College Students with Physical Disabilities: An Exploratory Investigation within Counselor Education

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COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH PHYSICAL DISABILITIES: AN EXPLORATORY INVESTIGATION WITHIN COUNSELOR EDUCATION

by

Adam Tolbert Wall

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology Western Michigan University December 2019

Doctoral committee:

Phillip Johnson, Ph.D., Chair
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Debra Lindstrom, Ph.D.
DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my mother, Angelyn T. Wall, my father, Robert E. Wall, and to my aunt and uncle, Lillie and Clifford Johnson. May you both continue to find rest unto your souls.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are many people to whom I owe gratitude. I’m grateful to the five human beings who eagerly volunteered to share their stories with me. Thank you each for your willingness, time, trust, candor, and vulnerability. I also wish to thank my entire family for providing their unconditional love and unwavering support, excitement, and encouragement throughout this project, especially my mother, Angelyn Wall, my father, Robert Wall, my brother, Bowen, my sister, Teiko, my aunts, Lillie Johnson and Diane Wingfield, and my uncles, Larry Tolbert, Clifford Johnson, and James Sanders. Thank you for continuing to believe in me.

I extend my heartfelt thanks to my committee members, Dr. Phillip Johnson, Dr. Carla Adkison-Johnson, and Dr. Debra Lindstrom for their thoughtful guidance, calm patience, and expertise. Dr. Johnson, I will be eternally grateful for your advocacy on my behalf and for allowing me to journey through the process in my own way. Similarly, I wish to thank my mentors, Dr. Twinet Parmer, Dr. Sherene McHenry, Deanna Johnson, Dr. Mark Deskovitz, Vernon Payne, Mary Ebejer, and Dr. Kahler Schuemann for your full sponsorship of and commitment to my academic and professional endeavors.

To my dear friends, Marc Greene, Kate Papson, Katie Reming, Priscilla Valentine, Leonard Zongo, Kimberly Carroll, Valaree Kyser, Kristel Oelke, Tiffini Graham, and Malinda Lisak, thank you for uplifting me and providing abundant love, compelling inspiration, and anchoring support.

I also extend my gratitude to countless members of my work family, especially my supervisors, Dr. Evelyn Winfield-Thomas, Dr. Diane Anderson, Roshona Porter, and Laura
Darrah, as well as my colleagues Tammy Miller, Felicia Crawford, Cindy Town, Veronica Thomas, Brian Dubrish, Susan Coker, Shari Glasser, and Pamela Buist who deeply encouraged and enhanced the integration of my professional and academic worlds.

Lastly, to Dr. LaSonda Wells and my beloved cohort with whom I began this endeavor, Dr. Janeé Steele, Dr. Darryl Steele, Dr. Nikita Murray, Dr. Darryl Plunkett, Dr. Dan Romero, and Dr. Patrick Kamau: time continues to reveal what a special period of my life it was to be surrounded daily by so many brilliant intellects of color. I am honored to have shared time with you all. The circle is now complete. May we all continue to pay it forward with integrity, purpose, and cooperation.

Adam Tolbert Wall
According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2017a), there are over 19 million students who are currently enrolled in institutions of higher education. For the past 40 years, the number of students with disabilities attending colleges and universities has grown exponentially (NCES, 2017b). There is an abundance of research regarding many aspects of the experience of college students with a physical disability across social science, medical, and education literature; however, research targeted specifically at general counseling practitioners, counselor educators, and college counselors is relatively limited.

The purpose of this investigation was to study the inner lives of a group of undergraduate students with physical disabilities as they pursue degree attainment. More specifically, the investigation sought to understand (a) their general concerns, (b) the types of challenges they face and how they navigate resolving them, and (c) advice they have for faculty, staff, and other students based on their individual experiences.

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Harper & Thompson, 2012) was used to analyze in-depth interviews conducted with five participants. Findings revealed three dominant themes. Striving towards independence and self-reliance was central to understanding the experience and meaning making of the participants. Additionally, accessibility to space and
all of the accommodations they believed would be helpful proved to be challenging. Lastly, students believed their engagement on campus was central to their overall success.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, there are approximately 19.5 million students who are currently enrolled in institutions of higher education (NCES, 2017). For the past 40 years, the number of students with disabilities attending colleges and universities has grown exponentially (NCES, 2017). Many scholars attribute these gains, at least in part, due to increased access as a result of legislation such as the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 and 2004, and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, which resulted in unprecedented numbers of students with disabling conditions enrolling on college campuses (Collins & Mowbray, 2006; Brockelman, Chadsey, & Loeb, 2005; Enright, Conyers, & Szymanski, 1996; Stage & Milne, 1996; Thomas, 2000).

Enrollment projections suggest there continues to be increases in the number of all types of marginalized students who enroll in postsecondary institutions each year, including students who report having a disability. While these numerical gains are impressive, post-secondary institutions continue to struggle with assisting students with disabilities (Geblar, 2015; Smart & Smart, 2006; Squires, Burnell, McCarty, & Schnackenberg, 2018). For example, according to the U. S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs, in 2004, over 40 percent of students who began college in 1996 with a disability had dropped out 4 years later (USDE, 2004). Rates were so alarming that during that same year, the National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities was established by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), an extension of the U.S. Department of Education (DOE), to help states build and implement sustainable programs…that will yield positive results in dropout prevention.
(NDPC-SD, 2011). In 2006, OSEP reported that only 15% of students who began bachelor’s degree programs in 1995 had completed their degrees within the following 6 years and that nearly 41.2% had dropped out during the same period (Walker, 2006). Explanations for such low retention differ depending on the type of disability; however, most scholars agree these reasons include, but are not limited to: (a) a limited amount of support services offered (Gelbar, 2015; Horn & Nevel, 2006), (b) poor self-efficacy and mobility issues (Denhart, 2008; Enright et al., 1996), (c) accessibility (Association on Higher Education and Disability, 2008), (d) lack of knowledge among faculty and staff about best practice for the implementation of accommodations (Lombardi & Murray, 2011), (e) racism (Ferri & Connor, 2005; Hong, 2015; Mwachofi, Broyles, & Khaliq, 2009; Shaw 2012), (f) classism (Oesterreich & Knight, 2008), and (g) genderism (Asch, 1997; Doe, 1997; Hunt, Matthews, Milsom, & Lammel, 2006). Although research with college students with disabilities has seen a proliferation of research since 2006, information pertaining specifically to those with physical disabilities remains relatively sparse (Geblar, 2015).

**Statement of the Research Problem**

Disability legislation pertaining to employment and education continues to be amended, broadening the scope of these laws. Concurrently, increasing accountability is still being placed on institutions of higher education to improve graduation rates for all students (U.S. Department of Education, 2017; Wessel et al., 2009), including students with physical disabilities. While the past few years have seen a renewed focus of attention regarding many aspects of the experience of college students with disabling physical conditions across social science, medical, and education literature, contemporary research targeted specifically at general counseling practitioners, counselor educators, and college counselors is limited (Smart & Smart, 2006).
When attention is given to issues of disability within counselor education and college counseling literature, few published articles specifically address physical disability issues among college students (Gelbar 2015; Smart, 2008). This is especially important because college counselors work in a variety of settings on college campuses outside of the counseling center including career services, financial aid, housing, recreation, and multicultural affairs (Dean & Meadows, 1995). Recommendations from published studies consistently express the need for more research to be conducted about the needs and experiences of these students (Oesterreich & Knight, 2008; Smart & Smart, 2006; Thomas, Curtis, & Shippen, 2011). This paucity of literature severely limits counselors in their ability to successfully intervene, educate, and advocate regarding disability issues on college campuses.

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this investigation was to study the inner lives of a group of college students who have physical disabilities as they pursue an undergraduate education at a university located in the Midwest of the United States. The following research questions were addressed in this study:

**Research Question 1:** What are the concerns of students with physical disabilities?

**Research Question 2:** What types of challenges do students with physical disabilities face and how are they addressed?

**Research Questions 3:** What advice do students with physical disabilities have for faculty, staff, and students?

**Significance of the Study**

This study contributes to the current literature within the counseling profession by providing attention to a student population that is rarely discussed. Literature that targets college
personnel with professional identities as counselors and highlights issues of physical disability is very limited. Counselor preparation programs provide counselors-in-training with many components to address the needs of all college students. For example, they receive formal training in student development, advocacy, theory, multiculturalism, and career development (CACREP, 2016). The findings of this inquiry advance the understanding of disability-related issues on college campuses by contributing direct insight from students with physical disabilities.

**Definition of Terms**

Agencies and researchers define the following terms differently in order to operationalize provisions of service, conduct research, or interpret laws. Additionally, as new information is disclosed and language becomes antiquated, new terms are developed to reflect these changes. The following terms are operationally defined for the purpose of this inquiry:

**Disability:** A physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities of such individual; a record of such an impairment; or being regarded as having such an impairment (ADA, 1990).

**Physical Disability:** A physical impairment that significantly limits mobility, movement/motor skill, or one’s ability to complete tasks of daily living.

**Organization**

The remainder of the dissertation is organized into four additional chapters. Chapter II provides a review of relevant literature related to this inquiry and is organized by subheadings. Chapter III details the overarching methodological approach and means of collecting and analyzing data. Chapter IV addresses the findings of the inquiry, highlighting themes from each series of interviews. Chapter V provides the discussion, implications of the findings and methodologies, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future inquiry.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The desire to obtain education and training as a means to gain employment and the opportunity to increase social mobility have motivated students to attend college for decades. It was not until the mid-1970s institutions of learning started becoming accessible to the masses of mainstream students with disabilities (Smart & Smart, 2006). Prior to the 1970s, classrooms across the country remained heavily segregated on the basis of ability status. On the heels of the civil rights movement, early legislation was designed to provide equity and opportunity for students with disabilities (Mwachofi et al., 2009). The experiences of college students with physical disabilities are influenced by many the same factors that impact college students without physical disabilities. As most environments are not designed with students with disabilities in mind, each individual student is affected differently depending on the nature of his or her disability and needs. This may impact one’s ability to successfully matriculate. Students will certainly share some common experiences; however, how they perceive themselves and the interactions they have with other students, faculty, and staff involves many complexities and considerations (Brockelman et al., 2006; Rao, 2004).

Providing a brief overview of all disability types is necessary in helping to understand how students with physical disabilities are positioned within the broader context of disability research, as well as understanding the challenges associated with the uniqueness of each experience in relation to other disability types. Information about cognitive and psychiatric disabilities is much more accessible within the counseling profession. Given the inherent focus on mental health concerns in the counseling profession, this may not be surprising. Moreover, disabilities are often mentioned within the context of other issues of multiculturalism, which may
dilute the significance of the issue. Physical disabilities involving mobility impairments and/or visual impairments are potentially some of the most conspicuous and stigmatized. The practical challenges associated with tasks of daily living can be significant obstacles for some students to overcome. As secondary education graduation rates improve, so does enrollment in post-secondary education among this student population (NCES, 2017a). Like their counterparts, arrival on a college campus alone does not guarantee their retention or the completion of a degree program. Many of the same developmental challenges will have to be overcome in addition to the aforementioned issues directly related to having a physical or sensory limitation.

The review of literature provides information about several relevant topics pertaining to college students with physical disabilities and the role of college counselors, including: a historical context of college counseling, characteristics of college students with physical disabilities, attitudes and perceptions of faculty, social relationships, relevant legislation, accommodations/assistive technology, and frameworks with which to view college student disability.

**Higher Education and Counseling**

There continue to be increasing numbers of students on college campuses with some type of disability. Education and rehabilitation literature suggest that university personnel, including college counselors, are uncomfortable and/or unsure of how to assist students with disabilities, hold negative stereotypes or perceptions of students with a disability, and have had little if any formal training or experience working with students with disabilities (McCarthy 2003; Scott, 2019; Stage & Milne, 1996). This has serious implications for counselors working in college settings, as universities place more accountability on staff for retention efforts and providing supportive services to help students matriculate institutions of higher education. Given the
numbers of students with disabilities enrolling in colleges and universities, it is likely college counselors will encounter a student with some type of physical disability during the course of their work.

Outside of rehabilitation counseling, the counseling profession has struggled to keep its general membership informed and trained to effectively address issues of disability (Rubin & Roessler, 2001; Smart & Smart, 2006) since the turn of the century. In spite of the growing demands from the general population and college students alike, very few university counseling programs provide adequate training about disability issues (Kemp & Mallinckrodt, 1996; Olkin, 1990; Pleger, 2003 as cited in Dell Orto & Power, 2007). Because disability is a natural part of living that transcends all people and environments, proficiency surrounding disability issues is necessary in order to adequately serve all students (Hayes, 2001). More specifically, if counselors adhere to the CACREP (2016) Standards, the ACA Code of Ethics (2014), as well as multicultural and advocacy competencies in terms of meeting a mandatory standard of professional practice, they will need training in disability issues. Rehabilitation counselors cannot be the only people with formal training in disability (Thomas, 2000). Evidence of this need becomes clear when examining the content of professional publications directly related to college counselors and counselor educators.

Historically, professional counselors have played a significant role in the support of students with disabilities within the realm of both clinical and education settings at all stages. Some of the earliest publications within what was then titled the Personnel and Guidance Journal, the flagship journal of what is now the American Counseling Association, included articles specifically addressing the needs of college students with physical disabilities (Condon, 1957a, 1957b, 1962; Condon & Lerner, 1956; Lerner & Martin, 1955; Stuart, 1959), in addition
to broader publications about attitudes (LeCompte, 1967) and social desirability (Feinberg, 1967). These early publications focused primarily on veterans entering college and the establishment of higher education curriculum and programs designed to assist them.

Subsequently, a concentration of articles were written during the 1970s through the mid-1980s as awareness of all types of disabilities grew following legislation resulting from the Civil Rights Movement, deinstitutionalization, and passage of early disability laws such as the Rehabilitation Act and IDEA. Counseling literature during this period stayed abreast with these changes and included research on many topics across setting and type of therapy such as rehabilitation and career counseling (Brolin & Gysbers, 1979; Hershenson & Murov, 1970; Sinick, 1979); secondary education (Wyne & Skjei, 1970); family therapy (Hohenshil, 1979; Kennedy & Bush, 1979; Prescott & Hulnick, 1979); defining disability (Fagan & Wallace, 1979); early advocacy efforts (Hohensil & Humes, 1979; McIlory & Zeller, 1979); counseling strategies and assessment (Guidubaldi, Kehle, & Murray, 1979; McDowell, Coven, & Eash, 1979; Nathanson, 1979); IEPs (Kameen & McIntosh, 1979); ethics (Corrigan, 1998); and counselor education (Hosie, 1979).

College enrollment has increased steadily since then. However, the number of articles published in mainstream counseling journals was sporadic following the mid-1980s. There is a paucity of relevant literature found in flagship journals during the past 35 years. This is a seemingly backwards trend. A search of the Journal of Counseling and Development, the flagship publication of the American Counseling Association and Counselor Education and Supervision, the journal of the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision, yielded 12 articles specifically addressing the needs of clients who are disabled (Atkins 1981; Emener, Rasch, & Spector, 1983; Fabian, Lent, & Willis, 1998; Filer, 1982; Iovacchini & Abood, 1981;
Lambie & Wilson, 2010; Lofaro, 1982; Smart & Smart, 2006; Strohmer, Biggs, Haase, & Purcell, 1983; Thomas, Carter, & Britton, 1982; Tucker & Olson, 1963; Tucker, Sheperd, & Hurst, 1986). Most of this research was conducted in the early 1980s, approximately 7 years following the implementation of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and several years prior to the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.

Following these publications, articles addressing concerns of disability have significantly declined during a time when new knowledge on these topics is in great demand (articles examining the impact of disability on ethnic minorities were even more scarce). For example, in a content analysis of Counselor Education and Supervision (CES) in June of 2008, Smith, Foley, and Chaney examined a 17-year period between 1989 through 2005 of articles addressing multicultural issues that appeared in the journal. CES is “recognized as a leading peer-reviewed journal in the counseling profession. It has expanded to encompass a broad range of professional topics and concerns related to the counseling profession and thus provides a framework for helping counselors understand the multifaceted areas of multiculturalism, diversity and social advocacy” (Smith et al., 2008, p. 249). During the period covered in their analysis, it revealed only one published article that addressed a disability-related issue (Smith et al., 2008, p. 255). The near complete absence of disability-related articles from the publication of the division of ACA primarily responsible for counselor training suggest the issue is not a priority for counselor training.

In addition, a review of articles addressing issues of disability in the Journal of College Counseling, the primary journal of the American College Counseling Association (ACCA) between 1991 and 2008 yielded only three articles addressing disability-related issues. The articles discussed issues of disability in general terms encompassing many different types of
disability or in the context of other issues of multiculturalism. Further examination of the articles published in these three journals revealed the following similar trends: (1) the articles focused solely on other types of disabilities such as learning or psychiatric disabilities, (2) disability-related issues were given “honorable mention” in the context of multiple other issues, (3) although some results were generalizable, articles often dealt with very specific groups as the population of study (e.g., freshman with depression), (4) there were very few qualitative studies and (5) most of the publications extrapolated research from other disciplines. Collectively, this suggests that counselors-in-training and counselor educators are not receiving adequate training in master’s level and doctoral training programs to understand or meet the needs of this quickly growing population in college settings. While the information in these articles is still relevant, there have been many changes with regard to who is attending colleges, advances in assistive technology, the services available to students, and the federal and state laws that often dictate institutional policy. The profession itself has also evolved as new divisions have formed, accreditation standards have been revised, and a stronger professional identity within counseling has emerged.

