By definition…the person with a stigma is not quite human" (Goffman, 1963, p. 5). In attributing a nonhuman identity, society justifies discrimination against people with disabilities based on one attribute. People with disabilities become the sum of one attribute – the disability.

Going further, Sedgwick (1990) identifies crude axes of categories for differences that are inscribed in mainstream culture. Commonly used categories such as "gender, race, class, nationality, sexual orientation…they, with the associated demonstrations of mechanisms by which they are constructed and reproduced, are indispensable, and they may indeed override all or some other forms of difference and similarity…[which] prove that even people who share all or most of our own positionings along these crude axes may still be different enough from us, and from each other, to seem like all but different species" (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 22). Adding disabilities to Sedgwick's list of axes shows that disability, even minute disability, has enough fear imposed by culture to be used as a separating force.

Although Goffman (1963) does not specifically address intellectual disabilities, similarities can be generated between his work with mental health patients and intellectual disabilities. Some people with learning disabilities feel inferior to others and possess feelings that other people are able to read their inward thoughts and reasons for their actions (Titchkosky, 2003). They can perceive that their disability is viewed as if it

were a big neon sign, publicly announcing their disability. This signals a warning for others to avoid the person with a disability. Even though no outward sign is actually evident, the feelings are internalized and based solely on the disability, which can lead to feelings of being too different and unacceptable in society. This stigma "silences" those who are stigmatized (Couser, 2001, p. 79).

For Goffman, the stigma associated with intellectual disabilities can be viewed in terms of what is unspoken. Just like sexuality, where heterosexuality is presumed unless otherwise stated, absence of disability is presumed unless otherwise stated (Swain & Camerion, 1999). Coming out as being disabled forces a person to change his/her identity and aligns a person's identity outside of society's ideal image. Using Goffman's concepts of a stigma being a discrediting characteristic, people with learning disabilities therefore possess a stigmatizing social characteristic. Although in many cases, a learning disability can be hidden from public view, higher education students with learning disabilities must "out" themselves prior to receiving accommodations and modifications. The learning disability label becomes a trait of marked difference. These labels are purposeful and understanding their significance needs to be considered.

Passing with a Disability - Stigma

Similar to African Americans who pass for white and lesbians and gays who pass as straight, people with disabilities who make a deliberate effort to conceal their disability are passing as a person without a disability (Corbett, 1994; Linton, 1998; Swain & Camerion, 1999). For a person with disabilities, Linton (1998) defines passing as the ability to "conceal their impairment or confine their activities to those that do not reveal their disability" (p. 19). Hiding the presence of a disability becomes part of a daily

routine to mask any perception of difference and appear normal. There are many reasons for passing and one of those reasons is associated with not wanting to be stigmatized as an "other" in certain social situations. The anxiety and fear of not being accepted by the community is real. So for a person with a disability, passing is rationalized (Rodis, 2000).

The connection between passing and coming out for members of othered groups and disabilities ties together with the idea of personal control. The loss of control over one's self has a negative psychological effect (Rodis, 2000). For the high school student with disabilities who chooses to attend an institution of higher education, the increased competition and desire for success leads some of them to refrain from disclosing their identity. Students with disabilities exercise the opportunity to create a new identity as they transition to higher education – one that does not include their disability label. Yet, according to Linton (1998), passing takes an enormous emotional toll on the person who is passing. The toll is a loss of identity, community, and continuous anxiety.

The Language of Disability - Labels

The quagmire with the use of disability labels becomes problematic in the disability debate. On one hand, the labels are educationally purposeful. They are used to diagnose academic weaknesses in struggling students and provide specific areas where help is needed. On the other hand, the labels become markers of negative traits. These traits are used to identify those students who are unable to fit into the one-size-fits-all educational system. In other words, a student with a disability label has access to additional educational support; however, without the label, no additional support is given. Students with learning disabilities in higher education are stuck in the dilemma of

accepting the disability label and receiving support or not recognizing the disability and not being able to access additional support. Not every student who is diagnosed with a disability necessarily needs specific help. Some individuals are able to create coping strategies that cover up or minimize the impact of the disability on academics. By coming out as a higher education student with a learning disability, the student makes a change in his/her identity - one from able-bodied to disable-bodied, one that accepts (to some extent) the disability label.

Summary

After reviewing the history, law, and theory relating to disabilities, there continue to be areas that are unsettling to me. Looking through the lens of the medical model, disabilities are viewed as something that needs to be cured or fixed. Using the social model, society is the problem because of the manner in which the able bodied person is given precedence over the disabled body. Cultural norms enforce the stigma that is associated with the labels of disabilities. Unfortunately, as long as humans continue to age, disabilities will be a part of daily life. Some disabilities are not necessarily obvious traits and can be hidden from view. Yet in order for higher education students with disabilities to access modifications and accommodations, they need to identify themselves as possessing a disability. Knowing more about all aspects of disability can lead to a better understanding of how people with disabilities organize and view their world. Challenging the cultural stigmas associated with fear of disabilities for higher education students is one step closer to understanding how labels affect an othered group – individuals with disabilities. This research is designed to attempt to understand the stigma of disability labels for higher education students with learning disabilities and how

they choose to “out” their disabilities to access accommodations and modifications from the ARC on campus. In the next chapter, I will explain the research design used in this study, provide an overview the methodology, and introduce the participants.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This interview-based, qualitative study looked into how higher education students with learning disabilities chose to reveal themselves as possessing a learning disability by seeking modifications and accommodations from the campus ARC. As a reminder, the principal research questions are: (1) How do higher education students choose to identify with specific learning disabilities? (2) How do students with specific learning disabilities in higher education describe their experiences seeking academic support? (3) How do students describe the experience of being labeled disabled? The primary source of data was obtained from two one-on-one interviews with higher education students who possessed specific learning disabilities and used the ARC. The data from the interviews was organized into three overriding themes. Briefly, these themes encompass the students' interactions with the ARC, the time that is devoted to academics, and the meaning of success for each participant.

Site Selection

The research site for this project was a four-year state university located in the Southeastern United States with a current combined undergraduate and graduate

enrollment of approximately twenty thousand students. This institution was chosen because of its size, variety of academic majors, and diverse student population. The enrollment size allows for two elements necessary for research, especially research relating to students with disabilities. The first is to have an adequate potential pool of informants to participate in the study and second to aid in student anonymity.

Access to Research Site and Participant Selection

The identity of students with disabilities is protected under confidentiality laws and any institution of higher education cannot and will not provide specific names. Due to the potentially sensitive nature of the research topic, participants needed to volunteer rather than the researcher contacting potential informants. The first step in accessing the research site was to gather as much information about the campus' ARC. Much of this information was available on the university's web site and included the steps students used to access the center, the services available, and the supportive documentation necessary prior to receiving services. The second step was to contact the director of the school's ARC and request a face-to-face meeting. The purpose of this meeting was to solicit support and acquire greater detail about how the center was organized and operated on a daily basis (e.g., the process students needed to go through in order to receive academic modifications and accommodations). During my initial meeting with the director of the ARC, we discussed the various types of disabilities that the students possessed who sought accommodations and modifications at the school as well as the number of students that utilized the ARC. With her support, she suggested that the best method to reach the more than five hundred students who used the ARC would be via

email. There was already an established electronic mailing list that delivered information specifically from the ARC. This list was used to inform students about a variety of topics that related to the ARC. A recruitment brochure (see Appendix A) was sent out from the director's email requesting research participants. I was carbon copied on the email and did not have access to the actual students' email addresses. This manner of secrecy was conducted so that student confidentiality continued to be preserved. Those students who were interested in participating in the research study were able to contact me directly via email. Initially, there were five students who responded to the emailed recruitment brochure about the research study. I responded with a follow-up email that requested some additional background information (e.g., disability label, current accommodations received by the ARC, and level of education) and provided a brief overview of the study. Three students responded to the second email and the first round of interviews was scheduled. After a second interview, one of the participants, Jane, expressed an interest in the possibility of her daughter, who also had a learning disability and who had just completed her first year of undergraduate school, also participate in the study. Although her daughter did not attend the university used in this study for her first year of school, the woman was eligible for the study because she was taking summer courses at the research site and initially fit the research participant criteria for the study. A first interview was completed with this woman, but she was later dropped from the study. The reasoning behind her dismissal was because she had never received support from either of the ARCs at her primary university or the university used in this study. Due to the situation of only having four participants and one being dropped from the study, a second email using the same recruitment brochure requesting additional participants was

sent out during the summer semester. One additional student responded to this second request and a first interview was scheduled. All participants volunteered for the study and self-identified as possessing a learning disability and used the ARC for accommodations and modifications.

Physical Description of the ARC

The ARC in this research study was located in the main student service building on campus. From the outside, it looked like a typical office with no special banner or signage on the entrance door other than the office number and the name, ARC. Immediately upon entering the office, there were two reception desks and a small waiting area. The waiting area consisted of a couch, two chairs, and several small book shelves centered-around a table with an assortment of magazines relating to different educational topics. During my visits, the reception desks were monitored by students participating in the college's work study program. One of the reception desk's counters was a computer devoted to visitor sign-in. This computer kept a running record of all of the people that utilized the office including meetings with the staff and students that scheduled accommodations. Beyond the front area was a long and narrow hallway with five rooms off of it. Two of these offices were used by the director and an assistant while the remaining three were devoted for students to use for testing accommodations. The back hallway was connected to a separate department unrelated to the ARC and had a separate front entrance. The other department used the area adjacent to the hallway as a break room. It had a small kitchen area with three or four tables and a couple of vending machines. During my visits, the noise from this break room carried into the ARC's

testing room where I conducted several of my interviews. As a result of the noise, students who needed quiet testing environments were not always provided this accommodation. The director of the ARC and the assistant director were the only two full-time staff within the center.

Population Size and Demographics

The sample size used for this research project was four informants/participants. A small sample size provided for a greater depth of knowledge rather than breadth of knowledge (Bogdan & Biklin, 2003; Patton, 2002). No specific demographic group was isolated in this study, and the sample included one male and three female participants. Three of the four participants identified themselves as white/non-Hispanic and one identified herself as African. It is important to note that more females than males (NCES, 2005) and blacks than whites (NCES, 2004) are identified with learning disabilities enrolled in higher education. The potential for the sample to consist of only one gender or racial/ethnic group existed with a small sample. However, because students had to self-identify and volunteer for the study, the total number of participants was limited to the number of students who volunteered and met the research criteria established in the protocol. Every effort was made to prevent the study from including only one gender/racial/ethnic group. Because this is a new frontier of research, initial data may lead to future research on specific demographic groups.

Research Methodology

A qualitative research design was used for this study. The primary source for obtaining data was from two, one-on-one interviews with each of the four research participants. The initial interviews ranged from 1-2 hours in length and consisted of a semi-structured question-answer format, also known as a standardized open-ended interview (Patton, 2002). Using a standardized open-ended interview ensured that all of the participants were asked the same questions providing for greater comparability among the interviews. At the same time, it allowed for differences across the interviews. Open-ended interview questions provided participants with a window to "describe what is meaningful and salient without being *pigeon holed* into standardized categories" (Patton, 2002, p. 56 original emphasis). The questions for the first interviews consisted of two parts. The first part was general, background, and demographic information. The second part was questions related to the individual's disability and how the initial decision to obtain support services was reached. The themes of the interview questions were grounded in reasons for seeking academic help, the importance of the ARC in higher education, events that lead to seeking accommodations and modifications, and personal feelings and perceptions. The semi-structured interview process was utilized to aid in the development of common themes between the participants. Using the semi-structured question-answer format allowed for the data to be organized by a cross-interview analysis (Patton, 2002). By incorporating a cross-interview analysis, each interview question was grouped based on the answer provided by the informant. Although each participant had a unique story to tell, commonalities and differences among their experiences emerged. In addition to commonalities within experiences, the

differences or variations of experiences also have the potential to inform how each individual with a specific learning disability views their experience.

Some of the interview questions were based upon the premise of a disability diagnosis prior to attending an institution of higher education, yet some students were not diagnosed until they were well immersed within higher education. Because the focus of this study is on disabilities in higher education, the initial interviews aided in establishing a baseline for all of the participants (see Appendix B for the interview questions used). The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. Also, I took field notes during the interviews. The field notes consisted of emerging themes or patterns, additional questions that arose during the interviews, and serve as a backup in the event of faulty audio equipment (Patton, 2002). After the completion of the first round of interviews and cross-interview analysis of the data and field notes, the data were reorganized based on natural topics or emerging themes (Patton, 2002). Preliminary themes included topics about disability stereotypes, feelings of success or failure while attending the university, the manner in which students reveal their disability to their professors, and the personal evolution of understanding the effects of each individual's specific disability on their academics.

After the audio recordings were transcribed and preliminary analysis of the first interviews were completed, the second, follow-up interviews were conducted allowing the researcher to seek greater clarity of topics and allowed students to elaborate on themes that emerged from the initial interview (see Appendix C for second interview questions). The format for the second round of interviews also took a semi-structured question-answer approach. The second round of interviews primarily focused on the

ARC and how the choice to "come out" as a person with a disability was reached, and the change, if any, in perceptions or acceptance from instructors. The questions that related to the ARC centered on the accommodations and the manner in which they were carried out. Another aspect of the follow-up questions was to clarify how the stigma of disabilities affected the student's education and the meaning of success for each individual.

Once the second interviews were completed, the data were analyzed by natural themes that emerged. The overriding themes that emerged from the second round of interviews were specifically related to the ARC. Briefly, the overriding themes that the interviews provided were the role of the ARC in aiding success in course work for students with learning disabilities in higher education, the significances of the accommodations and modifications on student success, and the change, if any, by "coming out" with a disability has had on individual success.

Introduction to Participants

This research began with five higher education students that all self-identified as having a learning disability and as receiving accommodations from the ARC. Initial interviews were conducted with all five of the participants and second interviews were conducted with four of them. Again, the one participant who was not interviewed a second time was dropped from the study because she was not receiving nor has ever received accommodations from the ARC. The four participants, three female and one male, varied in age, major of study, and level of education. Three of them identified as white, non-Hispanic and one considered herself as black and was native to Kenya, Africa,

having moved to the United States after she graduated from high school. This participant is a citizen of the United States. Each participant was given a pseudonym to protect their identity.

Before presenting research data by participant in a thematical manner in the next section, I offer a brief, narrative account of background information provided by each participant. Understanding some of the history of each participant will aid in the greater understanding of the extent (or lack of extent) that disability has manifested itself in the educational experiences and lives of these students.

Lynn – The Talker

Lynn, a twenty-seven year old, white female, fifth-year senior majoring in Biology, considers herself a non-traditional student and lives off campus with her boyfriend, who recently graduated from the same university with a computer science degree. The disabilities that Lynn described possessing are Post Traumatic Stress, slow working memory, and reading/writing comprehension and processing difficulty. Although Lynn was diagnosed with a disability in middle school and placed in a self-contained classroom, she did not want to remain in a special education setting. The reason she did not want to be placed in that classroom was because she felt the school was not providing her adequate instruction compared to her ability. She also felt that she did not fit in with the other students in the class, as she described them as juvenile delinquents just taking up a seat until they were old enough to drop out of school. Once she was moved out of the self-contained classroom, she was placed in regular classes and, according to her, did not have any special education accommodations for the rest of her middle school and high school career.

Lynn started higher education by enrolling in a local community college in her state. She attended one semester and transferred to her current college. The main reason she described for the transfer was that she felt she wanted a more challenging education. Lynn did not receive any accommodations for her disability during her first three years of college. The catalyst for Lynn to receive accommodations was due to her failing the gateway test (Regents' Test). This test is one that all college students in her state must pass prior to graduation. It covers basic reading comprehension and writing skills. Students who do not pass the gateway test have a hold placed on their registration until they sign up for the test again. This test can be taken repeatedly until a passing score is received. According to the policy information posted on the governing system's web site:

> Each institution… shall ensure that students obtaining a degree from a System institution possess certain minimum skills of reading and writing…The Regents' Writing and Reading Skills requirement has been developed to help attain this goal. The Regents' Writing and Reading Skills requirement will ensure students have competence, at a minimum System wide level, in reading and writing.
>
> Students enrolled in undergraduate degree programs leading to the baccalaureate degree will be required to complete the Regents' Writing and Reading Skills requirement as a requirement for graduation.
>
> (http://www.usg.edu/academic_affairs_handbook/section2/2.08/2.08.01.phtml retrieved on October 4, 2009).

Lynn failed the writing portion of the gateway test two times. After the second failing grade, Lynn went to the ARC to find out what help she could receive based on her knowledge of previously possessing a learning disability in middle school. The director of the ARC, Peggy, suggested that Lynn complete the full battery of psychological tests to determine if she possessed a learning disability. The testing cost Lynn five hundred dollars and was completed at one of the state's research universities. Once the

psychological testing results were revealed to Lynn, the tests suggested that she possessed a learning disability. With this documentation, Lynn was able to go to the ARC on campus for further assistance. The first accommodation from the ARC that Lynn received was being able to use a computer for the gateway test. She was able to type the essay on the computer and the computer read it back to her. She was able to hear her mistakes and correct them. The third time that Lynn took the gateway test, she passed.

After passing the gateway test, Lynn continued to use the ARC for extended test taking time, which is the only accommodation that she regularly receives. Additional accommodations that were approved for Lynn to use were computer software that reads written text aloud and textbooks on tape or CD; however, Lynn does not feel that these accommodations will help her and infrequently uses them.

Jane – The Nurturer

Jane is a fifty-five year old, white female. She is a nontraditional freshman working toward a major in Human Services. After the experience of taking care of her mother in the last years of her life, Jane wants to give back to the community after she graduates from college. This is Jane's first experience with higher education as she was a "stay-at-home" mom and has two children who both attend college. Her husband is an emergency room doctor and works twelve hour shifts three or four days a week. Jane started taking classes after both of her children left for college and she wanted to have a productive life after child rearing. When Jane began attending college, she did not have the success that she anticipated in relationship to the amount of work and preparation that she put forth for her classes. Jane takes only one or two classes each semester and

understands that she will have to take on a larger class load in order to graduate in a timely fashion. Both of her children were diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder and struggle in school. Jane described her struggles with school as similar to her children's and decided to get tested by her doctor. The doctor diagnosed Jane with Attention Deficit Disorder and Test Anxiety. Once diagnosed, Jane was able to look further into receiving accommodations from the ARC based on a list of accommodations that the doctor suggested.

The accommodations that Jane received from the ARC were extended test taking time, use of a recorder for lectures, access to a student note taker, copies of the professor's notes, preferential seating, help with registration for the gateway test, priority class scheduling, and school-provided textbooks on tape or CD. Although Jane has the longest list of accommodations of all of the participants in this research study, she commonly only uses the extended test taking time and the textbooks on tape or CD. She describes the other accommodations as ones that she has either not tried or found unnecessary to use. Jane is not far enough along in her course work to be able to register for the gateway test although she describes it as a source of anxiety for her because of the high stakes involved with it. She will be taking this in the next year or so.

Erin – The Positive Thinker

Erin is a twenty-six year old, traditional, female student who lives on campus and is native to Kenya, Africa. She is a Biology major and in her last semester of her senior year. Erin has both a physical and a learning disability. Her physical disability occurred when she was nineteen years old and still living in Kenya. She was hospitalized after she mysteriously became unconscious. The doctors were unsure of how to treat her because

she was showing signs of a stroke, but due to her young age, they were baffled by her illness. In the end, she was diagnosed with Left Sided Hemiplegia, which causes weakness in her left side due to right side brain swelling. Prior to this hospitalization, Erin was a healthy, young woman and was successful in school. After almost two years of physical therapy, Erin was able to have adequate use to move without assistance. Shortly after this time, Erin moved to the United States to live with her father.

In the United States, Erin describes having better access to health services and also becoming a US citizen. Erin began school in the United States by taking GED courses. Although she already had a high school diploma from Kenya, she wanted to acclimate herself to the American education system. Erin began college and only received accommodations that were related to her physical disability. During Erin's sophomore year, a professor noticed that her performance on tests did not align with her performance in the classroom and in conversations outside of class. This professor suggested that she look into the ARC to be tested for a learning disability.

Erin went through the psychological battery of tests and was diagnosed with Test Anxiety, blanking out, and being easily distracted, the latter of which has similar characteristics to Attention Deficit Disorder. Once diagnosed, she was provided additional accommodations that included extended test taking time and a distraction-free testing area, in addition to the ones that were already in place such as the use of technology with a right-handed keyboard.

Ryan – The Career Minded

Ryan is a thirty-nine year old white, male student working on his second bachelor's degree in Computer Security. Previously he earned a bachelor's degree from a

private college in video production, but has never worked in that industry due to the lack of jobs in the area. He is single and lives with his parents. Ryan was diagnosed in first grade and re-diagnosed in college with an Auditory Processing Deficit in Reading and Math and additionally diagnosed with Bi-Polar disorder when he was in his first year of college. He is the only participant in this research study who received and utilized special education services prior to attending college.

Ryan did not receive any accommodations during his first-year and a half of college. Ryan was struggling to pass the required first year English and math courses for freshmen students. At this time, Ryan and his parents knew he needed additional help in order for him to be a successful student with a disability in higher education. Ryan's mother researched other colleges that specifically advertised help for students with disabilities. Ryan transferred to one of these private colleges. The assistance that the second college provided for students with disabilities was in the form of additional tutoring. This tutoring was set up where each student with disabilities was charged double tuition. For each course in which Ryan needed additional assistance, he attended the regular class with other students and then went to a second class that taught the same material a second time via a different teaching technique. The second class was set up where the students reviewed the material from the main class and learned techniques to assist with studying the content. These tutoring classes were taught by actual subject area professors and because of the additional cost associated with smaller class sizes, additional tuition was charged each of these students. Ryan graduated from this college and works for a retail business unrelated to his undergraduate degree. Ryan feels that he does not have a career in retail and implies that it is a dead end way of life, living pay

check to pay check. He wants to personally improve himself by obtaining another degree in a profession in which he can make a productive career and move out from under his parents' roof.

The accommodations that Ryan received from the ARC are extended test taking time, distraction-free test area, carbon paper for a note taker, and early class registration. Ryan only uses the extended test taking time when the tests involve writing long passages or contain essay responses. He feels that multiple choice tests are not as hard for him because he can narrow down the choices and he prefers to take the tests in the regular classroom and often asks the professor for additional time when necessary.

Assumptions and Limitations

This research involves the stories of individuals with disabilities who live their day-to-day lives within the bureaucracy of education. As a result, the limitations of this research are similar to those of other research projects with a small sample size. With a different group of individuals, the stories would most likely be different, at least in some way. Although the specifics of the narratives would be different, narratives were used so that the data could be generalized to larger groups of people in similar situations. The potential implications that the data can suggest can have an effect on current policy and practices within education. These are areas that are currently overlooked and need to be changed. From these stories, the potential for change to occur exists and the potential for a better experience for students with disabilities in higher education is possible.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH DATA

"Becoming" Learning Disabled

As mentioned earlier, in the initial development stages of this research, three guiding questions were established: (1) How do higher education students choose to identify with specific learning disabilities? (2) How do students with specific learning disabilities in higher education describe their experiences seeking academic support? (3) How do students describe the experience of being labeled? In what follows, I present four themes that emerged from the data collected. These themes lay a foundation for understanding meanings students attach to "becoming" learning disabled.

Although each of the participants in the study achieved some success in their pursuit of higher education, they have all faced challenges that are unique to each individual. Four themes emerged from the data collected during the interviews. These themes offer insight into the successes, struggles, and interpersonal turmoil that many students with disabilities in higher education face on a daily basis. The themes are self-identification and stigma of disability, the ARC, time factors, and success. Initially, each of the themes will be individually presented by participant as separate phenomena or themes. Then, because of the overlapping and intermingling among the participants' stories and themes, a discussion will follow as to how they are related to each other.

As described in Chapter 2, historically, disability has been a mark of imperfection, something for people to remove themselves from the taboo it presents. This stigma has ingrained itself in society so that any suggestion of the possession of a disability almost always and automatically leads to isolation. Therefore, many people do not want to be associated with disability or to be identified as possessing a disability in any way.

The issue for college students becomes one of access to accommodations. In order for college students with disabilities to have access to accommodations provided by the ARC, they must "out" themselves as having a documented disability. Yet "outing" their disability can create a stigma of inability to compete with their peers. So the dilemma becomes a choice of whether to "out" a disability or remain silent. "Outing" a disability leads to access to accommodations. Silence leads to no accommodations. However, just because students have access to accommodations provided by the ARC does not mean that they automatically are going to be successful. Each student must put forth adequate effort to complete the necessary assignments and course work. The accommodations must be useful and faculty must be helpful and willing to work with each individual student's needs. So there are a lot of conditions that must be established more than just providing an individual with an adaptational fix. The students who participated in this study all described large amounts of time that they devoted to completing assignments, studying, and testing. Although all of the students suggested that they are more successful in higher education because they had access to the ARC, each individual student has a different meaning and experience of success.

The organization this chapter follows begins with how disabilities developed and manifested themselves in each participant. It will continue to expose how the stigma of disabilities affects the perceptions of initially receiving accommodations from the ARC. Once the importance of the ARC is laid out, time factors for students with disabilities will be addressed. And then because of the possession of disabilities and the support of the ARC, a narrative will be given on success and the meaning it takes on for each participant.

Lynn – Lifetime Struggle with Disability

Lynn first experienced the stigma of disabilities when she was diagnosed and placed in a self-contained, special education classroom in middle school. The simple idea of being placed in a special room with other students who were separated from the general student body did not sit well with her, her peers, or her teachers: "in middle school you have ridicule from your peers, who have no social etiquette, they don't care and, I don't know, the teachers look at you a little differently." Lynn internalized and understood the consequences of being placed in a self-contained classroom as negative because she was then associated with special education. Therefore, she did whatever she could do to remove herself from that classroom because she felt that she could perform better academically than her special education classmates. Lynn recalled her experience and said:

> They [the school] tried to put me in like a learning disability class, but like I could do everything. It was like people who were in the class with me in the seventh grade were at like this level [hand motion showing low level] and like I could just go around [them] in like circles, so it was like a waste of time for me to be in there.

According to Lynn, her presence in the room was a waste of her time and a waste of school resources. Lynn says that her experience with special education in middle school was short-lived because of "a stigma that went with it, so I really wanted out of that class." When asked about how she went through the process of getting herself out of the classroom, Lynn responded by saying, "I just stopped cooperating." Lynn suggested that she became a behavior problem rather than completing her class assignments, thus creating a less conducive learning environment for the other students in that classroom who may have needed that learning environment. Through Lynn's lack of cooperation, she describes that along with her parents' help she was able to change her placement in the self-contained, special education classroom to a regular education classroom – a placement that made her happier, but may not have been the best solution for her educational needs.

This change in placement may have created a two-fold problem. The first problem was that Lynn did not receive the special education support services that she needed in school to help her in her area of disability. As a result, she acknowledges that she was not adequately prepared for college and admitted that there were times that she struggled. The second problem was that because Lynn did not continue with her special education label in middle school and high school, she was not aware of her ability to receive accommodations for her disability when she began her higher education career. Unfortunately for her, she says that it has taken a toll on her college GPA and caused other areas of stress in her life.

Upon beginning college, Lynn chose biology as her major. She describes how she selected biology, but continued to feel uneasy based on her previous experience with

education. "I've always been really interested in science and you know doing stuff, but I was kind of afraid of school because of the experience I had in high school." Lynn's previous educational experience with disability and the stigma she attached with a special education label carried over to her experience with disability in college. As a result, Lynn struggled her first three years of higher education, did not have any accommodations, and fought to maintain adequate grades. "When I first started college, I wouldn't ask for help. I would just suffer through it. I would take the B or take the C and just move on… I don't like to ask for help, but what are you going to do?" Lynn felt as if the grades she earned were adequate, but continued to struggle regardless of her effort.

It seems that Lynn did not associate her academic performance with her grades during her first three years of college and having a science major may have contributed to her disassociation between disability, grades, and performance. She commented that many students in the science department wrestle with grades and it was not uncommon for her to see other students work extra hard to maintain their grades as well.

During Lynn's junior year, she registered to take the Regents' Test. As described above, the Regents' Test is a gateway test that all students in the state are required to take and pass in order to progress through the remaining coursework prior to graduation. This test has two components: reading and writing. According to a hyperlink located on the state's website:

> The Reading Test, which has an administration time of one hour, is a 54-item, multiple-choice test that consists of nine reading passages and five to eight questions about each passage. The passages usually range from 175 to 325 words in length, treat topics drawn from a variety of subject areas (social science, mathematics and natural science, and humanities), and entail various modes of discourse (exposition, narration, and argumentation). The questions that accompany the passages of the Reading Test have been designed to assess four

> major aspects of reading: (1) Vocabulary, (2) Literal Comprehension, (3) Inferential Comprehension, and (4) Analysis. A sample form of the Regents' Reading Test, which provides examples of the types of passages and items comprising the test, is available on the Regents' Testing Program website.
>
> Students who take the Essay Test have one hour in which to write on one of four topics that are given. A list of the topics that are used has been provided to all institutions in the System. http://www2.gsu.edu/~wwwrtp/overview.htm (October 7, 2009)

Lynn did not pass either section of her first attempt with the test. On her second attempt, she passed the Reading Skills portion, but failed the Writing Skills portion. Since Lynn did not pass the written portion a second time, she was referred to the ARC. It is at this time that Lynn met with the director of the ARC to discuss her options. During this meeting, the director suggested that because Lynn had a documented disability in middle school and received special education services for that disability, it was possible that she had a disability that was preventing her from receiving a passing score. The director gave Lynn the contact information for her to be tested at one of the state's universities at a discounted rate of five hundred dollars, which was Lynn's responsibility to cover. Once Lynn completed the testing and received the results, it reaffirmed a Reading/Writing disability with Slow Working Memory. Now that Lynn had documentation to substantiate a learning disability, she was able to receive accommodations from the ARC.

In her narrative, this time is the only moment that Lynn mentions the continuous nature of her academic struggles. Lynn explains:

> I had a real hard time in high school and when I got here everything was fine, you know, like I was just in lower classes and my core curriculum, you know, was like English. I'm really good at Math, so I didn't have any problems there, but I went to take the Regents' Test, I failed it. And I went to take the Regents' Test again and, you know, I passed the comprehension part, but the writing portion the one paragraph you have to write, you know, like the grammar in it was so wrong that

> and like I would read it and read it and, you know, like I would do really well on the content, I just, they wouldn't pass me because of the grammar and the spelling.

While at college she was enrolled in basic college level English and writing courses, she still had difficulty with her writing. Writing may not have been a major issue for her because of her having a more hands-on major like biology instead of a major that involved more writing. It is not surprising that Lynn was having trouble passing the grammar and spelling components of the Regents' Test because of her Reading/Writing disability. And although she has made it, at the time, through three years of college, tests like the Regents' Test often become a problem for students with disabilities to pass based on a person's area of disability. Potentially, Lynn could have made it all the way through her undergraduate degree without realizing that she had a disability, but due to her inability to pass the Regents' Test, her progress was halted until she received a passing score.

Lynn talks about how she had no other option and was forced to pursue disability testing:

> It was force. I would not have pursued this if it was not for that Regents' Test stopping me and then them telling me, "Well, I think you have a learning disability," and seeing how much effort it took for them to help me pass that stupid test. And then, you know, it cost five hundred dollars to get that test for me, I mean, it wasn't cheap. I have always noticed that I've worked harder than most people, but I just thought well, I just don't see what they're doing, but no that's not the case.

