

Syracuse University

SURFACE

Dissertations - ALL

SURFACE

May 2014

"You Missed the Exam!" A Discourse with College Students with Learning Disabilities on their Experiences with Self-Determination, Self-Advocacy, and Stigma in Secondary and Postsecondary Education

Karen Diane Grella
Syracuse University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/etd>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Grella, Karen Diane, ""You Missed the Exam!" A Discourse with College Students with Learning Disabilities on their Experiences with Self-Determination, Self-Advocacy, and Stigma in Secondary and Postsecondary Education" (2014). *Dissertations - ALL*. 112.

<https://surface.syr.edu/etd/112>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the SURFACE at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations - ALL by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to learn about the participants' academic and social experiences in high school and college as students with a learning disability. In particular, this study focused on the self-determination of college students with learning disabilities, how they understand the concept of self-advocacy, and how they utilize self-advocacy skills in educational settings.

Eleven college students with learning disabilities participated in one-on-one in-depth interviews at a university in the Northeastern United States. The data was informed by Carol Dweck's theoretical work on motivation and intelligence and Erving Goffman's stigma theory. The results of this study provide insight into how students with learning disabilities navigate college, particularly around their views of motivation and self-determination, which related to their belief in an "incremental" view of intelligence that focuses on effort, not native ability, leading to success. Contrary to subscribing to the latter "entity" of view of intelligence, the students maintained that with effort, hard work, and perseverance, they can be successful academically and act as strong self-advocates. Most of the participants identified their parents or other close family members as vital to their understanding of and ability to self-advocate, which casts a strong light on the influence of familial support in students' development of self-advocacy skills. Students reflected that stigmatization was often attached to the special education high school environment, but it could also occur at the college setting, particularly when students utilized disability accommodations during exams. With its focus on self-determination, self-advocacy, and stigma, this study provides rich and interesting insight into the educational lives of eleven students with learning disabilities and the struggles and successes they faced as learners pursuing a common goal of completing their postsecondary education.

“YOU MISSED THE EXAM!”: A DISCOURSE WITH COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH
LEARNING DISABILITIES ON THEIR EXPERIENCES WITH SELF-DETERMINATION,
SELF-ADVOCACY, AND STIGMA IN SECONDARY AND POSTSECONDARY
EDUCATION

By

Karen D. Grella

B.A., B.S. Syracuse University 1996, 1997
M.S., C.A.S. University at Albany 2000, 2001

DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in
Special Education in the Graduate School of Syracuse University

May 2014

Copyright 2014 Karen D. Grella

All Rights Reserved

Acknowledgements

First of all I would like to thank God for giving me the strength, knowledge, and the gift of time to finish my dissertation.

I would like to extend my deep gratitude to my advisor Dr. Corinne Smith for her guidance, support, wisdom, and encouragement throughout my program and especially during the dissertation process. I would also like to thank my dissertation committee members Dr. Wendy Harbour and Dr. Jeffery Mangram for their valuable insight, feedback, and encouragement during my research and dissertation writing. My gratitude also goes to my friend Michelle Mondo for her impeccable work as my data transcriptionist.

My deepest gratitude goes to my parents, Ellie Grella and Dave and Beth Grella, and my brother and sister-in-law Paul Grella and Marjorie Jimenez Grella. Their incredible love and support carried me through the dissertation journey, and their encouragement and faith in me helped me to persevere during times when I needed it most.

I would also like to acknowledge and thank my family, especially, Grandpa Salvatore Grella, Grandma Jane Kwasigroch, and my uncles John Chistolini and Louis Chistolini who all believed in and supported me. Thank you to my friends, Heidi Beverine-Curry, Dr. Michelle Storie, Joanne Valachovic, Cynthia Doss, Amy Maxcey, Heather Rice, Kathleen Delavan, Vickie Swizdor, Peggy Carroway, Fr. Peter Ben Opara, and Brigid Dunn for their unwavering supportive and encouragement.

This dissertation is dedicated in memory of my grandmothers,

Mary Rose Chistolini and Grace Marion Grella

who were proud of me every day and whose spirits guided me in finishing my writing.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Literature Review	7
High School Students with Disabilities	8
Self-Concept, Self-Efficacy, and Self-Determination	8
Individualized Education programs and Special Education Service	12
Perspectives on Learning and Instruction	15
Stigma and Special Education	18
College School Students with Disabilities	20
Self-Perceptions, Persistence, and Self-Determination	21
Motivation Theory and Perceptions of Ability	26
Carol Dweck's Theories of Motivation	26
Self-Advocacy.....	33
Stigma and Self-Disclosure.....	40
Erving Goffman's Stigma Theory	40
Chapter 3: Methods.....	47
Why Qualitative Research?.....	47
Symbolic Interactionism as Methodology	51
Setting	53
Participants.....	53
Data Collection	58
Data Analysis	61
My Positionality as Researcher and School Psychologist	65

Considerations/Limitations	68
Chapter 4: Self-Determination	70
Effort, Persistence, and Determination	70
Making Educational Decisions and Agency	72
Ability vs. Effort as Approaches to Learning	77
Questioning their Labels	97
Summary	99
Chapter 5: Self-Advocacy	102
Defining Self-Advocacy	103
Independence, Requesting Assistance, and Utilizing Resources	104
Learning to Be a Self-Advocate	110
Facing Barriers to Self-Advocacy	115
Summary	134
Chapter 6: Stigma	137
Stigma Theory	137
Stigma in the Public School Setting	138
Disability Stigma and the Term “Retarded”	146
Using Minimizing Language to Describe Their Disability	149
Does Stigma Around Disability Exist in College?	152
Self-Disclosing to High School Peers	156
Self-Disclosing to College Peers	163
Disclosing to Instructors	172
Summary	176

Chapter 7: Conclusion.....	179
Synopsis of the Data Chapters	179
Comparisons to the Literature.....	182
Melding Dweck and Goffman’s Theoretical Perspectives	189
Implications, Recommendations, and Approaches for Future Research	191
Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer.....	199
Appendix B: Informed Consent	200
Appendix C: Student Information Form	202
Appendix D: Table 1	203
Table 2	204
Appendix E: Semi-Structured Interview Questions.....	206
References	207

Chapter 1: Introduction

College students with learning disabilities represent the largest and fastest growing population of students with disabilities attending postsecondary schools (Heiman & Precel, 2003; Henderson, 2001; Johnson, Zascavage, & Gerber, 2008). As a result, more research on how college students with disabilities navigate the college setting is needed in order to best support them in their academic success and to eliminate the societal misconceptions about the ability of students with learning disabilities to be successful in higher education. Based on this information, I was interested in conducting a study that explores how college students with disabilities feel about their educational and social experiences in inclusive high school settings and at the university level. When I initially began this study, I approached it with a narrow focus on understanding how college students made meaning of their disability around the concept self-advocacy and how they developed self-advocacy skills. I was interested in how college students with learning disabilities described and understood their own self-advocacy skills. I was also interested in seeing if the students in my study would refer to experiences around stigma and/or acceptance pertaining to their own disabilities or the disabilities of others. As my study progressed, I discovered that self-determination was a crucial underlying factor in how the college students in my study negotiated their educational experiences. In particular, I found that students' understanding of and skills around self-advocacy could actually be tied to the concept of self-determination and motivation theory.

The purpose of this study was to explore how college students with learning disabilities negotiated their educational and social experiences during secondary and postsecondary education, particularly around the concept of self-advocacy. The term self-advocacy is a contested term. For example, Brinckerhoff (1994), citing work from Byron (1990) and

Goldhammer and Brinckerhoff (1992), defined self-advocacy in relation to learning disabilities as “the ability to recognize and meet the needs specific to one’s learning disability without compromising the dignity of oneself or others” (p.229). VanReusen, Bos, Schumaker, and Deshler (1994) gave a broader definition of self-advocacy as “an individual’s ability to effectively communicate, convey, negotiate or assert his or her own interests, desires, needs, and rights. It involves making informed decisions and taking responsibility for those decisions” (p.1). While those definitions are important, I was interested in how students made sense of the term and how they experienced it as college students with learning disabilities.

Self-advocacy skills are of particular interest to me given my experiences working with college students with disabilities in a disability services office. My profession as a school psychologist in a school district carried over to a university setting where I began working with students with disabilities as both counselor and acting director at a disability services office. In my professional experience, many students entered the postsecondary setting with few self-advocacy skills, but somehow appeared to gain those skills as they progressed through college. I also have experienced students who have been strong self-advocates, along with others who have not yet developed those skills or have relied heavily on others to advocate for them. Moreover, I have heard students’ accounts of issues around stigma and exclusion in both the academic and social arenas. For example, I have encountered students who have discussed negative feedback from teachers and rejection and isolation by peers because of discrimination based on disability.

Based on my professional experiences and interests in inclusive education, I became curious as to how college students with learning disabilities would describe their self-advocacy skills if asked. Specifically, I wanted to conduct a study that provided college students with learning disabilities an opportunity to reflect on their educational and social experiences in

secondary and postsecondary education, because I wanted to understand how they believed their self-advocacy skills developed and evolved.

My study is important to the field of education, as research indicates that high school students with learning disabilities are being educated in general education classroom settings at increasing rates, with a decrease in resource room support and separate academic classes (Holloway, 2001). This puts the onus on the student to be aware of his or her needs and to take more independent action to be sure these needs are met. In addition, a growing number of students with diagnosed learning disabilities are attending college and adding to the diversity of learners on campus (Beilke & Yssel, 1999; Cosden & McNamara, 1997; Heiman & Precel, 2003; Johnson, Zascavage, & Gerber, 2008; Scott, McGuire, & Foley, 2003; Thomas, 2000). Some researchers attribute increasing numbers of students with learning disabilities attending colleges and universities to the increase in support, services, technology, and transition planning that is offered by postsecondary institutions (Beale, 2005; Shaw, McGuire, & Brinckerhoff, 1994). Others cite legislation protecting individuals with disabilities such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990¹ and Section 504² of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 as key

¹ The purpose of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 is to “provide a clear and comprehensive national mandate for the elimination of discrimination against individuals with disabilities” (42 U.S.C. § 12102). The Americans with Disabilities Act defines a person with a disability as one who: (a) has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, or (b) has a record of such a physical or mental impairment, or (c) is regarded as having such a physical or mental impairment (42 U.S.C. § 12102). According to Colker and Milani (2005) under both the ADA and Section 504, “to qualify for a postsecondary educational program, an individual with a disability must be capable of fulfilling the essential functions or requirements of the program, with or without the provision of reasonable accommodations” (p. 352).

² Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was enacted by Congress in order to avoid discrimination against individuals with disabilities (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005). According to Section 504, “no otherwise qualified person due to disability may be denied the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance” (29 U.S.C. § 794). Although this statute only applies to public and private “recipients” of federal aid, almost all public and most private postsecondary institutions receive federal funding (Thomas, 2000). Similar to the ADA, under Section 504, the definition of a qualified “individual with a disability” must meet a three-prong definition. An individual meets the criteria of a person with a disability under Section 504 if he or she “(1) has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, (2) has a record of such impairment, or (3) is regarded as having such an impairment” (29 U.S.C. § 794). This law further indicates that students with disabilities must receive reasonable accommodations in order for

contributors in the increase in numbers of college students with learning disabilities attending college (Beale, 2005; DaDeppo, 2009; Hadley, 2006; Jameson, 2007; Yost, Shaw, Cullen, & Bigaj, 1994).

Some students with learning disabilities who attend colleges and universities have chosen neither to disclose their disability to their institution nor to request support services (Johnson et al., 2008; Troiano, 2003). Unlike physical disabilities which are more visible, learning disabilities, are hidden and, therefore, nondisclosure is easier (Frymier & Wanzer, 2003; Troiano, 2003). In many cases, students choose not to disclose their disability in order to reduce potential stigmatization associated with receiving special education and other disability-related supports (Leafstedt, Richards, LaMonte, & Cassidy, 2007). Similar to race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, disability is a category that has been historically fraught with stigma, discrimination, and oppression (Kauffman, 2003; Russell, 1998; Trent, 1994). Moreover, individuals who have faced oppression, such as those with disabilities, are rarely given a voice in decisions that directly affect them (Denhart, 2008; Moore & Keefe, 2004; Shaffer & Shevitz, 2001; Smith & Polloway, 2008). High school students in particular have had little opportunity to inform society about the experiences they encounter and where or how they should receive their education (Moore & Keefe, 2004). Similarly, at the college level, students with disabilities report difficulty in voicing their educational needs or asking for assistance from their professors who may be uninformed on the topic of learning disabilities or attach stigma to those with a

them to be afforded “an opportunity to participate in or benefit from the aid, benefit, or service that is provided to other students” (29 U.S.C. § 794). Students with disabilities who desired to attend college first found protection under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Cope, 2005; Thomas, 2000). While the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) no longer applies once students exit secondary school, ADA and Section 504 are laws that pertain to postsecondary education by removing barriers that prevent students with disabilities from participation in higher education (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005; Thomas, 2000; Tincani, 2004).

learning disability (LD) label (Frymier & Wanzer, 2003; Hadley, 2006; Hartman-Hall & Haaga, 2002; Lock & Layton, 2001; Norton, 1997).

Limited research exists in which college students have been afforded the opportunity to personally discuss their experiences and feelings surrounding their learning disability, their education, and social realms (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). Indeed, much of the previous research in this area has been survey-based or quantitative rather than qualitative, where students with disabilities have not been given an opportunity to openly tell their stories and share their experiences (Moore & Keefe, 2004). Qualitative studies have been conducted, however, on the topic of students with learning disabilities in high school and college and their experiences and perceptions related to their disability, instructors, academic performance, and support services (Anctil, Ishikaw, & Scott, 2008; Beilke & Yssel, 1999; Denhart, 2008; Hadley, 2006; Lovitt, Cushing & Stump, 1994; Reis, McGuire, & Neu, 2000; Troiano, 2003). My research aimed to contribute to the existing qualitative literature by providing college students with learning disabilities an opportunity to personally discuss and reflect on their educational and social experiences. Although quantitative measures can give us valuable information in terms of comparing students' experiences, qualitative methodology offers postsecondary students a platform to discuss their experiences in their own words from the lenses through which they see the world.

Much of the literature on the high school experiences of students with learning disabilities focuses on special education programs, self-determination, and self-efficacy, with many studies highlighting the discrepancies in these areas between students with learning disabilities and their nondisabled peers (Clever, Bear, & Juvonen, 1992; Elbaum & Vaughn, 2001; Lackaye, Margalit, Ziv, & Ziman, 2006; Lee, Wehmeyer, Palmer, Soukup, & Little, 2008;

Lovitt, Plavins, & Cushing, 1999; Pierson, Carter, Lane, & Glaeser, 2008). For college students with learning disabilities in particular, the research focuses on self-determination, self-advocacy, communication with professors, and social adjustment (Cosden & McNamara, 1997; Denhart, 2008; Estrada, Dupoux, & Wolman, 2006; Hadley, 2006; Palmer & Roessler, 2000; Troiano, 2003). The literature needs more in-depth focus, however, on how students understand self-advocacy skills and how they utilize those skills in educational settings. Furthermore, although studies exist on the concept of self-determination and persistence with college students with learning disabilities, there is little research on how motivation theory contributes to students having strong self-determination and effective self-advocacy skills.

Lastly, while stigma around learning disabilities is discussed within the literature, it is not often directly addressed with the participants and is indirectly theorized to explain behaviors, particularly in relating to peers and faculty members (Stage & Milne, 1996). As a result, I was interested in how students may have experienced both stigma and acceptance as they progressed through their educational careers, particularly to uncover whether students report a shift in others' attitudes toward them as they advanced in their academic and social environments.

The following chapter will review the literature on students with learning disabilities at both the high school and college levels, which includes studies examining topics such as: self-efficacy, self-determination, persistence, self-advocacy, and stigma. I will also present Carol Dweck's theoretical perspectives around motivation and intelligence, along with Erving Goffman's work on stigma theory. Chapter Three will present my study's methodology, followed by three data chapters focused on the major themes that emerged from the participants' interviews: self-determination, self-advocacy, and stigma.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter will explore the literature surrounding students with learning disabilities in both high school and college. Both quantitative and qualitative studies exist that examine students with learning disabilities and the impact of their disabilities on their educational careers and social environments. Many quantitative studies conducted on these particular issues tend to be comparative studies between students with learning disabilities and those without, around academic achievement and socioemotional themes. Quantitative research in the field of disability often utilizes surveys or rating scales to gain opinions or perceptions of individuals with disabilities or seeks information indirectly from teachers (Cosden and McNamara, 1997; Hall, Spruill, and Webster, 2002; Pierson, Carter, Lane, & Glaeser, 2008). While there is much to be learned from quantitative methods, this type of research does not get to the heart of the students' personal perspectives and stories around their experiences of being high school and college students with learning disabilities.

My research focused on the academic and social experiences of students with learning disabilities. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education act of 2004 (IDEA), a "specific learning disability" is defined as "a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations." The term specific learning disability also includes conditions such as "perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia" (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. § 1401 (30)). For the purposes of this study, I will be referring to the above definitions when utilizing the term "learning disability" (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. § 1401 (30)). This qualitative study aimed to make visible the lives of college students with learning disabilities by

giving them an opportunity to describe both their past and current experiences around their academic careers and social relationships. As I will reveal in more detail in my data chapters, the students in my study described how they demonstrated self-determination, understood self-advocacy skills, and helped shed light onto the stigma around disability in our society as revealed in their personal accounts.

Since I was interested in the perspectives of college students with learning disabilities, I recognized that their stories would be drawn from many facets of their academic careers, including their most recent high school years. Consequently, I will begin my literature review with a few studies that have focused on the experiences of high school students with learning disabilities. I will give greater focus, however, to the literature around college students with learning disabilities. It should be noted that, while most of the studies in my literature review focused specifically on learning disabilities, some also included students with additional disability diagnoses where relevant or necessary for the context. Lastly, embedded in my literature review will be a presentation on the theoretical frameworks around motivation, intelligence, and stigma, as each will be important facets within my data chapters.

High School Students with Disabilities

Self-Concept, Self-Efficacy, and Self-Determination

A review of the literature reveals that many studies focus on the self-concept, self-efficacy, and self-determination of high school students with learning disabilities. In particular, research has demonstrated that for students with learning disabilities, poor self-efficacy and self-concept have been of particular concern (Elbaum & Vaughn, 2001; Lackaye, Margalit, Ziv, & Ziman, 2006). Lackaye et al., citing Bandura (1986), defined self-efficacy as “individuals’

judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances” (2006, p. 111). Self-concept “provides a description of an individual’s own perceived self, accompanied by an evaluative judgment of self-worth that reveals how positively or negatively the individual views one’s self” (p. 112). Self-determination is defined by Wehmeyer (1995b) as “The attitudes and abilities required to act as the primary causal agent in one’s life and making choices and decisions, regarding one’s quality of life, free from undue external influence or interference” (p.17).

Some studies that explored self-concept of students with learning disabilities have revealed that those with learning disabilities have lower academic self-concept than their nondisabled peers (Elbaum & Vaughn, 2001; Hagborg, 1999). In addition to holding significantly lower perceptions of general academic achievement compared with their nondisabled peers, students with learning disabilities have also presented with lower self-perceptions in areas of athletics, physical appearance, self-efficacy, and social acceptance (Clever, Bear, & Juvonen, 1992; Elbaum & Vaughn, 2001). Unfortunately, negative self-perceptions once developed can be difficult or resistant to change. The feelings that students experience about themselves during their academic career can impact their later development and psychological well-being (Elbaum & Vaughn, 2001).

Hampton and Mason (2003) conducted a quantitative study of 278 high school students with and without learning disabilities on their self-efficacy beliefs around academic achievement. According to the authors “high school students with learning disabilities tend to have lower scholastic self-efficacy than students without learning disabilities, and those with both high abilities and a learning disability had the lowest academic self-efficacy and perceived themselves as failures more frequently than students with both average ability and a learning disability” (p.

102). Hampton and Mason, citing Bandura (1986, 1995), identify four sources of efficacy: (1) past performance accomplishment, (2) exposure to and identification with efficacious models (vicarious learning), (3) access to verbal persuasion and support from others, and (4) experience of emotional or physiological arousal in the context of task performance (2003, p. 102).

According to the results, students who have more sources of efficacy have both higher self-efficacy beliefs and higher academic achievement. Unfortunately, students with learning disabilities at the high school level may have lower academic self-efficacy, because they are at a disadvantage in terms of the availability of appropriate resources to form self-efficacy in learning (Hampton & Mason, 2003). In fact, students with learning disabilities often have fewer successful experiences, reduced access to successful peer models with learning disabilities, less support from teachers, and less positive reinforcement from others compared with their nondisabled peers (Hampton & Mason, 2003).

In addition to self-efficacy, other socioemotional factors including loneliness, effort, and hope have been examined, with students with learning disabilities compared with their nondisabled peers at both the middle and high school levels. Lackaye and Margalit (2008) conducted a comparison study of 120 students with learning disabilities with 160 students without learning disabilities at both the middle school and high school levels. The authors found that compared with students without learning disabilities, students with learning disabilities at both the middle school and high school levels displayed lower levels of hope. Lackaye and Margalit, citing Snyder (2002), identify hope as a pathway for which students can “set valued goals, identify the means to achieve those goals, and summon the drive to achieve them” (2008, p. 5). In addition, middle school students with learning disabilities displayed higher levels of loneliness compared with middle schools students without learning disabilities, although these

differences were not significant between the two groups at the high school level (Lackaye and Margalit, 2008).

The research reveals that compared with their nondisabled peers, students with learning disabilities have lower scholastic self-efficacy, fewer successful experiences, reduced access to successful peer models with learning disabilities, less support from teachers, and less positive reinforcement from others compared with their nondisabled peers (Lackaye and Margalit, 2008). These findings are consistent with the theory that students with learning disabilities may not have enough availability of appropriate and positive resources to form self-efficacy in learning (Hampton & Mason, 2003).

In addition to self-efficacy, studies on the experiences of high school students with learning disabilities have focused on the concept of self-determination. As stated above, Wehmeyer (1995b) defines self-determination as “The attitudes and abilities required to act as the primary causal agent in one’s life and making choices and decisions, regarding one’s quality of life, free from undue external influence or interference” (p.17). Pierson, Carter, Lane, and Glaeser’s (2008) quantitative study focused on factors influencing self-determination for high school students with learning disabilities and emotional disturbances. Forty-three secondary students with emotional disturbances and 47 secondary students with learning disabilities participated in this study. In addition, the students’ primary special education teachers were asked to assess their students’ capacities and opportunities to engage in self-determined behavior as well as their social skills and problem behaviors. Pierson et al. found that the social skills of students with learning disabilities and emotional disturbances were a substantial predictor of teachers’ ratings of their students’ capacity for self-determination. In addition, teachers rated

students who demonstrated higher social skills as having a greater capacity for self-determination.

In order to gain more information regarding self-determination and high school students, researchers have explored whether teaching students about self-determination is effective in increasing students' academic success and ability to meet their goals. Lee, Wehmeyer, Palmer, Soukup, and Little (2008) conducted a study of 45 high school students with disabilities to explore the impact of promoting self-determination as an instructional strategy. According to the authors, self-determination was a strong predictor of an increase in student academic engagement activities and a decrease in behaviors that disrupt student engagement. Moreover, students who were exposed to a specific curriculum, the *Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction*, were more successful than those who were not exposed to the instruction with achieving their self-set goals that were linked to the general education curriculum (Lee et al., 2008). The results of this study suggest that students with disabilities can achieve their education goals when provided instruction to promote self-determination and self-directed learning (Lee et al., 2008).

The following section explores the literature regarding how high school students with learning disabilities understand the special education services they receive, including their knowledge surrounding their academic programs, supports, and documentation.

Individualized Education Programs and Special Education Services

According to a report from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2), about one-third of parents report that the Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)³ and transition

³ An Individualized Education Program or IEP is “a written statement for each child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised in accordance with Section 1414(d) of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004” (Wright & Wright, 2007, p.53). An IEP is a written plan that includes educational goals and interventions including accommodations and services for each child who receives special education (Overton, 2006).

planning processes for their children do not provide as much opportunity for their involvement in decisions as they would like. Furthermore, although the partnership between families and schools in setting goals for students is a reality for about one-third of students, parents report that the school mostly decides students' goals for almost half of students, and parents and youth decide for one in five students" (Cameto, Levine, & Wagner, 2004). It is not surprising based on this data that students with disabilities may not understand or have knowledge of many of the support services and accommodations they receive. Lovitt, Cushing, and Stump's (1994) qualitative study examined how 29 students with disabilities understood their Individualized Education Program (IEP) as mandated under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)⁴ and how those perceptions compared with the actual content of the documents. The students were interviewed on specific issues associated with IEPs such as personnel, service delivery models, performance evaluation, and graduation requirements.

While some had little to no knowledge around IEPs, other students' awareness of their IEPs ranged from recalling that their parents attended some type of meeting and signed paperwork to knowing a few details about their document. One student when referring to her IEP stated "I just know that teachers fill it out and they talk to my parents or something" (Lovitt et al., 1994, p. 36). When asked about her recollection of sitting in on an IEP meeting her freshman year of high school, she stated "I didn't really understand what they were talking about...I didn't understand it all" (p.36). Of the few students who identified having attended a special education meeting, many stated that while they were physically present, they did not

⁴ The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 "ensures that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment and independent living and to ensure that the rights of children with disabilities and parents of such children are protected" (20 U.S.C. § 1400(d); Wright & Wright, 2007, p.7)

understand what was occurring at the meeting. The authors concluded that “in most cases, the language used to write goals and objectives was not ‘student friendly,’ and certainly would have been difficult for students with disabilities to understand” (Lovitt et al., 1994, p. 37).

Lovitt, Plavins, and Cushing (1999) conducted a study using a mixed research methods approach by interviewing 54 students with disabilities and surveying 231 students with disabilities on their experiences in high school. The students’ disabilities ranged from learning disabilities, behavior disorders, mental retardation, developmental delays, health impairments, and hearing impairments. The study revolved around the question, “What is an IEP?” which was asked of the special education students in a survey. Similar to the results of a previous study conducted by Lovitt et al. (1994), when students who received special education support were asked, “What is an IEP?” of all the respondents surveyed, about half had “at least a vague idea of what an IEP was” (Lovitt et al., 1999, p.70). Some individuals actually stated that they did not know what an IEP was, while other students chose to leave the question blank. Students’ lack of awareness of their IEP’s is consistent with a lack of understanding of their disability and special education program (Lovitt et al., 1999).

Similarly, Scanlon, Saxon, Cowell, Kenny, Pérez-Gualdrón, and Jernigan (2008) conducted a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews in order to examine the post-school aspirations and awareness of 39 ninth-graders. The results of the study demonstrated that approximately half of the students identified as having a learning disability and involved in special education were unclear about their disability and special education status (Scanlon et al., 2008). These results are troublesome, because in terms of future planning, students need to be informed about their disability in order to recognize their own learning strengths and needs and to effectively self-advocate (Scanlon et al., 2008).

Perspectives on Learning and Instruction

According to Moore and Keefe (2004), “although there is limited research that examines the perceptions of high school students with disabilities toward their education, the existing literature indicates that most students want to do well in school and appreciate classes that allow them to experience success” (p. 9). Spencer and Boon (2006) conducted a qualitative study using interviews that focused on how four students perceived effective and ineffective learning experiences. According to the authors, the students relayed stories that reflected more positive than negative classroom experiences. For example, students stressed that teachers who offered choices in terms of independent or group work were demonstrating respect towards their students. The students also identified the need for teachers to have both a good sense of humor and a good relationship with their students. In addition, the participants highlighted the student-teacher relationship as an important influence on whether or not they liked a course and stressed the need for the teacher to connect course content to real-life experiences. Relating content to real-life was also identified as important to maintain student interest and motivation. Students identified a *boring* teacher as one who primarily lectures or reads from a textbook. One student stated “If they try to teach me something that doesn’t apply to my life, then I don’t want to learn it. I just won’t try. I don’t really care” (p. 246). Another student stated “Bad teachers really can’t or won’t explain things to you, and sometimes, I feel like they enjoy embarrassing you. Some teachers have very oppressive classrooms. You feel like you’re always defeated, even when you try” (p. 247). Some students also believed that teachers who never gave “second chances” or allowed them to redo work caused pressure and less chance for success.

The results of Spencer and Boone’s study are consistent with research on motivation which suggests that students’ emotional and behavioral engagement and success in school is

affected by the quality of teacher-student relationships and differentiated instructional approaches (Lovitt et al., 1999; Murray & Pianta, 2007). The study mentioned above by Lovitt et al. (1999) also demonstrated that when students with disabilities were asked to identify what teachers could do to help them, many responded with “give individual attention, explain things clearly or better, provide demonstrations, motivate students, and provide hands-on activities” (p. 72). When asked which personnel provided the most assistance with school, 80% of the students credited teachers as being the most helpful.

Moore and Keefe (2004) used a naturalistic research approach to examine the feelings of 15 high school students with disabilities toward their educational experiences through focus groups and asking students to write about their feelings toward school and teachers. Parallel to the previously mentioned studies, Moore and Keefe’s study showed that students felt that effective learning environments involved teachers who were willing to share their own experiences and relate the curriculum to real-life situations. The need for teachers to differentiate their instruction was also emphasized, including explaining lessons carefully and providing students with choices and modifications. Peer acceptance and belonging were craved by the students, along with efforts by teachers to listen to them and teach material beyond what was in the textbook.

Kortering and Braziel (2002) conducted a study examining how 185 high school students with learning disabilities perceived various aspects of their high school program. The students were interviewed with questions that covered four areas: student background, school history, perceptions of school, and future ambitions. Consistent with the previous studies mentioned, participants reported that the worst part of school related to boring or too difficult classes, or mean, uncaring or difficult educators. Furthermore, peers who were difficult to get along with,

had a bad attitude, or made fun of participants were also mentioned as contributing to negative school experiences.

Students in Kortering and Brazier's study were also asked questions regarding their perceptions of effective teaching. Students were asked to recall how a teacher had assisted them and helped them to learn. Like the above studies, the results demonstrated that teachers who offered special assistance or were viewed as caring accounted for the largest set of responses. Teachers who provided individual instruction or assistance as well as those who used hands-on activities or took time to explain information were also mentioned as helpful.

Deshler, Schumaker, Marquis, Bulgren, Lenz, Davis, and Grossen (2002) conducted a qualitative case study utilizing observations that explored the school life of 26 students with disabilities and 27 students without disabilities. According to the results, compared with their nondisabled peers, students with disabilities shared more similarities than differences relative to their interactions with teachers and peers. For instance, no discernable differences were found between the students with and without disabilities regarding attitudes about learning, self-assessment of skills required to be successful in school, and relationships with adults (Deshler et al., 2002). Other results revealed that, compared with students without disabilities, students with disabilities tended to be more serious about school. For instance, on a student survey, the students with disabilities scored higher than their nondisabled counterparts on measures of how much they cared about gaining an understanding of the material and not giving up when faced with challenging assignments. Lastly, the students with disabilities rated their rapport and relationships with teachers more positively than those of their peers without disabilities.

As previously mentioned, Scanlon, Saxon, Cowell, Kenny, Pérez-Gualdrón, and Jernigan (2008) conducted a study examining high school students' post-school aspirations and awareness

and found high levels of similarities between the students with and without learning disabilities in a variety of areas. In their research, the results revealed that both the students with and without disabilities maintained similar awareness of post-school options such as education, employment, and living. While the students with learning disabilities more often cited self-motivation and general lack of support from others as barriers to their postsecondary school goals, both groups of students admitted that they were their own barrier to success by lacking in motivation, being distracted or unfocused, and not taking school seriously. Interestingly, none of the students with learning disabilities identified the disability itself as a barrier to their post-school aspirations, although they did discuss various ways in which their disability affected school: grades, ability to focus without distractions, and social skills were all identified as areas in which their disability affected their educational experiences.

Stigma and Special Education

Research has unveiled that high school students with learning disabilities have experienced stigma. According to Moore and Keefe (2004), one of the prevalent themes from their research was that students stressed the importance of not receiving “pity” or “special treatment” because of their disabilities, and they expressed a desire to be seen as typical teenagers. The students also voiced frustration that they were labeled as “special education” and felt that their typical peers attached “antagonistic or disparaging images” to the word “disability” (p. 12). According to one student in the study, “If you tell someone you’re in special ed, they always go ‘Oh you’re in special ed. Oh I didn’t know that.’ It’s like ‘I’m sorry’” (p.13). As a result, the students expressed a need to keep their special education status hidden from their nondisabled peers. Lastly, in order to conceal their disability status and participation in special

education from their nondisabled peers, the students explored interests and activities outside of the school setting. Nevertheless, according to the authors, even outside of the school setting the students in this study still experienced stigma. One student stated that she hid her disability from people at her after-school job, “I don’t tell nobody at my work no more that I’m in special ed, because they’ll look down on you later” (p. 13).

According to Lovitt et al. (1999), many of the students with disabilities in their study reported negative interactions with their general education peers, particularly with being made fun of, teased, or put down. Many of the responses from the students reflected a need for improvement in their relationships with general education peers. The authors further reported that many of the interviewed students expressed that they did not like special education. For instance, “some students wanted to dissociate themselves from special education and special education students because to them ‘special’ implied ‘undesirable’” (p.75). This is consistent with research that demonstrated that although most students desire a pull-out model of special education instruction and the ability to receive instruction in the resource room, some students report a social stigma associated with special education due to being removed from the general education classroom (Leafsteadt et al., 2007).

In summary, the literature review on high school students reveals lower levels of hope, self-concept, self-efficacy, and academic achievement in students with learning disabilities compared with their nondisabled peers. On the other hand, other studies show that high school students with learning disabilities report similar post-school aspirations and goals compared with their peers without disabilities as well as positive relationships with peers and teachers. Students with learning disabilities also describe how relationships with teachers, effectiveness of teachers, classroom instruction, and delivery of content impacted their ability to be successful

academically. Research has also revealed that students with learning disabilities demonstrate an overall lack of awareness of their Individualized Education Programs and reduced understanding of their disabilities and special education services. Lastly, students revealed stigma around their disability in interactions with others, particularly around their participation in special education. I will present the literature on stigma around disability more in-depth in the following section on the experiences of college students with learning disabilities, including an expanded discussion of Erving Goffman's stigma theory. The following section explores the literature regarding how students with learning disabilities negotiate their social, academic, and personal lives as they participate in postsecondary education.

College Students with Disabilities

Since my research focuses on the experiences of college students with disabilities while they are actively enrolled in postsecondary education, the literature I reviewed below is limited primarily to students during their college enrollment. According to Foley (2006), "for many students with LD, the entry into higher education is the first time they are responsible for getting their needs met, a process that begins with self-identifying, communicating the nature of the disability, and suggesting appropriate accommodations" (p.643). Unlike their nondisabled peers who begin their postsecondary education as simply a "student," college students with learning disabilities who self-disclose carry the identity of a "student with a disability." In order to receive reasonable accommodations and services to help them be successful academically, students must disclose their disability status (Beale, 2005; Foley, 2006). As a result of their self-disclosure of a disability, students may experience stigmatization by faculty and peers which may not occur for their nondisabled peers (Stage & Milne, 1996). Therefore, college students

with learning disabilities may find the transition from high school to college particularly challenging compared with their peers without disabilities, particularly with respect to deciding whether or not to reveal their disability identity (Field, Sarver, & Shaw, 2003).

While there are a growing number of students with disabilities entering postsecondary institutions, many find their schools' programs to be lacking in the accommodations they need to be successful (Hadley, 2006; Lock & Layton, 2001). Past research has revealed that college students with learning disabilities have experienced opposition, resistance, and concern on the part of the faculty to their requests for accommodations, due to instructors' lack of awareness regarding learning disabilities (Beilke & Yssel, 1999; Lehmann, Davies, & Laurin, 2000; Thomas, 2000). Many postsecondary educators have little knowledge of how to adapt their instruction to provide reasonable accommodations and have received minimal training in working with students with learning disabilities (Lock & Layton, 2001; Thomas, 2000). The apprehension of many college students with learning disabilities about disclosing their disability in order to receive support has been attributed to both disability stigma and lack of knowledge on the part of their professors regarding disabilities (Barga, 1996; Jameson, 2007).

Self-Perceptions, Persistence, and Self-Determination

Students with learning disabilities pursuing postsecondary education appear to be more vulnerable to both academic stress and failure than those students without learning disabilities (Cosden & McNamara, 1997; Greenbaum, Graham, & Scales, 1995). In spite of this vulnerability to academic difficulties, some students with learning disabilities did not find difficulty with other aspects of college life including social adjustment and social integration.

A quantitative study by Cosden and McNamara (1997) examined self-esteem, academic self-perceptions, and social support of 50 college students with learning disabilities and 50 without learning disabilities. The authors used the *Self-Perception Profile for College Students* and *People in My Life* rating scales with their participants. According to the results, students with learning disabilities demonstrated lower self-perceptions of their cognitive and scholastic abilities compared with their nondisabled peers. On the other hand, college students with and without learning disabilities presented with similar levels of global self-esteem and perceptions of nonacademic competencies related to job skills, physical appearance, romantic relationships, and morality.

Cosden and McNamara indicated that these findings are inconsistent with other studies on college students with learning disabilities, which have reported that students with learning disabilities have lower self-esteem than their nondisabled peers. Moreover, Cosden and McNamara's students with learning disabilities reported higher levels of perceived social support and social acceptance compared with their nondisabled peers. The authors speculated that students with learning disabilities who attend college may have a history of strong social relationships and more success in school when compared with those with learning disabilities who do not attend college.

A quantitative study by DaDeppo (2009) explored the impact of academic and social integration on the academic success and intent to persist of 97 college first-year and sophomores with disabilities. According to DaDeppo, social integration was deemed the most powerful predictor of persistence among college students. The author also found that while they were a factor in the significant amount of variance in college GPA, background characteristics such as race/ethnicity, gender, and mother's level of education were not significant predictors of intent to

persist. For students with learning disabilities, being integrated into the college or university setting through strong social connections appear to have a much stronger influence on students' persistence in school than high school GPA and scores on entrance exams (DaDeppo, 2009).

According to a qualitative study by Greenbaum et al. (1995), during telephone interviews with 49 adults with learning disabilities about their experiences attending college, many attributed their academic success to their own perseverance and hard work. Emotional and academic support from friends and loved ones was also mentioned as a major factor in their success in college. Lastly, assistance and personal attention from professors or disability services offices were positively related to the students' academic achievement. Areas where students found the least amount of help surrounded faculty members. Students responded with "Some professors didn't care," "Teacher who called me illiterate," and "Some of my professors were not informed enough about learning disabilities" (p. 466).

Greenbaum et al. also found that despite having a learning disability, most of the students in their study adjusted well to the demands of college life, including forming and maintaining social relationships. The students with learning disabilities as a group were socially active and more than half participated in extra-curricular activities. According to the authors, being socially active and involved in university activities helped to make the students in the study indistinguishable from their nondisabled peers.

Self-determination and its relationship to college students with learning disabilities have been explored in various other studies. Jameson (2007) used a mixed research methods approach to examine the association between success outcomes of 48 students with disabilities attending a two-year college and self-determination. For the qualitative phase of the study, follow-up interviews were conducted with four participants who had participated in the quantitative phase.

Jameson concluded that college students with disclosed disabilities and more positive postsecondary success outcomes had higher degrees of self-determination. The results showed that the students with higher degrees of self-determination described highly self-determining behaviors. For example, those with high self-determination described positive postsecondary experiences, told stories that reflecting high autonomous behavior, and demonstrated ability to identify, think through, and solve problems. These students also described strong psychological empowerment in their belief that their disability would not hold them back, and if they put their mind to something they could achieve it. The students with low self-determination described their postsecondary experiences in negative terms and demonstrated a profile with limited autonomous behavior and psychological empowerment. The students with low self-determination also presented with limited self-regulatory behavior which was defined as “interpersonal cognitive problem-solving, goal setting, and task performance” (p. 29).

