

# Disability and the Higher Education Experience: The Issue of Time

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## Abstract

Students with disabilities are enrolling in higher education institutions in greater numbers. 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 undergraduate students.

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. Following qualitative interviews and a focus group, we found 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. The total undergraduate population of the United States in 2007-2008 was 20,928,000.

In spite of these gains in post-secondary educational enrollment, students with disabilities fare poorly in college. Many students with disabilities will withdraw from college without completing their degree. 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. Moreover, students without a college education will face limited employment opportunities.

## 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 self-reported educational experiences of students with disabilities attending the University of Florida. Qualitative methodology, which utilizes information gathered from interviews, is appropriate because it allows for in-depth analysis of how higher education is experienced by students with disabilities.

We performed eight in-depth interviews and one focus group consisting of four participants. The interview recordings and transcripts were analyzed using the constant comparative method elucidated by Glaser and Strauss. In this technique, continuous comparisons are made of the entirety of the interview data from within a single interview and among the set of interviews collected for the study. 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.

### Sample characteristics

	Individual Interviews	Student Focus Group
Students	6	
Faculty	1	
Staff	1	
Under-graduate		1
Graduate		3

## Results

Time management was identified as a critical concern of students with disabilities participating in the study. Specifically, they are concerned about completing assignments, keeping up with classes, and finding time for campus involvement.

### Concerns About Completing Assignments

*"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."*

*"Every written assignment takes me way longer than average."*

*"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."*

### Concerns About Campus Involvement

*"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."*

*"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."*

*"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

Significant concerns engendered by disability-related time constraints are negatively affecting student perceptions of university life and overall satisfaction with the higher education experience for students with disabilities. Because having a disability adds another layer of complexity to the daily life of a university student, the university must act to minimize unnecessary administrative burden. This can be accomplished by encouraging faculty to extend deadlines as appropriate for assignments and secondly by offering specialized time management workshops with special attention to the unique needs of students with disabilities.

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