**History of College Counseling**

To understand the current presence of counselors on college campuses, it is important to have a historical understanding how their roles and functions have evolved. In the early 1990s, one more step towards establishing a stronger professional identity took place when what was then called the American Association for Counseling and Development (AACD) changed the name of the organization to the American Counseling Association in order to clarify the identity of AACD’s members, define their role, and affirm the counseling profession (Sacks, 1991). The name change eventually took place in 1992; however, another significant event occurred when
the AACD Governing Council affirmed the American College Counseling Association (ACCA) as a subdivision to “expressly serve the needs of college counselors” (Sacks, 1991). This was a significant occurrence in that the process of establishing ACCA eventually resulted in the American College Personnel Association (ACPA), the national organization that serves the needs of student affairs personnel, disaffiliated from AACD. Professional identity was an issue of paramount importance for counselors, and these are two examples of how this manifested. ACCA as a subdivision was also very intentional in trying to recruit student members almost exclusively from Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) accredited programs. In the official newsletter of AACD, *Guidepost*, the president at the time, Marianne Mitchell, in making welcoming remarks about the newly formed organization also informally offered a broad purpose of the group stating “the new affiliate will provide a home for those in higher education settings who consider counseling to be their professional identification” (Sacks, 1991, p. 15). Mitchell did not mention the counseling center although this is obviously one venue where counselors work in higher education settings. Researchers (Davis, 1998; Dean & Meadows, 1995) who were heavily involved with creating the structure and/or held leadership positions within the organization explicitly discussed the role of college counselors in broad terms. In providing a historical account of the formation of ACCA, Davis (1998) stated “this organizational realignment on a national level clearly signaled ACPA”s intent to serve those with a primary identity in student affairs. Consequently, individuals working in higher education who had a primary professional identity in counseling had to reevaluate their professional affiliations” (Davis, 1998, p. 7).

Dean and Meadows (1995) addressed the issue of professional identity in their article *College Counseling: Union and Intersection*, explicitly stating that college counseling is a
“professional identity and focus, rather than a specific job function or title” (p. 141). They conceptualized college counseling as both the “union of several movements in higher education” (Dean & Meadows, 1995, p. 139) and “intersection of a professional activity and environment” (Dean & Meadows, 1995, p. 139). The diversity of environments that college counselors work in is also evidenced by the latest revisions to the CACREP (2016) standards for college counselors. Under section III A9 it states “understands strategies and leadership required for services encompassed by college student development in postsecondary education, such as admissions, financial aid, academic advising, judicial services, recreational sports, disability services, international student affairs, and health services” (CACREP, 2016, p. 47). If college counselors are being compliant, one would expect literature being disseminated in ACCA publications to reflect more than clinically focused articles better fitted for clinicians working in a college counseling center. All college students including those with physical disabilities seek help in each of those respective settings. If college counselors are expected to be competent in working with students with disabilities, they should be able to consult their own literature base for information. Because little is still known within college counseling about the experience of college students with physical disabilities, an investigation of this topic would be timely.

**Rehabilitation Counseling**

The fact there is a limited amount of literature targeted at the aforementioned groups is not to suggest that when examining the broader profession of counseling, there are not organizations whose central mission is to put forth information focused on improving the quality of life for persons with disabilities of all kinds at various life stages. Indeed, it would be inaccurate to state the entire “umbrella” profession of counseling does not devote attention to this historically marginalized group. The American Rehabilitation Counseling Association (ARCA)
is a division of the American Counseling Association (ACA). It contributes profusely to knowledge and research regarding best practice, knowledge, skills, and training to insure that rehabilitation counselors are helping clients meet their “personal, vocational and independent living goals” (ARCA, 2019). While this research is applicable to all persons with disabilities and is therefore helpful to college students and college counselors, ARCA focuses heavily on vocational rehabilitation. The population they serve is broader in comparison (i.e. not just college students) and their focus is narrower. Rehabilitation counseling has a distinct identity within the broader scope of counseling, different accrediting body (CORE), and specialized training to meet the needs of its consumers. This is evidenced by ARCA’s scope of practice statement:

The Scope of Practice Statement identifies knowledge and skills required for the provision of effective rehabilitation counseling services to persons with physical, mental, developmental, cognitive, and emotional disabilities as embodied in the standards of the profession’s credentialing organizations. The several rehabilitation disciplines and related processes (e.g., vocational evaluation, job development and job placement, work adjustment, case management) are tied to the central field of rehabilitation profession with counseling as its core, and is differentiated from other related counseling fields. The professional scope of rehabilitation counseling practice is also differentiated from an individual scope of practice, which may overlap, but is more specializing than the professional scope. An individual scope of practice is based on one’s own knowledge of the abilities and skills that have been gained through a program of education and professional experience (ARCA, 2019)
It is important to recognize that rehabilitation counselors can (and do) work effectively as college counselors however; they are not frequently employed in higher education settings. In 2019, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, rehabilitation counselors employed directly by colleges and universities constituted only an extremely small percentage of the total number of employed rehabilitation counselors in the country, accounting for less than 1 percent of all employed rehab counselors.

**College Preparation**

For students with a disability who graduate from high school, research has historically generated modest outcomes for those students’ ability to graduate from a post-secondary institution. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) is a federal law that allows for special education services to be provided for students until age 21 with the goal of providing a free and appropriate public education that prepares them for further education, employment and independent living. Eligibility for services under IDEA are defined as a “child with mental retardation, hearing impairments, speech and language impairments, visual impairments, serious emotional disturbance, orthopedic impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairments or specific learning disabilities; and who need special education and related services” (p. 3). In summary, IDEA required schools to create Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and Summary of Performances (SOPs), which collectively provide necessary documentation to assist with transitions to additional education or employment. Critics of the legislation assert that the frequency with which students are required to be evaluated are too infrequent and the age at which transition goals are set is too late (age 16), which inhibits the ability of students bound for postsecondary education to have up-to-date and financed assessments prior to entering college (Katsiyannis, Zang, Landbark, & Reber, 2009). Reasonable
accommodations provided under other legislation like ADA does not require “specialized therapies (e.g., occupational, physical, speech)” (Smart, 2009). In essence, students could potentially lose services offered under IDEA and not ADA. These students would also potentially incur the costs associated with being re-evaluated and the cost of the additional services they request.

Additionally, there is a significant shift of responsibility onto the student entering postsecondary education. Under IDEA, it is the school’s responsibility to ensure students are being evaluated, retain records, receive the necessary services, and involve all of the adults included in the IEP. When a student enters college, it is their responsibility to provide documentation, request accommodations and monitor the effectiveness of the accommodation(s). This underscores the “overwhelming tendency for disability support coordinators to advocate for students with disabilities without teaching them how to advocate for themselves” (Stodden et al., 2001, p. 195). If it is the student’s responsibility to advocate for themselves, then developing initiative and self-advocacy skills are a critical skill for students.

**Enrollment**

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2018), enrollment in degree-granting institutions has continually increased for all groups since 1970. There are currently 19.2 million students enrolled in institutions of higher education. This number includes all levels of degrees, although enrollment trends have differed somewhat depending on degree level. Generally, the trends that colleges and universities are seeing reflect a growing number of younger students, women, ethnic minorities, and graduate students. Of the total 19.2 million students, approximately 15 million are undergraduate students. Of that 15 million, approximately 11.5 percent or 2.8 million are students who report having some type of disability. Although
there are mixed estimates of the number of students with disabilities who graduate, numbers range from 12 to 41 percent during the last two decades (Stodden et al., 2001). Those students who identified as undergraduate men with a disability constitute 11.2 percent of the total undergraduate population, whereas 11.4 percent were female. Of those students with disabilities, the majority self-identified as White (66.3%), while 12.7 percent identified as Black, 12.3 percent as Latino, and 4.8 percent as Asian. Sixty percent of students who report some type of disability are age 23 or younger, and 60 percent are enrolled part-time. Just over 30 percent live with a parent or relative, which means that nearly 70 percent live on campus or nearby communities.

According to the NCES (2017b), students who identified themselves as disabled remained “proportionately represented in terms of race and had similar socioeconomic status as those students who did not identify themselves as disabled” (p. 2). Students with disabilities were more likely to be male and have scored lower on self- efficacy measures than their nondisabled counterparts. In a summary of trends of students with disabilities completed by the NCES, it appears as though secondary education performance (graduation) is not necessarily a good predictor of postsecondary success. The most significant shortcoming in the published research was little distinction between types of disabilities. It would behoove researchers to conduct studies at specific populations enabling them to cater interventions to specific disability type.

Overall, students whose parents identified them as having emotional problems or multiple disabilities earned lower grades, performed poorly on math and reading proficiency exams, were more likely to drop out, and had lower expectations about education attainment (NCES, 2017b, p. 2). Students who reported a physical disability or “health problems” performed “favorably with their nondisabled counterparts” (NCES, 2017b, p. 3). It is important to note that not all
students with physical disabilities need services, especially if they have received all of the requested services prior to arriving on a college campus. Once students with physical disabilities arrive on campus, physical challenges often come from mobility and accessibility issues navigating the physical grounds of the campus. Like any other type of disability, students with physical disabilities exhibit a wide range of capabilities. There are some students who need relatively little assistance and those that may need a great deal of help. Stumbo, Martin, and Hedrick (2009), in an article examining the need for personal assistants for students with severe physical disabilities in college, provided much needed insight into the experiences of students with severe physical disabilities. The article discussed whether or not a student’s decision to attend a postsecondary institution depended on the ability of the school to provide a personal assistant to aid in activities of daily living (ADLs) such as getting dressed, eating, bathing, etc., which are not required by law (IDEA or ADA). In their synthesis of literature regarding articles that focused on severe physical disabilities, one article was found that addressed the issue of personal assistants within postsecondary education. The authors wrote: “this total exclusion of research and discussion about this issue likely reflects the dilemma surrounding the relatively small number of individuals effected compared to those of other disabilities enrolling in higher education…however, it is clear that college degrees are essential for all individuals to obtain competitive employment” (Stumbo et al., 2009, p.12). This further speaks to understanding the range of functionality even within physical disabilities. It is clear that regardless of the severity of the impairment, a better understanding of the needs of these students is warranted.

Disability

It is important to note that disabilities can occur concurrently. The term disability has many definitions and it has changed over time. Culturally, what is considered to be a disability
can vary greatly; however, in the United States, the federal government has four different classifications of disability including: physical, sensory, cognitive, and psychiatric. These classifications are used by the government in terms of being able to define who qualifies for services and what types of services a person is entitled. A comprehensive definition of disability used by rehabilitation counselors Rubin and Roessler (2001) states “…a limitation of function that results directly from an impairment at the level of specific organ or body system” (p. 27). This is a more narrow definition focused on parts of the body than the federal government's definition under ADA. Physical disabilities are those disabilities that are often visible and impair some part of the body limiting movement or the ability to care for oneself. Usually assistive equipment helps individuals with physical disabilities to become more mobile and increase autonomy. Examples of this assistive technology can include everything from wheelchairs or walking canes to more mainstream technology like Bluetooth headsets or computer software.

Sensory disabilities have to do with those impairments that effect one or more of the senses. The most common sensory disabilities are blindness and deafness. The third classification is cognitive disabilities. Cognitive disabilities also have a wide spectrum and are difficult to detect because these students usually have average IQ but struggle in memory and/or communication. The most popular of these are learning disabilities. There is a tremendous amount of research that has been done across disciplines in this area (Oesterreich & Knight, 2008; Reiff, 1997). Cognitive disabilities are increasing at alarming rates across the country in institutions of higher education due to different mandates in assessment, awareness of opportunity, and better transition planning in high school (Daily, 1980; Madaus, 2008). The last category is classified as psychiatric disabilities. Psychiatric disabilities are characterized by mental or emotional impairments. The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that 1 in 4
Americans experiences a diagnosable psychiatric disability each year (NIMH, 2006). This trend is consistent with a proliferation of counseling and related literature on college campuses which suggests that there continues to be an increase in the severity of mental health issues on college campuses (Beamish, 2005; Benton, Roberson, Tseng, Newton, & Benson, 2003; Dalton & Crosby, 2007; Davis & Humphery, 2000; Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2004; Kitzrow, 2009; Nolan et al., 2005; Soet & Sevig, 2006; Vogel & Armstrong, 2010). Students who have more than one classification of disability are particularly vulnerable to higher dropout rates (Stumbo et al., 2009, p. 14); however, college counselors are again likely to meet with these students in some capacity and are well-equipped to intervene and/or make accurate referrals to on and off campus resources for additional testing, assessment, or counseling-related services.

**Relevant Legislation**

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 holds that no student with a disability be “excluded from the participation in, be denied benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance” (794a), which includes most public and private postsecondary institutions. The legislation defines disability as well as the legal parameters for “admissions and recruitment, the treatment of students, academic adjustments, housing, financial and employment assistance and other nonacademic services” (Katsiyannis et al., 2009, p. 37). Section 504 contains particularly strong language that addresses accessibility and accommodations. It prohibits the exclusion of people with disabilities from participating in “academics, research, occupational training, housing, health insurance, counseling, financial aid, physical education and athletics, or other postsecondary aid, benefits and services” (104.43). As Thomas (2000) stated “…prior to 1973, the only federal law that provided extensive protection for persons with disabilities was the fourteenth amendment” (p.
which provided all citizens equal protection under the law. Laws prior to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 did not provide protection to persons with disabilities in the same way as other forms of discrimination. Students with disabilities have historically been excluded from access to education. Among other reasons, many researchers cite advances in legislation as a primary reason for the steady rise of participation from students with disabilities in higher education. Another critical piece of legislation is the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Title II and Title III of ADA prohibit public entities from “discriminating against qualified individuals with disabilities and protects students from retaliation and adverse treatment for having filed a complaint in the event they were discriminated against” (Thomas, 2000, p. 249). The additional legislation makes it illegal to discriminate against persons with disabilities “by denying them full and equal enjoyment of goods, services, facilities, privileges, advantages, or accommodations they do provide” (Thomas, 2000, p. 249). ADA expanded the rights of people with disabilities and publicly acknowledged that

society has isolated and segregated individuals with disabilities, this discrimination continues to be a pervasive social problem particularly in the areas of education, employment and access to public services; and that persons with disabilities occupy inferior status in American society and lack political power. (Stoney, 1999, p. 41)

For institutions of higher education, this law provides more legal recourse in the event a student is discriminated against. Absent from ADA are any mandates to provide a free appropriate education, as are contained in IDEA for primary and secondary education. Accommodations or requests to lower or completely change program requirements are not covered in any provisions.
ADA allows institutions discretionary power to establish “reasonable standards for documenting one’s disability” (Katsiyannis et al., p. 37).

Since passage of the ADA, there has been a proliferation in legislation aimed at creating equal access and protection at all institutions from discrimination. This often manifest in amendments to current legislation such as the Rehabilitation Act, ADA, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004. While well-intentioned, some legislation draws criticism from institutions charged with having to make the accommodations and become compliant, particularly in secondary education (Lambie & Milson, 2010). Universities are still struggling today to comply with all of the provisions of laws pertaining to Americans with disabilities (Thomas, 2000, p. 248). In essence, the laws represented the first legal mandates for public and private postsecondary institutions to provide equal opportunities for students with disabilities. Because of litigations at all levels of court, it resulted in additional legislation and more clearly defined parameters for institutions. There is a very involved process that every institution must complete to demonstrate compliance, typically through their university’s civil rights entity. All preadmission assessments, admissions, and demonstration of compliance must be thoroughly documented. In order for individuals to qualify for services, they must demonstrate that they do in fact have a disability according to criteria used by the federal government described in the aforementioned laws. For college admission, they must demonstrate they would meet admission criteria with or without accommodation. Although this process may sound simple, there have been differences by courts, particularly in admission to advance degree programs.

Although some faculty and students perceive students who are protected under these laws have preferential treatment (Findler, Vilchinsky, & Wernerm 2007; Greenbaum, Graham, & Scales, 1995; Sowers & Smith, 2004), they students are actually are held to all of the same state
and federal laws and university codes of conduct as all other students. In the unfortunate circumstance of academic dismissal where a student with a disability alleges the dismissal is based on discrimination, generally it is very time consuming, difficult for the student to prove, and sometimes embarrassing (Thomas, 2000, p. 249). More often than not, the issue is around whether a student was accommodated appropriately in the first place. It is important for college counselors to become familiar with the institutional office responsible for assisting students to receive services, and to stay abreast with upcoming changes to legislation and the impact changes could potentially have on their clients and the work they complete.

**Finances**

Financial hardship among students with disabilities has received increased attention over the last 15 years (Murray, Lombardi, & Kosty, 2012). Although the vast majority of research has grouped all college students with disabilities together, included within those samples are college students with physical disabilities. Parent income has been the best predictor of financial hardship experienced by college students with disabilities, although studies are limited. College students with physical disabilities have the same financial challenges as their non-disabled counterparts face in terms of rising tuition costs, room and board, books, and supplies, in addition to daily living expenses. Many college students utilize some form of financial aid and/or find employment while attending college to help offset financial demands. For college students with physical limitations the added expenses for medication, equipment, care for service animals, etc. is challenging transition for their secondary experience where many expenses are covered under IDEA. Newman et al. (2009) estimated an approximate decline of 60 percent of students transitioning to college from high school who continue receiving service accommodations.
Perceptions

In order to meet the needs of students with disabilities, it is important for counseling professionals to carefully examine their own stereotypes and perceptions of students with disabilities, as this will inevitably effect the interaction they will have with these students. Many studies have documented the perceptions or attitudes of faculty, staff, and students towards those with disabilities (Brockelman et al., 2006; Findler et al., 2007). Although research varies by disability type, academic discipline, and age, most studies find there is a stigma attached to people with disabilities, even among college and university personnel (Abes & Wallace, 2018; Granello, Pauly, & Carmichael, 1999; Kelly, Sedlacek, & Scales, 1994; White, Gordon, & Jackson, 2006). When compared with the general population, however, those in institutions of higher education have less stigmatizing attitudes. Much attention has been given to cognitive disabilities and physical disabilities in education literature, whereas, mental health professions have focused expectedly more on psychiatric disabilities.