The effect that the "stupid test" had on Lynn to follow through with disability testing emerged. Lynn placed blame for the re-emergence of her disability on the gateway test as the process of passing the test became a source of anxiety. Lynn's acknowledgement that she worked harder than most people to be successful suggested there was a "secret"

to being successful in college that she was not in on. She internalized a feeling of being an outsider and unable to reach the standard set by the state for achieving a college diploma. Up to this point and based on the standard the college established, Lynn was successful due to her adequate progression and passing course grades. In other words, the gateway test was the only standard blocking her future goal of graduation.

Lynn passed the writing portion of the Regents' Test on her third attempt. The difference between the first attempt and the third attempt was that Lynn was provided testing accommodations from the ARC. She was able to use a word processor with a read back software program that read the written text back to her so that she could hear her mistakes and correct them. Without this or a similar accommodation, Lynn may have never passed the Regents' Test.

When asked about the emotions that Lynn experienced when she sought help from the ARC, she said:

> I didn't want to get help, I didn't want to. It was like, you know, it's like admitting defeat, it's like you know also now I have this problem, this stigma that is going to be on me for the rest of my life, you know. And, you know, like so, it's that and then it's like great, well, where are my limitations now because everybody else can do it and I know there is people who aren't necessarily as smart as me or as diligent as me who are passing this test and here I am flunking it. So what does that tell me about my prospects for the future? So it was kind of, it was definitely not a good place.

It is as if Lynn feels deceived by the university because at one point she is successful in her course work based on passing grades and then when she takes the gateway test, she is told that she does not have the necessary skills to graduate even though she is only semesters away from graduation. The problem emerges based on a standardized test that all students must pass in order to graduate regardless of course pass/failure rate. The purpose of the gateway test is to ensure that all students who graduate from the university

system have adequate skills; however, a question arises when students are repeatedly confirmed through passing course grades and then halted by one standard measure of ability. Does this standardized test adequately measure student ability and skills or does it cause fewer individuals to achieve success through graduation, specifically students with disabilities? Lynn equates her diagnosis with a disability as a stigma that she will have to deal with for the rest of her life and it has the potential to threaten her future success. Although these academic "limitations" have always existed throughout Lynn's pursuit of education, they have taken a prevailing role in her education now that she has been forced to address the issue of disability and the potential it has on her future endeavors. As Lynn compares herself to her peers based on her work ethic and intelligence, she suggests that other students who are not as intelligent and who do not put forth the same amount of time and effort are able to be successful, which leads her to question the fairness of the situation. According to Lynn, she is angry at the thought of possessing a disability that could put her future goals in jeopardy. Prior to her awareness of her disability, she was able to see a future, but now that a learning disability is present, there seems to be little hope and a need to reevaluate her future of having a career in the field of science.

Initially, Lynn did not want to accept the fact that she had a learning disability, but deep down she knew that she learned differently than other people. She says:

> It's been hard. It's been hard. I've always known that I've been different than other people like understanding things, but I've always found that my understanding usually of a subject is usually better than most people. My comprehension is usually better than most people, uhm, it's when it comes to me sitting down and doing the test. It's been difficult for me to just accept it that I have this, that I just have to be disabled; you just have to have extra time. It's been hard. [Laughter.] I'm still, I'm still working on it, I guess you could say.

Lynn knew that she understood academic concepts differently than her peers and in many instances she believed that she has a better overall understanding. The problem for Lynn was when testing situations occurred, she did not have enough time to read, comprehend, and answer the questions. She was unable to fully relay her knowledge during tests. It is as if she had an object blocking her retrieval pathways. The last line of Lynn's comment implies that she continues to struggle with her disability, identity, and with the injustice of having to work so hard compared to her peers and not receiving the anticipated results in the form of a higher GPA.

The frustration for Lynn emerged:

> It, it, it hurts my self-esteem I think… It's hard because uh like I will sit next [to] and study the same [material as other] people and do the same things that they're doing and I will get a C and they will get an A, and that is really hard to take because I know that I understand it just as much as they do and I'm not getting the GPA points and I'm not getting, you know, the points that they are.

The process that students maneuver to "out" their disability emerges from Lynn's acceptance of her learning disability. In higher education, it is the student's responsibility to approach the professor and reveal the possession of a disability. The ARC at the university in this study provides each student with a disability an accommodation packet to give to each of their professors to whom they are requesting accommodations. Different students complete this task at different times and in different ways. Some students prefer to deliver the packet prior to the start of the semester. This gives the professor some time to prepare for individual needs and potentially adjust plans if necessary. Others prefer to deliver it on the first day of class. These students may only need minor accommodations that do not greatly alter a professor's preparation time. And still others wait until they experience difficulty in class after the semester has progressed.

For these students, they may be very self-determined and want to attempt to complete as much work or assignments as they can without the assistance of accommodations. There is no set manner in which this task must be completed because it is up to the individual student to decide and take responsibility for the necessary accommodations. For some students, the very act of approaching an individual like a professor and revealing a disability can be a disturbing and painful event leading to greater feelings of a stigma associated with disabilities, while others are more at ease with the process. Lynn chose to give her packet after the first class meeting and explained how she provided the professor with the accommodation information:

> They [the ARC] give me a packet and I hand it [the accommodation packet] to them and I tell them, you know, I have - I need a little extra time on tests. I usually do alright, you know, like I do better on essay [tests] da da da duh and I just tell them kind of like that, and, uh, usually I think a lot of them are really afraid of the law and they don't want to like cross that boundary so they are like whatever, whatever, yea, just whatever.

Lynn does not provide a lot of detail about the process she uses to "out" her disability to her professors. In fact, it seems that Lynn downplays her disability by starting to say, "I have" but stops short of saying, "I have a disability." Instead, she stops, changes directions, and softens her language to say, "I need a little extra time on tests." It is unclear what Lynn means by saying that she needs a little extra time, but through her comments she certainly seems to downplay the additional amount of time that she needs to complete any of the tests for which she requests extended test taking time. However, during the interview process, Lynn explained that it takes her more than twice the allotted time to complete many of her tests. This whole process of revealing her disability informs Lynn that disability is something to be kept a secret and something that should only be revealed in small revelations when she needs help to be successful.

In the second interview with Lynn, I asked her if the stigma of disabilities is reinforced by having to take her professors the accommodation packet immediately after the first day of class in order to receive accommodations from the beginning of the course. She explained:

> It's intimidating… I'm becoming a little bit more comfortable with having the disability and being able to talk to people about it and I don't feel like I'm, you know, like an outcast immediately, but you know, I have to go up in front of the class because usually you can't approach a professor without a group of people standing behind you, and you know, you have to say, "Ok, I have this problem"…And sometimes they [the professors] just brush you off.

When asked about how Lynn knew her professors were brushing her off, she explained:

> You kind of get brushed off enough times that you kind of realize that, you know, like it's aggravating them [the professors] because it's taking away from their time. They already have to plan around your schedule to get you in to take a test and, you know, it's difficult enough as it is because, you know, you are just an extra burden and if you ask them a question about something then they're kind of like "how am I going to explain this to you so you can understand?" So it's, you know, I think even if it wasn't a disability thing like say it was just a student that was causing the professor extra work; it becomes a nuisance regardless of why - it's just a nuisance.

Although Lynn claims she is getting more comfortable with "outing" her disability, she continues to feel intimidated by the process of having to self-identify to her professors based on the potential for them to push her educational needs aside, not consider her as a complete student, and see her as a time burden. Her feelings of being an outcast appear to be based on past experience with some professors who make her feel as if something is wrong with her because she is requesting accommodations.

The issue of student confidentiality develops in Lynn's situation because she presents the accommodation packet to her professors while other students are present. Not only does Lynn "out" her disability to her professors, but also to her peers who are

nearby at the time. (More discussion about the stigma that Lynn feels with her peers will follow in a subsequent section.) In terms of her testing accommodations, Lynn takes her tests in the ARC so that she can have additional time, as well as a setting free from many typical classroom distractions. Because Lynn does not take her tests in the regular classroom, it is the professor's responsibility to ensure that the test is given to the ARC, allowing enough time for the ARC to complete the necessary steps to receive the test and schedule a testing room. The actual generation of a test to be sent over to the ARC can be an inconvenience for some professors and causes a greater stigma on students with disabilities due to their absence from class during tests.

Lynn describes an example:

> I have this one professor who literally he wouldn't write the test until like he is still writing it feverishly like five minutes before the class starts. So for him having to have this paper submitted before the test time is a big issue for him. I mean, that's a very big difficulty because, you know, he's still writing it, you know, and I'm not saying that I have no idea what his life is constructed like, you know, but that's an issue. So sometimes he would actually give me the test in an envelope and tell me to bring it over here myself.

Not only does Lynn have to use her time to come to class, pick up a copy of the test, and then walk back to the ARC to take the test, but she has to show up to class where her peers can witness the professor giving her a copy of the test. Such a situation leads to additional feelings of a stigma of disabilities because Lynn is placed in center view of her peers when she picks up the test. The very accommodation that Lynn requests to help her be successful has the potential to cause her to become stigmatized by her peers based on how it is carried out. During regular, non-testing class days, Lynn is present in class; however, on testing days she is absent and over in the ARC taking her test. Being consistently absent from tests is noticed by her peers because she is present during

regular classes and not during the tests, but has not dropped the course and questions arise from her peers concerning her absences. Again, Lynn struggles with this outward pressure weighing on her identity as a person with a disability. She says, "You have to explain your absence and usually, you know, I will try to like pass it off, but by the third test they kind of realize. Yea, you know, she is taking it somewhere else, and why, I don't know why?" According to Lynn, her peers know that something is happening, but because Lynn has a learning disability that is invisible to the eye, her peers cannot pinpoint what is going on. Lynn feels compelled to reveal her disability, but hides its presence as long as possible:

> A lot of time[s] I wouldn't tell anybody if it wasn't for the fact that they kind of know something's up, that I am always absent for the test so I kind of have to give them some explanation, but I don't try to tell too many people because then well they are like, "Well she gets extra time, why don't I get extra time?" And it's very competitive, I mean like, you know, like people will whine if somebody gets five points and they didn't for whatever reason. I mean, so like I get a whole extra hour to do the test and they're like that's not fair, da da da duh. So I don't like to tell. I don't talk about it unless I have to and a lot of times when I have finally gotten to the point where I have run out of excuses like I just scheduled the test at a different time because I couldn't take it in the morning or whatever. Then I will tell them, "Oh I have a learning disability and, you know, I needed a little extra time" and I just kind of move on from there.

Although Lynn has a disability for which she needs accommodations for testing, she does not want to be perceived as having an advantage over other students. She claims that her major is very competitive because many biology students want to and need to continue their education with graduate school. One of the factors considered for graduate school admissions is undergraduate GPA. Therefore, many students will fight for every point to help boost their GPA. The idea of fairness comes into play as of her success would have a negative affect on the other students ability to succeed.

Summary

For Lynn, the stigma of disability weighed heavily on her sense of self as a student in relation to her achievement, peers, and professors. And being forced to follow through with disability diagnosis in order to complete the state's gateway test, compounded her understanding of achievement and feelings of inadequacy. She struggled with the timing of revealing her disability because she did not want others to perceive her as having an academic advantage over her peers. Even though Lynn felt that she devoted more time and effort toward her course work than her peers, she was stigmatized by the potential manner in which others may perceive her. In the next section, I will address the role of the ARC and how it shapes her education.

ARC – Support or Waste of Time?

Given her difficulties with the gateway test, academically, Lynn "had no choice" but to turn to the ARC. With the help of the director of the ARC, Lynn proceeded to take the necessary steps to be able to qualify for assistance by completing a psychological evaluation. This step allowed her to access help in the form of accommodations that she needed from the ARC. Once Lynn received accommodations for testing, she was able to pass the gateway test. Lynn felt that because she has a disability and without the ARC she would have never passed this test, she would have a lower GPA, fail more courses, and take longer to graduate. Looking back, Lynn described her GPA by saying:

> I would have a higher GPA right now if I had of had the help that I needed from my freshman year…It's helped me get better grades because I have extra time [for testing]…It [school] would be a lot more difficult, I wouldn't be graduating right now.

Lynn believes that if she had had access to accommodations earlier in her higher education career, she would have had a different experience – one that she described as being better.

The ARC provides individual accommodations for each student based on individual needs. For example, some students require extended time for testing as an accommodation where as other students do not need that accommodation, but need another type of accommodation. Again, each accommodation is individualized based on each person's needs according to their unique disability. The manner that Lynn chose the accommodations that met her academic needs was similar to other students. She met with the director of the ARC and together came up with a list of accommodations that they believed would help Lynn become successful. These accommodations included extended test taking time, access to a class note taker, access to a word processor with read back software, and textbooks on CD/audio tape (when available). Lynn explained the process:

> They gave me a list of things…this is what you can do. This is your accommodations that we will allow you to have. And immediately I picked…which ones I wanted; like I could force somebody to write notes for me if I wanted to, but I don't want that. I could, there's some other stuff - I have a list of things, but most of it - I don't feel deemed necessary.

Even though Lynn had access to other accommodations like having a note taker in class, she mentioned that the only accommodations that she used are the extended test taking time, the audio versions of textbooks, and occasionally the read back software. It is almost like she does not fully understand the purpose of her accommodations, why they are in place, and the importance that they could play for her success. Lynn did not utilize the accommodations that the ARC could and would provide for her, and only used the accommodations that she deemed necessary. Lynn explained the reason why she chose those accommodations:

> I am very much in command of my life…I saw what I could get and I said this is what I want. So I decided I avoid the book to begin with, but if I have no choice

> to read the book then the book, the CD on tape, is much better than trying to sit down with the book. The extended test time was obvious that I needed it because I was like not finishing the test, you know, so it was like if that is nothing else, so I get the extra time. That will help me. And then the quiet environment…taking the test in the class does not help me… somebody moving, people coming in or the teacher not shutting up that's one thing because a lot of time they will talk and correct things and people will ask questions and that is really disturbing.

Lynn further explained the process that she used to determine which accommodations would be most helpful and why. She said:

> I don't learn things through reading, I don't absorb that way. It's – I become so entangled in the mechanics of reading that I don't get what I need to out of it. And then when I go to write, my mind is working faster than, than I can write, and when I read too and when I read it, I just skip over the mistake because I auto-correct, you know, because that's - it's not important to me so what, you know, what I'm saying the words are right here. That's the jist of my disability.

According to Lynn, her disability affects her ability to read and write. For reading, she does not focus on content and gets bogged down with the actual process of reading the words. This affects her ability to comprehend larger portions of text and information similar to the reading that is required for a college course. For writing, she strings words and sentences together, but their ideas do not correlate with one another. Thus, her writing is fragmented and is not coherent when other people read it.

Lynn mentioned on several occasions in the interviews that prior to being diagnosed with a disability she did not read the textbook at all and only used the book as a reference source for vocabulary. She reiterated that reading was a waste of time because she did not feel that it was helpful to her comprehension. "I have kind of always realized without maybe knowing why that I just wouldn't use the book because I knew the book was useless to me. I kind of just figured it out and went to plan B with the notes." She exclusively studied her class notes rather than using the textbook to aid with learning. She continued, "I have become more aware that reading the book is a huge

waste of time for me, it is just a huge waste of time; it is just not worth it. So, I do not think that finding out that I have a disability has really changed that natural linear progression in terms of study habits." It seems that Lynn does not know how to study and once diagnosed, primarily relied on the accommodation of extended test taking time provided by the ARC as a crutch to aid her passing courses. Because Lynn has a disability related to reading, she skips the reading portion all together. Since Lynn's diagnosis and having access to audio versions of the textbook, still she rarely listens to the recordings. It is interesting that Lynn does not read the correlating reading assignments for her classes even with access to audio recordings. It is almost as if Lynn is not completing her work and believes that the accommodations will make up for her lack of preparation. This is a big concern for Lynn, and although the ARC provided her with various accommodations, she did not utilize her time to prepare for her courses and continued to fail tests despite extended test taking time. Lynn felt that having access to these accommodations was going to make her successful and did not realize that it was her responsibility to put forth her own effort to become successful. The questions arise from Lynn's continued struggles with courses, are the accommodations suitable for Lynn and her disability, what is the ARC's responsibility in teaching Lynn and other similar students in utilizing the specific accommodations that are in place to achieve success, are the specific accommodations appropriate, and do they change over time?

I asked Lynn if she thought other accommodations would be helpful. She responded:

> I think when I first got here, I was open to everything, you know, I was like somebody's going to help me with this or somebody's going to help me with that. But I found that more often than not they end up wasting more of my time, and so there's a lot of times that I won't seek out those resources because they usually

> end up being very general and not specific. They are really not going to help me. They are just going to take up another hour of the day that I could be just working on that paper.

On several occasions, the ARC attempted to help Lynn with her difficulty with studying because they noticed she was not utilizing the accommodations provided to her and continued to have difficulties passing tests. However, Lynn did not think that the assistance they offered would be any more beneficial to her than what was already in place.

Problems with the ARC - Accommodations and Lip Service

Even though Lynn was able to access accommodations from the ARC, it was her responsibility to arrange classes and test schedules. This task became a larger challenge as Lynn progressed through her higher level course work when fewer class options were available which lead to her scheduling back-to-back classes. Problems relating to test scheduling from the ARC as well as professors developed. According to Lynn, there were instances when she had to schedule back-to-back classes and was required by the professor to begin taking the test during the first class period when the rest of the class was scheduled to take the test. Due to her extended test taking time, she often missed part or all of the second class because she was still completing her test for the first class. The missed content from the second class put an extra burden on her academically because she had to acquire and comprehend that new information herself. When Lynn asked for help with scheduling, she described her experience with the ARC:

> I mean, like for the most part everybody here [in the ARC] is very helpful, but I do get that kind of sentiment every once in a while where it's like, "Well, there is nothing we can do. I guess she took too many classes," you know, nothing was said to me like that, but that was the impression.

The conflict for Lynn was that the ARC was supposed to help students like her with the necessary accommodations in an effort to support them to become successful in higher education, but Lynn felt they were, at times, offering lip service and little help. Although the ARC did help with testing accommodations via extended time, she believed that the office was unwilling to help with scheduling alternative test times that prevented her from missing valuable instruction. Lynn said:

> I will give you an example the best way I can explain my current problem. Organic two is mostly, basically drawing chemical structures on the board and what happens to one chemical structure when another chemical structure meet, the final product and what is called a mechanism which is basically how this all happened, how the products are formed. Well you have what's called mechanism arrows now on the notes she puts online for everybody to have access to, I printed them off and you know everybody can do that, that's fine, that's great, that's wonderful. And I asked her in class yesterday because there is no mechanism arrows on the mechanisms there is just the structures, can we just learn the mechanisms because I noticed there is no mechanism arrows on the structures you have on the power point. She [the professor] was like, well that's where you have to come to class. So now I am going to take an exam, I am going to miss part of her lecture, miss where those mechanism arrows are and that's going to definitely affect me for the next time because you can't get that anywhere else. You can try to get it off of somebody else's notes, but let me tell you how sloppy it gets.

The ARC was not the only source of problems that Lynn encountered with testing schedules. The other conflict that emerged stemmed from her professors' unwillingness to accommodate due to time constraints and academic security. According to Lynn's understanding of these problems, she said:

> I think the prevailing force is that there is a lot of lazy students and, you know, like there is a difference between being lazy and I need a particular accommodation. I'm just saying that - what do you want me to do? I have classes back-to-back; the center closes. You [the professors] don't want me to take the test early because I will tell people, you [the professors] don't want me to take the test later because then people could tell *me what's on the test*. So what, you know, I can handle this load, but, you know, give me a little help here. I'm going to miss part of the lecture, which is going to affect exam two.

Lynn showed her frustration of the situation where she felt that the people in the ARC were only giving her lip service about helping with scheduling concerns between her and her professors. She felt that some of the people in the ARC, as well as professors, blame students for some of the problems that arise relating to scheduling. The professors want to maintain high standards in academics and do not want to alter test times to be fair to all students, but failing to alter the times that Lynn and other students are able to take tests caused Lynn to miss instruction. According to Lynn:

> It's kind of like, you know, well you set yourself up, you took too many classes this summer. But it's like if I didn't have a learning disability I would probably be – I can handle this load, you know, if I could just read the chapters, write that essay in less than thirty minutes, get it up there and submit it, move on with my life, you know, then this wouldn't even be an issue for me because I could just take the test in the allotted time with the rest of the class. But I have to come here, I can't take that test, I can not take that huge multiple choice test in class where there is noises and then, you know, they literally take off the last five minutes, "You got five minutes, hurry it up." You know, I can't deal with that environment, so, and I have for the three years before that even in the science classes and I held on, you know, but like it was difficult.

Lynn understands the potential problem from altering testing days from the professor's point of view:

> On some regards it's an extra advantage thing because you have extra time to study than everybody else. But mostly it's who's going to leak out the information, that's what they're afraid of and they would have to rewrite another test for me especially or, you know, like there's no way that they can keep their test confidential. They already have a problem with leaking, so they don't want that. They want to dam that up, that's for sure. And then the nuisance factor because, you know, they got papers to grade, they just want to feed them through the machine, get the answers back, and post it and be done. They don't want to wait three days and finally get your test and now I have to grade it, that's probably more it.

I asked Lynn how she would resolve the problem with scheduling and her professor's sentiment about students with disabilities in higher education. She responded:

> More leniency on when I could take test…I have this learning disability. It's going to take me longer to study for this test. Sometimes I run out of time, if I could just push the test back to another day. Maybe I don't take a test on top of another test, maybe that would help…that runs into problems, though, because there is always the potential to cheat, you know, like somebody tells you what's on the test or you tell somebody else. That runs into problems so that – but that would help me probably a lot more if I could say instead of taking the test on Tuesday with the rest of the class, if I could just have until Thursday, you know, so I can space out my study time and, you know, not get so stressed out, that would help…even just giving me an hour to go get lunch sometimes and I have a test right after the next test and I have to immediately, I just sit in the same room and they just bring me the test.

For Lynn issues related to scheduling classes and taking back-to-back tests where she was not allowed to take a break between tests became very problematic. Lynn was in the situation where she felt like nobody was helping her resolve scheduling conflicts. She understood the professor's concerns in regards to altering testing schedules and locations that could potentially lead to cheating; however, it created a hardship for her when she was required to spend so much time testing without a break. This was especially difficult around mid term and final exams when the ARC only has a limited amount of testing space to accommodate for the number of students requesting accommodations. In the end, Lynn places blame on both the ARC's lack of flexibility and on professors' unwillingness to work with students' needs.

Summary

Lynn described some concerns that developed because she accessed accommodations from the ARC. The overriding problem was related to scheduling issues and professors' concerns during her test accommodations. Yet, although there were some problems related to Lynn receiving accommodations, she understood the role and importance that the ARC played in her education. She explained, "The fact that there is a center… that there is other people that are having trouble too and you run into, you

know, that's helpful that, you know, you are not the only one, you don't feel so isolated." Lynn knew that she was not the only person dealing with disabilities in higher education and took some comfort in the fact that she did not struggle in vain. However, Lynn is not utilizing that accommodations established to academically help her overcome some of her learning difficulties. In the next section, I will address the issues of time and how Lynn handles her schedule.

Biggest Issue – Never Enough Time

Lynn placed blame for a lot of her difficulties related to time with school on her disability. She said:

> It [my frustration] would definitely go down a huge notch. You know, I wouldn't have the frustration of having to deal with a learning disability. Plus, I would have the extra time, so time would be less of a constraint. What I need to be successful in school is I need time, time is the biggest factor because I will work around a problem if I can't go through it, but that again takes extra time so that's probably the biggest factor. Yea, I can cope with everything that everybody else is coping with, if I had extra time.

Lynn described studying and preparing for tests as burdensome due to the time involved in completing these tasks. "That's the biggest issue for me, I think is the time because I will do the work and I will do extra to compensate, but a lot of times the time constraint is the biggest issue." At one time, Lynn suggested that she spent enormous amounts of time completing the reading assignments for her classes, which is related to her reading/writing comprehension disability, yet at another point, she reveals that she does not complete many of the reading assignments even with accommodations and due to the fact that not all textbooks had a computer component or audio recording. For Lynn, because the actual process of reading continued to be very time consuming, she did not always complete the assigned readings due to the large amount of time it took her to

not only read, but comprehend the information, "So I usually don't read the whole book, I'll just scan…and just move on." Lynn became so bogged down with process of reading that she almost entirely bypassed that step and found ways around reading the textbook.

Lynn explained how she initially attempted to complete her assignments as instructed by her professors:

> I would do the homework exactly how they said. Read the chapter, do the problems at the end, and I would do that and I would fail. [Laughing.] So and I noticed that a lot of times I would give up in the middle of the reading because the reading would take so long and I wouldn't get anything out of it and it would just be a waste of time so I just said well why don't I just go right to the problems and a lot times if you just go right to the problems and you don't have the answers you'll spend a half an hour looking at something that should take, you know, just ten minutes. And you just stare at and stare at and eventually I was like, well I'll just look at the answer first and then later on I will quiz myself on that question, you know, I will go back.

In response to her frustration with how she was expected to study, Lynn created her own method for studying, such as memorizing vocabulary. She would find the vocabulary words and use index cards to write the words on one side and the definitions on the other side. Lynn explained that this manner of studying was somewhat successful for her during her first three years of college, but when she started to take higher level courses, it was less successful because reading the textbook on her own became a significant aspect of instruction.

Lynn ran into problems when she took classes where individual reading assignments played a crucial role in order to pass the class. She provided an example:

> I am having trouble currently in history because she [the professor] wants you to read the book, she lectures, which the lectures are helpful, but she keeps going back saying, "You need to read the chapters. It is so important to read the chapters. You got to. I'm going to test on things that I don't have time to lecture on." And that is making me – it's been making me upset because, you know, reading the book is just not going to happen for me. I'm just not, it's just not going to work, so I have the thing I copy and paste it and let the computer read to

> me, which takes a lot more time than reading it on your own. So I don't know if I'm going to have time for that so I guess, you know, what I am going to do is go over her notes, pick out the words and define them…that is how I learn. Most of the professors in science have to lecture. The book, they only use certain chapters. They pick and choose what they want you to read. So it's not as much of an issue because, you know, you can't teach organic chemistry by telling somebody and handing them a book and say go [read]. You can't do it. You have to teach the class. The book is there to help.

The example that Lynn provided was one that was outside of her major area of study. Even though the textbook was supposed to provide additional information for students so they could complete class assignments and gain additional content, it was not the case for Lynn because of her reading disability. For her science courses, she noted, a majority of content must be learned through class instruction and not individual reading assignments, which may be one of the reasons behind Lynn choosing science as a major. The frustration with time continued for Lynn:

> I mean, if you can read the chapter and get all the information you need out of it, you know, that's exponentially faster than sitting down finding the terms, defining the terms, linking them together. You spend a lot of time doing that. And then writing the papers because I have to have somebody proof read the paper and then I got to go make the corrections and then I have to have somebody read it again and then I got to fix those things and then it still might not be right.

This is where the ARC should help her to prevail over her disability, by offering support in the form of study skills and other ways to utilize all of her accepted accommodations. There becomes a two-fold problem with the situation. On one hand, the ARC should be helping Lynn overcome her difficulties relating to her learning disability by instructing her on different methods that similar students with disabilities use to study. On the other hand, Lynn felt that the help the ARC offered was a waste of time for her and she did not accept their help, as well as some of the accommodations that had been offered to her.

One of the options suggested to Lynn was to take a smaller course load in an effort to be able to devote more time to her school work. This became a problem for Lynn because of financial issues. She needed to take a full load to be considered a full-time student and receive the maximum amount of financial aid available to her. However, if she took fewer classes in an effort to have additional time that she could devote towards assignments, she would have to compensate for her loss of financial aid and work additional hours. Because of this situation, she is stuck in the predicament of devoting her time to being a full-time student and receiving financial aid or taking fewer courses and working additional hours to be able to support herself and pay for them.

Summary

Lynn struggled with time constraints that were directly related to her disability. She was unable to move past her frustration with completing her reading assignments and attempted to bypass them all together. This set Lynn up for failure especially when courses relied heavily on individual reading assignments. Even though Lynn struggled with issues relating to time, she did experience successes in higher education. In the next section, I will address the successes that Lynn experienced during her higher education career.

Success as Validation

Lynn described her success in education as a long road because of her learning disability. Due to the fact that she is the first person in her family to attend and graduate from college, she possessed a strong feeling of accomplishment: “It’s a validation of my time and my energy. I’m very proud of it. Then it also means that I have reached this level that’s given me so many more opportunities. That’s what it means to me is that I

have more freedom to choose what I want to do. I've achieved one of the most difficult degrees." The most difficult degree that Lynn is referring to is a biology degree. She feels that education is important and in order to be successful in the field of science, she does not want to stop with a bachelor's degree and wants to obtain a higher degree like a master's or doctorate degree. Despite the hardships that she encountered up to this point due to her disability, she felt successful on a personal level.

One method that Lynn used to set herself up for success was to seek out a certain type of professor. The type of professor that Lynn was looking for accommodated her style of learning and assessment. She described how she chose her professors: "I really plan my schedule, what classes I am going to take, around the teachers. I usually will ask other students how they were tested and, you know, like if the teacher is all about multiple choice, I'll avoid that teacher."

From Lynn's class experiences, she explained her understanding of content:

> [If] I have a conversation with you about a subject… especially in the non-science classes like history or anything to do with like literature, you know, if something has been read to me or, you know, described to me in lecture, I would have a better understanding I feel like than most of the people that took the class with me, but when I went to take the multiple choice test or write an essay that a particular teacher did not allow you to turn in the paper for them to fix the grammar mistakes, I would immediately - like I made a B in English Composition and a B in the second one, too. I should have made A's in both of those.

Lynn looked for a type of teacher that was willing to accept her reading and writing disability and allow her to show her knowledge in alternative ways, such as a group project, class demonstration, or class debate, other than multiple choice tests and in class essays. Unfortunately, Lynn did not have this option with every class she took during her undergraduate program of study. There were times when she had no other choice but to

take a certain class with a teacher whose teaching style was not as accommodating to Lynn's disability and style of learning.

Lynn feels that there are both academic and nonacademic areas in which she performs better than her peers. "Most people would never suspect that I have a disability, unless they go to school with me." In fact, Lynn felt that she was more well-rounded than her peers based on experiences outside of academics and related to the amount of time and effort she put into her academics. She explained:

> I think in a lot of ways, I'm smarter than a lot of [my peers]…when you talk to me about a subject, I feel like I know way more than a lot of my average peers. Like I understand things that they just haven't put together yet or whatever they have never had the reason and it might be a lot of life experience that I've had before I came to college and it, you know, it could be because of the extra work that I have to do to get to the end point. But I feel like at the end of the day, if you quizzed me over everything that we learned, I *will* know more than they will. It's just the testing that differentiates us.

Lynn felt that her life experiences and the invisibility of her disability outside of academic arenas allowed her to be better equipped to thoroughly understand concepts than her peers who have better academic success such as grades. Even though Lynn's course grades do not align with the amount of time that she spent studying, she believed that the additional amount of work that she must apply toward her academics due to her disability gives her a more in-depth and complete understanding of the content. Thus, she feels she is better equipped to be successful after college in her career.