In their qualitative study, Thoma and Getzel (2005) used a semi-structured interview process within a focus group to explore the importance of self-determination in the lives of 34 postsecondary students with learning, physical, and psychological/psychiatric disabilities. While this study did not solely focus on students with learning disabilities, the results surrounding self-determination and disability are valuable. The students in this study suggested that self-determination was an important factor in their success in college. Learning about one’s self, especially one’s disability, related to their level of self-determination. The students reported that since others did not understand their disability, they needed to seek out other resources such as the Internet to receive disability-related information. For example, one student indicated that no one understood her disability and some told her that she could not attend college. As a result,

she gathered information from a variety of sources such as the Internet, doctors, and support groups in order to ask for accommodations and explain her disability to others.

Thoma and Getzel found that students identified problem-solving skills, learning about oneself and one's disability, goal-setting, and self-management as being essential for their academic success in higher education. In addition, the students in this study identified trial and error as the most frequently reported method of learning self-determination skills, such as trying out different instructors, determining what accommodations were successful for studying, and retaking classes in which they were not successful to determine strengths and weaknesses.

Anctil, Ishikawa, and Scott (2008) conducted a qualitative study that utilized semi-structured interviews to explore the self-determination of 19 college students with learning disabilities who had achieved academic success. The study examined both the cognitive and behavioral manifestation of self-determination in the participants.

According to Anctil et al., the students shared as many stories about reaching some of their academic goals successfully as stories of failed attempts at reaching other academic goals. Many described how negative experiences contributed to their perseverance and ability to succeed in the future. Some of the participants described supportive family members who advocated for their needs and were strong models of persistence. In particular, some students described parents who ensured that their children received the appropriate accommodations in both primary and secondary school. According to one student, "I remember my mom and dad; they would have to fight to get accommodations for me. And the school would always say that there's something wrong with me, that I am lazy or unmotivated or whatever, and that they refused to give me accommodations, but my parents fought and made sure I got it" (p. 169).

The results also showed that recognizing their strengths and weaknesses was essential to the students' development of identity and self-realization. Many of the students seemed to present with "a mature understanding of their own individual strengths and weaknesses and possessed an accompanying intrinsic motivation to complete tasks, which resulted in a high level of self-awareness and self-realization and ultimately a positive academic identity that facilitates success in college" (p. 172). The following section will focus more specifically on motivation theory and theories of intelligence by presenting the two existing frameworks for understanding intelligence and achievement.

Motivation Theory and Perceptions of Intelligence

Carol Dweck's theories of motivation.

In her work *Self-Theories: Their Role in Motivation, Personality, and Development*, Carol Dweck (2000) refers to two existing frameworks for understanding intelligence and achievement. She suggests that some individuals view their intelligence as a fixed trait while others view intelligence as something that can be fostered through learning. According to Dweck (2000), "entity theory" of intelligence maintains that intelligence is a fixed or innate trait. Furthermore, "entity theory" is so named because intelligence is perceived as "an entity that dwells within us and that we can't change" (Bandura & Dweck, 1985; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Conversely, "incremental theory" of intelligence suggests that intelligence is portrayed as something that can be increased through one's efforts (Bandura & Dweck, 1985; Dweck, 2000; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Kammrath & Dweck, 2006).

Individuals who prescribe to an "incremental theory" of intelligence do not deny that there are differences among people in terms of their knowledge base and ability to master certain

concepts. Incremental theorists just focus more on the idea that individuals can increase their intellectual abilities and academic performance by putting forth effort (Mueller & Dweck, 1997). Furthermore, research has demonstrated that even students who adhere to an incremental theory but have *low* confidence in their intelligence will thrive on challenge and will engage fully in difficult tasks and stick with them (Henderson & Dweck, 1990).

Carol Dweck (2000) refers to two existing patterns or approaches for how individuals react to failure, the “helpless pattern” and the “mastery-oriented pattern.” Dweck (2000), referring to Diener and Dweck (1978), defined the helpless pattern as “the reactions students show when they meet failure: denigration of their intelligence, plunging expectations, negative emotions, lowered persistence, and deteriorating performance” (p.6). Dweck stated that the term mastery-oriented refers to the “hardy response to failure because here students remain focused on achieving mastery in spite of their present difficulties” (Diener & Dweck, 1978, in Dweck 2000, 6). Dweck suggests that those with mastery-oriented approaches persist even when faced with significant difficulties or failure rather than doubt their self-expectations and intelligence (2002). Furthermore, those with mastery-oriented approaches “attribute failure to insufficient effort” (Elliot, 2005, p. 53).

According to Dweck (2006), “believing that your qualities are carved in stone—the *fixed mindset*—creates an urgency to prove yourself over and over” (p. 6). For these individuals, persistence on tasks occurs when they feel they can safely achieve; however, they lose interest when faced with challenges and thoughts of not being smart or talented (Dweck, 2006). On the other hand, Dweck suggests that those with a *growth mindset* believe that “their basic qualities can be cultivated through effort” and those with such a mindset thrive on challenge (2006, p. 7). Moreover, Dweck’s research has demonstrated that students who embrace a growth mindset

show stable high levels of interest even when they face challenges on tasks (2006). In fact, according to Dweck, “challenge and interest went hand in hand” for students who were presented with difficult tasks, as those individuals felt that challenges only made them more determined to succeed (2006, p.23).

According to Heckhausen and Dweck (1998), a motivational approach built around goal-directed behavior is helpful “to identify what specific variables (such as: beliefs, values, and strategies) are important in motivation and play crucial roles in people’s pursuit of their goals” (p. 5). When obstacles or conflicts present themselves, incremental theorists who believe in effort and in the power to make changes will approach negative situations with active, problem-solving strategies (Nussbaum & Dweck, 2008). Furthermore, those with incremental theories of motivation find attempts at remediating setbacks or dealing with negative feedback as less risky, compared with those who maintain an entity theory of intelligence who believed that negative feedback confirms their inability (Nussbaum & Dweck, 2008). Consequently, when those who maintain an entity theory are provided with negative feedback, they respond more defensively than incremental theorists who directly address the causes of their difficulties (Nussbaum & Dweck, 2008). In my data chapters, I will utilize Dweck’s theories of intelligence and motivation to analyze the data obtained from the students’ interviews, particularly in terms of how they frame their academic performance related to effort and hard work.

Limited studies exist that explore the connection between theories of intelligence and the motivation of college students with learning disabilities. Only one study referred to this topic. May and Stone (2010) conducted a quantitative study that examined the stereotypes of individuals with learning disabilities from the viewpoints of 34 undergraduate and 4 graduate students with learning disabilities and 99 undergraduate and 1 graduate student without learning

disabilities. In their surveys, the authors asked questions in order to gauge students' perspectives on entity and incremental theories of intelligence. The authors were also interested in stereotypes around learning disabilities and the relationship between those stereotypes and individuals' theories of intelligence. The results revealed that overall the stereotypes of learning disabilities held by postsecondary students was generally negative. Furthermore, the majority of the students with diagnoses of learning disabilities and those without viewed learning disabilities as "either low ability or an insurmountable, limiting condition" (p. 494). Although most of the students with learning disabilities believed others viewed those with learning disabilities as less intelligent, they were also more likely to hold an entity view of intelligence. The authors in this study stated that they were only able to locate one quantitative study that explored how students with and without learning disabilities perceived intelligence and how those theories connected with their views on learning disabilities. In this study, Meese (1987) compared 37 elementary school children with learning disabilities with their nondisabled peers, and found that the students with learning disabilities were more likely to embrace an entity view of intelligence.

Locus of control has also been explored in studies regarding college students with learning disabilities. Estrada, Dupoux, and Wolman (2006) conducted a quantitative study that examined the relationship between locus of control and social and personal-emotional adjustment of 61 college students with and without learning disabilities. Students were administered the *Adult Nowicki-Strickland Internal External Scale* and the *Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire*. The authors citing Spector (1982) referred to Rotter's (1954) social learning theory which states that the term *locus of control* is a personality construct which "refers to a person's attributional tendency regarding the cause or control of events" (Estrada et al., 2006, p. 44). "People who demonstrate an 'external locus of control' believe that fate, luck,

other individuals, or social structures determine reinforcements or consequences, while individuals described as having an ‘internal locus of control’ believe that effort or ability determines reinforcements or consequences” (Estrada et al., 2006, p.44; Lefcourt, Miller, Ware, & Sherk, 1981; Rotter, 1966). The results of this study revealed that students with and without learning disabilities reported similar scores on locus of control and personal-emotional adjustment. According to the authors, the positive correlations with external locus of control indicate that externality is associated with better social and emotional adjustment for students with and without learning disabilities (Estrada et al., 2006). This association suggests that external locus of control may be the “appropriate survival tool” for students in the college setting (p. 50). As a result, the authors argued that external locus of control is “facilitating the adjustment to college life in both the personal-emotional and social domains” (p.50). Similar to the research conducted by Cosden and McNamara (1997), these authors suggested that students with learning disabilities who pursue postsecondary education may have developed better social skills than those students with learning disabilities who do not attend college. The authors identified the college students with learning disabilities as “the highest achieving segment of the entire population of students with learning disabilities” (Estrada et al., 2006, p.51). They further stressed that a qualitative research study may assist in better understanding the connection between social adjustment and personal-emotional adjustment with external locus of control (Estrada et al., 2006). Other studies have examined emotional resiliency and locus of control in college students with and without learning disabilities.

Hall, Spruill, and Webster (2002) utilized rating scales in their quantitative study to compare the emotional resiliency, stress levels, locus of control, and need for achievement of college students with learning disabilities to their peers without learning disabilities. Seventeen

students with learning disabilities and seventeen students without learning disabilities participated in this study. According to the authors, the results revealed no significant difference between the students with learning disabilities and their peers without learning disabilities in the area of locus of control. In fact, both the students with and without learning disabilities reported moderate locus of control scores, indicating that they evaluated situations from a realistic perspective as well as recognized that they had more control in some situations compared with others. Other results showed that the students with learning disabilities reported higher levels of initiative in their daily problem-solving skills and reported taking an active role in coming up with solutions. Furthermore, initiative correlated significantly with need for achievement, which the authors speculated to be related to goal-directedness, a protective factor for the students with learning disabilities. The authors described protective factors as “personal characteristics that encourage individuals to overcome stressful life events” (p. 80). According to Hall et al., “college students with learning disabilities are motivated by the need to achieve, a factor that may motivate them to apply to college in the first place and to put forth the effort necessary to be successful” (p. 84). The authors suggested that resilience may act as a protective mechanism that counteracts levels of stress in the students with learning disabilities. They provided an alternative explanation that maintains that students with learning disabilities are more likely to face challenges and, therefore, have developed more effective ways of coping with stress by the time they reach college.

Troiano (2003) conducted a qualitative study using in-depth interviews that examined the experiences of nine college students with learning disabilities. The author demonstrated that students who attached a high level of negativism to their learning disability defined their disability in terms of the limitations it imposed on their lives. According to their findings, one

student interviewed stated, “For me, it’s like knowing that you can do something, but when you try to do it, it takes forever to do, or you can’t do it when you know that you can do it” (p. 409). On the other hand, a low level of negativism led students to view their learning disability as “a unique aspect of their learning style” (p. 409). Another student stated “I don’t define it by learning disability. I use the term learning difference. What makes those that have a diagnosed learning difference special is that it’s diagnosed, but I don’t like to use the term *disability* because I think it has a very negative connotation to it” (p. 409).

Denhart (2008) utilized a qualitative methods approach which involved interviews with 11 college students with learning disabilities. The author found that the majority of the students reported having to work harder and significantly longer on assignments than their peers without learning disabilities. For example, one student commented: “People spent two or three hours on this paper. I spent twenty hours, easily” (p. 490). A few students believed that their instructors did not recognize how much time they put into their studies. One student stated “I don’t think my professors know how much, how hard I work” (p. 490). The participants mentioned that their excessive workload was incommensurate with the final product, and they feared that professors felt they were lazy. Other students identified a specialist that worked with students with learning disabilities who played a crucial role in their success and advocated for them.

In summary, how students perceive and understand their abilities are important factors that contribute to the success of college students, both those with and without disabilities. For students with learning disabilities, how they perceive their disability can impact their view of their potential, including whether or not they understand their disability as imposing limitations on their lives (Troiano, 2003). Research has shown that those with incremental theories of intelligence find attempts at remediating setbacks or dealing with negative feedback as less

harmful to their self-esteem, compared with those who maintain an entity theory of intelligence who believe that negative feedback confirms their inability (Nussbaum & Dweck, 2008). In addition, positive correlations with external locus of control indicate that externality is associated with better social and emotional adjustment for students with and without learning disabilities (Estrada et al., 2006). This association suggests that external locus of control may be the “appropriate survival tool” for students in the college setting (p. 50). These perspectives may also impact students’ ability to cope with challenges and their decisions to self-advocate (Hall et al., 2002). The following section will explore the literature around college students with learning disabilities and the notion of self-advocating for one’s needs.

Self-Advocacy

Numerous studies have been conducted around college students with learning disabilities and the concept of self-advocacy. According to Layton and Lock (2003), “for students with learning disabilities, the ability to self-advocate for accommodation needs and academic support is paramount” (p. 49). Disclosing their disability to instructors and engaging in self-advocacy are essential for students with learning disabilities to move from dependent behavior (typical of the elementary and secondary school environments) to more independent or interdependent, responsible behavior typical of the college student (Hadley, 2006). In primary and secondary school, a team approach is utilized for making decisions regarding a student’s participation in special education services. Although students are included in this process, a committee of individuals including directors of special education, teachers, parents, and psychologists are involved in determining students’ eligibility for special education and the types of services and supports they will receive. Once they reach the university campus, college students with

learning disabilities must become their own self-advocates by identifying themselves as having a disability, requesting and participating in specific accommodations, and ensuring that their needs are being met (DaDeppo, 2009; Foley, 2006; Smith, English, & Vasek, 2002). In order for students with learning disabilities to find success in college and university settings, they need to be taught both academic and self-advocacy skills (Beale, 2005; Brinckerhoff 1994).

Unfortunately, many students with learning disabilities have not been directly taught self-advocacy skills before they enter college (Brinckerhoff, 1994; Eckes & Ochoa, 2005; Skinner, 1998; Smith et al., 2002).

The benefits to being taught self-advocacy skills for students with disabilities have been examined in the literature. Palmer and Roessler's (2000) quantitative study examined the effects of an eight-hour training program on self-advocacy and conflict resolution for college students with disabilities. Of the 50 students who participated in the study, 26 were part of the control group and 24 were assigned to the experimental group and participated in the training program. The training program was designed to assist college students with disabilities in requesting classroom accommodations. According to the results, the individuals who had received the training had significantly more self-advocacy and conflict resolution skills than those students who had not received the training. In addition, those students who received the training significantly increased their knowledge of rights to and responsibilities for academic accommodations. The students who received the training "believed themselves more capable of successfully requesting academic accommodations and more able to successfully resolve disputes that may arise during that process" (p.41). Lastly, the participating postsecondary educators perceived those students who participated in the training program as more competent in requesting accommodations and resolving conflicts surrounding reasonable accommodations.

The research on self-advocacy for students with disabilities is important as it directly relates to students' academic success (Layton & Lock, 2003). In order to be academically successful, most college students will need to approach professors at some point during their educational careers in order to seek out academic support. For many college students with learning disabilities, however, academic success often depends on their instructor's willingness to make certain accommodations for them (Frymier & Wanzer, 2003). As a result, students may need to be strong self-advocates, particularly if accommodations are not being provided by an instructor. Consequently, feeling anxious or uncomfortable about approaching their instructors for assistance or responding to and asking questions both inside and outside of the classroom setting puts students with learning disabilities at a clear disadvantage (Frymier & Wanzer, 2003).

Hadley (2006) conducted a qualitative study of 10 college students with learning disabilities using semi-structured interviews and focus groups. The students reported that meeting with professors to discuss their courses or to seek academic support was one of the major adjustments they needed to make as college students. Some students also described feeling "nervousness" when needing to meet with their college instructors for academic assistance in their courses. According to the author, nearly all of the students in the study stated they felt anxious about meeting with professors, because they felt their instructors were both "uninformed and unconcerned" regarding students with learning disabilities (p. 14). As a result, many students sought help from other students or campus support services. Some students mentioned that professors' "detailed comments" on papers encouraged them to seek support from those instructors (p. 14). In addition, some students who sought out professors for assistance stated that their sessions were informative and helped with future assignments.

Other studies have focused on instructor-student interactions around learning disabilities and requesting assistance. In a quantitative study by Hartman-Hall and Haaga (2002), 86 students with learning disabilities were asked to rate their perceptions of their learning disability and whether or not they had past positive or negative experiences seeking help or accessing services. A brief interview was also conducted with each student asking them to rate their previous experiences with seeking assistance prior to college. In addition, the students were exposed to hypothetical situations “depicting a student with a learning disability asking for assistance or accommodations in an academic setting” (p. 266). The results showed that the reported desire of students with learning disabilities to seek help in the future was contingent on how those in the academic setting responded to their requests in past situations. For example, students who were met with previous negative reactions for assistance were less likely to seek further assistance. Those students who perceived their learning disability as stigmatizing and unchangeable also reported less desire to seek help when confronted with negative responses from professors and peers. Students reported the most desire to seek assistance for their learning disability after being exposed to a hypothetical situation in which a student received a positive response from a professor. The students also showed the least willingness to seek assistance for their learning disability when a hypothetical situation depicted a student being met by a negative response from an instructor.

Frymier and Wanzer (2003) conducted a quantitative study of 136 students with learning and physical disabilities and those without disabilities regarding their communication with their professors. Students were administered the *Willingness to Communicate* scale, the *Feelings of Understanding/Misunderstanding* scale, a measure of students perceptions of similarity with their instructors, and a measure of conversational appropriateness and effectiveness. The

students were also exposed to a list of 28 accommodations a student may request of an instructor. The participants were asked to indicate the appropriateness of a student to ask for each accommodation in class.

According to the authors, the students without disabilities and those with physical disabilities perceived their professors as more appropriate and effective communicators than did the students with learning disabilities. When compared with students without learning disabilities, both the students with physical and learning disabilities perceived their instructors to be less competent, less understanding, and perceived themselves to be less similar to their professors.

The authors speculated that the students with learning disabilities may experience difficulty in explaining their learning difficulties to instructors and may need academic accommodations from professors to be successful in their courses (Frymier & Wanzer, 2003). Furthermore, professors may appear reluctant to provide accommodations or appear suspicious of those with learning disabilities and may have limited, if any background on learning disabilities. Interestingly, other research has revealed that in cases where faculty are generally accepting of accommodation requests, students still reported feeling nervous about making the requests or articulating their needs (Norton, 1997).

The results of the Frymier and Wanzer study showed that both the students with and without disabilities reported fairly positive interactions with their professors overall. Nevertheless, the authors found that both the students with and without disabilities expressed reluctance to communicate with their professors such as by asking questions, talking with a professor before class begins, or making a presentation to the professor.

In their qualitative study of students' perceptions of faculty members' attitudes, Beilke and Yssel (1999) interviewed 10 college students with physical and neurological/learning disabilities. The results revealed that each of the students relayed a positive experience with a faculty member who had made a difference in their lives as college students. While students generally believed that their professors were willing to make instructional accommodations, this did not always mean they experienced a positive classroom climate. As part of this study, students gave examples in which they felt the classroom environment and experiences with professors were less than positive. For example, one student with a learning disability recalled that a physics professor tried to convince her that she would not need extra time on his exam. According to the student "I felt like he was telling me what I needed and what I didn't need [instead of] listening to me" (p. 366). Another student described an experience with a professor who felt since she could take quizzes in the classroom, she should be able to take the final exam with the class as well. The student felt resentment and stated that she felt like she was not being granted what she was entitled to as a student with a disability. She added that she felt that professors demonstrated skepticism toward learning disabilities, "Some don't believe in [learning disabilities] and they don't care" (p. 367). Another student with a closed head injury stated that his professors displayed "no feeling and no understanding when I asked for help" (p. 366).

According to Reis, McGuire, and Neu (2000), in order to be self-advocates, students with learning disabilities need to be aware of their own strengths and weaknesses. This awareness helps students with learning disabilities to be able to describe their strengths and weaknesses in their communication with faculty. The authors conducted a qualitative study of 12 university students with learning disabilities using open-ended questionnaires and in-depth interviews in

order to explore compensation strategies related to overcoming their learning disabilities. The results demonstrated that all of the participants described negative or painful memories when teachers in both elementary and secondary school accused them of being lazy due to “the intersection of their abilities and disabilities” (p. 128). Some participants mentioned that they would have liked to have learned coping skills or strategies before they came to college.

All of the participants in this study identified compensation strategies that they used in order to succeed in university settings and attributed their success in college to their ability to use these strategies (Reis et al., 2000). Many of the students also identified being dedicated to their studies and to acquiring excellent work habits. The students expressed that their greatest asset was their capacity for hard work, which they learned because of their learning disabilities. One student stated, “I worked very hard. I would do hours of homework every night, but I am glad I learned how to do homework in high school, and so now I know how to do it here in college” (p. 131).

In the study by Troiano (2003), the authors found that several of the participants voiced the importance of self-advocacy as being an essential skill for any student with a learning disability attending college. Furthermore, while some participants had no familiarity with self-advocacy, others had “extensive knowledge of the construct and had personalized a definition” (p. 414). Self-advocacy skills were frequently linked to both the time of a learning disability diagnosis and level of parental support. For example, those students with early diagnoses and a high degree of parental support revealed that they had been practicing and honing their ability to self-advocate for a number of years.

Garner (2008) utilized a qualitative research approach and interviewed three students with learning disabilities who had successfully graduated from postsecondary institutions. The

students in this study admitted that having knowledge of their disability and strengths and weaknesses were helpful in their success at the postsecondary level. The students further stressed the need to be their own advocates. One student stated “I was taught at an early age that no one can represent you better than you” (p. 7). Finally, students stressed their need to utilize resources on campus and access disability accommodations and services as being essential to their success in college. All three students stated that prior to choosing a postsecondary institution, they took the initiative to research the disability services at various colleges to find out if they offered specific supports for student with learning disabilities.

While the research on the experiences and perspectives of college students with disabilities is important, particularly in terms of self-advocacy, what is needed in the literature is more emphasis on how societal stigma surrounding disability may be playing a role in the students’ lack of self-advocacy skills, desire to disclose their disability, and “nervousness” about approaching professors. While some students disclose their disabilities as soon as they reach the college campus, other students choose not to disclose their disability or advocate for services until after they are academically unsuccessful (Thoma & Getzel, 2005). The last section of this literature review will highlight the stigma students report experiencing as students with learning disabilities and will begin with a presentation on Erving Goffman’s stigma theory.

Stigma and Self-Disclosure

Erving Goffman’s stigma theory.

Erving Goffman uses the term *stigma* to refer to “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” (1963, p.3). Goffman further concludes that a “stigma-theory” is an ideology constructed to explain the inferiority of individuals who are not considered “normal” and to account for the

danger they represent (p.6). Goffman's explanation of the stigmatized individual can apply to the notion that students without disabilities are not readily accepting of those who are not viewed as "normal" and have difficulty seeing them as individuals (Goffman, 1963). Goffman further suggests that the stigmatized individual defines one's self as not being different from others, while simultaneously s/he and those around him/her define him/her as someone set apart from the rest.

Many students have experienced this exclusion throughout their academic careers, beginning in early childhood and continuing through high school (Kavale & Forness, 2000). Kavale & Forness define inclusion as "a movement seeking to create schools that meet the needs of all students by establishing learning communities for students with and without disabilities, educated together in age-appropriate general education classrooms and neighborhood schools" (p. 279). Successful inclusion of students with disabilities, however, has been found to depend partly on teaching factors and the beliefs and attitudes of teachers toward students with learning difficulties (Jordan & Stanovich, 2001).

Research surrounding the experiences of college students with disabilities has indicated that these individuals have experienced stigma in various facets of their educational careers (Barga, 1996). Many students who refer to stigma around their disability report marginalization from peers, faculty, and others on their college campus. Stage and Milne (1996) conducted a qualitative study of eight college students with learning disabilities using semi-structured interviews to explore their experiences and adjustment to college. While some students described an experience with a faculty member to be one of their most positive college experiences, for other students it was the most negative. In their accounts of negative experiences with faculty members, students described how some faculty were insensitive to the

needs of students with learning disabilities and were unwilling to provide accommodations. The participants also described situations in which disclosing their disability to peers resulted in skepticism and/or outright negative reactions. One student stated that once she disclosed her learning disability to her peers, her roommates felt they needed to explain everything to her. On the other hand, some students experienced positive reactions from peers which ranged from supportive curiosity to reassurance. The students reported reluctance to participate in classroom experiences that might display their disability in front of an audience.

Students' willingness to disclose their disability was an important finding in Troiano's (2003) study. Some students mentioned that they were pleased that their learning disability could be hidden to reduce potential stigmatization. On the other hand, other students desired that their learning disabilities were more apparent so that others would have a deeper understanding of the challenges that students with learning disabilities face (Troiano, 2003).

Students also reported that nondisclosure with friends was not an option. Yet the need to disclose their disability in academic settings may necessitate disclosing outside the classroom such as with peers. For example, one student shared, "A lot of times, especially if I have in-class exams, friends ask why I was not in class for the exam, and I tell them I take my exams over at DSS" (Troiano 2003, p. 414). Finally, some students chose not to disclose their disability until after the first exam or major assignment, or felt most comfortable disclosing to faculty on a course-by course-basis. Other students waited until they had experienced frustration before disclosing their learning disability status to faculty.

In a qualitative study by Denhart (2008), the majority of the participants interviewed reported that faculty misunderstood them. One student noted that her professors stated, "Well I don't know if you need to be taking this class if you have a learning disability" (p. 491).

Students also described not receiving enough information from their psychological evaluation to understand their learning disability. One student stated: “I know that I have dyslexia, but I don’t really understand what that means” (p. 491). Many of the students also described reluctance to ask for accommodations for their disability. According to Denhart, the reluctance of the students to request or use accommodations was “the most striking finding of this study” (p. 493).

Students expressed reluctance to ask for accommodations with responses such as: “I just try to get by in class without having to ask” or “I just turn the paper in late. I’m too scared to ask for extensions.” Other students stated “They’ll see me as different and not the same as the other students, inferior almost” and “I feel like the less people utilize accommodations, the more valued their work is” (p. 492). Denhart utilizes disability theory and stigma to explain participants’ fear and refusal to request accommodations that may have reduced their work load and improved their performance.

In a study of how students with learning disabilities managed their disabilities and created success throughout their lives, Barga’s (1996) qualitative study involved interviews with nine students with learning disabilities enrolled in a public four-year university. The author also conducted classroom observations over a six-month period and reviewed academic records. Many of the students in this study experienced various degrees of “labeling” related to their disabilities, which Barga defined as “anything functioning as a means of identification or as a descriptive term, formal or informal” (p.414). According to the author, when it involved support for their academic struggles, the students described being labeled as having a learning disability as a positive experience. Conversely, students attributed labeling as negative when it created conditions that set them apart from peers or when they received treatment that differed from others. Barga referenced Goffman’s (1963) theory of stigmatization around labeling and

utilized this theory to lead into a discussion of the students' accounts of stigmatization around their learning disabilities. Specifically, Barga referenced Goffman's (1963) theory of labeling which states that "when someone comes into our presence, we first label and categorize the individual based on his or her appearance, to size up social status and place the person in a category of social identity" (1996, p. 414). Stigmatization was evident in the students' accounts of their grade school years in the form of low academic expectations by peers and teachers, name calling, accusations, and from being removed from the general education classroom (Barga, 1996).

Once students arrived to college, stigmatization came from having to disclose their disability to their university. More specifically, some students experienced a professor, chair, or department encouraging them to choose a different major or a professor who encouraged a department to have them removed (Barga, 1996). One student described a negative experience she encountered with an engineering professor. She stated that once the professor was made aware of her learning disability status, he held a meeting to have her removed from the class and ultimately the department, as he felt she would be a "dangerous engineer." The instructor was concerned that she would "misread chemical elements during lab and cause problems for the engineering department" (p.17). As in other studies, students were selective in disclosing their disability to others or hid their learning disabilities from others for fear of rejection and stigmatization. Lastly, in order to cope with the stigma around their disabilities, students reported relying on individuals who could offer emotional support and understanding, act as advocates, and provide academic support.

In summary, the literature on the experiences of college students with disabilities sheds light on related issues around social relationships, self-advocacy, self-perceptions, persistence,

self-determination, and stigma. Some studies revealed that college students with learning disabilities presented with similar levels of global self-esteem and self-perceptions as their peers without learning disabilities. Many college students with learning disabilities also reported positive experiences with social adjustment and identified support from friends, family, disability services offices, and faculty members as important to their academic success. Conversely, the research shows that lack of self-knowledge about one's strengths and weaknesses, professors' lack of knowledge on disability, negative classroom climates, and negative interactions with faculty members all relate to difficulties with college students with learning disabilities self-advocating their needs and requesting accommodations. In some studies, the literature review touched on stigma and disability in terms of the negative perceptions of students and faculty around disability.

While the literature explores the topic of college students with learning disabilities and self-advocacy, what is missing are studies that focus on how students make meaning of the concept itself from their own perspectives. Although it is useful to know if students are reporting a need to self-advocate and if self-advocacy training programs are valuable to students with disabilities for requesting accommodations, it is important to examine how students actually understand and define what it means to be a self-advocate. In terms of stigma and disability, the literature needs more evaluation of how stigma appears and/or is masked at the college level. My dissertation study aims to expand on the above research in order to understand individual students' academic and social experiences in high school and college, including examining their perspectives on self-determination, meaning-making around self-advocacy, and awareness of and insight into exclusion and stigma as it relates to disability. The proceeding chapter presents my

study's methodology, followed by three data chapters focused on the major themes that emerged from the participants' interviews: self-determination, self-advocacy, and stigma.

Chapter 3: Methods

Why Qualitative Research?

As a school psychologist for the past 14 years and a disability services provider for the last 6, I have been curious about how high school and college students have experienced and navigated their educational careers and social environments as individuals with disabilities. In particular, I have been interested in how students understand the concept of “self-advocacy” and what they believe it means to be a “self-advocate.” Throughout my professional career, I have attended meetings with high school and college students where educational decision-making has taken place regarding disability services and supports. I can often recall that during those meetings, professionals and parents have stated that their student was a good “self-advocate” or needed to learn how to “self-advocate.” I have also heard students themselves use the term “self-advocate,” but have not heard them describe the concept. During these moments, I have frequently asked myself “what does self-advocate really mean?” and “how do the students understand it?” In my experience, I have experienced the term “self-advocate” being tossed around many times in schools with students with and without disabilities, and yet I have rarely heard the students given an explanation or even examples of what the concept means.

As a result of my longstanding curiosity around students with disabilities and self-advocacy, I chose to pursue dissertation research around college students with learning disabilities and their perspectives and understanding of the concept of self-advocacy from their experiences in secondary and postsecondary schooling. I was also curious to explore broader topics around the educational and social experiences of college students with learning disabilities, and chose qualitative methodology as a means to approach my research with general thoughts, rather than a narrow focus or specific research question.

The purpose of my study was to learn about the participants' academic and social experiences in high school and college as students with a learning disability. As stated previously, the Individuals with Disabilities Education act of 2004 (IDEA), defines a "specific learning disability" as "a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations." The term "specific learning disability" also includes conditions such as "perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia" (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. § 1401 (30)). Through one-on-one interviews, the participants were given the opportunity to openly discuss their experiences around their disability without feeling that they would be "outed" to others, such as in a focus group or other open settings. My qualitative study involved in-depth, one-on-one interviews with undergraduate students at a public university in order to learn about their high school and college educational and social experiences as students with a learning disability. I was particularly interested in how students with learning disabilities understood and experienced the concept of self-advocacy based on their accounts of their educational experiences.

The quantitative literature on the experiences of high school and college students has contributed valuable knowledge and understanding to the field of education for students with and without learning disabilities. These tend to be comparative studies between students with learning disabilities and those without, around academic achievement and social-emotional themes. For example, quantitative studies have revealed that students with learning disabilities have had fewer successful experiences, reduced access to successful peer models with learning disabilities, less support from teachers, and less positive reinforcement from others compared

with their nondisabled peers (Hampton & Mason, 2003). Quantitative research has also demonstrated that college students who participated in a training program in self-advocacy and conflict resolution demonstrated significantly more skills in those areas than students who did not receive the training (Palmer & Roessler, 2000). In addition, research has identified factors related to student persistence, such as external locus of control, learning about one's self, theories of intelligence, self-determination, and strong social connections (DaDeppo, 2009; Dweck, 2002; Estrada, et al., 2006; Hall et al., 2002; Jameson, 2007; Thoma & Getzel, 2005).

In spite of its value to the field of education, quantitative research does not get to the heart of students' experiences of being high school and college students with disabilities. Quantitative studies also do not give the researcher access to students' personal perspectives and stories. Qualitative studies expand on quantitative data such as surveys, by allowing participants to share the depth and breadth of their perspectives. Qualitative research has shown that students with disabilities are able to recall at least one positive experience with a faculty member who had made a difference in their lives as college students, or that students do not understand their learning disability (Beilke & Yssel, 1999; Denhart, 2008). Moreover, qualitative research may reveal unexpected information as the researcher cannot predict the responses of participants. The unexpected results, therefore, are what I believe contribute to the richness of qualitative research.

According to Bogdan and Biklen (2003) "the qualitative researcher's goal is to better understand human behavior and experience; they seek to grasp the processes by which people construct meaning and to describe what those meanings are" (p. 38). Qualitative research "can refer to research about persons' lives, lived experiences, behaviors, emotions, and feelings as well as about organizational functioning, social movements, cultural phenomena, and interactions between nations (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 26).

I wanted to better understand students' experiences by letting them lead me through their stories. Seidman (2006) states that "stories are a way of knowing" and argues that "telling stories is a meaning-making process." He believes that "when people tell stories, they select details of their experience from their stream of consciousness" (p. 7). As a qualitative researcher, I was interested in hearing students' stories, particularly around disability and education, since I myself had worked with and evaluated students with disabilities and had my own stories and perspectives. I did not want to make meaning of students' experiences from my own perspectives as a researcher and psychologist, but rather to listen to others' tell their stories as a way to teach me about their perspectives. According to Watkins (1985), "the root of the word *story* is the Greek word *histor*, which means one who is "wise" and "learned" (in Seidman, 2006, p. 7). As a qualitative researcher, I am the learner, and the students are instructing me on their experiences as the experts of their own meaning-making of their world.

Qualitative research can be obtained from various sources, such as: case studies, in-depth interviews, participant observations, life histories, documents, and records in order to study the process of meaning making in context (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003; Biklen & Casella, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Qualitative studies provide a platform for students to openly discuss their experiences in detail without being restricted by survey questions which guide the participant's thoughts and are often too specific or narrow.

I chose to conduct one-on-one in-depth interviews in order to offer my participants a private space to share their stories without disclosing their disability identities to other participants. Given the sensitive nature of my research, students asked to participate in a focus group may have been concerned with disclosing their disability status to others, thereby potentially limiting the number of participants willing to take part in my study, or limiting their

contributions within a group. Since I was interested in a specific focus surrounding students' educational and social history surrounding their disability, I steered away from other qualitative methods such as case studies and life histories which would have offered a broader perspective on other areas of the students' lives.

Symbolic Interactionism as Methodology

Qualitative researchers approach their study with a particular paradigm or worldview, which outlines the beliefs or assumptions that will guide their inquiries (Creswell, 1998). According to Hatch (2002), symbolic interactionism as a perspective has had a profound impact on qualitative research in general and can provide the theoretical framework for grasping students' perspectives and interpretations of their lives, rather than simply their opinions. The work of Herbert Blumer lays the foundation for understanding symbolic interaction in detail. This glance into the characteristics of symbolic interactionism will be beneficial for understanding how this theoretical framework was useful in designing and interpreting this study.

According to Blumer (1969), symbolic interactionism is based on three premises. The first premise maintains that "human beings act toward things on the basis of meanings that the things have for them"; the second premise states that "the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows; and the third premise indicates that "these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters" (p.2). Blumer focuses on the idea that the "worlds" that exist for human beings and their groups are made up of "objects" which are the products of symbolic interaction. These objects can consist of physical objects, social objects,

and abstract objects. Blumer views an object as “anything that can be indicated or referred to” (p.11) An important component of symbolic interactionism to which Blumer lays claim is that

human beings interpret their world in order to act on it instead of simply responding to it.

Furthermore, human beings are prepared to act towards objects based on the meanings that these objects have for them. Thus, individuals learn and interpret their environment through interactions with others and social definitions (Charon, 2007).

Karp (1996) views symbolic interaction as “an ongoing exercise in sense-making” (p.14). Karp argues that individuals give meaning to “*everything*” in their worlds and as a result are free to define anything as they choose (p. 128). Specifically, it is through objects or “symbols” that we are socialized. We learn the rules, ideas, and values of a group and their roles, and how to act in society based on our interpretation and experiences (Charon, 2007). An individuals’ identity is his or her “social location” where “individuals will usually answer questions such as ‘Who am I?’ by identifying themselves in groups or social categories” (p. 87). Moreover, it is through social interaction that identities are created, recognized, negotiated, and lost. Consequently, at the same time we are labeling others by viewing their identity through actions, we are also being told by others how to define our own identities.

The students’ personal accounts and perspectives are able to provide me with rich information into their lives and experiences. Symbolic interactionism helps to understand the students’ perspectives or interpretations of symbols in their environment as they describe their experiences in their own words. By exploring the subjects’ ways of thinking about people and objects, I hope to identify data that points to how the individuals in my study understand themselves, outsiders, and the objects that make up their world (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003). Designing a study around the perspectives of students with learning disabilities using a symbolic

interactionist approach will assist me in grasping the depth and reasons for the students' perspectives.

Setting

The setting for my study was a public, four-year university in the Northeastern United States. In order to protect confidentiality, I utilized *The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education* from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching to describe the setting for my study (<http://classifications.carnegiefoundation.org>). The enrollment of the university is around 8,000 students which includes both undergraduates and graduates, although the majority is seeking an undergraduate education. In terms of the ethnic background of the student population, approximately 80% are White, 8% are Hispanic/Latino, and 5% are Black/African-American. Around 70% of undergraduates have financial need. The university offers undergraduate programs in an assortment of professional fields of study in arts and sciences, which granted me the opportunity to recruit participants who were pursuing majors in a variety of disciplines. Since most students live on campus, I had the opportunity to interview participants from around the Northeastern United States. The name adopted for the university was "Branchwood University" to protect confidentiality.

Participants

In order to recruit participants, I placed flyers on the bulletin board of Branchwood University's disability services office asking for volunteers (see Appendix A). The flyers were available to students for greater than half of the fall semester. I did not place flyers anywhere else on campus. The flyer gave a brief description of my study along with my contact

information. Since the flyers were only placed in the disability services office where students with disabilities access accommodations, I was able to recruit those with valid diagnoses as determined by the disability services staff who agreed that they were eligible for services. All of the participants revealed that they were registered with Branchwood's disability services office and were receiving services. I was not employed by Branchwood during the study nor at any other time. I presented myself as a researcher interested in the experiences of college students with learning disabilities. Although I recruited students through a third party (disability services office), students were not pressured from the office to participate, and their participation was entirely voluntary.

Only 11 undergraduate students contacted me with interest in participating in my study. I asked all 11 students before they agreed to participate or signed the informed consent document if they were coerced or felt conflicted in any way because they were affiliated with the disability services office. All of the students responded that their participation was completely voluntary. Students were offered \$10.00 in compensation for each interview. Students contacted me via phone or email to set up an interview. Once the interviews were scheduled, I reserved room space with the staff at Branchwood's disability services office or another private location on campus if necessary.

The participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity prior to the research process and written informed consent was attained from each participant. In order to ensure that students were given the opportunity to decline before the scheduled interview, I emailed participants a copy of the informed consent so that they could read it in advance or have the option of using a screen reader to review the document before our meeting. I also read the informed consent aloud word for word to all of the students on the day of the interview while

they read along, and asked them to sign the consent form if they agreed to participate in the study (see Appendix B). At the time of the interview, I provided students with a student information form that indicated their demographic information: name, address, phone number, email address, year in college, and academic major/degree sought (see Appendix C). As part of the interview process, students were asked to provide additional demographic information, including: age, a description of their learning disability, and the timeframe in which they were initially diagnosed with their learning disability. In order to maintain confidentiality in writing this document, I assigned a pseudonym to each student. A pseudonym was used for Branchwood University's disability services coordinator and for anyone else that the participants referred to by name in their interviews.