Physical and sensory disabilities can be very conspicuous. With other disabilities, the individual is not forced to disclose their disability to everyone. Like all other types of disabilities, physical and sensory disabilities vary greatly depending on the condition of the student (Megivern, Pellerito, & Mowbray, 2003). Because of the disabling condition itself or the assistive technology used to help the student, students with physical disabilities are arguably one of the most stigmatized groups. Coupled with being a female and/or a person of color, these students may face tremendous barriers to retention. In examining attitudes towards students with physical disabilities, three dominant themes have appeared in higher education research including: (1) students with disabilities feel stigmatized, (2) they believe they must to work harder than their counterparts, and (3) they must seek out strategies for help more frequently.
The label “disabled” comes with a stigma for many students. Students have reported feeling scared to ask for accommodations because of fear they would be thought of as trying to take advantage of their situations or cheat (Stage & Milne, 1996), and have had to take on much heavier workloads as a result of essentially refusing an accommodation.

Persons with learning disabilities are also perceived as less competent regardless of their area of study, and in fact are encouraged to choose programs of study that are based on their disability instead of ability (Roer-Strier, 2002). Sometimes they are even thought of as a liability to their respective professions. While there is a tendency for students to make contributions in areas they are passionate and informed about (e.g., a student with low vision entering vocational rehabilitation), they should still have the same options as other students to elect into any academic discipline. According to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2010), students with disabilities enter just as wide a variety of professions as their nondisabled counterparts.

Regarding the final theme of seeking strategies for help, students who have learning disabilities report the assessment to be an oppressive experience (Denhart, 2008). Recently, college and university personnel have begun attempting strategies to be more empowering of students by using more strength-based approaches similar to those used in psychotherapy (Denhart, 2008).

Students with psychiatric disabilities have also been challenging for university personnel to work with. Research on the attitudes of the general population towards others with a psychiatric disability have yielded mixed results. In the context of higher education, as was the case with some cognitive disabilities, findings suggest that higher education personnel maybe more understanding or have more empathy, but generally feel as though they do not possess sufficient knowledge to work effectively with students, and would seek help from colleagues or refer to university testing or counseling centers (Brockelman, et al., 2006). In general, women
seem to be more empathetic than men. Moreover, those who have friends with a psychiatric disability or are currently being treated for a psychiatric disability tended to be more empathetic than those who did not (Chen, Brodwin, Cardoso, & Chan, 2002; Longoria & Marini, 2006).

**Services and Accommodations**

According to the NCES (2017a), of students with disabilities, 26 percent reported being satisfied with the services they have received. Service availability and delivery have yielded mixed results. Dowrick et al. (2005) explored students’ evaluations of services at colleges and universities and discovered overall negative feedback from students about the types of services, programs, assessment processes, and supports by university personnel. Qualitative research conducted by Lehmann, Davies, and Laurin (2000) supports this notion. The themes generated from their research included the following: (1) a general misunderstanding and acceptance of their disability by faculty, staff, and fellow students, (2) a lack of sufficient services to assist them with academic and nonacademic concerns, (3) a lack of financial resources and how to acquire them, and (4) lack of self-advocacy skills and training.

Types of accommodations that are offered differ depending on region, campus size, and many other factors. Services and support provided to students with disabilities entering post secondary institutions should be an ongoing and regularly assessed process (Smith, English, & Vasek, 2002). While many students regardless of disability status, utilize services to assist with their development and transition entering and during college, the needs of students with physical disabilities maybe unique in comparison. According to Rice-Mason (2001), although required by law under Section 504 and ADA, universities often struggle to effectively implement all of the accommodations necessary to assist students even though the services are available. Many studies surveying students with all kinds of disabilities generally reported satisfaction with the
availability of service, but were very critical of implementation particularly from faculty and staff, including those working in college counseling centers. These findings are consistent within literature from rehabilitation counseling concerning the need to better educate general membership within the counseling profession regardless of work setting (Smart & Smart, 2006). Studies examining faculty perceptions of students with disabilities has yielded mixed results. Historically, there appears to be a general trend that suggests only minor improvements in attitudes over time. For instance, Farban (1983) conducted a qualitative study of science faculty regarding students with mobility impairments and discovered that faculty were either very willing to make accommodations such as spend additional time with students, provide copies of their notes, etc., or refused to modify anything at all. Seven years after the passage of ADA, Benham (1997) published research examining the faculty attitudes, knowledge of ADA, and of specific disabilities. Demographic information, and prior experience were assessed among other factors. Data revealed that in general, males and faculty with between 10 and 20 years teaching experience tended to have more negative attitudes. Most faculty had some knowledge of disability.

The geography of campuses is one issue that many students do not have to consider. Regardless of the campus location students with physical disabilities reside, there would be barriers. Students with physical disabilities could have challenges with building access, parking, bathroom access, classroom access, emergency procedures, drinking fountain access, shortages of staff in important facilities like health centers and financial aid, and even housing access. ADA continues to gain strength, but compliance times for colleges and universities are relatively slow. The geography, physical layout of the college, and layout of facilities on campus can be an everyday challenge on some campuses, especially when climates are seasonal or cold.
As the numbers of students with disabilities rise, so does the demand to accommodate. These kinds of disabilities range from learning disabilities, mobility or orthopedic impairments, health impairments, hearing or vision impairments, and speech or language impairments. Before students arrive at college the greatest accommodation is an involved parent(s) or family members. Research studies have demonstrated over and over again that those students who have involved parents are much more likely to graduate than those who do not. Upon arrival, they must be deemed eligible for services by documenting a disability that limits at least one major life activity such as talking, seeing, walking, self-care, etc. Accommodations are based on the disability and include, but are not limited to, extended time on tests, note taker, word processor, Braille typewriter, early registration, use of a tape recorder, and a distraction-reduced testing area. Although students have the right to not inform faculty of their disability, some suggest that dialogue with faculty about their specific needs is a good way of exposing and educating them about needs and establishing a rapport that ultimately benefits everyone involved.

**Peer Relationships**

Peer relationships and social proficiency can have profound effects on college student development. Establishing healthy social relationships is one of the most desired outcomes of many students attending secondary and post-secondary institutions (Hergenrather & Rhodes, 2007). For college students attending school in a new location, doing so provides an opportunity to start anew and leave behind some of the potentially negative residual social roles established in secondary education settings. Typically, college settings are larger in size, accommodate more people, and offer numerous activities aimed at engaging students in academic, social, and civic settings. Link et al. (1999) researched the concept of social distance as a component in the measurement of attitudes, defined as the “relative willingness of one person to participate in
relationships of varying degrees of intimacy with a person who has a socially stigmatized identity” (Hergenrather & Rhodes, 2007, p. 67). Research suggests that as social distance increases, positive attitudes also increase. Additionally, attitudes towards working with individuals with disabilities are viewed more favorably than dating or marrying a person with a disability (DiGuilio, 2003; Wong et al., 2004). In other words, the more potentially intimate the type of relationship and the further away from a work context a relationship is viewed, the more likely a negative attitude will persist. Interestingly, most studies do not focus on students with disabilities attitudes towards other students with disabilities. Many researchers conceptually discuss social relationships from an inferior position of the person with the disability; however, these students are not entirely dependent upon peer, faculty, and staff perceptions of them for their ability to develop meaningful relationships. This is not to downplay the importance of these relationships and perceptions, as indeed, they manifest in behavior and policy making alike.

While having allies rarely hinders the graduation process, students with disabilities will continue to graduate regardless of the role of peers, faculty, or staff. The objective and goals of college counselors and other staff is to decrease the disparity in which this happens. Among students with disabilities, research has yielded mixed results in terms of their overall satisfaction with peers and their ability to establish meaningful social relationships, although the research trend heavily favors students with disabilities that are not visible.

Theory

The use of theory is a powerful tool in helping social scientists to understand complex client or group issues. It allows therapists to appropriately and effectively intervene to bring about desired outcomes. In his critique of traditional counseling theories, Hansen (2006) argued, “Theories help counselors organize clinical data, make complex processes coherent, and provide
conceptual guidance for interventions. The overwhelming barrage of information confronting counselors would be a bewildering array of random, disparate happenings without the aid of organizing conceptual tools” (p. 291). Research focusing on the conceptualization of disability has grown substantially during the last decade. Smart and Smart (2006) suggest the “lack of training and the resulting failure to provide services may be due to the powerful influence of models of disability” (p. 30). Outside of textbooks specifically designed for the application of theory in survey courses of rehabilitation counseling (Chan, Berven, & Thomas, 2004; Dell Orto & Powers, 2007; Martz & Livneh, 2007) disability theory is not often incorporated into other information sources of mainstream counseling literature such as isolated peer-reviewed journal articles examining issues of disability. There are, however, many frameworks, models and theories that exist in other disciplines that can be extrapolated to specifically examine many aspects of disability in addition to traditional treatment theories that have been modified to work with people who have disabilities including psychodynamic, cognitive, behavioral, and humanistic perspectives.

There are several perspectives and models that should be reviewed when examining the experience of college students with physical disabilities. While college student development theory is an obvious tool, there are others that would help better understand the unique experiences of this diverse group of students. Racial identity development, therefore, will also be briefly reviewed. Additionally, there are four models of disability that are cited frequently in literature related to disability. Despite these four established and competing models of disability, I will primarily apply a contextualized humanistic perspective (Johnson, 2006) and the concept of somebodiness (Johnson, 2016) to give voice to the experience of these participants as it allows for the considering of contextual factors (e.g., the environment), while also recognizing the
humanity inherent in their existence (i.e., their ability to self-direct). This is a fundamentally different perspective because the assumption of pathology is not present, and it contains positive elements found in functional, environmental, and sociopolitical models.

When considering the many complexities of working with college students with physical disabilities, college counselors have to consider developmental processes and identity for issues of race, student development, gender, sexuality, and spirituality, to name only a few. Additionally, the type of disability (i.e., sensory, psychiatric, physical, or cognitive) duration (i.e., acquired, developmental, or congenital), as well as other contextual factors such as socioeconomic status, college preparation, years of attendance, support, campus size, geography, climate, and family background all contribute to an infinite number of possible experiences while navigating a potentially challenging higher education environment. For college counselors assisting students with physical disabilities, it is helpful to examine approaches helpful in making sense of these experiences. Based on what is already known about college students with disabilities and their experiences, the following frameworks maybe helpful in making sense of any themes discovered in data analysis. Smart and Smart (2006) caution that “counselor educators and practitioners, regardless of specialty, theoretical orientation, or professional setting, should recognize that disability is never entirely personal, subjective, and idiosyncratic experience, nor is disability a completely objective, standardized, and universal experience” (p. 29).

**Chickering’s Model of College Student Development**

One of the most widely used models of college student development is Arthur Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) model of college student development. This model is a helpful means of understanding general developmental competencies all college students will experience;
however, little research has expanded this popular model to explain the experience of college students with physical disabilities. Developing competence has been divided into three subcategories of (1) intellectual competence, (2) physical and manual skills, and (3) interpersonal competence. Intellectual competence have to do with developing a repertoire of skills to “comprehend, analyze, and synthesize” information as well as the practical mastery of content, and gaining new “points of reference…to make sense out of our observations and experience” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 45). Assuming that a cognitive and/or psychiatric disability is not also present, students with physical and sensory disabilities are equally as capable as anyone else to learn material, make meaningful experiences, and develop critical thinking skills. It is the physical process of learning material (e.g., turning pages, writing, reading, etc.) that potentially creates challenges for students with physical and sensory disabilities. Often, students with physical and sensory disabilities are stereotyped or presumed to have a developmental, cognitive, or psychiatric disability (Kelly et al., 1994) whether there is more than one type of disability present or not. Physical and manual skills have to do with what Chickering and Reisser (1993) described as “athletic participation or artistic achievement; designing and making tangible products” as well as developing “strength, fitness and self-discipline” (p. 46).

Depending on the type of impairment, students with physical or sensory disabilities are able to enjoy all of the benefits of living active lifestyles. This is evidenced in the exponential growth in adaptive athletics programs at all levels of education (United Spinal Association, 2009; White et al., 2006). Interpersonal confidence involves “listening cooperating and communicating effectively” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 46). For students with disabilities, the means of communicating maybe unconventional; however, learning how to express themselves and listen or be attentive to others as a process is no different. There may be additional training involved as
students with physical disabilities learn how and when to educate others on their condition(s) and what needs, if any, exists (Madaus, 2008; Torkelson-Lynch & Gussel, 1996).

Managing emotions entails the awareness and managing human emotion. Students with disabilities will not range in their experience or management of emotion any more or less than any other college student. Based on some research, the differences in the type of disability and whether it was congenital or acquired have yielded some results that suggest persons with physical disabilities maybe at greater risk for depression (Rovner, Zisselman, & Schmuely, 1996).

Moving through autonomy towards interdependence has to do with students assuming personal responsibility for their own goals and direction, and to be less bound by parents, peers, and other groups. Depending on the nature of the disability, some students may rely heavily on a caregiver or other assistant to ensure needs are met; however, a distinction should be made. This should be viewed as more of a practical and/or necessary reliance than an external or underdeveloped sense of self. Many studies have demonstrated college campus personnel, including counselors or instructors, will misinterpret reliance on a caregiver as a sign of underdevelopment or lack of autonomy (Emener et al., 1983; Filer, 1982; Rao, 2004; Strohmer et al., 1983). Noteworthy is the fact that while transitioning from high school to college, parental involvement can be helpful in terms of advocacy for the student’s needs and assisting with orientation of living arrangements, setting up accommodations, etc., aside from all of the other practical ways in which the parent of any new college student can assist with a significant life transition (Thomas, 2000).

Chickering and Reisser (1993) explained the hallmark characteristics of “developing mature interpersonal relationships” as “tolerance and appreciation of differences and capacity for
varying degrees of intimacy” (p. 145). Hergenrather and Rhodes (2007) examined undergraduate students attitudes towards persons with disabilities and reviewed literature about social distance and the willingness of one person to “participate in relationships of varying degrees with a person who has a stigmatized identity” (p. 67). In short, they discovered that as social distance increases, attitudes become more positive towards persons with disabilities. Furthermore, when examining work and relationships they discovered that people have much more favorable attitudes about working with (as a co-worker) a person with a disability than dating or marrying them (Chen et al., 2002; Hergenrather & Rhodes, 2007). Given the desire for college students to “fit in,” this can be an especially difficult challenge for students with physical or sensory disabilities.

Chickering and Reisser (1993) discusses “establishing identity” in terms of “comfort with body and appearance, sexual orientation, sense of self in historical, cultural, and social context, self-acceptance, and sense of self in relation to others” (p. 49). This can be a multi-layered and complex vector. There is research that suggests students who have membership in other marginalized groups will have multiple challenges (Mpofu & Harley, 2006; Oeterreich & Knight, 2008).

“Developing purpose” has to do with discovering one’s personal calling, which may include work, commitments such as family, and clarifying interests (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The uniqueness of this vector for students with physical and sensory disabilities has to do with the capability to “self-actualize,” particularly while searching for a meaningful job, there may be additional training and consultation the student receives prior to beginning a job search that other students will not have to contend with (Enright et al., 1996).
The final vector, “development of integrity,” centers around affirming core values and beliefs, being open and flexible, thinking communally, and exercising social behavior that is congruent with values and beliefs. The mere presence of disability does not in and of itself limit a student from reaching a level of self-actualization. For students with an obvious physical limitation (as opposed to a limitation that is not discernable), accessibility and what Chickering and Reisser (1993) refer to as *environmental influences* are also powerful forces that impact college students’ experiences. Barriers to accessibility include, but are not limited to, geography of campus, building access, classroom access, public facilities (such as housing, elevators, restrooms, parking availability, sporting venues, cafeterias, and drinking fountains), snow removal, and communication issues that effected students’ ability to receive appropriate medical care or instruction. Chickering and Reisser (1993) believe that institutional objectives and size, student-faculty relationships, curriculum, student development programs and services, integration of work and learning, and respect for individual difference and learning styles all play profound roles in terms of effecting student development. Research previously discussed in this review of literature strongly supports this claim.

**Contextualized Humanistic Perspective**

Johnson (2006) advanced a contextualized humanistic perspective in his research of working with African American men. This perspective is not only extremely applicable to working with African American male college students with physical disabilities, but all students with disabilities. There are similarities between the two general groups. This is obviously not to say they are mutually exclusive experiences, nor does this attempt to equate or quantify the two, merely recognize their experiences as human beings who have historically, because of experience and appearance, been portrayed as “sub-human, unintelligent, a drain on
resources…and unemployable” (Johnson, 2006, p. 187). Johnson (2006) outlines the central themes of humanistic counseling: “reflective consciousness, actualization, self-determination, and person centeredness” (Johnson, 2006, p. 188) in terms of being associated with being fully human. The historic portrayal of people with physical disabilities clearly has residual effects today that manifest in negative attitudes, perceptions, delivery of services, etc. They are clearly a marginalized group and find themselves in positions where they are “continually having to defend their humanity” (Johnson, 2006, p. 190) to professors, university staff, and other students. In the face of such systematic oppression, students with disabilities have and will continue to graduate from institutions of higher education, enter the workforce, and make contributions to society while maintaining and exercising all elements of their humanity.

In a subsequent article by Johnson (2016), he advanced the concept of somebodiness as it pertained to the psychological functioning of African American men. The concept of somebodiness expands on the contextualized humanistic framework and will offer a helpful lens with which to make sense of the participants’ experience.