Despite working hard and devoting large amounts of time to her academics, all of Lynn's struggles have not been in vain because she had a sense of success and accomplishment. She said, "I wouldn't take back the last five years regardless…I still would have signed up for it [college], I still would have done it." Looking forward, Lynn

described her accomplishment of graduation and the newly obtained knowledge she received over the last five years:

> It has to do with I wouldn't have felt fulfilled without gaining, I've always - I love knowledge. I mean I love to learn. I would feel deprived and I would be very upset – as a thirty year old, I am thirty right now, I would not be - I'd be much more upset about being thirty and not having a degree than, you know, because I felt like that was something you needed to do for yourself, you know, just to gain that knowledge on its own. So that's kind of what it [success] is I guess.

For Lynn, the struggles she experienced during college, like the enormous amounts of time and energy, as well as financial obligations she needed to be successful were acceptable sacrifices in order for her to obtain greater amounts of knowledge and in the end a college degree.

Summary

Lynn felt that she was not as good as everyone else in some aspects of academics because she possessed a learning disability, but was able to compensate in other ways. For Lynn she felt that a greater overall understanding due to the large amount of time and effort she devoted to education. Success in life meant that she earned her diploma regardless of the struggles she endures to obtain it. I now turn to Jane, whose experiences of these themes offer a different dimension in understanding higher education students with disabilities.

Jane – Older and Comfortable with Her Disability

Jane, the oldest participant in this research study, is fifty-five years old and offers two stories about the stigma of disabilities, one as a parent of children with disabilities and one about herself. She has two college-age children who were diagnosed with ADD in high school and used them as many of her examples when speaking about the struggles

of college and disabilities. Jane was referred to the ARC by her math professor because she experienced difficulty with finishing her tests and quizzes in class. Jane explained her initial experience with the stigma of disabilities when she visited the ARC for the first time:

> And I remember walking in there and I was just in tears because for me it makes me feel like I am not as good as everybody else because I can't academically do what other people can do. And it makes me mad that I try so hard and still can't accomplish certain goals. And I'm not sure that things are even set up for people like me to be able to do that and succeed. It is hard to get a high GPA to get you into some of the graduate programs when you can't test as well as other people and that's how you are scored is through your academics. I mean, I know you have to have some way of being able to tell whether or not people are or where they are academically, but when you have a disability and your whole grade is based on a few tests and it's done in a way that you can't learn it or you can't remember it, then you can't succeed at it.

Jane's reaction of tears was based on her assumption that she was previously successful as a stay-at-home mom and that this success would carry over to her pursuit of higher education. Jane believed in the idea that hard work lead to success and an individual's success was directly related to the amount of work and effort put forth to the task at hand. Because her success was not immediate, or based on her time commitment and her desire to succeed, she was frustrated and angry. The stigma of disabilities begins to emerge from Jane's narrative when she expresses her feeling of being inferior to her peers based on academic outcomes. The difficulty that Jane experienced with completing tests and earning a sufficient score puts passing courses in jeopardy when a majority of the overall course grade is based on test grades. She questions the purpose for tests being so important and weighing so heavily on course grades especially for people with disabilities who have difficulty passing tests. In other words, Jane believes that just because a person can be successful in a course by passing a test does not mean that they

can be successful in a real world situation. Jane mentioned that she does all of her class assignments and constantly studies well in advance for tests, but because her disability is related to the retrieval of information, she has difficulty taking tests. It is Jane's desire for herself and other people with similar disabilities to have their knowledge assessed using other methods rather than the ones currently used in her classes.

Jane set up an appointment with the director of the ARC. During this meeting, Jane discussed her children, their disabilities, and the struggles they experienced during school. Because their experiences were similar to Jane's experiences, the director suggested that Jane schedule an appointment with her personal doctor for further testing. After completing some psychological tests with her doctor, Jane was diagnosed with ADD and Test Anxiety. Jane described her reaction:

> It's a very mixed type of emotion. Part of me was crying and in tears because I have something that I already knew what I had. I don't know why it was so much of a shock. And then part of it, which made me mad. It's ok to have a disability, it just makes me mad that I can't be like everyone else and I can't do things the way everyone else can do them. And I haven't figured it out how I can do them. So I'm still not real happy about that deal.

Jane says she does not mind having a learning disability because she feels like she has had a successful life raising two children, managing a household, and being involved in social activities. She is very frustrated because of the way academics are set up, which does not lead to her being successful. Also, she is frustrated because she has not discovered her learning style and the style of studying that is required for her to obtain information, process it, and demonstrate her knowledge during testing. Again, a subtle stigmatizing tone emerges from Jane's narrative – one that she never completely recognizes. She wants to have academic success similar to that of her peers.

Jane does not completely see herself as being personally stigmatized because of her disability based on her age and life achievements, but realizes that disability does affect other students, specifically younger students, and offers her own children as an example:

> I think for me personally it [the stigma of disabilities] doesn't really affect me as much as I can see it affecting some of the younger people. I know my own kids don't like, or they don't like to talk a lot about it even though I get them to talk about it. They have learned through the last couple of years of high school that there are a lot more kids out there with ADD that are doing the same thing they are doing because nobody wants to talk about it. So I think people need to talk about it. So the more I can get them to talk about it and tell them that it's ok. I don't harp on them if they don't have straight A's in college. If they are getting up and I know they are going to class and I know that they are going to study sessions and I know that they are talking to their teachers, it's ok with me if they have a C in a class. Do I want them to have an A or B? Oh, I would love it! I would love to have an honor student as a child, I mean as a parent. Is it what's important to me? It's not the most important thing. The most important thing is that they get the education that they need to be able to succeed in life. And uhm down the road it's not really going to really matter if they have a C or a B, unless they choose to go to a graduate school like a medical school or law school that maybe they might look at what college you came from or what your GPA is. It hurts them in that they might not get into schools they want to get in to because of their GPA, but that's ok, too. There are a lot of good schools out there, you know. So I think that they have gotten a lot better with it. We talk about it a lot. I don't know how much they talk about with their other friends because they are not home a lot anymore, but I hope that they have learned that it is ok to talk about. It's really - it's only a big deal, if you make it a big deal. And you are going to have good times and bad times and you are going to be frustrated like I am at test taking time when I have tried so hard and then you are going to have good times when you have succeeded and maybe I actually will get my diploma and that will just, you know, I will just be one really happy person when I do that.

Jane has tried to relay the message to her children that there are many people with disabilities, but nobody wants to publically acknowledge them. Jane believes that the more people who have a disability and talk openly about it, the less stigmatizing it will be for everyone. Jane stresses to her children that grades are not always the most important end result of education. For Jane, as long as her children are not only going through the

motions in an attempt to be successful, but putting forth their best effort, then, in her eyes, they will be successful in life.

Jane even claims to talk openly about her disability and sees her disability differently than her children:

> One of the things I have never done is a hide the fact that I have a learning disability. I've always taught my kids not to hide it, it's a part *of who we are* and it's not anything that you should be ashamed about. It's not, you know, it's not the worst thing that could happen to anyone…I openly talk to *all age groups*, even the students that I run across in the classes that I take here that are seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty that maybe are diagnosed with it. I actually use my own kids as a lot of examples in order to be able to relate to them. You know, so that they see me not as a parent or an adult, but maybe they're looking at me through my kids in some way. I try to get them to talk about it and to understand that it's just a part of *who we are* and it doesn't mean that you can't succeed and you can't do things. That we just have to figure out different ways of doing things, and it's ok. It's not a bad thing. Now sometimes I get upset and I cry and it makes me angry when I try so hard and those kind of things are tough for me, but it is part of who I am. I can't change that I can just be the best I can be with what I have and what resources are available.

Jane attempted to communicate with other students who have similar struggles. It was her hope that by sharing her experiences, they would seek accommodations and not feel so stigmatized or isolated. She wanted them to know that there are services available to help struggling students with disabilities succeed and that just because a student has difficulty in some courses, they can still achieve success. Jane stressed that there are times when it is very difficult for her to complete her work because of her disability, but that the disability is a part of who she is as an individual; therefore, other people should accept their disability as one aspect of identity and not an overriding trait. By accepting her disability, she is able to concentrate on her academic work rather than struggling with her sense of self. It is Jane's desire to diligently work towards the actual process of learning and achieving success rather than allowing her disability to be the focus and

hinder her academic progression. In other words, she believes hard work will pay off and success will follow because of the effort put forth.

But no matter how much she relays to her children that disability is not necessary a bad trait, they still hide the fact that they have one. She continued:

> Sometimes kids in seventeen, eighteen, nineteen year old brackets don't want to go ask for help. They don't want you to know. They think that there is a stigma attached to it, so it's a little bit harder for them to say, "I have a problem and I need help."

Jane admits that there is a stigma associated with asking for help among college students and that age seems to be one of the factors that hold students back from seeking help. Jane's age plays a role in how she understands and relates to the stigma that is attached to disabilities. On one hand, she says that she is not stigmatized by her disability, and on the other hand she admits to experiencing feelings of inferiority because of her continuous struggles with academics relating to her disability. She thinks that the stigma of disabilities is more problematic for younger students and desires to be a source of support. Jane wants to be viewed as a role model for these students with disabilities grounded in the belief that hard work and dedication towards a goal will ultimately bring success. Jane continued to talk about how she interacts with her peers, hoping to help them overcome their struggle with disability identity:

> Most students are very open with me. I don't treat them like they're a two year old or you know like a high schooler…I treat them like a young adult because that's what they are. We discuss lots of different things, so I think that they are pretty open with me. *So I hope I have an impact, I hope I help them to understand* that it's ok and to use the resources. The problem for some of them is that it's probably pretty obvious that they are probably ADD or ADHD, but they don't have the financial means to have the testing done and that's a problem in college because colleges don't pay for it.

Jane takes comfort in how students openly discuss disability with her, as she sees herself as nonthreatening. The resources that are present for students with disabilities are not designed to be roadblocks, but established to aid in students' success. Once these resources are accepted as a means of academic support and not barriers, then the focus of identity can be switched from the possession of a disability to success despite possessing a disability. This change in the way academic support is linked to success rather than disability allows for students to view it as beneficial rather than negative/discriminating. For Jane, this is where she struggles with disability identity. She believes that disability is not stigmatizing for her because it is part of her identity, yet she struggles with the fact that others do not view disability the same way she does. For Jane, disability is just one aspect of her life and not the total summative point. She wants others to openly accept disability as such. According to Jane, if students with disabilities take on her mantra of disability identity, more individuals will be successful because they will willingly accept the resources. She desires to show other students that the academic resources are not meant to be stigmatizing, but offer hope to struggling students.

With Jane being so open about her disability and freely talking about it with others, I asked her if she thought that her peers had a problem with her receiving accommodations. She responded:

> I don't think my peers have a problem with it. I'm pretty open about letting them know that I have a *really hard time* that it takes me hours and hours and hours to study and sometimes I still can't remember the information. I try to encourage them to do anything that might be extra credit just like I do with my own kids even if you do really well, don't be a fool and not take what's free. I mean don't not do the stuff that's easy, you know, just because you think you're ok because you don't always know that you are ok. But I'm pretty open, and I don't think I have had problems with them. I've not seen anybody who's been jealous that I had what I had. I'm sure that probably most of them would probably have what they have and not have to study as long as I do.

Jane admits that she struggles with academics and that it takes her a lot of time to complete her work. Yet, Jane is less concerned with focusing on her disability identity and more focused on overcoming the challenges that are preventing her from being successful in school.

Summary

For Jane the stigma of disabilities is problematic when she has to put so much time and effort into her school work and it does not pay off in terms of the way she anticipated. Although Jane says the stigma of disability did not affect her, she does struggle at some level with disability identity. Her age plays a role in how she relates to the stigma associated with disabilities and how she views herself. Jane wants to focus her attention on her successes rather than the affects that her disabilities have on her. In the next section, the resources that Jane utilized will be discussed.

The Resources Available to Jane

Jane is a very determined person and mentioned on several occasions during the interviews that she was willing to devote herself to her goal of earning a college diploma. After struggling with academics, she realized that this goal may be more difficult to acquire than previously anticipated. Once diagnosed with ADD and Test Anxiety and having the appropriate documentation, Jane was able to access help in the form of accommodations from the ARC. Jane described the reason why she looked into additional resources: “I decided to do it because I have a goal and whatever I can do to reach that goal is what I will do. And it was recommended…that this was a way it might

be able to help me make that goal come possible." With accommodations from the ARC, Jane believed that she would be able to obtain her goal of graduating from college.

Jane continued to describe her feelings about using accommodations from the ARC:

> It made me feel really good that at least I have an opportunity. At least [the director] will work with me and her staff out here is great and that the teachers that I have had so far have worked really well with me, so that I can accomplish the goal at my age. I don't have to be here. I'm here because I want to be here. I'm here because I want to learn. I just need to figure out how I can learn.

Jane looked to the ARC for more than just accommodations. She was looking for help on becoming a better student and obtaining skills to be able to accomplish her goal. Jane's understanding is very different in comparison to how Lynn views her responsibility of her learning because she follows her professors' instructions.. Jane takes the responsibility and the necessary steps that will help her in achieving her goal. Again, Jane's individual work ethic emerged as she embraces her goal of graduation.

The accommodations approved for Jane to use by the ARC are extended test taking time, quiet testing environment, audio recording of class lectures, access to a student note taker, copies of the professor's notes, preferential seating, assistance with Regents' Test registration, priority class scheduling, and audio version of textbooks. Despite the long list of accommodations, Jane only used extended test taking time, quiet testing environment, audio recording of lectures, and audio versions of textbooks. Jane mentioned that she was willing to use some of the additional accommodations, but at the time of the interviews did not attempt using them because the director suggested that she only try a few accommodations at a time and not become overwhelmed by them.

Jane provided a description of using the ARC:

> I use it mostly for taking tests. I've just started using it this past semester, so I'm still learning some of the things that are available to be able to be used over there now. I will be taking the Regents' Test which I'm going to schedule…I'm going to be taking that there because I think *that* makes a really big difference on that exam.

Jane has only accessed accommodations from the ARC for a little over a semester and because she only registers for two classes at a time, her interactions with the ARC had been limited. Similar to Lynn, the Regents' Test weighed heavily on Jane's mind as it could potentially halt her educational progression. Although Jane has not taken the Regents' Test, she explained that it was already a source of anxiety and the accommodations that the ARC provided offered one solution to calming her fears and overcoming this obstacle. When Jane does use the ARC, she described the people as being very accommodating:

> I think they're awesome. I think they are really, really great. I mean they are just always, always helpful. I couldn't load one of the books that I have of the audio…And I couldn't get it on my computer, it wouldn't load the right way. And I brought my computer in and they sat down and one of the guys came out and he helped me put it together, so I think they are awesome. I think they work really hard to put you in wherever you need to be put. Sometimes I'll ask to be in a room that's just me to do my testing, you know, and stuff like that. So they try to accommodate you as much as they possibly can.

The ARC is not a source of additional stress for Jane; in fact, the ARC became a place where she felt supported. Although Jane is comfortable with herself as a student with a disability, she reaches out to the ARC as a source of solace and understanding her difficulties associated with her disability.

When I asked Jane if she felt that she had an advantage over other students because she received accommodations, she responded:

> I feel bad sometimes that not all students have this extra say test taking time…It's not about this is not fair because you get this and I don't get this. I need this. What do you need to do in order to succeed? If there is something that you don't

> have that would help you succeed, then I would like to think that an educator would give that person that. Ok, if I need extended test taking time because my brain - the speed of my information doesn't come out whether it's age, brain decay, or ADD. The fact that I have that helps me reach my goal. Getting a degree really isn't about anybody else except your self. It's about your own personal goals of what you want to do for yourself. If you had a teacher that's giving you an A and you're not doing anything that might, that's a different deal. But if you got a student that has a problem whether it is a learning disability or physical disability or whatever then help that person feel good about themselves cause that is what the real world is about. Feeling good about yourself and you're not going to get that if you can't succeed in the goals that you want, whatever they are.

Jane disagrees with the one-size fits all mentality of teaching and believes that education should be more individualized to meet individual needs especially for those who have disabilities. The value of education for all people and access to it emerged as she suggested that each individual must work towards their own personal goals in order to obtain success. Fortunately for Jane, her professors up to this point in her college career were willing to work with her so that she was able to adequately manage her course load and test schedules. She provided an example: "I asked [my professor] if I could take my math test early because I didn't want to have my math and my psychology on the same day. So I took hers [math professor's] on a Monday and the other one on a Wednesday." Jane credits part of her success in education to the willingness of her professors to work with her schedule and accommodating her needs. The method that Jane used to persuade professors to work with her was to be up front with them about her needs. She did not hide her disability or her need for accommodations to be successful.

Another example Jane provided demonstrated the willingness of one of her professors to support her by allowing her to attend a different class section on days when she misses the regularly scheduled class time to complete a test or quiz in the ARC. This allowed Jane to continue to stay on track with class instruction. Jane said: "I go to her

[the professor's] second class so I might miss my first class, but I'll make sure she knows I'll be there for the second class. So that I'll pick up whatever information I didn't get from a class." Again, Jane demonstrated her commitment to reaching her goal by putting forth the extra time and effort so that she would not miss any seat time and classroom instruction provided by her professors. It appears that Jane does not solely rely on the accommodations that the ARC provided for her success; she took the initiative and responsibility to be in charge and liable for her own academic outcomes.

One resource that Jane felt extremely grateful about was having the support of her husband. She described his support as not only being financial, but emotional. As a result, Jane was able to focus on school and did not have to worry about working to help support herself or a family.

Problems Relating to the ARC

Jane experienced some concerns with taking her tests in the ARC that were specifically related to the limited amount of space that was devoted to testing areas and the amount of distractions that persisted during the times she took her tests. She said:

> When I got ready to take my math final exam and I was nervous about it this past semester, they put me in with a student, which was fine because they were busy with finals, and I was fine until that person needed to type on a computer in order to complete what he was doing and he felt really bad. But I could not concentrate. I had my ear plugs in, but I could still hear the clicking sound which is, you know, that's all it takes for me to lose my attention. So I did ask them to put me somewhere, [the director] put me in her office. You know, she said, "Jane, just go back there and take it back there, don't worry about it." You know, she put me back there and it was great. So I think that they work as hard as they can to accommodate all of their students…I do think that they need to separate people who need to be on computers.

Jane was fortunate that the director of the ARC was able to provide the necessary space to accommodate her and move her to a less distracting space; however, this may not be

possible with every student and in every situation due to the limited number of rooms available for testing. The circumstances that concerned Jane the most were related to the amount of space available for students to be placed in distraction-free rooms for extended test taking time. She further explained:

> I don't know what their ratio is, I don't know how many students they actually serve, and I don't know how many actual rooms that they have, but *to me* it looks like it is a very small, very tight, closed in area for all that they need to do. I know that there are a lot of people, there've got to be a lot here that have learning disabilities that need accommodations and the rooms are so close to regular working areas for the volunteers and for the adult learning center that sometimes you get noise from those areas just because it is so close. It would be nice if it were a little bigger room and if it was a little more spaced out almost like if they had their own section and didn't have all of that other stuff there.

The actual space and design of the ARC is limited to three testing rooms, each about the size of a walk-in closet. Each of the testing rooms that is available can provide three spaces for students to take tests. In total, there is enough space for nine students at a time to be used for testing accommodations. Because the ARC used in this study provided services for over five hundred students, there are certain times during the semester when space became a premium, such as mid-terms and final exams. This becomes a problem for students who need as few distractions as possible when they are testing. When there are two other individuals in a small room who are making noises as they are taking their tests, it is easy for students like Jane, even with the use of ear plugs, to be overwhelmed and in actuality have more distractions than if they took the test in the regular classroom. So it was not always possible to provide the accommodation of extended test taking time in a distraction-free environment.

Summary

Jane credits her reduced stress level to the resources that the ARC provides to her. Although the testing accommodation does not automatically mean that she will pass her tests, she believes that it helps. Jane does have some concerns with the amount of space that is available for students to use for testing allowing for all students to have appropriate accommodations. The next section will address time factors that Jane faces as she maneuvers through her college career.

Enough Time - Frustration

Out of the four participants in this research study, issues related to time were the least concerning for Jane on the surface. Because she only took two classes each semester, Jane was able to devote large amounts of time to studying and preparing for classes. Unfortunately for Jane, the amount of time she devoted to studying did not always provide her with the end results that she anticipated. Jane experienced similar difficulties with the amount of time she spent studying for tests in comparison to her peers and still not being able to pass the test: "I studied for hours and hours and it took me four hours to do the test and I failed it. That's hard sometimes and it's not that I resent them or dislike them. It's just - it's very frustrating as an individual that I work so hard." Jane is committed to putting in the necessary time and makes school a priority, but despite all of the time and effort, she does not pass some of her tests and becomes frustrated with her lack of success. Jane explained how committed she was to school:

> When I am in a school mode… I treat it like my job. I get up, I come in here early, I do my classes and I study and I study however long it takes me to study. The other stuff is not what is important – cutting the grass, cleaning the house, that kind of stuff. It gets done when I get through with what I feel like I need to do to prepare for my classes or for my tests…it certainly does take *a chunk of time* out of my daily routine, but that's ok.

Jane was not concerned about some of her responsibilities outside of school when school was in session. Again, she was very devoted to spending as much time as she felt necessary to school-related activities.

Similar to devoting as much time as she felt necessary to studying, Jane used as much time as she felt appropriate to take her tests and quizzes. Jane described the experience of taking tests in the ARC:

> So now I take my quizzes over in the disabilities' office. I can put my ear plugs in, I don't have students moving around, I don't panic because I am the only one left trying to finish my work, I stay over here. I take my quiz. If it takes me the whole class period to take a five question quiz that is what I will do because I'll work it the best way I can until I think I got it as good as I can get it.

Not only does Jane spend an exorbitant amount of time taking her tests and quizzes in the ARC, but she missed class instruction while doing so. She explained that the other students in her class were only taking five to ten minutes to complete the quizzes at the beginning of class, but it was taking her the whole class period. Some other students outwardly showed their frustration with students like Jane who took more time than they felt was necessary to complete the quizzes by making comments relating to the start of class. Being the cause for the delay in starting class created additional stress for Jane. Taking the quizzes in the ARC alleviated some of the stress that Jane felt. In this situation, Jane was fortunate for two reasons. The first reason was that she had the flexibility in her own schedule to use a whole class period taking a quiz. If she took more classes or had back-to-back classes, she may not have been able to devote the time that she felt was needed to testing. The second reason was that her professor taught the same course back-to-back. This provided Jane with the option to take the quizzes or tests at the same time her class was taking them and then having the option to attend the second

section without missing instruction. Her professor allowed her to attend the second class because there was sufficient space to accommodate one more student; however, this may not be an option for every course that Jane takes in her college career. At some point, she will have to discover a solution to the amount of time it takes her to complete tests.

Jane talked about the amount of time that it took her to complete tests. She believed that if given the option, she could no longer take tests in the regular classroom because she needed the extended test taking time in order to complete her tests. She explained:

> I think that it would be really tough; I don't know that I could complete the test. It may depend on the subject and how the test is given. I re-took psychology this past semester. Our tests were *all* sixty questions each, plus an additional twenty questions for extra credit. They were multiple-choice, but that means reading and then trying to comprehend, you know, make sure because some of them can be tricky. So trying to figure out what the answer would be if you weren't one-hundred percent sure. It took me probably two and a half hours to take the eighty question test. Math was taking me four hours to take a test in math. It was crazy.

The actual testing process for Jane is very time-consuming because she has extended test taking time with no limit on the amount of time that she is allowed to complete a test. In many instances, she spent more than twice the regular class time to complete a test. For Jane, this seems to be the only alternative that she has to help her complete the tests and receive adequate grades. She explained how the accommodations helped:

> I think that it takes the test anxiety away because I have no limits on the test taking time. The last math test that I took a week ago, took me four hours to take. Ok, now regular class periods are an hour and fifteen minutes. I, I spent four hours taking that test and failed the test. And I had studied for it really, really hard. But because I can't remember stuff, I didn't pass the test. Now there are a lot of other students who didn't pass this test in that class either, you know, some who studied, some who didn't study, some who go to help session; some who don't. All I can do is do the best that I can do for me.

Despite having accommodations like extended test taking time and a reduced distraction environment, Jane was not always successful with passing her tests. The extended time only decreased her anxiety during tests, but then it creates other anxieties like frustrated peers, a lot of time spent in the ARC, and often limited success. These issue will be discussed in more detail in the discussion section.

At the time of the interviews, Jane was only enrolled in two classes per semester. At the current pace, Jane knew that it would take her a very long time to complete her degree. Because she was an older nontraditional student, she felt an urgent need to take more courses at a time so that she could graduate and move toward her goal of using her degree skills to give back to society. Jane commented that the next semester would be even more challenging with time because she was going to take a full load of courses. The uncertainty of continuing to be able to devote enough time to all of her courses developed.

Jane further discussed her frustration with the amount of time and effort that she put forth into earning grades because she is not a good test taker. She said:

> I had to work *really, really hard* to get the A that I got in her class. I spend numerous hours. I went to all the SI [Supplemental Instruction] sessions. I went to *all her* study sessions. I mean I did whatever I could do that gave me extra help other than paying for an outside tutor…So I'm not sure what other things because testing seems to be the hard, the thing that I have the hardest time with. I can do my homework. I can sit there. I can work those problems and I don't have any issues, I can write papers giving enough time I can sit there and edit it and read it and it will be fine, but when you take all of the information away and then have me try and retrieve it, it's really hard. I'm trying to work on better ways to remember things by using codes or you know maybe I'm better at something else that someone else is not good at. So in the long run it somewhat balances out in life, I mean, I don't think that we were all made the same.

Another concern that developed related to time came from a conversation with the director of the ARC was professor selection. Jane explained how she currently chose her classes and professors:

> What I tried to do is I am trying to pick teachers that don't grade strictly on tests. I am trying to pick professors that have extra credit available or that will that have their points broken down into ways that it's not all test, maybe its group projects, maybe its homework assignments, whatever it is. Then what I tried to do is everything I have an opportunity to do that way if my test grades don't work out, then I've got the backup stuff that does it. I will go to extra classes or I will - I'm in class everyday, I don't miss a class unless there's a death in the family, so teachers who give points for attending class, guess what? I'm taking those points. I will take my points where ever I can get them because I know that I don't test well and that's the only way that I can make up for those tests.

In one way, this is how Jane sets herself up for achieving successful grades by being able to devote as much time as possible to each class. The method of compensating by completing extra credit that Jane initially incorporated may have been effective, but there will probably be a time when there are fewer course options and she will have no other option than to take certain courses with certain professors who solely rely on tests for course grades. Up to this point in Jane's college career, time is her biggest asset, but she is aware that this is only momentary. She explained:

> It is a disadvantage because you can't always get into the classes that you need to get into. The further along that you go, the classes get tighter from what I understand…there may be a subject that she's the only teacher for that particular class and you just have to deal with whatever is there and that will be if I run across that - that will be an issue - that will be hard.

Her struggle with retrieving information and blanking out during tests places her at a disadvantage when course grades heavily rely on test grades. If Jane is going to continue to be successful in college, she is going to need to learn how to utilize her time that she devotes to studying. She summarizes how she feels about time by saying:

> I think that I could probably go at a faster pace if I didn't have a disability. I could take more than two classes, which would mean that I would graduate sooner, which would mean that I could give back sooner or work sooner. I think it would be less stressful because it is extremely stressful to prepare for a test when you can't remember information that's really, really hard for me when you know that you've studied it and you know you put the time in, but you can't, you just can't remember it and that's really hard. So it can be extremely stressful. What would I change? I'd probably like not to have any of it if I had to, but I think I'm made the way I am for whatever reasons and although I may have the disabilities I think I make up for that somewhere else.

Summary

Although Jane is able to put an abundant amount of time into her academic endeavors, she continues to feel anxiety and frustration related to her disability. Jane feels that she is made the way she is for a reason and is able to compensate for her disabilities in many ways. The main way she compensates is by devoting as much time as she deems necessary to studying and testing. As of now, Jane does not feel like she has any other option but to spend large amounts of time devoted to her course work, but realizes that this option may not always be available and desires a solution so that she can complete her degree.

The Three Aspects of Success

Jane understands success differently than the other participants in this research study. She feels her life as a stay-at-home mom was successful because of her family's success. Her husband is a well-known doctor in the community with over twenty years of experience. Both of her children attended and graduated from a local prestigious, private high school and were successfully attending college. Jane believes that she was instrumental in their success because she was able to support each of them in their endeavors. With everyone else in her family being successful in their lives, Jane wanted to experience her own success separate from them. So after both of her children left

home for college, Jane felt the need to pursue a different path in order to be fulfilled. The only obstacle that Jane believed was stopping her future success was beginning higher education at her age. Jane's understanding of success was based on her life experiences. As a result, Jane experienced success as self-fulfillment in three areas: age, graduation, and productivity.

Success in Age

Jane graduated from high school over twenty-five years ago and has not been enrolled in any type of schooling since that time. Due to her age, Jane feels like she is at a disadvantage educationally in relation to some of her younger, class peers. She felt that because she grew up in a large family of ten children in an agrarian community where young women were not considered worthy of higher education, domestic life was her predestined future. In fact, she did follow that trajectory as a stay-at-home mom raising her own children. Educationally, Jane wondered what life would have been like if she was raised in a different era or challenged her family's mentality toward women and education. She explained:

> There's so many factors that go into education and, you know, I wonder a lot of times if I was brought up differently or if my teachers were different, if my parents had of had the time to read to us, if we read more than doing some other things, there are all kinds of things you always wonder if it would of made a difference in how you were later on in life.

Jane does not regret her choice of becoming a full-time mother over continuing her education. She devoted her life to raising her two children and supported them in their education by being actively involved with their schooling as a room mom and member of the Parent Teacher Association.

Prior to beginning college, Jane cared for her mother who was suffering with Alzheimer's disease. Jane researched the effects of that disease on adults and discovered one of the associated traits was brain decay. One of her findings was that the signs of brain decay began earlier in a person's life than she previously realized. According to her understanding of the research, the brain begins to decay when a person fails to regularly exercise it through inactivity. Jane related her mother's experience with brain inactivity to herself because her life history was beginning to resemble that of her mother. Jane did not want her children to experience the same situation of taking care of their mother like she did her mother. After the death of Jane's mother and her children going off to college, Jane made the choice to go back to school. Jane knew that because she was a nontraditional student she would have a transition period before getting into a rhythm with school and experiencing success. At the time of Jane's enrollment, she was unaware of her disability and hoped that the onset of brain decay could be prevented. However, for Jane, the discovery of a disability compounded her concern about success at her age and the potential for the onset of brain decay. She said:

> One of my concerns when I started in [college] and I started realizing that I couldn't do what I thought that I could do easily, which was test taking and passing classes really well. I wasn't surprised at the ADD because of my kids, but the other thing that concerns me is given my age there also starts to become brain decay and other issues like that that could be part of it. Do I think that that's it? I don't know if it's it or not. I don't know if its brain decay. I don't know if it's a combination of both - certainly a lot of the things that I do indicate that it's ADD versus brain decay.

Again, success was not immediate for Jane at her age and was compounded by the discovery of a disability.