I conducted one-on-one, in-depth interviews with 11 college students in order to learn about their high school and college experiences as students with a disability. All of the participants reported that they were registered with Branchwood University's disability services office. In order to be registered with the office, the students' learning disability diagnosis was required to meet the university's guidelines for eligibility for disability services and accommodations. According to the university's disability services office, students must verify eligibility of a learning disability under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). The university's documentation guidelines of a learning disability state that the evaluation must have been conducted by a qualified professional, within the last three years. The evaluation must be comprehensive and include test scores, reason for test selection, and clear and specific evidence of identification of a learning disability.

During the interviews, the participants presented with differences in affect at times, but all seemed to be fully engaged in the interview process and appeared to be eager to tell their

stories. Although each was compensated with \$10.00 at the end of the interview, when I handed them their compensation, many looked surprised and mentioned that they had forgotten that there was a monetary reward for their time. I took the students' reactions to mean that there was an altruistic component to their motivation to complete the interviews; as some even expressed optimism that my research would assist others with learning disabilities with their educational experiences.

My original goal was to recruit only first-year and sophomore college students since their high school experiences would be more recent. Only one first-year student, however, agreed to participate in the study. As a result, I chose to interview any student with a reported learning disability who wanted to participate in my study, even if he or she had not been diagnosed before college. All 11 undergraduate participants who contacted me with interest in participating in my study were interviewed. Specifically, I interviewed one first-year student, three juniors, and seven seniors. Five of the undergraduate participants were male and six were female. I interviewed half of the students once and the other half twice for a total of 18 interviews. The interviews lasted anywhere from one to two hours in length. Three of the seniors, two of the juniors, and the first-year student participated in two interviews. I asked some of the students to participate in a second interview, if we had not completed the first interview within the scheduled time-frame, or if I wanted to gain further information on some of the topics they raised. The single interviewees had reached saturation in their interviews, as no new information was revealed with time. A second interview, therefore, was not requested from those participants.

Ten of the participants attended public high schools, although one female informant mentioned that she attended an all-girls public high school in Canada. One participant revealed

that he attended a private, Catholic high school. Two of my participants had transferred from a community college and one was a transfer from a public four-year university. I did not ask for information regarding the participants' race or ethnic background. I made the determination that ten of the participants were White. One male participant self-disclosed that he was of Hispanic-American descent from his mother's side of the family. Although I would have liked a more ethnically diverse participant sample, the majority of the students who expressed interest in and agreed to participate in my study were White. My sample size is representative, however, of the population of students attending Branchwood University in terms of ethnicity. Ten of the participants reported that they were from the Northeastern United States and one female participant stated that she was from Canada. I did not inquire into the socioeconomic status of the participants, as I chose not to explore class as an element in my study. During the interviews, however, some participants referenced their parents' or guardians' educational backgrounds or professions. One participant mentioned that her uncle (guardian) was a high school teacher and another stated that her mother was a high school teacher. One participant stated that her mother worked at her high school but did not specify her profession. Two participants revealed that their fathers had not attended college.

All of the participants in my study disclosed that they had a diagnosed learning disability. In order to protect the students' confidentiality, however, I did not ask them to provide me with proof of their disability, such as a psychoeducational evaluation. Instead, I asked students to provide a self-report as to the nature of their learning disability. When asked to specifically identify or describe their learning disability, my participants gave the following labels: (4) "dyslexia"; (2) "math and short-term memory"; (1) "math"; (1) "auditory processing disorder and memory"; (1) "dysgraphia", (1) "reading and written expression"; and (1) "learning

disability” (unspecified). Some of my participants identified comorbid diagnoses in addition to their learning disabilities. Three participants indicated that they were also diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). One participant disclosed that in addition to one of the above terms and ADHD, he was also diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Another informant revealed that he had both a learning disability and a visual impairment.

I asked the students to recall when they were initially diagnosed with a learning disability. One of the students reported being initially identified as a student with a learning disability in preschool, nine stated they were initially diagnosed in elementary school and/or high school, while one student stated that she was first diagnosed in college. The academic majors reported by the students represented a variety of programs of study. Table 1 displays the characteristics of the students in my study (see Appendix D).

Data Collection

The interviews were conducted over a two-month period from September through November, during the first semester of the academic year. The majority of the interviews took place in a private room in Branchwood University’s disability services office. During times when the disability services office was closed, I reserved classroom space on campus to conduct a few of the interviews. I discussed with the students prior to the interviews whether or not they felt comfortable being interviewed in the disability services office, or if they would rather meet in an alternate location on campus. All of the participants agreed that the disability services office would offer them a comfortable, private location that would ensure them confidentiality. Those who were interviewed in a private classroom setting when the disability services office was closed were given the option to reschedule if they felt more comfortable in the office setting.

The interviews were approximately one to two hours in length. Each interview was audio taped using a digital voice recorder and the interviews were transferred onto two flash drives. The two flash drives and the digital voice recorder were kept in a locked, secure location in my residence. In the interest of time, I hired an individual to transcribe each of the interviews onto hard copies for my data analysis and gave her one of the flash drives. The transcriptionist kept the second flash drive containing the interviews in a locked, secure location in her residence, and returned it to me once she had completed transcribing all the interviews. The hard copies of the interviews were kept in my residence in a secure, locked location when I was not reviewing them.

The participants were asked open-ended questions regarding their experiences in high school and college as students with a disability. According to Seidman (2006) “an open-ended question, unlike a leading question, establishes the territory to be explored while allowing the participant to take any direction he or she wants” (p.84). Therefore, there are no presumptions as to what the answers will be when open-ended questions are asked to participants. The framework behind using open-ended questions in interviews is that it aims to discover from the participant “what was that experience like for you?” (Seidman, 2006). Moreover, open-ended questioning allows interviews to flow naturally and be led by the discussion rather than guided by specific or closed-ended questioning.

As part of the open-ended interview process, I employed semi-structured questions in order to gain some information from the participants (see Appendix E). Semi-structured interviews involve a “question-and-answer” approach. Through selecting the topics and themes, “the interviewer sets the agenda and in principle remains in control of what information is produced” (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, p. 31). To guide my participants through the topics and

themes I was interested in, the students were asked eight semi-structured interview questions regarding their experiences in high school and college as students with learning disabilities. The questions I asked the students included: “Tell me about your disability,” “What were your experiences like in high school/college as a student with a disability?” and “Tell me about your experiences with self-advocacy.”

Although I was able to present general ideas or themes for discussion through semi-structured questioning, ultimately I let the students’ responses lead the way for other ideas to be discussed. During the interview process, follow-up and/or probing questions were asked based on the responses of the students in order to encourage further discussion. For example, students were asked questions such as: “Can you tell me more about that?”, “Can you describe that in detail?”, or “Explain what you mean by...” As stated earlier, some students were asked to participate in a second interview, which allowed me to further explore themes from the first interview and to ask these students to expand on particular concepts they had discussed.

Furthermore, I asked students to reflect on themes or ideas that other participants discussed in their interviews, using a constant-comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The constant-comparative method allowed me to compare and contrast other participants’ ideas in order to look for common themes. For example, while some of my students talked about self-advocacy on their own, others needed prompting on my part. In order to understand, therefore, how all of my students understood the concept of self-advocacy, I asked the following questions: “Some of the students talked about self-advocacy and used that term in their interviews; how do you understand that term? What do you think it means?” I did not offer my own definition of the terms ‘self-advocacy’ or ‘self-advocate’ to any of the interviews, nor did I reveal other participants’ definitions. I also asked students who mentioned that they needed to work hard or

put forth effort the following question to gather more information on the topic: “So, you talked about having to work hard (put forth effort); how did you know that you needed to work hard (put forth effort)? This type of questioning was also used with other topics that students raised during their interviews.

Immediately following each interview, I wrote memos as an additional method of data collection, in order to comment on themes I began constructing or to record observer comments about ideas I generated from the interviews (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003). The memos also provided me with the opportunity to reflect on and notate any of my analyses, interpretations, and areas I wanted to further explore with the students during a second interview (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Data Analysis

The data was categorized and coded into categories and themes that could be connected back to symbolic interactionism. The data for my study was coded using perspective coding, situational coding, and by exploring the ways participants think about people and objects (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For example, perspective coding includes shared rules and norms as well as general points of view. Situational coding categorizes individuals’ world views and how they understand and see themselves in relation to the setting or topic (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003). Both perspective and situational coding were utilized as methods for interpretation in order to look for commonalities in participants’ ideas of “self-advocacy” and how they see themselves in relation to the high school and college setting as a student with a learning disability.

I constructed a total of 62 codes based on themes or categories from my data and reoccurred across interviews. As I read through the transcriptions, I chose particular codes that I found to reoccur within and across the interviews. I constructed my codes based on words that came directly from the participants themselves or from decisions I made on my own as to how information and data could be categorized. For example, if a few of the students used the terms “effort” or “hard work” and I was just taking note of it, I went back through earlier transcriptions to see if the terms were mentioned there. I may not have determined that a code was important or recurring until I had read through each of the transcriptions multiple times. I categorized and coded the data into common categories and themes that could be connected back to theory. While examining my data, I constructed themes based on consistency of recurring ideas from my students within and across interviews. All of the coding was done without the use of coding software.

The major codes that I generated from the data were: ability/effort, disability stigma, and self-advocacy/self-determination. Subcodes that reappeared most often included: disability services, parental support, confidentiality, self-disclosure, and decision-making. Table 2 displays a list of the reappearing qualitative codes that were placed into larger categories that I constructed from my data (see Appendix D). Some of the codes are listed multiple times as they overlapped categories.

Once I developed my codes, I utilized an inductive process to generate themes that I explored in-depth by examining the data again to look for patterns in the interviews. I also used a deductive analysis to determine if theory supported those themes. Initially, I took an inductive approach to my study by seeking to collect data that was relevant to my interest in the academic and social experiences of students with learning disabilities, particularly around the concept of

self-advocacy. During inductive approaches to research, researchers explore patterns within the data and attempt to understand those patterns through theory (Blackstone, 2012).

As I had already taken an interest in particular theories such as motivation theory and disability stigma theory prior to beginning my study, I also utilized a deductive approach where one begins their study with a theory(ies) of particular interest and attempts to analyze the data using such theory(ies) (Blackstone, 2012). I used a deductive approach by analyzing my data utilizing Dweck's motivation theory and Goffman's stigma theory. An inductive-deductive analysis was utilized continuously throughout my data analysis.

I utilized a number of methods to test the rigor of my coding. I employed peer debriefing by meeting with my dissertation committee members on multiple occasions to discuss my emergent findings. Specifically, I revealed to my committee members the codes I had generated from my interviews and the larger concepts that I was beginning to see surface from the data. Through this debriefing process, I was able to receive feedback on whether or not I was over- or under-analyzing points, if I needed to emphasize particular categories over others, and whether or not I needed more evidence to support my findings. I also utilized a constant-comparative method as described earlier and conducted second interviews with the participants in order to expand on topics discussed in the first interviews. I wrote memos following each interview to reference later, which included my notes regarding the affect of the participants during the interviews. I deduced that all of the students appeared enthusiastic and genuine while participating in the interviews, lending creditability to their stories and experiences. Lastly, when testing the rigor of my findings, I also looked at consistencies within and across interviews regarding the emergence of themes and identified those findings that were consistent with existing literature.

I ultimately chose to focus on the larger concepts of self-advocacy, self-determination, ability versus effort, and stigma, because these themes repeated themselves across the different students' personal accounts. After deciding on the broader themes on which I wanted to focus, I generated subcategories that fell under the umbrella of the larger concepts. I explored subcategories such as barriers, self-disclosure, disability labels, testing accommodations, decision-making, parental support, peer relationships, and trust. For example, once I identified a larger paradigm such as 'self-advocacy,' I reread my codes and determined what subcategories would fall under the umbrella of the larger concept. I deduced that students had developed an understanding of self-advocacy, faced barriers, experienced parental support, and made decisions about how and when to self-advocate. I utilized the same process when I generated the larger theme of stigma and identified subcategories, including self-disclosure, peer relationships, testing accommodations, special education, missed exam, confidentiality, trust, and disability labels. Lastly, I determined that self-determination would be an exemplar category in my study and generated subcategories that fit under that particular theme.

Although other themes were constructed from the interviews, I needed to utilize a decision-making process to determine which categories and subcategories would be pertinent to my study. I chose not to focus on categories such as gender, employment/careers, transition to college, and extra-curricular activities. According to Karp (1996), looking for themes or patterns in the data raises methodological questions such as: "How many respondents need to make similar comments before deciding that a clear pattern exists?" and "Once having settled on a pattern worth writing about, what criteria are used in deciding on the particular data to illustrate the theme?" (p. 200). These were questions I considered as I analyzed and coded my data. Karp

further stresses that a researcher needs to use his or her subjective judgments to determine whether or not students' comments are noteworthy or should be highlighted (1996).

My Positionality as Researcher and School Psychologist

As a veteran school psychologist and disability services provider, I came to my research with areas of expertise along with skill sets that are unique to my professional roles. During the interviews, however, it was important that I presented myself to my participants as a doctoral student researcher interested in students' experiences around their disability rather than as a school psychologist or disability services provider. As a school psychologist, I have worked in the public school setting with students who have received special education services, and I have conducted psychoeducational evaluations for the purposes of diagnosing learning disabilities. I also have experience working in a disability services office providing accommodations to college and graduate students with disabilities. If I disclosed my profession to my students prior to the interview process, they may not have understood my role as a researcher, thus interfering with the data collection and the information they discussed with me. Furthermore, some interviewees may have sought advice or an evaluative opinion. By admitting that I could not assist them with any personal needs, even though I am a school psychologist, I may have lost the students' trust and confidence in my role as a researcher. Had I revealed my profession, some participants may have been hesitant about being open due to prior experiences with professionals with my titles.

Simultaneously, as a school psychologist and disability services provider, it was important for me to leave any judgments or advice at the door and to remove myself from a "helper" role when I listened to my students reconstruct their experiences or disclose their current situations. During their interviews, some students revealed information related to

personal difficulties or struggles. In order to retain my role as researcher and not veer to my role as professional, I refrained from helping them work through those issues.

Lastly, I did not probe my students about their learning disabilities by asking them specific information about testing results or through utilizing language that a school psychologist might with a student or client. By probing into the specifics around students' psychological evaluations and support services using professional jargon, I risked coloring the data by changing the course of the interviews or taking the knowledge away from the respondents. Rather, I let the students lead me through their learning disability experiences and knowledge by asking them general questions about their own understanding of their disability labels, needs, and characteristics.

Although I was able to maintain my role as researcher, it was not without its challenges. As a school psychologist, it can be difficult to refrain from asking questions that pertain to my expertise or, to react or make corrections, when students describe something inaccurately. Simultaneously, however, school psychologists are trained to ask questions on assessments without providing feedback as to whether or not the individual has provided a correct response. Furthermore, the evaluator must be able to walk a tightrope between a caring psychologist and one who is in control of the testing even when encouraged by a client or student to provide feedback. Coming to the interviews with this experience, as students told their stories, I was able to maintain a level of control where I did not "tip my hand" that I had particular expertise. It was a struggle, but I feel that I managed to be successful.

In addition to my role as a veteran school psychologist and disability services provider, I also came to the research table as a white female in her mid-thirties who was pursuing a doctoral degree. Although the ratio of males to females in my study was fairly equal and nearly all of the

participants identified as Caucasian, with the exception of one male participant, my identity should be taken into account. Some students may have felt more comfortable disclosing their disability identity to females instead of males. While I do not have information as to how the students perceived me in my role as researcher, my identity should be noted in relation to the participants in my study.

Finally, in terms of the type of theory that I will present on disability stigma, it is important to state that there can be diverging ideas between psychologists and cultural and social theorists. For example, disability studies “examines disability as a social, cultural, and political phenomenon, rather than views disability from a medical, clinical, or therapeutic model (Taylor, 2001, p. 94). Psychologists who conduct evaluations for the presence of mental health diagnoses and learning disabilities in most cases approach disability from a medical model. As a result, one can argue that my roles as psychologist and researcher are contradictory, in that I am straddling the worlds between the medical and sociocultural perspectives of disability. I believe that my graduate work in disability studies has provided me with a lens to critique my own professional role as psychologist while at the same time recognizing that there is an important need for some medical knowledge and expertise around disability.

As I will demonstrate in the following data chapters, I will interpret my data largely in terms of theories of intelligence, motivation, and stigmatization. My interest in motivation theory began in my master’s level education program while I was pursuing graduate work in school psychology. In addition, my analysis of the data also includes research I was exposed to in my doctoral program around the theoretical perspectives of disability from a sociocultural vantage point. I am excited that my dissertation research combines both my master’s and

doctoral level programs thereby making my graduate work seamless and much richer than if I had not found a way to interlace both areas of study.

Considerations/Limitations

The small number of participants interviewed for this study, along with the nature of qualitative research, prohibited me from making generalizations based on the data. As a qualitative researcher, however, I was interested in how students made meaning of their own experiences rather than whether this information was generalizable to the larger population. Qualitative data is the only research method which explores the meanings people attach to various concepts and provides a deeper sense of what an experience is like for them (Karp, 1996). In my study, I was interested in giving students a platform to discuss how they made meaning of their experiences as individuals rather than to represent a larger group. My aim was to deepen and broaden the research on the experiences of high school and college students with learning disabilities, particularly around the concept of self-advocacy.

Another consideration of this study was that the students were asked to take a retrospective glance at their educational experiences in high school and college, rather than only discussing their present situations. While the first-year college student had recent recollections of his experiences during high school, the other students were asked to reflect back on their high school and early college careers from more distant memory. According to Seidman (2006), participants should be asked to reconstruct their experiences rather than to remember them. Direct questions such as “*what was an experience like?*” or “*what happened?*” rather than “*do you remember what an experience was like?*” will assist students in reconstructing their past experiences. Seidman (2006) further states “reconstruction is based partially on memory and

partially on what the participant now senses is important about the past event” (p. 88). Based on this information, I asked all of my students regardless of their academic levels to reconstruct their experiences in high school and college around self-advocacy.

In the following chapters, I will present my findings from the interviews I collected in my study. Chapter Four will examine how my students demonstrated self-determination and identified the concepts of hard work and effort as being significant to their academic success in relation to Dweck’s theories on motivation. In Chapter Five, using Dweck’s theories of motivation, I explored how students understood and experienced the concept of self-advocacy including the decision-making and assessment process they used when self-advocating, the barriers they faced, and how they learned to be strong self-advocates. Lastly, Chapter Six explores the theoretical framework around stigma including how my students experienced stigmatization as students with disabilities and what factors influenced their decisions to self-disclose their disability to others.

Chapter 4: Self-Determination

In this chapter, I will explore how the students in my study demonstrated self-determination and a lack of learned helplessness surrounding academic achievement. I will relate these findings to Carol Dweck's work on motivation theory and intelligence. I will also examine how the participants identified the concepts of hard work and effort as being significant to their academic success, while simultaneously grappled with the role innate ability plays in learning. Lastly, I will focus on how some students questioned their disability labels and discussed how those labels conflicted with their theoretical perspectives about their academic achievement.

Effort, Persistence, and Determination

Although I presented Carol Dweck's theories of motivation and intelligence in my literature review, I will reiterate some of her work here, since it pertains to the analysis of my data. In her book *Self-Theories: Their Role in Motivation, Personality, and Development*, Dweck (2000) refers to two existing frameworks for understanding intelligence and achievement. She suggests that some individuals view their intelligence as a fixed trait while others view intelligence as something that can be fostered through learning. "Entity theory" of intelligence maintains that intelligence is a fixed or innate trait. "Entity theory" is so named because intelligence is perceived as "an entity that dwells within us and that we can't change" (Bandura & Dweck, 1985; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Conversely, "incremental theory" of intelligence suggests that intelligence is something that can be increased through one's efforts (Bandura & Dweck, 1985; Dweck & Leggett, 1988).

Individuals or incremental theorists who prescribe to an "incremental theory" of intelligence do not deny that there are differences among people in terms of their knowledge

base and ability to master certain concepts. Incremental theorists just “focus more on the idea that everyone, with effort and guidance, can increase their intellectual abilities (Mueller & Dweck, 1997). Research has demonstrated that even students who adhere to an incremental theory but have *low* confidence in their intelligence will thrive on challenge and will engage fully in difficult tasks and stick with them (Henderson & Dweck, 1990).

Dweck refers to two existing patterns or approaches for how individuals react to failure, the “helpless pattern” and the “mastery-oriented pattern” (2000). Dweck (2000), referred to Diener and Dweck’s (1978) exposition of the helpless pattern or response when students meet failure: denigration of their intelligence, plunging expectations, negative emotions, lowered persistence, and deteriorating performance (2000, p.6). Dweck referred to Diener and Dweck’s (1978) description of the term mastery-oriented as the “hardy response to failure because here students remain focused on achieving mastery in spite of their present difficulties” (2000, p.6). Dweck suggests that those with mastery-oriented approaches persist even when faced with significant difficulties or failure, rather than doubt their self-expectations and intelligence (2000).

Individuals identified with the label “learning disability” are often inaccurately perceived by others as having deficits in fixed traits such as intelligence or ability. Consequently, carrying a learning disability label can negatively impact how an individual perceives his or her own ability and potential for academic success, if they view that label as indicative of stable, innate traits. Although the students in my study identified themselves as having a “learning disability,” overall, they did not seem to view their disability as being a fixed trait nor did they adopt a helpless pattern to learning. Rather, nearly all of the participants appeared to support an incremental theory of intelligence and mastery-oriented approach to learning, thereby viewing their ability as something that was malleable and could expand through effort. Throughout this

chapter, I will describe how most of the students in my study categorized themselves as hard workers, and believed that with effort, they could achieve their goals and reach academic success.

In the following section, I will highlight how the participants demonstrated self-determination and possessed a mastery-oriented pattern to problem-solving when faced with difficulties or when experiencing failure. I will also explore the educational decision-making processes that the students navigated and how their self-determination assisted them in taking agency over their own learning.

Making Educational Decisions and Agency

Some of the students described experiences in which they needed to make important decisions surrounding their education. These students demonstrated self-determination in their independent decision-making processes toward higher goals. Ron, a senior English major, indicated that he planned to graduate at the end of the semester in which I was conducting the interview. Ron identified himself as having dyslexia, which was diagnosed when he was in first grade. Ron described his educational experiences in grade school when he was placed in a self-contained English class. According to Ron, being in the self-contained classroom affected him emotionally and had a negative impact on his academic performance in English. Ron described his determination to be placed in a mainstream English class and the process he needed to take to leave the self-contained classroom setting.

I was always depressed. I'll be honest. I was depressed because I would succeed in all of my other classes, but I was not doing as well and not being praised in the English class. But all my other classes were, "You were one of the greatest students I've ever had." And then I would go to this bad teacher, "You're a C student at best." And it was like, okay. And I went home being miserable because it would affect the rest of my day. And finally

I just said, you know, I'm sick of feeling this way. I'd rather run and fall than walk and feel like crap and be treated like I don't matter.

For Ron, a self-contained English class interfered with both his emotional functioning and his academic progress. He described the self-contained classroom setting as impeding his ability to succeed. Based on his success and positive teacher feedback in his other courses, Ron made a decision to take agency over his own learning and raise his own academic bar. He mentioned that he would rather take a chance at not being successful in a regular English class than experience negative emotions and teacher feedback. He described how he ultimately advocated for placement in a mainstream English class and succeeded in doing so with his mother's support.

Ron: Okay. Enough is enough, I'm out. And I went to talk to them and said, "Okay, look, I'm mainstream..."

Karen: Who did you talk to?

Ron: I talked to my guidance counselor at that time. I go, "Is there a way for me to try in mainstream." He goes, "Well, we would need your parents' permission, we would need this, we would need that. We'd have to set up a meeting with your mother, okay? We can't do that right now." I'm like, "Yeah, you can. Okay, go ahead. You start the paper work." And I commandeered the phone and said, "Hey Ma, I talked to my guidance counselor and he said that we can do it. I just need your signature basically saying that you're for it." She goes, "Okay, I'll be there in a half hour."

Ron viewed his difficulties in English as being hampered by his environment, rather than his own abilities. As a result, he requested that his learning environment be changed so that he could be included with his peers in a general education setting. Ron's self-determination to change his learning environment suggests that he viewed his academic achievement as shaped by external factors that he could control, thereby demonstrating a mastery-oriented approach to learning.

Isabelle, a senior psychology major, described her learning disability as “labeled as reading and writing expression.” She added, “I have a hard time comprehending as fast as other people.” Like Ron, Isabelle described how she was “determined” to make educational decisions on her own. In Isabelle’s case, she wanted to be on a New York State Regent’s diploma track so that she could pursue college. According to Isabelle, with self-determination she was able to achieve a Regent’s diploma, which aligned with her goal of pursuing postsecondary education.

I was determined to get a Regents diploma, because I knew I wanted to go to college. I was like, “I don’t think it’s right just because we have a learning disability, to not try to push us to go further in school. I mean, unless you really don’t want to, that’s fine, but I’m not going to take a local diploma. What am I going to do with that?”

Isabelle ultimately received a Regent’s diploma despite being directed by educators toward a local diploma track. Similar to Ron, Isabelle experienced an academic environment in which she felt limited, and therefore, needed to take the initiative to change her educational path. Isabelle also appeared to perceive her academic potential as based on factors she could control, such as altering her external learning environment. According to Isabelle, she told her teachers she wanted to be on a Regent’s track so she could pursue higher education. Isabelle stated, ‘I was like, “I’m going to get my Regents diploma because I’m going to college.”’ Isabelle took agency over her own learning and set the bar higher for herself than was originally set by her educators. I asked Isabelle to describe her teachers’ reactions when she self-advocated to be placed on a Regent’s diploma track.

Karen: So what was their [teachers] responses when you said, “No, I want to stay in the Regents track?”

Isabelle: They [teachers] were fine with it. They were very understanding. I think they were happy that I was so driven to go to college, because a lot of their students weren’t. I wanted to graduate, too, but I was determined to do something with my life at the same time. And I was pushed by my parents, too, so...like I always have been. Even though my dad also says if we didn’t want to go, we didn’t have to; he just wants a better life for us.

In her narrative, Isabelle indicated that eventually her teachers were encouraging of her drive toward a higher diploma track to assist with her future educational goals. Isabelle ultimately received teacher support, but it is possible that without self-determination she would have remained directed toward lower standards.

While their educational experiences were different, Ron and Isabelle both suggested that it required the effort of a student to push him or herself to achieve before educators would get on board and support those efforts. In both cases, teachers took a helpless approach to learning or an “entity theory” of intelligence, as their expectations were lower, likely due to the students having a learning disability. While they both displayed self-determination with making educational decisions on their own, Ron and Isabelle also identified their parents as instrumental in encouraging higher goals and supporting their decisions.

Rosemary, a junior majoring in communications with an athletic coaching minor, is also a student athlete. Rosemary described her disability as difficulties with “auditory processing.” She elaborated by stating, “I have a little bit of like a short-term memory type thing, so I just need a lot of things repeated for me to write them down.” Rosemary expanded on this, “I might need someone to dumb it down for me, so, and just sort of re-word it in a different way so I completely understand it, so it’s just in processing-it-type thing.” According to Rosemary, when she was first identified with a disability label, her doctors were not optimistic. Rosemary stated that those who delivered the learning disability diagnosis set low standards for her.

Rosemary: When I got diagnosed with my disability, the doctors told my parents that I wasn’t going to make it to college. So and that’s how bad it was when I was first diagnosed. So, like I’m here [in college], you know, like proving everybody wrong.

Karen: How do you feel about that?

Rosemary: When I first heard about it from my mom, I was pissed because I'm like, "You know what? I'm going to show all these people that I can do it." And she's [mom] like, "It's going to take a lot of work and stuff." I'm like, "I know, I'm ready to do that, I'm ready to dedicate myself." And so, here I am, you know, just proving that I can prove people wrong.

Rosemary's experience with low academic standards being set for her by professionals mirrored those of Ron and Isabelle. Her description of her doctor's negative prediction for her educational future suggests that he supported an entity theory of intelligence. Rosemary's physician admitted that he believed that she did not have the innate ability, and therefore, maintained that she would not be successful in higher academic arenas.

Similar to Ron and Isabelle, Rosemary recalled that she did not want her educational track decided for her. Simultaneously, she stated that she would need to "prove everybody wrong" suggesting that she was driven to succeed academically and attend college in spite of others' low expectations for her. Furthermore, Rosemary did not seem to take her disability label or her doctor's negative feedback as an inhibitor to her ability to be successful. Contrary to her doctor's belief in an entity theory of intelligence, Rosemary's mother's response of "it's going to take a lot of work" implied that her mother had adopted a mastery-oriented pattern to learning, and believed with effort, Rosemary could succeed.

Based on the above students' experiences, it seems that parental support and encouragement played an important role in students feeling supported in making educational decisions on their own. The participants' narratives further signify that parents and students may understand the label "learning disability" to mean that success is achievable with effort, while on the other hand, educators and physicians may be more influenced by the power of a learning disability diagnosis to view it as a limitation regardless of one's work ethic.

In the following section, I will explore how some of the participants in my study described how they understood the dichotomy of ability versus effort. I will also demonstrate how many of the students stressed the need for hard work and effort as integral to their academic success, despite carrying a label that is often misunderstood as deficits in ability.

Ability versus Effort as Approaches to Learning

Nearly all of the participants in my study articulated their need for hard work and effort to be successful. In some cases, students compared their level of effort to that of their peers. Many of the participants identified family members as instrumental in encouraging effort, while some felt that educators were more likely to equate ability with academic success. Lillian, a junior majoring in political science with a concentration in international relations, identified herself as “dyslexic.” According to Lillian, she began to put forth effort around academics at a young age, but felt that “the system” interfered with her persistence in middle and high school.

Lillian: So I mean, it's not like I wasn't trying when I was young, you know, everybody wants to try when they're little. It's just, you do. The system, I really think, kind of really beats the effort out of you after a while.

Karen: What do you mean?

Lillian: Well, you know, when you go to middle school and you go to high school and you hear negative things, and the teachers aren't willing to explain things more than one way, and you're trying, but they tell you you're not, and they make you do things a certain way. Don't you kind of think it beats the drive and creativity out of you?

Lillian raised an interesting point here in that she claimed that all students begin school with a desire to put forth effort, but that inflexibility in teaching styles and negative feedback trumps their desire to persist. She argued that while students feel they are putting in effort, teacher feedback suggests otherwise, which ultimately results in a lack of exertion over

academics. Lillian's narrative further suggests that when teachers do not differentiate instruction to meet the needs of all learners, students will recognize that their instruction is directed toward one type of learner, which ultimately excludes them. Based on Lillian's account, she also seems to infer that once students experience academic difficulty, the blame is put on the student rather than the teacher's teaching style.

Although she shared her perspective on teachers' negative feedback regarding student effort, Lillian described instances in which she continued to put forth effort even when she faced difficulties. I asked Lillian how she maintained her drive to persist when she felt discouraged.

Karen: So, you didn't give up even though you were discouraged?

Lillian: No. I mean, I wanted to sometimes. I wanted to say, you know, why am I even bothering with this?

Karen: But what made you not?

Lillian: I'm a realist. Realistically, so "what, I drop out of high school, then what?"

Lillian's self-determination to persist in the face of difficulty appeared to be driven by external factors such as a desire to pursue a career or higher education. Lillian also described herself as "determined." She stated, "I'm a determined person and I'm really stubborn. I don't give up on anything because you never will get anywhere if you do that." Lillian juxtaposed her label of dyslexia against her need to work harder.

I've always been more driven as a student than most other students, because I'm dyslexic, so I always feel like I have to work harder. I graduated high school with a 4.0. So, in college I'm carrying a 3.8. So I'm above and beyond that curve and you wouldn't know on paper that I am dyslexic. But I kind of really have to push myself more.

In her statement, "you wouldn't know on paper that I am dyslexic," Lillian was insinuating that technically she has been identified as having a disability in reading, but theoretically her hard work and effort trumps any indicator that she is dyslexic. Lillian stated

that she was a more driven student because of her dyslexia, suggesting that she has adopted an incremental theory of intelligence and a mastery-oriented approach to learning. Later in this chapter, I will discuss how other students also challenged their disability labels as not reflective of their learning potential when juxtaposing them with their actual educational performance.

In an effort to find out more about Lillian's history as a hard worker, I asked her where she learned to adopt her work ethic.

Karen: It sounds like you have a work ethic, how did you learn to develop that?

Lillian: I guess I've always had one. And I've always, again, you know, been very driven and a sociable person. So I guess it's something you just pick up. And, again, I've had that great support system for help. My mom still tells me I need to manage my time better, you know.

In her first interview, Lillian described her parents as her "safety net." She also referred to her parents as instilling in her the value of hard work. Lillian stated, "My parents were fantastic...I had a great support system at home."

Claire is in her fifth year of college and is majoring in public justice. She transferred from another college to Branchwood University to play ice hockey. According to Claire, she was not identified with a learning disability until the second semester of her first-year at college. While describing her learning disability, Claire stated, "One of the main things my disability is under is reading comprehension. So sometimes I'll read it through and I won't completely get it." Claire disclosed several times during the interviews that she was born "drug-addicted," because her mother used drugs during her pregnancy. Claire mentioned that she was not close to her mother, and therefore, spent a lot of time with her grandmother and Uncle Bob. Claire referred to these family members frequently during both interviews and identified them as being influential in her academic success.

During my two interviews with Claire, she talked repeatedly about how hard work was crucial to her academic achievement. According to Claire, she began putting forth strong effort early in her education, and her work ethic continued to be solid at the postsecondary level. I asked Claire how she came to know that hard work was essential for her academic success.

Karen: How did you know that you needed to work hard? You said that for a long time you've needed to work hard.

Claire: Yeah. I don't know. It just takes me a little bit longer, I think, than the average student, so I know that I really need that extra discipline to be like, okay I can do this. It's going to be challenging but I need to set goals for myself each day and even...there were a couple of days where I just wasn't feeling well and I'm like, "I really don't feel like doing this, but I need to, I have to. Even if I get a page, just do it."

Karen: But how...where did you develop that? I mean, how did you know?

Claire: Like my Uncle Bob, last time I was telling you when I was younger how I'd go over every night. He really disciplined me in getting my work done and sticking it out, no matter how tough it gets. He always said that I had an ability to hang in there and to not give up. So a lot of that comes from my Uncle Bob helping me in school when I used to struggle.

Like Isabelle, Claire suggested a family member was responsible for educating her on the value of hard work and effort as tools for academic success. Claire stated that her uncle told her that she had "an ability to hang in there and to not give up." Uncle Bob's encouragement ultimately led Claire to develop a mastery-oriented learning pattern which fostered a strong work ethic around academics. I asked Claire if she could recall when she first learned the importance of hard work and effort.

Karen: So when do you feel like you realized that you needed to work?

Claire: Probably like in first grade. Because my Uncle Bob came and had a talk with me and was like, "Okay, you're struggling in school and education is important and you need to come over and I'll help you." I don't know if I fully understood, because I was just a kid and I wanted to have my own free time, but then again I understood where my Uncle Bob was coming from. Education was important.

And I felt good when I got those 100's on my spelling tests. I started seeing the success from my hard work, and I really loved that.

Claire reiterated that her uncle was instrumental in encouraging her to persist when facing challenges. She also revealed that her uncle instilled in her a strong belief in the importance of education. Claire ultimately began to see success from her efforts, which may have helped to strengthen her mastery-oriented approach to learning.

In her narrative, Claire compared herself with the “average” student and used her peers as a reference point for why she needed to work hard. I was curious as to what she thought the “average” student needed to do to be successful academically.

Karen: What about the average student; what do you think that they have to do?

Claire: Yeah. I mean, they probably have to work just as hard, too, but, I don't know, in a sense like it takes me longer. I'm not trying to say, “oh, they don't work hard”, but, I don't know, I think that an average student... things probably come a little easier to them. Especially like reading those articles. Sometimes I'm like, “how does somebody understand them?” For me it would take forever and a tutor explaining examples. I don't know, so they still definitely work hard at it, too, but it's different. I feel like things come to a normal student. And sometimes I feel that well maybe if I would have been born like normal or not like drug addicted, maybe I could be like that, too. Not that things come easy to them, but it would be a little easier, I think.

When she stated that “things probably come a little easier to them,” Claire inferred that “average” or “normal” students may have more innate ability. Simultaneously, however, she admitted that she believed “average” students may have to work hard as well. Through an analysis of Claire's narrative, it seems that ‘ability versus effort’ is not a clear dichotomy, but instead, one ideology that blends the two concepts. Claire insinuated that her ability was not that of a “normal” student, and yet has adopted a strong philosophy around effort. According to Dweck, Claire's struggle with ability's role in learning would be characteristic of someone who had adopted a mastery-oriented pattern of learning, because he or she would not deny that there

are some differences among people in terms of knowledge base and ability to master certain tasks. I asked Claire to give an explanation of her conceptualization of “normal.”

Karen: What does normal mean?

Claire: I don’t know. It’s funny, because then sometimes I kind of think that a learning disability... I feel like everyone has a learning disability, because it’s almost, well it’s just testing like weaknesses and strengths.

In her narrative, Claire continued to lean towards a mastery-oriented approach, and this was evident in her challenging the term ‘learning disability.’ Although she often compared her ability to the “normal student,” she simultaneously suggested that everyone has strengths and weaknesses. I probed Claire a little further into her perception of the idea that some individuals may not have to work hard.

Karen: Do you know people that don’t need to work hard?

Claire: I hear stories of, I don’t know, a lot of students like procrastinating and waiting until the last minute. I don’t know if I really know anyone who doesn’t work hard, but you hear those stories of students that leave the paper until the morning that it’s due and they hurry up and rush through it. And you hear that they get an A. I know my friend’s done that a few times. I don’t know, I hear a lot of stories of students who aren’t part of disability services that are around campus that just wait until the last minute, and they rush through it, and then somehow they end up getting a good grade, and I’m like, “How did you pull that off?”

In this narrative, Claire continued to grapple with an entity theory of intelligence that suggests that some students do not need to work hard to be successful academically. Although she indicated that she has heard “stories” of students who are able to be successful completing work at the last minute, she did not provide specific examples other than that of a friend. According to Claire, using her disability-related accommodations was another way that she demonstrated her strong work ethic. She further noted that her philosophy around hard work made her a role model or “advocate” for other students with disabilities by showing them that they too can be successful with effort.

I'm a good example. I think I have worked hard and the accommodations that are available to me, I've used to the most extent that I can use them. I do it, and I work hard. And, I don't know, I think that I am an advocate, because it shows other students who may have disabilities that they can work hard and be successful, if they work hard and go to get those accommodations, and then go the extra mile of following through with the accommodations.

Similar to Isabelle's belief that effort was discouraged in school, Claire described an experience where she came to the same conclusion. She recalled how her elementary school gave out awards to students based on their academic achievement. According to Claire, one of the awards gave "effort" a negative connotation.

At school like every half a semester, they would do a learning...they called it the learning celebration. And you go and you sit in an auditorium, and then they announce the students of who got what, and the lowest was effort role, which is like barely passing kind of. And then achiever, and then all-star, and your all-star students were your straight A, like really good students. And they would announce everyone's name, like who got what. Like my friends would get all-star. There was one girl that was really mean to me and she'd be like, "Oh, still didn't get all-star, did you?" She'd always make fun of me, because most of the time I got effort role, which is like barely passing, and she's like, "Oh, you only got effort role? I got all-star, again!"

Although Claire spoke repeatedly during her interviews about the importance of hard work, she experienced a school setting in which effort was acknowledged but not acclaimed. In fact, Claire's school was discouraging others from seeing the value of effort when it was attached to a "barely passing" academic performance. Claire spoke further as to how these labels made an impact on the students.

I think it's horrible, because it labels kids right there, you know? They're like naming off...now that I look at it, back then it was just school when I was a kid. But now that I'm older and I look at that, I'm like, "That is horrible." Because kids will pick on each other, you know, you're labeled right there. You're labeled as "effort role."