**Biomedical Model**

According to Nagler and Wilson (1995), disabilities maybe congenital, developmental, or acquired and are defined from a medical, legal, social or rehabilitation perspective. The oldest, most well known and arguably most powerful perspective is the biomedical model. This model is deeply rooted in medicine and assumes a position of pathology. On one hand, this model has been credited with using the scientific method as way of being able to categorize, predict, explain, and effectively “cure” disabilities. It allows professionals across disciplines to speak a similar understandable language, have an organized and efficient way of classifying illness for the purpose of funding for service delivery, prioritize academic curriculum in training programs,
establish effective prevention methods, and intervene once acquired. On the other hand, inherent with this model is a preoccupation with individual problems and how to remedy them with the use of science and medicine. The biomedical model’s shortcomings are potentially dangerous. A relationship is established, whereby the expert physician dictates treatment to the ignorant and needy patient. As described by Smart and Smart (2006) “The problem and the treatment of the disability are all considered to lay within the individual with the disability” and “…disabilities are objective conditions that exist in and of themselves” (p. 30). This “objectification opens the door to the possibility of dehumanizing the person because attention is focused on the supposed pathology…with this model disability is privatized and individualized” (Smart & Smart, 2006, p. 30). Because the “problem” is within the person, it is ultimately their responsibility to “fix” it. Society is exempt from having any role in determining a solution because they did not cause the problem to begin with. Bickenbach (1993) has long been a critic of the biomedical model stating:

The most commonly held belief about disablement is that it involves a defect, deficiency, dysfunction, abnormality, failing, or medical “problem” that is located in the individual. We think it is so obvious as to be beyond serious dispute that disablement is a characteristic of a defective person, someone who is functionally limited or anatomically abnormal, diseased, or pathoanatomical, someone who is neither whole nor healthy, fit nor flourishing, someone who is biologically inferior or subnormal. The essence of disablement, in this view, is that there are things wrong with people with disabilities. (p. 61)

This model is stigmatizing, ignores environmental factors, and has historically not advocated for necessary social and political change where many scholars believe the real problems lie (Hahn, 1993; Wright, 1983).
Functional and Environmental Models

Collectively, functional and environmental models are much more considerate of functional and environmental factors and the interaction the disability has with them. Moreover, these models define what disability is in any given context. The value on the biological aspects of disability are still considered however, not nearly as profusely as found in the biomedical model. The “problem” is viewed more externally; thus, the responsibility to resolve it is the shared responsibility of external forces. As noted by Smart and Smart (2006), “Environmental and Functional models of disability posit that society can cause disabilities, exaggerate disabilities, and even create disabilities” (p. 33). If there are other factors to consider aside from the disability such as physical environment, it is much harder to marginalize or categorize people.

Sociopolitical Model

Several scholars have advanced versions of sociopolitical models. The hallmark characteristics of the sociopolitical model are: (1) the belief that disabilities and individuals with disabilities are not “problems,” (2) as such neither disabilities nor individuals with disabilities are the focus of intervention, and (3) the problem has to do with oppression and disenfranchisement because of systematic discrimination resulting in a lack of civil rights and opportunity. According to Hahn (1985), service providers, policymakers, and the general public are each considered to have a role in the problem of disability, which therefore requires their collaborative action. Since 1985, there have been numerous advances in legislation that have resulted in greater social awareness and opportunity; however many scholars believe society has still not granted persons with disabilities equal opportunity, protection, or integration into mainstream society (Smart, 2009).
Racial Identity Development

The number of ethnic minorities on college campuses has steadily increased during the past two decades, along with the number of students who report having some type of disability. Researchers continue to advance and refine models of racial identity development for many ethnic groups (Winograd & Tryon, 2009). In general, many models are presented using a stage approach, wherein each stage must be resolved before advancing to the next developmental stage, although most models allow for an individual to revert back to a previous stage. The initial stage is typically characterized by comfort with one’s own racial group(s) and a lack of knowledge or desire to learn about groups that are different. After moving through several stages, individuals become more knowledgeable and comfortable with groups who are different than the groups in which they have membership, eventually resulting in action and advocacy for all groups. Variations of models can vary greatly across ethnicity, discipline, and theoretical orientation.
CHAPTER III

METHOD

The purpose of this investigation was to study the inner lives of a small group of college students who have physical disabilities as they pursue an undergraduate education at a university located in the Midwest of the United States. The investigation sought to understand the meaning participants assigned to their experience, and more precisely, the challenges they faced. Subsequently, participants were asked for recommendations for various stakeholders based on reflections of their experience. This chapter provides information about the rationale for the research design, participant selection, data collections procedures, and data analysis.

Research Design

The nature of the research questions and purpose of this study was used to determine what research tradition and data collection and analysis procedures were most appropriate. Accordingly, a qualitative research methodology was utilized. One hallmark of qualitative research is the “belief that people assign meaning to the objective world, that their valued experiences are situated within a historical and social context and that individuals construct their realities” (Myers, 2000, p. 2). Qualitative research of all kinds is “concerned with human experience, making meaning and its richness” (Ashworth, 2003, p. 4). It was important to use a methodology conducive to understanding the context around the experiences of the student participants of this study and their process for understanding and maneuvering within the environment around them.

An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Flower & Larkin, 2009; Harper & Thompson, 2012; Tuffour, 2017) was selected for this investigation. According to Tuffour (2017), IPA is focused on two main objectives: (1) to explore in detail how “someone makes
sense of life experience” and (2) to thoroughly “interpret the account in order to understand the experience” (p. 52). Larkin and Thompson (2012) concluded that successful outcomes of studies utilizing IPA possess an appropriate balance of both “giving voice” and “making sense” (p. 99). In other words, the researcher accurately captures the experience and concerns being shared and offers an interpretation of these narratives, often drawing on external constructs and theories to do so. This investigation sought to accurately understand the experience and concerns of college students with physical disabilities and interpret the meaning of these experiences.

Qualitative research methodologies are established as necessary forms of inquiry, particularly in social sciences where researchers may be interested in understanding the subjective realities of their participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 1995), including the counseling profession (Berrios & Lucca, 2006; Hong, 2015; Hunt et al., 2006), IPA in particular (Tuffour, 2017).

Research Participants

According to Larkin and Thompson (2012), IPA studies require a small sample size, as the focus of the investigation is governed more by quality and depth of information that will permit a thorough analysis rather than quantity of participants. Five undergraduate students at a mid-western institution who were enrolled full time, registered with the Office of Disability Services and had completed at least their sophomore year were interviewed for this study. Sample selection was extremely important and resulted from careful reflection with the purpose of reaching data saturation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) or the point in which no new information was observed or shared about the topic under investigation. Additionally, selecting the sample was based on being able to adequately address the research questions (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). This small group of participants was consistent with an ethnographic interviewing
approach (Spradley, 1979) whereby relationships are formed with respondents in an effort to collect in-depth, rich, and descriptive information from a potent sample. A potent sample is comprised of a small group of strong participants.

Strong participants were defined as those students who had adequate time to adjust to campus life and were able to reflect thoughtfully on their experiences and articulate them. Participants had junior or senior class standing. Sufficient time had been spent acculturating to campus and the surrounding community, and they were experienced navigating campus, interacting with professors, staff and peers, establishing resources, and engaging in other campus activities. The selection criteria for class status and enrollment allowed participants enough time and interaction to provide a thoughtful reflection of those experiences.

Maximum variation purposeful sampling (Etikan et. al, 2015; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) allows researchers to “document unique variations that have emerged in adapting to different conditions” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; p. 102). Specifically, maximum variation sampling is used when “the researcher selects a small number of units or cases that maximize the diversity relevant to the research question” (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006, para. 2). In other words, the purpose of maximum variation sampling is heterogeneity within the group being studied. I selected a sample of students that were demographically diverse (e.g., ethnicity and gender) and experientially diverse in terms of their disability (e.g., student with low vision/blindness, student that uses a wheelchair, etc.) so as to provide a broad range of experiences.

After satisfying all requirements outlined by institution’s Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (Appendix A-E), I began soliciting subjects to participate. Students were invited to participate in the research project in several ways. I requested that the Office of Student Disability Services (SDS) send invitations to registered students on my behalf via letter and
email format, as these formats accommodate a variety of assistive technology. The SDS office is responsible for registering and tracking all students on campus who wish to receive services or accommodations. Registration with SDS was not a requirement for participation. Understandably, due to confidentiality constraints, I was not able to access these student records. Working with SDS to send invitations prevented a breach in confidentiality by not allowing me access to these files. Sending the invitations required working with an administrator at that office to ensure the information was delivered in the proper formats and within the scheduled timetable. Interested students contacted me directly via phone or email as instructed by the invitation to participate. This prevented an unnecessary step for SDS having to forward the contact information of students who were interested.

Formally organized campus student groups, also known as registered student organizations (RSOs), were also an excellent way to recruit potential participants. RSOs are formally recognized groups that must complete a formal application process with the university. Most RSOs focus on student interests outside of the classroom. Although some groups have academic subjects as a focus, many groups have social or philanthropic missions designed to increase awareness of issues, meet others who share similar interests, or promote values such as leadership and professional development. Each organization must submit detailed information about membership, budget, and governance, as well as abide by rules set in place by the university in order to maintain active status and remain in good standing with the university. One such group was the Organization for Students with Disabilities (OSD). The OSD was a local student organization that sought to raise awareness and educate faculty, staff, and students about disability related issues on campus through service projects. I presented in person to the general
assembly of OSD and explained the research project, answered any questions, and provided the invitation to participate with the leadership of that student organization.

Additionally, I considered working through the department chairs of both the rehabilitation counseling and occupational therapy programs at WMU to invite potential participants via email or other accessible means to participate. Students in these programs were likely to be more familiar with issues of disability; therefore, potentially providing referrals. Lastly, I invited any individual students I encountered in other contexts on campus that would potentially meet criteria via word of mouth, providing them with the invitation to participate.

The invitation to participate/informed consent document provided background information about the research project such as the rationale, length of study, and requirements to participate. My contact information as well my dissertation committee chair’s information was included if students had questions. Potential risks of participating, storage of data, confidentiality, and significance of the study were also outlined.

**Data Collection**

For the purpose of this investigation, data was collected using the ethnographic interview (Spradley, 1979), as it allows for an in-depth process with which to collect information and understand the meaning attached to their experiences. The ethnographic interview is an exchange between the interviewer and respondent whereby the interviewer is completely engaged, encouraging, and supportive, and allows the respondent to share their narrative. The ethnographic interview is based on trust between the interviewer and respondent. Similar to the rapport in a counseling relationship, the trust that is developed allows the participant to share his or her story with minimal concern or fear, which in turn allows the researcher access to richer details of their narrative. The role of the interviewer is not only to interpret behavior and
experiences, but to “go beyond them to understand the meaning people assign to them” (Spradley, 1979, p. 6). That level of understanding would be difficult to obtain without the participant feeling safe, empowered, and heard. Interviews are a very informative process for both the researcher and the participant, as the researcher is continually explaining various aspects of the research project and answering any questions the participants may have. Each participant was interviewed a minimum of two times to ensure I exhausted the information and accurately understand it or until saturation occurred (Etikan et. al, 2015; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Interviews were conducted in comfortable, easily accessible sites that were agreed upon by each individual participant. Participants were reminded of the confidentiality agreement prior to each interview and of the opportunity to cease their participation at any time without penalty. I anticipated varying levels of comfort with the interview process from each participant. Each interview was audiotaped. Participants were assigned a pseudonym to protect identity. Audiotapes of each transcription were transported from the interview site immediately to my residence, which requires both card and key access to gain entry. Within my residence, the tapes were stored in a locked file cabinet. The key to the file cabinet was stored in a hidden location away from the file cabinet. Electronically recorded files were identified with the following information: pseudonym, date of interview, and number of the interview conducted with that participant. I was forthcoming and thorough in my explanation of the entire process, supportive of participants as they shared their respective stories, and made myself available to answer any questions throughout the process. Collectively, I believe the process created a safe environment conducive to building trust and facilitating sharing, which in turn create richer interviews.
Data Analysis

Data analysis “is a simultaneous activity in qualitative research” (Stoney, 1998, p. 82). From the moment the first field notes are taken to the conclusion of the last coding sequence, the qualitative investigator endures a “rigorous series of tasks collecting and then sorting through large amounts of data and reducing them to a few themes or categories” (Creswell, 1998, p. 17).

The analytical process for this investigation consisted of organizing the transcribed material, coding the data, and developing interpretations. By reading the transcriptions and listening to the audio recordings of each interview, it familiarized me with the content of each interview and allowed time to reflect on that content. After reading the interview transcriptions multiple times, I generated categories and themes.

Categories are broad headings that were used to classify data from the interviews. Examples of categories included items such as “relationships,” “classroom experience,” or “assistive technology.” Each category was identified in text by using a different color or combination of colors for each category. For example, every instance in which a respondent discussed assistive technology was highlighted in red. Later, these categories were analyzed to discover themes. A theme emerges when there is either a similar interpretation of meaning across a majority of the informants, or a unique response emerges from a single respondent (Huberman & Miles, 1994). Once themes emerged within and between categories, statements pertaining to each were taken directly from the interview transcriptions and placed beneath the corresponding theme in a coding document. The coding document was a method of systematically organizing data to look for patterns within and between participant stories. This systematic process continued until all discovered major themes were represented. Themes from each individual
respondent were recorded side by side on coding sheets, allowing the researcher to further examine trends across all participants, as well as unique trends to one or two participants.

Field Log

The investigator’s field log is a cohesive history of the entire investigation (Johnson, 1996). I utilized a field log during the data collection and data analysis stages of the investigative process in which I recorded any thoughts or reflections, conversations, or observations about the process or disability-related encounters as means of better understanding my biases and the culture of disability. Notes about informal and formal observations and contacts with potential participants were also logged. For example, reactions to television shows, changes in legislation I became aware of, or various conversations related to disability were documented.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness has to do with the legitimacy of the research. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), “the basic issue in relation to trustworthiness is simple: How can a researcher persuade their audience that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of and credible?” (p. 290). In other words, trustworthiness ensures the investigation was conducted carefully, and that the investigator accurately understands the experiences of the participants. I made every effort throughout the process to guarantee trustworthiness. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe several techniques that should be utilized throughout the investigation to increase the likelihood that findings are credible. An explanation of techniques that were used to enhance the credibility of this investigation are explained.

Prolonged Engagement

Prolonged engagement is “the investment of sufficient time to achieve certain purposes: learning the culture, testing for misinformation introduced by distortions either of the self or of
the respondents, and building trust” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 301). Lincoln and Guba (1985) believed that the cultural context a respondent is being observed in is important for understanding any specific phenomenon relevant to that respondent. They believe it is “imperative” and that in becoming oriented with the context, the researcher should be “soaking in the culture through his or her pores” (p. 302). They explain that the investigator must be immersed long enough to detect distortions or bias. All researchers enter into the research environment with biases. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted, “Any researcher is able to write down ahead of time what they expect to find…no one enters a site in a mindless fashion” (p. 302). While there are some safe guards in place such as field notes, researcher bias is an omnipresent threat throughout the process. Lincoln and Guba (1985) believe this is a positive issue because it allows the researcher to conduct a self-check. They explain that if the researcher’s field notes regularly contain entries that make interpretations that are predictable from the original formulation, then the investigator is likely in error and has either “not spent enough time on site or has persisted against all logic in her or his ethnocentric posture” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 302). There is also a possibility the respondents themselves will introduce distortions, deliberately or unintentionally, and the researcher must be aware enough to understand what has happened.

Finally, building trust is arguably the most important part of prolonged engagement. Lincoln and Guba (1985) define building trust as a “developmental process to be engaged in everyday whereby the researcher demonstrates fidelity, honors anonymity, ensures no hidden agendas are being served, and educates respondents that they have input and influence into the inquiry process” (p. 303). The processes described in the section above described the efforts taken to build trust during this research.
Peer Debriefing

A second technique used to increase credibility is called peer debriefing. Peer debriefing is a process by which “the researcher discloses to a disinterested peer…with the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit with inquirers mind” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). According to Morse (2015), peer debriefing serves multiple purposes including: (a) increasing the awareness of the inquirer about any aspects of their research position, (b) serving as an opportunity to test working hypotheses, and (c) providing an opportunity to “vent” about whatever else maybe on their mind. In this research, peer debriefing enabled the researcher to exercise good judgment and be mindful of any feelings or emotions that are present. Due to the duration of the inquiry, I originally proposed to have two peer debriefers: (a) a professor and familiar with studies in disability and (b) another student familiar with qualitative methodology. For the data collection phase and early coding, meeting with peers periodically allowed for continual feedback and the researcher enough time in-between meetings to prepare clear thoughts and ideas. As the investigation lengthened over time, this became limited primarily to the faculty member and an editor.

Member Checks

Member checks can be a formal or informal continuous process whereby the researcher is able to “check” with respondents about interpretations, constructions, and conclusions. These can take place many different ways. Lincoln and Guba (1985) believe this is “the most important for establishing credibility” (p. 314). For this investigation, member checks took the form of clarity during interviews and/or conducting an additional interview(s) after the researcher had time to analyze and code data from the respondent. Four out of the five participants were consulted via
phone to ensure accuracy of information they provided. This process helped strengthen the reliability of the data and the validity of the findings.

**Personal Stance**

According to Hunt (2011), “researchers must be clear to readers about their role in the study, including describing their assumptions and potential biases…with the goal of being as transparent as possible” (p. 297). Forwardly outlining this position, allows readers to understand the researcher’s “experience and interest” in the topic, bringing more credibility to the study. Furthermore, Larkin and Thompson (2012) support the notion that the researcher seeks to position themselves in a neutral and facilitative manner that allows participants to tell their story. As the researcher engages with material, it is important to acknowledge the absence of total neutrality.

To that end, I am an able-bodied African American man currently working as an administrator, in addition to being a student. While my personal and professional experiences working directly and regularly with students with physical disabilities was primarily limited to my internship, it was an experience that was rich with exposure and challenge. My initial interest in the topic was due to being able to empathize with the narratives that were being shared with me. I found many aspects of the narratives familiar and relatable, and this was both intriguing and exciting to me. I knew enough to realize that I had much to learn about the experience of college students with physical disabilities. My background in counseling was helpful as I sought to collect information about my participants’ stories, and I suspected that being able to relate to their experience in some capacity would also assist in developing an appropriate rapport so as to gain trust. I did not anticipate any negative experiences based on who I am or what my
experience was. I did expect to hear diversity in the narratives, even from participants seemingly sharing membership in similar groups.
CHAPTER IV
FINDINGS

This chapter describes the findings obtained from the data collected through the methodology described in the preceding chapter. To this end, each participant is described, along with salient themes derived from interviews with the participants. The chapter concludes with a discussion of meta-themes that emerged from the collective narrative of the participants.