In our interviews, Jane discussed her experiences of other older individuals she knew who went back to school with mixed reviews. Once she enrolled in her first

semester of classes and because success was not immediate, Jane questioned her goal of graduating because of her age, yet was still determined to continue attempting to succeed. She said:

> I *love* coming here and as much as I *love* coming here it's *very, very difficult* and at a time where people my age can't really retire anymore and a lot of them are having to go back to school and a lot of them are learning things like I have about myself. I want people to continue to learn, I think it's *really, really important*, but it's not easy for older people in general and it's not easy for older people like me…there are a lot of emotions tied up into it. You don't feel like you are as adequate as everybody else because you can't do the things that everyone else can do and that's really hard sometimes and some people would just quit. I don't intend to quit. I may have to *work really hard*, but I don't intend to quit. And I would like to see a lot more people be able to do that and not think that they can't do it because it's hard. Because I think you *can*, but you just need some extra help and I think that is where this comes in.

Although Jane is an older, nontraditional student, she understands that success will not be an easy endeavor and she is not willing to quit despite any amount of effort that she needs to put forth. And in order to be successful, she will need some encouragement to work around her feelings of inadequacy at her age. Jane realizes that there are other individuals who are experiencing the same struggles and emotions of inadequacy because of their age. Jane is reassured that despite her age hard work will bring success. Jane appears to have the drive and the desire to overcome her concern about being successful at her age, but her newly diagnosed disability places another obstacle on her path to a college degree. It seems that Jane's struggles related to her age are compounded by disability.

When Jane began her college career, she struggled. Success for Jane did not come as easily to her as she anticipated. She said:

> I would of never of thought that I would have had a hard time as dedicated as I am and as important as getting a degree is to me. I would have never of thought that I would have had a hard time taking tests or learning. I would of thought that I

> could go in there, I could read the material, and I can go take my test and I'll study really hard and I'll give it one hundred percent and I'll do well. It's been totally the opposite and that has been really, really tough for me.

Jane mentioned on several occasions in our interviews that she realized education evolved between the time she graduated from high school and when she enrolled in college. Never did Jane mention that education was going to be easy for her, but only that failure was not an option. Although she struggled before and after she had access to accommodations from the ARC, she set her goal of graduating from college and was determined to finish despite her chronological age. Jane felt that no matter how hard it was going to be to achieve a college degree, if she worked hard enough, then success would follow.

Jane spent a lot of time pondering what major she wanted to study in college so that she could make a wise decision. She believed that her age needed to be a factor in her selection. She said:

> The major that I chose is a very forgiving type of major for my age group and the type of personality that I am and given the fact that it's probably not a type of a job that makes a lot of money. And money is not my primary goal. Um so I think it's a very giving area for me. I don't think I necessarily have to have a major degree in order to work that field. I do think I have to be somewhat intelligent, but I don't think I have to have a medical degree or law degree or anything like that to be able to accomplish it.

Jane knew that because of her age she would be limited in her choice of majors because of the time that it would take for her to complete her coursework. If she spent too much time pursuing her education, then she would limit her ability to pursue other goals that lead her to feeling successful. Jane is frustrated because of the struggles that she feels are related to her age, but places faith in her determination to be successful regardless of age. Success with age leads into success as graduation.

Success as Graduation

Success for Jane at her age is more than just going back to school and even though Jane is still a freshman, the ultimate measure of educational success for her is graduating with a college diploma. I asked Jane to describe graduation day and what graduation means for her. She paused a moment and said:

> Oh I'll probably have the biggest party there's ever going to be because it is - it is a *goal* that is *really important* to me if I don't do anything, but walk across that stage. My kids will be there and they're very supportive, my sister, who is very supportive, and my husband who is extremely supportive. It will be awesome! It will be one of the greatest things that I ever did and I think what's really cool is I'm doing it for me. I'm not doing it for anybody, but me. It's not about my kids, it's not about my husband, it's about me fulfilling something that is important to me. So it will be awesome!

Jane believes that all of the important people in her life will surround her and together they will celebrate her special day. Jane realizes that each of the people she mentioned were supportive in some way during her pursuit of education. Intrinsically, she believes she will feel a great sense of accomplishment with something that she has wanted for a long time. She explained:

> Getting a degree really isn't about anybody else except yourself. It's about your own personal goals of what you want to do for yourself…Feeling good about yourself and you are not going to get that if you can't succeed in the goals that you want, whatever they are.

For Jane, her goal of graduation leads to personal fulfillment and places her on the path to obtaining a successful career.

Graduation becomes a stepping stone for Jane so that she can move into the workforce, having a career rather than just an entry-level job. Jane feels that the diploma is a necessity in order to gain respect and qualify her for quality employment. The

diploma instills confidence in Jane which is something she would otherwise lack without it because of the way she understands the importance of the diploma. She said:

> It means that I now can enter the work force with a degree so I no longer am just someone who makes minimum wage that I can actually qualify. Unfortunately that's what a lot of businesses look at - is the fact that you have gone through and gotten a higher degree so you are more qualified to make more money.

Although Jane does not have to worry about finances due to her husband's income, Jane equates success in future employment and the ability to make money with earning an undergraduate degree. She believes that employers look at the degree first rather than the person; however, Jane believes that the degree is less important over other personality traits and life experiences. She said:

> So many people are put down because they *don't have* that piece of paper called a diploma and it just burns me because I think that there is a lot to be said for people who *work really hard* and who have more of a work background versus a diploma or educational background. I think that I'm as smart as the next person, but without that degree, I don't qualify for higher salary and that just makes me mad. So that piece of paper tells me that I've got what you now say that I need to have and that academically that I'm as smart as everybody else because this is what you think that I need to have in order to be intelligent. Whether or not that is true that's how you feel, you don't feel as intelligent as those who have gone through and gotten a degree and yet you *are intelligent* because you've done a lot of other life experiences whether it's a stay-at-home mom or you have worked in other settings, you've learned things. So it's not that you're not learning, it's just that you don't have that piece of paper.

For Jane, her potential success with future employment is based on her success in higher education and is only cemented when she successfully earns a degree. The life experiences that she brings along with her diploma are more relevant for her than the degree itself and she would like employers to look at those areas of experience in addition to her academic accomplishments. Jane does not want her future employment to be solely based on her educational obtainment; she wants to be hired as a whole person.

It seems that she believes experience is more important over the degree because of her age and her life experiences.

Success as Productivity

Jane was disappointed with her academic performance during her first year of college and felt overwhelmed with the amount of time it was taking her to complete coursework. She thought she would progress much faster and initially was discouraged with the discovery of a disability. Jane felt unproductive based on her lack of success despite the amount of time and effort she committed to her school work. She said:

> I think that I could probably go at a faster pace if I didn't have a disability I could take more than two classes which would mean that I would graduate sooner which would mean that I could give back sooner or work sooner.

After being diagnosed with ADD and Test Anxiety, Jane described her motivations for obtaining assistance from the ARC. Jane said, "I decided to do it because I have a goal and whatever I can do to reach that goal is what I will do." Jane feels that the ARC gives her an opportunity to be set up for success and to help her accomplish her goal of graduating from college and ultimately becoming a productive part of society. She believes that the staff at the ARC will do whatever they can and is thankful that the ARC is there for her to access accommodations that support her academic needs. It is this support that allows her to become more successful than without accommodations. She said:

> For me, I have made it known. I'm pretty open. It's listed as a disability, but I *don't look* at it as a disability, I don't look at it as a bad thing necessarily for me. I don't necessarily like it, but I don't think it's a terrible thing for me. There are a lot of worse things that I could have. I feel like it's a way of explaining to others is how I look at it. By you understanding who I am and why I am having a difficult time lets you know that at least I am trying really hard to accomplish a goal. I feel better letting my peers know quite frankly that I have a disability because it explains why I come to all of these sessions, it explains why I can't get

> this information and hopefully it educates some of the people that we're not all the same and that there's nothing wrong with me as a human being I just can't do it the same way that you do. I need to do it a different way or I need *help.* It doesn't mean that I am lazy and I need a teacher to give me all of the answers, it just means that there is something else going on somewhere in my brain that keeps me from being able to do things the way that you do them, but I can probably bake cookies a lot better than you can or I can cut my grass better than you can. I just can't do *the academics* as well as you can and that's ok with me. I don't have a problem with the disability office talking to other people, I don't have a problem with the teachers talking to other students, I've even told my math teacher that if there is somebody she's concerned about and she wants me to talk to them as a nontraditional student about how I feel that that is fine and I have done that with her before so that it doesn't scare people because it is a terrible feeling for people when they don't – it's very depressing for nontraditional students who realize that they can't *do* what everybody else does because they've always thought that they were just fine. And they *are just fine,* they just need a little help.

Jane does not use her disability as a crutch, but rather uses it as a way to help others become productive both in coursework and achieving their goals. Jane views academics as only one aspect of an individual's self-worth. She feels that academics are a minute part of a person's overall capabilities and that productivity does not always have to be viewed through the narrow lens of academic success. Jane identifies baking cookies and cutting grass as tasks that she may be more capable of doing than others who are possibly more academically inclined. For Jane, there is value in both academic and nonacademic arenas and one area does not always outweigh the other – a person's value should not be solely based on academic success. Jane does realize that she must comply with the constraints of academics, but understands that that is only temporary while she is progressing through her course work.

Despite Jane's struggle with her coursework, she desires to be productive upon graduation. She may not feel productive in her academics at times, but she knows that it is just a stepping stone to her life's goals. She said:

> At this particular point, I don't have *to work*, but I don't want to spend the rest of my life and not be productive. So *I want* to do something, I'm not totally sure what that is. It will depend on how long it takes me to get my degree and that's going to be – that's going to depend on how hard the subjects are and how many I can take at one time. But I would like to leave this world thinking that I made it a better place somehow and I'm not sure how that is, but that is what I would like to do… I see me completing this [degree] and then hopefully giving back somewhere in the community through whatever my degree is here in human services hopefully with either kids in foster care or with the elderly or some other way.

The way that Jane feels she can be productive is community based. She wants to assist others in creating their own successful life.

Later on in the interview process, Jane specifically described how she wants to lead a productive life giving back to the community. This was influenced by two factors: her own life experiences taking care of her children and the time she spent taking care of her mother. Because she was able to stay at home with her children and support them, as well as spend the necessary time to care for her mother, she understood that there were different levels of support that a person needed at different times in their life. Jane focused on these different levels of assistance as her personal calling and her way of having a productive life. She said:

> There are a lot of elderly people - we're living longer and they can live on their own. They don't need to be in nursing homes or assisted living, but they need help. They need someone who maybe can take them around to grocery stores or help them in their household chores or things like that and I think because of my mom and I'd like to give back. As far as the foster kids, there are way, way too many kids that are stuck in the system and I just don't think that that is positive for our society. So if I can help a few of them see a different side of the world from maybe what they came from, I think it's, it's giving back to the community. I've been very blessed from where I came from because we grew up without any money and I've lived a really comfortable life and I just want to give some of that back to the community.

Jane feels very fortunate about her life experiences and the ability she has had to live a comfortable life despite her upbringing and limited educational background. She

understands that everybody does not have the same opportunities as she did, but would like to open the door for others to be able to have similar experiences. Jane does not feel that everybody needs to live a certain way, but wants to share some of the advantages she has had in her life.

Summary

Jane feels that she can be successful at her age. She believes that success is not only measured in academic terms through earning a college degree, but also about having a meaningful career helping those in her community. Her involvement within the community stretches farther than academic knowledge and incorporates other aspects of life experiences. Jane wants to measure her success by helping other people who are less fortunate and those who are in need of assistance from other people. She believes that success in life is not just about having a career or earning a college degree, but about being happy with your self and giving back to the community. In the end, Jane wants to be happy with her life.

In the next section, I will discuss Erin. Not only does Erin posses a physical disability, but a learning disability as well. Because she possesses both a physical and learning disabilities, her narrative will outline her physical disability first and then her learning disability. Both disabilities will be discussed as separate phenomena and then brought together as one.

Erin – Negotiating Two Disabilities

Erin's physical disability causes her to walk with a limp at a slow pace. She feels that her physical disability "is more noticeable, more...tangible" than her learning

disability because people can see it as she maneuvers around campus. The stigma that Erin experienced because of her physical disability reveals itself with everything that she attempted to do. She says:

> I'm walking up the stairs in the student center and someone is like, "Oh there's an elevator." [Laughter.] I'm like, "Come on, I want to feel normal," you know. I know I don't have to take the elevator all of the time, you know. Come on, if I'm taking the stairs a lot of the buildings will have an elevator, you know, I feel like, ok, I'm not that visible…It's in the sense that there are *those times* that you walk into a room and you feel all of the eyes on you as you walk just because you are not walking like everybody else. It's in the sense that you do something, and certain people are like, "Wow! You can do that?" Just because I think they expect that because I have a one-sided disability you can't do it.

Erin understands the stigma of disabilities in ways specific to physical space. Erin feels that people are constantly watching her because of her slower pace and awkward movements due to her physical disability. The desire for her to feel "normal" can be interpreted as her not wanting to stick out and instead blend into the crowd. Rather, she has a desire to be unnoticed, contending that it is only when she is physically moving that the physical disability is pushed to the forefront. She does not want to be known for her disability because it separates her from others who do not have physical disabilities. By taking the stairs instead of the elevator, Erin strives to be like others and appear physically able and not physically disable.

She described how people react to her physical disability when she attempts to sit towards the top of a theater-style classroom:

> I think they are like, "Oh well she's not able to do nothing, so we got to"…She's not able to do anything so we got to do it for her or maybe like, "Oh well, in class she needs a lot more space," and stuff like that because you know sometimes I walk into class and it is a what do you call it a theater kind of classes we have in the science building and I'm trying to go up maybe to the back seat and there's people wanting to give me room…I'm like, well, it's my preference to go and sit wherever. [It] doesn't mean just because I have a disability, I got to sit towards the front.

When people automatically assume Erin is in need of assistance and attempt to accommodate her disability, her physical disability is put into the forefront of their perception of her identity and places more emphasis on her physical disability rather than her physical ability. Erin provided another example of how people react to her disability:

> I walk into a room and I can tell that there are so many eyes on me with so many questions. It means, I'm in the lab and I am trying to do something that everybody did in a second, but I am still trying to do it, its two minutes later. It means, I'm in a class trying to write down notes, but I have to keep on getting back, especially let's say like last semester when I had the professor [who] was writing on the board, I had to keep telling her, asking her what she wrote when everyone else was way ahead of me and stuff like that.

This slower pace places her disability into greater view every time she has to stop one of her professors for clarification or to slow down the pace of instruction. Erin reiterated how the tangibility of her disability impacted some aspects of her life, including the physical aspects of learning.

Erin's biology course of study meant that she had to enroll in laboratory classes. These laboratory courses required Erin to physically manipulate lab equipment and conduct experiments which was physically difficult for her at times and created turmoil in her life. She explained:

> You mention a lab and I am anxious all of a sudden…because of experiences I have had in the past…When it comes to labs – chemistry and biology – that was usually intimidating especially [when] the professor is not so willing to accommodate my disabilities. And also because I want to learn, I want to learn how to do these things in my way because I can't do it the way other people do it. Not many professors have that patience, it's frustrating. We talk about sometimes in biology using a lot – lots of use of microscopes. For me because of my eye problems, sometimes I need someone to help me adjust the microscope and stuff. Some professors are not willing to do that. So I want to learn, I want to know these things, but then it's not – there is not that provision for me to comfortably get to it.

Erin did not feel that people should feel sorry for her because she had a physical disability, rather she was frustrated with how her choice of major and the associated activities were set up to prevent her from using the capabilities that she possessed to be independent and complete the activities independently on her own. Moreover, she was frustrated with how laboratory work and activities were designed almost exclusively for able-bodied people. Although she was able to complete the intellectual aspects of coursework, the physical aspects were the obstacles. This design set her apart from her peers based on physical ability. Her isolation was justified when some of her science professors refrained from assisting her with certain tasks during laboratory classes. Erin attempted to substantiate to other people that her physical disability did not mean that she was completely disabled in all areas of her life, but that she required a little more assistance than other students on certain tasks. She explained her point of view:

> [T]hat there are things that I don't do in the same way that everybody does and in ways that I require assistance way more often than - because I believe everybody in life requires assistance in there, but I require assistance *way more often* than normal and probably the fact that I do have a physical disability, I think. I don't have use of, good use of, my left hand and leg.

In the academic arena of college where the focus is generally based on intellectual outcomes over physical outcomes, Erin was able to adapt to the requirements that were established with minimal accommodations. However, in certain courses that required physical activity, she struggled with some of the tasks and needed extra assistance. In most instances, Erin's physical disability played a small role in her day-to-day course work and was not a complete hindrance to her educational progression.

Even though Erin's physical disability had little impact on the physicality of academics, it had an emotional toll that often caused her to isolate herself from others.

Erin mentioned that she did not have many friends on campus and she attributed it to her disability. The emotional toll was compounded when one of Erin's professors noticed inconsistencies between the work effort, study habits, and studiousness she demonstrated when compared to the grades on her tests in class. She was following through with all of her assignments and assigned readings, but was not doing well on the quizzes and tests. In situations like Erin's, where outside-of-class performance does not match in-class performance, a specific learning disability is potentially the reason behind the lack of consistency. Erin described the situation when she walked into the ARC for the first time to learn more information about further disability diagnosis. She says:

> I was very emotional… I was *nervous*; I think that is the word, in the sense that I wasn't sure. First I couldn't believe [laughter] someone thinking that I do have a learning disability. That word sounded so big. But walking in there I wasn't sure, I was nervous because I wasn't sure what I *should and could share* about me because I think at the time in my life was just kind of a cocoon that I would *rather remain* and not just share what, what it is that I go through. Yes, so I guess very nervous.

Initially, Erin is shocked that she could possess a learning disability because she was able to successfully complete her first three semesters of college with a high GPA and hard work. Erin had already experienced the stigma of a physical disability and the possibility of possessing a learning disability only made the situation and emotions worse for her. I picked up on the sentiment that her learning disability was troubling for her to discuss throughout the course of the interviews. Early in the interview process, Erin did not share a lot of information about her learning disability because of the way that people interacted with her based on her physical disability. She surmised that if people reacted to her physical disability that the awareness of a learning disability would exclude her doubly. She was very closed off to strangers and did not want to share her personal story;

however, as the interviews progressed and Erin felt more comfortable, she shared greater details about her experiences. Although Erin followed through with disability testing within the last two years, she was unable to recall the details of the events including what diagnostic tests were used and the details of her learning disability. It was as if she was traumatized by the event and did not want to remember the details.

Now that Erin had both a physical disability and a learning disability, she was able to access different accommodations that were directly related to the academic curriculum and not just the physical aspects of learning. These accommodations included extended test taking time, a quiet testing environment, and the use of a recorder for class lectures. Although Erin was able to have academic accommodations, she commonly only used the extended test taking time and the quiet testing environment because she did not want to draw attention to herself. The stigma of Erin's physical disability gave her a greater sense that she must keep her learning disability a secret. When I asked Erin whether she spoke to others about her learning disability, she commented, "Sincerely not that much, [I] barely do…I for one don't find it *necessary*, and two I think, I think I have a fear of being branded."

Branding, the terminology that Erin used to describe the way she felt others reacted to the revelation that an individual possessed a disability, is not only a painful process, but it leaves a permanent impression and scar on the body. I have witnessed an animal being branded first-hand. It is a painful process that involves heating an iron symbol to a temperature hot enough that it permanently places a mark of ownership and identity on an animal's body. In this process, the animal is held down and forced to endure the pain. Once branded, the animal is easily identified by the label imprinted on

the body and ownership is clearly visible for others to see. The label then becomes an identifying symbol.

Erin participated in a summer study abroad program for three weeks to India between her first and second interviews. She recalled an event that occurred on this trip and described how she views disability, labeling, and branding:

> We had this guy on our study abroad and he seemed kind of *slow* in what he was - especially in his reasoning and his reactions towards things and one day he told us the issues he has had with this…when he was a little kid and everyone at the table, "Oh, so that's why." To me, I didn't find that necessary in the sense that so now everybody looks at him even more and they are like, "Oh forget him, he is a jerk, he just - he will never get it," or stuff like that. To some extent I felt like it would have been easier had he just let it go because it would just be like, "Oh this guy seems so slow," but they would never have to *brand* it on him and especially because when you think about learning issues it comes from the brain, so a lot of people will be like, "Oh, you have a learning disability, so you are slow." Stuff like that, so for one it is that fear of being *branded wrongly*, but then also I don't find it necessary. So unless there is a reason for it coming up and sometimes it will come up and [I] just avoid it.

The stigma of her appearing mentally slow on top of a physical disability was difficult for Erin to accept and she did not want to be doubly branded. Given the choice, she hid her learning disability to avoid another marker of perceived negative identity specifically in the academic arena. Erin's feelings and strong language used to describe how she views disability are clear. Disability to her represents a corporal mark on the body, one that is outwardly visible for all to see. Once the disability is noticed, then the individual is discredited and unable to access the group. Erin attempted to keep any knowledge of her learning disability a secret to prevent her further exclusion from the group.

Erin felt intimidated during class and did not want to draw attention to her self. The desire to blend in with the class by appearing as invisible reveals itself. She said:

> One of the reasons why sometimes I can't speak up in class [laughter] and it's wrong, but sometimes I'm like, you know, or let's say because sometimes it takes

> a while for me to process something in class sometimes and maybe the professor's an old guy and I'm asking, "Oh what did you say about that," and sometimes I'm like, you know, it's kind of intimidating sometimes. [It] makes me feel, I don't know how to say - much more visible like aware.

The fear of bringing attention to herself during class and routinely outing her learning disability kept her from fully participating in class. Combining her fear and slow pace led to Erin struggling on multiple levels. She felt isolated.

Erin perceived how many people in society understand disability as a branding of inability. Erin explained how she understood disability labels:

> I think it is just like I was trying to explain - a lot of people and this is my understanding, it could be wrong, a lot of people they look at stuff like ADD/ADHD so negatively and a lot of people will actually *ignore you*, if that is the word, when they realize you have some of these issues. So even if it is *not*, even if it is not out there, once they learn about it, they will start treating you differently just because they don't think you got what it takes, so if it's out there that everybody knows. "Oh, Erin has a learning disability," they will take it as a reason for them not thinking I can make it.

These brands or labels are used to identify and categorize people. Because these labels carry cultural weight, the labeling process is used to separate and isolate individuals. The mark, brands, or labels have an implied meaning that is capable of isolating individuals based on disability rather than ability.

Erin is stuck in the same dilemma that many people with disabilities face. The disability answers some questions as to why and provides access to accommodations. The problem is that when a person with disabilities "outs" themselves to gain access to support, the pressure from society of possessing a disability emerges. Although Erin internalized some of the ways that people perceive disabilities, she has a different understanding of disabilities through the terminology that she chooses to use to describe her disabilities. She said:

> The sincere thing is that I don't personally, I don't - I don't look at myself as a disabled person too. Yes, the disability is there and to me that is just a term…Actually to me it's like at that time, it was like, "Oh so that's it, that's what it is." It kind of was an explanation to a lot of the struggles that I had, but after that it's just, it's just a label, you know. But at that time it was – it *made me* understand why I was going through those struggles…Because it is not in my mind to me, I don't know how to explain it to you, I consider myself yes to have a weakness on my body, but not or kind of they say it's a weakness a unique weakness, but it's not an inability.

It is almost a relief for Erin to understand the reason why she was struggling, but at the same time being diagnosed with a learning disability only compounded her feelings about her physical disability.

On one hand, Erin is very demoralized about possessing both a physical and learning disability while on the other hand she does not allow it to consume her entire life. I asked Erin to describe herself. She responded:

> I don't know. [Laughter.] I guess - a girl - with a disability – that, that doesn't bother her - unless something happens to remind her that she has a disability. Because, this is how I generally describe myself to people. Yes, I had all of these things happen to me, and yes I have a disability, *but* it doesn't rule my life, it doesn't run my life. So I do live a very normal life, I do do everything like everybody else does, *but* once and a while there will be *those things* that trigger it to remind me to bring my emotions to the lowest level, but you know, ninety percent of the time, I am good, I guess. I don't know if that is a description anyway…I can't do it all…Me, not the disabled me…The me *I am*. The person, the person I am and my abilities not my disabilities. Because this is how I view life, if *I focus* on what is not perfect, let me use that word. It takes a lot more effort than if I focus on what is positive. If I am focusing on the positive, the *good* in me, it takes *way less effort to* make me better, but if I focus on what is not good, it takes away a lot of time. It's not, it's not good. So if people are to focus on *the good* and the positive, the best, the good, the strong points in me – the *me*, the person in me, not the disabled person, then that would be awesome.

The emotional burden of possessing two disabilities was at first heavy for Erin to carry. This burden was noticed when Erin felt a lot of pressure from her professors during class and laboratory sessions because of her disabilities. Similar to Lynn's experience with professors in the science department, Erin described how there was an

overriding sentiment that science professors strived for high academic standards that were consistent and rigid for all students. As a result, many of them were unwilling to accommodate for students with disabilities. Erin explained:

> Some of them [the professors] are really nasty. Sorry to use that word, but, yes, I have met some that are really, you know, don't understand at all or they are not willing to budge. Because I had one that I had his classes before some lab and he wouldn't let me take my test any time, not even twenty minutes before the rest of the class.

Erin's experience with academics was influenced by her professors' reactions to her disabilities. In fact, the pressure from one of her professors who was not willing to accommodate Erin's disabilities was so great that she considered taking a break from school and even switched her major course of study to one that she described as less intense:

> I mean she [the professor] even is one of the people that - actually is a lot of the reasons why I switched from bio-chemistry to biology because I was like if this how it is going to be and I, I didn't pass the class. And I, I was very demoralized. I actually was planning on taking a break from school, but my dad wouldn't let me. That doesn't deter me from really wanting to learn because I want to learn and I want to get to a point where I will probably and hopefully will get to understand what happened to my body, but it's hard, I'm not going to lie. It's, it's not easy and sometimes, it's very demoralizing.

On top of the emotional feelings that Erin possessed when she became aware of her learning disability, to make matters worse, she felt that she was not receiving support from her professors. Not only did Erin have to understand and cope with disabilities on her own, but she felt outward pressure from her professors to earn her grades without the accommodations that needed to be provided so that Erin could be successful.

Summary

Erin's experience with her physical disability transferred to the way that she viewed her learning disability as branding. The tangibility of Erin's physical disability

caused her to keep the knowledge of her learning disability a secret. Although both identities of disability influenced the way she interacted with others, she understood the labels that were placed on her as just labels and not identifying markers of self. Erin believed that she was more than the disability labels and that she should be recognized for her abilities rather than the branding that a disability often portrays.

The Many Faces of Resources

The resources that Erin utilized were more than just those provided by the ARC and became a support system that Erin incorporated to work through her daily struggles and overcome her physical and learning disabilities. These resources encompass more than school as Erin surrounded herself with positive influences. Her family and church, combined with the ARC, as well as some professors, all became sources of support that she relied upon to continue through the hardships that created a difficult path toward her pursuit of education.

Erin had already experienced a few accommodations from the ARC because of her physical disability. These accommodations primarily included access to a right-handed keyboard and allowing her to type lab reports instead of writing them out by hand. It was not until one of Erin's professors suggested that she may want to look into other academic resources that the college via the ARC could provide. The director of the ARC met with Erin and discussed her struggles. After the meeting, the director provided Erin with information about diagnostic testing. The director explained that the tests would determine Erin's academic strengths and weaknesses. It is important to note that Erin did not mention who paid for the testing, but the choice to accept the diagnostic testing resource was up to Erin. Again, completing the diagnostic testing was the only

way for Erin and the ARC to determine if her struggles were related to her possessing a learning disability or other possibilities. After the battery of tests was completed, it suggested that Erin had test anxiety and was easily distracted.

Access to testing services was one resource that the ARC provided to Erin that was not related to the accommodations that she was already receiving for her physical disability. Once the testing was completed and deciphered, the results demonstrated that she had a learning disability. The ARC was able to offer other accommodations specifically relating to Erin's academics now that there was sufficient documentation to support a learning disability. Then Erin was able to access accommodations not only related to her physical disability, but to her newly discovered learning disability that would support her success in classes.

Erin felt that without the ARC she would not be able to continue her college career because the academic accommodations bridged the gap between her ability and the anxiety that prevented her from being able to fully demonstrate her knowledge during tests in class. The resources that the ARC provided to Erin were the missing link in her ability to maintain adequate grades without fluctuation. Erin was easily distracted when academics were involved. She was able to control the noise level and distractions when she studied by using a cubical in the campus library or by isolating herself in her dorm room. But in class during testing, she was unable to control the noise level or distractions that fueled her anxiety. The typical classroom noises distracted her and prevented her from fully concentrating on her tests. These distractions include pencil sharpening, students asking questions with professors' responses, and students getting up from their seats after they have completed their test. Each time she was distracted, it took several

minutes for her to refocus on her test. This down-time opens up the potential for her to question what is happening around her and her ability. Questions like why am I the last one to complete the test, did I study the correct material, what happens if I do not finish the test when class time has expired, all race though her mind. Extended test taking time in the quiet environment of the ARC reduced Erin's anxiety. Now that Erin takes her tests in the ARC, she does not suffer from test anxiety as much compared to when she took her tests in class. Erin explained how she used the ARC as a resource for testing:

> When I am taking a test in the center, I am ok. I'm ok in terms of I will be calm and I guess because I know I am taking my time. I will be calm the entire time and even if I forget something, I don't panic. The fact that I'm able to take my tests in quiet and take my tests with enough time…when I am taking my test over in here [the ARC], I request if possible to take the test in the room by myself. And then I will talk things out because when I study, I try to talk so when I talk things out it kind of reminds me.

The ARC becomes a resource for Erin because it reduced her anxiety. Through taking her tests in a quiet environment with extended time, Erin continued to be responsible for the academic content just like everyone else was responsible for in her classes. Yet through the accommodations, she is given an opportunity to be successful. Extended test taking time is a relatively small accommodation, but it allows Erin to be successful. Although she is given this academic resource, it does not automatically mean that she passes her tests that she takes in the ARC. Erin must put forth enough effort to be able to pass the tests on her own by properly preparing. It is interesting that Erin advocated for herself in the ARC by requesting a room to herself. Previously, Erin did not speak up in class because she was intimidated. Erin used the isolated environment to her advantage by talking through her thoughts and by doing so, she was able to recall, retrieve, and remember the information that she studied. Using this method of recall during testing

was not an option in a regular classroom setting. Not only could it disturb others, it could be considered cheating because it would relay information and potentially help others. Through the accommodations provided by the ARC, Erin incorporated her own strategies.

Erin used the ARC as a resource to be successful in school and when she used that resource, not only did her feelings about school change, her confidence increased as well. Erin explained:

> For me, it has boosted my confidence. My GPA has improved, as much as, it has been fluctuating [laughter] up and down, but more in the confidence especially in the test taking area. And also knowing kind of like I could say an advocate sort of and if I really have an issue with them - with my professors. I know I can approach the director and she will be *more willing to come in* and she's to me the aid between me and the professor.