Claire indicated that there was a stigma attached to effort in her school as students would make fun of those who were praised for hard work. I asked Claire to tell me more about how this experience impacted her feelings about effort and hard work.

But I was made fun for it. I don't know, I guess when I was little they didn't understand I had to work so hard to achieve that effort role. But for them, they just got all-star and I mean not that they didn't work hard, too, but geez, you know? I mean, is that right? Is that right that they can make fun of me just because I got effort role again? I really didn't like that, because that really hurt my feelings and upset me. And then one year, at the end of sixth grade, before I moved into seventh grade, I got all-star role. So I was really excited about that. I had all A's in everything.

Claire described the emotional impact of the teasing she encountered when she received the "effort role." She described how even though she put in effort toward her academics, she was ultimately stigmatized for it in a public domain. According to Claire, the awards told the students that getting good grades meant "smart," even though effort may have been a component of that success. Claire's experience raises two questions: when ability is praised is it actually masking the fact that there is effort involved and do students need to hide their effort in order to stand out as academically or to be an "all-star?" I asked Claire if she received any praise for achieving the effort role.

Karen: Did you ever get praised for getting the effort role?

Claire: My family, I guess. They'd be like, "Well, that's good. That's good." I mean, at least I'm not failing, you know?

Karen: What about the all-star role?

Claire: They were really happy about that. They were like, "Wow, that's really great."

While her family praised her for her effort, Claire recalled that her all-star achievement brought even stronger praise from her family. It appears that her family already recognized that Claire was putting forth effort and believed that with even more effort, she could achieve the grades she strived for. Unlike her peers, Claire talked about how some teachers praised her for her effort and good character which was instrumental in her receiving the awards.

I always got awards for good character, hard work, so I think the teachers saw that in me, that I really worked hard to try to obtain a passing grade or whatever. So that always

made me feel good about myself, because I was praised for that effort. I knew that I had a good character and hard work, and I was rewarded for that.

Claire implied that although teachers praised her for her hard work, when that attribute was put into the context of a school award, effort took on a negative connotation. Claire ultimately recognized that she should feel good about her effort and that her teachers were cognizant of her hard work. Claire expanded on her feelings associated with achieving the all-star role, while simultaneously questioning the system that recognized students' achievements.

And then when I got that all-star role, I was excited because I'm like, well now, I have gotten to this level. But I don't think that's right to do, in a sense, because it's a celebration of learning, so it's like they're recognizing those students who are working hard. But if your name isn't called, then it's like you're obviously failing or something. But, I don't know if I like those categories and students being put into them.

Even though she admitted that she was excited to have achieved the all-star role, Claire challenged the awards in general. By categorizing students' achievement and effort and leaving others out, the school sent a message that those who struggled academically were not worthy of recognition. At the same time, those students and their academic performance were exposed to everyone by the fact that their name was not called. In her statement, "they're recognizing those students who are working hard," she's acknowledged that even those who achieved higher than the effort role were likely putting in hard work to achieve success. I asked Claire if she felt those in the all-star role had to work hard.

Karen: Do the students in the all-star role have to work hard? I mean was effort involved?

Claire: I'm sure it was. But I just always looked at those students, because they were smart, and those were always the kids that got the good grades and the smart kids that I wanted to be like. I wanted to be that. I just always felt lower than them, just seeing them in study halls and stuff, they would just breeze through work.

By unpacking Claire's statements, we can see that she continued to struggle with the ability/effort dichotomy. When she stated, "I just always looked at those students because they

were smart,” Claire seemed to imply that this may have been a past perspective, as she now maintains a strong belief in effort based on a mastery-oriented response to learning. It is not surprising, however, that Claire wanted to be like the “smart kids,” since when effort was given a negative connotation, it was more desirable to be considered “smart” rather than a “hard worker.” Even the “achiever” role award which also implied effort was a step below the all-star role award which symbolized the success of the “smart” students.

Ron provided evidence of his belief in a mastery-oriented approach to learning in his statement that he needed to “work that much harder” to be successful in his English course. He described specific “effort” techniques such as getting work done early and staying in during weeknights to finish his work. Taking a mastery-oriented approach to learning speaks to Ron’s success despite having a learning disability in reading and writing, subjects that are the foundation of an English major.

Ron described how he had difficulties in reading and writing, but chose to pursue a major in English after being encouraged by a professor to study the subject. I asked Ron about his struggles with reading and writing in relation to his English major.

Karen: So, with the difficulties you had with reading and with writing, what did you have to do to excel in your English major?

Ron: Find a way to surpass it, work that much harder. Instead of going out every night, get the homework done. Don’t put the homework off, get it done sooner than later. I mean, focus that much harder. Where, instead of going out every night, I’m in, getting it done, so that on the weekend I can have my time to myself.

Based on the other students’ narratives, I asked Isabelle to discuss her approach to learning and whether or not she felt she needed to work hard.

Karen: Some of the students have talked about how they have to really work hard. What do you think about that in terms of your own learning?

Isabelle: I do. It’s very frustrating because sometimes it does feel like I have to...it takes

me like ten times more than it does other people to really get stuff.

Isabelle's response was enlightening, because although she indicated that she has had to work hard, she also compared herself to others in terms of her ability. Isabelle referenced ability when she mentioned that it takes her longer to understand information compared with her peers. I further probed into Isabelle's work ethic by asking her how she adopted such an approach to learning.

Karen: Where do you think you learned to get your work ethic from?

Isabelle: Probably my parents, mostly. My dad, especially. He always pushes you to do good because he didn't go to college or anything. So he's very serious about us going and getting stuff done. Because he feels that if he was motivated and pushed to do it, then he would have went, because he was such a good student. So we've all went to college, all of his kids so far.

Isabelle identified her parents, particularly her father as instrumental in her adoption of a strong work ethic. Although her father was likely aware of her disability label, he was not focused on the societal perspective that the label equated with innate difficulties with learning. Consequently, Isabelle's father instilled in her a mastery-oriented pattern of learning and encouraged her to put forth effort around her academics. Like Lillian, however, who felt that educators negatively interfered with her self-determination and persistence in school, Isabelle suggested that her high school educators "did not try to push [her] further" to achieve success. In her narrative, Rosemary also identified a parent, in this case her mother, as contributing to her understanding of the need for hard work. Rosemary stated, "She [mother] always pumps me up, she's like, 'You'll do good, don't worry about it, you've studied so hard for this,' and just mentally pumps me up for it." Rosemary's parental encouragement of effort paralleled the experiences of Lillian and Isabelle. Rosemary also observed her brother's work ethic and

modeled her behavior after his. She was further motivated by parental expectations to work hard in athletics and academics.

Rosemary: I saw how hard my brother worked with his school, like his work and all that. So I just kind of saw it, I'm like, "okay, I want to be like that. I want to work hard." My parents expected me to work hard, it was just all around me, like in hockey and in school. So I knew I had to work hard for myself and for my family.

Karen: So tell me a little more about what you had to do, what effort you had to put in.

Rosemary: Say if someone had to put in five times the effort, I'd probably have to double that and put in ten times the effort. So I just forced myself to sit down and memorize, have a sheet of paper in front of me and be like, "okay, these are the things that I need to know," and I memorized. I sat there repeatedly putting the stuff into my head so I was pounding it and with extra effort. So it was all that extra hard work.

Similar to Isabelle, Rosemary quantified her level of hard work by stating that she had to exert five times more effort compared with her peers. Whether or not these are indirect references to ability, quantifying effort could signify that some of the participants believed that even though others have to put in effort, they need to put in more because of their learning disability.

According to Rosemary, participation in field hockey has also helped to shape her view of hard work and effort as being important to academic success. She stated, "Field hockey has helped me a lot. It's taught me how to be committed and dedicated, and not just hockey, but in everything, like academics." During her interview, Rosemary stated that she struggled academically her first semester in college. She attributed her academic difficulty to be the result of lack of discipline rather than lack of ability.

Rosemary: I kind of didn't do so well academically first semester last year, and I busted my butt the second semester and got the grades that I needed to get to be back.

Karen: Why didn't you do so well the first semester?

Rosemary: Just lack of discipline and didn't study all that much for finals...I needed to do more than I should have done.

Rosemary admitted that she struggled academically because she did not study for finals and lacked discipline. With this perspective, Rosemary seemed to recognize that her academic difficulties were due to external factors which she could control such as studying for finals or exerting more effort. While Rosemary may have recognized that she needed to work harder than others, she was still emphasizing the need for effort rather than ability to be academically successful.

Nathan is a senior graphic design major who has an associate's degree in digital art from a community college. When I asked him about his learning disability, he stated, "I have mainly trouble in math." Nathan added that he struggles with "stuff that locks in memorization." Nathan also indicated that he has a visual impairment. He revealed difficulties at home, particularly a strained relationship with his mother. Like the previous participants, Nathan talked about hard work.

Karen: Tell me about some experiences in either high school or college when you were having difficulty and maybe your needs weren't getting met, what did you do?

Nathan: I just tried compensating for it and working harder myself trying to compensate. Like I said, I mean I knew that there's a limit that the people around can do, you know, my grandma could help too, because of my mom causing problems there, too. But there's just a limit, because there's only so much people can do. And only so much, you know, that I can do because my brain is going through so much.

I asked Nathan to elaborate on how the stress of his family situation impacted his academic performance.

Karen: So how did you get through your academics with all that stress?

Nathan: I just worked. My grandma helped me quite a bit. I worked with my grandma with my homework stuff.

Karen: You worked with your grandma on homework?

Nathan: Yeah, for quite a while and then my mom decided to refuse me, you know, decided for me not to go there and for a while, so I just did work on my own and tried to get tutoring.

Karen: Was this in high school?

Nathan: Yeah. I just kept on working, and working, and working as hard as I could. Art work, too, because my major in high school was art, and I switched over to graphic communications.

Nathan noted that he managed his academic struggles and difficult family dynamics by working harder. He also mentioned that his grandmother was an important source of support for him. Nathan further expressed his frustration with his academic difficulties.

It frustrates me, you know, I'm trying to essentially achieve the same thing, and I work ten times harder, so it just gets frustrating, you know? Especially with me with math, failing it over, and over, and over and my foreign language, watching people go so far ahead, you know, and you're stumbling just on the basic stuff.

Similar to Isabelle and Rosemary, Nathan quantified his level of effort by suggesting that he needed to work "ten times harder" compared to his peers. I asked Nathan to expand on this idea that others are "so far ahead" academically.

Karen: What do you think that's about, that there are those people that are so far ahead?

Nathan: Just their memory is a little bit different than mine. The way I learn is completely different from what other people learn. It's just different types of memory. I think every single person has a different type of memory, not, you know, one specific way you remember. Because essentially there can be twenty, thirty types of memorization, you know, different brain structures, a multitude of that.

Nathan's description of "different brain structures" and learning styles suggests that he is taking the perspective that learning is based on innate abilities. Nathan stated that the way he learns is "completely different from what other people learn." What was interesting about Nathan's narrative was how strongly he emphasized his work ethic in reference to both academics and family struggles which suggested a mastery-oriented response to difficulty.

Similar to some of the other participants, Nathan's view of learning reinforces Dweck's theory that one can embrace a combination of both a mastery-oriented approach to learning and a theoretical perspective that stresses innate ability. Like Dweck, I would argue that the mastery-approach to learning is stronger, as Nathan has achieved success in college despite academic difficulties and family struggles. He attributed his success to his work ethic.

Based on his narrative, I was curious as to where Nathan learned about his work ethic.

Karen: So, you talked about having to work hard, how did you know that you needed to work hard?

Nathan: I don't know, I just do. I just kind of told myself when I was like six or seven years old, you know...because my dad wasn't around anymore, I just had to keep working and that's all I did. Plus my grandma was around, too, which helped quite a bit.

Karen: How did that help?

Nathan: Just trying to push me along and, you know, trying to encourage me to keep working and try to push all the garbage my mom's been doing, get that out, you know, try to keep that out of the way.

Like some of the other students, Nathan mentioned a family member, in his case his grandmother who was contributory in his understanding that hard work can lead one forward toward success. His grandmother also appeared to be an important source of support in the difficulties Nathan was facing with his mother. Nathan elaborated on the support that his grandmother provided him.

I talk to my grandma a lot. My grandma knows probably...one of the few people actually that knows almost everything about this stuff, you know, everything about the home stuff, the memory thing, trying to help me with that.

Bryan is a first-year student English major who is also interested in creative writing. He indicated that he has Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and dysgraphia. Bryan stated that he has "a little bit of trouble paying attention" but it has "gotten better over the years."

I asked Bryan to describe his understanding of dysgraphia. Bryan stated, “Like a hard time writing kind of thing. As it’s been described to me, it has something to do with like my hand and my brain kind of having a bit of a disconnect.” Like some of the other students, Bryan’s theoretical perspective appeared to teeter on the border of entity and incremental theories of intelligence. During the interview, Bryan stated that his brother has “natural ability.” I asked him to tell me more about this.

You can be considered smart in one of two ways, or talented or what have you. You can either have it at birth, instilled with natural ability, like pure natural ability, or you can be given a strong work ethic and kind of like, you know, earn your way. And I can’t really say, you know, which is better but...I do believe there is some kind of cross-over.

Bryan’s description proposes that he was combining both entity and incremental theories of intelligence. Bryan suggested that when defining smart there may be a “cross-over” in that one can have less ability but still succeed because of a strong work ethic. Bryan’s ideology is similar to Nathan’s perspective, which suggests that one can embrace a combination of both mastery-oriented and ability-oriented theoretical perspectives of learning. Bryan described his brother’s innate ability versus his own need to exude effort.

Again, maybe just because I’m biased, but I think my brother is very, very smart, whereas I’ve had to like, for lack of a better term, bust ass to get to where I am. And I guess in some cases, I still don’t feel that everybody gives me enough credit.

Paralleling Isabelle, Bryan also cited both his parents and brother as influencing his philosophy of hard work and effort. Although earlier in our interview, Bryan described his brother as having natural ability, he later stated that his brother could be even more successful with effort, a theory which was also recognized by his parents.

So my parents have always been warning me, “Don’t slack off like your brother.” Like I said, I think he could be the next Bill Gates if he tries hard enough. But, you know, he has slacked off and that’s kind of a shame. Because, you know, I’ve said that he was born with a lot of natural ability, whereas I don’t really consider my ability to read, write, correct grammar, etc. I don’t consider that necessarily all natural. I believe that was

learned. That was done through a lot of effort, you know, that sort of thing. So I guess where he got as far as he did by talent alone, I had to get this far with effort and learning capacity, which is again why I called it a learning disorder, not a learning disability.

Later in the interview, Bryan quoted Conan O'Brien, a late-night talk show host, as someone who adopts a hard work ethic. Bryan stated, "To quote Conan O'Brien, there's that philosophy of, if you work really hard and are kind, amazing things can happen." It appears that outside of his family unit, Bryan has identified a role-model who has been instrumental in his view of hard work and effort being essential for success.

Rachael, a senior graphic design major indicated that her learning disability was diagnosed in tenth grade. I asked Rachel to describe her learning disability.

As far back as I can remember, I've always had problems retaining information and comprehending. I've always been a little bit slower, I guess you can say. It's basically with math. For some reason, I can't really retain numbers and make sense of them and sometimes I read them backwards. It's just confusing to me, and as far back as I can remember, I've always had problems with it.

In her description of her learning disability, Rachael referenced her difficulties with retaining information. She also identified herself as someone who worked at a slower pace. While working at a fast or slow rate can represent a type of ability, it can be argued that if one who works slowly is afforded more time, he or she can be as successful as those who work at a faster pace. With unlimited time, pace with regards to completing tasks becomes an external factor in academic success, and therefore, could be argued as not representative of one's actual ability. This perspective is taken in academic settings when time becomes a controlled variable for students with disabilities, and they are given the accommodation of extended time on exams.

Rachael further revealed how she viewed her academic progress during the current semester.

I've had better semesters. I'm not going to lie. This philosophy class is really hard. It's the only thing that's bringing me down right now. I excel in art. I always have. I'm not a

good test taker. I never have been and probably never will be. I got a 60 and I was really upset because I studied, I studied so hard for it, for like three days straight, over and over and over again. I guess I just didn't understand or just can't retain the information and remember it well enough.

In reference to her current academic progress, Rachael admitted that she struggled with taking exams despite her effort. At the same time, she expressed that she was successful in art. I asked Rachael to reflect on semesters where she has felt success and what she needed to do to be successful.

Karen: So when you have had good semesters, how have you gotten through? What have you had to do to have good semesters?

Rachael: Work extra, extra hard, really, really hard. And some classes are easier than others, you know, some of the material is just easier to remember and retain then, you know, say a history or a math course. But, I don't know, I mean for most of my other semesters I've just taken art courses, so that's why I've always done really well.

Like many of the other students, Rachael mentioned that she worked hard to do well academically. At the same time, she suggested that some material was easier for her to retain, and that she has done well when she has taken courses which she has "excelled at." Rachael also stated during the interview that she "loved" her graphic design major. I asked Rachael to tell me more about her major.

Well it's graphic design. I applied for the Bachelor of Fine Arts, so it's more of a concentrated degree. I don't have to take as many gen. ed. courses, which I think was a really, really great opportunity for me to do, considering I don't do well in math and science and history.

I also asked Rachael if she needed to work hard to be successful in graphic design. She stated, "No. It comes natural. That's what I feel." Rachael referenced innate ability when she indicated that her graphic design major comes naturally to her. Overall, Rachael seemed to adopt more of an entity theory of intelligence than some of the other participants. She described a time when she took a course and faced difficulty.

I was taking an anthropology class. It was a Human Sexuality course and at first it was really easy, because it was so basic. And then we got into theories of evolution and all of this other stuff and I was just really, really overwhelmed. And I ended up failing the class the first time because I gave up. I was simply so overwhelmed, and I didn't want to do it anymore. And I just stopped going to class, stopped giving any effort. I met with my advisor, and she told me that I have to take it again, and I was absolutely terrified. It's like there is no way I'm going to pass this class, no way. So I took it again. The second time around I busted my butt really, really trying, and I passed it. I passed it with maybe a 65 though, trying really hard. So even passing it, I was still upset because I tried the hardest I possibly could and I still didn't get, you know, an 80 or a 90.

Rachael admitted that when she began to struggle academically, she "gave up" and stopped putting forth effort. With her advisor's encouragement to take the class again, Rachael still doubted her potential to pass the class. According to Dweck, an entity theory approach yields learned helplessness and an act of giving up. Rachel was the only student in the study who admitted to giving up on a course when faced with difficulty. She revealed, however, that with effort she was ultimately able to pass but not with a high grade despite her hard work. I was interested in Rachael's perspective with continuing to persist despite struggling.

Karen: You said that you worked really hard and you didn't pass [the first time], so what drives you to continue to work hard again if you failed at something?

Rachael: My parents, definitely. I'm going to be the first kid to graduate with a degree, a college degree, and it's really important for my parents and it's really important for me, as well, to have my college degree. I think just the second time around, you know, failing it and seeing the disappointment in my parents, I think that was really hard. And it made me want to just try that much harder to get my feet back on the ground.

For Rachael, her parents seemed to be a driving force in her motivation to succeed and persist even in the face of failure. Her experience raises an important point in that even if Rachael hasn't fully adopted a mastery-oriented approach to learning, seeking her parents' approval trumps taking a learned helplessness approach. Like Claire, who questioned whether or not other students could complete work easily, Rachael talked about her friends and her assumption that they do not have any difficulties with learning. Rachael stated "I think it's a

little bit more difficult for my other friends to understand, just because they don't have any issues with learning, you know? For them it comes naturally and easy." I asked Rachael if she felt her friends had to work hard.

Karen: Do you think they have to work hard?

Rachael: Some people, yeah, I tell you, some people don't even have to lift a finger and they can get a 95 on a test and that really, really bothers me. I wish I could do that. I wish I could go to class ever and get straight A's like some people do. But unfortunately that's not the case; that's not the way I am.

Karen: So you think it comes naturally?

Rachael: I do. I really do. My father has...he never said that he had a learning disability, but he never got good grades. He always said that he had to work extra hard. And he's the reason why I'm here, you know? He's always pushed me to further my education, do as best as I can, and strive.

Although Rachael continued to suggest that some individuals have natural ability, she also cited her father as being encouraging of effort. Rachael's father was influential in her adopting a strong work ethic when he relayed his own experiences to her. Rachael discussed her father's support of her academic achievement and encouragement of her effort. She stated, "My dad says the same thing every single time, 'Talk to your professor, go see him, go get extra help, try harder,' you know, just, 'Try your hardest. C's get degrees, Rachael, that's all you need.'"

Some of the participants perceived that academic success could be achieved by some without effort as was evident in statements such as "they wait until the last minute and then somehow they end up getting a good grade" and "some people don't even have to lift a finger." By unpacking the narratives' statements, we can see that their theories are not necessarily based on actual witnessed accounts. Both Claire and Rachael suggested that they "know of" individuals for whom success comes easily, but they do not give specific examples. Both Claire and Rachael described their perceptions of others not needing to put in effort, but their lack of

evidence implies that this may be a misperception. In the following section, I will explore how some of the students challenged their learning disability labels and struggled with connecting those labels to their ability to be successful academically.

Questioning their Labels

Some of the students in this study questioned their learning disability labels against their personal experiences with academic success. Although she was able to identify the nature of her learning disability and her difficulty with comprehending material compared with others, Isabelle juxtaposed this with her true understanding or lack thereof of her disability label.

When I look at the label, I'm like, okay, what does that mean? It never really got explained exactly what it is. I mean, I can guess now that I'm older, but when I was younger, I was like "I don't know what reading and writing expression is, what you mean by that?" Because that's what I'm labeled as, I don't know what that is.

It is frustrating to hear that Isabelle has carried a label of "learning disability" in reading and written expression throughout her childhood and early adult life, but cannot articulate the true meaning of that label. According to Isabelle, she was diagnosed with having a learning disability, but had never received thorough explanations as to what that means. Isabelle raised important questions in her narrative: if one does not understand the label, can one identify with it and can it affect one's view of his or her ability? Isabelle seemed to grapple with how her label affected her performance, particularly with writing papers.

My label is always in reading and writing expression, so I guess it does make sense that sometimes with papers I do struggle, even though it seems like I do better on papers a lot of times than tests. I think it's the timing thing that bothers me, too, like under pressure.

According to Isabelle, her performance on academic papers does not always work in accordance with her learning disability label. Her statement "it does make sense that sometimes with papers I do struggle, even though it seems like I do better on papers a lot of times than

tests” signified that she was challenging her label. Challenging one’s label as not necessarily indicative of his or her actual academic performance, may be an important factor for individuals to adopting a mastery-oriented response to learning. Through an analysis of Isabelle’s narrative, it appears she is articulating “my learning disability label does not correlate with my academic performance; therefore, it does not mean I cannot be successful, nor is it reflective of my ability.”

On the other hand, Isabelle also inferred that when students are labeled with disabilities, it’s their peers who actually question their abilities. She stated that she believed that labels were detrimental to how students were perceived by peers.

It’s the labels that I think hurt the student the most with things that are wrong. Because if you label somebody, “There’s a student that’s not mainstream,” okay, wow, they look at that student and say, “There’s something wrong with him.” And other students just buy into that.

Isabelle implied that there exists stigma around being educated outside of the “mainstream” classroom. She also inferred that there lays a negative connotation associated with disability labels in that others believe there is something “wrong” with individuals with disabilities. By stating that others have negative perceptions of the ability of students with disabilities, Isabelle suggested that she believed that students without disabilities were more likely to adopt an entity theory of intelligence in general. As a result, Isabelle perceived a learning disability label as being hurtful to students, because they could potentially be viewed by others as flawed or lacking in ability.

Bryan also discussed the term “learning disability” and described how he challenged that label in regards to his own learning.

I kind of don’t really consider it a learning disability because...this may be semantics but learning disability, to me, implies that one is unable to learn just as one who has a disability of the legs is unable to walk. So I believe that disorder is true. My thought, my

ability to learn is not hindered; it's more that it's like rearranged. It's not normal. It takes a little bit more work but, I don't feel it necessarily impedes me.

In Bryan's narrative, he believed he had a "disorder" rather than a "disability." Bryan further stated, "My ability to learn is not hindered; it takes a little bit more work," and stressed his belief that with effort he could be successful regardless of his label.

But, again, where I think I got through with all of that is because I worked very, very hard. That's one of the things that having ADHD has kind of taught me, is that it's not a disability, it's a disorder. If I work hard enough, like there is no excuse for me not giving at least 100% because, you know, it's kind of I know I can do a lot more than some people think I can.

As Bryan stated, his distinction between "disorder" and "disability" could just be one of semantics, since disorder also carries a negative connotation in society. Bryan's interpretation of the term disorder, however, was that it was less stigmatizing than the label "disability." Furthermore, Bryan understood having a "disorder" to mean that in spite of any learning differences, with effort one could achieve success; whereas he defined "disability" as referring to a general lack of ability.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented how the students in my study exhibited self-determination surrounding decision-making and academic achievement. I also demonstrated how many of the participants viewed the concepts of hard work and effort as integral to their academic success, which according to Dweck would indicate they have adopted a mastery-oriented pattern to learning. The participants also did not subscribe to an entity theory of intelligence, and although they regarded their learning disability as contributing to academic struggles at times, they did not view it as something that prevented them from succeeding. By viewing their learning disability as a construct that they could affect through hard work, the students were characterizing effort as

a tool to use toward success rather than as a method for overcoming their learning disability. Although the some of the participants in my study emphasized that they needed to work hard and did not appear hindered by their learning disability label, the boundaries between how they viewed innate ability versus effort were at times blurred. Consequently, it seems that some of the students were wrestling with the role innate ability plays in students' learning even though they had embraced a strong work ethic.

In spite of the message from others that a learning disability equated with lower academic expectations and the discouragement they received, the participants in my study did not demonstrate learned helplessness when confronting academic difficulties. In fact, for some of the participants, lower expectations from others and academic challenges caused them to put forth even more effort.

The students' narratives further signified that parents and family members played a vital role in their beliefs that hard work and effort were important tools for success. Consequently, although some of the students identified physicians, educators, and other professionals who suggested that their learning disability label meant that they would struggle to succeed, parents and close family members tended to take an opposite perspective. Contrary to professional opinion, family members believed that their students with a learning disability would be successful if they focused on external factors such as hard work and effort, rather than internal factors related to lack of ability. By encouraging students to use methods they could control like good study skills, extra time, resources, and persistence even in the face of academic difficulty, the students were more likely to see themselves as able, because they equated success with hard work and taking agency over their learning. According to the participants in my study, their hard

work and effort has paid off, which was evident in the academic success they demonstrated in the college setting.

Lastly, this chapter highlighted how some of the students questioned their disability labels and how those labels juxtaposed with their theoretical perspectives on their own academic achievement. By examining the meanings of their labels, some of the students were again working through their conceptualization of the roles innate ability and effort play in learning. These struggles were evident when, in reference to his learning disability label, one student stated, “I know I can do a lot more than some people think I can.” The participants in my study demonstrated the truth in that statement by displaying academic success at the college level despite receiving low expectations at times from people about their potential. By questioning their labels, the students were also suggesting that there was stigma associated with being identified as a person with a disability.

In the following chapter, I will explore more deeply how the students in my study understood and made meaning of the concept of self-advocacy. I will again utilize Dweck’s theories of motivation and intelligence to understand students’ desires and persistence around self-advocating. I will lay the foundation for how students defined self-advocacy, where they learned to self-advocate, and the individuals and resources they sought out when self-advocating.

Chapter 5: Self-Advocacy

In Chapter Four, I discussed how most of the participants in my study demonstrated self-determination and a lack of learned helplessness surrounding academic achievement. I also revealed how many of the students identified the concepts of hard work and effort as being significant to their academic success and how they contrasted their disability labels with their actual academic achievement. I stressed that the students in my study seemed to have applied incremental or mastery theories to learning whereby they view success as something that can be achieved through external factors such as hard work and effort, rather than limited by internal weaknesses (Mueller & Dweck, 1997).

In this chapter, I will explore how the participants in my study understood and experienced the term “self-advocacy.” Specifically, I will lay the foundation for how students defined self-advocacy and the individuals and resources they sought out when self-advocating. I will reveal how students reported learning about the concept of self-advocacy, including who they identified as influential in their understanding and appreciation of the term. Moreover, I will discuss the barriers some students faced when self-advocating and the persistence and lack of helplessness they demonstrated when initial attempts to self-advocate were unsuccessful. Lastly, I will discuss how students utilized a decision-making process when self-advocating, taking into consideration the individuals and circumstances involved.

In my analysis of students’ desire and capacity to persist in the face of barriers, I will refer to Dweck’s work on incremental theory of intelligence. Throughout this analysis, I will connect the students’ behaviors around self-advocating to their philosophies on the need for hard work as essential to academic success. It appears that the students’ mastery-oriented approach to

learning as evidenced in Chapter Four can be applied to various aspects of life, including: academics, athletics, peer relationships, and disability support services.

Defining Self-Advocacy

Since I was specifically interested in how students made meaning of the concept of self-advocacy, I did not offer my own definition of the terms ‘self-advocacy’ or ‘self-advocate’ to any of the interviewees. As a means for encouraging students to describe instances in which they needed to self-advocate, however, I asked the students the following question: “Tell me about your experiences in high school or college when you may have been having difficulty and felt your needs were not being met.” After being asked the above question, a few of the participants used the terms ‘self-advocacy’ or ‘self-advocate’ on their own and provided explanations on their understanding of the concept. Following their responses, I asked them to expand on their ideas about what they believed the term ‘self-advocacy’ meant.

Many of the other participants in my study did not use the term self-advocacy during our conversations. Consequently, in order to gain specific information as to how participants who did not actually use the term ‘self-advocacy’ made meaning of the concept, I asked them versions of the following questions: “Some of the students talked about self-advocacy and used that term in their interviews. How do you understand that term? What do you think it means?” Based on my questions, many of the students in my study offered definitions for how they understood and made meaning of self-advocacy, and in turn, described how they would act when needing to self-advocate.

The students in my study described self-advocacy as a complex concept that involves autonomy, requesting assistance from others, and utilizing resources and supports. Furthermore,

the participants' narratives suggested that imbedded in the concept of self-advocacy is a decision-making and assessment process that is situation specific. Students utilized this decision-making process when encountering a variety of circumstances that involved getting needs met, facing difficulties, seeking advice, and requesting supports. Moreover, this decision-making process appeared to be instrumental in the students' ability to successfully meet their own needs or when they ultimately chose not to self-advocate.

Independence, Requesting Assistance, and Utilizing Resources

Some of the participants in my study described self-advocacy by suggesting that getting needs met required total independence. Lillian, a junior majoring in political science, gave the following definition of self-advocacy: "You do things for yourself; nobody else can really help you out. That's pretty much what self-advocation is." Nathan, a senior graphic design major, offered a definition that resembled Lillian's. He stated, "Self-advocate? Just trying to work stuff out for yourself, I guess. I don't know, that's just essentially it with that. Just trying to stand up for yourself and work things out, I guess."

In their descriptions, both Lillian and Nathan identified self-advocacy as a process which did not include seeking the assistance of others, thereby emphasizing the "self" in self-advocacy. Many of the other students, however, believed that self-advocacy did involve assistance from others and inferred that "self" was only part of the definition.

According to Ron, a senior English major, learning to be a self-advocate was important for him to be able to get what he needed. Ron stated, "Because, I mean, if I had anything that needed to be met, I was the first one to say, 'I need this.' That was the biggest thing that I had to learn is to be my own advocate and that was one of the things that I knew if I didn't do it for

myself, I couldn't expect other people to do it for me." Ron's statement, "if I had anything that needed to be met, I was the first one to say, 'I need this'" suggests that he experienced self-advocacy as an assessment process that involved identifying his needs before he could initiate action to get those needs met. I asked Ron to expand on what he meant by being his own "advocate."

I can't rely on this person, I'll go to that person, and if that person I can't rely on, so I can't rely on two and I go to the third and finally I just said, you know, if anybody's going to do it, I've got to do it because its...for nothing else, if I want it done and I want it done soon, it seems like I'm going to have to do it, or I'm going to have to find somebody to help me do it.

According to Ron, in addition to a self-assessment process that evaluates need, self-advocacy also involves identifying those individuals who can provide assistance. Furthermore, unlike Lillian and Nathan who stated that self-advocacy involved complete autonomy, Ron mentioned that he began his approach to self-advocacy by seeking out the assistance of others. He admitted, however, that if initially relying on others to get his needs met was unsuccessful, he would either take care of things himself or keep looking for someone to assist him.

Claire, a fifth-year senior majoring in criminal science, understood self-advocacy as recognizing one's disability, assessing one's needs, and seeking the assistance of others. Claire described self-advocacy in the following statement: "Like helping yourself, like self-advocacy, like knowing you have a disability and knowing that you need that extra help, and then you seek the extra help, like you go the extra mile yourself and like self-advocate for yourself."

Isabelle, a senior psychology major, constructed self-advocacy as a balance between taking initiative "because if you don't do it, nobody's going to do it" and asking others for assistance "when I do ask for help, it is helpful to, like, actually go and ask." I asked Isabelle to expand on her definition of self-advocacy.

That you're not going to really get help unless you ask for it and tell people, which is true because I've done that. Like I haven't said anything and stuff, but I realize when I do ask for help, it is helpful to actually go and ask. You have to do it yourself; it's not going to just come to you. If you don't do it, nobody's going to do it.

Bryan, a freshman majoring in English, initially described self-advocacy as acting independently to get needs met because others will not provide assistance. Bryan stated, "You have a problem, you work to resolve it, and if you really want something done right, you have to do it yourself. People will not help you." Bryan further suggested that when others refrain from assisting, acting autonomously to solve problems can have a positive aspect.

And at times they shouldn't [help], because it's a little more rewarding and fulfilling if you do it yourself because then you...I mean, to put it in a bit of a cynical way, you can kind of show it to people and kind of rub in the face of people that try to put you down in those areas...like, "No, really, no here's proof. I did this."

Bryan raised an interesting point in that working independently to meet one's needs is a sort of "proof" that one is capable or has the ability to solve their own problems. Bryan appeared to view the concept of self-advocacy as complex. His reference to the "Lone Ranger" to describe his philosophy on the process for getting one's needs met is an interesting example of a cultural reference to interactions and relationships with others.

It's one of those things that you learn on your own. That's where I developed my, "Lone Ranger" style of thought in that like, at some point, you can't necessarily rely on other people...There are a lot of very important things you've got to do on your own. Relying on people just kind of like can get you in trouble. And relying on people way too much... I hate to be cynical and yet, at times, a little bit, you know, hopeful because it makes me sound a little hypocritical, I think, but, yeah, people can't always be trusted....I like to give people the benefit of the doubt when I first meet them, but ...it has been proven time and again that people will almost always let me down at least once. And, you know, I've kind of realized that, yeah, self-advocacy is like...at some point isn't an option. You have to...like there's no choice.

Bryan insinuated that relying on others could actually be a barrier to getting what he needed, and that in some cases, he is left with no option but to rely on himself. His reference to the "Lone Ranger" was symbolic in his description of how he understood self-advocacy. Since

the “Lone Ranger” is a fictional character who fights against injustices, it seems that in some instances Bryan viewed others as being opposing forces who worked against his mission to get what he needed.

Later in the interview, however, Bryan offered a perspective that was similar to Ron, Claire, and Isabelle, by suggesting that self-advocacy did include the need to ask for assistance from others. In the following passage, Bryan described self-advocacy as the balance between working independently to get needs met and also requesting help from others.

That’s what I believe self-advocacy to be, is that, you know, you will look out for yourself, but you can also acknowledge that you cannot solve everything and that you hunt people down that can. So it’s like...you’re working for yourself, but you’re also looking for others to work with you.

Throughout our interviews, Bryan seemed to be constructing varying insights into his conceptualization of self-advocacy. Bryan’s initial autonomous approach to self-advocacy in which he suggested that others would not assist was later juxtaposed against his perception that asking others for help was a component of getting one’s needs met. More specifically, Bryan’s reference to the “Lone Ranger” and suggestion that “relying on people just kind of like can get you in trouble” contrasted with his later reference to self-advocacy as “looking for others to work with you.” Bryan’s understanding of self-advocacy suggests that the lines between acting independently and asking for assistance from others are blurred. Based on the participants’ narratives, it seems that deciding to ask for assistance is actually part and parcel to an autonomous approach. One acts independently when self-advocating when they either choose to do something themselves or if they decide to ask others for assistance.

Bryan offered additional thoughts on the concept of self-advocacy: “My idea is in self-advocacy, is that, you know, if I don’t understand something if I have problems with something, I go to get help. I ask questions.” Bryan’s perspective on his understanding of self-advocacy

further implies that meeting one's needs does not involve a consistent and fluid process and that the term "self-advocate" does not carry one specific definition.

Utilizing resources appeared to be another important component in the self-advocacy process. The students in my study described assessing their need for and deciding when to utilize available resources. For example, the participants often referred to seeking out specific offices, agencies, or individuals for assistance. Rosemary, a junior majoring in communications, mentioned that self-advocacy involved making use of "resources" as an avenue toward getting her needs met. Rosemary stated, "It's all about what I kind of need and I just use the people that I need to help me." I asked Rosemary to expand on her definition of self-advocacy.

Like if I needed like help with finding classes or something, obviously I would go talk to my advisor. Or if I need something like testing-wise or something with my disability, I would go talk to Helen [Coordinator of Disability Services] about it. So it's just like if I need something with my needs or whatever, I would just go and use my resources.

Unlike the other students who mentioned seeking the assistance of "others" when getting needs met, Rosemary identified specific individuals with whom she sought out support, such as advisors and disability services providers. Nathan also identified specific individuals whom he approached for support. He described the action he took when he continued to fail his college math courses.

Nathan: I failed math four different times, you know, in college so I'm taking a substitute class for that.

Karen: How do you get a substitute for math? What do you have to do?

Nathan: I talked with Helen [Coordinator of Disability Services] trying to see if I can figure out something with math because, I mean, I was failing it and I couldn't keep failing, because my financial aid was running out. I got paperwork done [disability documentation]. My advisor, she told me to. So, I e-mailed my old guidance counselor and she sent the paperwork over here [disability services] and that was enough to get stuff working.

Similar to Rosemary, Nathan sought out individuals with whom he felt would guide him with regards to his academic difficulties. Guidance counselors, college advisors, and disability services providers were all instrumental in Nathan being able to receive a course substitution for math because of his disability. Essentially, Nathan utilized the resources available to him, but ultimately, began the process on his own by taking the initial step to ask for help.

Rachael was the only student in my study who could not offer a definition of self-advocacy when I asked her. She stated, “Self-advocacy? I’m not even sure what advocacy means. I’d have to look it up in the dictionary to tell you. I don’t know, I can’t answer that.” When Rachael described how she was struggling with her philosophy course, I asked her how she sought out solutions to receive support.

Karen: So when you started to struggle, what was the first step you took?

Rachael: Going to the disabilities office and I met with Helen [Coordinator of Disability Services]. I met with my advisor. I met with the teacher. I just wanted to make everyone aware of my situation. I felt like if I was more open about it, and I went to my professor... the more he knew me, the more he knew my face, he understood that I was really trying. And, I was trying. I am still trying.

Rachael described how when faced with difficulties, she made others on campus, such as her professor and advisor, aware of her disability and the effort she was putting forth with academics. In this narrative, it does not appear that Rachael was using self-advocacy strategies to ask for specific assistance, but rather took a passive approach through making important individuals aware of her “situation” to show them that she was “trying.” In Chapter Six which focuses on stigma and disability, I will share a dialogue with Rachael that demonstrates how she ultimately did utilize self-advocacy strategies and asked professors for extra help with her work. Based on this information and in spite of her inability to provide me with definitions, it can be

inferred that one may not need to know what the terms “advocacy” or “advocate” mean in order to actually demonstrate or describe behaviors that are characteristic of the overall concept.

Based on some of the participants’ narratives, utilizing available resources and knowing the types of resources and individuals that were available both on and off campus was integral to the self-advocacy process and how students made meaning of the concept. The disability services office seems to be a primary resource that students seek out when they identify needs that require the assistance or guidance of others. It was also evident from their narratives that many of the students in my study understood self-advocacy as a decision-making process which involves assessing one’s needs, communicating those needs, and if necessary, seeking out support or resources for assistance. For some of the students, relying on others for assistance was not a part of their definition which suggested a kind of “do it yourself” motto. For others, the assistance of others and the availability of resources were crucial in getting their needs met. Either way, it appears that the students understood self-advocacy to mean that they know what they need and they choose what avenue to take when faced with a dilemma.