Eve

Eve is an enthusiastic 29-year-old Caucasian female with severe cerebral palsy. She is a transfer student and senior from a small, predominantly White town on the east side of the state. Eve is wheelchair-bound and has limited fine motor functioning in her hands. She is majoring in interdisciplinary studies and is uncertain about her future plans following graduation. I engaged with Eve thoroughly for the first time while she was in the housing office completing an application to move to a different building during her final year on campus. She was accompanied by her service dog and appeared to be no stranger to the office staff. She engaged comfortably with everyone and was almost oblivious to the volume of her voice, which was unusually loud. After sharing laughs and animal stories, she proceeded to ask a series of practical questions to ensure we were able to accommodate her needs. There was a familiarity about her and I remembered not only seeing her and her service dog, Ella, around campus, but interacting with her briefly during my internship at Student Disability Services. Even then, I remembered her being quite talkative, but down to earth and pleasant.

My initial impressions of Eve were shaped primarily by what appeared to be her nearly effortless physical navigation of the office and her social proficiency. I reintroduced myself and she remembered me. Shortly after, we transitioned to making sure she was at ease with the
application process and what would soon become her home for the remainder of her time at State University. She was playful throughout the process and left only after everyone in the office had an opportunity to provide their well wishes for the two of them.

After she moved into her new housing, I saw her intermittently in passing around campus or in the office. Subsequently, I invited her to participate in the study. Eve was excited at the opportunity to be able to share her story and enthusiastic about the prospect of being able to contribute something helpful to others.

**Pertaining to Self**

**Theme:** I had a normal childhood and student experience.

I was always just part of the family. My disability was never considered to be a big deal, just different…because again, I’m a normal person in my household…my relationship with my brother was always the typical brother-sister relationship. I was going to college being your typical college student…it was just a normal experience…you’re a student and you’re normal and expected to act as such in all parts of student life.

**Theme:** I strive to be independent and self-reliant.

As my brother and I got older we were expected to take care of ourselves…I wanted to be independent and go to college. I wanted to develop as much physical skill as I could so that I could function on my own…nobody ever tells you how to achieve independence as a person with a disability. There is not guidebook or roadmap.

**Theme:** I dread having to ask for help even though it is necessary for me to be successful.
I hate asking for exceptions or extensions. It makes me cringe because at that point I feel like I’m asking for something beyond. It’s a very humbling experience. I don’t like to ask for help or exceptions or anything but sometimes there are things you can’t change. If I’m going to get the grades I want, I will have to ask for help.

Theme: People often mistake my physical disability for intellectual deficiency.

I had to fight to take the classes I needed…I was constantly trying to prove that I was a smart person, just more difficult to work with I guess. I had to do things a different way, my own way, just a little slower but I can show you I understand the concept. I knew that I wasn’t stupid. I know that academically. And it didn’t matter how many times someone told me “that’s hard”…coloring in this book [instead of academic work] is not what I need!

Theme: Life is difficult and I have accepted the fact there are some tasks I will never be able to complete.

Life is hard. Nobody is going to have rainbows and sunshine all the time…this is the only life I got and I can’t go and change it…they’re just facts of life and I have to deal them. Cooking is never going to be a reality for me, to transfer a hot pot by myself. It’s a nice idea, as is laundry, but there are just some things one needs to accept they will not be able to do…you don’t get what you want 100% of the time.

Theme: I am goal oriented and can make choices to improve my quality of life.

I’m goal oriented--and to not have that [opportunity to achieve] really throws me off. When I came home without that I couldn’t stand it…I had do something, go
somewhere. I’ve never been good at being your stereotypical disabled person.

You can choose to be happy or you can choose to be miserable. Everything in life is choices…you don’t get a free pass. You have to do things.

Despite the severity of Eve’s cerebral palsy, she maintained an experience of normalcy and striving toward independence in her narrative. Relationally, many parts of her experience were normalized at home. Her parents enforced similar expectations for her and her brother throughout their childhood, and strongly encouraged Eve to learn as much and develop as many physical skills as possible. They ensured she and her brother had equitable expectations and experiences within reason and encouraged her to set goals. Although she was cognitively aware of her limitations, Eve consistently described only being aware of her limiting physical condition when she was actually presented with having to accomplish a physical task she was not capable of completing or it was brought to her attention outside of her home environment. Eve was accepting of the severity of her disability on the surface and recognized that she would be limited in some of the tasks she was able to complete, but also dreaded having to ask for help, which was intriguing given the fact that she required assistance for many activities of daily living such as getting in and out of bed, bathing, transferring in and out of her wheelchair, etc. Eve’s perspective was such that the only limitations she had were physical, but she otherwise lived as normal a life as anyone else her age. Additionally, Eve reported great frustration with her teachers and administrators during her primary and secondary education. She reported that she often believed they misinterpreted her physical disability as synonymous with intellectual deficiency. As a result, her parents withdrew her from school and she was homeschooled for a year. She remained focused on trying to achieve as much as possible and have a full experience both inside and outside of the classroom.
Disability

Theme: My disability prevents me from being able to complete some tasks without assistance.

Research papers are daunting for me because I have to go to the library to get the books but it requires a person to come with me because I can’t reach the shelves and it’s hard to turn the pages.

Theme: I must schedule my daily activities around my disability.

I found a home health care agency that is willing to work with my schedule since it changes every 4 months. They all like very set schedules and very set everything. I only get 8 hours a day and I have to break that up into four blocks…During the whole time I’m home I have to think ‘ok, I have to get this out of my bag, I have to get this set up and get that set up so that when she’s gone, I have everything I need. She doesn’t just come back whenever I call. It’s set times and that is the only time they come. It’s a lot of planning and it takes the average student [with a disability] a lot of getting used to because you have to plan your whole life in the winter time. I have a lot of issues when it snows, it’s everywhere. I understand it’s Michigan and it’s unavoidable but a lot of times when they plow they push the snow into the curb cuts and my chair cannot handle that. I have to accept the reality that winter classes are not going to be easy for the simple fact that I cannot always make it to class.

Theme: I do not believe the University administration understands the needs of students with disabilities.

I have to push and dig and ask people and make suggestions, and it’s [suggestions] being heard but I don’t feel like the services of the university or the students are being utilized
to their [University] advantage or mine…they don’t realize the whole picture. Yeah, I made some of these suggestions to the university. I said “Hey, they have a nursing school, maybe I can get some nursing students to come and help me with my daily care or do some of those [care providing] things” and they said “No.” I feel like it’s because they don’t realize the whole picture. I guess there are other services other places, but why not use the students who are here who want to learn and get degrees in this stuff anyway. There shouldn’t be such a barrier.

**Theme:** I have to sacrifice my privacy in order to accomplish activities of daily living.

I don’t necessarily get the typical privacy of a normal person…in terms of the way I function…I cannot get in and out of bed or go to the bathroom without the help of an aid.

**Theme:** Sometimes I feel excluded and discriminated against.

I think there needs to be more of an idea of inclusiveness because everyone can be successful on some level doing something…I don’t know if it has to do with the fact we [people with disabilities] haven’t been around in the public eye as much. When my parents grew up you didn’t see anyone with a physical-anything. I still believe that people with disabilities in general are the most discriminated [against] population in society today that struggle to get the things everybody else takes for granted.

**Theme:** Sometimes I cope by reframing my experience

I was in your typical mainstream classroom, but otherwise I had a person with me in case I needed anything that required physical help…people used to spit in my hair, I was the girl they threw things at during lunch and sometimes I had to eat
my lunch in the bathroom or the counselor’s office since I didn’t want to be there.

But, I think it’s hard for everyone during those years.

Since childhood, Eve’s disability dominated every facet of her life. Although her parents were very involved and engaged throughout her primary and secondary education, attending a college institution was uncharted territory for her and her family. The shift in responsibility to the student initiating, paying for, and managing most of their disability-related accommodations was a challenge for Eve. Her parents served as her primary care givers until she arrived at college. The severity of her cerebral palsy meant that Eve had to schedule nearly every daily task. After attending a community college close to home, Eve transferred to a different institution that was well equipped to assist students with disabilities.

The Classroom

Theme: Some of my professors lack awareness and are unwilling to provide the accommodations or flexibility I need to be successful.

I have some who are willing to work with me, make things accessible in a way I can show my comprehension but others not so much. They feel like it’s making a whole different easier standard. New faculty especially, I think it’s important for them to realize that if they aren’t aware of what they should do, they need to. Students with disabilities are allowed to request a different way of testing. Some didn’t know that was something we could ask for. If you have students who have some difficulty, I would say be open and available to listening to their concerns. A lot of times we’re just trying to meet you in the middle and show you what we know. It might not be the exact way you want to see but it doesn’t necessarily mean it’s wrong.
**Theme:** I often have trouble physically accessing buildings and rooms on campus.

There are entire buildings on campus that once you get in, you can’t move around.

I don’t understand how that still happens...the little rooms are so crammed with
desks that often times there is no space for me to sit...campus is not ultra-
accessible.

**Theme:** I believe that people who do not always rely on assistive tools are not as likely to realize
their importance.

Sometimes it’s as simple as letting people know that the door button doesn’t work
on this door or the elevator because a lot of times the people who don’t use those
things don’t recognize their importance, or it doesn’t come to the forefront of their
mind.

As Eve’s condition worsened over time, she eventually became reliant on a wheelchair.
She cannot get in or out of the chair effectively without the help of an aide. This presented
problems for accessing buildings that are structurally antiquated on a campus geography not
conducive to wheelchairs. This was compounded by seasonal weather, which potentially
hindered her ability to navigate sidewalks and streets that become impassable. She often relied
on the help others in the area to assist her if she found herself in need. Once inside the classroom,
Eve was presented with another round of physical challenges to find space to position her
wheelchairs and try to convey her needs to some professors who were not aware of or willing to
readily offer the necessary accommodations to which she was entitled. Eve made consistent
efforts to educate peers and professors alike, and believed that by increasing awareness it would
translate to changes in attitude, sensitivity, and behaviors. By learning about the needs of
students with disabilities, she believed other would heighten their sense of awareness about
challenges those students face.

**Financial Burden**

**Theme:** I have always been concerned about having enough money for my college education.

I researched again and I just had to go to my parents and beg, “Please!” I needed them for college financial aid because they had to sign because of my age. I had to return home but I don’t regret my time there. It was really expensive, almost three times as much as it costs to go here because your services are included.

**Theme:** I had difficulty finding jobs that I was physically capable of doing on campus.

It was hard to find a job that I could physically do, but being the determined person I am, I found something 25 hours a week in the cafeteria… I’d take the 6:00 a.m. shift before class and it allowed me to use work study so I could actually work on campus.

Eve is a first generation college student. Neither of her parents attended college, but did their best to financially support Eve. She eventually convinced her parents to allow her to attend a 4-year institution after taking classes at a community college that was both closer in proximity and more affordable. Like many college students, Eve was intentional about choosing her first institution primarily because of the number of services they could offer and the geography of the campus. This proved to be too costly and after a brief period of employment working in her hometown, she decided to enroll again at a more affordable institution that was also closer to home. Although she had some difficulty finding a job, she eventually discovered one that she was physically able to do, which allowed her to utilize work-study, making her more marketable for campus employers.
Social Experience

**Theme:** Once I arrived at college, I no longer felt isolated based on my disability.

I had never been around that many people with disabilities. It was the first time I was around so many people…I wasn’t alone or the only one. It was very…you know, it’s ok to be you but all of a sudden it not just you, you’re not the only one.

**Theme:** It was difficult to find other students with disabilities who shared my expectations and values.

A girl told me “You have to stick to your own kind” and I asked her “What do you mean your own kind?” She told me “People in wheelchairs” and I told her “You are no different.” I had a hard time because there was a lot of jealousy among others at the school with disabilities because of the way I handled the people [without disabilities] I encountered. I just had a different set of expectations. I wasn’t going to make anyone else feel weird or not understand…I was much more vocal and they were too passive.

**Theme:** Sometimes my social life distracted me from my academics.

It was different and overwhelming from what I was used to. It gave me a lot more freedom, it was amazing after only having mom and dad drive me around. As much as it was healthy socially, it hindered my school work.

Eve’s journey in higher education consisted of time being spent at two institutions prior to her arrival at State. The exposure to different sized institutions allowed her to experience different social environments. Her first 4-year institution was her first time truly away from home on her own. It was also one of the best schools in the country in terms of its services and disability accommodations. The demographic included a much higher number of students with
various disabilities who enrolled. After feeling socially isolated, Eve recalls being surprised at the number of other students with disabilities and not feeling so isolated and alone. Initially, Eve was able to establish a peer group, began dating, and enjoyed participating in social activities without the presence of her parents. She conversed with and dated people of varying abilities. In doing so, she realized that she did not share many of the values of most other students with disabilities she met and believed she had higher expectations than many of her peers, which was disappointing to her. Eve eventually found herself somewhat alienated, and by the end of her first year her academics suffered as a result of spending too much time socializing.

**Romantic Relationships**

**Theme:** I believe the prejudice of others prevents me from dating.

I feel like a lot of parents of able-bodied people don’t tend to view me unless they get to know me as a woman or as someone that their son could date because they don’t see people with disabilities as adults…It’s like you’re an adult child even if you have an education. I feel it’s important for you as the person dating me to get to know me—all the other stuff you’ll notice or just ask a question. I’m very open.

Eve’s outlook and reflection on her romantic relationships centered on the prejudice she often perceived from others who discounted her as a potential partner based on what she believed to be her visible characteristics. She believed if offered an opportunity she would be able to break the imposed stereotype, which was consistent with her views on her academics, life goals, and ultimately her future success. Whether it was parents or her peers, she remained frustrated with feeling as though she constantly had to prove herself all the time.

**Adapting**

**Theme:** I cope with challenges by asserting myself and trying to educate others.
You have to let people know “hey, this is my issue”. You can’t be all quiet about it. It’s who you are. And if they don’t know who you are they cannot help you.

**Theme:** I rely on the use of technology and care providers to offset my physical limitations.

My previous college had so many services in comparison to what they have here: tutorial services, scribes, activities of daily living [ADL] help, transportation and other things like that. There was this assistive technology class, which was amazing for me. I didn’t know anything about other assistive technology where you can get all these additional programs. I didn’t have some of the programs on my computer but they gave them to you. The class also taught me how to better utilize the things I had.

Eve consistently described practical ways of coping with her physical disability. She had to employ several different services that allowed her to physically navigate campus and complete all of her academic work. Despite assistive technology, she still required the physical help of an assistant to complete her daily living activities. Consistent with her professors and peers, Eve viewed education as means of helping to improve her situation and others who were not knowledgeable. She often thought of herself as a trailblazer and a leader in terms of advocating and helping others understand the humanity of people with disabilities.

**Campus Housing**

**Theme:** I believe it was a mutually beneficial experience to live on campus.

I was in a dorm with a roommate and everything was just normal. I think it is a good experience for the disabled student and all of the able-bodied students for exposure. I think it was a good learning experience.

**Theme:** I trusted my neighbors to come to my aid in an emergency.
I was in the Jackson dorm and they had other technology to let students with disabilities know about fires and tornados. We worked out a plan with the neighbors who were willing to help if there was an emergency.

Socially, Eve described a positive experience with her on-campus housing and believed it to be a mutually beneficial experience for her and her roommates. Eve characterized the experiences as “normal” despite having to rely on the presence of an assistant, which limited her socially. In emergency situations, Eve relied on her neighbors who volunteered to assist to move her in the event of a tornado or fire. They exchanged contact information and were able to develop a cordial relationship. Although it was a wise preventive step, the employment of her neighbors help in an emergency underscored her vulnerability and dependence on others in order to remain safe.

**Thomas**

Thomas is a vivacious 21-year-old junior from Jamaica studying art. He enrolled after taking a year off immediately following his senior year of high school and continued his college education without interruption. He is a first generation college student with congenital spastic cerebral palsy, and has moderate fine motor skills with his hands and legs. Although he is able to walk, he utilizes a motorized wheelchair for most of his daily transportation needs and can complete most activities of daily living without relying on assistance. Thomas’s parents divorced when he was child, which was part of the impetus for moving to the United States to seek better educational opportunities. He was the second oldest of three siblings in their working-class household.

I initially made contact with Thomas at his residence hall after a mutual acquaintance connected us after hearing about the research project. As he approached me in the lobby, I
noticed him engage in multiple interactions with other students passing by him, which all appeared to be pleasant. He was using his wheelchair and maneuvered it carefully through the narrow hallway that led to a small study space near the lobby. He greeted me and I reciprocated. We made small talk as we decided where to conduct the interview. He displayed a lot of energy and animation as we reached the room, reviewing the past couple hours he spent at work and the studying that remained to completed after our interview. Once in the room he stood up and walked over to the table with a gait that was characteristic of other students I had met previously with cerebral palsy. When we began the interview, he spoke about his experience in a very down-to-earth manner, and I found myself captivated with his story.

Pertaining to Self

**Theme:** I strive to be independent and self-motivated.

All I want to do is be the most independent person I can. I push myself. I just want to be driven and not have to depend on anything else. At the end of the day it’s going to be you standing on your own. You have to be a man or be a woman about it, be determined and just go for it.