In addition to having access to extended test taking time which has increased her confidence and GPA, the ARC advocates for her when Erin encounters problems with professors. According to Erin, the ARC became the liaison between students requesting accommodations and some professors' unwillingness to accommodate students' needs. Because of her disability, Erin struggled with her confidence, which at times caused her to be unable to advocate for herself. The ARC steps in and becomes the voice to advocate for Erin. Erin explained:

> The person [from the ARC] will kind of mediate, you know, go to the professor about what the problem is and then she sends me to them and they give me suggestions and I go back to the professor. I talk to her or him and you know kind of find - I kind of have to be the one who works with both of them because it's to the best of my interest in figuring out what I would like based on what works out best based on what both participants are talking about.

Erin is not totally exempt from responsibility when problems occur between the accommodations that she is requesting and her professors' willingness to provide them.

Erin becomes involved by offering up solutions to the conflicts. It only makes sense that Erin becomes involved because it is her education. When students with disabilities graduate or leave college, they will need to advocate for themselves. The ARC will not be available to offer support.

The ARC provided Erin with the resources that were necessary for her to be successful by accommodating for both her physical and intellectual disabilities, specifically extended test taking time. But the ARC provided more than just accommodations for Erin: they accepted her for the person she was without focusing on her disability. Erin believed that accessing the ARC was the primary reason she is successful in college. As soon as Erin walked into the ARC, the staff welcomed her by offering a relaxed environment. Erin explained:

> They are always so friendly and, again, like I said, if there is an issue they are always, always trying to find a way to help, you know, and a lot of times, they really try to make me feel comfortable. I don't know if they know me personally, but they know I'm, I'm not a test person, so I get in there and they will encourage me, they will be like, "you'll get it" and "I don't think it's that bad" and they will give me candy. [Laughter.] And then it's not like I get there and they are like, "follow me, here is the test, there you go" [throws papers down]. No, I will get there and they will be friendly and make sure I am calm. They will be like, "are you ready? Are you sure? Do you need a few more minutes?" And they don't take me to the room until I am like, "Hey, I'm ready." Then they take me to the room, make sure my test is – make sure I am ok with my test and make sure I have all of the supplies and they do supply them – pens, pencils, and paper, extra paper, and then they will make sure I am comfortable before they leave the room and half way they might just knock on my door and be like we are just checking to make sure everything is ok. So that, you know, kind of makes me feel good.

At times, Erin's disabilities made her feel like an outcast. She desperately wanted to feel "normal" and "blend in" with the people around her, rather than being known for her disabilities. The support that the ARC provided to Erin was more than just accommodations; it was emotional support and a sense of belonging. The ARC was a

place for Erin to feel accepted despite her disabilities because the focus was not placed on her disabilities, but on her abilities.

The individuals who work in the office provide an environment of comfort and hope in addition to the accommodations she receives. Erin described:

> I feel they [the ARC] treat me like nothing is wrong, you know, like I'm a complete or normal person, but at the same time they want to do whatever they can to be a significant part of my life and to help me…I really think they make every student feel special and feel that they fit in…I know that there are people, you know, always there for me. Sometimes I just pop in to talk. And then it also feels good to know that there is someone concerned about the whole thing.

Erin feels that she is not alone because of the ARC. Her interactions with the office staff give her a sense of security that she would otherwise not possess because of her struggles with disabilities. Erin used the ARC as a source of support, both academically and emotionally.

Not All Aspects of ARC Are Helpful

Although the ARC was a source of support for Erin, there were times that Erin experienced difficulties with the resources it provided. There were two areas that Erin commented upon as concerns with accommodations – limited testing space and implementation of accommodations within the classroom. Each problem had the potential for creating yet another obstacle for Erin.

Erin has difficulty with focusing on her work when distractions are present. When Erin scheduled her tests in the ARC, she liked to take her tests without anyone else in the testing room; however, this did not always occur because of the limited testing space. She said:

> [T]he only thing I can say, *I wish* there was some difference in their testing space – [it] is kind of getting small. Because like a lot of times and I don't know why it happens, but if it's just another human being when I am taking a test, I get so

> nervous. So sometimes especially during midterms and finals, they will let you know, they will be like - they put you in a room and it's a tiny room and it will be like half way during the test, they will bring in someone else. Well, as much as I am getting more time, that distraction takes me a few minutes before I get back to myself and continue the test. So *I wish* they had a way of having more space that way it's not too crowded for us when we are taking the tests, especially during midterms and finals.

The solution sought to allow her to complete her tests in a distraction-free setting with additional time; however, when she is interrupted by the ARC staff placing other students in the room with her so they can have accommodations, it defeats the purpose of Erin's accommodations.

Another problem related to the ARC that Erin encountered was with some of her professors not allowing her to have any classroom accommodations even after providing them with the official documentation from the ARC. Erin's solution was that she wanted the ARC to intervene on her behalf and encourage professors to comply with accommodations. Erin said:

> With the struggles that I have had so far with my classes, I wish they [the ARC] had *more say*. In this sense, remember the professor that I told you I had an issue with in my class last semester? Actually, I didn't do well in that class, I didn't pass that class just because of that lab. And yes, [the director of the ARC] came in by telling the professor she had to give me the accommodations, but she was *so rigid* so the kind of accommodations that she gave was *so limited* and that's all [the director] could do. She is the director up there, I *wish* she had more say in like saying, "Hey you have Erin in your class and she *has these issues. You got to do this*, you know, you got to work with what works. Things don't have to be your way, but then, you know, it has to be something that students don't just take as a loophole not to do work. Because I still believe we need to still do our part in the work, but then I wish they *had more* say in that.

Erin believed that she would be successful in her classes when she was provided with the accommodations outlined by the ARC. For the classes in which she did not receive accommodations, she struggled. To rectify the instances when her professors were not willing to allow Erin to have accommodations, she wanted the ARC to have greater

influence over the implementation of accommodations. She wanted the ARC to be able to have a greater role in the classroom.

Professors as a Resource

Erin viewed some of her professors as more than just facilitators of new knowledge; they became a resource of support for her needs as a student with disabilities. As discussed earlier, one of Erin's professors suggested that she inquire into the resources that the ARC provided for struggling students. Although Erin had to make the choice to go to the ARC, her professor was the initial resource for academic assistance. Erin explained:

> There are professors that have made me feel like I can really do it. You know, I just didn't bump into the student development center [ARC]. I had a professor refer me because she discovered that I wasn't, you know, I wasn't a dumb student because I asked her questions, spent time with her in her office because I mean I had to quit work just so I could put all of my work into schooling; just so I can do well and she realized I am spending time with her in the office, I am asking questions after class - I am not able to speak up in class, so I ask questions after, but when it came to the test, I just couldn't do it.

The particular professor that worked with Erin played a valuable role. Not only did the professor steer Erin towards the ARC, but the professor was willing to spend additional time working with Erin outside of class. This professor noticed the discrepancy in Erin's effort and her outcomes specifically on tests. Erin credits this specific professor as being a resource to her success.

Other professors also specifically worked with Erin when she needed assistance. She explained:

> I have found professors who are *so willing*, you know, they will be like, "Hey, just shoot your hand up and I will know." If a professor has a mutual understanding and they will be like "Hey just raise your hand up, and I will come and help you." That helps me. It is professors that are so willing and empathize with my situation and are willing to come in and help.

For Erin, the key factor for a professor being a resource was their willingness to provide her with additional support that the ARC could not provide. This support does not always need to be in the form of documented accommodations, but fills in the void between classroom instruction and her comprehension of class content.

Unfortunately for Erin, all of her professors were not willing to work with her and accommodate her disabilities. Therefore, Erin had to endure both types of professors; those who were willing to accommodate for her disabilities and those who were not willing to accommodate. Classroom accommodations are at the discretion of the individual professor as to what accommodations are acceptable in his/her class. The reasoning behind this is to keep academic integrity intact for each subject area as well as the unclear definition of reasonable accommodations. For Erin, her understanding was informed by her interactions with her professors. She explained:

> Some of them [professors] don't think I really need or some of them actually think that a student with disabilities shouldn't be given any accommodation, they think that allows laziness or slack…I think some of them are like [sigh] I've got to deal with this again. *I got to* do things differently just for one person…but for some of them, it is just like a burden, if I can say that…Not a lot of them [professors], but there are quite a bit of them that think that.

The word choice that Erin used to describe the feeling that she received from some of her professors clearly demonstrates that students with disabilities are not accepted by some professors at the collegiate level. The lack of acceptance is not based on a perception of ability or learning style differentiation, but on a perception of "laziness" and an unwillingness to actually complete the work/assignments. The extra "burden" that students with disabilities place on professors indicates that Erin did not feel accepted by these professors because she needed accommodations.

> I think they [the professors] *need* to understand that a lot of these things I'm actually, I mean nobody calls a disability on themselves, and even if they did, a lot of times it takes a lot of courage for you to be so different - let me use it that way, especially when you have a physical disability, and yet trying to live a normal life. It's not; it's not a piece of cake. It's work and if they would be more willing to understand the student - understand and then also not taking all of you as one think because my requirement my needs are not the same as another person, if they could just give you a few minutes and just get to understand you, then they can – it makes it easier. If they would be more willing to work with the accommodations that are there, I'm not talking about getting an easy way out, but I am talking about them *willing* to give the accommodations *when they are required*. Because I mean some of the accommodations you - *don't use them all of the time*. Like for me, a lecture class is very easier and I require *way less* accommodations compared to a lab class, so if professors are willing to first of all understand what the *need is* and then be willing to give the accommodations, I think that that would make things easier. Because for my professors that *understand me*, a lot of times it just takes one sitting with them, less than thirty minutes of talk, and they understand where I stand and the kind of maybe struggles, I have then my classes with them are usually *way easier* compared to professors that are not willing to understand, not willing to even try to understand and then usually it's a back and forth the entire semester and by the end of the semester, you don't even want to see each other [laughter] just because of misunderstandings that could have been taken care of.

As a result of her experiences, when Erin encountered new professors, she was very proactive with introducing her disabilities to them. She attempted to build a personal rapport with each professor. She said:

> A lot of times I'll try to create a relationship with the professor before the semester starts or *way early* in the semester…because a lot of times I will describe myself to them, go see them, and then maybe a little while later take to them the department letter from the disability office.

Erin does not bombard her new professors with her accommodations prior to introducing herself. The reason for this is because Erin wants to see their reaction to her physical disability. If they accept her physical disability when they initially meet, then when she returns with the ARC paperwork, she explains her learning disability and the accommodations. Erin wants to be seen as a person first rather than her disability dictating her identity.

Erin described her ideal professor. She said:

> It is one who once I give it [ARC paperwork] to them, just doesn't shove it away and be like "ok, sure." My ideal professor is one who is like ok, you know, looks at it and be like "Oh so this is what you need. Is this all, you know? What do *I need to do*? Is this similar to what I have done in the past with other students just sending the exam there? Is that how?" You know, kind of works on a plan with me *way ahead of time* and then now when I kind of talk with them and tell them some of the things that I require, then they are *willing to work on that* and they actually do not just say it, but they show it throughout the semester. Professors that get on my nerves like the one I had last semester try to be *so nice* when they are talking to you, but then they actually don't deliver.

Erin wants more than just lip service from her professors about her accommodations. She wants a professor who is going to follow through with the accommodations and be responsive to her needs as a student with disabilities. For Erin, these accommodations provide the tools that allow her to become successful within her classes. Without the help from professors who want her to succeed, the accommodations become obsolete. Erin provided an example of a professor who not only followed the accommodations, but made sure that Erin had the necessary assistance when she took her tests. She said:

> A lot of them are like, "Well my part is sending the test there, whatever you do with it, that's up to you." But I do have some, some that are you know they just want to get into it and do whatever they can do to help. I had one that actually allowed me to take it [the test]…She didn't want me to do it far away just in case and she let me use her office computer and she would come up like three times during the test just to check on me so yea, but very, very, very few that are willing to get that much involved.

By opening up her office as a site for Erin to take her test, this professor allowed Erin to have accommodations similar to the ones that she would have received from the ARC. However, this professor provided Erin with assistance during the test by allowing the opportunity for Erin to ask clarifying questions that may arise during the test. The option to have clarification during testing was something that could not be provided when Erin took her tests in the ARC. The professor Erin described understood that questions arise

while students take tests and it is important for students to be able to have those questions clarified immediately, especially students with disabilities who are already at a disadvantage.

Erin continued to describe the type of professors who are a resource for students with disabilities. She said:

> And some of them it is just normal, you know, they are *glad* that they can offer something to help *you* whatever it is just to help the person and this happens especially for professors that are *so willing* or *so want* to see their students succeed. So if there is *anything they can do*, they are so willing to give it. And I think to them, they are *so happy* at least there is a disability office that works with them to help make that happen.

It is this type of professor that Erin feels is the missing link between the accommodations offered by the ARC and the assignments within the classroom. Without this added assistance from professors who are willing to work alongside the ARC in providing Erin with the resources needed, success would be limited. Erin believes that if all of her professors were willing to work with her to the level of the professor she described, then she would achieve greater success.

Family, Friends, and Church as a Resource

Erin's support system for her disabilities was not isolated to the resources on campus. Erin found a lot of support from her immediate family, friends, and her larger church family. All three sources of support filled a need that encouraged Erin when she felt discouraged. Although Erin's mother continues to live in Kenya, Erin described her as very supportive of her pursuit of a college degree. Erin commented on her mother's overwhelming excitement when she spoke to her about her success in school. Because Erin's father was living in the United States during the event that hospitalized Erin with Left Sided Hemiplegia, her mother was the primary care giver. Erin described her

mother as knowing more and being more concerned about her physical disability and overcoming it, rather than her learning disability. Erin said that she did not discuss her learning disability in great detail with her mother and discussed it more with her father because he was her local support in the United States. In addition to Erin's mother being proud of her academic success, Erin stated that she looked toward her mother for spiritual encouragement.

During the regular school semesters, Erin lived in the dormitory rooms on campus, but when school was not in session, she lived with her father, who lived in the neighboring town. After Erin was diagnosed with a learning disability, her father supported her financially so she could devote more time to studying. She said, "He actually had to take a second job so I could quit my job and just pay attention to school." But her father's involvement did not end with financial support; he supported her through his constant encouragement.

The manner that Erin's father understood disability was one of the reasons why Erin had a positive outlook on life. He did not view disability as a trait that would automatically define the outcome of her life. She commented:

> He just considers me to have a limitation which he believes that everybody has limitations in life or weakness which he believes everybody has so he doesn't believe that I have a disability and he will never call me disabled.

Erin's father looked at disability as only one aspect of life and not something that only a few people encounter. He believed that every person had moments in their life that were challenging and limited one's ability, but that they did not make up the total summation of a person's life.

Erin suggested several times during the interviews that she did not have many friends on campus. She felt that her disability isolated her in two ways. The first way was through people not wanting to associate with a person with a physical disability and second because she devoted a large amount of time to her academic studying. The friends that she did have were very supportive and encouraged her despite her disabilities. Erin explained:

> I know my regular friends, a lot of them don't remember it [disability], because they kind of say that I don't give them a chance to remember that I have a disability just because I live - I'll behave normal and live normal.

Erin did not allow her disability to dictate her life. She worked hard to pursue her goal of graduating and having friends who did not view her solely on her disability gave Erin an added sense of security.

Erin explained that she was very dedicated to her religion. Her devotion acted as a resource to keep her motivated when she experienced trying events. Erin drops by her place of worship to talk with her pastor and pray with him for strength and the endurance to continue through life's hurdles. The encouragement she received allowed her to continue. Erin said:

> I love spending time at church, so I just drive over to church and you know I will find and have a talk with one or two people there; my pastor or whoever and just leave there, my spirit uplifted or I get a chance to pray and read the Bible and a lot of times I come back and I am, I am good – good to go [laughter].

Erin's church acts as a resource, providing her with a safe environment used to regenerate her soul and lift her spirits.

Without the academic resources from professors and the ARC as well as the support that she received from her family, friends, and church, Erin's daily struggles would be unbearable. The emotional support gained from the people that surrounded

Erin provided her with the encouragement that she needed to overcome the struggles she encountered with her disabilities. Without these supportive resources, the potential for Erin to accomplish her goals would be limited.

Time – Not Always on Her Side

Erin's physical and learning disabilities require her to devote additional time to compensate for physically maneuvering around campus, studying, and testing. According to Erin, academics do not come easy for her. She understood that she needed to put in large amounts of time studying and preparing for classes, but is not concerned by the additional amount of time she needed to spend. Erin just accepts the time commitment as part of the process and effort necessary to be successful in school. Erin's disabilities weigh on the amount of time necessary for her to complete her work and negatively affect her progress towards completing college. As a result, Erin feels that time is not always on her side.

Once Erin transitioned from her freshman to sophomore year of college, she noticed that she was devoting greater amounts of time to her schooling not only with studying, but also with preparing for classes and completing assignments. It was at this time that she was diagnosed with a learning disability through the ARC. Because of her commitment to education and with support from her father, Erin chose to stop working as a way to devote more time to her schooling. Although she only worked about fifteen hours a week, Erin felt that these additional hours were crucial for her to spend with her academics. With the additional time available for Erin's studies, she developed a method of studying that she feels works well for her, but continues to stress over class preparation. She said:

> I always got to be prepared. I have to plan things ahead of time. I have to get ready, if not I am a mess [laughter] and also it kind of wrecks you, it just displaces me because I can't really function at that time because I feel incapable. I feel not ready basically.

If Erin feels that she is unprepared for her classes, then she becomes frustrated before the class even begins. As a result, Erin developed a method that she uses to prepare herself for classes.

Erin described the different ways that she devotes time to her school work. She said:

> And this is not always successful, but this is how I try to do it…I will try to read ahead of or read the material that will be covered so kind of be ahead of the professor in reading the textbook. I have to make sure that I have my books ready, I have a mental note of where I am in my notes, I try to get back to the notes from the previous class that way when I get to class then I will *link them up to* from there and also *get myself ready* for that class ahead of time. You know, like get my mind ready make sure I have an idea of where we are and where we are coming from and where we are heading to, if that is possible.

Erin prepares for classes before the actual start time by reading the assignments that are required for that day's classes so that she can be familiar with the material prior to it being presented. Erin feels that by previewing the material in advance she will not be so overwhelmed when new material is presented. When it comes to the physical aspects of class itself, Erin arrives early so she can choose a suitable place to sit. This seat selection was contingent upon the subject and format of class. For laboratory classes, she wants to be at a corner station because it is easier for her to maneuver around her work area with the stronger side of her body and, the extra space allows her to move more freely. For lectures, she likes to sit near the back of the classroom so she can observe the entire room. Her hope is that she will not miss out on the happenings of class. When lecture style classes begin, she takes notes on the material presented in class and used an audio-

recorder like many other students. But for Erin, the physicality of taking notes itself is difficult because of the nature of her physical disability and causes her to work at a slower pace. When Erin is required to take arduous notes or when a professor constantly writes on the board or speaks without frequently stopping, Erin falls behind with the notes, missing portions of the content presented in class. After class is over, she asks her peers to borrow their notes so that she could check the accuracy of her notes and adds missing content. Here, it depends on the amount of notes and the style of instruction as to the amount of time that Erin has to devote to completing the class notes. Once Erin completes the process of ensuring the accuracy of her notes, she schedules an appointment to meet with the professor. It is at this time Erin requests that the professor review the class notes and she asks questions on areas that continue to be unclear for her. After the meeting with the professor is completed, she organizes and rewrites the entire notes into a new document. Because Erin is easily distracted, she likes to work in a quiet place and frequently goes to the quiet section of the library to rewrite her notes. According to Erin, the library is a place where she can also spread out multiple copies of notes as she condenses them. During this time, Erin also listens to the recorded lecture and again adds missing content to the notes. Erin feels that by completing these steps, it allows her to absorb information using multiple methods of learning.

Not only does Erin rewrite all of her notes from each class to reorganize them and check for accuracy, but she rewrites them as a way to help her remember the content. The method of learning by recopying notes was suggested to Erin by one of her professors; however, this method is very time consuming. When asked about the amount of time that Erin devotes to the process of note taking, she replied:

> It takes a lot of time…because you've got to go through the entire notes, rewrite them the first time and then go over them again and I'll make a summary and it is very effective in that once you've written something more than three times most of the time you'll remember it. It helps a whole lot more in the whole blanking out thing because I will try to remember what I wrote after.

This method is very effective for Erin because of the way that she retains information. Erin places her faith in the process of recopying notes because she respects her professor and values his opinion. During tests, Erin sequentially recalls information that she has copied multiple times based on visually picturing where the information was located in her notes. For example, when she is asked a question on a specific idea, she remembers where that idea is written in her notes based on the ideas around that one.

In addition to writing and rewriting her notes and in an attempt to retain more information, Erin listened to the audio recorded lecture over and over again. She believed the more times that she heard the lecture, the deeper the content would sink into her mind and ultimately help her during the test. Another study habit that Erin used was to talk out her notes when she studied. This was a way for Erin to remember the information by using auditory learning. These multiple modalities of learning are how Erin studies and she believes that they are very effective for her learning style.

I asked Erin about her learning style. She explained:

> I think one I am audio-visual…if I can see the same thing then it registers, but then also the writing part of it plays a big part so as much as I am seeing and hearing then also talking – writing it down also makes it stick and that's the reason why I told you, I rewrite my notes just to make it stick.

Despite the additional time it takes Erin to complete her method of studying, she believes that the added time is what makes the difference with her recalling the information for tests and the results are worth the effort.

Erin is in the midst of her senior year and notes that scheduling classes has become more difficult for her because of the limited availability of the required classes she needs for graduation. The issue with scheduling classes is compounded for her because she wants to give herself enough time between classes to take a break and physically rest her body prior to the start of the next class. She explained:

> It's getting easy in the sense that I'm getting used to *working on it*. It's getting harder in the sense that upper level classes are only available – they have *so few* and only available at certain times. But what I do is I try to not over burden a day with a number of classes. And then, when I talk to my professor, when I take to them my letters from the disability office, I explain to them and I want to understand from *day one***,** if I have to change an examination time "Are you ok with that or do I have to get to your class?" And then that way, I have it in mind. Then a lot of times what I do is *way ahead of class of exams***,** I look at all my exam schedules, confirm them with my professors, then see how they fit in the day.

Having back-to-back classes is physically exhausting for Erin and although she does not like scheduling them, she has had to resort to doing this in order to graduate. The larger issue for Erin with back-to-back classes becomes two fold - scheduling and taking tests in the ARC and professors' willingness to accommodate with time. She explains:

> So if I have a test maybe in one class and I know the next class is maybe - let's say I have a class at eight to nine-fifteen and then I have another nine thirty to ten forty-five, but I have a test in the eight a.m. class, a lot of times I know *I can't get* done with my test by nine fifteen. So I will talk to the professor and see is it ok for me to take my test at the end of the day when I am done with my classes that way I don't have to miss classes. A lot of times so far professors have been willing, *but there are times* that I have found that a professor is *not willing to work with me on that*. Then if they are not willing to work with me on that, then I will talk to the professor in the next class to see what kind of accommodations that I can get. Make them understand, I have a test, *before his class* and the other professor is *not willing* for me to take it later, which means I'll most likely come to class late, if not miss the class. So then me and the other professor will work and see if maybe, you know, I will give him my recorder to record the lecture or give it up to another student. Some of them will even talk to the class and see if I can get someone to get the notes from.

Erin has to go back and forth between her professors to work out a schedule that everyone will agree upon. This process not only requires additional time, but places a strain on her physically and emotionally. And on some occasions, she will have to spend extra time after both classes to take the test at a different time. This is especially hard when it is just a short quiz and she has to take the quiz either in the ARC or another time. Because of the time it takes her to complete even a short quiz, Erin would often miss important instruction given during the remainder of the class while she is still finishing her quiz in the ARC. A short quiz that the instructor may only want to devote five to ten minutes of class time could possible take Erin up to thirty minutes including the time that is necessary for Erin to travel between the ARC and class.

Erin becomes frustrated with the amount of time that is required to complete these quizzes because it involves more than just taking the actual quiz itself. She said:

> In the sense that it's sometimes frustrating thinking that, oh God, I have to walk all the way across the campus just to go to take a test. *I wish* it was *different. I wish I* was sitting in the class with everyone else. *I wish* I wasn't distract – I wouldn't be so distracted every time I try to even take a quiz, a simple quiz. *I wish* it was different. You know, *I wish* I didn't have to be the last person getting done with things. You know, I wish I got it easier. You know, I think in terms of if I didn't have a learning disability besides a physical disability, I'll probably be able to work a regular even if it's a part-time job. Why, because at least I wouldn't be taking that much time to get stuff, I would be using *that much time* for me to learn stuff. I don't know if that makes sense?

The accommodations that Erin receives for her disabilities weigh on the amount of time she has available to use. On testing days, Erin goes to her class and picks up her test from her professor. Then, she walks over to the ARC to begin her test. Erin's physical disability makes walking long distances laborious and some days she is exhausted by the additional trip across campus. The additional trip across campus to pick up the test increases Erin's stress and tires her out prior to beginning the test. The whole process of

taking short quizzes seems to be counter-productive. Erin should not have to exert additional energy and time to acquire accommodations that are supposed to help her. It seems that by receiving the accommodations she has to endure a greater hardship than if she were to take the quizzes or tests in class without any accommodations. All of this is unnecessary for Erin to endure. The process of going to class and picking up the test or quiz and then traveling to the ARC is not an issue for every one of her classes and varies depending on the professor. Yet when she does have to take the extra time consuming steps to obtain her test, it has a domino effect on the remainder of her daily schedule. If all of Erin's professors were organized so that quizzes were sent to the ARC, she would not have to endure the added time or stress related to receiving accommodations that are supposedly to be in place to help her.

Erin's accommodations state that she is allowed to have time and a half to complete her tests and quizzes. This means that if the class has one hour to complete the test, Erin will be allowed to have an hour and a half to complete the same test. But the ARC allows her to have as much time as she feels is necessary to complete the tests. This unlimited amount of time may not always be a positive factor for her accommodations due to the possibility of her over thinking or second guessing her answers. The additional time that she uses to complete the tests in the ARC interferes with the total amount of time that Erin could devote to other aspect of academics.

Even though time is not always on her side, Erin feels that the end result is worth the time commitment. She summarized her feelings about time and said:

> I will tell you this sincerely, the times that I have put *more time* just because I told you it takes me more time to learn, usually I perform *way better***,** if I slack on that, if I don't put in *that much time* it hurts me, I don't do as well and I am so

> frustrated with myself [laughter], so yes it's *way worth it* when I put in *way more time* to my studies.

All in all, Erin realizes that her disabilities affect her academics and she must put forth greater amounts of time than her peers. She is less concerned about the summation of time involved and more concerned with the end result. Erin believes that regardless of her frustrations, the additional time commitment will be worth the sacrifices put forth to achieving a degree. She said:

> It's not the most encouraging thing, but the way I like to look at it is I am going to get frustrated and I will take a break and try to give myself *a reason* to move on while it's frustrating while it's taking me way too much time, but then who cares? It's about me once I get to succeed, once I get to get it over with, once I get to graduate, then at least - it's not about how much it took me it's to be the same degree I get it will be the same degree the others take.

Erin understands that even though it may take her additional time to study or complete her academics, in the end, she will receive the same degree as her peers. And that degree is worth the efforts she has to put forth.

Success – A Defining Moment

Success for Erin is multifaceted because of her experiences with both physical and intellectual disabilities. According to Erin, the beginning of her higher education experience was horrifying, with many struggles. Erin's physical disability limited her capacity to maneuver around campus and fully participate in her classes. She struggled academically, which impacted the amount of time necessary for her to devote to independent learning, and the anxiety she experienced during testing all compounded together creating negative feelings about education. Then she was diagnosed with a learning disability, yet Erin continued. Even though she has endured many obstacles, Erin feels that she has experienced success in school and will continue to experience

success in the future. As a result, Erin views success in two distinct areas – success despite disability and success as graduation. Both realms open up opportunities for future success.

For Erin, success is a series of defining moments that allowed her to concentrate her focus towards achieving her goal. That goal for her is graduation; however, prior to achieving her goal Erin has had to endure many challenges and has had smaller accomplishments that define success for her. She said:

> The way I look at it is I have overcome a lot of obstacles and a lot of times it dawns onto me when I share my experiences and I hear a lot of people say, "I don't know if I was in your shoes, if I could have handled it." And I am like, then I am not as weak, I'm really strong. And, I view myself as a normal person.

Erin does not feel defeated when she evaluates the hurdles she has had to face in her young life. Overcoming a serious medical illness that left half of her body paralyzed as well as being diagnosed with a learning disability are more hardships than most people face in a lifetime. Erin developed a sense of victory rather than defeat as many people whom she has encountered reveal to her that they would have taken an easier path in life and not fared as well. For Erin disability then becomes a way that other people view her, which is contrary to her own perception of herself. Others view her as disabled, but she feels "normal" because she can do many things without any assistance.

Erin feels strong because she has experienced success despite these obstacles. She said:

> They [obstacles] made me stronger, they give me a way to tackle life, they've made me understand that yes I do have a disability that kind of makes me different, but at the same time not everybody – nobody is perfect, so everybody has at one time they have something that they are struggling with, but the greater thing is really making me stronger.

Even though Erin struggled and continues to struggle with her disabilities, she is able to understand that each individual struggles in life at some point. She challenges the idea that disability means inability and that disability means a permanent fixture in life. In order for Erin to succeed in life, she looks beyond her personal disabilities. She credits her experience with her disabilities with making her a stronger person – stronger for having to work through her disabilities on top of the same work other complete.

Erin credits her ability to maintain her focus on her goals because of her childhood rearing and constant encouragement from her father. She explained:

> A lot of times I will not, you know, allow whatever is limiting me limit me. I'm a person that my dad brought me up to believe that the sky is not the limit because if I aim at the sky more likely than not I'll, I'll not get to the sky, it will be below the sky, but if I aim higher than the sky then if I don't get above there whatever it is it is above the sky then I will be somewhere maybe at that sky where most people aim at, so yes there are obstacles, but I'm determined to go through it all and just come out successful and I know I have a lot of things that I want to do in life and some of them I will do them with the obstacles or without obstacles.

Erin's father instilled in her the priority to set high goals in life and even though a person may not achieve every created goal, they are a necessity for success. Erin believed that people who do not set career goals or life goals do not know where they want to go and have nothing to achieve. These people just live day-to-day without challenging themselves to be more than they are currently. And even though a person may have the ability and potential to achieve success in life, without goals, they do not have a plan to be successful. Erin knows there are potential obstacles that slow her progress towards her goals. These struggles or obstacles are what she bases her success upon. Each obstacle is one more challenge conquered and one step closer towards her goal.

Erin understood that her life was different when compared to other people because of her disabilities. She said, "I can't do it all." Based on Erin's understanding,

she has altered her career goal because of her physical disability and realigned it to one that was more conducive to her capabilities, but her goals continued to be grounded with education. She said:

> Definitely whether I am with or without a disability it changes life - it alters life and of course the quality of life. I believe and he [my dad] believes the same - it is not the same without education. So with or without a disability and my dad doesn't consider me to be disabled.

As a result, Erin takes the hand that she is dealt in life and moves forward, not dwelling on the past or what things could have been like if she did not possess both physical and learning disabilities. Erin realized that her disabilities affect her life and her future goals; however, in order for her to have a higher quality of life, she needed an education. For Erin, education provides the route for success. It is the catalyst for success without it; she would not have the same hope for a better life.

