

# Juggling all the roles: Managing time and disability in the higher-education experience

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## Abstract

Students with disabilities are enrolling in higher education institutions in greater numbers. Yet, issues of dissatisfaction with the college experience and early college withdrawal continue to plague this group of students. Understanding factors contributing to this group's perceptions and college experiences is critical to adequately addressing their needs.

The research presented is the result of a larger qualitative study designed to gain understanding about the educational and social experiences of students with disabilities attending the University of Florida.

Time management was identified as a key concern of students with disabilities participating in the study. We found during interviews and focus group that students with disabilities are concerned about issues of time and disability-related time constraints. Moreover, students identified numerous ways their disability affects their academic and social endeavors.

## Introduction

The number of students with disabilities attending post-secondary institutions is steadily increasing. The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics reports that in the 2003-2004 school-year, 2,154,000 undergraduate students reported having a disability. By the 2007-2008 school-year, the number of students reporting a disability had increased to 2,266,000, which represents 11% of all students in an undergraduate program (US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). The total undergraduate population of the United States in 2007-2008 was 20,928,000 (US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2009).

In spite of these gains in post-secondary educational enrollment, students with disabilities fare poorly in college (Quick, Lehman, & Deniston, 2003). Many students with disabilities will withdraw from college without completing their degree (Quick, Lehman, & Deniston, 2003). This is a perilous situation for students with disabilities as there is an increasing demand for training and education beyond high school given the shift away from manufacturing and industrial employment to a knowledge based economy (Jarvis & Keeley, 2003). Moreover, students without a college education will face limited employment opportunities (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2003).

## Methods

University of Florida (UF) Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained prior to the conduct of any research. Participants were recruited via several methods: the placement of flyers on campus, email list serve announcements to include the UF Resource Center list serve, and by word of mouth.

The study employed qualitative methods to understand the educational experiences of students with disabilities attending the University of Florida from their perspective and that of the faculty who work with them. The primary instrument of data collection was an in-depth interview and a focus group. These were conducted in a conversational style to elicit rich narrative data.

A constant comparison method of qualitative data analysis was utilized in the development of themes. Validity of the data was enhanced by use of repeated discussion of findings, peer checking, and member checking of emerging concepts with the focus group participants.

## Data

Our sampling method was a criterion-based strategy as described by Miles and Huberman (1994) to obtain a sample in which all cases met the criterion of being: (a) English speaking, adult students (age 18 and over) from the University of Florida who self-identify as being eligible to register for services through the University of Florida Disability Resource Center and (b) University of Florida faculty and staff (age 18 and over) who have dealings with students with disability and have expertise in issues of disability.

Specifically, we conducted eight in-depth individual interviews and one focus group. The participants determined where the individual interviews took place – either their home or some other mutually agreed upon location. The composition of participants in the individual interviews was six students, one faculty member, and one staff member. The focus group was composed of one female undergraduate, and one female and two male graduate students. The focus group was held in a conference room in the College of Public Health and Health Professions.

## Results

Students with disabilities are concerned about issues of time and disability-related time constraints. Students identified numerous ways their disability affects their academic endeavors. Specifically, they are concerned about **completing assignments, finding time for involvement in the campus community, keeping up with classes, and learning time management skills.**

Several students echoed concerns regarding timely completion of assignments. For example, one focus group participant stated, **"They give you time and a half for the exam but they don't give you extra time for homework. So... you're just supposed to turn it in when they told you you have to turn it in."** A second focus group participant addressing educational responsibilities added, **"So it's kinda like you can take more off your plate so you have less on it but at the same time could you maybe handle it if you were afforded more lenient time lines and stuff."** A third participant in an individual interview expressed concern getting assignments done in a timely manner, **"Every written assignment takes me way longer than average."**

Similar to planning their educational tasks, a student with a disability must plan carefully if they desire to participate in extracurricular activities. One participant with a heavy daily treatment burden conveyed the challenge of contending with a disability and establishing a social identity. He summed it up this way, **"I was trying to hang out with them. Plus, I was making new friends and trying to hang out. So it was a balance. It was all a balancing act of what you can do and what you can't do."** Another student with a mobility impairment expressing the challenge of socializing stated, **"So as far as going out and hanging out with students like after class and stuff, there was some opportunity to do that but probably not to the extent if I had been independent."** A focus group participant noted, **"Well sometimes it takes me a lot longer than most students also to get some assignments done so then that then cuts out of my time to go to a meeting for an organization or something like that. But to get more involved because I know I need more time to get all the assignments and stuff."**

## Discussion

Having a disability adds another layer of complexity to the daily life of a university student. Our interviews and focus group highlighted the impact of disability on the routine and daily activities practiced by the participants in this study. As UF students, our participants share a familiar set of everyday events: taking courses, taking exams, studying, completing assignments, getting to and from campus, maintaining a social life, and participating in campus activities. Moreover, as students with a disabilities they each encounter the unique circumstances presented by their particular condition. While their individual disability may present distinctive constraints, there are some similarities, particularly in the time involved in managing their disability within the context of attending college.



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