**Theme:** I will not allow anything to prevent me from pursuing or achieving my dreams.

Many people assume because of my disability that I’m not able to be an achiever. I remember an instructor telling me after I confided in her about my goals telling me that based on my education and experience I wasn’t capable. Listen, you are not going to paint my scene. I’m not going to allow anyone to discourage me from becoming what I want to become. I think many times you will find people or things that try and talk you down but if you really want to be successful, you have to be determined.
Theme: I believe people often mistake my physical disability for intellectual deficiency. My teachers assumed just because of my physical disability that I didn’t have the brains or power to pursue a college education. I didn’t receive the education I needed because I was placed in the wrong classes, I was always behind in something. Many times they did not want to go out of their way to provide an accommodation; I was just placed in a corner. I had to take a year off before coming so I could get everything I missed and boost my ACT score…raised my score 9 points.

Theme: I am an artist.

I was introduced to art as part of my physical therapy when I was 6 or 7 years old. I had to go to physical therapy for my arm and they had me drawing and I just became addicted [laughs]…Art is everything. It is my prized possession, my gift. I get to put what I feel on a canvas which is a gift alone; it’s unique. I have my own style and people can tell it’s my work and I love that aspect, but I love all art. Despite the physical challenges I’m anticipating, I’m going to Europe to study abroad, which I am really looking forward to. It has become one of my biggest goals. As an artist, it’s an inspiration. It’s a different type of culture and style and it increases my creativity. It will be another adventure. My mom tried to bribe me to go to school closer to home. But I’m the type of person who wants adventure, wants to see new stuff. I wanted to see snow, I wanted to see the fall with all the color, as an artist it would give me more inspiration.

Theme: I try to emulate the lifestyle my mentor modeled.
Nathan became a great mentor and changed my life completely. He’s the one that gave me that quote “Never give up.” His family is like a second family, I call his mom, grandma, and I call his dad, grandpa. Nathan had cerebral palsy too but was able to achieve so much before he got real sick…sadly he passed away. He pushed me to keep drawing, kept me and my siblings on track, came to our events, took us traveling, and helped me with my scholarships. The whole thing is for me to remember the seeds he planted. He was such an inspiration to me, so kind to all of us. I understood how important it was to do the same to other people.

The mentorship that Nathan provided helped shape Thomas’s acceptance and understanding of his disability. Having a relatable, outgoing, and supportive role model who was clearly invested in his success not only provided him with a model of living he wished to emulate, it also accelerated clarity about his own values and reinforced his belief that he was capable of accomplishing anything he desired—something he internalized and put into practice since his arrival. His identification as an artist was of significant importance to how he saw himself, coped with stressful situations, and what he aspired to accomplish. His refusal to be deterred from his goals was only reinforced when met with prejudice or challenges. It was clear that he constructed a personal blueprint for his personal success and valued trying to assist others with creating their own. Although less pronounced in college, Thomas remarked that he still encountered people who wrongfully assumed he was intellectually deficient in some capacity.

**Disability Theme:** I do not believe the University always understands the needs of students with disabilities.
We are normal. Sometimes we might need special accommodations but should be seen as any other kid. They should be willing and open to accommodate students with special needs and be willing to ask; put a survey out and see what we may be experiencing. Don’t always assume that you know what’s going on. I wouldn’t be offended if people asked.

**Theme:** I cannot always financially afford my medication.

Growing up and now I just cannot afford it. My family can’t afford it. I remember I went years without taking my pills, my muscle relaxer…when I don’t take my medicine my speech is hard to understand.

**Theme:** I rely heavily on my wheelchair in order to be successful.

I have a heavy-duty wheelchair. I remember I got caught in the middle of a snow storm on my way back from a hockey game going to my dorm and I did not get stuck not even one time even though it wasn’t plowed. But let me tell you, when your equipment is not working right, I’ve had a couple moments where my chair breaks down. That can be a tough day in my shoes. I depend on my equipment and when it’s not working, my day will not go well. I end up having to walk and I’m like 20 minutes late for class and my body is exhausted because it hasn’t adjusted.

**Theme:** I have discovered there are still many places on campus that are not accessible.

There have been some improvements since I’ve been here but there is a long way to go. I advocated for the new curb cuts and they put in some of them; the bus stop, the student union, and some of the lecture halls. Before that, I wasn’t able to move my chair around some of those places.

**Theme:** I can perform most of the daily tasks required to take care of myself.
I usually start my day around 9:00 a.m. I’ll make a bowl of cereal or fry some eggs, get dressed, hop on my chair, and go to class or work. Sometimes I’ll have trouble with buttoning up a shirt but I’ll have someone else do it the day before. Small little tasks, I’ve found ways to work around them.

**Theme:** There are times I believe people are prejudiced toward me.

Well, I can tell you many times, like in my home town, many people look down on me, they are quick to judge the cover but are not willing to look inside the book. They assume because I have a disability I’m not capable.

Although Thomas maintains an overwhelmingly positive attitude, his reality for living with cerebral palsy is not without challenge. He has moderate overall functioning and can perform many activities of daily living without the assistance of others; he is able to cook, clean, do laundry, and get dressed. Although he is able to walk, the physical toll on his body is extensive, so he does rely heavily on his wheelchair. As a contingency, he also has a pedal bike that is stored off-site by friends, which he is able to utilize should the wheelchair become inoperable. Unlike many other students who use wheelchairs, he has a relatively powerful one that can navigate moderately poor weather conditions, affording him more freedom and dependability in poor weather. The costs associated with school, medication, and services continue to be a challenge despite supplemental income from supporters. Consistent with many other students, he also believed the University does not fully understand the needs of those with disabilities, and that more work remains to be done in terms of providing basic accessibility to commonly used places across campus. Although transitioning from high school to college broadened his social network, he still described experiencing prejudice at the University level; however, it was much less frequent.
Classroom

Theme: Some of my professors have been unwilling to provide the accommodations I need to be successful.

Some of my professors have said, “No, this is not right, this is not going to work out” and there are others who are helpful all of the time, so it just depends.

Usually, it is new professors who just do not understand the codes that apply to someone like myself. There are a lot of people on campus with CP like me, if they need extra time, or a scribe or something the Disability Office is who lets the professor know you have to accommodate this student.

Theme: My wheelchair cannot physically access some of the classroom spaces.

My biggest concerns are in lecture halls. Some of the big lecture halls on campus, you don’t have the double doors so I physically just can’t get in there. I have to park my chair outside and then walk into the room.

Although Thomas experiences issues with accessibility, he described an overall positive experience within the classroom. Because Thomas is able to walk, navigating spaces that would otherwise be inaccessible were not problematic for him. Like many students, the willingness of his professors to comply with his accommodation requests varied. He noted that in his experience most professors who were initially not compliant were unwilling to do so out of ignorance of the legal and/or University mandate, adding they were also “new.” After professors were made aware, they complied and Thomas did not share anything he interpreted as retaliatory or an unwillingness to be helpful after the mandate was made clear.

Spirituality

Theme: I am inspired and humbled by my faith in God.
God plays a big role in my life. I can remember growing up and my grandma was the one who introduced me to God. It plays a big role in who I am today; it keeps me strong and humbled. Anything God does, he does for a reason. I used to regret having a disability but I’ve learned to have an open mind about it and I see the impact it has on other people. God is using me and my disability to give Him glory. If it wasn’t through faith I wouldn’t be here. You can imagine as a mother, your first child not moving, not crying, in a coma for 16 straight days. They told her I would be brain damaged, never walk, be paralyzed, and would be on watch 24/7 with everything I did. I couldn’t walk until I was 5 years old but I give the Man above thanks for that.

The role of spirituality was both an anchoring force and roadmap for Thomas. His very survival, the way in which he learned to cope with his disability, and the manner in which he engaged people and determined his own values was all governed by his understanding of the role that God played in his life. His developing relationship with God provided purpose and humility. Coupled with his personality, it enhanced his social experience and allowed him space to vent frustration, give thanks, and remain cognizant of the example he was setting for others.

**Finances**

**Theme:** I rely on the support of my friends and family to assist me financially.

After Nathan passed away, my family opened a foundation in his name to help raise money for all of my needs. With that, I had the opportunity to buy my own wheelchair. I had great friends and great family who invested in the foundation. Sometimes my tuition overdrew and I had to depend on that account to pay for my tuition. I had debt, owed the school money, and didn’t have enough. Yet, I was blessed and fortunate enough to have people in my life who are willing to see me
succeed. Lucky for me, I know a doctor back home who has known me since I was little who knew my mentor. He wants to see me successful and I know he sees me as a determined guy. I update him when I go back home and he is always willing to help.

**Theme:** I must work multiple jobs to try and support myself.

I do keep a pretty busy schedule. I work at Student Services and in the library in addition to my classes and volunteering. I enjoy both of them and they help me save the money I need during the school year.

Although his family was financially poor, both he and his siblings created ways to pursue higher education. Being unable to access financial aid proved to be only a minor setback. After the passing of his mentor and the subsequent establishment of the foundation, they were able to generate a significant amount money, in large part due to the positive relationships and kindness that he and his family established with so many people locally. He continued to garner support once on campus, and although he had periods of financial hardship or paying in a timely manner, ultimately he was always able to continue his education, receive the necessary supplies, sufficient medication, and pursue opportunities of interest--including his art and study abroad.

**Social**

**Theme:** I have a successful social life because I genuinely invest in my peers.

You’ll see many people say “Man, you know everybody.” The reason is because I’m willing to stop and say “Hi.” I’m the kind of person who goes out of my way. You have to be willing to take the time out to get to know somebody. I’ve been very successful. My friends often tell me that I’m a motivation to them, and I’m just being myself, doing what I do day to day.
Thomas’s core values and beliefs, based in large part from his personal childhood experiences, are extended to others with most of his interpersonal interactions. Compassion, kindness and reliability are values he prides himself on. He was able to develop an extensive network of friends with his level of campus involvement, having a brother who was a star athlete and holding two visible jobs in heavily trafficked areas—the cafeteria and the library. He manages to keep the fragility of life fresh. His acquaintances are often able to reciprocate the assistance and kindness he shows in ways that offset some of the physical and financial hardship he would otherwise be faced with.

**Romantic Relationships**

**Theme:** I have not been able to date much because the people cared more about others’ perceptions.

I haven’t really dated. I’ve liked a few people who couldn’t see past my disability and they were always afraid of what other people would think.

**Theme:** I am often frustrated with the attitudes of my peers toward intimate relationships.

There is a downside, I’m not going to lie. It’s difficult when you see your friends in relationships and they mistreat the opposite sex. I’m the good guy and they’re afraid to take a risk because of my disability but if they were willing to take the time to get to know me…I think many women want to have someone who is compassionate and cares about them. Many times, not always but many, they have it right in front of their face—but afraid to take the risk. The same is true for the opposite sex.

For being as socially adept as he was, his greatest source of social frustration was attempting to date. Like many students with a physical disability, he had a difficult time finding a
person who desired him as he was. He was equally disappointed with roommates and others he was close to who failed to treat their partners in the same manner he would, if provided with the opportunity.

**Campus Life**

**Theme:** I have enjoyed and benefited from immersing myself in campus life.

I’ve lived on campus my whole time. It has been really nice, you know, I’ve received a bunch of awards, it has been a great atmosphere.

Thomas had an exceptional campus experience with the way in which he immersed himself in so many activities outside of his academic commitments. Multiple registered student organizations, churches, regular attendance at athletic events of all kinds, participation in his residence hall governance, and connectedness within the city have led to an enviable collection of experiences that allow him to continue meeting people, gain leadership experience, travel, fellowship, and fundraise. He maintains a rigorous schedule that is consistent with his perspective of living a full life, rich with experience and conducive to self-development and service.

**Adapting**

**Theme:** I use my art to cope with stressful situations.

Many times, if I am having a bad day or a tough day, I can just pick up a pen or a pencil or a brush and express everything I feel in a notebook or a canvas, it’s like my journal.

**Theme:** I became wiser and more mature earlier than my peers as result of my disability.
I’ve experienced many things that other kids didn’t have to experience. It made me mature and wisen up much faster than other kids. I remember my mom yelling at my older brother asking him why he couldn’t be more like me.

**Theme:** I motivate myself when I am able to uplift other people.

My disability gave me a great opportunity to inspire others, which is something I always wanted to do. Some people say, “Thomas, you have your own problems, why do you take time to help others?” The reason is, that many times, I myself need a pick-me-up and that’s why I’m always willing to take my time out.

It was apparent throughout Thomas’s narrative that aside from the technological tools he uses to physically cope, he is deliberate and mindful of his attitude, often referencing examples of choosing to be positive in his outlook. He discovered art as not only physical therapy, but as an effective way to manage daily stressors and cope with significant events. His faith, friendships, and family offer comfort and support and he reciprocates this—even generates energy from it. However, in the absence of supports he has also learned how to self-motivate using the same methods he employs to support others who may be struggling.

**Race**

**Theme:** I felt compelled to study abroad with all of the exposure to different kinds of people.

Going to a university has made me see the world in a whole different point of view. It has helped me a lot because you have so many people from so many different backgrounds. It has been one of the best things, to the point that I now want to study abroad. I know not everyone is open to that but I think coming to a university is helpful because it will expose you to many different people and ideas.
Thomas identifies as an African American male. Throughout his narrative, he acknowledged the existence of discrimination based on disability but never by race. His social experiences at the university served to broaden his exposure and pique his interest and curiosity in other cultures. Race was discussed in terms of the different acquaintances he was able to make and being able to consider alternative perspectives. Racial discrimination did not appear to be a significant part of his experience at college or at home.

**Carl**

Carl is a 41-year-old African American senior who enrolled in college after completing a career in the military and spending time in civilian law enforcement. Originally from Missouri, Carl moved to the state as a child with his working-class parents and siblings. After high school graduation he entered the military and eventually settled in a diverse mid-size town, taking a law enforcement position. While on the job, he sustained life-threatening injuries that eventually resulted in partial paralysis in one leg and a spinal cord injury. Virtually all of the sensory perception in one leg was lost. Despite intensive care and rehabilitation, he sustained a subsequent foot injury that resulted in a series of botched surgeries. Ultimately, more damage than repair was done and his condition worsened. Shortly before arriving at college, he underwent additional treatment and rehabilitation to address his deteriorating physical condition, which only offered periodic relief. Nonetheless, after speaking with acquaintances while investigating employment possibilities with Veteran Affairs, his interest was sparked in administration and he immediately began researching programs. At the time Carl enrolled and began taking classes, he was practically confined to his wheelchair for mobility.

**Pertaining to Self**

**Theme:** I have always worked towards having a purposeful life.
I have never been a lazy person, I’ve always had good jobs. I have always been the type that wanted to achieve and I couldn’t see myself sitting at home on my butt just waiting for the mailman to come deliver a check that’s supposed to last me for the whole month. I want more out of life…I want to do more than just survive.

**Theme:** I will not allow others to discourage me from achieving my goals.

I was telling him that I wanted to work in the VA and I want to get a Ph.D. And that’s another thing, you gotta be careful. You can’t let other people’s realities become your reality. He was telling me flat out “You won’t be able to get a job in the VA. It’s not possible.” Really? Well, ok. I’m glad I’m not one to believe in other folks’ mess. I take what I can and I leave the rest. And I left that with him. There was no empowerment, no uplifting. None whatsoever. So, I had to let it go. So, with that, this is where I am and this is where I shall continue to be until I get a Ph.D.

**Theme:** My education is my top priority.

I came here knowing this is my last shot at having a life. At the life I should’ve had that is better than the generation before. It’s all about business. It’s all about business. Man, look here, this is too big of an investment. In the predicament I’m in. I gotta make it work. What room do I have for fuckin’ up? None. I better be about business every inch of the way.

Prior to the incidents that left Carl paralyzed, he had experienced success in both the military and private sector. He had always been accustomed to investing in his work and maintaining what he would identify as personal values of a strong work ethic and competence. When he decided to enroll in higher education, it was in part because he views it as the last opportunity to utilize his skills and experience toward the completion of the highest degree
possible; thus, allowing for financial stability, as well as the ability to achieve what he considers to be purposeful life and comfortably provide for his children and grandchildren.

**Disability**

**Theme:** I have never given up on my education despite illness and pessimism from my physicians.

They doctors never had anything positive to say, nothing uplifting. No one listened to me during recovery, no one was helpful. My physical therapist just comes back telling me all this doom and gloom…it’s like if it ain’t one thing it’s another. I’m just fighting the battle, that’s all it is to it. But through it all, I didn’t give up on my education. I’m still here!

**Theme:** I do not believe senior administrators care to initiate understanding of the needs of students with disabilities.

They only have fellowship amongst themselves, the mice of the roundtable. But the kingdom out here is suffering. But you wouldn’t know that because you’re expecting somebody to come from the outside and bring it to you when you should be outside seeing it for yourself. Yeah, cause the only thing they deal with is the Board of Trustees and their coffee and crumpets or whatever else they have catered in and all. Life is good up there. But it ain’t so beautiful all the way around. You know, some of us have serious issues that we’re trying to deal with. Serious.

**Theme:** I have limited use of my wheelchair if the weather is not conducive.

I’m using this old computer but where I used to be able to go to the computer lab up the hill, can you imagine me in this slipping and sliding…battery could go dead being in the cold.
**Theme:** I become invisible when I’m in my wheelchair.

Yeah, this is how I get treated. When I go up and down the street in my hoveround, do you know that man, people can’t even look me in the eye!? They’ll look the other way and act like they don’t see me. The only way they look at me is if the hall is so narrow they have to look at me, gotta make eye contact. I know damn well you see me!

**Theme:** I am still coping with the loss of my mobility.

They don’t know my predicament or what caused me to be this way. But, if they only knew. I didn’t come here like this. Shit happens, it really does. I never thought when I was here I would be sitting in a wheelchair. Never thought that. Never. Never. Never. Been athletic my entire life. All my life.