The next section will highlight how the participants in my study learned the concept of self-advocacy and who was instrumental in their conceptualization of what it means to be a self-advocate.

Learning to Be a Self-Advocate

As a component of my research around students understanding of self-advocacy, I was interested in how students were exposed to or taught about what it means to be a self-advocate. One student recalled being taught how to self-advocate by public school teachers and described how that training has helped him at the college level. Many of the other students experienced

learning to self-advocate by parents and close family members and expressed how such guidance was valuable in their navigation of postsecondary education.

Josh, a fifth-year senior psychology major, discussed his experiences in middle and high school and indicated that his teachers taught him to be “self-advocated.” I asked Josh to explain what “self-advocated” meant to him. Josh stated, “How I interpret it, they allowed me to, when I needed to get [extra] time and a half [on tests], it was up to my own decision. I did this into high school to get me more prepared.” Josh mentioned that learning how to self-advocate became part of his special education Individualized Education Plan (IEP) beginning in middle school.

According to Josh, the teachers’ goal in encouraging self-advocacy in middle and high school was in preparation for students seeking postsecondary education. Josh elaborated on why his teachers promoted self-advocacy training, “They were just giving me the preparation saying that, you know, ‘when you go to college you’re going to have to make sure you do all of this on your own.’ As opposed to me just going to college and being thrown into something I didn’t know was going on.” I asked Josh if the self-advocacy preparation he received in middle and high school has helped him in college.

It’s helped me a lot. I mean, I know where I have to go like if I need...if I have a problem with anything or a teacher, I know where I have to go. If I have to approach a teacher, you know, about something that happened in that class or if I need, you know, to go over somewhere, it’s actually helped to know what office I have to go to.

When Josh described how his self-advocacy preparation assisted him in college, he referred to his ability to seek out and utilize resources. Josh stated, “It’s actually helped to know what office I have to go to.” For Josh, being a self-advocate means you “know” about resources and who you need to seek out, suggesting that there exists a necessary knowledge base when navigating college. Although he can likely find out what resources are available, for Josh,

already “knowing” who and where to go for support is key to being a strong self-advocate. Josh expanded on the self-advocacy preparation he received from his teachers.

They would just get me more prepared this way because they were like, “College is a big step; it’s different,” you know, “You have to really know...you have to really be a self-advocate because you’re not going to have us resource room teachers following you every class to figure out, what you need, what you need to do for the next day and stuff like that.”

According to Josh, his resource room teachers promoted their perception of the college setting as requiring a higher level of independence and stronger need to self-advocate as did others in the middle and high school settings. Josh identified specific examples of how his teachers conducted self-advocacy training.

So they would stop asking me like the day before or whatever, “So, do you have your assignment done? Are you ready? Do you have everything prepared for the next day?”...Slowly by slowly, they would stop asking me those questions. And they would obviously see that I came to class the next day, they would see that I had the assignment, and they were like, “All right, good.” And if I needed help on an assignment, they would ask but mainly I would have to approach them and say, “Can you look over a paper for me that I wrote for a class,” you know, “before I hand it in?” It was as long as I asked, they would be willing to help.

Josh’s description of the preparation he received around self-advocacy included a gradual decrease in teachers asking students directly if they needed assistance. According to Josh, although asking for and receiving help was encouraged by his teachers, students needed to request the assistance themselves. Based on Josh’s narrative, self-advocacy involves identifying a need, such as teacher’s feedback on an essay, and then determining how and when to ultimately ask for the assistance. In order to probe Josh further on his preparation in school around self-advocacy, I asked him if the teachers actually used the term “self-advocate” with the students.

Yes, they did. So that’s how I have it; they’d say it all the time. They actually said, “You have to start being self-advocated for yourself and start doing things for yourself now. Because, when you go to college, that’s what it’s going to be like, so you have to like prepare yourself.

For Josh, the concept of self-advocacy was part and parcel to his secondary education as teachers were attempting to foster independence in students and encouraging them to take an active role in their education. Interestingly, while other students may not have received preparation in school around self-advocacy, many gave similar explanations of the concept and credited their self-advocacy knowledge to others in their lives.

Many of the other participants identified parents as influencing how they understood the concept of self-advocacy. When asked where he learned about self-advocacy, Ron identified his mother as influential in encouraging him to ask for what he needed.

My mother, actually. She instilled it into me, “I’ll fight with you, but you’ve got to fight. You’ve got to start the battle enough where if I’m not there, you’re not going to fall on your face. And if you fall, you’re going to have the strength to get back up and fight for yourself.”

Lillian had previously suggested that self-advocacy did not involve gaining assistance from others, but later identified her parents as instrumental in how she framed the concept of self-advocacy.

My parents always were very much, you know, “We’re always here for you, but you need to do things for yourself, you need to be your own person,” and, you know, “We’re your back and your safety net and we’ll help you and when push comes to shove, we’ll be there. But you need to, you know, learn how to handle yourself in situations.

Interestingly, although Lillian originally identified independence as integral to self-advocacy, she later acknowledged her parents to be her support network when she needed help. It could be ascertained that based on her own experiences, Lillian has felt safe and supported by her family to take charge of her own needs. As a result, it appears that Lillian’s understanding of self-advocacy involves more than “you do things for yourself; nobody else can really help you out.” It could be argued that Lillian actually understood self-advocacy the way many of the other participants had, as taking charge of some issues by yourself but also seeking support from

others if necessary. In Lillian's case, the "others" were family members who could provide her with what she identified as a "safety net," by encouraging her to work through her needs independently but also providing backup support if necessary.

A few of the other students also indicated that parents played an important role in how they learned to self-advocate. Rosemary identified her mother as contributing to her conceptualization of self-advocacy which included seeking out resources or support from others.

Just that was the way that I was brought up, like from my mom, she was always like, yeah, go for it, go talk to whoever or like talk to your advisor, talk to Helen [Coordinator of Disability Services], like just talk to the people who know what they're talking about, like who know what they're doing. So I use my resources from her [mom], really, I mean I go talk to her [mom] about it.

According to Bryan, his parents have continually reinforced the need to self-advocate and helped shape his understanding of the concept. Bryan stated, "My parents still feel the need to remind me, though, that the most important thing is to go to class. The second most important thing is to get help when you need it. And that's what self-advocacy is." Isabelle also referenced her parents when asked how she came to understand the concept of self-advocacy. "I don't know, probably my parents essentially. I think I've learned a lot from them, just how I grew up."

For many of the students in my study, parents were integral in how they made meaning of self-advocacy. While Josh's training in school around self-advocacy may have been helpful as he experienced obstacles in college, his understanding of the concept seemed to mirror that of the other participants who did not receive such preparation. Based on the participants' narratives, it appears that communication, guidance, and encouragement from parents to self-advocate may be just as effective for students as training in the school setting. In addition, the participants suggested that parents were their support system or "safety net." It seems, therefore, that feeling

protected and encouraged by their family may have been a primary factor in the students' confidence with self-advocating in the college setting. Simultaneously, Josh's description of the training he received at school suggests that while his teachers provided encouragement and guidance around self-advocacy, they did not appear to provide a familial "safety net" for their students. In any case, training, encouragement, guidance, and family support all seem to be instrumental in students feeling prepared and comfortable being self-advocates.

Although there were similarities and differences in how the participants made meaning of "self-advocacy," many of the students described similar experiences with encountering obstacles when attempting to get their needs met. The following section will examine the barriers that students faced when they took on the role of self-advocate and the decisions they made when confronted with those barriers.

Facing Barriers to Self-Advocacy

In some contexts, students faced barriers or obstacles when attempting to self-advocate to get their needs met. In other environments, however, students experienced less resistance when self-advocating. In spite of the obstacles some of the students faced when they attempted to get their needs met, those barriers did not seem to prevent or deter them from self-advocating in the future. In some cases, students met barriers when self-advocating around particular issues in one setting, but still chose to self-advocate around the very same issues in another setting.

In Chapter Four, I examined how students identified the need for hard work and effort as a main ingredient in their academic success. I also presented Dweck's incremental theory of intelligence, which asserts that an incremental view supports success through effort. The students in my study repeatedly stressed their need for effort to be academically successful.

While the elements of effort and hard work were largely applied to academic performance in Chapter Four, it appears that the students' incremental approach to learning can also be employed when examining students' motivation behind persisting when faced with barriers to self-advocating.

Josh, who experienced self-advocacy training in junior high and high school, recalled an occasion in which a professor was not supportive of his accommodations.

Here, last semester when I was...when I needed [extra] time and a half [on tests] from one of the teachers, he just kind of gave me, you know, a little bit of trouble for it. And he was just kind of like..., "I understand that you need time and a half but I don't understand why you're taking this much time to take a test."

According to Josh, he spoke with the professor directly about his concerns for not receiving his accommodations. Josh stated that after he talked with his instructor and directed him to the disability services office, he eventually received his testing accommodations: "I just told him, I'm like, "This is my accommodations. If you need to talk to somebody about it, you can talk to the director [of disability services]. Josh noted that he was not sure if the professor ever went to the disability services office as he had suggested. Josh stated, "I'm not sure if he did. I'm assuming he would have, because most of the teachers here do just to make sure, just to check." Josh described another instance when he directed a professor to disability services to get clarification on his accommodations. In this case, the instructor who was unfamiliar with the office took Josh's suggestion and contacted disability services.

I know this semester, one teacher here, she's like, "Oh, I never had to deal with the "Disability Services," so she was asking me questions. I'm like, "I'm not really sure what else you might need," so, I gave the e-mail to her and then she did contact them.

Throughout his narratives, Josh seemed to feel comfortable self-advocating in the college setting. When his instructors questioned his need for accommodations, he directed them both to the disability services office for clarification. Josh implied that instructors sometimes need to

“check” or have proof of a student’s need for accommodations, and as a result, seemed to determine that it was more effective for him to refer his instructors to a person of authority than to continue to push alone for what he was already entitled to.

While Josh initially faced barriers with receiving his accommodations from his instructor, the situation was ultimately remedied. It appears that Josh recognized that in order to get his needs met quickly, it was important for him to gain assistance from an ally such as the coordinator of disability services who could advocate on his behalf. Josh chose not to accept the situation as fixed but rather viewed it as something he could control through seeking out external supports. This perspective mirrors a mastery-oriented approach to learning which involves a “hardy response to failure because here students remain focused on achieving mastery in spite of their present difficulties” (Diener & Dweck, 1978, in Dweck, 2000, p.6).

Claire described a situation in which she had difficulty getting her notetaking accommodation for her courses when she attended a public four-year college prior to attending Branchwood University. According to Claire, the notes were in a filing cabinet in the center of the disability services office, and all the students registered with the office had access to this filing cabinet.

Like with notetaking at [her previous college], some of the problems I had...The way they [disability services] would do their notetaking is they wouldn’t e-mail them to you, like that wasn’t an option. It was you had your note takers and then when you go in to get your notes, you...there’s like a file that’s kind of sitting there in the middle of the disability office and there’s just a bunch of different files with a bunch of different people’s names, a bunch of different tabs with all different classes, and then you’ve got to go through that, find your folder yourself, like nobody helps you with that.

Claire further indicated that when the notes were not there for some of her classes, she repeatedly asked the staff at the disability services office for assistance.

I thought it was horrible. ...Because people were stealing people’s notes that were in the same classes. Like I had a mid-term exam coming up that I was really fretting about. I

went in there, tried to get my notes, my notes weren't there in my folder; I was freaking out. I was like trying to ask for my advisor, who was part of disability services, but she was never there because she was a teacher, so it was very hard to get in touch with her. So I'm like, "Oh God, who do I go to?" And they're like, "Well, I'd ask the front desk lady." And she'd be like, "Well, we have some other people here if you want to talk to them about it." I'm like, "Well, I guess." So I go try to talk to them and I'd say, "My notes...I still don't have my notes and the exam is like in two days and I don't know what's going on." They'd be like, "Okay, we'll look into it." And then my notes just never ended up being there and I had to go without the notes.

Although she was persistent with self-advocating for her needs, Claire expressed frustration that it took repeated attempts to get the notetaking accommodation she was entitled to as part of her disability services, and she still did not get the notes. Even though she was insistent with the disability services office that they provide her with notes, she eventually recognized that she had little control over receiving her accommodations, due to what she believed was a "disorganized" setting. According to Claire, she continued to ask the disability services office at her previous college for assistance to get the notes and even offered to contact the notetaker herself.

You know, a teacher or advisor/professor that would be in the office at the time would say, "Well, let's go over and I'll help you look." And they'd sit there and ...there goes another five minutes of my time. I have golf, hockey. So we'd sit there and go through it and then I'd be like, "See, there's my folder, there's nothing in it." And they'd be like, "Oh well, I'll have to try to contact the notetaker and we'll try to resolve it." And I'm like, "Okay, the test is in two days and I'm still waiting."...And then I'm like, "Who is the notetaker? Can I e-mail the note taker?" I never knew what student was my notetaker. So if they're [disability services] not going to do it, I'll do it, you know? So I never knew the contact information of the note taker myself, so I couldn't contact them. Sometimes my notes would be there, sometimes they wouldn't.

Based on her narrative, the difficulties Claire experienced with accessing notes negatively affected her view of the disability services office at her previous college. Claire stated, "I thought it was very disorganized, and I felt like the disability office weren't taking our disabilities maybe as serious as what they were. They didn't go that extra mile, that extra effort to make sure that the student was accommodated. Like maybe they just...they weren't taking it

seriously.” Based on her narrative, I asked Claire if others could see who else was registered with the disability services office when they went into the filing cabinet to retrieve notes.

Oh yeah. All of the students’ names were listed right there; nothing was confidential. And the classes are right there, the students’ names...because that’s what I had to do. I had to go look for my name and then also that tab would be like the class. Sometimes there would be like big tabs that would tell you like there were a lot of students in one class; they’d have a big tab with the class name on it. And then you would know right away, okay, well that’s my class, so go through and look for your name. And they’re like little like manila folders.

Claire recalled that she never mentioned her concerns with confidentiality to the office and after several attempts to self-advocate, she stopped asking about the notes.

Especially being at [my previous college], seeing the way they did their disability services, it was a mess. I just hated it. And maybe that whole vibe...I’m not blaming them for it, but maybe that whole vibe of not taking it seriously also brought me down because it’s a struggle to get the accommodation, so I’d just give up and I’d be like, well never mind, I won’t even bother with the notes because you can’t get them anyways. And I didn’t take academics maybe as seriously as I should have.

In spite of some of the barriers that Claire faced around disability services at her previous college, those obstacles did not seem to detract from her motivation to self-advocate in the future around the same issues. For example, when Claire transferred Branchwood University, she discovered that the notetaking system at Branchwood was much more effective. The disability services office at Branchwood told her they could email her the notes or she could pick up a hard copy at the office. According to Claire, she did not hesitate to tell them that email would be a better method for her to receive her notes.

Well here [Branchwood University], like there’s always somebody in the office ...You’re always able to find somebody here to help you. And also with the notes, like you have the option of getting your notes e-mailed or you can come in and get a hard copy, And like me, I choose to have them e-mailed just because sometimes... I’m at golf, I’m at class, I’m very busy, sometimes I can’t get a hard copy, so I just ask them, “Hey, I think the e-mailing would be the best.”

Although Claire's self-advocating did not result in her receiving her notetaking accommodation at the previous college she attended, she viewed the situation to be the fault of the disability services office. By viewing the problem as rooted externally, she could try her best to advocate, and when unsuccessful, chalk up the situation to a "very disorganized" disability services office. In general, an external perspective toward success can lead to learned helplessness when one is faced with challenges. In this situation, however, Claire's overall belief in effort as essential for success withstood a situation in which she did not have control and her attempts at remediation were unsuccessful. Claire utilized a mastery-oriented approach to advocating, as her failed attempts to receive her accommodations were viewed as setting specific, thereby not hindering her desire to advocate around a similar situation in another setting.

Ron experienced a parallel issue to Claire's where he faced barriers when advocating for the accommodations he was granted at a community college. According to Ron, he needed to be persistent with the disability service office at the community college in order to get audio versions of textbooks which were part of his accommodations. Ron indicated that when he was not getting the audio texts in a timely manner, he went to the disability services office. Similar to Claire, he offered to assist with the process.

I started being...I was there so much that I started not wanting to be there anymore and I started just saying, "Okay, you print the book, I'll scan it myself," because they'll be scanning Chapter One and I would need Chapter Five. The test for Chapter One was already passed. And they'll be like, "Well, we're scanning it as fast as we can."

Once he transferred to Branchwood University, however, Ron discovered that he was more successful with getting the books on time. He also took initiative and went to his professors early to find out what texts they were using for their courses in order for the office to

get a head start on converting his texts to audio format. Ron continued to self-advocate despite past attempts which resulted in failure.

As explained in Chapter Four, Ron and Claire both identified their need for hard work and effort to be successful academically. It could be theorized that these students' incremental approach to learning carried over to their persistence with receiving disability services. Neither student backed down when faced with barriers to their self-advocating, and seemed to maintain that their "efforts" at advocating would lead to success in getting their needs met. Consequently, they did not take a learned helplessness approach but continued to advocate in the hopes to remedy the difficult situations they faced. At the same time, after repeated attempts to get their accommodations, the students seemed to recognize that the problems lay within the disability services offices themselves, and that ultimately, they could not do much about changing systems. Nevertheless, these situations did not change their incremental view of intelligence and both continued to believe that effort was important to success and to getting what they needed.

When individuals take an incremental approach to learning and view effort as important to success, they are less inclined to demonstrate learned helplessness in the face of defeat. Consequently, it appears that those individuals will likely try the same advocacy tactics again in a different setting even when those approaches were unsuccessful in previous circumstances. Advocating does not seem to come without perceived negativity, however. Although Ron persisted despite the barriers he experienced advocating for his textbooks in the past, he felt as though his continued self-advocacy at Branchwood was perceived as an "annoyance."

And here [at Branchwood University] I'm there just to make sure that everything's up to date and I can get everything. I'm there frequently because of the fact that I just don't want to have that happen where I don't have something and then I need it. So I try to make sure that I'm there enough where...I mean, sometimes I feel like I am a little bit of an annoyance because I'm there so much that it's like, "Well, Ron's here again." Okay.

And I'll check in every couple of days just to make sure, because that way I can have the books, have everything I need.

When I asked him what motivated him to self-advocate in spite of negative past experiences and feelings that his advocacy was perceived as "annoying," Ron mentioned that he trusted that there were others who would provide assistance and stressed that it was important to have "somebody in your corner." Ron stated, "That's the biggest thing, is having somebody in your corner. If you get down, they're there to say, 'It's okay. It happens.'" And people are...if you need to be helped back up, they are there to help you back up, kind of thing." I asked Ron to expand on his persistence to self-advocate despite difficulties he could potentially face in the process.

Ron: I don't know if you know what I'm trying to say, but...after a while it got to be, I've either got to stand up for myself and do what I can and figure it out by myself, or for myself, I shouldn't say by myself, for myself, so that it gets done. Even if it gets done wrong, at least I tried. I'd rather try and fail than not try.

Karen: But even though you had experience with going to people and not getting what you needed, going to several people; do you still go to people now when you need things?

Ron: Yes.

Karen: Okay. So how did you know to continue to do that?

Ron: It's the trust. I mean, to keep trusting. There's good people that will know and try to help you, where, yes, there are still some that won't but if you find those people that are willing to take the time out of their day or their busy schedule and try to help you, keep in contact so that it's easier for you.

Karen: So, who are those people now that you go to that you trust?

Ron: I mean former teachers. Here [at Branchwood University], I go to Helen [Disability Services Coordinator] a lot in the Disability Center. If she can't do it, she says, "I've looked into this and this seems good and let me look into it more and I'll give you a name of a person that's higher up and they'll see what they can do. That's the biggest thing, is having somebody in your corner. If you get down, they're there to say, 'It's okay. It happens.'" And people are...if you need to be helped back up, they are there to help you back up, kind of thing.

Although Claire and Ron felt discouraged when their needs were not being met, the obstacles they faced did not seem to detract from their ability and desire to self-advocate in the future. Claire and Ron described having significant difficulty getting class notes and audio textbooks while they attended colleges prior to transferring to Branchwood University. Both students repeatedly asked the disability services offices at their previous colleges to provide them with the accommodations that they were entitled to by law, but they were not successful in getting their needs met. Although they became discouraged and stopped asking for help, they placed the blame on external factors such as disorganized offices, which can ultimately lead to learned helplessness. In spite of their beliefs that the circumstances were out of their control, however, they did not adopt a generalized helpless approach to all disability services settings. This was evident when upon transferring to Branchwood University, both Claire and Ron requested from the disability services office the same accommodations that they were having difficulty receiving at their previous schools. They did not appear to apply an entity approach to their negative experiences by viewing them as stable across settings, since in spite of the barriers they faced in their preceding disability services offices, they still advocated for their accommodations when they arrived at Branchwood University.

As Ron offered, trusting that there are those who will provide assistance and the need to have “someone in your corner” also seems to be critical for individuals to persist in the self-advocacy process when faced with obstacles to getting needs met. In their accounts, both Claire and Ron did not generalize their negative experiences with the disability services offices at their previous colleges as being reflective of all disability services offices on every college campus. Their lack of generalization was evident by their faith that they would receive accommodations without difficulty in their new college setting and their lack of apprehension with self-advocating

for those needs. Ron referred to his belief in an incremental approach to learning and the value of expending effort when advocating when he stated that he would “rather try and fail than not try.”

Claire described another situation in which she needed to self-advocate, but in this instance, the situation revolved around her participation in field hockey practice. Since she was a two-sport athlete, Claire asked her field hockey coach if she could take an evening off because she had a golf match the next day, as the golf coach encouraged the players to rest the night before a match. The field hockey coach said no, and consequently, she asked the golf coach to ask the field hockey coach for her. Even with the assistance of the golf coach, the field hockey coach still denied the request and Claire ultimately had to practice.

Claire: I was in a golf championship and I got told, “Well, that’s up to you if you want to miss your [field hockey] practice or not, your tryouts.” Because my golf coach didn’t want me skating a day before a championship match and I asked my hockey coach if I could miss one day of tryout because the following day I had a championship match and he was like, “That’s up to you. You know what I’m looking for.” He [the field hockey coach] was not very nice to me. Like, because the hockey coach had such power like, you know.

Karen: But you went yourself first to the field hockey coach?

Claire: Yeah....And he just kind of gave me a hard time about it, so I forced myself and I did all the sprints, the practice the next day. And then the following day I had to play in the championship match, which was just very difficult on my body.

While Claire was persistent with the disability services offices around her notetaking accommodations, she seemed less comfortable forcing the issue with her coach when she needed to miss a field hockey practice. In her narrative, Claire described her field hockey coach as “powerful.” Claire may have felt that it was more of a risk to stand up to a “powerful” field hockey coach than it was to attend a hockey practice that could potentially jeopardize her golf championship. Claire’s narrative suggests a complex decision-making process that seems to

occur when individuals need to self-advocate. Even though she had a strong need to miss hockey practice, she chose to forego that need in order to evade the coach's negative response. In this case, the coach-athlete relationship may have caused Claire to be hesitant to ask to miss practice for fear that she would not be able to remain on the field hockey team. Consequently, regardless of Claire's past behaviors with persisting in order to get her needs met, in this instance, the perceived "power" she described of her hockey coach seemed to trump her belief in persistence when self-advocating.

Bryan, a first-year English student, described a situation in high school when he faced barriers self-advocating to get his needs met. According to Bryan, he was experiencing anger and frustration with being teased by other students. Bryan recalled that he expressed anger to other staff members at school. Seeing his anger, staff members sent him to the high school principal, who became concerned that Bryan might be a threat to others. As a result, Bryan ended up getting reprimanded by the principal despite attempts to advocate for himself.

The principal like dragged me into her office, yelled at me, like didn't realize that I was going through hell. Like I was trying to explain like, no, the reason I was like freaked out, I was angry a little bit, was that here's this kid who has been like harassing me for the past three years, I never realized it up until now, and now it's gotten really bad. And I'm not sure if she understood that or cared but, yeah, she yelled at me and, in a few ways, it made things worse. It made it sound like I was the bad guy, like it was all my fault, you know.

During his second interview, Bryan talked about having issues with his college roommate. I asked him if he had spoken to his roommate or the residence hall advisor about the situation. Bryan said that he did not bother talking to the residence hall advisor about it. He stated that he chose not to speak with the residence hall advisor, because similar to his experience in high school, he felt that advocating might backfire on him and he could end up getting in trouble.

I don't say anything to him even though we filled out a roommate agreement as per the rules of Greenwood Hall. And even though we have a rule where we have 48 hours to talk to our residence hall advisors..., we have to talk to them if we've got a problem. At some point I realized throughout high school that at those kind of points, you don't even bother because if you go to them to say something, the other party is always going to find something about you that you said, did, or need to do, or otherwise, and they will throw it back at you and then you will be the one getting yelled at, not the other party. That has happened too many times and it is...I know it is wrong, I know it shouldn't happen that way, but it always does. So really, like I try to not bother with that and ...I feel like a jerk whenever I have to do it.

In another narrative, Bryan recalled that one night when the roommate kept all the lights on and had a girlfriend over, Bryan told his roommate he needed to get some sleep. Even though he indicated that he was able to self-advocate in this situation, he said he apologized the next day. Bryan stated, "And I apologized. I was like, "Look, I know, I'm sorry ...I feel really bad about that but push comes to shove, like, I need sleep." It seems that while Bryan chose to self-advocate, he was still concerned that he would experience negative consequences, and as a result, supplemented his advocating for sleep with an apology to his roommate.

At the time of the interview, Bryan mentioned that he had a recent personal issue and needed extensions on assignments for some of his courses. He described how he approached requesting extensions with his instructors.

I e-mailed all of my professors because I didn't go to class yesterday because I needed to take a personal day off...And it was a little bit last minute, I know, but it was the kind of thing that kind of hit me upside the head. So, you know, some of my professors, they understood completely.

Even though Bryan completed an assignment that was due for one of his courses, he described how he would respond to his professor if he got a low score on his paper.

He wanted the essays turned in through e-mail, so I basically said, "Here's my essay," and then pasted it into the e-mail. If it turns out that I get a low score on that, I'm, you know, kind of considering going...like sending him another e-mail or, hell, even meeting him face to face and saying like, "I e-mailed you. I explained my circumstances. I get it, it's a paper, it's very important, but I can bring you proof of what happened and...is there

any possibility that you can go back, keeping in mind my situation at the time of the paper. ..Is there any chance I can rewrite the paper?” that sort of thing.

By examining Bryan’s narratives closely, it seems that he felt more comfortable self-advocating with situations that surrounded academics compared with circumstances involving disciplinary or roommate issues. Bryan’s experiences suggest that self-advocating takes on many facets based on the circumstances. Bryan defined self-advocacy as a process that involves remedying problems on your own, but also seeking the assistance from others if needed. In spite of his definition, however, Bryan also viewed self-advocacy as contextually specific. It seems that when he was concerned about consequences or misjudgment about his behavior, he was less likely to advocate.

Similar to Claire with her hockey coach, Bryan was more likely to persist and advocate with professors around academic issues, than with others around nonacademic issues. Professors carry power and authority over students’ grades. The need to succeed academically may have overcome these students’ fear of consequences by their instructors, as there was a lot at stake for them academically. On the other hand, when Claire and Bryan faced individuals in other perceived positions of power or authority, such as a high school principal, coach, or residence hall advisor, they chose not to persist in advocating for their needs. While a roommate perceivably holds less power than a high school principal, in Bryan’s case, he still approached advocating to his roommate with trepidation. His concern with advocating for his needs with his roommate could be attributed to the fact that he was fearful that the situation would escalate to the residence hall advisor, and he would ultimately receive blame. This concern was evidenced by Bryan’s statement that “the other party is always going to find something about you that you said, did, or need to do, or otherwise, and they will throw it back at you and then you will be the one getting yelled at.”

Although it seems that students ultimately believe in the value of self-advocating, the contexts and settings can play an enormous role in how students approach and choose to act in particular situations regardless of whether or not they have adopted an incremental approach to learning. The students also showed flexibility in their decision-making, their ability to adapt to various situations, and the discernment process they used before they chose what avenue to take to self-advocate.

Other participants described experiences with self-advocating even after having faced barriers. In some cases, students sought out other individuals for assistance when they encountered individuals on whom they could not rely. For instance, Ron and Rosemary were told that they were not going to be academically successful by their guidance counselor and mentor respectively. Instead of accepting the rejection they experienced, both sought out others who they felt would be more supportive.

Rosemary described an experience in which she sought out one of her professors to discuss choosing a major. She indicated that the professor was discouraging and gave her negative feedback around her ability to be successful academically. According to Rosemary, the response she received from the professor did not discourage but rather encouraged her to work harder.

Rosemary: I went to go talk to one of my professors, being the time when I was still undeclared as my major and I went to go talk to her like about what like I should be doing. And she's in the Education department, so I'm like maybe being a teacher when I go back home or when I'm down here or whatever. So I went to go talk to her and she was like, "Yeah, I don't really see you going past this semester and coming back and being able to get an education." So she was like pretty much telling me that I'm going to fail out of college and I'm like, whatever. And I'm like, you know what, no. Nobody's going to tell me what I'm going to be able to do. So that just made me work even harder to come back and still finish my degree.

Karen: What was your response to her when she said, "I don't see you coming back?"

Rosemary: I was appalled. I'm like, "You know what, after you telling me that," I'm like, "I'm just going to work my butt off." Because this is what I want for myself, just something that I've always worked for since I was diagnosed with my disability because the doctors said that I wasn't even going to make it to college back home. So like I'm like, "You know what, fine, see ya," like that just made me work even harder to come back this semester.

Karen: So, it may have motivated you?

Rosemary: Yeah, it motivated me, even though that it was like crushing, I was obviously pissed off about it. I called my mom crying, you know, and then she was like, "You've just got to move forward," like, "I know you can do it." So she just like motivated me to come back and work even harder for it.

Later in the interview, Rosemary described her relationship with Helen, the disability services coordinator. She mentioned how she decided to ask Helen about getting clarity on choosing a major after she felt she was having difficulty getting support from others on this issue.

Well she [Helen, Disability Services Coordinator] helped me like sort of like pick a major...Because I felt like no one was there and they didn't know what to tell me. So I went to Helen and she's like, "Okay, well, go to the student center and do this test and it will give you your strengths and weaknesses." And she's like, "Okay, come back after you've done that and then we'll talk again." So I went and I did the test and then I came back and I'm like, "Okay, this is what I got. What majors are out there or here at the school that I can do?"

According to Rosemary, she viewed the discouragement she experienced from her professor as a motivator, which in turn, resulted in her seeking out support from someone else. For Rosemary, the negative feedback did not put an end to the self-advocacy process. Her goal was to find a major, and similar to the other students, the barriers she faced initially did not discourage her from self-advocating around the same issues again but in a different context. Rosemary's behavior in this situation parallels her belief in hard work around academic achievement that she stresses throughout our interviews. She views her ability to be successful

as controlled by external factors such as effort, and therefore, did not take a helpless approach to a professor's discouraging remarks.

Rosemary described another experience when she faced barriers self-advocating to teachers about her extended time accommodation for exams. She recalled a specific incident in which she advocated for accommodations in high school but was unsuccessful in getting those needs met.

One of my teachers when I was in high school...we disagreed with each other, so we were not the favorites of each other. And I was trying to write a test and it was gym class and she was just being a total bone about it, you know. I'm like, "I need extra time," and then she said, "Okay, well you can sit right there." And I asked to go out to the academic resource room and she's like, "No, you can just sit right there and you've got five extra minutes." I'm like, "Okay, well, five extra minutes isn't going to do much for me." It was hard for me to tell her, like I was just getting so frustrated with her that she didn't understand what I needed ...it was harder because everybody was going around the gym and throwing basketballs and all this stuff.

According to Rosemary, her negative experience with receiving accommodations in high school did not transfer to the college setting. "Well like now, since I've been in college, I've gotten a lot of help through disability services. I usually have a room to myself and I write there, so no distractions, no cell phone, no iPods. I'm just in a room sitting by myself." In spite of the barriers she faced in high school, Rosemary still sought out accommodations in college. Paralleling the narratives of Claire and Ron, the experiences Rosemary faced in high school did not appear to be deterring her from requesting accommodations in another setting in the future.

Sarah experienced similar difficulties with barriers in high school when she attempted to self-advocate during times when teachers asked students to exchange homework with their peers in class. According to Sarah, she did not feel comfortable with peers exchanging papers and reading her homework assignments. Even when she directly disclosed her concerns to the teachers, some were not cooperative.

Some teachers were nice about it. I mean actually I always told the teacher up front, “Like, hey are you going to exchange papers, because I’m not going to be okay with that. If I can exchange it with a friend or if you can just correct it.” But some of them weren’t...you know, they weren’t nice about it so I’d just say I didn’t have it. Sarah realized that some teachers were not going to understand her concerns with having

other students read her homework and decided to declare that she did not do the homework at all.

I asked Sarah to describe another instance in which she felt her needs were not being met and what she did about it. Although she made reference to her feeling that there was nothing she could do about the situation, she mentioned that she attempted to get assistance from her special education teacher.

I mean, there’s not that much you can do, I think, you’ve just got to suck it up and take a lower grade. Because, you know, they don’t...if it’s a teacher that’s not nice then there’s not much you can do about it. Once or twice in high school I’d go get my special ed. teacher and be like, “They’re not doing this or that.”

Isabelle described a similar instance in which she felt uncomfortable reading aloud to others during class. For some students with learning disabilities, reading aloud in front of others can be extremely distressing and cause embarrassment, fear, and shame.

Isabelle: “Like I could never read as well when I was younger, it was kind of embarrassing to read out loud; I never wanted to.”

Karen: Did you have to?

Isabelle: Mm hmm.

Karen: So how did you handle that?

Isabelle: I don’t know. I just kind of did it, like I would stumble like a lot more than other kids. I started reading more when I got older, I was never into reading, maybe that’s probably why. I read a lot more when I was older and got into it.

Karen: Did you ever tell the teacher you didn’t want to read out loud?

Isabelle: Yeah. I’ve done it a lot. Like some teachers would let me get away with it and other teachers would be like, “Well, you have to,” but they wouldn’t make me read too much. I’m like, “I don’t want to do this; I’m so embarrassed...” “But other teachers would say, “You have to; it’s part of the grade,” so I’d suck it up

and do it.

Isabelle did not continue to pursue her concerns with her teacher and went ahead and read aloud in front of the class. While some teachers seemed to be more supportive, others suggested that reading counted toward her grade, leaving Isabelle to believe that there were no other options.

Rosemary, Isabelle, and Sarah described instances in high school where teachers were not supportive either with accommodations or with their concerns with peers seeing their homework or reading aloud in class. Both Sarah and Isabelle used the phrase “suck it up” to explain their decisions to not self-advocate when they believed they had no choice in their situations. Although Rosemary and Isabelle felt they needed to concede and do what the teacher wanted them to do appears on the surface to represent a lack of agency over their own learning, their choice to not pursue the issue could reveal the actual power the students did have as learners in their ability to decide for themselves how they would act in particular situations. Sarah also demonstrated her agency as a learner when she chose to not hand in the homework assignment and take the failing grade rather than exchange papers with her peers. While the students may not have achieved satisfaction with the outcomes of their initial attempts to self-advocate, their decisions to not push the issues any further and accept the consequences were ultimately their choice.

When I asked her to recall an experience in college when she was not getting her needs met, Isabelle described an incident in which she sought support from a math teacher because she was struggling in his class. According to Isabelle, this instructor did not provide her with the assistance she was looking for.

That math teacher I had was awful to go to. Even when you went to his office, it was really nothing was accomplished and I still got a bad grade in his class...He would keep

us in class for like a half hour longer than usual and he'd want the assignments done. And even when I went to his office, I was like, "Okay, I really don't know what you want from this." He really wouldn't explain it well, even when you were in person, and then he seemed like he didn't really care if you didn't get it, it was just like whatever, you'd get a bad grade. It was frustrating.

I asked Isabelle to describe other situations in which she has asked for help in college.

Although she has experienced negative reactions from professors or faced barriers to self-advocating, she continued to seek out professors' support.

Karen: What about in college, what types of things have you had to ask for help with in college?

Isabelle: Sometimes I've asked professors to re-explain something in a different way, if they could explain it better or break it down a little bit more so I understand what they're asking. I think the wording throws me off sometimes, how they word things, especially with psychology, I'm like, "What are you talking about?"

Isabelle indicated that she asks professors for assistance in class or after class or will email instructors if she needs assistance.

But if I have an assignment at home, I'll usually email or something if I don't get it. Like I have on-line classes, too, so...like discussions and stuff, if I don't understand exactly what they're asking in the discussion, I'll email them just to get a clear answer about what they want from the discussion, so I can do it better, because if I don't understand it, I'm not going to be able to write about it.

In spite of the negative experience she described with her high school teachers and her math instructor in college, Isabelle continued to seek support from her college professors when she needed assistance. According to Isabelle, she believed that most of her professors were helpful.

Isabelle: Usually professors aren't very difficult, like some are, but other ones, they'll just tell you what they want better.

Karen: You mean they're not difficult in what respect?

Isabelle: Like coming to them and talking to them. Like some professors will just brush you off and be like, "Well, you should know how to do that," and other ones will

actually explain it to you. I haven't had to deal with a lot of professors that are like that, though.

Isabelle's persistence and belief in her professors suggests that she maintains a positive outlook on her educational experiences and ultimately believes she is in control of her learning.

Summary

In this chapter, I discussed how students understood the terms "self-advocacy" and "self-advocate." For one student, self-advocacy required complete autonomy, while for others, self-advocating was a balance between getting something done independently and seeking out resources and the assistance from others. While one student revealed that he learned to be a self-advocate in school from his teachers, many of the other participants identified their parents and family members as teaching them to be self-advocates.

Overall, it appears that most of the participants were able to recognize their needs, but meeting those needs often required a complex decision-making process around how and when to self-advocate. For example, in some cases, students independently and directly asked for assistance from a professor, disability services office, teacher, coach, or peer when needing assistance. In many situations, students were "going right to the source" when attempting to get their needs met. Other students sought assistance from a third party such as a special education teacher or disability services provider in the hopes that they would advocate or speak for them when they were experiencing difficulty. For many of the students, they would only choose to ask others to advocate on their behalf after being unsuccessful when they tried to resolve a difficulty on their own.

The participants in my study described many different experiences and areas of life in which they needed to, or chose to, self-advocate. They described experiences self-advocating

around academics, disability services, roommate issues, choosing majors, and participation in athletics. Students also seemed to be selective as to when they would self-advocate and whether or not they would be persistent in their advocacy or need to seek out the support of others. When faced with individuals in positions of power such as high school teachers, principals, residence hall advisors, coaches, etc., some of the students chose not to advocate, and therefore, accepted negative consequences. Students were more persistent with their college professors around academic issues, however, suggesting that there may be more at stake when it comes to coursework.

In some situations, students seemed to “give it their best shot” and advocate once to particular individuals. If faced with barriers after advocating, however, some students referred to the decision to “suck it up” and take the consequences. For example, some of the participants felt that not handing in a completed homework assignment, being humiliated reading aloud, or having to attend an athletic practice which could jeopardize a championship, were better consequences than other possible outcomes had they continued to advocate for their needs. In other cases, students were more persistent when advocating for their needs (living with a disruptive roommate) even when they faced obstacles, and some sought out the support of others to assist.

The participants seemed to be most persistent with advocating with disability services offices or professors when they needed assistance. It seems that in some cases students felt more comfortable advocating to their college professors than their high school teachers. While arguably both could be considered to hold power over their academic success, a few students described reluctance to “fight” for their needs while in high school. Overall, the decision to self-

advocate and whether or not to include others in the process seems to be affected by a variety of complex external and decision-making factors.