Erin's goal of becoming a nurse and returning to Kenya to improve its healthcare system has been altered because she personally needs better healthcare not readily available in Kenya. Erin does not quit when her physical disability prevented her from achieving her initial goal; she just altered her goal and continued towards the new goal. Although she may never return to Kenya to fulfill that goal, she wants to maintain a career in the healthcare by doing laboratory work and research to improve the healthcare conditions in Kenya. As for her learning disability, Erin progresses toward her goal, putting forth the time to achieve her goal of graduation.

I asked Erin how she was able to continue when she was discouraged and did not experience immediate success. She said:

> Keep myself *determined* and, and - God – keep reminding myself what it is that I am working towards, you know, what it is I want to achieve, what the *goal is* and look at the future, so yea kind of keep on looking at the future and what it is and

> what it holds…I have a goal that I am working towards and so *I have* to be sincere to myself about it, but at the same time, I have to *really work towards what it is* and more look at the benefits of what I am working towards and you know look at what the pains of today, the fruits that they bear tomorrow and so *that* motivates me to keep on going towards that and then because my goals is really what I want to achieve, then I work towards it and I have to keep on reminding myself that this is what I want to – this is what I want, so I got to keep going and *keep going towards it* until I *touch it*.

Again, Erin's faith in God keeps her grounded by focusing on the future where she believes success will lie. Her goals engross her persona and establish a purpose for all of her hard work and effort. As a result, Erin is very goal driven. She blocks out distractions that have the potential to prevent her from her goals and focuses on her goal of success. She is so intent on her goals that she describes them as tangible and physically able to reach out and touch them. This drive for success is overwhelming.

Due to Erin's experience with disability and by necessity, she refocused her goals by understanding that she had enormous potential and did not want to minimize her success. However, she struggles with success because of her disability. In order for Erin to have success, she must concentrate on her goals more than many other people. Erin is able to maintain her goals because of one key trait. She said:

> Focus, and focus, and more focus…Not to let too much distractions come my way and just focus a bit, you know, be more focused then I have been and just not let things, little things, stress me and not to let little things get into me and yea just focus on like I said before, just focus more on my strengths than my weaknesses.

By focusing on Erin's abilities rather than disabilities, she is able to minimize distraction.

Erin's largest and immediate goal is graduation. Because she is so goal driven, Erin focuses all of her effort and energies towards graduation. Erin believed that earning a college degree would successfully define who she was as a person rather than a disability. She said:

> It's actually going to define a lot of, I don't know what word we use, but in the sense that a lot of people never expected me to succeed, so it's going to be proving people wrong. And yeah, I have come this far and I am even going to do more.

Erin wants to prove the nay-sayers wrong. She wants to prove to people that disability may be limiting on the surface, but that people with disabilities can still experience success in higher education. Erin believes that by being a college graduate, she will be able to prove to people bases on her successful accomplishment. Erin continued:

> It's going to mean that I can actually – that I am capable. That *disability* is not *inability* and that we can always overcome obstacles. It's going to mean that the fact that I have achieved this, than I can do *more*. It's going to be like a motivation for me to keep on going and achieve more and also because there is a lot of people that have been involved in my success in my getting it. It's going to mean that I have now the key to go and touch someone else's life out there.

Erin knows that she could not experience success without support from many people. These people, who have helped her, have been instrumental in her success. Now that she has experienced success, she wants to do the same for others. She wants to use her experience with disabilities in college and help others. Erin understood that because she possessed disabilities she could not do everything, but there were many things that she could do. Erin described graduation day. She said:

> Oh my goodness [sigh]. I will be grateful more to God - I will actually dedicate my degree to my dad because he'll be kind of the reason why – the person that really, the key person that helped me come that far. It will also be a stepping-stone to the next level in my life. Oh my goodness, it will be one of the happiest days of my life. I will sing, you know, accomplishing that which at first was very dreadful to even start off, it will be a very, very satisfying experience.

Erin views graduation as a stepping-stone that will lead to her next goal. Erin believes that she could not have been successful without the support from her father, who she gives credit for her success.

Because Erin is very close to her goal of graduation and is almost finished with that goal, she is already contemplating her next goal. She said:

> It means with or without graduate school, I have accomplished something in life and I can still use it for the best. I can turn it around before me is a vast of possibilities. It's an open field of possibilities, if I can say that and it means still my life will be better in the sense that I know that I have accomplished something and it still will be a motivation for me and hey I will work myself – work, work as much as I can. But my *main goal* again is to touch people's lives for the best. That is one of the reasons, but that's not the main thing. My main goal is because I want that *key* to be able to go out there and actually be able to touch people far and wide - be able to be a blessing to people's lives. Right now and before I even graduate it means starting to think about tomorrow. What next? It's going to mean that I am going to have to start working on my post-grad[uate]. Yeah and it's going to mean *yeah* a lot more doors open for me and *yeah* my highest level of education is not high school anymore - it's college.

The hard work and struggles that Erin endured and overcame provide her with feelings of success and achievement in many ways, as a response to others' perceptions of her as a person with a disability. These feelings of success have instilled in her the confidence to want to go beyond her bachelor's degree and pursue graduate school.

Summary

Erin started her higher education career with a physical disability that took a toll on her emotionally and physically. Her approach to success was not to allow her disability to be an obstacle for her capabilities. Erin established her goal of graduation and set forth to complete it. Only by undivided focus was Erin able to complete it.

In the next section, I turn to Ryan. He is the fourth participant in the study. Ryan has two hidden disabilities - a learning disability and Bi-Polar Disorder. He was diagnosed with the learning disability in elementary school and the Bi-Polar Disorder while he was in college. Ryan's story is very different from the other participants because he knew prior to attending college that he had a disability. As a result of his

knowledge, he sought out the resources from the ARC as soon as he arrived at his first university. And upon his transfer to a second school, he looked for a university that specifically advertized the services of their ARC and actively recruited students with disabilities.

Ryan - Dual Disabilities

Ryan is the only participant in the study who was diagnosed with a learning disability in elementary school and was provided special education services throughout his elementary and middle school career. Ryan, like Jane, is an older, nontraditional student and claimed that he did not feel the stigma of disabilities was as great for him as for other students, specifically younger students. Early in the first interview, Ryan revealed that not only did he possess a learning disability, but he was also diagnosed with Bi-Polar Disorder his first year of college. This revelation allowed Ryan to provide two stories about his experience with the stigma of disabilities - one about his learning disability and one about his Bi-Polar Disorder.

While living in Michigan, Ryan was diagnosed with an Auditory Processing Deficit in Reading and Writing in first grade. From the point of diagnosis on and continuing through the remaining years of his school career, Ryan struggled with reading and writing. In fact, Ryan admitted that he still struggled with reading and writing in college. Shortly after being diagnosed with a learning disability, Ryan was provided with reading and writing support services through a pull-out method of instruction. In other words, Ryan was given small group or one-on-one instruction in his area of academic weakness – reading and writing. At the same time, he recalls that his same-age-peers

back in his classroom were also being taught reading and writing; however, they were progressing at a faster pace. This separation was disturbing to Ryan, who did not want to be excluded from his peers because he did not want to appear different from them in any way.

Ryan talked about the stigma of disabilities that he faced as a child when he was pulled out and separated for small group instruction. Thinking back, he said:

> I guess I don't want to be singled out from the rest of the group. I think it is more as a child, the kids on the "short bus" they go to the special classroom, they don't interact just because and I guess [I was] scared of being classified as being retarded that was more as a child.

Any sign leading to Ryan being viewed differently than his peers was horrifying for him. The language that he used to describe the specific areas for special education students was very dichotomous and those were spaces with which he did not want to be associated. He especially did not want to be labeled as being "retarded" due to what he perceived as its negative connotation, similar to the other terms he used - short bus and special classroom.

Ryan did not want to be socially isolated from his peers because of the stigma he felt was attached to learning disabilities. He explained in more detail and said:

> I guess the stigma was when I was up in Michigan for about a year. I went to an actual special ed[ucation] school and I rode a special bus. I went to a camp that had everybody from Down syndrome to just learning disabilities and I was fine when I was with all that group, but when I interacted with the kids, the normal kids on the block, and they didn't understand - there was some stigma. Kind of why are you having to be on that one? Why are you on that bus and not this bus?

Ryan experienced the stigma of disabilities to a greater extent when he was bussed to a separate school for students with disabilities. At first not only was Ryan taught in a different classroom, but now he was separated in every social experience relating to

school from his neighborhood friends. This meant isolation, fear of being different, gave meaning to the attached label of disability, and weighed on his identity. For both Ryan and his friends, they could not explain the reasoning behind the separation because his disability was not corporal in nature. The stigma of disabilities for Ryan was established when he was separated from his neighborhood peers when he went to a separate school and rode a separate bus. It was only when Ryan was around other students with disabilities while attending summer camp that he did not experience the stigma of disabilities like he experienced at home. Because Ryan possessed a hidden disability, a learning disability, he was more aware of the stigmatizing terms "retarded," "short bus," and "special classroom" – labels he did not want attached to him.

Once in high school, Ryan explained that he was no longer provided with one-on-one, pull-out instruction and that he was in regular courses that were considered college preparatory. Although Ryan noted he was in regular classes without support for his learning disability, he continued to struggle with reading and writing. He also believed that the courses he took were only preparing him for a community or junior college and not a four-year university. According to Ryan, this lack of preparation and not having accommodations from the ARC caused him to struggle during his first two years of college in general, but specifically with the basic college reading and writing courses.

Although Ryan did have experience with both separate bussing and special education prior to college, which made him question his ability, it is interesting that he claimed the stigma of disabilities did not affect him as an adult or non-traditional college student; however, it did affect his choice of major. It is important to note that Ryan graduated with a video production degree and during the interview process he was

working towards a second undergraduate degree in computer security. Ryan explained how his disabilities affected his decision of choosing a major for his first undergraduate degree. He said:

> Definitely…because I had to look at what was I going to be successful at. I knew anything that was heavy in concentration in math like for instance business, it was going to be a real tough haul because with math being one of my weaknesses there is a lot of math required to get into business school and throughout business school. And the other one was - I like science, but like I said the nursing or medical the kind of studying required to get through that course work, I didn't think that I would be successful. And I just saw that nursing, I'm not real good with math and some of the sciences and so that I wanted to kind of – I didn't see that field and then the education with - I have been diagnosed with Bi-Polar. So I was a little scared to get into the education because if the Bi-Polar got out and I'm teaching small kids or something like that and the stereotype is a little bad…I think that if I didn't have the Bi-Polar, I think education would have been one of my top picks because I enjoy seeing the light turn on when I am showing somebody something.

Ryan admitted that he was not very good in academic areas like math and science, so he steered away from the medical and business fields. This decision made sense for Ryan due to his reading and writing disability. These majors had the potential to overwhelm him with large amounts of reading and mathematics that accompany them and lead to frustration after spending so much time and effort studying without success. But the reason for Ryan steering clear of the education field was not because of his learning disability or academics, it was because of the Bi-Polar Disorder and the stigma attached to it. It appears Ryan was afraid that if he was teaching young children and the knowledge of his diagnosis of Bi-Polar Disorder emerged it would negatively impact his students in some way. And that the perception would lead to parents being afraid of him teaching their children causing him to lose his job and ruin his career.

Even though Ryan was aware that he struggled in academics because of his learning disability, he did not feel the need to reveal his disability when he began college.

He said, "When I started [college] my first year, I didn't do anything with the LD." As a result, Ryan did not have any accommodations in place to help him with academics. Again, Ryan commented that he steered away from course work and even a major area of study that had large concentrations of classes relating to math and writing. He focused more on his strengths and areas that he felt comfortable with learning, hoping to avoid or at least putting off as long as possible the revelation of his learning disability. According to Ryan, he understood his learning disability differently than many others and said:

> The way I understand LDs…you won't show it because if you were *that extreme* you would be classified as retarded or having Down syndrome or something like that because the way I understood it was you are an average person, but you *learn different*. So for the rest of the group, you won't be able to pick up on it. Just like someone with dyslexia, they could be really smart at some stuff, but when it comes to reading, they can't read and write because everything is flipped for them…I just happen to be given a couple of different ways to learn, so I – I think as a child, I didn't understand, I didn't like it, I was picked last, now it is just I happen to learn differently. So I don't see it as a crutch or a birth mark or something like that.

Again, Ryan used the term "retarded" to describe what he felt was a label for an individual with an extreme disability and the fear that other people could potentially associate him with that label and as being "retarded" because he had a learning disability. The association between the term and society's perception was too much for him to accept. Ryan did not think that his learning disability was going to prevent him from being successful in college and later in life. He felt that if he worked hard and put forth adequate effort, he would succeed. But he did not want to have an association with being different or having a learning disability during college because of his experience with special education as a child and the impact it had on his feelings towards education and his identity. He explained:

> I think because college is so *different* than your elementary through high school, there really isn't [a stigma] because everybody is – at the college level, you are an individual you are not trying to follow the pack, you are not trying to be identified, as identified as, ok I belong to this group. I think that when you get to the college level, you try to identify who you are.

Ryan felt that the disability label and stigma associated with it became less important in college and that other factors became more important as identifying traits such as major area of study, career interests, and leisure activities.

Due to Ryan being diagnosed with Bi-Polar Disorder his first year of college, he received counseling from the department of student services to help him work through some emotional conflicts he was experiencing in his life. This larger department of student services included other offices, specifically one devoted to students with disabilities. Even though Ryan was struggling with academics during those first two years of college, he did not receive any accommodations for his learning disability. It was not until he almost failed his first college and started searching for another college to attend that he decided that he needed to access services for his learning disability. The process that Ryan undertook to transfer colleges was not taken lightly. He knew because of his learning disability that he needed additional assistance in order to be successful. He found a small private college that he felt could accommodate his disabilities. This college targeted students with disabilities via its recruitment brochures by offering smaller classes and additional small group, class-specific instruction combined with and over and above regular classes. Those services were offered at the rate of double tuition. Ryan initially felt that this additional support would help him academically without having to reveal his disabilities in order to receive extra help. However, in order for Ryan to receive this additional assistance, he needed to provide documentation of his

disabilities. This required Ryan to undergo diagnostic tests to re-establish his learning disability because he did not continue his accommodations and transition them between high school and college.

Once Ryan began at this new school, he felt more comfortable with his learning disability because he was around others who were in similar situations. He claimed he did not feel the stigma of disabilities because of this environment. He commented about his new college and said:

> Once I got to the college level, I didn't see a stigma with it. I just figured, you know, I know a college education, without it, you're very limited to what you can do or have access to try to get into. So that wasn't a big deal, I think that for me, I saw the stigma in the lower grades for the people that were in the "special ed" that were separated from the rest that didn't learn all of the social skills and how they got treated and I didn't and because of my experience I never felt that stigma of ok, I've got an LD, you know, I'm on the short bus. You know, I'm not on the same par as somebody else.

This is the second time that Ryan felt comfortable with his disability because he was around others who encountered similar difficulties and situations. The first time was when he attended summer camp and the second time was when he transferred to his second college. In both situations, people with disabilities were made to feel as if they were part of the group and not separated because of their disability. In turn, there was minimal focus on specific disability traits that separate individuals compared to what they typically experienced in their daily lives. However, Ryan appeared to continue to struggle to some degree with the stigma of disabilities.

When asked if the stigma of disabilities continued to affect Ryan, he said:

> I don't think so anymore. I say maybe when I was younger because I didn't quite click in everything and I can look back at some of the sports and some of the other social awkwardness I might have had because I didn't quite comprehend my surrounding…I felt a little like an outsider.

Ryan did not feel like an outsider when he was surrounded by others with disabilities and provided with academic support to help him work through his area of disability, but he was affected as a child. The experience of possessing a disability as a child continued to evoke strong feelings for Ryan.

Ryan continued to claim that he did not experience the stigma of disabilities while he was in college and said, "I just happen to be one of the older ones." Now that Ryan is an older non-traditional student, he viewed the social aspects of college life and the possession of a learning disability differently from when he was getting his first undergraduate degree. He said:

> I think the *bigger thing* is that especially at a, a school like [this college], you got people going and coming all of the time and some people are only going into class, they are not interacting after class, so your social setting is completely different. Where as if you went to a school that had a dormitory and you are seeing the same group of *students everyday***,** then I would say you could have a stigma. But even at [the other college], there wasn't a stigma for it. Actually there was more kids that wanted to get into the [student support program] so they could get the extra help, but they wouldn't qualify because they only took a certain amount.

Some students without disabilities who were struggling with course work wanted academic support; however, this support was not provided because they did not qualify. The stigma of disabilities was lessened because those students experienced success. For Ryan's second undergraduate degree, he was not living on campus nor was he involved with many of the social aspects of his college experience. This limited social exposure allowed for Ryan to maneuver through campus silently without many individuals even knowing his presence on campus. Because Ryan was not socially connected to the college, he could come and go as he pleased without many people noticing. Three factors seemed to contribute to Ryan's feelings; age, living situation, and experience. These

three factors allowed Ryan to seamlessly earn a degree without revealing any personal traits to the people he met on a daily basis.

Although Ryan claimed that the stigma of disabilities did not affect him, he was afraid of the way people would view him based on his disabilities. Only when probed did he provide small pieces of information about his learning disability. For the Bi-Polar Disorder, he hid it because he felt it was more stigmatizing and damaging to him than his learning disability. He said:

> And I think for me, like I said before, I happened to be diagnosed Bi-Polar. That's something I tend to keep much more quiet and under than I do the LD. If someone asks me about it, I don't mind sharing, but I don't wear a t-shirt that says, "Oh by the way, I have a learning disability. How about you?"

There is a shift in the way Ryan described his disability. He contended that he does not want others to know and then he opens up the possibility for him to reveal his learning disability over his Bi-Polar Disorder because he felt that one was less socially stigmatizing for him.

Ryan hid his Bi-Polar Disorder because he felt that that information will cause people to reject him based on one characteristic. These feelings of rejection are based on Ryan's personal history with disabilities. Although Ryan is somewhat open to talking about his learning disability with others, he does not intentionally bring it up in conversations. It is only when he is questioned about his learning disability that he will share. He said:

> I don't usually just bring it right up off the bat. "Hey, I got a learning disability." Same thing if someone was a recovering alcoholic. I don't think they go right up to somebody and say, "By the way, I am a recovering alcoholic."

For Ryan, a person with a learning disability, just like a person who is a recovering alcoholic, always has to guard themselves against the associated stigma. Revealing

personal traits that have been shunned by society, as well as his personal experiences, are the underlying factors that lead Ryan to keep his disabilities a secret.

Summary

Ryan believed that the stigma of disabilities was more prevalent for him when he was a child, and because of his age it was not a stigmatizing factor for him, but Ryan still felt it necessary to hide his disabilities and not disclose them to others. It is clear that Ryan may no longer view disability as a stain on his identity; however, it continued to affect him as he was pursuing his undergraduate degrees. In the next section, I will briefly describe and outline Ryan's understanding of the ARC at the college Ryan earned his first undergraduate degree, then I will turn to the manner in which the ARC Ryan is currently using was one resource for him in his pursuit of an education.

Resources Equals Tools

Ryan's perspective of the ARC was more varied than the other participants in this study because he used the services of the ARC at two of the three colleges he attended. Due to this experience, Ryan understood the ARC as a resource available to him because he possessed a disability. Ryan perceived the accommodations provided by the ARC as individual tools and by having access to these tools, he believed he was able to be on a more leveled playing field with his peers for academic areas where he possessed academic weaknesses due to his disability. Ryan believed that the missing link between being able to academically compete on the collegiate level was not only knowing the tools available to students with disabilities, but using them. He said:

> I think if you are given the right tools, you get to compete with everybody else. But I think I have seen students, fellow students, that have not taken advantage of that and then you don't see them next semester because they didn't have, they might not have known, hey if I'm taught a little differently, this stuff is going to

> click…I feel that if you have the right tools you can make it through. So you don't have the struggles, you don't have to – it doesn't have to been an obstacle course to try to get an education.

Ryan learned his lesson the hard way about the importance of the tools provided by the ARC when he almost failed out of his first college. At the time, he did not have any academic support nor did he want others to know he possessed a disability. Ryan's understanding of the ARC was based on his experience of not having accommodations and having limited success versus having accommodations and having greater success. The ARC was the resource that allowed Ryan to access the tools to progress through college as a student with a disability.

When Ryan transferred to his second college, he sought out a school that was supportive and had a more conducive environment for students with disabilities. At Ryan's second college, support services that were provided to students with disabilities were incorporated into the additional, small group instruction and student support system. This support system was woven into specific core academics and viewed as an integral part of the success for students with disabilities. The academic support consisted of Ryan attending all of his regularly scheduled classes with his peers. Just like many other students, Ryan took notes, completed assignments, and participated in class discussions. During the regular scheduled classes, Ryan received no additional support within the class itself; however, after the class was over, he went to a second class to receive academic support. This second class was taught by a different instructor who was more familiar with educational learning strategies that exceptional learners could benefit from using, and was taught in tandem with the first class. For example, if Algebra was the first class, Ryan would have a second Algebra class taught by a different professor. The

format for the second class was different from the first class, but it followed the same content as the first class. There were only three to five students in the second class and the focus was on learning strategies and techniques to comprehend the content from the first class. The primary focus of the second class was to provide students with disabilities alternative methods not typically used in college classrooms in an effort to aid in the process of gaining and retaining knowledge. Ryan commented about his learning and said:

> For me, it's all about the visual and how it was represented. Is it represented with some repetition? I don't always pick up the material from just reading it once or being told these are the directions once. I have to kind of have repetition and I have to, I have to see it and touch it.

Ryan described his learning style as needing frequent repetition and review to retain information. Due to the pace of instruction at the college level, his learning style was not typically incorporated in classes. Ryan felt that by not having the accommodations in the first class, his disability was down-played and it gave him a sense of academic equality with his peers. And by having an opportunity to be taught the content in a more hands-on manner as it was in the second class, Ryan was able to learn using his style of learning, and then, able to demonstrate his ability by earning good grades. Both methods of learning or instruction had to be in place for Ryan to be successful in college.

The idea of a one-size fits all method of instruction and learning was challenged by this second college's approach to learning. Ryan explained:

> Basically, I would go to class and then depending on the subject we were taking for instance Biology. We would actually sit down - go over what the chapter was. In the Biology case, we had all of these different puzzles to help us with the memorization. So for instance, if we were going over the circulatory system, we'd have a puzzle that would actually break it down by not only human beings, but also whatever animal that they were describing so that we would have the constant memorization and the repetition of working it out. It was more going

> through the material helping us with, you know, homework to an extent, but was actually kind of re-teaching us the material so that we could, we could grasp it.

The academic support that Ryan received may have contributed to the way he understood how he comprehended and learned content. Because the academic support was designed like another regular class, Ryan did not feel separated because of his disability. Ryan said:

> But even at [my second college], there wasn't a stigma for it. Actually there were more kids that wanted to get into the ASO [Academic Support Office] so they could get the extra help, but they wouldn't qualify because they only took a certain amount.

This extra help was actually designed for all of the students with disabilities and was a tool that allowed for Ryan to adequately maneuver through coursework, but because of the manner in which it was perceived, other struggling students wanted to access the support. Rather than the resource being viewed as a stigma for students who were not successful, it was viewed as a way to help students who had a hard time in college level courses.

When I asked Ryan about his feelings when he initially asked for assistance from the ARC in the study, he responded:

> I just basically knew that I had to have the resources when I graduated from [my second college], I'd be stupid not to take advantage of the same when I'm going for a second degree. I just took it as one of those – I'm not – I'm not different from anybody else. I just, I learn differently, so if that gives me a fighting chance to get a degree versus not getting it, I am going to use the tools that I have to get through.

Even though Ryan possessed a learning disability and once he arrived at the college in this study, he did not feel separated from his peers as he previously had. He understood the importance of having a college education in order to pursue his goals in life. Initially, Ryan struggled with accessing the resources and in order for Ryan to be successful he

needed accommodations from the ARC. Again, Ryan contends that the stigma of disabilities was more prevalent when he was younger and for other individuals with more severe disabilities.

At the time of the interviews, Ryan was working for an office supply company. He worked regular hours, but did not make enough money to fully financially support himself and he referred to his job as dead-end. As a result, Ryan was living with his parents, who supported him. Ryan hoped that when he completed his computer security degree, he would be able to move out from his parent's home and find his own place to live.

Specific Tools

Although the school in this study did not have a support system like the one Ryan previously attended, he became more aware of the specific accommodations available to him. According to Ryan, accessing the ARC was the overall encompassing resource and from that larger resource, Ryan had access to tools or accommodations to support his education. Ryan's accommodations included having access to an in-class note taker, extended test taking time, and a separate, less distracting testing room. Each provided support for Ryan to be able to progress through college.

Ryan's Auditory Processing Disability thwarted his ability to take notes and comprehend class lectures simultaneously and being provided with an in-class note taker, helped to alleviate Ryan's difficulty with this task. For this accommodation, the ARC provided carbon paper so that another student in each of Ryan's classes could take his/her own notes without interfering with their learning or instruction while at the same time accommodating Ryan's learning disability. This way the note taker did not waste his or

her time by writing two sets of notes and was able to immediately provide a copy to Ryan. Ryan also took his own notes in class, but he used the carbon copied notes to ensure that he had all of the information correctly written. Allowing Ryan to concentrate less on note taking during class instruction enabled him to devote his focus on the content of the professor's lecture and the events in class rather than focusing on the task of taking notes.

At first, Ryan approached his professors and allowed him or her to arrange someone to take the notes for him. He explained:

> [T]he teacher would actually assign somebody to it. They would say, "Hey, we have somebody that needs some extra help. Would someone be willing to take notes?"

On many occasions, the first volunteer became Ryan's note taker without any pre-qualifications or quality control measures put in place to ensure the notes were complete and/or accurate. Unfortunately for Ryan, not everyone who volunteered to take notes took good notes. Although the accommodation was in place, receiving poor quality notes created a difficult situation for Ryan. The successfulness of the accommodation was contingent upon the note taker's ability to write down, copy, and summarize the imperative information from class.

The accommodation was put into place to support Ryan, but it was not working. After several failed attempts of getting poor quality notes, Ryan decided to become personally responsible to find people to take the notes for him – people Ryan described who took good notes. He said:

> And I have found that it was better that I looked around and saw who was actually taking the notes because sometimes the note taker I got in the past by the teacher had worse notes than mine.

Ryan commented that at one point there was a stigma associated with having a note taker, but it was becoming less of an issue for him. He understood that having a note taker was a beneficial tool towards his pursuit of an education, but the effectiveness was based on the quality of the notes.

Approaching individuals to take notes was not an easy accomplishment for Ryan. He said:

> It's just, you know, a little nervous at first because it's a little awkward, but…then I finally got, you know, enough courage to just look around and see who was taking better notes. You try to spark up a friendship. I've kind of gotten over it now. It is a little embarrassing at first, but typically, it all depends on who you ask. I'll be honest, I typically ask the girls to help out. Most of the guys I don't, I might see them as study partners, but I typically don't go to one of the guys or one of the younger guys, "Hey, can you take notes?"

Ryan further explained how he approached potential note takers. He said:

> I just kind of gage the person that I am asking, typically they're an older student or they are someone that I'd see, you know, I would strike up the conversation with - say, "Hey my notes really stink, you know, would you mind," to boost their ego a little bit. Like one girl last semester, I ended up giving her a pen or something like that, you know, I went out and bought a [university] pen just to say thanks. I know it wasn't that big of a deal, but I appreciate that you know, helping me out. Because it helps me seeing someone else's notes, comparing it to my own, and seeing what I am missing. I typically try to disarm them a little bit by saying, "Hey, your notes are really great, I'm not so great." And then depending on their reaction then I will go, "Hey, by the way I kind of have an LD." I usually don't start the conversation with, "I've got an LD. Can you help me with my notes?" I typically say, "Hey your notes are, you know, you really take some nice notes. I'm kind of weak at it. Would you mind?"

Ryan did not like to provide any information about his disability or the reason he was requesting assistance with his class notes. At this point, the stigma of disabilities overlapped with Ryan discretely acquiring accommodations. He had to reveal at some point his limited ability to take notes in order to access better notes, and on another point he wanted good quality notes in order to have the right tools to study. Ryan downplayed

and even refrained from discussing his disability with most people and only revealed a few minor details.

Although Ryan said that the stigma of disabilities was greater for younger students, it continued to be an influencing factor in his life for revealing his disability especially when he used the tool of having a note taker. Ryan believed that having this tool increased his ability to perform at the same level as his peers, but only when he received good quality notes that potentially could be used when completing assignments and taking tests.

Test Taking Tools

Ryan's test taking tool was two-fold – extended test taking time to complete each of his tests and being allowed to take his tests in an environment that had fewer distractions than those that occurred in classroom testing situations. Although Ryan was allowed to take his tests in the ARC, he liked to begin each semester by taking the first test of each course in the classroom with everyone else without accommodations. There were multiple reasons as to why Ryan came to this decision. First of all, Ryan wanted to be able to see how he personally improved his test taking ability semester-over-semester and moreover he had a personal goal of self-improvement. Second, he did not want the professor to view him as a lazy student with a disability only desiring to have an easy experience and grade. Even though Ryan had a learning disability, he did not want to use it as an excuse for his performance and he believed that the tools or accommodations were the leveling factor for his success. Third, he did not want to separate himself from his class peers. Ryan strived to only use accommodations to be successful and not abuse

them in any way. But for Ryan there were other reasons that were influential to his decision about the first test. He explained:

> I typically like to take them [the tests] in class just because I know how much of a royal pain it is to get the paper work from the professor, go to the testing room, and typically since I am taking a lot of more, you know, after five o'clock [classes, the] testing center is only open a certain amount of time. So, I just, I work around it.

Two concerns emerge from Ryan's statement. Ryan revealed that in order to use the test taking accommodation, he would have to go to class, pick up the test from the professor at the classroom, and travel across campus to the ARC's testing room to complete the test. If going through the process to obtain the test was not enough work as well as time consuming for Ryan, he would only be able to use the ARC's testing room during its normal business hours of eight o'clock in the morning to five o'clock in the evening or schedule his test for the one day of the week that the ARC was open until seven o'clock with extended evening hours. For some tests when his evening class did not begin until five o'clock, two hours to take a test was not extended time especially when the class was not scheduled to be over until after seven o'clock. In actuality, based on the ARC's hours of operation, Ryan would have more time to complete his test in class than in the ARC's testing room.

Ryan commented that some professors became concerned when he wanted to take his test on an earlier or later day than the rest of the class. The specific concerns were testing security and test readiness. Some of Ryan's professors did not want him to share the contents of the test with other students who had not yet completed the test. One of the ways to prevent test information from leaking out would be for the professor to create another version of the test. This concerned Ryan because he did not want to put an

unnecessary burden on his professors to accommodate his disability. Ryan was under the impression that he was the only student who required testing accommodations in his class. Due to confidentiality with disabilities, Ryan, like the other students in this study, only saw himself as having to request accommodations and was almost unaware that there were other students in similar situations. In the event that Ryan had to take his test earlier than the scheduled time, the potential existed for him that he may not receive all the content or material required for the test, thus putting him at a disadvantage for the test.

Due to the scope of Ryan's disability, he was able to use extended test taking time for almost all of his tests including the ones that were not in his specific area of disabilities. So I asked Ryan, if he needed extended test taking time for every test he took. He responded:

> Certain ones, I mean if I have two hours to take an exam or something like that I usually don't feel the need to come in here [the ARC] and take it, but on certain subjects if it's a lot of math, then having the extra time and not having the distractions and looking at the clock and seeing people turn it in, it tends to help.