Carl’s experience with acquiring multiple physical disabilities as an adult forced him to seek a means of securing a life he considered meaningful by returning to school. He seemed surprised at the lack of encouragement, particularly from his medical providers, about his ability to do so, which was exhausting and frustrating. Considering his values and upbringing, coupled with his perspective that higher education was the only way he would be able to mitigate the mental and financial challenges he faces, education became his top priority. While his life experience allowed him to more easily navigate the bureaucracy of trying to solidify services, he was not immune to experiencing some frustration. He believed administrators and other students did not understand his needs as a student with a disability or a Black man on a predominately White campus.

**Race**

**Theme:** I have an obligation to try and improve the lives of black people.
…like my parents, I was always from the mindset every generation needs to be able to do one better than if not equal to the generation before it. So, I had my mark, my goal was set before me long before I started to achieve it. And especially when you’re men of color-you go all the way! You got to achieve. It’s up to us to teach our children that. I mean, I wish I could make a difference and maybe I will with my children and grandchildren. But it’s so many that I grew up with that I tried to let them know man, it’s a different way, you just gotta put the effort in and go that route.

**Theme:** I have been discriminated against at my campus job.

All I know, it was based on discrimination. So, you know what? It got to the point where I just gave her smile like, I see you. Like I said, last hired, first fired. Plus I didn’t fit into their little mold anyway. I can’t change who I am. I can’t help that and I’m not going to try to.

**Theme:** Racial discrimination continues to be problematic on our campus despite efforts to address it.

Oh yeah, discrimination and prejudice alive and well at State University. That’s why they always got all these diversity speakers coming to campus. It seems like most of the time they direct their presentation toward the White audience. All the people of color in the room already get it.

**Theme:** I encounter twice as much prejudice being a Black man with a disability.

So, I have to deal with this and to be a man of color! But we’re all grouped into one basket until they get to know us, it’s incredible man, I’m telling you…two strikes against you. It’s serious.
Without prompting, Carl raised issues of race throughout our dialogue. A core component of his narrative is his experience as an African American man; that is, the obligation he feels to help generationally improve the condition of other people of color, his commitment to his own friends and family, and his awareness of the campus climate. His experience on campus was shaped largely through that lens. He continued to experience prejudice and discrimination inside and outside the classroom and at his first job. His disability status seemed to fit into a more salient part of how he identified as a Black male. Although Carl was not a stranger to prejudice or discrimination, the change in his mobility added an additional “head to an already ugly monster.”

Finances

Theme: I struggle to meet all of my financial obligations.

It’s a struggle man, it’s a struggle. But there was no way in the world I could just sit up and wait for the mailman to come every 30 days. You get one check every month, but still got 30 days worth of bills that piled up. So after that, there is nothing to show. Nothing.

Theme: I must complete my education as a means for achieving financial stability in the future.

…I came here knowing this is my last shot at life. I have to achieve. This is the only shot I have at having a better life. I’ve already invested too much. Failure is not an option. I cannot afford to lose this one.

Carl arrived at State University with a tremendous amount of medical debt. The limited income he did receive was barely enough to sustain him month to month. This was in large part the impetus for his return to school after being able to put together the minimum investment needed to pursue a degree in higher education. He is here out of necessity. The life he envisions
if he fails to complete his degree (and achieve greater financial stability) is miserable and unacceptable to him, which is why it remains his top priority.

**Classroom**

**Theme:** I am not always provided with an opportunity to make a contribution in class.

Believe me, if I raise my hand I’m not just wasting wind. I got better things to do.

So there have been times where I’ve actually had a point to make, raised my hand, and they just kept on and on and on. Didn’t acknowledge me. I was like fuck it. To hell with that. I’ll just let it go. So an idea or a thought that could have inspired somebody was killed. I hated those professors. I’ve got experience with this stuff…

**Theme:** I am able to garner support when professors get to know me.

Those who have allowed me to say what I need to say, they love me. They love me. They love me. They really do. You know, because I bring an honest perspective, common sense. With my life experience, it’s a perspective most of them don’t get to hear. I’ve been able to develop rapport in a lot of my classes.

Carl’s classroom experiences were varied, although overall his experience was favorable. He enjoyed being able to contribute meaningfully when he believed there was something in his experience that would benefit the group-something most of his professors encouraged and appreciated. He describes the letters of recommendation he was able to obtain and the ongoing relationships he has maintained with many of them. He was not able to attribute why other professors completely ignored him, and he didn’t care to engage. He kept his idea but felt as though the entire group, and possibly he himself, were shortchanged because of the missed opportunities.
Social Experience

Theme: I am no longer interested in social experiences because my education is more important.

See. I’m running out of time. I’m a non-traditional student. I got kids that’s older than kids on this campus. So, I don’t have time for no per se social life. I’ve never been to a football game. I’ve never been to a basketball game. Not because I don’t want to go, just because those things don’t interest me anymore. I’m not on that level no more. It’s not that important. When I got here I knew what my ball game was about. I knew what the plan was. I already had it firmly established and it didn’t involve hanging out.

As a nontraditional student with a family of his own and a clear directive, Carl did not have an interest in socializing. It was viewed as an unnecessary distraction and a waste of time. He shared observations about the presence of African Americans on campus and that he was concerned at what he believed to be fewer black men on campus than when he arrived, but maintained he would do what he could to help if presented with an opportunity.

Faith

Theme: I am able to endure more because of my faith in God.

I mean damn, how much hell do a brother have to go through. It’s hard enough being a Black man in America. They make it really hard on me, man. But I’m winning. But they’re not fighting just me. They’re fighting the God in me and that’s way more powerful that anything I can put up. Way more powerful man. So, I’mma keep fighting the good fight. Been at it this too long, I ain’t gonna give up in the middle of the race. I mean shit you’ll never know how close you were to the
finish...you have to cross the finish line. I’m too close. I didn’t live to make it past death just get this far and give up. I can’t. I don’t know how.

Carl had been pronounced legally dead twice during his lifetime, endured multiple botched operations, financial hardship, racism, and discrimination. He believes he is on a mission. Although he moves between various stages of grief with the loss of his mobility, he remains steadfast and committed to his goal of eventually obtaining a PhD and working for the Veterans Administration. He is grateful to be alive and has surprised himself with his resilience throughout the entire arduous process—something he attributes directly to God and his faith.

**Adapting**

**Theme:** I cope by motivating myself and maintaining perspective.

It does take away from you, having to deal with something like this. But I’m dealing with it. I’m dealing with it. Sometimes you gotta say fuck this shit. Ask yourself. Where am I at, what am I here for? Make and print a mission statement, define purpose, goal and expectations. That’s what I needed to do. I gotta be my own cheerleader, man I’m telling you. Cause if I don’t do this, I’m gonna lose... and I’m not going to lose. I don’t believe in a no-win scenario...but we have to tell ourselves these things man to keep ourselves motivated because we don’t always have somebody telling us.

**Theme:** I rely on family to help me through difficult periods.

It was unbelievable the support I had. Family members were calling me constantly seeing how I was doing and I think a large part of being able, of making it through all of that, all those months laying on my back is because I had someone there to support me. It made all the difference in the world.
Theme: I utilize Disability Services to assist me with many different services.

They have been wonderful for the services. It has been a factor. If the weather is getting bad or need a ride, anything. It all adds up it makes a difference.

Carl’s ability to cope with acquiring multiple disabilities, his recoveries, and general support were all largely influenced by faith his family. He considered himself to be a spiritual person, but not religious—the major difference for him being the ceremonious and institutional rituals associated with organized religion. He has become adept at motivating himself, but admittedly shared multiple times what a significant difference his family can make when going through difficult periods. Practically, he shared a positive experience with using the local resources with Disability Services.

Mark

Mark is a 23-year-old Caucasian senior from the eastern part of the state, majoring in public administration. He has congenital optic atrophy and cerebral palsy. He was diagnosed with optic atrophy at the age of 2 years, which resulted in the gradual loss of his eyesight. He and his parents struggled to understand and accept the diagnosis; however, they eventually decided to enroll him in the public school system—a decision in hindsight they all believe was the best. It meant adding a curriculum to learn Braille and Nemeth in preparation for the imminent loss of sight, as well as properly learning how to hold and use a cane. Around the age of 11 years, Mark’s father noticed the development of an irregular walk and a short time later he was diagnosed with cerebral palsy. The next 9 years were challenging for both Mark and his family as he learned to eventually accept the loss of sight and mobility at relatively young age. Mark described moving back and forth through stages of grief and was very cognizant of the similar process his parents were experiencing. He explained that his parents were also “new” to learning
about visual impairments and cerebral palsy, but remained incessant with their support. He excelled academically and by the time he reached high school was participating in athletics, working, volunteering, and preparing for college.

I initially met Mark after a business meeting being conducted by a registered student organization, the Organization for Students with Disabilities. Each week a member volunteered to provide the group with a 10-minute overview of their disability at the conclusion of the meeting, and Mark spoke that evening. He was accompanied by his service animal, Lab, and after a series of questions and answers the meeting adjourned and I introduced myself. He was very open about his experience during his presentation and I seized the opportunity to share information about my research project. He was very interested in assisting me. I accompanied him on the way out of the classroom and it was apparent that Lab served to assist him with balance as well as lead him. He struggled to navigate the narrow aisle between the neatly arranged rows of chairs as he approached the front of the room. I offered to assist by moving chairs to create more space for him and Lab to exit the room. He used his cane once we were in the hallway and effortlessly appeared to transition the steps and doors until we were outside. We scheduled the initial interview and he was pleased I had asked for his help.

**Pertaining to Self**

**Theme:** I am a normal college student.

I am just your average college student, pretty normal, if there is such a thing. Sure, I may need some assistance or a different way of doing things, but I interact just the same. I’m just as involved as anyone else is and I seem to get along well with everybody.

**Theme:** I thrive when I feel a sense of belonging.
I feel like a sense of belonging strengthened all of my performances. I really enjoyed working in the organization because of all the people I met and the lessons I learned, I was really having a great time. I was involved in six other groups mostly in leadership positions and it felt good to be a part of so many positive things. It felt good to be accepted.

**Theme:** I enjoy being an independent person.

I like being able to do things on my own. I had gotten to a point where I just really enjoyed being independent. The perfect example was finally getting my own apartment. It forced me to continue breaking out of my comfort zone and I just learned how to manage.

By the time Mark arrived at college, he thought of himself as a normal college student with the same needs, desires, and aspirations as his sighted able-bodied peers. The longer he remained at college, the more his network developed. This reinforced the notion that he was valued and his sense of accomplishment expanded. He became heavily involved during his sophomore year in both work and school, and his sense of belonging was synonymous with feeling as though he was accepted, valued, and contributing to the needs of groups where he held membership.

**Disability**

**Theme:** I am much more complex than just a disability.

My disability doesn’t define who I am. It’s just one aspect of my life, one unique characteristic about me among many others…like I said, I’m not going to let my inability to see or walk normally interfere with the things I want to do.
**Theme:** I believe working together is the best method for achieving a plan that is mutually agreeable.

If you work together with people who have disabilities… I guess putting your heads together you will find a solution that will work for both parties. I have found that usually people are more open to figuring out what the possibilities are and what we can both do to make things work within reason.

**Theme:** I anticipate prejudice and view it as an opportunity to triumph.

Well, my perception is that there is a stigma with the whole blindness thing—people are going to naturally question my abilities. Like when I walk into a job interview and pass my resume or I remember once when I was running a student group, there was a woman who said: “You know, I was questionable about having a blind president but you’re doing a great job.” It’s hard sometimes but I just take it as it comes and try to prove them wrong.

**Theme:** I find utilizing Disability Support Services to be helpful during my transition to college.

They’ve been very helpful. In high school they were promoting advocacy and preparing us for the transition to college. So once I registered with them, they were able to help me with a lot of different things. Talking with professors, requesting a reader for a test, several things like that.

**Theme:** I have learned to use a variety of services in order to be successful.

...lots of different things over the years; Braille, braces, a walker, my cane. As far as at college, Disability Services has spoken with professors, extra time on test, large print reader… my [service dog] Lab.
Having both a visual impairment and cerebral palsy were almost viewed by Mark as external characteristics—features that have nothing to with who he is as a person. Even though his atrophy is considered a congenital disability, the loss of his sight was gradual, as was the onset of cerebral palsy, which helped to shape his experience differently. During his time at State University, he learned to utilize Disability Services consistently and viewed them as a reliable ally throughout his experience. While he was aware of, even anticipated prejudice, he took a very collaborative approach to helping others understand his disability. He trusted that his work, personality, and persistence would speak louder than directly engaging prejudice and ignorance, which he found to be more satisfying.

The Classroom

**Theme:** I had difficulty with some professors who were not willing to make accommodations.

This one professor, I could not get it in his head that I could not see! The very first day of class he showed a video and I stayed after to talk with him about my accommodations. He mentioned “I noticed you weren’t watching the video, why is that?” I explained that I could not see and reassured him that I was in fact listening and he again asked “But, why weren’t you watching?” I went back and forth with him for 5 minutes! He saw my dog because he was petting him, yet, he still could not understand that I could not see. There was no way around it.

**Theme:** I had many instructors who were creative and understanding with making accommodations.

I had one professor who made arrangements to have another student help me out and another professor who personally helped me take online quizzes. There was an instance in a biology lab that required us to record what we saw from the
microscope so I ended up going to my TA’s office hours. She made up a written version for me, explained what was on it and had lab partners help me…a person with no vision passing a biology lab; I did pretty decent in the class…She enlarged all the diagrams and color coded them for me. She made sure that I had extra time for the exam and a reader…really helpful.

Mark’s experience in the classroom was varied. He expressed that the majority of his professors and instructors were very helpful, often going above and beyond to ensure his needs were met; however, there were also other instances where he encountered resistance, if not complete refusal to recognize his circumstances. Mark found working through Disability Services to be a helpful strategy with resolving those issues.

**Finances**

**Theme:** I must pay additional expenses for the health of my service animal.

After posting on Facebook that my dog was sick, my friend came by to help me.

Once I found an animal hospital, we took her. That trip alone was about $500.

**Theme:** I need to have a job to help pay for my expenses.

I worked part time in the library, which I actually got my freshman year. I liked the social aspects of the job, but I needed the money. Every student needs more money and I was glad they allowed me to keep the job year to year.

Mark was able to maintain employment for the duration of his time at school, which helped to supplement his expenses. While Mark did not necessarily struggle financially, the additional income did allow him flexibility with social activities, extra-curricular interests, and entertainment. While he received assistance from his parents, he tried to assume as much responsibility as he could for living on his own, including the needs of his service animal.
Social Experience

Theme: I was surprised at how many friends I made at college.

It has been pretty successful. For a while I couldn’t believe how many friends I was making, it was hard to keep them all straight. Of course I couldn’t see them so I had to ask who I was talking to. I even made friends with people from back home that I didn’t talk to when I was there.

Prior to moving onto campus, Mark had to complete additional training in town as part of a preparation program through the state and the university. His early arrival provided a social head start, as he was able to secure future jobs and volunteer opportunities through the networking he was able to do at the training facility. Although it took a year for him to become involved on campus, in doing so, it was often in a leadership position, which this allowed him to grow his social network exponentially.

Romantic Relationships

Theme: I struggled to find dates that were accepting of my disability.

Yeah, dating was always kind of challenging for me. I tried to ask out a couple of people, but they ended up turning into friends instead. I don’t have any trouble getting numbers but they don’t answer or ended up standing me up.

Dating proved to be a difficult social interest for Mark, which was frustrating for him. He believed that people were initially interested in him, but attributed their dismissal of him to his disability. He was able to date some, but shared that most ended up turning into friends or not materializing into anything beyond an initial date.

Adapting

Theme: I still cope with the loss of my sight and mobility.
When I was diagnosed with optic atrophy, I was around 2 years old. It was a struggle for me and my family. Then, when I was 11 and I was diagnosed with cerebral palsy, it was really difficult. I still find myself going through the stages of grief, back and forth between some of those stages, the denial, anger, depression, bargaining, but I’ve come to accept me for me.

**Theme:** I cope with challenges by positively reframing or minimizing them.

I consider all obstacles minor setbacks now. I was writing the other day about always feeling like my disabilities were a disadvantage…that I had to prove something and fight to get respect. From all of that, I learned that I needed to accept me for who I am, and others would follow.

**Theme:** I often employ comedy to educate others or minimize.

I feel comfortable joking about my disability because it helps other people feel more comfortable. I think there is humor in everyday situations and it can make it less awkward for everyone.

**Theme:** I compensate by planning ahead and rehearsing.

I actually prepared for the high school graduation ceremony. I had my mobility instructor take me to the stage where the ceremony would be held and tried to get a sense of how everything would be set up and walked the course until I felt comfortable.

Mark used different methods to compensate for his limitations. He possessed a strong awareness about his emotional state and acknowledged moving back and forth through stages of grief, even as a college a student. Although the negative feelings that accompanied the grieving process were infrequent, he maintained a positive overall perspective with his approach to
managing emotions and reframing challenges. He spoke enthusiastically about the success he had using comedy in individual and group settings to help educate others in a way that he felt mitigated awkwardness and created an atmosphere he believed made others feel safe to ask questions or start conversation with him. He continued to refine his strategies after high school and developed practical ways of making up for physical challenges with sound planning, familiarization, and repetition.

**Campus Life**

**Theme:** I believe the exposure and interaction with people who are different enriched my college experience.

I feel like I’m much a more well-rounded since I was able to learn in an environment of people from different backgrounds. I have an idea of what it would be like in the real world and I think it’s important. Everybody benefits from being around others who are different.

**Theme:** I achieved things I did not believe were possible by becoming involved on campus.

Well, a lot of people were like, “Get involved, get involved!” and so I figured why not make the most of the experience. I regret nothing about my experience or activities. They’ve helped me meet people, network, and be academically successful. I’ve gained tools to further my travels in life, basically. I never thought I would be able to get all of those things out of it.