In many contexts, students experienced success when self-advocating. Once students identified those individuals from whom they could request assistance, they were likely to reach out to those individuals in the future. It appears that there are multiple ways of viewing self-advocacy. It is interesting that the participants view the definition of self-advocacy as multifaceted or a balance between meeting their needs on their own and seeking out others that they can rely on for support. In my study, self-advocacy emerged as a constant decision-making process that involved students determining who they could trust, who and what were good resources, who to seek out when faced with barriers, and what the consequences could be of their self-advocating. An incremental theory of intelligence seems to promote these students to put effort into their advocacy, as this effort is likely to pay off.

While all college students will encounter situations in which they need to self-advocate, college students with learning disabilities who are receiving accommodations must navigate a process in which those without disabilities do not participate. Along with seeking and receiving their accommodations, students must self-identify their disability, which in some contexts may result in stigma.

In Chapter Six, I will more deeply explore the philosophy of stigma around disability, including examining how my students experienced discrimination and exclusion based on their disability and how they managed that stigma. I will also examine what factors were central to whether or not students chose to self-disclose their disability status.

Chapter 6: Stigma

In the Chapter Five, I discussed how students made meaning of self-advocacy, how they came to understand the concept, and the barriers they experienced when self-advocating. In this chapter, I will explore how many of the students experienced stigma surrounding their disability in elementary, middle, high school, and college. I will further examine how some of the students described experiencing less stigma around disability in college, yet kept their disability private from their peers. In addition, I will highlight how students used minimizing language to describe their disability and explore what factors influenced their decisions to self-disclose their disability to peers and instructors.

Stigma Theory

Although I presented Erving Goffman's stigma theory in my literature review, I review his work again here, as I utilize his theoretical perspective to analyze the stigma my participants discussed in their narratives. The concept of stigmatizing individuals with disabilities has a long historical existence which has led to their exclusion in many facets of society. In the 1800's, although schooling was encouraged for individuals with disabilities, enormous stigma and marginalization was connected to those identified as burdens to families and society (Trent, 1994, Winzer, 1993). Furthermore, while there continues to be a growing number of students with disabilities being fully included in regular education, in spite of IDEA and its new reforms, many students with disabilities are still being educated outside of the general education setting. Some students with disabilities have experienced this exclusion throughout their academic careers, beginning in early childhood and continuing through high school (Kavale & Forness, 2000).

According to Goffman (1963), the stigmatized individual “may perceive, usually quite correctly, that whatever others profess, they do not really ‘accept’ him and are not ready to make contact with him on ‘equal grounds’” (p. 7). Goffman’s explanation of the stigmatized individual connects to disability in that students without disabilities are not readily accepting of those who are not viewed as “normal” and have difficulty seeing them as individuals. Goffman further suggests that the stigmatized individual defines himself as not being different from others, while simultaneously he and those around him define him as someone set apart from the rest.

Goffman uses the term *stigma* to refer to “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” (1963, p.3). Goffman further concludes that a “stigma-theory” is an ideology constructed to explain the inferiority of individuals who are not considered “normal” and to account for the danger they represent (p.6). Moreover, according to Goffman, “the stigmatized individual is asked to see himself from the point of view of a second grouping: the normals and the wider society that they constitute” (p. 114-115).

In this study, Goffman’s ideology of stigma theory appeared to be present in many of the participants’ personal accounts of their experiences in elementary, middle, and high school. In addition, while some students reported experiencing little or no stigma around disability at the college level, others suggested that such stigma is still very present at the postsecondary level.

Stigma in the Public School Setting

Some of the students openly shared experiences of discrimination around their disability during the years that they attended public school. Ron recalled that he experienced stigma around his disability as early as elementary school. He described his experience in a self-

contained classroom setting with other students with disabilities and the stigma he encountered when he was eventually included in the general education environment.

Ron: I was in elementary school, they were in a room, all together, all the behavior [students] to the students with the reading disabilities. And if you're one of them that was able to go into a different classroom, they treated you different.

Karen: What do you mean into a different classroom?

Ron: I don't want to say mainstream but into a classroom where the students that were in a regular fifth grade class that would teach math, social studies, science. And you come in and the other students would be like, "Wow, the kid from the special ed. class is in here."

Karen: Did you have that experience?

Ron: More than usual. And the thing that really upset me about it was I was smarter than half of the ones that were making the comments. And I felt like I was being picked on for something that I couldn't control. And I think that caused me to fight that much harder just to distinguish myself as a "fighter" of I'm going to get into mainstream just so you stop. Or I can say, "Well, yeah, I came from that, but that's not me. I'm not just a student that has a disability. I'm a student."

Ron's narrative of his experiences in fifth grade signifies that students at a young age had already adopted stigma around disability and openly displayed discrimination towards others who they viewed as "different." Furthermore, Ron's experience reflects Goffman's ideology of stigma-theory. As a self-contained student, he was not perceived as "normal" or on "equal grounds" with those in the mainstream classroom. Ron's story suggests that when students are set apart from their peers and placed in the special education environment, they are viewed as outcasts by students in the regular education environment. The surprise that students expressed when they stated "wow, the kid from the special ed class is in here" could be understood as what Goffman describes as the "danger" of accepting someone into a space where others perceive he or she does not belong.

Isabelle also revealed that she experienced stigmatization around her disability, particularly during middle school and early high school. She expressed that she was “embarrassed” by her learning disability diagnosis and for being pulled out of the regular education classroom for resource support. I asked Isabelle to describe the embarrassment she felt as a student with a disability.

Isabelle: More when I got a little older, because the kids would kind of stigmatize it a little bit. Embarrass me, like I’m “going to resource.” Probably middle school was the worst. And a little bit of high school, at first, like ninth grade, but I got over it.

Karen: What would people say?

Isabelle: I don’t know. It was kind of embarrassing. I’d be like, “Well, I have to go here to get extra help because I don’t get it.” It’s basically like, “Oh you’re dumb,” and stuff like that. I could never read as well when I was younger. It was kind of embarrassing to read out loud. I never wanted to.

Isabelle’s narrative demonstrates how the special education population in public schools was identifiable to the general student population. As a result, students were generally not given a choice as to whether or not they wanted to self-disclose their disabilities, partly because they were physically removed from the regular classroom space. Consequently, being labeled as “special ed” resulted in a forced “outing” of a student’s disability, and leaving the regular classroom setting for academic support made that label obvious to other students.

According to Isabelle, students without disabilities recognized those who were placed in special education even if they were not pulled out of the regular education classroom. She gave an example of how a student’s disability status would be revealed when he or she struggled with reading aloud in class. Isabelle’s narrative suggests that exclusion does not have to be obvious, as in separate educational settings. Other forms of exclusion can be much less apparent on the surface, but still quite damaging underneath. In Isabelle’s case, she experienced stigma both in

and out of the classroom setting. I asked Isabelle to expand on her account of how students with disabilities were being stigmatized in high school.

Isabelle: I just felt like the students would be embarrassed to go to the resource room, or to tell people they have a learning disability, because they don't want people to think they're stupid and stuff. And they had a room, like the room was off to the side so nobody really knew where it was at first. And I guess they moved it and the teachers didn't even like it. Because the students...they didn't like the fact that people knew they went there.

Karen: How did you know kids were embarrassed?

Isabelle: When they came in they're like it was kind of embarrassing to tell their friends that they were in special...like they were in resource and had a learning disability.

Karen: Did you ever witness people stigmatizing other people?

Isabelle: When I was younger, yeah, people would say people were stupid or they were retarded, because they didn't get it. And "special ed" people, they were in "special ed. class," and stuff like that. I tried not to let it bother me, but sometimes, of course, it did.

Isabelle's account reiterated that the concept of "special education" carried a negative connotation leading to embarrassment, stigma, and exclusion. The students who received special education perceived that their nondisabled peers were not accepting of them. As a result, those students experienced embarrassment when their disability was disclosed to others or when they were witnessed by others receiving special education support outside of the regular education environment. In her narrative, Isabelle also referred to students with disabilities as being labeled "retarded" by peers without disabilities. Later in this chapter, I will highlight how other participants experienced this term used in a negative way toward individuals with disabilities. Similar to Isabelle, Claire also referred to the term "stigma" when describing the concept of disability. Claire described a conversation she had with her uncle when her elementary school recommended that she be tested for a learning disability.

[Uncle] “They want to test you, for some learning disabilities.” And it’s like a big stigma, disabilities, I was like, “What? No. Then they’re going to put me in one of those classes.” And he’s [uncle] like, “This is the choice, if you want to be learning disability tested, you can. And if you don’t want to, you don’t have to.” And I was like, “Okay, I just want to stay with what I’m doing.”

Claire’s decision not to pursue a learning disability assessment in elementary school seemed to be influenced by her perception of society’s stigma around disability. Furthermore, Claire characterized herself as not being different from her peers. As a result, she was concerned that if she carried a label of disability, peers would define her as “other.” Like Isabelle, Claire also associated stigma around disability with being placed in special education, or as she described it “one of those classes.” Claire expanded on her conceptualization of a “separate class.”

I know there was one class with I think some of the disabled students. I don’t know if it was behavioral or what it was, but it was a separate class. And I just felt like they were going to put me into that class, and everyone was going to make fun of me. And I was going to be away from my friends, all the kids in my class. And like the regular classes made fun of those kids.

Similar to Ron, Claire described how students in “regular classes” made fun of those who were placed in “separate classes” for special education assistance. Both Ron and Claire’s accounts signified that students with disabilities were viewed as outcasts in their schools. Based on her narrative, Claire did not necessarily seem concerned with participating in an LD assessment, but rather, the “stigma” that could result from a learning disability diagnosis and placement into special education. Claire’s negative views toward special education seemed to have been the primary reason she chose not to seek testing that may have resulted in her receiving support services to help her academically. Although she was not considered a student with a disability at the time, Claire understood that those with disabilities were removed from their peers, were not perceived to be on “equal grounds” with their nondisabled peers, and were

not readily accepted by their peers. Consequently, she did not want to be someone who was “set apart” from the group of what Goffman would term as “normals.”

Sarah also experienced stigma in the regular education classroom when teachers asked students to exchange papers with other classmates. Although I referred to this narrative in my chapter on self-advocacy, I chose to highlight it again, as I believe it is also an important example of stigma around disability.

Sarah: We would do homework or a paper, and then the teacher would say, “Exchange with the person next to you, they’ll correct it,” I had never not done my homework in my life, but I’d say, “Oh, I didn’t do it,” because I didn’t want them to read it. And there were times kids did read it, and it was really, really embarrassing and they would say stuff.

Karen: What would they say?

Sarah: They would yell to the class. Because a lot of times they knew everyone’s names. They’d be like, “Oh my God, this person, I don’t understand this, they couldn’t spell anything. Dude, look how they spelled this.” So I’d just either get up and leave, say I had to go the bathroom and come back, or I’d just say I didn’t have the homework.

Karen: Did you ever let the teacher know?

Sarah: Yeah. And some teachers were nice about it. I mean actually I always told the teacher up front, “Like, hey are you going to exchange papers? Because I’m not going to be okay with that. If I can exchange it with a friend or if you can just correct it?” But some of them weren’t nice about it, so I’d just say I didn’t have it.

Sarah’s narrative is another example of how students with disabilities were experiencing a lack of inclusion by their teachers and nondisabled peers in the regular education environment. Even though she had completed the homework, Sarah was willing to say she did not do it in order to avoid the embarrassment she experienced when peers looked at her work. Sarah raised an interesting point when she indicated that in spite of advocating to teachers about her discomfort with exchanging papers, some teachers displayed insensitivity and did not respond

favorably. Sarah's account suggests that some teachers may be unaware that they create environments or situations such as peer review of students' work that could be catalysts for bullying those with disabilities.

Later in our interview, Sarah described another example of stigmatization toward her disability when her Spanish teacher openly discussed her disability with other students and expressed surprise at her acceptance into a particular college.

Sarah: I took sign language too, because I got kicked out of Spanish class in high school. She [Spanish teacher] was like, "This is not working out for you at all." Even though I had an A.

Karen: You had an A? So why did you get kicked out?

Sarah: I'm spelling exempt, in high school at least. So she had to not take me off for spelling, which doesn't really make sense when you're learning a language. But, she was just like, "You shouldn't be in here." She also stopped me in the hallway, when she found out that I got into Greenville University, which is where her son goes. She was like, "I heard you got in there." Yeah, I did. She thought I was an idiot.

Karen: What did she say?

Sarah: She was just like, "You got into that school?" That's all she really said, but it was just really obvious. And she contacted my counselor; she's like, "This person shouldn't be in Spanish class." There was only like seven kids in the class for odd scheduling reasons, not that many people. Three of the other kids were special ed. I knew they were. They were in my reading classes in elementary school. And she would talk in front of the class about me. She'd be like, "Well, Sarah's a little different, she thinks differently, so, you know, she might not do as well with this." And she would talk to the class about my specialness when the other kids had it too. I didn't want to be in there anyway.

Sarah described an example of how similar to peers, teachers may also be complicit in stigmatizing students with disabilities. Sarah's Spanish teacher's stance that Sarah "didn't belong in Spanish class" paralleled the perceptions of her nondisabled peers who viewed students in special education as outcasts in the regular education environment. Furthermore, the Spanish teacher's surprise at Sarah's acceptance into the college her son attended may have

reflected her belief that Sarah was not as capable or on “equal grounds” with those without disabilities. Furthermore, like Ron’s experience of his peers’ surprise at his being included in the general education environment, the surprise Sarah’s Spanish teacher expressed at her acceptance into a particular college may also be representative of the hesitance around including those with disabilities among those who are “normal.”

Some teachers are unknowingly modeling to their students discrimination against students with disabilities or are sending the same message indirectly when they choose not to intervene when students are being bullied by others because of their disability. Lillian described an example of how teachers did not intervene when a student was being bullied in a monitored lunch room.

Lillian: I almost got in a fight in high school, because a bunch of girls were picking on another one with Down syndrome. It was a pretty bitch move. I told them to knock it off, like, you know, stop being a bitch basically.

Karen: What were they doing?

Lillian: Just making fun of her, blatantly making fun of her at lunch. Like up in her face making fun of her. And the teachers don’t say anything. They’ll monitor the lunch room and sit there, because they don’t have a class to teach right now. They don’t want to be there. They don’t care. As long as it’s not coming to blows, they really don’t care at all. So I almost got in a fight in high school a few times because of that.

In this case, Lillian was not the target of bullying herself, but came to the defense of another student with a disability. Teachers not intervening while students are bullying others in the lunch room send a message to students that, not only is it acceptable to bully, but adults will not interfere when students are picking on a person with a disability. The unacceptable behavior of the teachers in this story also communicates to students that those who are perceived as “different” are not individuals with a right to be treated with respect or valued as human beings.

Later in our interview, I asked Lillian to describe her own personal interactions and experiences with high school peers as a student with a disability. According to Lillian, she experienced stigma first-hand around her own disability. She stated, “Well they just look at you differently and quite literally look at you differently.” In the next section, I will discuss how the participants experienced the term “retarded” used globally to describe disability and will explore the impact this label had on their identities.

Disability Stigma and the Term “Retarded”

Earlier in this chapter, Isabelle described how peers without disabilities called those who were in special education “retarded.” A few of the other students also described experiences with hearing others using the words “retard” or “retarded” to describe persons with disabilities. The term “mentally retarded” was historically used by professionals to categorize individuals with intellectual disabilities. Until the passage of the latest edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.; *DSM-5*;) in May 2013, when the term was changed to *intellectual disability*, the identification *mental retardation* was used as a technical term to describe individuals with deficits in cognitive ability and adaptive functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Unfortunately, the term “retarded” has a history of being used in a derogatory way, and some of the students in my study shared how they experienced the use of this label.

In my study, a few of the students experienced students using the words “retard” or “retarded” globally to describe any individual who struggled academically or who received special education services. During my interview with Bryan, he stated that the term was

“politically incorrect,” and stated that he did not like the label being used by others to describe him. Bryan discussed how he was labeled a “retard” by his peers.

So at the beginning I was kind of labeled...this specific word was said a couple of times, so when I use it, I know it’s very politically incorrect. But this is a quote. I was called a “retard” by some people early on, and obviously I was bothered by that. I was upset, because I would be making social faux pas that no one would bother to sit down and to explain to me why it was wrong. So, for the first couple of years, yeah, generally everybody thought I was stupid or at some points, retarded.

For Bryan, the label “retard” carried a negative connotation in the realm of disability signifying someone who was “stupid” or lacked intelligence. In Bryan’s narrative, he suggested that others may have recognized that he was struggling socially “or making social faux pas,” and therefore, he was not accepted by peers or viewed as someone on “equal grounds.” Bryan understood that students considered him as set apart from his peers, but wanted to remove himself from the negative connotation associated with the term “retarded.”

According to Goffman’s definition of *stigma* as referring to “an attribute that is deeply discrediting,” one can argue that society views being “retarded” as a “deeply discrediting attribute.” It is not surprising that the students in my study recognized that the term “retard” was being used in a stigmatizing manner and wanted to separate themselves from the negative connotation associated with the label.

Rosemary also stated that she experienced people using the term “retarded” to describe individuals with disabilities.

Karen: You said that you heard people make fun of people with disabilities?

Rosemary: Yeah.

Karen: What experiences have you had with that?

Rosemary: Well it’s just like the everyday Down syndrome, like the “retarded” word. I feel like I’m not directly affected by it, but sometimes I am because of my disability.

Karen: Where do you hear that? Were you hearing it in high school, in college, other times?

Rosemary: Both. Like it was probably used more in high school, just out there. Like people not choosing their words right, so it kind of sort of bothered me.

While she did not refer to students directly labeling her as “retarded,” Rosemary admitted that listening to others use the term in a derogatory way bothered her, as she was “sometimes affected by it” as an individual with a disability.

Derek also referred to the negative connotation associated with the term “retarded” when stigmatizing individuals with disabilities. In Derek’s case, however, he labeled himself as a “retard” as a tactic to manage his friends’ teasing.

Well, I mean, in high school, I had a couple kind of punk friends that would always make fun of me for it [disability], and then I’d just make fun of them back. I always was able to play it off as a joke like, “Oh, yeah, I’m a retard,” and then I’d make fun of them for something.

While he mentioned that he used the term as a defense mechanism to ward off bullying, he became complicit in the stigmatization that surrounds disability, particularly intellectual disabilities, by using “retard” in a negative way to be humorous. By using stereotypical language to describe himself, Derek was indicating to his peers that he understood that having a learning disability meant that others thought he was “retarded.” Derek’s choice to self-identify as a “retard” cut his peers off at the pass before they could stigmatize him for his disability. By making fun of himself, Derek may have been attempting to minimize the pain and embarrassment that can result when peers tease each other.

Although the participants recognized that others were stigmatizing them based on their disability, they neither resisted the concept of “normalcy” nor aligned with other students with disabilities, such as those with intellectual disabilities. Instead, these students expressed discomfort with the negative connotation associated with the word “retarded” and tried

separating themselves from it. One student even took ownership of the term by using it to describe himself. His objective here was likely to dissipate the effects that could emerge had it persisted in being used by his peers.

According to Goffman, “the stigmatized individual may exhibit identity ambivalence when he obtains a close sight of his own kind behaving in a stereotyped way; the sight may repel him, since after all he supports the norms of the wider society” (1963, p. 108). In the students’ narratives, it appears that they were experiencing identity fluctuation with their disability status. Although they repelled being viewed as someone who carried the label “retarded” and wanted to dissociate from it, they were simultaneously frustrated that the inappropriate use of the term was stigmatizing to themselves and anyone else with a disability. In the next section, I will discuss how students used minimizing language to describe their disability as a method for managing the stigma they experienced as individuals with a learning disability.

Using Minimizing Language to Describe Their Disability

Using minimizing language to describe their own disabilities seemed to be an avenue for students to manage their stigma and separate themselves from other individuals with disabilities. According to Goffman, “presumably the more allied the individual is with normals, the more he will see himself in non-stigmatic terms” (1963, p. 107). Goffman states that the stigmatized individual defines himself as not being different from others, while simultaneously he and those around him define him as someone set apart from the rest.

Some students seemed to manage being stigmatized by separating themselves from those students with (as in the words of one student) “heavy needs” in order to appear “normal.” Lillian described her disability in minimizing terms when comparing it to other students with

disabilities. Lillian stated, “I wasn’t a heavy needs student and my accommodations weren’t anything obscure and demanding, but it was always a fight. And I felt really bad for other students who did have problems and whose learning disability was much worse than mine.”

Rosemary also utilized minimizing language to describe her disability. She identified her disability as something that can actually be measured in terms of size. She stated, “My disability hasn’t really been like big, like the other disabilities that are out there.” I asked Rosemary to expand on this statement.

Say for Down syndrome, people know how to take care of that, right? Because mine is not as big as that. So people don’t know and they don’t understand, it because they don’t have that much information about it. And so they just don’t understand what I go through every day and how much of a struggle it is for me.

By describing her disability as not as “big” as someone with “Down syndrome,” Rosemary appeared to use minimizing language as a method for managing societal stigma and being viewed by the wider society as “normal.” At the same time, Rosemary’s narrative is important in its reference to the concept of “hidden disabilities.” Since her learning disability was “hidden” or not readily apparent to others by sight, Rosemary implied that many people were not able to understand the struggles she experienced or how to help her.

Individuals with Down syndrome on the other hand are often not able to hide their disability due to the particular facial features and other characteristics associated with the syndrome. Consequently, some individuals may not understand or recognize the struggles that those with LD experience because they physically appear “normal.” Although Rosemary suggested that because she did not have a “big” disability she could be closer aligned with “normals,” she also implied that the trade-off of having a hidden disability meant that others might not understand her needs.

In Sarah’s narrative, she also used minimizing language to describe her disability, while

simultaneously admitting that she felt that others did not understand her needs. Sarah further discussed how she liked having friends with disabilities because they were more understanding.

I like having friends that are disabled, so if I had to vent because somebody really pissed me off, they'd get it. Where my other friends, they tried to get it, but they don't really know. And I think this is a great school. I mean, we don't have anyone that's that severely disabled here, which is standard.

Even though she felt more comfortable with her peers with disabilities, she also stated that she thought her school was "great" because there were no "severely disabled" students at Branchwood University. It seems that Sarah was setting herself closer to "normals" by minimizing her disability and suggesting that she was not part of an educational environment which included individuals with "severe" disabilities. Like Rosemary, Sarah seemed to manage her stigma by measuring her disability in size terminology. By implying that it was "standard" to not have students that are "severely disabled" in college, she was suggesting she did not fall into that category, and therefore, was on "equal grounds" with her nondisabled peers. Like Rosemary, Sarah seemed to recognize that the trade-off to being identified as "normal" with her nondisabled peers, meant that she risked them not understanding her needs should they become privy to her learning disability.

Derek minimized his disability by using "disability language" to describe how he perceived disability services at the postsecondary level. Derek conversed with me about how he chose not to utilize disability services when he initially began college.

My mom asked, "Do you want to have disability services in college?" And I thought to myself, "I'm an adult. I should be able to work as an adult does. I shouldn't have to rely on a crutch." Because I'm like 18, 17, I thought I was a little more mature. But then I realized everybody does work at their own speed. My decision was just I wanted to grow up; that's what my decision was. I realized that I couldn't...well, not that I couldn't but just that people need this, people need help.

Derek symbolized disability services as a “crutch” and simultaneously understood those supports as inappropriate for adults or “mature” individuals. Derek’s narrative parallels Goffman’s ideology on how “the stigmatized individual may exhibit identity ambivalence when he obtains a close sight of his own kind behaving in a stereotyped way” (1963, p. 108). By symbolizing disability services as a “crutch” meant for immature individuals or “the disabled,” he seemed to be grappling with his own needs and identity as a college student with a disability. The idea of utilizing disability services in college initially repelled Derek, which according to Goffman’s theory was because he supported the norms of the “wider society.” Derek seemed to believe that the wider society reflected the mindset that adults do not need support services once they are in college. Derek eventually accepted that he needed the support, and ultimately chose to utilize disability services. Like Rosemary and Sarah, it appears that Derek came to grasp his disability identity and accepted that the trade-off for getting the help he needed was that others might view him as being on unequal grounds with other college students. In the following section, I will examine how the participants understood and navigated stigma around disability in the college setting.

Does Stigma Around Disability Exist in College?

Some of the students juxtaposed their experiences with “teasing” or stigma in high school with their experiences in college thus far. In some students’ narratives, they compared stigmatization around disability in secondary school with the postsecondary environment without prompting on my part. In other cases, I directly asked students if they had witnessed stigma around disability in college. A few of the students referred to college as being an environment where stigma was not as evident compared with what they had experienced in secondary school.

According to Derek, he believed that people were understanding of and “okay” with disability at the college level. Derek stated, “No big problems in college with it; everybody’s pretty okay with it, understanding that this is okay.” Josh also indicated that he has not experienced individuals stigmatizing disability in college.

Karen: Do you hear people make fun of people with disabilities, you know, just other people?

Josh: Here? [Branchwood University]

Karen: Yeah.

Josh: I haven’t here, no. I mean, I haven’t encountered anything like that. I haven’t experienced it first-hand or seen anything like that.

Josh stated that he has not “encountered” or “experienced first-hand” stigma around disability at the college level. By unpacking Josh’s statement, it was evident that Josh was not arguing that disability stigma does not exist in college, but rather that he has not witnessed it himself. Josh’s narrative further suggests that college students may not be openly revealing their negative feelings around disability or their non-acceptance of those with disabilities. In other words, while stigma around disability at the college level may not be obvious to others, it may still exist under the surface.

Claire did not receive special education support in public school, because she was not identified as having a learning disability until she came to college. She stated, however, that she has also not witnessed stigmatization around disability at the college level.

I find in public school, you hear a lot of stories of kids who are made fun of because of, you know, getting disability accommodations. I find in college, I haven’t seen any negative experiences of somebody making fun of somebody because they’re part of disability services.

I also asked Isabelle about her experiences with stigma around disability in college. According to Isabelle, she was “shocked” that she had not encountered individuals making fun of those with disabilities in college.

No. I actually haven’t. I was kind of shocked a little bit but, I don’t know maybe people are more mature. I don’t think people are mature all the time here, but about that kind of stuff they don’t really seem to say anything.

Although she stated that she was “shocked” that she had not encountered stigma around disability in college, Isabelle insinuated that people may be more mature at the postsecondary level. In Bryan’s narrative, he described how at the college level he was able to participate in a variety of activities and was able to demonstrate his strengths to others. While he suggested that there were still a few individuals who may not be accepting of others, according to Bryan, he seemed more comfortable with the college environment.

I’m able to do all these things, and I’m able to prove to everybody that, “I’m actually a really talented, really cool person if you sit down and you stop to look at me, and you don’t take absolutely everything I do out of context.” There are still people that do that and, quite frankly, forget about them. They are going about it all wrong, and they need to learn. But everybody else...I’m among people that finally understand that high school is over, and it’s a different world.

The students’ perspectives raised interesting points, particularly when they reported that they have not actually “witnessed” stigma. Based on this information, the following questions arise from the students’ narratives: Does stigma around disability not exist at the college level? or is stigma present but invisible, because students at the college level understand that it is not “politically correct” to openly discriminate against marginalized groups, such as those with disabilities? As I will explore below, some of the participants’ narratives pointed to the latter.

Unlike, Derek, Josh, Claire, Isabelle, and Bryan, some of the other students indicated that they still experienced stigma around disability in college. According to Rachael, because her disability was not visible to her peers, they were not aware that she had a learning disability. She

mentioned that she has personally witnessed her peers being openly discriminatory towards those with disabilities, which was likely because they were not aware of her disability status.

Rachael: Still today, when I meet a lot of new people, they don't realize that I have a disability. So there's a lot of jokes that go around with people with disabilities. And I'm sitting there like, "How are you guys making all these jokes, when you're having a person right here in front of you with one?" Because they don't know about it.

Karen: So what happens in those situations?

Rachael: I guess I just kind of sit back, unless it gets really bad, and I'm like, "Hey, you know, guys I have a disability," so they realize.

Unlike some of the other participants, Rachael described a "first-hand" experience of witnessing discrimination around disability. It seems as if Rachael chose to self-disclose when her discomfort level for jokes around disability reached a peak. Because of her frustration, Rachael chose to "out" herself by informing her peers of her disability status to dissipate the stigma they exhibited around disability. As a witness to others stigmatizing disability, Rachael was faced with a complicated decision as to whether or not to keep her disability identity hidden from her peers. Although we do not know the outcome of Rachael's self-disclosure, one potential consequence of not self-disclosing her disability would be that she would likely have to continue to experience peers' discriminatory remarks. Conversely, self-identifying to protect herself and others with disabilities from stigma could ultimately cause her to risk being stigmatized herself and excluded from her peers.

Similar to Rachael, Nathan suggested that he has witnessed stigma around disability at the college level. According to Nathan, first-year students were still complicit in the exclusion of others with disabilities. Nathan stated, "I've been finding mainly with freshmen, they still act like it's high school, and they still shun people, you know, if you talk a little different or look a little different." According to Nathan, he had experienced stigma first-hand in the college

setting. In addition to having a learning disability, he wore glasses with extremely thick lenses which revealed his visual impairment. His reference to first-year students as complicit in stigmatizing others may be reflective of the concept of “maturity” that other participants have described as characteristic of the college student. First-year students may not be as mature or far enough removed from the high school environment to recognize that it is not “politically correct” or appropriate to discriminate against peers who may look or act differently from the larger population.

In the following section, I will explore what influenced students to disclose their disability to others, what factors played into how and when they chose to disclose, and to whom they were most likely to self-disclose their disability status.

Self-Disclosing to High School Peers

The decision to disclose a disability was generally not an option for students with disabilities in elementary, middle, and high school. In some of the students’ narratives, however, they indicated that they could choose whether or not to disclose their disability to peers, mostly due to the types of services they received or the location of their special education setting. During our discussion of her experiences in high school, I asked Lillian if her peers knew that she received special education services.

Karen: Did the students know you got services?

Lillian: No, because that would have been a problem

Karen: Why would that have been a problem?

Lillian: Kids are immature. People in general are immature and stupid and do really horrible things. They’ll pick on other people. I mean, you went to high school, and I’m sure you’ve monitored and looked at high schools. I’m sure you see it all

the time where kids are just malicious and they're rude. And some people grow out of it and some people don't.

By unpacking Lillian's narrative, it seems that she may have chosen to keep her disability status private in order to avoid the exclusion and stigma that surrounded disability. Earlier in this chapter, I highlighted how Lillian described an instance in which she had witnessed a student with Down syndrome being bullied in the lunchroom. Consequently, Lillian's personal experiences may have played a role in her choice to keep her disability private, as she may have preferred that her peers perceive her as "normal" than confront stigmatization around her disability.

According to the participants, students without disabilities were often privy to other students' disability status during exam time when those who received accommodations left the classroom to take exams in a separate location. Based on this information and the fact that she was generally able to keep her disability private, I asked Lillian where she took her exams.

Karen: Did you take exams in the classroom?

Lillian: Later on, yeah. If not, my classes were pretty big. And if you're out, nobody really says anything, if they even notice. Or, you know, they'll just make a joke out of it like, "Where were you?"

In Lillian's case, her classes were large enough that students may not have noticed her leaving for exams, or if even if they did, they did not probe deeply into the reason for her absence. As a result, Lillian could maintain control of her ability to disclose or not disclose her disability at the high school level.

Rosemary stated that she took her high school exams in a separate location, but unlike Lillian, was unable to keep her disability status private since students recognized that she was not in the classroom during test time.

Karen: In high school, you said you took exams in a different location. What was

that like, if you weren't in the classroom taking the exam?

Rosemary: The way that we did it when I was in high school is that everybody was put into one classroom, and everybody who had a disability was put into one classroom.

Karen: Did people know that you weren't in the classroom taking the exam?

Rosemary: Yeah, by that point, everybody knew. Everybody's asking, you know, "Where were you when we took the exam? You missed it." I'm like, "No, I actually took it; I just took it at Disability Services."

Karen: And what was their reaction?

Rosemary: They're like, "What? You have a disability?" I'm like, "Yeah." So it seems like they were shocked.

Rosemary's narrative is another example of how students with disabilities are often "outed" due to their accommodations, such as when they take their exams in a separate location. While receiving disability services or testing accommodations is a means to help students to be successful academically, the trade-off is the stigma students must manage from their peers when those services expose their disability status.

Rosemary's experience demonstrated how students with learning disabilities were able to "pass" as "normal" because of the nature of their hidden disability. Once she disclosed her disability, however, Rosemary's high school peers expressed "shock," which may signify her peers' sudden need to reframe their perceptions of Rosemary. Consequently, her peers without disabilities immediately recognized Rosemary as not "one of us" (a person without a disability) but as someone who fell into the category of "other" (person with a disability).

According to Josh, his high school friends also learned about his disability when he was not in the regular classroom taking an exam.

My friends even back in high school when they knew I wasn't there for a test, they asked me, "Oh, did you study for the test, because I didn't see you?" I'm like, "Yeah. I took it

in a different room.” They’re like, “Oh, okay.” The school that I went to was a small, tight-knit school. It was really small so a lot of people knew each other.

Josh inferred that because he went to a small, “tight-knit” school, the environment did not lend itself to privacy, and consequently, others knew that he utilized testing accommodations. From his narrative, it seems that the nature of his accommodations and school setting did not offer him a choice as to whether or not he wanted his peers to know that he had a disability.

Rachael described how she struggled with keeping her disability status from her friends and peers in high school. I asked her if she ever chose to self-disclose her disability to others. Rachael stated, “Well, I didn’t have to, but I think people were a lot more nosey back then. Especially my group of friends and everything, you know, ‘Oh, why is she going into that room and not this room?’”

Karen: Did you disclose to them that you had a learning disability?

Rachael: I lied about it. I would tell them it was a study hall class, and it had maybe four people in it. And I would wait until after the bell rang and until no one else was in the hallway. And I would go into the room, because I didn’t want anyone to think I was “stupid.” And finally, I think it was my senior year, I wasn’t taking any more math classes and I stopped with the...it was called special ed. I stopped with the special education, because I was so embarrassed. That really is the main reason why I stopped.

Karen: So your friends didn’t know?

Rachael: No. They knew that I struggled with learning and they knew that I wasn’t as, you know, academically inclined, I guess you can say. But my close friends were really accepting of it. But I was still embarrassed, I think just for myself.

Similar to some of the other students, Rachael symbolized “special ed” as an environment that yielded embarrassment and fear and caused others to question the intelligence of the special education student or view them as “stupid.” Rachael went as far as lying about her situation in order to avoid experiencing stigma around her disability. She also inferred that her “close

friends” were informed of her disability status and she felt that they were “really excepting of it.”

I asked Rachael to expand on her decision to self-disclose to her “close friends.”

Karen: Did they know, your close friends?

Rachael: Yes.

Karen: Do you remember what their reaction was?

Rachael: I got a little bit of teasing here and there, but nothing too harsh. I mean, they were my good friends, they would never say anything to hurt me. I think it was in the very beginning when they were like, “Oh, why don’t you understand it?”

Rachael suggested that her “close” or “good friends” represented individuals in whom she trusted, which seemed to be very important in her decision-making process for disclosing her disability. Even though she indicated that she was teased “here and there,” Rachael appeared to feel that it did not rise to the level of the stigma she experienced from those with whom she did not have a strong, trusting relationship. An individual’s “close friends” who are accepting of his or her disability reflect a population of individuals who may or may not still be complicit in stigmatizing disability, but when faced with a friend with a disability, view that individual as someone on equal grounds with themselves. While she suggested that her good friends would never say anything to hurt her, she simultaneously maintained the embarrassment around her disability.

In Sarah’s narrative, she also referred to her “close friends” being informed of her disability status. She further stated that she identified with other peers with disabilities who she knew from the resource room setting.

Sarah: Freshman year, I was always in normal classes. But I had a resource room and I loved it. I felt like these people were on my side.

Karen: What people?

Sarah: The other special ed kids. If we were in a class together and the teacher asked me to read, I'd say, "No," and the other kids would be like, "Don't make her," they'd back me up.

Karen: Did your friends that weren't in special ed. know that you received services?

Sarah: Oh yeah. I mean, my close friends, "How do you spell this? How do you spell this?" They know. They're fine with it. But other kids I wouldn't tell.

Sarah recalled that other students who received special education services were "on her side" and inferred that she viewed herself as aligned with a group of people who recognized and empathized with her needs by "backing her up" when she was asked to read aloud in class. Like Rachael, Sarah also stated that her "close friends" without disabilities were aware and accepting of the fact that she had a disability. While she chose to be open with students who were her "close friends," Sarah did not disclose to her other peers. I asked Sarah to tell me more about why she chose not to disclose to peers who did not fall into the "close friend" category.

Because I didn't think they'd understand. If people get to know me for a little bit, then I'll let them in and they're like, "Oh wow, I never would have guessed." "Well, yeah, it's not that big a deal." Where if you tell people right up front, they're like, "Oh, she's an idiot." I want them to get to know me first and then I tell people, and then they don't care.

Sarah sensed that when she told new acquaintances about her disability, they viewed her disability as defining her and questioned her intellectual ability. Similar to Rosemary's experiences, Sarah stated that peers who were not close friends were surprised when they discovered she had a learning disability and likely reframed their perception of her. For some of the students, it seems that once their identities were viewed by others as "friends" they were less likely to be concerned with being defined by their disability or set apart from the "normal" peer group.

Like Sarah, Isabelle also talked about how she had friends with disabilities who seemed to be accepting of her and did not use stigmatizing language.

Isabelle: I had a lot of friends that also had a learning disability, it was so common. You don't think it is at first and then you realize it is. Like my best friend is dyslexic, so we had resource room together in elementary school. It's not like I talked about it or anything. They didn't call me stupid or anything, it was fine. It was usually people that didn't really understand what it was that would say stupid things.

Karen: How did you know they didn't understand?

Isabelle: Because they would just be all like, "You guys are getting extra help, so it's like basically cheating and it's not fair." But really they don't need the extra help and we do, so it's not like the teachers give you the answers. That's what they basically thought happened. But they don't. They just try to explain it a different way.

Isabelle raised concerns that others who did not understand her disability saw support services as "unfair." Like some of the other students, knowing that peers were not understanding of her disability was a crucial component in Isabelle's decision-making around self-disclosure. Like Sarah, Isabelle was open with her friend who also had a learning disability and who represented someone with whom she felt safe from discrimination. Derek also described how he liked that he knew other students with disabilities in his high school and that those students were aware of each other's disability status.

I definitely liked the fact that the school I went to was so geared towards helping out people with disabilities. Because there were a lot of other students that I got to know through that. Most of them were just kids that I knew from around town but I didn't know they had disabilities. And then when I got into high school, you would see them around school. It wasn't really looked down upon to go out and take your tests in a different area, but you wouldn't really boast about it. So, I mean, you'd wave hi to the people [students with disabilities], and sometimes I'd go and hang out with them, and you get to know them. You're like, "Wow, they have disabilities, too," so it's pretty interesting to know that I'm not the only one.

In Derek's narrative he seems to be protecting himself from stigma around disability and simultaneously aligning with others with whom he shares a disability identity. When he referred to receiving accommodations, he stated "I wouldn't boast about it," which implied that having a disability was not necessarily something that he disclosed freely. At the same time, he aligned

himself with those who were “others” and seemed to find comfort in knowing that he had peers who were allies in the special education arena. In the following section, I will examine how the students discussed what influenced their decisions to disclose to college peers and the parallels and juxtapositions that existed with disclosing to peers in the high school setting.

Self-Disclosing to College Peers

For some of the participants, the college setting represented the first opportunity for them to decide whether or not they wanted to disclose their disability to others, utilize disability services, or have input into the types of services they needed to be successful. Prior to college, however, the students in my study experienced meetings, assessments, and decisions to place them in “special education” without much input from themselves.

While students are granted similar disability-related accommodations in both high school and college, at the college level, they are not pulled out of the regular classroom for resource support nor are they placed in a “special education program.” Based on these circumstances, college students with disabilities should theoretically be able to pass as “normal” and viewed on “equal grounds” with their classmates, because they are no longer a part of a special education program. Consequently, college peers should not be aware of a student’s disability status unless he or she chose to self-disclose. Similar to their experiences at the high school level, however, the students reported that the accommodations they received at the college setting also resulted in a forced “outing” of their disability status. Moreover, although in their discussions some students identified college as a less stigmatizing environment towards disability, overall when given a choice, they seemed to be selective as to whom they chose to disclose their disability.