Ryan's class schedule was one of the reasons why he was able to take his tests in the classroom a majority of the time. Because he mostly took night classes that typically met one time per week and were between two and three hours in length, there were many occasions Ryan did not require additional time for his tests and he did not have to use this accommodation. However, there were situations when Ryan did need the extended test taking time and a less distracting environment to complete his tests. Upon further inquiry about testing, Ryan became visibly flustered and said:

> Most of the time, it is just to…[I] need more - need more time and sometimes I need the a - I can sometimes - when I get nervous, I get distracted and to be in an area where I am not I don't have the distractions; tends to help out.

Ryan's appearance when he was probed about test accommodations changed. As viewed from the above interview excerpt, he did not speak in a complete thought rather he started and stopped four times before finishing his thought.

Ryan was mostly enrolled in evening classes when the ARC was closed. Not having access to the ARC during class hours caused problems for Ryan because he was not able to utilize the tools put in place to help him - specifically extended test time and a less distracting, quieter environment for testing. To overcome this situation, Ryan believed that if he approached each of his professors and explained his dilemma, they would understand and together they could come to an agreement with accommodations. Ryan explained:

> Sometimes the professor just lets me have it and take the extra fifteen minutes. Typically I have already, I have already brought that matter up to the professor to begin with and they are already *aware* that I am probably going to be there the whole time and they will typically work with me.

Ryan felt that this was a better compromise for both his professors and himself. He would be able to take the test (at least the first test) in class without having to alter the time schedule of the test, the professors would have the peace of mind about the test's security, and no additional version of the test would have to be created for one student.

It was only after completing the first test that Ryan made his decision about where to take future tests. According to Ryan, three factors played into this decision – test format, distractions, and grade. Ryan felt that if the test was in a multiple choice format, he would be able to take the test in class without accommodations. He said that the multiple choice style of testing was more cut and dry because the correct answer was provided and it was his job to figure out which one was correct. If the tests were in essay format or contained large amounts of math, he preferred to take them in the ARC with

extended time. The amount of distractions that occurred in class during tests varied depending on the specific individuals and the instructor of the class. Some professors were more lenient with the amount of noise that was acceptable during tests. Other professors routinely interrupted tests to clarify or answer student questions. For the classes that had more interruptions, Ryan was more distracted and definitely needed accommodations and took his tests in the ARC. When the test was graded and returned to the students, Ryan was able to gage his performance. If he was satisfied, not only with his grade, but also with the format of the test as well as the amount of distractions he incurred during the test, he continued to take his tests in the classroom without accommodations. However, if any one of the factors were not conducive to his ability to take his test, then he used the testing accommodations of the ARC. All three factors influenced Ryan's decision to use the tools provided by the ARC and in the end it was his choice whether to use the tools.

Personal Tools – Professors and Tutors

Although professors are not officially listed as an accommodation, Ryan felt his professors were a tool that he relied upon to help him on a regular basis and viewed them as support within his classes. He believed that his professors were the key to understanding the content and were responsible for assigning grades. Ryan believed that if his professors were aware of his disability and saw him putting forth the effort to complete the work to the best of his ability and using the available support resources for students, they would view Ryan in a more favorable light as opposed to someone with a disability who used the disability label as a crutch for personal gain. As a result, Ryan approached his professors at the beginning of each semester following the conclusion of

the first class session and explained to them his disability and how it affected his learning. He provided the paperwork from the ARC that outlined the approved accommodations that were available for his use. He said:

> I think opportunity is there for anybody. I don't, I think - I'll be honest having the paperwork to give to a professor that says, "I have an LD," puts me in a different light, you know, I have to show up for class otherwise that paper is meaningless… I give them that paperwork that says this is what I have - they're more than willing, as long as I'm not slacking off, to give me at least a fighting shot… So I think it makes a big difference.

By informing his professors about his disability, he attempted to gain their support through showing his willingness to work by putting forth the appropriate effort. Ryan felt that by providing professors with the knowledge of his accommodations at the beginning of the semester, he could easily access and utilize them at any point during the semester to help him achieve success.

Ryan explained how he approached each of his professors and said:

> I basically pull them, talk to them off to the side and say, "For right now I would like to take the exams in your class, but I *might* want to take exams in the testing [room]."

By telling his professors that he would like to take the tests in the classroom despite the approved accommodations, he believed that this would demonstrate that he was not trying to create more work for them, but rather he was willing to put forth additional effort to earn his grade; however, he still wanted the option of having testing accommodations in the event that they became necessary. There were times when Ryan felt that a distraction-free setting would benefit him when taking certain tests. In order for him to utilize this tool, he had to plan out his semester's test schedule in advance. Ryan explained how he went about requesting accommodations for certain subject areas and tests when he felt a quiet environment would better suit his needs. He said:

> [T]ypically as long as I'm not saying the day of the test, "Can you give me special consideration?" Plus the way the testing - the way they have it set up *you have to tell* them in advance. They've got to know about it and I have found out that that's, that's fine and I just have to go write it on the calendar and most - I haven't found any of the professors here that give me any kind of flack on the testing.

Ryan continued to explain to his professors his difficulties with learning and his learning style so that they would have a better understanding of his struggles thus opening up the possibility for the professor to alter his/her method of instruction to better meet Ryan's needs. He said:

> I think when they know that you learn a certain way and you are not going to them at the last minute to try to get assistance - they tend to be more - I would say on a whole - be more willing to work with you.

Ryan knew that he could not wait until the last minute to reveal his disability and expect the professor to modify any of the instruction or material that was already planned for during the semester. Again, Ryan believed that being upfront and open about his disability and accommodations with his professors from the start of the semester would allow them to work together and in the end benefit them both. Ryan provided an example of how he worked together with a professor. He explained:

> Like the professor I had this past summer, he saw I had the paperwork. He knew I was trying. I was trying to get a tutor for it. He made a point of trying to show me everything visually when we were talking about the accounting and stuff. I don't think that it is so much that they change, but they are *more willing* in some circumstances to maybe go over the material a couple of different times, explain it a couple of different ways, instead of just saying, "Ok, I've put it on the board, know it."

For Ryan his professors became an important tool for him in being able to obtain the class material in a way that he could better understand. Ryan knew that not only did he have to explain to his professors his disability and learning style at the beginning of the semester, but also be actively involved in every class. He said:

> I ask questions in class and they break it down, but then you are also talking at a college level, they are going to break it down to an extent, but I think that for me I need to have that one extra step where I saw the problem, but someone sees that I am having a difficulty they can say ok you need to break it down farther. More – especially in the math - I have a tough time when the person just talks, and talks, and talks versus the one that actually says, "Ok you have to do this because you have to get to this step and you have to." The teacher that is more methodical in processing the material to me, I tend to pick up and tend to grasp better than the one that just says, "Ok, it's on the board, we did this, this, this," and then that's the end of their discussion…I guess, to me they are just more receptive to if I say, "I'm not quite getting the notes. Can you go over this with me?" Or they are more willing to say, "Hey you know you can't quite meet my regular office hours, you know, I will work with you, I will work with you at a different time."

Ryan was aware of the style of instruction that was conducive to his learning style and disability. He believed that the majority of professors were there to honestly help students, but in order to gain that help the student had to initiate a positive relationship, demonstrate a desire to want to learn, and be willing to put forth the extra time and effort that was necessary to be successful. Ryan suggested that most of his professors on a whole understood and were willing to work with him. He commented:

> I think overall most of them like I said there is only that ten percent that I would say tend to be a pain, but I'd say a majority of the time, they understand, they've been there, they've been a college student. Someone helped them out, so they don't mind helping within reason…[A]s long as I show that I am willing to do the work, they're willing to not *give me a grade*, but push me the right direction is I guess the way I put it.

Ryan felt that everyone including his professors had struggled academically at some point throughout their educational endeavors. Even though he had a disability, he was not unique in the process of struggling to achieve academic success. Ryan did not expect to be given a grade, but rather viewed his professors as tools in helping him achieve a grade that was satisfactory.

Professors were not the only tool that Ryan sought to support his learning, he looked for tutors for additional support. Ryan was very determined to earn his second

college degree. He commented that he would do anything in his power to work through his areas of academic weakness to earn his degree, including using tutors and seeking available support on campus. Ryan initially used the math laboratory or math help center on campus to get extra help in his math courses. This center was open to all students who needed additional assistance in math. It was provided by the university and staffed by students who were successful in math classes, typically mathematics majors. Ryan explained how the math laboratory was not always helpful and sometimes confused him even more. Ryan understood that the personnel who staffed the math laboratory were all experts in math and that they comprehended math so well that they could not actually provide assistance to people like him that did not comprehend math as well as the staff did. These students may have been so-called experts in math, but they were not experts in teaching math to students with disabilities. Ryan explained:

> I think that for me just right now as I'm dealing with the math, the accounting and … I wouldn't mind paying extra on certain subjects having some of the tutor stuff that I had at [my second college]. Where I could go to someone that understands what an LD is and could help me on certain subjects how to break stuff down.

Based on his experience with the math laboratory and compounded by his difficulty with math, Ryan wanted expert help to break down larger concepts into smaller ones for him to grasp. As a result, one of the tools that Ryan undertook was to find a math tutor. Ryan's willingness to personally initiate locating a math tutor and his willingness to pay for the tutorial services were contingent on the tutor not only being an expert in math, but also having the ability to break information down into smaller pieces that he could understand. Ideally for Ryan, the expert would have a variety of learning strategies that would enhance his ability to retain math processes and concepts as well as understand the difficulties someone with a math disability faced when learning new concepts.

The tutors Ryan sought were different each semester because he wanted class and subject specific tutors. At the time of the interviews, Ryan was enrolled in an accounting course and he was struggling to understand all of the concepts presented during class. Ryan described the type of tutor he was trying to find. He said:

> Yea, instead of just a regular student, someone that can offer tutoring on certain subjects, for me especially it's math - it's my Achilles. So if I could go to - I mean, there is nothing wrong with going to a student, but if someone understands even if they were another professor if they understood how to break some of the teaching down where as someone that happened to be good at accounting, I don't know how to say it, I guess it would have maybe a little more insight.

He realized that the experts he desired were potentially the professors themselves. Ryan continued to explain the type of math tutor he desired:

> Sometimes having a little extra help on how to do some of the problem solving for me for the math it doesn't, I don't actually - I can see when a teacher shows you how to do a problem up on the board, but just says this is how it is done versus going ok this is your first step, this is what you have to find. This is your second step, this is what you've got to find, this is your third and so forth that's how the problem, process flows. For me that works, I can understand that much better than when they go *a* times *x* equals and I don't know where it's coming from and I get lost.

He believed in this tool being so critical to his academic success that he was willing to personally pay for the services. Ryan was not a stranger to paying for tools to help support his academics. He paid double tuition to receive student support when he attended his previous college. Due to his success from the tutoring at his second college, Ryan perceived this tool as critical to the completion of his second degree. Ryan provided an example of how he achieved success in math based on the knowledge and assistance of one of his tutors. He explained:

> Actually, I had one of the girls from my class that had actually – she's going into her master's and retaking the accounting and she actually – I mean, I consider her almost like an LD tutor. She *made me break down the stuff* and spent the time which meant I spent a good last couple of Saturdays spending five hours at a pop

> to get ready for my exam and my professor worked with me on my grades, so I passed.

This tutor possessed the ability in Ryan's eyes not only to understand math concepts at advanced levels, but to explain them in a way that was accommodating for someone with his type of disability to grasp. At no point did Ryan imply that this was an easy process nor that he did not have to devote enormous amounts of time in order to accomplish a passing grade. Ryan was committed to using the tools that were available to him as well as the ones that he individually obtained.

Summary

For Ryan the resources that were available to him because of his disability were that tools that allowed him to be successful in college. These tools consisted of more than the ones that the ARC offered to students with disabilities. Ryan also believed that the effectiveness of the tools was solely based on the student's individual effort to seek out assistance from multiple resources and by utilizing these tools it would set him up for success. The ARC was the resource that allowed Ryan to access the tools to progress through college as a student with a disability. The tools that the ARC provided for Ryan were not always the right tools for Ryan. He concluded that he needed to put forth the effort to seek the tools that best meet his needs and his disability. In the next section, I will discuss Ryan's struggle with time and the affect it had on his schooling.

Focused Time to Study

Just like the other students with disabilities in this study, finding large blocks of time to devote to schooling was an on-going, difficult, and challenging task for Ryan. Work, traveling to and from campus, and his disability were all factors that weighed on

Ryan's time. In this section, I will layout the aspects that Ryan struggled with in the area of time and the manner that he choose to make school a priority in his life.

Ryan was just shy of his fortieth birthday during the time of the interviews and felt he needed to be career-minded with his educational goals. He researched major areas of study to discover the potential for future employment. Due to a high demand in computer science, he selected computer security as his major. He was single and did not have any family obligations of his own other than those relating to living with his parents. Ryan lived a very simple life, primarily focusing his demands on work and earning his second degree. He commented that his current job was not mentally or physically demanding, which allowed him to focus more on school.

His time obligations were mainly split between his full-time job and school as a part-time student. Although he worked forty hours per week, his time obligation to work was limited to the responsibilities he performed on the job and did not carry over to other aspects of his life outside of work. His time obligation to school consisted of commuting to and from campus to attend his classes several nights a week each semester as well as the necessary time he needed to devote to studying. Ryan demonstrated his commitment to his schooling by attending every scheduled class and never missing a class due to a work scheduling conflict.

As previously discussed, Ryan attempted to take his tests in the classroom with his peers. In order to use testing accommodations, he was subjected to the ARC's hours of operation, which consisted of closing at five o'clock four days a week and staying open until seven o'clock one evening per week. The one evening each week that the ARC had extended hours was not always the same night Ryan was on campus for his

classes. In the event that his class testing time and the extended hours of the ARC were different, Ryan had to make another trip to campus on a different day to take his test. It is on these days that Ryan said, "Usually what I have found is if it is something like that especially the night, I'll take off of work and I will take the test before anybody else does." Driving to campus to take a test on a different day than his regularly scheduled class caused two problems for Ryan. First, he had to take time off from work, which affected him financially as well as the money it cost him for travel expenses making an unscheduled trip to campus. Second, the additional trip took away time that Ryan could have used to study.

There were times when Ryan had a hard time scheduling his classes due to his daily job commitment. In addition to finding the right class for his schedule, Ryan wanted to find professors who taught using his learning style. Ryan scheduled his semester well in advance taking many aspects into consideration specifically his disability. He said:

> I think that because I know I have it [a disability], certain subjects like the accounting I am taking now, I can't take a full load because I know I need the extra help or you know I have to determine more what the class is before I just jump into it. So one I don't stress myself out and two I can be successful at it. And this time around, I am paying for school. I had the parental scholarship the first time around. So you know it is just a whole concept of just not taking a class without knowing and trying to find out what professors, you know, how do they teach - because now with the Internet you can kind of find out a little bit more or talking to other people, you know, how does this professor teach? Is this person going to just talk for two hours? Does this person use slides? How do they interact?

Because he was limited to night and evening classes, he did not always have a choice as to which classes or professors to take. He had to take whatever was available. Between the two scheduling factors and compounded by his disability, Ryan did not want to take

more than one course per semester when he took a math class. He preferred to have the material broken down into sections and often took his math requirements during summer school so he could devote his attention to a single subject. He explained:

> For me, math it's easier if I split it up into smaller sections, than to do the normal pace…Either summer school or in one case I actually had a college algebra class that was suppose to be one quarter and they broke it into two… all of the material wasn't thrown at me at once and because it was spread out, it made it much easier for me to comprehend.

Ryan was successful when the material was modified by a slower pace of instruction and when he was able to focus on one course. Although taking classes that were spread out over a longer period of time may have made Ryan successful, the additional time that it would take for him to complete a degree would be close to double the traditional number of years. Additional costs would also be involved due to Ryan having to be in school for a longer amount of time.

Due to Ryan's processing disability, comprehending and retaining information was a struggle specifically with reading and mathematics. This required an enormous amount of time devoted to the task of studying and completing class assignments. Ryan mentioned that he needed to put a lot of time toward studying to feel somewhat confident about his readiness for classes and tests. I asked Ryan if he had to budget his time to study everyday. He responded:

> Not everyday, I would say that for me it's knowing when I have a deadline and putting the right effort forward for that deadline like if I have a test on let's say the exam is next Thursday and it's the Monday of the week before, I know that I am going to have to start studying something on Tuesday and for me I can't do it all like I said before - I can't cram. I have to break it into blocks.

Ryan's strategy for learning and comprehending was to take small blocks of information and slowly build his knowledge of the material.

At the beginning of each semester, Ryan went through his course outlines and marked down all of the dates his tests and assignments were due. He made notations to himself that he needed to begin studying about a week in advance for tests and even longer for written assignments. He said:

> I know for me personally, I can't wait until the day before the test to cram it all in because it won't stick. I'm going to have to budget time and start learning the material, but that is just me because I know that's how I learn.

Ryan's personal learning strategy for studying for tests was to break the content down into small blocks of information that were easier to comprehend. There were many tasks involved to his process of preparing to study as well as the act of studying itself. Ryan used a hodgepodge of study techniques to ensure that he was fully prepared. He said:

> I tend to highlight, but I find that flashcards are much better for me when I have to deal with vocabulary and I also like using flash cards to do the larger concepts. I try to get together with other people in my class and try to study. I feel that group study works better because I can bounce ideas off [others] than if I just try to study by myself.

Ryan highlighted key points in his textbooks and notes after reading through the material. This meant that Ryan read over the information and then went back through the same information to find the key points that he thought were important to remember. After reading and highlighting, he would then use this information to make flashcards of vocabulary and key concepts of the text. According to Ryan, it was not until these steps were completed that he actually began the studying process. Each of the processes Ryan incorporated into his studying was time and labor-intensive. When Ryan met with other people to study in a group setting, it was almost always done on campus. If the study group did not meet on one of the days that Ryan was on campus, he would have to make an extra trip to meet with the group. Although Ryan attempted to use group study as a

method to comprehend course content, he also used a great amount of time to travel between work or home and campus to be a part of the study group.

I asked Ryan about the search process he used to seek out people who wanted to be involved with a study group. He explained:

> [T]his is more subconscious - who are the group of people in this classroom that seriously want to pass and who are the people that are just going to take up a seat and may be gone half way through the semester. Find out where my support group is going to be from. Who can I go to if we have group project? Who are the people that I see in the class that are… serious about education?

Ryan wanted to surround himself with quality people who wanted to be successful and who were willing to put in additional effort and time into studying.

When Ryan's study group met, he said that they went over the notes from class and discussed them. They also reviewed the textbook and concepts that the members felt were relevant and attempted to clear up any misunderstandings. It is important to remember that Ryan had an in-class note-taker as an accommodation, which meant that Ryan possessed two sets of notes. Ryan did not want to show up at his study group with two sets of notes, so Ryan rewrote and combined his class notes with the notes from the note-taker. The act of combining notes was another additional step in the process of studying that consumed Ryan's time.

Spending time studying for tests was only one aspect for Ryan to prepare for classes; he had written assignments to complete as well. For Ryan, these written assignments were even more time-consuming than studying for tests because of his specific area of disability. Written assignments were an area that Ryan had to devote a lot of time towards completion. He said:

> It's for me it's the grammar and the spelling because I will know what word I want to use, but when I try to sound it out or say it out and just write it out depending on the word it gets totally fu-bar.

To compound his struggle, Ryan did not feel that he was sufficiently prepared for the level of writing that was necessary for college students. Ryan needed additional help with the writing process. He explained:

> [E]specially with the writing - having the extra help at [the other college] - for them to proof my papers and having someone actually say it out loud to me. Because one of my problems is unless I hear it out loud, I don't realize I forget adjectives and some of my punctuation. To me in my head, I still put the words in there, but I don't always put them on the paper. So it was helpful to have a second eye or now in this case having access to a computer that can actually spell check for you.

Ryan sought out the writing resources on campus to help with the writing process. Similar to the math laboratory, the writing center helped students with writing and proofreading papers. This process was often time-consuming and frustrating for Ryan because this was a continuous process for the completion of just one paper.

Summary

Ryan understood that he had to just get through his education in order to be able to move on with his life. He said:

> I think that it [disability] is going to be there and I just have to rethink on maybe some of the ways that I have to study. I'm like - this accounting I know I am going to have to have some tutoring one-on-one outside of just learning in class. But that is just a matter of me taking the time and doing it. I don't think that there's anything that's stopping me from furthering my education if I wanted to go on for a master's or something like that.

Ryan did not mind devoting the necessary time it took for him to complete courses and felt that the hard work and extra time would pay off once he completed his degree. Due to his previous experience with school attending double classes, Ryan thought that this method regardless of the time was his route in order to succeed. He felt that this was just

the way that things were going to be for him and knew that he had to maintain his focus on his academics. Even though Ryan's methods were important factors in the completion of his classes, he may have needed some different strategies to prepare and study more efficiently. In the next section, I will address how Ryan felt that the time-consuming strategies throughout his coursework set him up for success along with his personal views on success in his life.

Success Equals Career and Personal Validation

Ryan experienced success throughout his life on several occasions. Looking back, he believed that those experiences allowed him to be successful in life. He described several monumental events that were pinnacle points that brought him to where he was currently. The foundations for these highlights were educational achievements, specifically graduating from high school and college. Based on both events, Ryan felt that he was successful in other areas of his life because they were spring boards for success. Although Ryan believed he had a successful life, he knew there was potential for growth. As a result, Ryan understood success in two ways – career and personal validation.

Ryan believed his success was linked to education and that a person was more likely to be successful with a college degree than without one. For this reason, after graduating from high school, Ryan wanted a college degree. Yet for Ryan the task of earning a degree and the practicality of a career in the area of his degree were not initially linked together. He explained:

> I think when I got my last degree, I was kind of going through the motions, I wanted to graduate and I wanted to have a bachelors, but then when I got into the – once I got out and I realized the field I wanted to study was exciting, it's neat, but when it doesn't have any jobs, I need to be realistic.

After achieving a degree in video production, Ryan was unable to find meaningful and substantial employment with his degree in this field. Over the years, Ryan realized his understanding of the correlation between education and a successful career was not totally accurate. He altered his perception by believing that a person's educational background needed to be in an area of demand rather than a person just earning a college degree; the profession needed to have open positions for employment. This was not the case for a person with a video production degree in the southeastern part of the United States where jobs in that field were scarce.

The way Ryan understood success was that education was the key for him to have a successful career. As a result, Ryan believed that he needed to obtain more education and began researching college majors, career opportunities, and future growth in an effort to make a career change through earning a second degree. Computer security was his choice. He discovered that there was enough opportunity and industry growth to make the investment in school. Equating earning a degree with success was not a new concept for Ryan. Again, Ryan experienced feelings of success upon completing his high school degree and first college degree; however, these feelings faded as employment opportunities were limited. Ryan believed that obtaining a second degree in a different field was his opportunity to have a successful career. He said:

> This time it is more practical…these are tangible skills. The first time I went around I was having too much of a good time. This time around, I see it as this is my chance at having a career that I feel that I can achieve and be successful in and there is a need.

Although Ryan had a job, he did not consider it a career and therefore he felt his second degree would give him the career path needed to be self-sufficient and self-dependent. In turn, Ryan felt that he would then be successful.

According to Ryan, success was the ability for him to become self-sufficient and achieve a higher standard of living. Ryan's current job in retail was unfulfilling and lacked the financial security he felt was central to success. He said:

> I've been in the working field, I've seen the difference between someone that… enjoy[s] what they are doing and people that don't and I think this time around with me having to put forth the effort and I didn't really have my parents kind of paying the way for me; I think it means more. And then secondly, this is something that I feel – I feel that it is a career path.

The meaning of success for Ryan was based on his future ability to be able to support himself and do so without assistance. At the time of the interviews, Ryan felt successful because he was taking steps towards achieving his goals. These steps were not completed in isolation, but were achieved with the support of his parents and the ARC.

Ryan was being helped financially on a monthly basis by living in his parents' basement apartment rent-free. Although Ryan did not have a monthly housing expense, he paid his other financial obligations, including tuition without assistance from his parents. Ryan's parents were supportive in his quest for success in several ways. They encouraged Ryan to do his best despite having a disability. They instilled in him the idea that in order to be successful in life a person needed to put forth effort and work hard. He jokingly said:

> [They] give me a swift kick to tell me, "Hey, you need to do some studying. You're not going to get that second degree by eating Bon-Bons and watching TV."

Ryan believed his parents served as a guiding force behind his education and were the groundwork for his initial success by finding a college that specifically supported students with disabilities. It was through his mother's research that Ryan was lead to his second college and later graduated from that institute of higher learning. Ryan felt that he would have not been successful without the help from his parents.

Another source of support that led Ryan to obtain success in college was the ARC. They provided Ryan with the tools that he needed in order to be successful in education. He looked to the ARC to assist him with the skills to overcome the hurdles he faced throughout his coursework. These skills were what Ryan deemed necessary to be able to earn a second degree. He knew he would have to make sacrifices to keep school a priority and utilize the resources available to him. Ryan described how the help from the ARC made him successful in school and said:

> Knowing how to study, having the right information when I am preparing for a test, having the right resources when I am writing a paper so I know to do the spell check, have a thesaurus, someone to proof read to make sure my grammar is right.

The support from the ARC gave Ryan confidence and allowed him to feel successful in his coursework. Their assistance helped lead him towards his goal of graduating with the skills that he believed would make him successful.

The next stage of success Ryan was looking forward to experiencing was graduating with his second degree. He felt that once he graduated, he would be able to have a successful career, rather than just having a job. I asked Ryan about the importance of graduating with a new degree and what it meant to him. He explained:

> Validation. Because as you know, you can't take that piece of paper away, unless you did something in your undergrad[uate] that they find out about. I have friends that don't have the degrees that worked it through and got their stuff.

> They are ok to an extent, but everything I have ever grown up with, you *can't take away a degree* and if anything else it shows to a potential employer, they have done the steps and if you want to move up in a company having a higher level of education puts you above the applicant that doesn't.

The degree manifests itself becoming a part of Ryan and potentially has the power to transform him into a better individual. The degree opens up the possibility for him to succeed individually without assistance from others. For Ryan graduation meant validation and validation meant success.

Although Ryan did not view his current job as a successful career, he felt successful because he had earned a college degree. For Ryan, the degree meant that he could finally achieve the goals that he felt would steer him toward a successful career. He said:

> For me I would say once I have this new degree, I feel that I could *completely be on my own* because the academic foundation I am going to get from here is going to allow me to get the jobs that I could own a house - at least that's the thought.

Ryan understood success as the ability to support himself without help from other people. He also believed that having material possessions like owning a home were important symbols to demonstrate success according to society's standard. The introductory salary for someone entering the field of computer security was greater than what Ryan was currently earning. For Ryan, financial security demonstrated success.

Although Ryan has experienced success, he wants more out of life. I asked Ryan to explain how he would know he was successful. He said:

> I think it is life experiences and that, I will be honest retail is ok, I am earning a living, but I like what some of my friends have. I would like to have a family and I would like to have a house, you know, and I would like to be able to go vacationing. When you do retail and you do it at the level that I am doing it now, that's not too possible. So and I kind of - I will be honest, I think having to go from pay check to pay check, I kind of want to get out of it. That is kind of my incentive.

Ryan compared himself to others around him that he felt were successful because they had a career, home, and family. He bought into the American Dream that success was measured by extrinsic rather than intrinsic symbols. Therefore, in order to be recognized as successful, he needed to acquire a college degree which would lead him to a career that would allow him to progress towards achieving his dream. Ryan emphasized his belief that a college education is the foundation of success for all. He said:

> So everyone will get a shot no matter if it is a language barrier, a physical barrier, or a learning barrier that everybody has a chance because I honestly *believe wholeheartedly* the more people you have out there that have a college education, the better kind of society you are going to have.

Ryan felt that all of society could benefit through acquiring an education regardless of ability. For Ryan, success began with education and was the fundamental cornerstone that would eventually lead to a better world.

Summary

Simply stated, Ryan believed that he would be successful if he had the right education and was able to have a career. He believed that by being successful as a person with a disability he was opening up the pathways for others who may have struggled similar to the ways that he struggled. His measure of success was a career and material possessions that could be viewed by others rather than personal and internal measures.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The final chapter of this research will provide closure to the study and encompass the commonalities and differences between the participants that emerged from the themes. This chapter will begin with a brief summary of the research study and reveal the significant themes of the findings from the data provided by the participants. After the findings are discussed, the implications of the research will be addressed and the potential for future research pertaining to students with disabilities will be reviewed.

Summary of the Study

This research addresses the dilemma that students with disabilities face as they maneuver through higher education. They are faced with a choice to "out" their disabilities and receive accommodations or hide their disabilities and receive no accommodations. The decision becomes one that allows each individual to align their selves with the stigma that is associated with disabilities based on the prevailing social labels or refrain from any association with disabilities. The research questions used in this study are:

1) How do higher education students choose to identify with specific learning disabilities?

2) How do students with specific learning disabilities in higher education describe their experiences seeking academic support?

3) How do students describe the experience of being labeled disabled?

The inquiry method used to seek answers to these questions was based on a qualitative semi-structured interview-based research design.

Disability, the word itself, has many negative connotations. College is supposed to be a proving ground for the most capable students and the stigma of possessing a disability in higher education only compounds these negative feelings. Yet higher education students with disabilities must self-identify and document possessing a disability prior to having access to accommodations provided by the ARC on campus. Each of the participants described a founding moment of disability. This is the moment that they begin to identify with their disability and come to terms (at least to some extent) with possessing a disability. The narratives present insight into the students' contradictory experiences of self-identification of disability, the manner in which individuals came to grips with disability labels, how they "out" the presence of disability in different circumstances, and the resources that lead them to feelings of success.

The overriding concern for this research looks at the dilemma students with disabilities are caught in when they are accepted and attend institutions of higher education. By "outing" themselves as possessing a disability, they are able to access support services from the ARC in an effort to become academically successful. However, through exposing their disability and receiving additional support, there is a potential for others to attach negative labels (Sherry, 2004). These labels have an associated stigma. Students with disabilities need to choose between "outing" themselves as possessing a disability and accepting the disability labels or hiding their disability and passing as able-bodied and free from disability, forgoing academic support. The issue of

association and identification with disabilities becomes a problematic dichotomy. On one hand, students can choose to accept the disability label, be allowed to access academic support through appropriate accommodations and modifications, and negotiate the consequences of the choice. On the other hand, students can neglect to accept the label, refrain from accessing accommodations and modifications, and then negotiate their academics alone.

Each of the participants in this study shared a unique story about their experiences with disabilities in their pursuit of a higher education degree. Although each participant has their own story and own experiences, four themes emerged from data. These themes were related to the stigma of disabilities, resources used by each participant, the amount of time that was involved with being a student with a disability in higher education, and the personal meaning of success. In the next section, the themes will be discussed as to how each individual's experiences relate to each other and how they relate to policy, practice, and research. Furthermore, the research that this study is grounded upon will be related to the lenses of the medical and social models of disability.