In a few of the students' narratives, they discussed how they were often faced with the decision to self-identify to peers during exam time. For example, many of the participants indicated that they were forced to either lie about their whereabouts or self-disclose their disability when classmates found them absent during an exam. When I asked Derek to talk about his experiences with disclosing his disability, he recalled how his peers questioned his whereabouts during a test.

One of your classmates will come up to you and be like, "Oh, are you ready for the exam?" And you'll say, "Yeah, I'm ready." And then they'll be like, "I'll see you in class." And I'll be like, "No, you won't. I head down to Disability Services." And they're like, "Oh, okay. I wonder what that's all about?" and then walk away.

In Derek's case, he chose to disclose to his classmates his need to take his exams in the disability services office, which ultimately revealed his disability identity. Whether he was prepared to or not, the nature of his disability services, such a separate location for exams, resulted in him having to make a quick decision regarding his desire to self-disclose his disability. In his narrative, Derek also suggested that although students seemed to be wondering about his need to take his exams outside of the classroom setting, they did not probe him for more information.

Sarah also described how peers questioned why she was not in class during final exams and how she managed her decision to disclose her disability to her peers.

I mean, every finals week I get texts, "Oh my God, you missed the final," because I don't show up, you know? And sometimes if it's someone I don't know that well, I'll be like, "Oh, I had a doctor's appointment. Don't worry, I've got it." And other times I'm like, "Oh, actually I took it at Disability Services." And sometimes kids are like, "Oh, that's nice," and other times they're like, "Oh!" People think it's a real touchy subject, and they don't want to talk about it.

According to Sarah, with students she was not familiar with, she lied about her whereabouts during exams. With other students she may have known better, she chose to self-

disclose her disability. It seems that the concept of “trust” that the students suggested was necessary for self-disclosure in high school was also evident at the college level. The variety of responses Sarah received from her peers and her reference to disability being a “touchy subject” could reflect the varying ways in which people frame disability. Some may have expressed discomfort when they learned of Sarah’s disability status, because she was revealing personal information to them. At the same time, others may have revealed surprise, because they did not perceive Sarah as a student with a disability. I asked Sarah to discuss more about her decision-making around self-disclosure.

Sarah: But I tell people now. I never would have told people a while ago, but now it’s like, “Oh, I take my tests at Disability Services.” A lot of times I just say, “I’m ADHD,” because a lot of kids know what that is and they don’t think it has anything to do with how intelligent you are. They’re like, “Oh, she’s just jumpy.” So I’m like, “I can’t sit in a room with all you guys during the test,” which is true, I can’t. So, yeah, I tell people I’m ADHD a lot of times.

Karen: So what do you think changed that had you decided to be more open?

Sarah: I think I’m much more my own person now, and when you’re younger, you’re trying to fit in. I got into college my senior year to go to the same school as the other kids. So, I don’t think I’m dumber than them, just different. And it’s getting better. For a long time I was like, “I’m never going to learn to read.” Now I’m like, “All right, I can pretty much, it’s going to be okay. I’ve got Albert Einstein on my side, he was dyslexic, I think. So I think it will be all right. So I’m just kind of like, “this is me.”

While Sarah stated that she has grown to be more accepting of her identity as a student with a disability, she also admitted that she tells students that she has Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) rather than a learning disability. Her decision-making process may signify that she believed that ADHD was more accepted by others, because they did not view ADHD as reflective of cognitive functioning or learning ability. Through telling students that she has ADHD instead of a learning disability, Sarah may be trying to avoid the stigma that she experienced in high school with students’ perceptions of her as “stupid.” Her reference to

Albert Einstein, whom some have labeled as a “genius,” further suggests that she felt compelled to validate that her learning disability was not reflective of her capability to be successful academically.

Isabelle described a similar experience in which she was asked by classmates where she was during an exam which forced her to make a quick decision as to whether or not she should self-disclose her disability.

People usually ask me, if they’re friends of mine, they’re like, “Oh where were you?” And I’d tell them I had to take my test here [disability services]. And they’re like, “Oh, okay. Well, that’s cool. It’s quieter and stuff and you get extra time.” And I’m like, “Yeah, I like it. I get to have my own room most of the time.” They’re like, “Well, that’s nice; it’s cool.”

Isabelle’s narrative reflected acceptance and understanding from peers around her self-disclosure and need to utilize disability services. At the same time, she stated that it was friends who were inquiring into her absence from class during an exam, which may be an important factor in the positive responses she received. Similar to the other participants’ thought processes, knowing that she was self-disclosing to friends whom she trusted may have played an important role in Isabelle’s decision-making to self-disclose. Isabelle’s responses may have been different, however, had she been asked by acquaintances who were not friends where she was during an exam.

During my interview with Josh, I asked him to tell me about his experiences self-disclosing his disability to his friends at the community college he attended prior to Branchwood University.

Karen: What about your friends, like at the community college you attended, did they know you were registered with disability services?

Josh: Yeah, they knew. I told them because some of them are in my class and they’d be like, “Oh, you missed the test,” and I’m like, “Oh, I took it at a different location and I take time and a half.” And, I was really open about it. I didn’t mind that

people knew that I needed time and a half. I mean, there's no point in trying to hide it. I mean, I don't see a reason to, I'm not really ashamed of it. I'm not, you know, it doesn't make me feel bad that I need time and half, because it takes me a little bit longer to maybe process information. I mean, for me it's not a problem. If people ask where I was that day, I'm like, "Oh, I took it at a different office."

Josh described how he was comfortable with his disability and his need for accommodations but also admitted that he only disclosed to peers when they specifically asked where he was during exams. So while he maintained that he was not ashamed or did not need to hide his disability, he did not volunteer the information either.

Karen: Would you say that's the same for Branchwood University?

Josh: Yeah, I mean, I haven't told anybody because nobody notices. Because a lot of the tests that I've been taking here, usually I just take in the classroom, because some of the tests were doable and I could do it. Except for the Psych 280 class is the one where I got the extended time in, and some of the students, they're like, "Oh, you missed the test." And I'm like, "No, I took it in Disability Services." And they're like, "Oh, okay. That's what it was."

Josh's experiences at Branchwood University also involved students inquiring about his absence during exams. In his narrative, however, Josh admitted that he did not disclose his disability to his classmates in courses where he did not use his testing accommodations. He revealed, however, that he did disclose his disability with his roommate who also had a disability. Josh stated, "My roommate, who I don't have classes with, he knows that I'm in disability services. He actually told me he was too." Based on some of the students' accounts, it appears that in most cases when students were directly asked, they disclosed their disability, but without an inquiry, they kept their disability status private. This scenario is not surprising given the stigma that many reported experiencing around their disability prior to attending college.

In her narrative, Rosemary discussed her decision-making process for disclosing her disability to peers who were not necessarily friends. I asked her how she knew when she felt comfortable disclosing her disability to someone.

I don't know. I guess it's just eyeballing it type thing. It depends on every person, I guess. Like if I first meet someone, I'm not like, "Yeah, I have a disability," right off the bat, I just...I don't do that. So, I just normally wait a little bit until I get to know the person better.

Like some of the other participants, Rosemary seemed to need to develop a trusting relationship with individuals before she disclosed. She further admitted that having a disability was not something that she would share when she first met someone. Overall, the students' behavior does not seem to differ from the behavior of many people who choose not to reveal personal information to acquaintances. Consequently, it can be surmised that while Rosemary felt that her disability status was too personal to tell someone "right off the bat," she probably would have chosen to keep other personal information private as well. She may also not define herself by her disability, so it may not be something she sees as necessary to share when she first meets someone. It can be surmised that disability status seems to be only one aspect of an individual that may be shared with others through a trusting relationship. Rosemary further described how she chose to disclose to her friends.

Rosemary: With a lot of my friends, I kind of like wait to see or not really see but just like I kind of leave it out. Because I tell a lot of people that I have a disability. I don't even know how I do it sometimes. I just say, "Oh yeah, I have a disability." And they're like, "Oh really?" And I'm like, "Yeah, it's in auditory processing, dah, dah, dah." And they're like, "Yeah, that's odd." Because I guess a lot of people don't see me as having a disability.

Karen: What about your friends, do you feel like they understand your disability?

Rosemary: Some of them, I feel like, but that's only if I really describe it to them. But other people, they don't. They're like, "Oh, you have a disability? It doesn't seem like it."

Karen: Do they explain that?

Rosemary: No, I just...by their facial expression, you know, their non-verbal communication.

Karen: What do you mean?

Rosemary: Their body language, their facial expression.

Karen: What does it show?

Rosemary: Shock. Shocking news, you know. They're shocked when they first hear about it.

Rosemary described how she was able to "pass" as normal until she chose to disclose her disability. As was evident in other students' accounts, peers expressed shock at Rosemary's self-disclosure of her disability causing them to reframe their perspective of Rosemary as being different than what they originally thought based on the information they already had of her.

Lillian also discussed her decision-making process when disclosing her disability in college.

Lillian: Just because I don't disclose my personal information with everybody I know doesn't mean I'm not okay with it.

Karen: So you're saying that disclosure doesn't equal how you feel about yourself, it's just more of a personal choice?

Lillian: Yes, very much so. If it arises in conversation, then it does. But you don't need to know where I live, and where I went to high school, and how many siblings I have, and where I work, and if I have a learning disability. Those are personal things.

Similar to Rosemary, Lillian raised an important point in her narrative about the concept of self-disclosing personal information. Lillian inferred that her disability status was just one aspect of her identity. According to Lillian, she does not need to reveal to others "personal things" about herself. Lillian suggested that disclosing a disability was no different than other personal information that she owned about herself. She also expressed that her decision not to disclose her disability to others was not reflective of her feelings around her disability status. She stated that she was "okay" with having a learning disability. Both Rosemary's and Lillian's viewpoints reflect the philosophy that many people choose to keep personal information from

acquaintances, which does not necessarily mean that they are concerned about others stigmatizing or judging them based on that information. Since she shared that she did not disclose personal information to many individuals, I asked Lillian who knew about her having been diagnosed with dyslexia.

Karen: Do your friends know that you're dyslexic?

Lillian: I think maybe two.

Karen: And how do they know?

Lillian: My roommate's deaf. She's deaf, so she uses a hearing aid. So she knows, because we talk about it. Outside of that, I work with a friend in the office. So they've gotten to know just through everything else, but she is too, so it's never been a problem. That's about it. Like I said, I like to keep things separate. It makes it easier. Different groups of friends for different reasons kind of thing.

Like some of the other participants who admitted that they disclosed to their roommates, Lillian revealed that she disclosed her disability to her roommate who also had a disability. She further indicated that she also disclosed to a friend who received disability services. According to Lillian, she was selective with whom she chose to self-disclose her disability. Lillian's narrative suggests that there can be numerous reasons why individuals choose to keep personal information private including disability status, and that concerns around stigma may only play one part in the process. Rosemary and Lillian both suggested that personal identity information does not necessarily need to be shared with people who are not close friends or with new acquaintances.

In my interview with Claire, we discussed whether or not her peers knew about her need to utilize disability services.

Karen: Do your peers here know that you're registered with the office [disability services]?

Claire: Yup. Actually my roommate's also registered. She's registered and all of my other friends who aren't registered, they know that I'm part of disabilities [services] and they're totally cool with it. They're like, "That's great."

Claire's narrative is similar to that of Josh's and Lillian's who also stated that they had roommates who were students with disabilities and felt comfortable openly disclosing their disability with them. Although they may have felt more comfortable disclosing their disability status to another student who shared in their experiences, choosing to disclose to roommates could also imply that regardless of learning disabilities being considered "hidden," it may have been more difficult for them to keep that information from individuals with whom they shared a residence. According to Claire, however, her friends who did not receive disability services were also accepting of her disability status. Unlike Sarah's and Rosemary's accounts of their experiences disclosing to friends, Claire stated that her friends did not express surprise or shock, but rather support. The participants' stories reflect the idea that students with disabilities can have varying experiences with and responses from their non-disabled friends when they choose to self-disclose.

Rachael had indicated that as a college student she had experienced individuals openly stigmatizing those with disabilities. At the same time, she stated that the college setting yielded a "confidential" environment that allowed her to keep her disability status private if she wanted to. I asked Rachael to expand on how she experienced the college setting as a student with a disability.

Coming to college was just such a different experience, you know. No one really knows you, no one knows your background and in college it's more confidential, too. You don't really have to tell anyone your story. So I think it was a little bit easier for me to be here.

Rachael seemed pleased that she had the ability to choose whether or not to disclose her "story" at the college level. Since she had mentioned during her interview that she had lied

about her disability to others in high school, it is not surprising that she felt that college was a “different experience,” and that it was “easier” to be at the postsecondary level, because she had the freedom to self-disclose or not. In the following section, I will discuss how some of the students described what influenced their decisions to disclose their disability to instructors.

Disclosing to Instructors

In my study, it was evident that disclosing a disability to instructors was a choice that students needed to make in order to receive disability-related accommodations in their courses. In some cases, however, students chose to disclose their disability for purposes other than to receive accommodations. Ron described how he approached instructors to disclose his disability and inquired about their understanding of his needs to see if he should take their course.

If I can catch them before the classes start, I'll say, “Hi, I'm Ron, I am in the Disability Center and I'm thinking about taking your class. Is that a good idea?” Because some teachers are more open to students with disabilities and some are closed. And if you get one that is closed off to it, it's going to be that much harder for you. Because they're not as lenient as the ones that have doubts with students with disabilities or are aware of what kind of disabilities they could encounter. Some of them are like, “Well, what do you mean?” I'm like, “Well, I have disabilities, and how do you react to a student with disabilities?” And some will look at me like I have three heads, they're like, “What do you mean?” Because it doesn't click. Some people give off vibes or give off this sense that they don't want to be bothered and others are like, “Yeah, I'm open, whatever they need. If they need me to be in touch with the Disability Center, I'm right there. My door is an open door. I have an open-door policy.” Some teachers don't have the open-door policy; it's that little brick that you can slide papers in and out and you'll see eyeballs.

Ron chose to disclose his disability to instructors even if he might not choose to take their courses. According to Ron, he was proactive when he asked instructors about their experiences with student with disabilities. Throughout his interviews, Ron presented as someone who was in charge of his disability-related needs and took ownership of his learning. Having an instructor who knew about his needs up front, so that he could avoid encountering any difficulties once a

course began, was Ron's motive for disclosing his disability to professors before the start of the semester. Ron did not seem to be worried that he was disclosing personal information to a professor, but rather felt that it was necessary information to share in order to take control of his learning needs.

A few of the students described other reasons for why they chose to disclose their disability and what that meant for them academically. In her narrative, Sarah mentioned how she disclosed her disability to one of her journalism instructors at the start of the semester for the purposes of receiving her disability-related accommodations. She indicated that the instructor called her into his office one day to discuss her disability, when he realized that she was having difficulty with her papers.

He was foreign, he was like, "I don't understand, why can't you spell anything?" Because we had to write papers in class. And I tried to explain it to him, and he was just like, "What are you going to do after college?" I mean he was trying to help, he was trying to understand, so I guess that's positive. I mean, it's the first time it's ever happened to me in my life. Someone reached out and was like, "How can I help you? What's going on?"

According to Sarah, her journalism instructor was concerned about her difficulties with writing and spelling based on her career goals and consequently, questioned her ability to be successful in the future. While it may have appeared on the surface that the instructor was stigmatizing her based on her difficulties with writing by implying that she would not be able to be successful after college, Sarah viewed his questioning as a positive experience.

As was discussed earlier, Sarah's Spanish teacher had also expressed concern about Sarah's ability to be successful academically and insinuated that Sarah did not belong in Spanish class or the same college her son attended. Her response to her journalism instructor juxtaposed how she perceived her high school Spanish teacher's perspective on her learning. In the case of her journalism professor's perspective, Sarah felt that he was not stigmatizing her, but rather was

trying to understand her disability. The difference in the two instructors' reactions may be that the first assumed that she would never be successful or on "equal grounds" with those without disabilities, while the latter was asking "Why can't you spelling anything?" and "What are you going to do after college?," two questions that he sincerely hoped she could clarify for him. The journalism professor may have been looking to Sarah as the expert of her own learning to help him understand her disability and how she will manage it in her future career as a journalist.

In his discussion about his college professors, Derek noted that he disclosed his disability to all of his instructors in order to receive accommodations. For Derek, the process of disclosing to professors and receiving accommodations was a comfortable and "smooth" process.

All the professors are really good about sending you out. They always, the first day of class, "If you have a disability, go and notify this office." They've been doing it for a while, I feel. It's just really a smooth process. I like it and it's helped me out.

Derek seemed to have positive experiences with his professors in regards to his need for disability services. He believed that his instructors have "been doing it for a while" and implied that there was an understanding and acceptance of students' need for disability services on the part of the instructors. It appears that Derek's primary motivation for self-disclosing was to receive his accommodations, and his positive perspective on instructors in the college environment seemed to play a large role in his comfort in disclosing his disability to all of his professors.

Rachael also mentioned that disclosing her disability to her professors has helped her academically and with asking for assistance.

Rachael: I feel like there's always something that I don't understand, there's always something that I need help with. But I think because I was open, and I have been open with most of my professors this far, that it's been easy for me to go up to them. Like I said, since I've matured a lot more, I think it was a lot easier for me to ask for extra help.

Karen: When you say open, do you mean open about your disability?

Rachael: Right.

According to Rachael, her maturity and acceptance of her disability has assisted her with self-disclosing to her instructors. As mentioned previously, Rachael indicated that she was not open with her college peers about her disability, suggesting that she may perceive her instructors as more trustworthy and accepting and less stigmatizing. Rachael seemed to put her concerns with self-disclosure aside and revealed her disability status to her instructors in order to focus on getting the support she needed to contribute to her academic success. Rachael found a purpose for disclosing her disability to her instructors, and that purpose appeared to surmount any concerns about stigma.

Some students admitted, however, that they did not disclose their disability to all of their instructors. According to Isabelle, she only chose to disclose to professors in courses where she needed to use disability services for exams.

Karen: And they're aware that you have a learning disability, your professors?

Isabelle: Most are. Right now I think only one is. I didn't give it out to everybody, because I do not take a test in those classes. I don't really feel it necessary to give them it if I'm not going to leave the room to take a test. That's pretty much what I use it for right now. So I don't think I gave them out to everybody. I think it was just one this semester.

Karen: Okay. So if you don't need accommodations, you don't disclose to them?

Isabelle: No.

Isabelle did not indicate that she had concerns about disclosing to instructors like she did with her peers. On the other hand, Isabelle also stated that she did not disclose her disability to all of her instructors. Even though she did not tell all of her instructors, Isabelle's primary purpose for disclosing to some was to receive accommodations in courses where she needed

them. Isabelle could be taking the same perspective that she did when she chose to disclose with peers, that the information was personal and that she did not need to share it with everyone. For Isabelle disclosing to instructors seemed to be on a “need to know basis.”

Summary

According to Goffman’s (1963), stigma theory, the stigmatized individual “may perceive, usually quite correctly, that whatever others profess, they do not really ‘accept’ him and are not ready to make contact with him on ‘equal grounds’” (p. 7). Many of the participants in my study described experiences when they encountered stigma around their disability in elementary, middle, high school, and college. In the public school setting, stigmatization was often attached to the special education environment and resource support services, although some students mentioned that they felt stigmatized in the regular classroom setting. Many of the participants in my study recognized that students with disabilities were removed from their peers, were not perceived to be on “equal grounds” with their nondisabled peers, and were not readily accepted by their peers. Some of the participants also described how stigmatizing language was used to describe students with disabilities such as “retarded” or “stupid.” While participants recognized that they were uncomfortable with others’ use of stigmatizing language to describe students with disabilities, they also tried to remove themselves from the labels in an attempt to not be “set apart” from the group of what Goffman would term as “normals” (1963, p. 115).

Goffman suggests that the stigmatized individual defines himself as not being different from others, while simultaneously he and those around him define him as someone set apart from the rest (1963). Using minimizing language to describe their own disabilities supports was one avenue for students to manage their stigma and separate themselves from other individuals with

disabilities. Some of the students described their disability in terms of size, using phrases such as “not a heavy needs student” and “not as big” to compare their disabilities with those of their peers. Furthermore, because learning disabilities are considered “hidden” and not readily apparent to others, many of the students wanted to keep their disability identity private. On the other hand, participants also seemed to recognize that the trade-off to being identified as “normal” and aligned with nondisabled peers, meant that peers may not understand their needs should they become aware of their learning disability. The participants’ narratives of experiencing stigma during their educational careers supports Goffman’s stigma theory, as many recounted experiences of being viewed outside the realm of “normal.” This led them to feeling excluded and at times misunderstood by peers and teachers.

In most cases, students with disabilities in middle and high school were not given the choice to self-disclose their disability. The college setting offered more opportunity to keep one’s disability status private. Taking tests outside of the classroom setting at both the high school and college levels often resulted in a forced “outing” of students’ disabilities, as their peers often inquired about their absence during exams. While some of the students described experiencing less stigma around disability at the postsecondary level, many still chose to keep their disability private from their college peers, particularly those who were not close friends. Overall, students were more likely to disclose to peers with disabilities and with close friends with whom they had developed a level of trust and support. The participants shared different experiences around their decisions to disclose their disability to their instructors. Most felt, however, that there was a need to disclose to professors, whether it was to receive accommodations in particular courses, to receive academic support, to help instructors understand their needs, or to aid in their overall academic success as college students.

The last chapter will provide a conclusion based on the results of this study. Included in this conclusion will be the implications of the research, how it contributes to the existing literature on the topic of high school and college students with learning disabilities, and what impact this research could have on the education of students with disabilities at the secondary and postsecondary levels.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to learn about the participants' academic and social experiences in high school and college as students with a learning disability. Although I entered my research with ideas for exploring issues around students with learning disabilities, such as self-advocacy and stigma, upon interviewing the students in my study, I uncovered other concepts that were significant to their academic success. The 11 college students in this study shared stories around the struggles and achievements they faced as learners pursuing a postsecondary education. As students with learning disabilities, the participants offered important insight into their educational experiences both in high school and in college. Based on the participants' narratives, I presented an extensive analysis of my data which focused on self-determination, self-advocacy, and stigma as important themes around how the students negotiated and understood their educational experiences.

Synopsis of the Data Chapters

Chapter Four focused on the concept of self-determination and how students identified hard work and effort as being significant to their academic success, while simultaneously grappled with the role innate ability plays in learning. Throughout students' interviews, I repeatedly heard the terms "hard work" and "effort" in their descriptions of how they approached their academic work. Concurrently, I realized that the students generally did not infer that a learning disability meant they could not do the work. Rather, it seemed that the students were stating "I can do it; I just need to put in effort."

In spite of the fact that many students quantified their need to work harder than their nondisabled peers with statements such as: "If someone had to put in five times the effort, I'd

probably have to double that and put in ten times the effort,” “It takes me like ten times more than it does other people to really get stuff,” or “I work ten times harder,” they did not suggest that they lacked the capability to complete tasks. Instead, the students recognized that having a learning disability may result in their need to work longer or harder than those without, but ultimately with effort they could succeed.

As stated in Chapter Four, although the students in my study identified themselves as having a “learning disability,” they did not seem to view their disability as being a fixed trait nor did they adopt a helpless pattern to learning. I analyzed my data using Dweck’s theories on entity versus incremental theories of intelligence and deduced that most of the participants in my study adhered to an incremental theory of intelligence and a mastery-oriented approach to learning, thereby viewing effort as essential to academic success. Although the students were largely speaking of their own academic achievement and success, by holding an incremental theory of intelligence, they inferred that individuals in general need to put forth effort, including those without learning disabilities.

In Chapter Five, I explored how the participants in my study understood and experienced the term “self-advocacy.” I began by setting a foundation for how students defined self-advocacy, identified the individuals and resources to seek out when self-advocating, and revealed who was influential in their understanding and appreciation of the concept. I also discussed how the students in my study identified many different experiences and areas of life in which they needed to, or chose to, self-advocate. Students seemed to be selective as to when they would self-advocate. They also appeared to use a decision-making process as to whether they persist in their advocacy, take on a challenge independently, seek out others for support, or not persist in their advocacy and accept consequences. In addition to presenting with a mastery-oriented

approach to learning, the students in my study did not exhibit a helpless approach when faced with barriers to self-advocating. I suggested that there may be a connection between students' theoretical perspectives on motivation and intelligence and how they persevered when faced with obstacles and challenges.

In my study, I wanted to uncover how students understood what it means to be a self-advocate. I discovered that many of the students in my study understood self-advocacy as a decision-making process which involves assessing one's needs, communicating those needs, and if necessary, seeking out support or resources for assistance. For two of the students, they adhered to more of a "do it yourself" motto and put less emphasis on the notion that self-advocacy involves seeking out the help of individuals or resources. For others, outside assistance and the availability of resources were a critical focus in getting their needs met. Either way, it appears that the students understood self-advocacy to mean that they choose what avenue to take when faced with a dilemma.

Additionally, the data uncovered that many of the students in my study referenced their parents or close family members as being instrumental to their understanding of what it means to be a self-advocate. Only one student indicated that he received instruction in school on self-advocacy. In Chapter Four, I noted that the students also referenced family members as essential in their adoption of a strong work ethic. An important finding from my study, therefore, highlights how parents and close family members played a strong role in the lives of their children with learning disabilities in encouraging success through hard work and teaching them the skills necessary for being a strong self-advocate.

Lastly, in Chapter Six, I used Goffman's stigma theory to analyze the stigma the participants in my study reported experiencing. The students recalled that during their high

school years, stigmatization was often attached to the special education environment, but could also occur when students with disabilities were included in the regular classroom setting. Many of the participants in my study recognized that students with disabilities were removed from their peers, were not perceived to be on “equal grounds” with their nondisabled peers, and were not readily accepted by their peers. The students’ narratives revealed that they experienced stigmatizing language used to describe students with disabilities such as “retarded” or “stupid.” While participants recognized that they were uncomfortable with others’ use of stigmatizing language to describe students with disabilities, they also tried to remove themselves from the labels in an attempt to belong to the group of what Goffman would term “normals” (1963).

Comparisons to the Literature

The results of my study that focused on self-determination, motivation, and effort are consistent with the literature on college students with learning disabilities which found that students reported having a strong work ethic. Students in prior studies mentioned needing to work harder and significantly longer on assignments, even quantifying their hard work compared with students without learning disabilities (Denhart, 2008; Greenbaum et al., 1995; Reis et al., 2000). My results were consistent with that of other studies indicating that “college students with learning disabilities are motivated by the need to achieve, a factor that may motivate them to apply to college in the first place and to put forth the effort necessary to be successful” (Hall et al., 2002, p. 84).

Only one study in the literature has explored the connection between theories of motivation and intelligence and college students with learning disabilities. This quantitative study actually found that students with learning disabilities adhered to an entity theory of

intelligence, thereby viewing ability as a fixed and stable trait (May & Stone, 2010). One other quantitative study concerning these issues has been conducted at the elementary level, which also revealed that students with learning disabilities were more likely to embrace an entity view of intelligence (Meese, 1987).

In the May and Stone (2010) study, a participant questionnaire was utilized which contained fixed-choice and open-ended questions. Students were asked to rate their level of agreement or disagreement with statements such as “Your intelligence is something about you that you can’t change very much” and “You can learn new things, but you can’t change your basic intelligence.” Although these questions mirrored how an individual with an entity theory of intelligence would perceive ability or intelligence, without probing the students for more information, it is difficult to gauge the reasoning behind their answers. May and Stone’s open-ended questioning involved participants responding to the following question: “What do you think people in general believe about individuals with learning disabilities?” Although this type of questioning shed light on how the participants believed others viewed learning disabilities, it did not delve into how the students themselves understood their own disabilities, nor did it uncover how they perceived the constructs of ability and effort.

I found that my data contradicted the findings of the aforementioned study. The students in my study for the most part adhered to an incremental theory of intelligence and a mastery-oriented approach to learning, as they viewed their disability as something that was malleable and not fixed. Many of the students in my study categorized themselves as hard workers, and repeatedly stressed that with effort they could achieve their goals and reach academic success.

It could be concluded that May and Stone’s (2010) study did not use methodology that could get at the heart of the students’ perspectives. The results of their study necessitated further

exploration in order to tell more of the story. Although May and Stone's findings are valuable, it is difficult to determine how their participants actually understood the term "intelligence."

Following up with May and Stone's participants in an interview format could have revealed more information as to how they made meaning of intelligence as a concept and how that played a role in their responses. It is important to note that the students I interviewed are a subset of the college population who hold an incremental view of intelligence. Students who pursue postsecondary education have achieved academic success prior to entering the college environment. While the students in my study were "incremental theorists," they only represent a small number of college students with learning disabilities. Consequently, these findings cannot be generalized to the larger population of college students with learning disabilities. There is much to learn from the students in my study, however, such as how they came to their perspectives on intelligence and motivation and what can be done to encourage those beliefs in other students.

In the interviews in my research study, I also found that there were instances when the participants seemed to be struggling with the ability/ effort dichotomy by inferring that there are those with "natural" ability. Once I delved deeper into the conversations and perspectives of the students, I could see that their beliefs slanted much more towards an incremental theory of intelligence or mastery-oriented approach to learning, thereby challenging the results of the previous studies. One student stated, "It just takes me a little bit longer, I think, than the average student, so I know that I really need that extra discipline to be like, okay I can do this. It's going to be challenging but I need to set goals for myself each day..." This student recognized that her disability created some academic struggles, but she did not view it as an obstacle to her

achievement. Rather, she viewed her ability to put in effort and extra time as essential to her success, in spite of comparing herself to an “average” student who may have more ability.

The nature of my study offered an opportunity to examine the students’ perspectives around the constructs of ability, intelligence, and effort and revealed that the students had insightful ways of perceiving these constructs. One student showed his perceptive views of natural ability versus effort by stating, “I don’t really consider my ability to read, write, correct grammar... I don’t consider that necessarily all natural. I believe that was learned. That was done through a lot of effort, you know, that sort of thing.” Another student suggested that his learning disability label did not encumber his ability to learn by stating, “My thought, my ability to learn is not hindered; it’s more that it’s like rearranged. It’s not normal. It takes a little bit more work but, I don’t feel it necessarily impedes me.” Another participant questioned her learning disability label by stating, “When I look at the label, I’m like, okay, what does that mean?” By questioning the connotation behind their labels, some of the students were again working through their conceptualization of the roles innate ability and effort play in learning. It was evident that the students believed that having a learning disability does not mean they cannot be successful, nor is it reflective of their potential ability.

The majority of the students in my study mentioned their parents or family members as influential in their adoption of a mastery-oriented approach to learning by telling them that putting forth effort will lead to academic success. For example, one student referred to her uncle as instrumental in her adoption of her strong work ethic toward academics. She stated that he encouraged her to get her work done and “stick it out, no matter how tough it gets.” She mentioned that her uncle also told her that she had “an ability to hang in there and to not give

up.” Another student, when asked what drove her to continue to work hard again if she failed at something, replied “my parents, definitely.”

Parents and close family members were also identified by the participants in my study as vital to their understanding of and ability to self-advocate. Similar to the students in my study, their family members also appeared to adhere to an incremental theory of intelligence, although it is unlikely that they have studied Dweck’s work on theories of intelligence and motivation. A follow-up study to my research could involve interviews with the parents and family members of the participants exploring their perspectives on ability and effort, their confidence in their students’ abilities to be successful, and their philosophies behind encouraging their students to self-advocate.

There are numerous studies that have examined self-advocacy and college students with learning disabilities, and many indicate that being a self-advocate is crucial to students’ academic success in the postsecondary setting (DaDeppo, 2009; Foley, 2006; Layton and Lock, 2003; Smith, English, & Vasek, 2002). Furthermore, researchers have suggested that students need to be taught how to be self-advocates (Beale, 2005; Brinckerhoff, 1994). The results of my study confirm prior findings regarding students describing a need to self-advocate in college. A valuable finding from my study is that most of the participants identified family members as vital to their understanding of and ability to self-advocate, which casts a strong light on familial influence on students’ development of self-advocacy skills.

Another avenue of research surrounding the experiences of college students with learning disabilities has shown that these individuals have experienced stigma in various facets of their educational careers, including from faculty and peers (Barga, 1996; Denhart, 2008). Prior studies reveal students describing that disclosure of their disability to peers resulted in skepticism

and/or outright negative reactions (Stage & Milne, 1996). My study is consistent with prior research, (e.g., Troiano, 2003) that nondisclosure in academic settings often is not an option. Troiano's students shared that, in order to receive services, they needed to disclose their disability to peers who asked about their whereabouts during exams.

The participants in my study supported prior research observations about choice in self-disclosure. It seems that many of the students in my study were not given the choice about whether to self-disclose their disability. In high school, school practices "outed" them, as they did in the college setting. While the college setting offered more opportunity to keep one's disability status private, disability accommodations such as taking tests with extended time outside of the classroom often resulted in a forced "outing" of students' disabilities, when their peers inquired about their absence during exams. Students in my study admitted that peers often asked about their location during a test with statements such as: "Where were you when we took the exam?"; "Oh, did you study for the test, because I didn't see you?"; "Oh where were you?"; or "Oh my God, you missed the final!"

As a result of their self-disclosure of having a disability, students report experiencing stigmatization by faculty and peers which may not occur for their nondisabled peers (Stage & Milne, 1996). Other research studies also have found prevalent themes around stigma and disability, particularly that students disliked receiving "pity" or "special treatment" because of their disabilities and expressed a desire to be seen as typical individuals (Moore & Keefe, 2004). Students also have voiced frustration around the stigma of "special education" and felt that their typical peers attached negative images to the word "disability" (Leafsteadt et al., 2007; Lovitt et al. 1999; Moore & Keefe, 2004). At the postsecondary level, apprehension of many college students with learning disabilities about disclosing their disability in order to receive support has

been attributed to both disability stigma and professors' limited knowledge regarding learning disabilities (Barga, 1996; Jameson, 2007). College students also report stigma around their disability related to being misunderstood by faculty (Denhart, 2008).

In my study, students described stigma at the high school level, particularly the special education environment. The participants described how peers would place labels on those receiving special education as "special ed people," "stupid," or "retarded." Some students reported feeling embarrassed about receiving special education services or suggested that inclusion of students with disabilities in the regular education environment resulted in peers' discomfort or surprise with statements such as "Wow, the kid from the special ed. class is in here."

While some of the participants in my study reported experiencing fewer stigmas around disability at the postsecondary level, many still chose to keep their disability private from their college peers, particularly acquaintances. One student shared that after she disclosed her disability, she received differing responses and felt that others saw disability as a "touchy subject, and one they didn't want to talk about." Another student felt that her peers were walking away thinking "I wonder what that's all about." Some felt that disability status was just one aspect of their identity and suggested that disclosing a disability was no different than revealing other personal information. The students in my study were more likely to disclose to peers with disabilities and to close friends with whom they had developed a level of trust and support. For some of the students, it seems that once their identities were viewed by others as "friends," they were less likely to be concerned with being defined by their disability or set apart from the "normal" peer group. The students' decision-making process to disclose at the college level could be related to previous experiences with stigma prior to college such as at the middle

and high school levels. This also would be another interesting question to explore in future research.

Melding Dweck and Goffman's Theoretical Perspectives

Dweck's research on motivation theory and theories of intelligence has significant implications for both engaging in self-advocacy and managing the stigma associated with learning disabilities. While the participants in my study were already viewing their disability as something that could be managed through hard work, they also believed that others continue to understand the label "learning disability" as meaning less ability or less intelligent. Even the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act's (2004) definition of "specific learning disability" begins with "a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding..." a statement that infers a disorder in the innate ability to understand or learn, thereby implying a fixed trait (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. § 1401 (30)). In reality, students with learning disabilities do have areas in which they struggle in reading, math, writing, etc., but as the participants in my study have demonstrated, effort and hard work are important tools to their academic success. By viewing learning disabilities through the lens of an incremental theory of intelligence, society can begin to understand that having a learning disability does not mean a lack of potential to be successful, thereby reducing the stigma that those with disabilities experience from others. Educators, parents, family members, students, and others can create change by stressing to society the importance of incremental perspectives on intelligence, which could hopefully begin to reduce stigma around learning disabilities. The participants in my study have this very important perspective to teach to broader society.

Goffman's (1963) stigma theory, that the stigmatized individual defines one's self as not being different from others, while simultaneously others view the individual as someone set apart from the rest, can be applied as a direct analogy to the ability/effort dichotomy related to learning disabilities. Most of the students in my study viewed their own and others' successes as attributed to effort, thereby defining themselves as not being different from others; while at the same time, others view those with learning disabilities as having an innate inability, which sets them apart from the larger group or the "normals." As Goffman's stigma theory predicted, many of the students with learning disabilities in my study implied they were viewed by the larger population as not being "normal" learners, as society's view is based on an entity theory of intelligence. This was evident when the students cited educators and physicians who conveyed that they would achieve limited academic success due to their learning disability diagnosis. For instance, one student stated, "When I got diagnosed with my disability, the doctors told my parents that I wasn't going to make it to college...So, like I'm here [in college], you know, like proving everybody wrong."

In many ways, by identifying their strengths, talents, and capabilities and believing in their need to exert effort, the students in my study are putting their theories of intelligence into practice and taking control of their own learning. The participants in my study did not appear to experience learned helplessness, nor did they state that they needed to "overcome" their disability. Rather the students adopted a strengths approach to their learning disability instead of defining it through a deficit model. The students appeared to manage their learning disability beyond the tension between a medical diagnosis that characterizes a learning disability as a disorder and the perspective of societal stigma that views them as separate from the group of "normals." By recognizing their own capabilities, talents, and strengths, these students

challenged societal stereotypes while at the same time, with hard work and effort, demonstrated that they do not have to prove to themselves or others that they can be successful college students. One student demonstrated her challenge of stereotypes around the diagnosis of learning disability by stating, “Sometimes I kind of think that a learning disability... I feel like everyone has a learning disability, because it’s almost, well it’s just testing like weaknesses and strengths.” The participants’ perspectives on intelligence and motivation are valuable lessons on how we might work to reduce societal stigma around the label of disability. If hard work and effort are universally understood as essential to academic success, not only for students with learning disabilities but for all learners, then society may begin to reconstruct its view of students with learning disabilities as set apart from other students at any stage of their educational careers.

Implications, Recommendations, and Approaches for Future Research

This study has shed new light on important issues around the perspectives of students with learning disabilities surrounding their ability to be successful academically. It sets the groundwork for future studies to examine these issues further. Based on the fact that those who adopt an incremental approach to intelligence are more likely to achieve success when faced with challenges, parents and educators should continue to stress to their students that hard work and effort helps individuals to succeed (Dweck, 2000). They must put less emphasis on stable ability traits (“you are weak at writing,” “you are not a good speller”) and praise specific attempts at effort (“you worked really hard on outlining that paper and therefore did great,” “good job making those index cards to study spelling words”). Parents and educators often praise children and young adults by telling them that they are “smart” when they achieve academic success. This has the unfortunate consequence of having students derogate their intelligence when they

fail; in life people fail all the time, but this should not cause them to destroy their confidence in their own ability and try again to succeed. Research has shown that those who adopt an entity theory of intelligence doubt their abilities and experience helplessness when faced with challenges (Dweck, 2000). It is important for those who are involved in raising and educating children and young adults to emphasize an incremental view of intelligence and discuss the implications of hard work. By stressing specific effort over innate ability, and praising hard work, family members and educators can give students tools to help them to be persistent and resilient when difficulties arise in academics and in other areas of life. This is of particular importance, as students with learning disabilities are more likely than their peers to have faced significant academic challenges by the time they reach college (Hall et al., 2002). Family members and educators should praise all students' specific effort regardless of whether or not they have a disability. A fixed perspective on ability will only add to one's uncertainty regarding the capability to be successful, which can lead to helplessness and giving up on postsecondary education.