Research Findings

The two lenses that society views disabilities through are the medical and social models of disability (Llewellyn & Hogan, 2000; Oliver, 1990). These models not only differ in the way they frame disabilities, but the way they perceive the individual. The medical model individualizes the disability and believes that a cure must be found to bring the person to a "normal" state of being (Llewellyn & Hogan, 2000; Paterson & Hughes, 2000). Disability is viewed as a deviation from normalcy and is a negative trait

that is unacceptable in society. The individual is identified solely on the basis of disability rather than other traits. In other words, disability owns the person and dictates their role in society; therefore, disability must be overcome or hidden so that a person can be accepted within the larger society. The social model treats disabilities as acceptable traits that are part of life and acknowledges that, because they are human and individual, every person has or will acquire something that is disabling or different. Disability is viewed as an acceptable variance of human characteristics and part of society (Paterson & Hughes, 2000). The way society understands disabilities becomes the problem. The larger society fails to accommodate for human variances and therefore places a label on anyone who does not fit the status quo. The medical and social models of disabilities offer a means of understanding how students with disabilities maneuver through higher education in order to obtain success.

From this research four nuances have emerged. The first involves the stigma of disabilities and the differences in the way that disabilities are portrayed as acceptable or unacceptable by others who appear to be free from disability. These students want to feel included and "normal" without having to be isolated or stigmatized by their learning differences within academics. The second is about the ARC and the accommodations that it provides to students with disabilities. It includes a difference between how traditional and non-traditional higher education students view disabilities. The third establishes the additional and often excessive amounts of time that people with disabilities are compelled to employ in order to receive accommodations. The final nuance relates to the feelings of accomplishment or success that students with disabilities feel as they progress through college.

Stigma

For each of the participants, disability was part of their identity. The diagnosis of a disability answered some of the personal questions that developed about their ability to be successful in higher education. The participants did view themselves as being people with disabilities, but more importantly disability was not the sole identifier of their life. Although disability was a part of each individual, they were not overcome by the trait. The problem was that society used their disability as the one identifier that excluded them from fully participating in other aspects of life.

Although each of the participants experienced the stigma of disabilities, they each experienced it in their own way. Lynn, Erin, and Ryan did not want others to know about their disabilities and wanted to hide them, whereas Jane openly discussed her disability. Lynn believed that disability was a stigma that followed a person for life. Once a disability label was put in place, there was no escaping the ramifications that resulted from the label. Similarly, Erin called disability a "brand" that was obvious to others, separating the able-bodied from the disable-bodied. Erin believed that her physical disability was worse than her learning disability due to its visibility. Ryan had a different response to stigma relating to learning disabilities versus his Bi-Polar disability. He felt that a learning disability was used to separate, but as people aged the range of separation lessened. Ryan hid his Bi-Polar disability because he felt that people viewed it as a negative trait when he revealed it due to the attached correlating social stigma. As a result, he was protective of this aspect of his identity and only cautiously revealed it when comfortable or necessary. Jane experienced feelings of inadequacy, but believed that the stigma of disabilities did not affect her because she was more than her disability.

Jane and Ryan identified themselves as non-traditional students and stated that they did not feel the stigma of disabilities was as great for them as younger students with disabilities based on their age and previous experiences in life. The prevalence of disabilities and the acceptance of them have changed since Ryan was diagnosed many years ago. He attributed his learning disability to a difference in learning style, one that is not typically used within the classroom. Jane, the oldest student in the study, believed that her learning disability was only noticeable when academics were present. Up until college enrollment, her life experiences were not based on academics, but on her ability to blend in with society. She appeared "normal"/free-from-disability because academics were not a part of her daily routines as a stay-at-home mom and wife. In other words, her disability only was evident when academics were involved, and in other areas of her life, disability was not apparent. Based on experience, she placed more weight on her life as a whole rather than her academics. The difference in her way of thinking compared to the other participants is crucial in how Jane viewed the stigma of disabilities. She felt that her life experiences made her more than a person with a disability. As a result, she did not focus on the stigma attached to disabilities.

The medical and social models of disability help to illuminate these students' experiences. Because of the overriding beliefs about disability within society, Lynn, Erin, and Ryan, did not openly disclose their disabilities to others and attempted to hide them as much as possible. They did not want to be singled out as different or viewed solely on the basis of their disability regardless of visibility. On the other hand, Jane openly discussed her disability with others, hoping her experiences would encourage other people who struggle with academics to look at the possibility of possessing a

learning disability. As a result of her openness, other students would be able to accept their own disability and have access to support services. Under the medical model, disability is something that needs to be hidden and kept a secret (Llewellyn & Hogan, 2000; Paterson & Hughes, 2000). Each of these participants experienced situations where they felt stigmatized due to the entrenched belief that the medical model has on society. For them, there was something wrong because they could not learn like the others around them. As higher education students, they were surrounded by what they believed were the most capable and intellectually qualified people. In many ways, they felt as if they did not belong because they were different from everyone else and not "normal" students. They needed accommodations in order to meet the standards put in place. This overriding belief separated them from their peers and caused them to isolate themselves. This isolation is very problematic. When these students do not openly discuss their experiences because of feelings of inadequacy, they lose their voice and ability to find others who they can share experiences with that relate to their disabilities. The isolation prevents the possibility of improving circumstances for students with disabilities.

There were times when the participants in this study associated more with the social model. They understood that they were different in the way that they learned and that they did not do things the same way as others. The problem was that they were forced to learn using a learning style not compatible with their own. As they progressed through education, they experienced a change in the way they understood disability. It became less important and was just one aspect of who they were as an individual and not the sole identifier of self. The learning disabilities that they possessed were only

experienced within the academic arena, and did not follow them into other areas of life such as work, family, and church. They understood that their learning disabilities were only experienced because of the way that academics are organized. Once they achieved a diploma, learning disabilities would have a limited impact upon their lives due to the invisibility of learning disabilities in other venues. However, Erin's physical disability is visible and therefore continues to be stigmatizing. Erin struggles with her physical disability because she is viewed for her disability rather than her ability and many people automatically assume she is incapable.

The lines between the medical and social models are deeply entrenched in our society. They are so much of a stronghold into society's beliefs about ability that all of the participants contradicted themselves at some point in their understanding about the stigma associated with disability. There were many instances during the interviews when the participants would express the importance of keeping their disability hidden while at other times they felt it beneficial to reveal the presence of disability. The participants needed to disclose their disabilities to their professors in order to receive the accommodations, but did not openly discuss them with their classroom peers. Two of the participants specifically mentioned that other students inquired about their absence from class on testing days.

Available Resources

Resources are a very important aspect for each participant and although they included family, friends, and church, they center around the accommodations that the ARC provided. The participants went to the ARC seeking assistance with academics and had a wide range of disabilities. Each of them believed that without the assistance

provided by the ARC, they would not have been successful in higher education. The ARC instilled degrees of confidence in these students with disabilities. However, from the research, concerns about the ARC emerged. These concerns are related to the effectiveness of the accommodations provided to each individual and the manner in which these accommodations were utilized.

Accommodations are meant to be individualized and specific to the needs of the student and their disability. In other words, specific disabilities need certain accommodations to be the most beneficial. The ARC gave each of the students the same accommodations even though they had different disabilities. Lynn was even allowed to pick the accommodations that she felt were the best fit for her. For example, each of them was provided extended test-taking time and a quiet environment for testing. The possibility that each of the participants in this study would have benefitted from extended test-taking time exists, yet many people who do not have disabilities could also potentially benefit from extended test-taking time. Because the accommodations were not tailored to the students' disabilities, the effectiveness of these accommodations is called into question and better results may have occurred with different accommodations. Other accommodations, like fewer test questions or oral response to questions rather than extended test taking time, may be more beneficial for students who have difficulty maintaining their focus on lengthy tests and as a result, the outcomes may be similar to or better than the ones currently taking place.

The ARC's institutional position and its limited funding can only accommodate a small, limited amount of students in the office, but serves more than five-hundred students. The ARC had only three small testing rooms available to use for the testing

accommodations. The problem of ensuring that accommodations were readily available to the students who needed them existed. There were times when there were multiple students in each of the testing rooms and/or being brought in and out during another student's testing time. Each of the participants mentioned that movement during testing was one of the worst distractions. Other distractions like pencil noises and pecking on a computer key-board did not allow for the accommodations to be properly executed. In fact, each of the participants complained about not always having a quiet testing environment to complete their tests and instances when rooms were not available. When accommodations are not properly administered and carried forth as prescribed, the students are placed at a disadvantage.

The extended test taking-time was not always monitored by the ARC staff. Three of the four participants mentioned that even though they were only allowed time and a half, they were given as much time as they wanted to complete their tests. On one instance, Jane recalled a math quiz she took in the ARC. The other students in the class were only given five minutes, but Jane took an hour and a half to complete the same quiz. Jane not only missed the remaining class instruction, but the excessive time did not benefit her and she still received an inadequate score. This example applies to other students who often were allowed as much time as they felt necessary, yet still were not passing tests. The possibility that these students doubt their answers and over-think questions develops. This created extra anxiety associated with testing and leads to resentment toward peers who complete tests in a timely manner and receive passing grades. Accommodations are developed to assist students and should be monitored by the ARC in order to be most effective.

The accommodations that were provided by the ARC were not always accommodating and did not promote success. Once accommodations were put into place by the ARC, the students became responsible for them and the ARC was not always helpful in ensuring they were correctly followed through. The burden that resulted is a shift of responsibility, in which accommodations become the students' problem, adding additional stress to already struggling students. For example, there was a lack of communication between the professors and the ARC and obtaining accommodations was sometimes too much work and required too much time. The professors did not always understand that they were partly responsible for the accommodations. The ARC does not readily intercede on the student's behalf for problems relating to accommodations that may arise between students and professors. This is when students need to make a concerted effort to build a rapport with their professors. Erin takes on this responsibility by attempting to meet with her professors prior to the beginning of the semester and explains her learning needs. By doing so, it is possible that professors will be more informed, understanding, and open to assisting with accommodations exists.

Once a list of acceptable accommodations was created, it was up to the individual to utilize them to the best of their ability. There was no follow-up or check for effectiveness on the accommodations that the ARC provided and a lack of substantive support emerges. A dilemma developed because the students had to determine whether or not the accommodations were successful and whether or not their achievement was facilitated by the accommodations. Because many students did not know about the different accommodations that were available and how different accommodations could be more beneficial than the ones they were currently receiving, they often felt trapped

and may have even been afraid to try new ones because of the potential to fail. For these students, the gap between passing and failing was small and taking a chance on a new or different accommodation that may not work was too big of an academic risk. Failing was too large of a wager. The participants felt and wanted the ARC to improve on the existing accommodations, but were not aware of specific accommodations. One way to accomplish this is to make the accommodations fluid, flexible, and adaptable over the course of the semester in accordance with the students' needs.

The ARC only assisted students through current accommodations and only gave students accommodations to help with overcoming academic obstacles. The ARC did not teach students adaptation skills that could benefit them with future instances when they would not have access to accommodations outside of academics. Accommodations are not viewed as a stepping stone for future success. In other words, the ARC did not help with long-term occurrences when students would need to learn to work through and around their disability, like learning new skills associated with a job. Accommodations are only a means to an end and only help students complete their education, offering no support when the accommodations are no longer available outside of academics. Students with disabilities will continue to struggle because society is organized for life free from disability. Although these students are somewhat set up for success in the academic arena, they must independently maneuver through life after graduation.

Under Federal law, institutions of higher education are required to provide accommodations to students with disabilities; however, the method of delivery is not specified. As a result, different colleges and universities will vary in the way that they provide services and the extent of accommodations offered. Ryan felt that the ARC was

not always accommodating, especially for non-traditional students, like himself, who were limited to enrolling in evening and night classes because of work schedules. The ARC was only open until five o'clock four days a week and on one day of the week it was open until seven o'clock. As a result of the limited hours of operation, Ryan frequently took off from work without pay to be able to access accommodations. This placed an unfair financial burden on Ryan and potentially for other students in similar situations. Resolving this problem would be as easy as adding additional hours to keep the ARC open longer into the evening. But by doing so, it will result in a greater expenditure for the school. This suggestion may not be accepted with open arms due to the scarcity of additional funds.

The laws are an attempt to provide access to struggling students, but fall short in several areas. Student access is based on the ability to personally obtain diagnosis and makes the student financially responsible. The intentions of the policies are valiant, but continue to weigh heavily on an individual's ability to pay. Once the diagnosis is obtained, it does not automatically guarantee access to accommodations or that these accommodations will actually be beneficial once put in place. The students are put in a dilemma of taking a financial risk, but those who struggle are left with no other option.

In addition, another financial/corporate aspect occurs when students with disabilities are not able to access accommodations and fail courses. If students fail necessary courses, they will be required to repeat them and pay additional tuition until they pass. This process of not being able to access accommodations due to the ARC's limited hours of operation, and not having the appropriate accommodations, benefits the school rather than the student because the student will be charged tuition. It is almost

like colleges are providing poor quality accommodations in the form of lip service so that they can say they are offing services, but in actuality they are not helping this group of students. Not only are these students faced with the added financial burden, they also must endure the additional time it takes for them to complete courses.

Time

Each participant described similar experiences with needing large amounts of time to devote to school compared to their peers. For these higher education students with disabilities, the amount of time to complete assignments, prepare for tests, and arrange accommodations is overwhelming. Time constraints did not only develop because of their disabilities and lack of knowledge about study methods, but were often outside of their control. These students did not mind spending the additional time devoted to schooling and internalized it as a necessary action in order to succeed. They realized they were at a disadvantage and changes needed to be made to help minimize unnecessary wasted time.

The obstacles they faced began prior to the inception of accommodations and started with the amount of time that they had to spend jumping through hoops to obtain accommodations from the ARC. None of the participants obtained accommodations immediately upon entering college and struggled through courses before seeking assistance from the ARC. After inquiring about accommodations, the process that needed to be completed was not instantaneous and took nearly a semester from diagnosis to classroom accommodations. Students were only provided information regarding the process and the steps for becoming diagnosed while in the interim little to no follow-up help was available from the ARC. Decreasing the amount of time needed to become

diagnosed is one solution for obtaining accommodations faster; however, that solution may not be very feasible. A better solution would be to allow students to access some type of accommodations that could be available while they were going through the process of being diagnosed. To ensure that this solution is not abused or used in place of following through with a diagnosis, limiting the scope of the support would need to be established. By managing the down time more efficiently and establishing a temporary plan for accommodations, students with disabilities would be able to access accommodations sooner and potentially waste less time.

Each of the participants commented that they devoted large amounts of time to the act of studying; however, the extra amount of time did not always equate to passing assignments and courses. In general, these students did not seem to know how to efficiently use their time to study in order to achieve the best outcomes. For example, Erin spent much of her time recopying class notes hoping to retain information, while Jane continuously went over the same math problems attempting to memorize the steps to accurately complete the equations during tests. Although the students felt that their method of studying benefitted them, in actuality the methods were not adequate for the collegiate level. It appears that the students were using antiquated methods and did not know how to properly study in order to retain content and learn new information. If students were explicitly instructed on study methods, time could be used more productively rather than students spinning their wheels with the amount of time devoted to studying without positive results. The ARC needs to provide instruction on study methods rather than just supportive lip service and testing accommodations. If these students were taught different methods of studying that correlate with their learning

disabilities, then they may be able to study more efficiently with better results. The solution is similar to Ryan's experience at his second college when he was given additional class instruction that specifically focused on different methods for learning and studying the material. Although this type of help was very time consuming, Ryan benefitted. The missing component from Ryan's experience is that the help he received was focused more on additional instruction and not methods of studying. As a result, once the secondary instruction was taken away, Ryan did not experience the same level of success because he did not know how to study and retain information on his own. An additional downside for Ryan accessing help was that he had to pay double tuition to access additional instruction. In reality, not every student with disabilities would be able to absorb the additional cost in order to obtain help.

The accommodations provided by the ARC outside of the classroom frequently compounded issues relating to time. For example, professors were not always finished writing their tests in advance to send them over to the ARC in time for students who were scheduled to complete them. When the ARC does not have a test for a student, the student has to travel across campus in order to obtain it prior to beginning the test. When the accommodation is not followed by the professor, the student is forced to use their time to access them. This places an additional burden on students like Erin and others with physical disabilities because it takes longer to complete the task of traveling across campus and places an unnecessary physical strain on them. This example of wasted time and added steps places students, who already struggle with academics and the amount of time required to access accommodations, at a disadvantage. If the ARC is going to provide testing accommodations, it must be responsible for ensuring that the work is

received from professors. In turn, students who access the ARC for testing accommodations would potentially have one less obstacle to face and be able to use their time focusing more on academics rather than completing additional nonessential tasks.

Scheduling college classes for many students is a difficult process in making sure that certain classes are taken in the correct sequence for graduation. Due to limited availability, some semesters it is necessary for students to take classes that are back-to-back with little or no break between them and sometimes in different buildings on opposite sides of campus. While many students are not concerned with back-to-back classes or their location on campus, the participants in this study did not like to schedule back-to-back classes for several reasons. Erin did not like to be rushed because it physically took her longer to move between classrooms and buildings across campus. She wanted to arrive allowing herself time to fully prepare for class. If classes were scheduled back-to-back, Erin would not be able to appropriately prepare like she desired, would be physically drained, and often late.

All of these time factors and constraints come in to play when students can not successfully manage a full course load each semester as well as repeating failed courses. Therefore, students with disabilities take longer to complete their degree, are subjected to the financial obligation that correlates with additional time spent enrolled in school, and are potentially unable to begin a career. These students in this study experienced an increase in the level of frustration because they witness the success of their peers who seemingly were able to quickly maneuver through coursework with ease and in some cases without devoting any time to studying. Because of struggling with time, each participant did not feel like they were able to take a full course load. Scheduling classes

so that students can utilize the accommodations is crucial for students with disabilities. When these students are put in situations when classes have to be scheduled back-to-back, receiving accommodations or missing instruction or altering schedules creates a difficult choice.

From an accommodation stand point, scheduling back-to-back classes creates a problem because students are unable to have the extended test taking time during the first class because it will run into the second class, causing students to miss class instruction when taking the test at the same time as their scheduled class. Two options arise, the first of which is to take the test with the extended time during the regular class time in the ARC and possibly miss all or part of the second class. Doing so places these students at a disadvantage because they are forced to miss instruction and as a consequence are forced to make up missed work and learn the material absent of classroom instruction. The next option is to schedule a different time to take the test. Some professors do not like to reschedule tests due to testing security and do not allow for tests to be rescheduled. This forces the student to only have the first option. Taking the test at a different time causes students to rearrange their schedule, taking additional time away from other activities like studying.

Time is the key to being successful. Without putting in the necessary time, success is not possible. These students are aware that they learn differently and do recognize that they must put forth effort. The ARC needs to instruct students to focus on ways to eliminate wasted time and prioritize their schedules to ensure flexibility with accommodations. The ARC knows these students are strapped for time, but requires them to be responsible for ensuring that they receive accommodations correctly. As a

result, the ARC provides little assistance and in reality only places greater stress and pressure for time on these students.

Success

Success has a different meaning for each individual despite their disability. It is a very personal standard that is a moving target and changes over time. Although each participant had a different measure of success, they all had the same goal of earning a college degree and used the diploma as the main indicator of their success. As a result, each participant looked toward a future of having a career based on having earned a degree. This career would make it possible to maintain a lifestyle that they equated with success.

The motivation for success appears to stem from an internal source within an individual. Three of the four participants mentioned that in order for students to be successful, they needed to want success and work toward a goal. This personal drive was portrayed as a trait that intrinsically exists and cannot be taught, but it is learned trait based on societal factors. Jane and Erin had that internal motivation and drive, while Ryan had a combination of internal and external motivation because of his family, and Lynn lacked the drive wanting success to be handed to her without putting forth any effort.

Another commonality that emerged across the participants was the belief that access to the ARC and specifically adhering to the rules automatically lead to academic success. The ARC was viewed as the line of demarcation or key between success and failure and the only way for a student with a disability to be successful was through accommodations provided by the ARC. It is as if the ARC reinforced a Disneyesque

mentality of the American Dream and success could only be achieved through a college education that resulted in a degree. The standard of success that correlates with the American Dream is based on a material version of success including a career, house, and family and only after a person had a college degree. The problem was that even though the students put their faith in the accommodations that the ARC provided to create a level playing field, it did not guarantee their success.

The outcomes of success contradict reality. The extended test taking time and the additional accommodations were given too much weight for making these students successful. The accommodations did not always lead to success because they were not individualized for each student; rather, a blanket version was given to everyone who qualified, making them feel good inside over true success. The limited success experienced by these students can be attributed to a narrow range of available accommodations not specific to their actual area of need. So in the end, the successfulness of the accommodations is called into question when these students have to exert a lot of additional effort in order to access accommodations and especially when students continue to fail.

Research Implications – Practice, Policy, and Research

Although the data from this research are limited to the participants' personal understandings and do not include every student with a disability, their stories may be similar to other students with disabilities. The narratives offer new way of thinking for policy, practice, and research about students with disabilities and their experiences in higher education. This research is not the final link in the chain of research, but only one

link added to the totality attempting to address questions about students with disabilities in higher education. The hope of this research study is to positively influence the future experiences of other students with disabilities in higher education and make suggestions that have the potential to improve current policy, propose changes in practices, and inform future research.

Practice

Improving the quality of experience for students with disabilities is one area for practice to address. Specifically asking students with disabilities what accommodations they believe are important in making them successful is a place to begin; however, valid and reliable practices need to be part of the decision process (Lindstrom, 2007). From this research study, I suggest improvements for practice in four areas: fewer obstacles in obtaining accommodations, specific accommodations relating to individual disabilities, greater involvement in the classroom from the ARC, and an increased role of assistance from professors. These suggestions are consistent with findings from other similar and recent research studies (Cawthon &Cole, 2010 and Marshak, Wieren, Ferrell, Swiss, & Dugan, 2010). Each of the participants stressed the need to be able to quickly access accommodations so that time would not be wasted and they would receive academic support in a timely manner. The steps of having to meet with the director of the ARC to obtain the process of acquiring accommodations, scheduling a doctor's appointment for testing, testing, waiting for the results, returning to the ARC to provide copies of the test results, creating an accommodation list with the director of the ARC, and distributing the accommodation letter to professors takes too much time. For students who require current or updated disability diagnosis, streamlining this process may not be possible

when it is sought during the academic semester because diagnosis is the key to ensuring that only students with disabilities receive accommodations. Clearly posting the requirements in the college handbook or on the college's website is one solution to eliminate some wasted time. If the steps were readily available both on and off of campus, many students who know or suspect that they have a learning disability and also would benefit from accommodations could complete or begin the diagnosis process prior to the beginning of school or between semesters. For students who have an IEP in high school and immediately transition to higher education, it is important that they have copies of their most recent psychological evaluation and IEP. The information that is contained within these documents will eliminate many of the steps and potentially allow for accommodations to begin as soon as the first day of the semester. If the process for obtaining accommodations was streamlined so that it allowed for accommodations to be developed faster, students could potentially have a better experience in high education.

Each of the participants in this study was receiving accommodations; however, they were not individualized to their specific disability. As a result, questions emerged about the effectiveness of the accommodations. According to Fuchs, Fuchs, and Capizzi (2005), there is not a set of standard accommodations that can be used to benefit all students with learning disabilities. Therefore, in order for accommodations to be effective and truly benefit students with disabilities, they must be based on the specific disability and the individual student. It is imperative that when the accommodations are being discussed between the student and the director of the ARC, multiple inputs are used including the student's learning style and other preferences.

The participants wanted the ARC to have a greater role in ensuring that accommodations were being followed within the classroom, as well as, the professors providing the necessary assistants with accommodations. The participants realized that all of the accommodations were not always accommodating especially when they were not followed correctly. When the ARC develops a plan for accommodations to help students, the accommodations need to be followed by all of the people involved including the ARC, students, and professors. There is a lack of communication between the participants and it appears like the professors are on one side against the ARC on the other side leaving the students in the middle trying to negotiate accommodations and communication. To ensure that accommodations are being followed and that the most appropriate accommodations are occurring, both sides need to come together. Better training is needed for professors so that they are aware that they are not absolved from helping students with disabilities succeed and that their input is crucial to the success of these students.

In some way there needs to be someone responsible for ensuring that the accommodations are being followed after they are developed. The director of the ARC may be the one who has to accept this responsibility, but that will be difficult based on the number of students accessing accommodations. The suggestion for practice is to create a position within the ARC to monitor accommodation compliance. Thus, greater financial support needs to be provided to the ARC and as a result will allow for the original purpose to be re-established which was to concentrate on supporting students.

These students are responsible for their learning and the accommodations that they receive, but because they place all of their trust in the support services, they are

offered false hope. Putting faith in the accommodations alone will not automatically bring success and needs to be accompanied with hard work. Therefore, students need to be aware of the multiple options and learn to make educated choices about them. The individual students are the only ones who are able to judge the true effectiveness of the accommodations.

Policy

One of the goals of completing research with a specific group of individuals is to suggest changes in policy either on a small, local scale or on a larger, broad scale and this research is not any different from other research in that respect. The current federal policy for institutions of higher education is that they provide reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities; however, expansion is needed to help resolve concerns that have developed from a broad sweeping policy and the stakeholders' input. In many ways, the policy is working for students with disabilities because they are receiving accommodations and modifications allowing for greater access to higher education, but the problem is that the extent of help does not differ despite individual learning disability. The policy needs to move beyond simply providing services and extend to include specific differentiation within the accommodations, making them individualized. By doing so, students will have specific accommodations based on their current needs and will be provided with an opportunity to achieve real success. In other words, the current one-size-fits-all mentality and practice that provides a narrow range of accommodations needs to be expanded to meet student's specific needs. In order to be able to offer a wide range of accommodations and able to meet each student's needs, the ARC needs to be fully funded.

The University of Arizona is beginning to incorporate a whole campus initiative that focuses on the needs of students with disabilities (Strauss and Sales, 2010). The purpose of this initiative is not to create a campus that solely targets students with disabilities, but uses the concept of collaboration of all participants with and without disabilities to create a better learning environment for all students. Only time will tell if this whole campus movement will benefit students with and without disabilities. One potential outcome is that an environment of acceptance for disabilities develops resulting in students with disabilities undergoing less stress relating to the process of "coming out" as possessing a disability. In the end, policy should help students, rather than hurt them with their pursuit of a higher education degree.

Future Research

With an increasing number of students with disabilities enrolling in colleges, more research needs to be conducted with this group of students. Accommodations are established and being used; however, because of the lack of variance, they may not be the most appropriate fit for all students. Greater insight into the methods used to individualize accommodations for higher education students needs to be discovered. Understanding the best accommodation methods to use for each individual student will allow for the most effective outcomes, eliminate wasted time, and lead to greater success. The accommodations are one of the keys to assisting students with disabilities, but without making the accommodations individualized they are not always the most beneficial. Closing this gap in understanding will lead to an increase in student achievement.

Another area for future research is to look into the differences between traditional students who enter college with accommodations because of a transition plan from high school and those who do not have a transition plan. When a transition plan is absent, students are required to undergo the diagnostic process before receiving any accommodations. The down-time between diagnosis and accommodations may be one of the factors for students repeating courses and withdrawing from college altogether. If colleges could reduce the time between diagnosis and actually receiving help/accommodations, enrollment and graduation rates for students with disabilities could potentially increase.

A final suggestion for future research is to look into how the academic accommodations affect students after graduation. Did having access to accommodations cause any problems after academics were no longer part of the equation or did areas of weakness continue to prevent future success? Following students after graduation could potentially lead to a better understanding of how students maneuver in the absence of accommodations. Other questions that need to be discussed further are: based on graduation, do students believe that their definition of success was correct, did students acquire the necessary skills to be successful outside of academics, and does earning a college degree make these students successful?

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Appendixes

Appendix A

Research Opportunity

Interested in taking part in a research study?

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to better understand how college students with specific learning disabilities decide to use the campus resource center.

Basic Eligibility Criteria

- *diagnosed with a learning disability in high school or college*
- *received academic assistance for a specific learning disability from the office of academic resource center either previously or currently*
- desire to have a voice in a research study relating to learning disabilities

Description of Project

This research project will consist of two interviews on separate days 8-10 weeks apart. The first interview will primarily focus on background information, secondary education (high school) experiences related to learning disability, and experience during college with learning disabilities. The second interview will focus on experiences with the campus academic resource center.

Benefits

The benefits for participating in the research study are minimal to the participants; however, participating can help the experiences of other college students with disabilities. Participants will be given a medium to allow their experiences to be voiced to a larger audience. The hope for the participants is to help others understand how disabilities are experienced individually and communally potentially leading to the improvement of the experiences of other higher education students with learning disabilities.

Time commitment/compensation

- The time commitment involves two interview dates lasting between 1 and 2 hours.
- No financial compensation will be provided to participants.

Contact Information

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Appendix B

Interview questions – "Life after Disability Diagnosis: The Impact of Special Education Labeling in Higher Education"

Background/Personal Information Questions

1. What is your name?

2. Where are you from?

3. What is your academic major? Where do you think your major will take you in the future?

4. How did you choose that major?

5. How did you choose to attend _____ University?

6. What is your disability label? When were you diagnosed?

Study Information

Stage 1 Interview Questions – historical and initial decision about support services during higher education

Pre – Higher Education

1. When did you become aware of your disability? What was that like? Were you involved in planning special education services through an IEP meeting?

2. What, if any, special education services did you receive in high school?

3. Do you feel that those services helped? Why or why not?

4. Do you feel that your disability label is accurate? How do you know? (Do you feel that you will ever overcome your disability?)

5. What have been your struggles with academics in school? How have you coped with these struggles? (How has your disability affected your feeling about education?)

6. How did your parents/guardians discuss your disability with you?

Higher Education

7. How has your disability affected you in higher education? (How has it affected your choice of major or college selection?)

8. What strategies do you use to help you overcome your disability? (Have they changed over time?)

9. How did you decide to seek accommodations and modification from the academic resource center on campus? (When? Why? How do you feel about receiving accommodations and modifications?)

10. What modifications do you receive? Do you feel that they have helped?

11. What were your feelings like when you requested academic assistance for your disability?

12. How has the "outing" of your disability affected your academics?

13. How does it feel with others to possess a disability in higher education? (Professors? Friends? Resource center staff? How does the stigma of disabilities affect you?)

Stage 2 Follow-up Questions – greater detail about experiences in higher education and person specific

1. Do you feel that academic resource services have helped your academic performance?

2. What helped you make the choice to seek help from the academic resource center?

3. How have you been received by university personnel because of your disability?

4. Is there anything else you would like to tell about your experiences with

   disability?

Appendix C

Second Round - Additional Questions

1. What is the purpose of speaking to me? What importance does it have to you? Tell me your story. How do your struggles change your life?

2. Tell me a story about when you graduate. What is graduating from college going to mean to you? What does that accomplishment mean to your future?

3. Why is your goal to graduate? What do you see the future holding for you?

4. It seems like you have internalized what society thinks you should feel about your disability. How do you feel about your disability? What would you change? What would your education be like if you did not possess a disability?

5. What support does the ARC provide to you? How do you take advantage of that support?

6. If you could have any support that you wanted to be successful, what would it be? What would it look like?

7. What do you need to be successful in school?

8. Does the college offer a study skills course for students with disabilities? What about freshmen?

9. How does the confidentially of disabilities keep you from discussing your disability with other students?

10. Describe the stigma that you feel with disabilities?