Given that most of the participants in my study identified their parents and close family members as vital to their understanding of and ability to self-advocate, training programs for family members of students offered through school districts or agencies could provide them with specific techniques for modeling those skills to their students. In my study, one student recalled how self-advocacy training beginning in middle school helped him to identify his needs and be able to self-advocate when he reached the college setting. Training programs that begin earlier, such as during elementary school, and that utilize a developmental curriculum, could provide students with opportunities to practice and advance their self-advocacy skills. Such programs may help students become more independent and responsible learners at an earlier age. By using

what could be viewed as a “supported self-advocacy” approach, educators and family members could rehearse and practice self-advocacy techniques before their students are in circumstances where they need to self-advocate. For instance, at the junior high and high school levels when a student needs to meet with a teacher to discuss his or her needs, a parent, family member, or support person in the school setting could brainstorm with the student in advance strategies and suggestions for speaking with the teacher. Once it is time to meet with the teacher, the support person could accompany the student to the meeting. While the student would do most of the advocating at the meeting, the support person could fill in if needed. After the meeting, the individual implementing a supported self-advocacy approach with the student could provide the student with feedback about his or her performance with self-advocating.

As stated earlier, an interesting follow-up study to my research could be to interview the parents and family members of the participants regarding their perspectives on ability and effort, their confidence in their students’ abilities to be successful, and their philosophies behind encouraging their students to work hard and be strong self-advocates. Although one student indicated that he received training on self-advocacy in school, the majority of the other participants reported that their parents or close family members were explicit in encouraging them to self-advocate. Furthermore, educators were only mentioned by one participant to be praising effort and hard work. In fact, one student revealed that the school actually gave effort a negative connotation by presenting an “effort role” award to struggling students. This award fell well behind the “all-star” award which was esteemed by teachers and students. Educators can learn from the strong influence of family on praising students’ hard work, which leaves a lasting impact well into their postsecondary years. As emphasized earlier, there is much to learn from

the students in my study such as how they came to their perspectives on intelligence and motivation and what can be done to encourage those beliefs in other students.

An important question arising from this study and prior research surrounds stigma and the use of disability services at the college level. Due to the nature of special education services as we know it in public schools, it is difficult for students with disabilities to hide their disability status from their peers. At the college level, however, students can choose whether or not to utilize disability services, and theoretically, have a choice as to whether or not to disclose to their peers. Despite this greater choice, based on the research, it seems that students with learning disabilities find themselves in circumstances where questions are raised by others about their whereabouts. This is particularly true during exams, when students with disabilities who use the accommodations of extended time and an alternate location are absent from the classroom during a test. So while students with disabilities at the college level are ensured of confidentiality, the accommodation process during tests can make them the focus of attention. As a result, when confronted with inquiries from peers about their absence during an exam, they face the dilemma of whether to disclose, which may lead to stigmatization.

Although some of the students in my study suggested that they had not experienced discrimination around disability at the college level, others had experienced such stigma. As some students indicated, when they chose to tell their peers that they took their exams in disability services, they were met with varying responses or reactions. For example, one student stated that after she disclosed her disability, she received differing responses and felt that others saw disability as a “touchy subject, and one they didn’t want to talk about.” Another student believed that her peers were walking away thinking “I wonder what that’s all about.” One student told her peers that she had Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder instead of a learning

disability, since she felt it was more acceptable to be viewed as “jumpy” than as someone with learning issues. On the other hand, some students stated that they received positive responses from peers such as, “Well that’s nice; it’s cool.”

Some students are still reporting experiencing stigma around their disability at the postsecondary level, which raises the following questions: “Does the use of disability services in college contribute to students experiencing stigma?” and, if so, “How can we reduce the stigma associated with disability services at the college level?” By educating students on the importance of effort when they enter the college setting, such as in first-year experience courses, all students may achieve increased academic success and decreased helplessness. This approach could also reduce the stigma around disability as being viewed as an inherent trait that infers less ability.

Even though students are considered adults who can choose whether or not to use disability services such as testing accommodations, their discomfort around possible stigma could actually interfere with their desire to do so, particularly when being questioned by peers during exams. The students in my study had all chosen to utilize disability services, but many other students with disabilities decide not to request services. A future study examining students’ with disabilities choice to not use disability services could shed some light on their decision-making process around this issue.

Based on the circumstances students with disabilities face with self-disclosure, confidentiality, and stigma, colleges and universities may want to look at alternative methods for delivering accommodations and services such as through the concept of universal design. Story, Mueller, and Mace (1998) offer a definition of universal design as “the design of products and environments to be useable to the greatest extent possible by people of all ages and abilities.”

By allowing all students access to extended time on exams or utilizing multiple locations for students to take exams other than the regular classroom setting, students with disabilities would be afforded the opportunity to blend with other students who are all receiving the same accommodations. Additionally, all students could be allowed to take exams in private, study carrels or utilize headphones or white noise machines to provide a nondistracting environment. In terms of accommodations such as note taking, professors could post notes for all of their students on a campus website, or every class could be required to have a student note taker to provide notes to classmates. These accommodations also could be employed in the public school setting along with other methods of universal design such as a daily resource room period for all students.

Universal design in providing accommodations and services in the field of special education and for college students with disabilities should be explored in future studies. Specifically, a qualitative study that examines the perceptions, awareness, and understanding of students with disabilities around the concept of universal design could shed further light on ways in which educational environments could be created that provide access for all and reduce the need for students to disclose their disability status. Including students without disabilities in such studies is important in order to gauge their learning preferences and how they can be accommodated through the use of universal design.

One limitation of this study is that the population of individuals I interviewed was students who had elected to pursue a postsecondary education. The participants' narratives about their high school experiences were coming from the perspectives of successful students with learning disabilities who were achieving at the college level. Future studies that focus on research with students with learning disabilities who did not attend college may reveal differing

findings into their beliefs on motivation and intelligence. Research on this topic may be beneficial to find out more about the perspectives of students with learning disabilities who experience varying educational success, about their ability to be successful.

It should be emphasized that only one first-year student volunteered to participate in my study. Since the majority of the participants were juniors and seniors, one may speculate that as they progressed through their college years and had more experiences related to their disabilities, the students became more comfortable with their disability status. This well-being surrounding their disability identity may have contributed to their desire to volunteer in my study and tell their stories, potentially accounting for the low number of first- and second-year students in my participant group. A future study looking at disability identity and college level would be beneficial to exploring these hypotheses further.

Another limitation of this study is that the participants represented a homogenous population in terms of ethnicity, as nearly all were White. Moreover, socioeconomic status was not factored into the findings. Students of color and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds who also have a disability hold multiple marginalized identities. A follow-up study replicating the methodology utilized in this study that includes more diversity in terms of race and class, could provide more insight into the experiences of college students with learning disabilities when accounting for the intersectionality of race, class, and disability.

Another limitation of this study is that I did not explore the self-advocacy of college students with learning disabilities who were not receiving disability services. Students with learning disabilities who are registered with a disability services office and receive accommodations, may be predisposed to self-advocating based on their experiences with requesting disability-related supports. A follow-up study that includes students with learning

disabilities who do not access disability services could shed further light on these students and their perspectives on self-advocacy and stigma.

Since this was a qualitative study that involved in-depth interviews, the findings are based on students' individual perspectives. Consequently, a limitation of this study is that the findings cannot be generalized to the larger population. Quantitative methods provide the opportunity to use statistical evidence to generalize to the greater population. Qualitative studies, however, can complement existing quantitative research and also offer opportunities for individuals to tell their stories, thereby expanding on perspectives that may come from rating scales and surveys.

As a qualitative study that gave college students with learning disabilities the opportunity to openly share their educational and social experiences, my research contributes to the existing literature around this topic. My study provided rich insight into how students with learning disabilities navigate college, particularly around their views of motivation and intelligence, and their adherence to a theory that maintains that with effort, hard work, and perseverance, individuals can be successful academically and act as strong self-advocates. More research on these topics, including interviewing individuals with learning disabilities who have not attended college, could provide another lens for which to understand these issues. With stigma around disability still prevalent in educational and social arenas, future studies examining stigma around disability services at the college level would provide an important supplement to the literature. With its focus on self-determination, self-advocacy, and stigma, this study provides interesting insight into the educational lives of 11 students with learning disabilities and the struggles and successes they faced while pursuing a common goal of completing their postsecondary education.

Appendix A

Recruitment Flyer

WOULD YOU LIKE TO PARTICIPATE IN
A RESEARCH STUDY ABOUT STUDENTS
WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES?

I am a doctoral student at Syracuse University and I am interested in interviewing students who have been diagnosed with a learning disability prior to college. One-on-one interviews will take approximately one hour to two hours per visit with a maximum of two visits. Students will be compensated with \$10.00 for each interview. Interviews will be conducted at Branchwood’s Disability Services Office in a private location.

Please call or e-mail
the person below if
you are interested
in participating in
this study.

Karen
Email address
Phone number
Karen
Email address
Phone number
Karen
Email address
Phone number
Karen
Email address
Phone number
Karen
Email address
Phone number
Karen
Email address
Phone number
Karen
Email address
Phone number
Karen
Email address
Phone number

Appendix B

Informed Consent

In Their Own Words: College Students with Learning Disabilities Describe Their Experiences with Self-Advocacy in Secondary and Post-Secondary Education

Date:

Dear Branchwood Student:

My name is Karen Grella, and I am a doctoral student at Syracuse University in the School of Education. I am inviting you to participate in a research study. Involvement in the study is completely voluntary and you have the choice of whether or not to participate. This form is designed to explain to you my study, and I encourage you to ask questions about the research should you feel the need. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have or explain anything in greater detail.

I am interested in learning about the high school and college experiences of students with diagnosed learning disabilities. Students must be 18 years of age or older to participate in this study. Through a series of interviews, which I will be recording using a digital voice recorder, you will be asked to share your experiences while you attended high school and college. This will take approximately 1 to 2 hours of your time during each visit with a maximum of two visits. For your participation in this study, you will receive \$10.00 in compensation for each of your visits.

In any articles I write or any presentations that I make, I will use a pseudonym for you, and I will not reveal the high school or university you have attended. In order to maintain confidentiality, all digital audio recordings, transcriptions, and notes will be stored in a locked cabinet in my residence during the research process. I will be the only person with access to your identity. The original audio recordings will be kept until the completion of the research study following which they will be destroyed.

One of the benefits to you of participating in my study is that you may find the opportunity to discuss your experience as an individual with a learning disability to be positive and fulfilling. You may also recognize the importance of sharing your experiences in order to contribute to research that aims to create a more positive climate towards individuals with disabilities. The benefit of this research is that it may help us to better understand the experiences of college students with learning disabilities by hearing students share these experiences in their own words. In this study, students will in fact be given this opportunity in a confidential space in order to minimize the risk of being "outed" and increase the benefit to be heard. The students' experiences contribute to the knowledge to be gained for the society at large on the experiences of college students with learning disabilities. This study may also help educators and staff who work in educational settings to gain better insight into the experiences of their students with learning disabilities. Such insights may lead to valuable changes in higher education practices.

The risks to you of participating in this study are minimal, but you may be sharing personal experiences related to sensitive information. In addition, you may be uncomfortable or reluctant to discuss your disability and educational experiences with the researcher. You may also have experienced stigma and, therefore, may be fearful that this will also occur during the interviews or that you will be "outed" as having a disability by participating in this study. You may also be sharing highly personal and confidential information regarding your disability which may cause you to become emotional, angry, or frustrated. I will do my best to minimize these risks by being sensitive to your views, emotions, and need for privacy. You have the right to withdraw from the study, without penalty, at any time.

If you have additional questions about this study, Dr. Corinne Smith, my dissertation advisor, can be reached at Syracuse University, 150 Huntington Hall or by phone 315-443-9321 or by email crsmith@syr.edu. If you have additional questions about this consent form, the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board can be reached at Syracuse University, 121 Bowne Hall, or by phone 315-443-3013 or by email orip@syr.edu. You may also contact Mr. John Doe, Director, Review Board for Research at Branchwood University, 222 Greenhouse Road, or by phone 555-555-555 or by e-mail johndoe@branchwood.edu.

All of my questions have been answered and I wish to participate in this research study. I affirm that I am 18 years of age or older. A copy of the consent form has been provided to me.

- ☐ I give permission to be audio taped
- ☐ I do not give permission to be audio taped

Signature of participant

Date

Print name of participant

Signature of investigator

Date

Print name of investigator

Appendix C

Student Information Form

Student Information Form

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

E-Mail: _____

Year in College: _____

Academic Major/Degree Sought: _____

Appendix D

Table 1: Characteristics of participants including name*, year in college, major, disability diagnosis(es), and timeframe for initial diagnosis.

<i><u>Student*</u></i>	<i><u>Year</u></i>			
<i><u>Name</u></i>	<i><u>in College</u></i>	<i><u>Major</u></i>	<i><u>Disability Diagnosis(es)</u></i>	<i><u>Initial Diagnosis</u></i>
Derek	Senior	Science	Dyslexia; ADHD	Elementary school
Ron	Senior	English	Dyslexia	Elementary school
Lillian	Junior	Political Science	Dyslexia	Elementary school
Sarah	Senior	Broadcasting	Dyslexia; ADHD	Elementary school
Isabelle	Senior	Psychology	LD- Reading/ Written Expression	Elementary school
Rosemary	Junior	Communications	Auditory Processing Disorder; LD-Memory	Preschool
Bryan	First-year	English	Dysgraphia; ADHD; Bipolar Disorder	Elementary school
Claire	Senior	Criminal Science	LD-Math/ Short-term Memory	First-year college
Josh	Junior	Psychology	LD (nonspecified); ADHD	Elementary school
Nathan	Senior	Graphic Design	LD-Math; Visual Impairment	Elementary school
Rachael	Senior	Graphic Design	LD-Math/Memory	High school

*Pseudonyms were used to protect students' identities

Table 2: Codes by Category for Qualitative Analysis*

<u>Self-Determination/ Self-Advocacy</u>					
AD	Advisor/ Guidance Counselor	FR	Frustration/ Discouragement	SD	Self-Determination
BA	Barriers	IN	Independence	TH	Teachers
CH	Coach	PD	Proud/Pride	TR	Trust
DM	Decision-Making	PF	Professors	TS	Teacher Support
DS	Disability Services	PS	Parental Support		
DT	Determination/ Persistence	SA	Self-Advocacy		
<u>Ability/Effort</u>					
AB	Ability	MI	Multiple Intelligences	SB	Siblings
HW	Hard Work/ Effort	MV	Motivation	SG	Struggling
IQ	Intelligent/ Smart	PD	Proud/Pride	TE	Teacher Encouragement
LS	Learning Style	PS	Parental Support	WE	Work Ethic
<u>Disability Stigma</u>					
CF	Confidentiality	NM	Normal	SE	Special Education
DI	Disclosure	NT	Note-taking	ST	Stigma
DS	Disability Services	PE	Peer Relationships	TA	Testing Accommodations
ID	Identity	PF	Professors	TH	Teachers

Disability Stigma con't

LB	Labels	RA	Reading Aloud	TR	Trust
ME	Missed Exam	RR	Resource Room	UN	Understanding

* some codes are listed multiple times as they overlapped categories

Appendix E

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. What is your full name?
2. How old are you?
3. What year are you in at Branchwood?
4. What is your major?
5. When were you first diagnosed as having a learning disability?
6. Tell me about your experiences with having a learning disability.
7. Tell me about your experiences in high school or college when you may have been having difficulty and felt your needs were not being met.
8. Do you think Branchwood is a good college for students with learning disabilities?

References

- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing.
- Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, 42 U.S.C. §§12101 et seq. (1990).
- Anctil, T.M., Ishikawa, M.E., & Scott, A.T. (2008). Academic identity development through self-determination: Successful college students with learning disabilities. *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*, 31(3), 164-174.
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Bandura, A. (1995). Experience of personal and collective efficacy in changing societies. In A. Bandura (Ed.), *Self-efficacy in changing societies* (pp.1-45). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Bandura, M., & Dweck, C.S. (1985). *The relationship of conceptions of intelligence and achievement goals to achievement-related cognition, affect, and behavior*. Unpublished manuscript, Harvard University.
- Barga, N.K. (1996). Students with learning disabilities in education: Managing a disability. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 29, 413-421.
- Beale, A.V. (2005). Preparing students with learning disabilities for postsecondary education: Their rights and responsibilities. *Techniques*, 80(3), 24-27.
- Beilke, J.R., & Yssel, N. (1999). The chilly climate for students with disabilities in higher education. *College Student Journal*, 33(3), 364-371.
- Biklen, S.K., & Casella, R. (2007). *A practical guide to the qualitative dissertation*. New York: Teachers College Press.

- Blackstone, A. (2012). *Principles of sociological inquiry: Qualitative and quantitative methods*, v. 1.0. [Flat World Knowledge Online Textbook]. Available from <http://catalog.flatworldknowledge.com/catalog/editions/blackstone-principles-of-sociological-inquiry-qualitative-and-quantitative-methods-1-0>.
- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Bogdan, R.C., & Biklen, S.K. (2003). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods* (4th ed.). New York: Allyn & Bacon.
- Brinckerhoff, L.C. (1994). Developing effective self-advocacy skills in college-bound students with learning disabilities. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 29(4), 229-237.
- Byron, J. (1990). *Self-advocacy for college students with learning disabilities*. Presentation at Postsecondary Training Institute: Training College Students with Learning Disabilities, Conference at University of Connecticut, Hartford.
- Cameto, R., Levine, P., and Wagner, M. (2004). *Transition Planning for Students with Disabilities. A Special Topic Report of Findings from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2)*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International. Available at www.nlts2.org/reports/2004_11/nlts2_report_2004_11_complete.pdf.
- Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. *The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://classifications.carnegiefoundation.org/>.
- Charon, J.M. (2007). *Symbolic interactionism: An introduction, an interpretation, an integration* (9th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Clever, A., Bear, G., & Juvonen, J. (1992). Discrepancies between competence and

- importance in self-perceptions of children in integrated classes. *The Journal of Special Education*, 26(2), 125-138.
- Colker, A., & Milani, A.A. (2005). *The law of disability discrimination* (5th ed.). Newark, NJ: Matthew Bender & Company, Inc.
- Colker, A., & Milani, A.A. (2005). *The law of disability discrimination handbook: Statutes and regulatory guidance* (5th ed.). Newark, NJ: Matthew Bender & Company, Inc.
- Cope, D. (2005). Disability law and your classroom. *Academe*, 91(6), 37-39.
- Cosden, M.A., & McNamara, J. (1997). Self-concept and perceived social support among college students with and without learning disabilities. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 20(1), 2-12.
- Creswell, J.W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- DaDeppo, L.M.W. (2009). Integration factors related to the academic success and intent to persist of college students with learning disabilities. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 24(3), 122-131.
- Denhart, H. (2008). Deconstructing barriers: Perceptions of students labeled with learning Disabilities in higher education. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 41(6), 483-497.
- Deshler, D.D., Schumaker, J.B., Marquis, J., Bulgren, J.A., Lenz, B.K., Davis, B., & Grossen, B. (2002). *The educational context and outcomes for high school students with disabilities: A case study comparing the school life of students with disabilities and their*

- peers without disabilities*. (Research report), Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Institute for Academic Access.
- Diener, C.I., & Dweck, C.S. (1978). An analysis of learned helplessness: Continuous changes in performance, strategy, and achievement cognitions following failure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 36, 451-462.
- Dweck, C.S. (2000). *Self-theories: Their role in motivation, personality, and development*. (Essays in social psychology). Philadelphia, PA: Psychology Press.
- Dweck, C.S. (2002). Beliefs that make smart people dumb. In R.J. Sternberg (Ed.), *Why smart people can be so stupid* (pp. 24-41). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Dweck, C.S. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Dweck, C.S., & Leggett, E.L. (1988). A social-cognitive approach to motivation and personality. *Psychology Review*, 95, 256-273.
- Eckes, S.E., & Ochoa, T.A. (2005). Students with disabilities: Transitioning from high school to higher education. *American Secondary Education*, 33(3), 6-20.
- Elbaum, B., & Vaughn, S. (2001). School-based interventions to enhance the self-concept of students with learning disabilities: A meta-analysis. *The Elementary School Journal*, 101(3), 303-329.
- Elliot, A.J. (2005). A conceptual history of the achievement goal construct. In A.J. Elliot & C.S. Dweck (Eds.), *Handbook of competence and motivation*. (pp. 52-72). New York: The Guilford Press.
- Estrada, L., Dupoux, E., & Wolman, C. (2006). The relationship between locus of control and personal-emotional adjustment and social adjustment to college life in students with and without learning disabilities. *College Student Journal*, 40(1), 43-54.

- Field, S., Sarver, M.D., & Shaw, S.F. (2003). Self-determination: A key to success in postsecondary education for students with learning disabilities. *Remedial and Special Education, 24*(6), 339-349.
- Foley, N.E. (2006). Preparing for college: Improving the odds for students with learning disabilities. *College Student Journal, 40*(3), 641-645.
- Frymier, A.B., & Wanzer, M.B. (2003). Examining differences in perceptions of students' communication with professors: A comparison of students with and without disabilities. *Communication Quarterly, 51*(2), 174-191.
- Garner, D.B. (2008). Postsecondary education success: Stories of three students with learning disabilities. *TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus, 4*(4), Article 4. Retrieved from <http://journals.cec.sped.org/tecplus/vol4/iss4/art4/>.
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A.L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc.
- Goldhammer, R., & Brinckerhoff, L.C. (1992). Self-advocacy for college students. *Their World, 94-97*.
- Greenbaum, B., Graham, S., & Scales, W. (1995). Adults with learning disabilities: Educational and social experiences during college. *Exceptional Children, 61*(5), 460-471.
- Hadley, W.M. (2006). L.D. students' access to higher education: Self-advocacy and support. *Journal of Developmental Education, 30*(2), 10-16.
- Hagborg, W.J. (1999). Scholastic competence subgroups among high school students with learning disabilities. *Learning Disability Quarterly, 22*(1), 3-10.

- Hall, C.W., Spruill, K.L., & Webster, R.E. (2002). Motivational and attitudinal factors in college students with and without learning disabilities. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 25, 79-86.
- Hampton, N.Z., & Mason, E. (2003). Learning disabilities, gender, sources of efficacy, self-efficacy beliefs, and academic achievement in high school students. *Journal of School Psychology*, 41, 101-112.
- Hartman-Hall, H.M., & Haaga, D.A.F. (2002). College students' willingness to seek help for their learning disabilities. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 25(4), 263-274.
- Hatch, J.A. (2002). *Doing qualitative research in education settings*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Heckhausen, J., & Dweck, C.S. (1998). Introduction: A developmental and process-oriented approach to motivation and self-regulation. In J. Heckhausen & C.S. Dweck (Eds.), *Motivation and self-regulation across the life-span*. (pp. 1-11). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Heiman, T., & Precel, K. (2003). Students with learning disabilities in higher education: Academic strategies profile. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 36(3), 248-258.
- Henderson, C. (2001). *College freshman with disabilities: A biennial statistical profile*. HEATH Resource Center, American Council on Education. Washington DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- Henderson, V., & Dweck, C.S. (1990). Achievement and motivation in adolescence: A new model and data. In S. Feldman & G. Elliott (Eds.), *At the threshold: The developing adolescent*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Holloway, J.H. (2001). Inclusion and students with learning disabilities. *Educational Leadership*, 58(6), 86-88.

- Hollway, W., & Jefferson, T. (2000). *Doing qualitative research differently: Free association, narrative, and the interview method*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 (2004).
- Jameson, D.R. (2007). Self-determination and success outcomes of two-year college students with disabilities. *Journal of College Reading and Learning*, 37(2), 26-46.
- Janiga, S.J., & Costenbader, V. (2002). The transition from high school to postsecondary education for students with learning disabilities: A survey of college service coordinators. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 35(5), 462-468, 479.
- Johnson, G., Zascavage, V., & Gerber, S. (2008). Junior college experience and students with learning disabilities: Implications for success at the four year university. *College Student Journal*, 42(4), 1162-1168.
- Jordan, A., & Stanovich, P. (2001). Patterns of teacher-student interaction in inclusive elementary classrooms and correlates with student self-concept. *International Journal of Disability, Development, and Education*, 48(1), 33-52.
- Kammrath, L.K., & Dweck, C. (2006). Voicing conflict: Preferred conflict strategies among incremental and entity theorists. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 32(11), 1497-1508.
- Karp, D.A. (1996). *Speaking of sadness: Depression, disconnection, and the meanings of mental illness*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kauffman, J.M. (2003). Appearances, stigma, and prevention. *Remedial and Special Education*, 24(4), 195-198.
- Kavale, K.A., & Forness, S.R. (2000). History, rhetoric, and reality: Analysis of the inclusion debate. *Remedial and Special Education*, 21(5), 279-296.

- Kortering, L., & Braziel, P. (2002). A look at high school programs as perceived by youth with learning disabilities. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 25, 177-188.
- Lackaye, T., & Margalit, M. (2008). Self-efficacy, loneliness, effort, and hope: Developmental differences in the experiences of students with learning disabilities and their non-learning disabled peers at two age groups. *Learning Disabilities: A Contemporary Journal*, 6(2), 1-20.
- Lackaye, T., Margalit, M., Ziv, O., & Ziman, T. (2006). Comparisons of self-efficacy, mood, effort, and hope between students with learning disabilities and their non-LD-matched peers. *Learning Disabilities Research*, 21(2), 111-121.
- Layton, C.A., & Lock, R.H. (2003). Reasoning and self-advocacy for postsecondary students with learning disabilities. *Learning Disabilities: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, 12(2), 49-55.
- Leafstedt, J.M., Richards, C., LaMonte, M., & Cassidy, D. (2007). Perspectives on co-teaching: Views from high school students with learning disabilities. *Learning Disabilities: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, 14(3), 177-184.
- Lee, S.H., Wehmeyer, M.L., Palmer, S.B., Soukup, J.H., & Little, T.D. (2008). Self-determination and access to the general education curriculum. *The Journal of Special Education*, 42(2), 91-107.
- Lefcourt, H.M., Miller, R.S., Ware, E.E., & Sherk, D. (1981). Locus of control as a modifier of the relationship between stressors and moods. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 41(5), 357-369.
- Lehmann, J.P., Davies, T.G., & Laurin, K.M. (2000). Listening to student voices about postsecondary education. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 32(5), 60-65.

- Lock, R.H., & Layton, C.A. (2001). Succeeding in postsecondary ed through self-advocacy. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 34(2), 66-71.
- Lovitt, T.C., Cushing, S.S., & Stump, C.S. (1994). High school students rate their IEPs: Low opinions and lack of ownership. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 30(1), 34-37.
- Lovitt, T.C., Plavins, M., & Cushing, S. (1999). What do pupils with disabilities have to say about their experiences in high school? *Remedial and Special Education*, 20(2), 67-76.
- May, A.L., & Stone, C.A. (2010). Stereotypes of individuals with learning disabilities: Views of college students with and without learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 43(6), 483-499.
- Meese, R.L. (1987). Conceptions of ability, perceived ability, confidence level, and choice of achievement goals in third- and fifth-grade learning-disabled and not-learning-disabled children. *Dissertation Abstracts International (Sciences & Engineering)*, 48(1-A), 107.
- Moore, V.M., & Keefe, E.B. (2004). "Don't get your briefs in a bunch": What high school students have to say about where they receive their services. *Issues in Teacher Education*, 13(1), 7-18.
- Mueller, C.M., & Dweck, C.S. (1997). *Implicit theories of intelligence: Malleability beliefs, definitions, and judgments of intelligence*. Unpublished data.
- Murray, C., & Pianta, R.C. (2007). The importance of teacher-student relationships for adolescents with high incidence disabilities. *Theory into Practice*, 46(2), 105-112.
- Norton, S.M. (1997). Examination accommodations for community college students with learning disabilities: How are they viewed by faculty and students? *Community College Journal of Research & Practice*, 21(1), 57-69.

- Nussbaum, A.D., & Dweck, C.S. (2008). Defensiveness versus remediation: Self-theories and modes of self-esteem maintenance. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 34(5), 599-612.
- Overton, T. (2006). *Assessing learners with special needs: An applied approach* (5th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Palmer, C., & Roessler, R.T. (2000). Requesting classroom accommodations: Self-advocacy and conflict resolution training for college students with disabilities. *Journal of Rehabilitation*, 66(3), 38-43.
- Pierson, M.R., Carter, E.W., Lane, K.L., & Glaeser, B.C. (2008). Factors influencing the self-determination of transition-age youth with high-incidence disabilities. *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*, 31(2), 115-125.
- Reis, S.M., McGuire, J.M., & Neu, T.W. (2000). Compensation strategies used by high-ability students with learning disabilities who succeed in college. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 44(2), 123-134).
- Rotter, J.B. (1954). *Social learning and clinical psychology*. New York: Prentice-Hall.
- Rotter, J.B. (1966). Generalized expectancies for internal versus external control of reinforcement. *Psychology Monographs, General and Applied*, 80(1), 1-28.
- Russell, M. (1998). *Beyond ramps: Disability at the end of the social contract*. Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press.
- Scanlon, D., Saxon, K., Cowell, M., Kenney, M.E., Pérez-Gualdrón, L., & Jernigan, M. (2008). Urban adolescents' postschool aspirations and awareness. *Remedial and Special Education*, 29(3), 161-174.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504), as amended, 29 U.S.C. § 794, (1973).

Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Shaffer, S. & Shevitz, L. (2001). She bakes and he builds: Gender bias in the curriculum.

In H. Rousso & M.L. Wehmeyer (Eds.), *Double jeopardy: Addressing gender equity in special education*. (pp.115-131). Albany: State University of New York Press.

Shaw, S.F., McGuire, J.M., & Brinckerhoff, L.C. (1994). College and university programming.

In P.J. Gerber & H.B. Reiff (Eds.), *Learning disabilities in adulthood: Persisting problems and evolving issues* (pp. 141-151). Stoneham, MA: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Shaw, S.S., McGuire, J.M., & Foley, T.E. (2003). Universal design for instruction: A framework for anticipating and responding to disability and other diverse learning needs in the college classroom. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 36(1), 40-49.

Skinner, M.E. (1998). Promoting self-advocacy among college students with learning disabilities. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 33(5), 278-283.

Smith, J.D., & Polloway, E.A. (2008). Defining disability up and down: The problem of “normality.” *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*, 46(3), 234-238.

Smith, S.G., English, R., & Vasek, D. (2002). Student and parent involvement in the transition process for college freshman with learning disabilities. *College Student Journal*, 36(4), 491-503.

Snyder, C.R. (2002). Hope theory: Rainbows in the mind. *Psychological Inquiry*, 13, 249-279.

Spector, P.E. (1982). Behavior in organizations as a function of employee’s locus of control. *Psychological Bulletin*, 91(6), 482-497.

- Spencer, B.G., & Boon, R.T. (2006). Influencing learning experiences: Let's ask the students! (2006). *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 41(4), 244-248.
- Stage, F.K., & Milne, N.V. (1996). Invisible Scholars: Students with learning disabilities. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 67, 426-445.
- Story, M. F., Mueller, J. L., & Mace, R. L. (1998). *The universal design file: Designing for people of all ages and abilities*. North Carolina State University: The Center for Universal Design.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Taylor, S.J. (2011). Disability studies in higher education. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 154, 93–98.
- Thoma, C.A., & Getzel, E.E. (2005). “Self-determination is what it’s all about”: What post-secondary students with disabilities tell us are important considerations for success. *Education and Training in Developmental Disabilities*, 40 (3), 234-242.
- Thomas, S.B. (2000). College students and disability law. *The Journal of Special Education*, 33(4), 248-257.
- Tincani, M. (2004). Improving outcomes for college students with disabilities: Ten strategies for instructors. *College Teaching*, 52(4), 128-132.
- Trent, J.W. (1994). *Inventing the feeble mind: A history of mental retardation in the United States*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Troiano, P.F. (2003). College students and learning disability: Elements of self-style. *Journal of College Student Development*, 44(3), 404-419.
- Van Reusen, A.K., Bos, C.S., Schumaker, J.B., & Deshler, D.D. (1994). *The self-advocacy*

- strategy for education and transition planning*. Lawrence, KS: Edge Enterprises.
- Watkins, C. (Ed.). (1985). *The American heritage dictionary of Indo-European roots*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Wehmeyer, M.L. (1995b). The ARC's self-determination scale. *Procedural Guidelines*. Arlington, TX: The ARC.
- Winzer, M.A. (1993). *The history of special education: From isolation to integration*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.
- Wright, P.W.D., & Wright, P.D. (2007). *Wrightslaw: special education law* (2nd ed.). Hartfield, VA: Harbor House Law Press, Inc.
- Yost, D.S., Shaw, S.F., Cullen, J.P., & Bigaj, S.J. (1994). Practices and attitudes of postsecondary LD service providers in North America. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 27(10), 631-640.

Karen D. Grella

770 James Street
Apt. 703
Syracuse, New York 13203

(315) 430-4530

karendgrella@gmail.com

EDUCATION:

Syracuse University

Doctor of Philosophy, Special Education, 2014

Dissertation Title: *You Missed the Exam!": A Discourse with College Students with Learning Disabilities on their Experiences with Self-Determination, Self-Advocacy, and Stigma in Secondary and Postsecondary Education.* Chair, Corinne R. Smith

University at Albany, State University of New York

Certificate of Advanced Study, School Psychology, 2001

Master of Science, Educational Psychology and Statistics, 2000

Syracuse University

Bachelor of Science, Social Work, 1997

Bachelor of Arts, Psychology, 1996

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Disability Specialist

October 2012-present

Cayuga Community College, Auburn, NY

Coordinate comprehensive disability services programs on campus. Develop and maintain policies and procedures as they relate to the provision of reasonable and appropriate academic accommodations for students with disabilities. Evaluate disability documentation to determine and authorize reasonable and appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities. Consult with faculty regarding accommodative supports and services. Collaborate with local secondary schools to assist in transition of services. Assist students with accessing and utilizing assistive/adaptive technology. Participate in campus Behavioral Intervention Teams.

Counselor

August 2008-October 2012

Syracuse University, Office of Disability Services, Syracuse, NY

Maintain a case load of approximately 200-250 students. Meet with prospective students and families. Review students' documentation of disability to determine appropriate accommodations and supports. Meet with students to develop accommodation/service plans. Communicate with staff and faculty to insure the provision and delivery of necessary services and accommodations. Assist

other university departments and programs in understanding student needs. Provide counseling for students on disability-related issues. Participate in the development and delivery of summer programs for students with disabilities. Participate in projects, university committees, and professional development activities.

Supervisor, Adult Psychoeducational Clinic

December 2010-October 2012

Syracuse University, Office of Disability Services, Syracuse, NY

Manage the operations of the clinic. Supervise graduate assistant interns. Hire clinic staff. Lead staff meetings with school psychologist interns and professional psychologists. Assign cases to evaluators. Maintain clinic invoices/budget.

Acting Director

September 2011-December 2011

Syracuse University, Office of Disability Services, Syracuse, NY

Supervised office staff. Facilitated meetings with staff members in order to work through issues, concerns, and needs regarding coordination of services. Led staff and counselor meetings. Coordinated interpreter support for deaf students on campus and studying abroad. Managed departmental budgetary needs.

School Psychologist, Adult Psychoeducational Clinic

August 2005-December 2010

Syracuse University, Office of Disability Services, Syracuse, NY

Conducted psychoeducational assessments with college and graduate students for the purpose of diagnosing specific learning disabilities. Generated comprehensive psychoeducational reports and conducted feedback sessions with students to review results. Consulted with Office of Disability Services staff on the provision of reasonable accommodations and support services for students with disabilities.

School Psychologist

May 2006-June 2006

Lafayette Central School District, Lafayette, New York

Conducted initial referrals. Chaired Pupil Service Team meetings. Provided individual counseling to students. Supervised school psychologist intern.

School Psychologist

July 2001-August 2005

Central Square Central School District, Central Square, NY

Conducted triennial assessments, initial referrals, behavioral evaluations, and functional behavioral assessments. Facilitated building intervention team. Planned, coordinated, and chaired sub-Committee on Special Education meetings. Provided individual and group counseling and direct interventions. Consulted with teachers. Planned and implemented social skills lessons within the general and special education setting. Co-facilitated after school adolescent girls' group with school-based mental health counselor.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE:

Adjunct Faculty Member

January 2006-May 2011

LeMoyne College, Syracuse, New York

EDU 225- Assessment and Decision Making for Equality and Inclusion

EDG 525- Assessment: Practices and Legalities for Students with Disabilities

Courses are required for all students seeking New York State Teacher Certification in Childhood/Students with Disabilities and Adolescence/Students with Disabilities or those who are already certified to teach and are seeking additional certification. The focus of the course is accurate and holistic assessment of student strengths and weaknesses. Students must demonstrate knowledge of skills and practices associated with the accurate assessment of all students, including those with suspected and identified disabilities. The course responds to this need by providing academic learning coupled with actual clinical experience in the use of tests and other assessment tools in a structured, supervised setting.

EDU 205/215- Childhood Learning and Special Needs/Learning in the Sociocultural Context

Course explores essential areas of psychology in education examining research and theory on learning and teaching. The focus of the course is on the knowledge, understanding and application of such topics as development, memory, learner differences, motivation, behavior, and assessment. Discussions include the nature of effective teaching, classroom management, and inclusion of students with disabilities.

Adjunct Faculty Member
Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York

July 2006-August 2008

SPE 705- Seminar in Evaluation and Planning for Exceptional Students

Course offers students an opportunity to learn about and practice the roles of various support personnel in the school system: the school psychologist, special educator, speech pathologist, occupational therapist, social worker, and counselor. Students enrolled in the course form a team that simulates the pupil personnel team structure common in today's schools. Students take turns acting in various professional roles while assessing students with puzzling learning and behavioral difficulties and planning their school programs. While learning a wide range of approaches to assessment is a key objective of the clinic experience, equally important are the skills students gain in program planning, family and school consultation, and working within a team. The students are highly supervised by the instructor throughout the assessment process.

Adjunct Faculty Member
Colgate University, Hamilton, New York

January 2007-May 2007

EDUC 321- Educational Psychology

Course explores essential areas of psychology in education. Students examine research and theory on learning and teaching, which includes knowledge, understanding and application of such topics as development, memory, learner differences, motivation, behavior and assessment.

RESEARCH:

Research Apprenticeship Pilot Study, Syracuse University

Grella, K. (2010). *I Had a Small IEP: How College Students with Disabilities Negotiate Their High School Experiences*. Unpublished.

Research Assistant, Syracuse University

Participated in research experience in experimental psychology. Assisted in recruiting and running subjects and statistical and data analysis. Developed proficient skills in conducting and designing a research project.

Participated in research experience in educational psychology. Developed an understanding of classroom based assessment through video-taping elementary school classrooms and evaluating teacher feedback.

Participated in independent study in social work. Collected literary research on body image from a feminist perspective. Attended community meetings on eating disorders at Mental Health Association of Central New York. Completed a mini-thesis on findings.

Research Assistant, State University of New York at Albany

Participated in independent study on play therapy. Conducted play therapy sessions at urban preschool in Schenectady, New York with young children. Researched methods of play therapy and their implications for school psychology practice.

Participated in independent study/research in social psychology. Examined the influence of society upon individuals, families, work groups, and organizations. Explored current research, issues, and popular media presentations related to aggression and violence, race and ethnicity, and gender issues. Completed a research proposal on gender issues with implications for school psychology practice.

PRESENTATIONS:

Grella, K., Rice, H. (2012). *Providing Disability Services: A Collaborative Approach Across Two Campuses*. Presented at the NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education Mental Health Conference, Atlanta, Georgia.

Grella, K. (2010). *I Had a Small IEP: How College Students with Disabilities Negotiate Their High School Experiences*. Presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, Denver, Colorado.

Grella, K. (2009). *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 2004: Response to Intervention*. Presented at the New York State Disability Services Council Spring Meeting, Canandaigua, New York.

Storie, M., Turner, T., Grella, K., & Schlegel, A. (2009). *Transition from High School to College for Students with Disabilities: What Every High School Psychologist Needs to Know*. Presented at the National Association of School Psychologists conference, Boston, Massachusetts.

Grella, K. (2008). *Hidden Stories: The Reflections of College Students with Learning Disabilities on their Experiences in High School*. Presented at the Disability Studies in Education Conference, Columbia University, New York, New York.

Grella, K. (2008). *Interpreting Assessment Results*. Presented at the Post-Secondary Disability Consortium of Central New York quarterly meeting, Syracuse, New York.

TRAINING:

Mental Health First Aid, November 2012

REFERENCES:

References available upon request