Mark increasingly immersed himself in all aspects of campus life as he gained confidence with successfully being able to balance his academic, work, and volunteer opportunities, culminating with one semester where he made the Dean’s list and was involved in six campus groups, four of which he held some leadership position. He appreciated the diversity of people he
was able to interact with and believed that they were able to benefit equally by their exposure to him. He saw this as reflective of the real world and saw the value of being able to relate to people who are different. As the years passed, his confidence in his abilities grew, and he surprised himself with the number of organizations he had become a part of and the degree of responsibility he had accepted.

**Residential Housing**

**Theme:** I felt empowered by housing staff to self-advocate.

While I was moving in, staff stopped by my room to introduce themselves and offer help. We exchanged contact information and added me on Facebook. We discussed emergencies and instructions for Lab. It was a good change of pace to have someone ask me how they could help me. I felt like an adult, like I would call the shots.

Mark spent years residing in on-campus housing, and his initial experience set the tone for what most of his future interactions would be like. He appreciated being treated like a capable adult and eventually held multiple leadership positions within his hall government. Staff was thorough, and he liked the fact that others had knowledge enough to seek his help about any potential issues where they might assist him.

**Charles**

Charles is a junior from the southern part of the state majoring in communication and sociology. He is an African American male who was born with cerebral palsy and congenital vision loss in one eye. He is an only child raised primarily by his mother and grandfather, family connections that remain very close. He utilizes a motorized scooter for his primary transportation needs. He expressed an overall positive experience at State University for the 4 years he has been
enrolled. After careful research, he eventually decided to attend State University based on proximity to his family and the number of services he found available.

I met Charles with the help of another participant who put us in contact. We agreed to meet at his residence hall for our first interview, which was connected to a cafeteria. I called him when I arrived and he was finishing his meal, but invited me to join him inside. The room was not very crowded so I noticed him right away at a table by himself. He was on the phone with someone and his scooter flanked him on one side. I walked over and he acknowledged my arrival with a smile and signaled me to sit down. His phone conversation finished after a few minutes and we moved toward exiting the cafeteria. Although it was a short distance to return dishes, he hopped on his scooter and drove to the return counter and placed the dishes and we proceeded down the hall to a small conference room. Charles exited his scooter and used the wall to support himself as we walked over to the table. It was not readily apparent that he had a visual impairment.

**Pertaining to Self**

**Theme:** I value the support of my family.

I’m a family kind of guy, love to be around them. It’s important to me, we are very close. I come from a large family. I’m closer to my mom’s side and that is the way it’s been for a long time. They’re one of the main reasons I’m here today. Part of my decision to come to State University was its proximity to home and I didn’t want them to worry.

**Theme:** I strive to be as independent as possible.

I wanted to be my own man, to be independent, to prove to the ones that thought I could not do much that I could. That I could make my own way. The truth is I’m
not going to be around my family my whole life. As time passes, things change, we’re not always going to have those people in my life, we move on. You gotta make your own way, you have to take care of yourself, you always have to look toward doing whatever you can to keep improving yourself, to gain independence.

**Theme:** I will not allow obstacles to prevent me from remaining motivated and improving myself.

No matter what you go through in life, no matter what you accomplish, no matter what people say I think you can accomplish whatever you put your mind to. It’s all about getting better, being better, and never giving up with anything that you set out to do. You’re gonna have ups and downs but you cannot let it stop you from becoming better. I’ve been motivated at that time by what people say I can’t do. You can’t let anything stop you, can’t let it deter you. You have to go through it sometimes in order to get where you need to go.

Charles expressed the significance of his family throughout his narrative. He has very close bonds with his mother and grandfather. As he became older, he came to appreciate their support more while also trying to be sources of inspiration to them. He was very conscious of the fact that he would not be able to rely on them forever and this continued to motivate him to achieve his own independence. They were major advocates during his high school years when many of the staff and administrators attributed his physical limitations to cognitive dysfunction despite being acknowledged by some teachers as academically bright.

**Disability**

**Theme:** I learned how to become comfortable utilizing Disability Services to be successful.
I definitely use Disability Services. The large print reader, sometimes I need extra time for tests or just a quiet room to complete my work in. I always wanted to be like everyone else. I would feel rushed being the last one in class taking a test and that pressure to hurry up and get done—that was my problem so I didn’t always use the service but I wanted to be in the same environment. I’ve learned the hard way to use them and they have been great. I’m comfortable being the last one in class now. I just don’t allow myself to feel rushed. If I am last, so be it if it helps me. That’s the result I want.

**Theme:** I become physically exhausted due to inaccessibility.

I use the accessible buttons to get into the building, but I can’t get the scooter through the door. Most of the halls are like that. I usually just park it outside the door and walk down to class but my muscles get tight and it can be exhausting.

**Theme:** I would not be able to attend school without my motorized scooter.

I can’t walk up those hills, my muscles tighten up and tire. I can’t do that.

Receiving the chair was one of the greatest blessings I’ve ever received. Honestly, if it wasn’t for that scooter, I would not be here. I can’t imagine having to pack up all this stuff, get to the bus, the walking, I couldn’t do it. I tire out too easily. I use it everywhere I can. The disability just limits me. I’ve beaten it up over the years, but it’s still going.

**Theme:** I dread the winter season because it hinders my ability to attend class.

The snow. Ugh, the snow. I got stuck once and it was messed up real bad, it kills the battery. Snow takes longer so I have to leave earlier in the wintertime but that’s always a downfall, it’s so low to the ground. Having the sidewalk plowed helps a
lot. It can be a real struggle though in the winter. Sometimes I’m just not able to make it to class.

**Theme:** I believe people are prejudiced about my disabilities.

I think they have preconceived ideas about my capability. There are always going to be people that make assumptions about what you can do—doctors, teachers, whoever you know? People have told me all kinds of things like I would never be able to drive, never be able to read. I just keep setting my expectations high and trying to better myself.

Although Charles did not become aware of Disability Services until his sophomore year, he eventually learned to utilize the services they provided and spoke very positively about his experience with their office. He initially compared himself to his peers and was left feeling anxious after continually being the last person in class to complete exams. The resulting pressure negatively affected his grades. With some encouragement from his family and the support of a friend, he was made aware of Disability Services, which normalized his level of comfort with his limitations. He learned to adapt to his physical surroundings and relied heavily on his scooter, as his muscles tired quickly from having to use energy for balance. The spring semester was always something he dreaded because of the mobility limitations of the chair in the snow. Attendance was important to him and he was frustrated on occasion with physically not being able to attend class a result of the weather. He also highlighted the adjustment in schedule that was necessary with the unpredictability of the weather. It was clear that everything in the winter must be more carefully planned. Prejudice emerged as a theme again and it was evident that his pre-college experience was much worse that his experience after arriving.
The Classroom

Theme: I am most successful when I sit in the front of the class despite it being physically exhausting.

One thing with me having a visual impairment, I have to sit in front in class. I can see the board more clearly and hear the instructor better. I just learn better, it’s much easier for me. If I sit in the back, I can’t see the board or projector or whatever is being taught, although I wish I didn’t have to walk so far. It gets exhausting for my body, but I just need to be able to concentrate.

Theme: My professors have been accommodating with my requests for help.

My professors have been very supportive. I feel like my professors have been perceptive and pretty helpful, they’ve tried to assist me. You have to be responsible for yourself, but they do what they can to help you succeed.

Theme: I will do whatever I must to get to class unless it is physically impossible.

Even if I had to walk, I’ll do it. But I email and explain I cannot get to class today due to the weather. I try not to miss class at all. That’s what you’re here for. If I really had to miss it, that would be what I would have to do. Just email the professor and let them know I’m having transportation issues and make sure there’s nothing I need immediately.

Charles described an overall positive experience inside the classroom with staff and professors. He found the staff to be consistently accommodating and believed they cared about his well-being. Attending class and being on time were both priorities for Charles, and he reiterated his frustration with the spring term. He took initiative with communicating with professors if he was unable to attend class and described a thorough example of the information
he would include if he had to miss class. His education was his top priority and he learned quickly about the importance of communicating clearly with professors about his needs.

**Finances**

**Theme:** I believe it is more important to focus on academics than working.

I worked for one semester making minimum wage and honestly, my benefits were reduced once I started working and it was just not worth it. I guess I don’t want a job if it has to come before my academics. I didn’t want to have to tussle back and forth with a boss about the schedule, especially if I had a more challenging semester.

Charles did not discuss much about the need for finances. He wanted to retain complete flexibility over his schedule to ensure his academic success. He referenced several friends who suffered academically from having supervisors who were not flexible. Coupled with no immediate need for additional money, perhaps even being financially penalized for working on campus, employment was just not something that was worth his time.

**Social Experience**

**Theme:** I chose to be isolated my freshman year so that I could focus on school.

Honestly, I was isolated my first year. I didn’t go to anything, no social events, not games here or anything. I didn’t go out, I just focused on school. I had the highest GPA I’ve had since I’ve been here during my freshman year.

**Theme:** I desired to become more involved after I secured myself academically.

My GPA fluctuated a bit after that first year because I did want to get out. I ended up meeting my best friend here so we would go out and do a lot of things together.
I think it’s important to take advantage of your time here because you’re not going to get that time back. You don’t want to just rush those years away.

Charles’s primary focus was on his academics and it was important to him to establish himself before venturing into extra-curricular activities. Socializing was not an immediate priority. After he settled in, he became more involved in a number of student organizations and established a few meaningful relationships that he maintains. He became much more focused on a balanced experience and recognized the value in exploring other facets of campus life and enjoying his time. He acknowledged that college was a temporary setting and that while academics remained his priority, there was a benefit to making the most of his experience, even if it meant a slight drop in his GPA.

Adapting

Theme: I believe Disability Services has helped offset challenges with my disabilities.

Using DSS, which was a big help for me when I came to college. I didn’t even know about it. There are not a lot of facilities that will help individuals with physical disabilities too much. I found out a couple years ago and they have been a big help.

Theme: I cope by maintaining perspective about my experiences and thinking futuristically.

I’m very fortunate, very blessed to be living my life and I hope I continue to do so. I don’t give up, had many accomplishments and I plan on graduating, I just try to take it a day at a time and try to do everything I can to benefit myself. I know why I’m here and what I have to do so I just do what I believe in. Some people always have it better, but there are always people who have it worse.
Charles strived to better himself and maintain a realistic, yet, optimistic perspective about his experiences. Recognizing the need to prepare himself to be as independent as possible allowed him to maintain a helpful perspective as he moved forward with his education and career. Practically, he utilized a number of resources through Disability Services and was able to learn strategies that he could employ to be successful inside and outside of the classroom.

**Spirituality**

**Theme:** I believe God is ultimately in control.

I pray every night and every day. I talk with my family now about things once I became more independent. I think I motivated them to start going [to church] again after I left. My granddad just started going back after I started going. I didn’t go every week, but felt like having faith and believing has carried me. God is in control of everything in all of us. I don’t fully stand by things I say when I get frustrated. But with God, it has always worked out. It’s helpful for me.

Charles expressed significance in the role God plays in his life and uses his spirituality as a way of processing and understanding his daily experience. He is encouraged by his faith and took pleasure in knowing he played a role in motivating other members of his family to return to church. Charles acknowledged instances where he speaks out of frustration if he is experiencing a lousy day, but explained that he rediscovers a healthy perspective when he can become spiritually reconnected.

**Campus Life**

**Theme:** Living on campus has been beneficial and convenient.

It’s been positive living on campus. If you’re off, you’re not going to get those same kind of experiences. If you’re on campus you keep up with classes better,
you’re right here, food is here, it’s convenient. Don’t get me wrong, I haven’t wanted to be here the whole time, but if I moved, I would move to a different dorm. I researched too and I read about the benefits before I came. You meet more friends, see advisors, eat, so many more things that are beneficial to you than being off.

Charles conducted his own research prior to making his decision about living on campus. His general impression was that students perform much better if they live on campus. He was able to take advantage of wheelchair accessible housing and the proximity to classes and resources had significant appeal. Ultimately, he enjoyed the convenience and practicality of living on campus.

Race

Theme: I was excited to observe an increase in the number of African Americans on campus. I feel like I’ve seen more African Americans this year than the past 2 years. It just doesn’t seem like that many of us go to college. It made me happy to see that. As long as they can give them the necessary tools to succeed. I definitely don’t see many African Americans with physical disabilities, I just see more Caucasian students in general.

Theme: I have not experienced racism or discrimination directly on campus.

This campus is diverse. I know racism occurs on campus but I haven’t caught it too much. I haven’t really witnessed it directly…the people I’ve been around have been friendly, not rude, not mean. You hope for the best but if I do, I’ll confront ‘em. Racism hasn’t left and it’s not gonna stop but thankfully, I haven’t caught it too much.
Although Charles acknowledged the presence of racism on campus, he never experienced it directly and the same was true for his disability status with perceived discrimination. He remained optimistic and expressed his intention to confront it if he believed he was a target. With professors, other students, and staff, he expressed overwhelmingly positive interactions. Albeit a positive perception, he also acknowledged it may have been the result of choosing to develop his social life after his freshman year.

**Masculinity**

**Theme:** I believe manhood means becoming independent and acting responsibly.

It means being independent and standing your ground and being responsible for yourself. Taking care of what you have to take care of. Do your job as opposed to letting things go. You must get to know yourself and just take it a day at a time and do your job as a man…lead by example and prepare yourself. People are going to depend on you, it’s being selfless. My mom, to this day, says, “You’re the man of the household.” Why is that? She says that because I have to be there for my mother and anybody in that situation. Just can’t take anything for granted.

**Theme:** I had excellent examples of male role models that helped me define what it meant to be a man.

My dad was not a man, he wasn’t there. I made it without him based on him not being there. I didn’t need him and I still don’t need him. When he saw that I had CP he was ashamed. He didn’t know what to do. He put himself before me in that case. I figure if he hasn’t done anything, yet, he probably never will. I’m just happy to have my grandfather and my uncle.
Charles’s father abandoned him shortly after discovering his diagnosis of cerebral palsy. His grandfather and uncle intervened so successfully that many of his peers believed his grandfather was his biological dad. The absence of his father was minimized. He expressed disappointment, but was pleased to have learned the lessons he did as a result. They helped shape his perspective about what it means to be a man and his mother endorsed his role even before he left for college. It synchronized well with his other values and desires to be as independent and helpful as possible. He continued to experience a sense of responsibility to himself, his mother, and to his family; hence, the need to be as successful and realistic as possible.

**Meta-Themes**

A number of meta-themes emerged from the collective narrative of the participants. These meta-themes provide a summative insight into what the experience of attending higher education is like for a student with a physical disability. A detailed analysis of the emergent themes and meaning making process for both individuals and the collective sample is explored in the subsequent chapter.

**Meta-Theme 1: I Strive Towards Independence and Self-reliance**

All of the participants described a desire to continue working towards becoming independent. Seeking independence was a motivating force that helped facilitate learning as much as possible, which included developing as much physical and mental strength possible so that they were able to function with minimal assistance from others. It meant breaking comfort zones, assuming more direct responsibility for their own care, including financially, and gaining mastery of all the tools they used to be successful each day. They were cognizant of the fact that college was a temporary destination in their quest to live meaningful lives as responsible adults. This realization was also true of the support they received from family. Although the support was
appreciated, even necessary at times, it was evident they had a desire to stand on their own and acknowledged the reality that their parents would not always be available. In fact, nearly all of them went against their parents’ wishes to attend school closer to home. There was a presence of futuristic planning and a sense that they were each mindful about preparing themselves for post-graduation life in the workforce and beyond. Examples of themes and quotes illustrating this meta-theme are as follows:

**Theme:** I strive to be independent and self-reliant.

I wanted to develop as much physical skill as I could so that I could function on my own…nobody ever tells you how to achieve independence as a person with a disability. There is not guidebook or roadmap.

**Theme:** I strive to be independent and self-motivated.

All I want to do is be the most independent person I can. I push myself. I just want to be driven and not have to depend on anything else. At the end of the day it’s going to be you standing on your own. You have to be a man or be a woman about it, be determined and just go for it.

**Theme:** I enjoy being an independent person.

I like being able to do things on my own. I had gotten to a point where I just really enjoyed being independent. The perfect example was finally getting my own apartment. It forced me to continue breaking out of my comfort zone and I just learned how to manage.

**Theme:** I strive to be as independent as possible.

I wanted to be my own man, to be independent, to prove the ones that thought I could not do much that I could. That I could make my own way. The truth is I’m
not going to be around my family my whole life. As time passes, things change, we’re not always going to have those people in my life, we move on. You gotta make your own way, you have to take care of yourself, you always have to look toward doing whatever you can to keep improving yourself, to gain independence.

Meta-Theme 2: The University can Improve Accessibility for College Students With Physical Disabilities

Ultimately, participants believed that the university had room to improve accessibility to physical spaces, including classrooms and pathways during mild or inclement weather. Many buildings located on campus were challenging to enter even with modernized electronic upgrades for doors, often at the expense of time and energy to the student. Although some improvements to accessibility were noted, successfully accessing and navigating campus proved to be challenging for all participants. Examples of themes and quotes illustrating this meta-theme are as follows:

Theme: I often have trouble physically accessing buildings and rooms on campus.

There are entire buildings on campus that once you get in, you can’t move around.
I don’t understand how that still happens…the little rooms are so crammed with desks that often times there is no space for me to sit…campus is not ultra-accessible.

Theme: I have discovered there are still many places on campus that are not accessible.

There have been some improvements since I’ve been here but there is a long way to go. I advocated for the new curb cuts and they put in some of them. The bus stop, the student union, and some of the lecture halls. Before that, I wasn’t able to move my chair around some of those places.

Theme: I become physically exhausted due to inaccessibility.
I use the accessible buttons to get into the building but I can’t get the scooter through the door. Most of the halls are like that. I usually just park it outside the door and walk down to class, but my muscles get tight and it can be exhausting.

**Theme:** I have limited use of my wheelchair if the weather is not conducive.

I’m using this old computer, but where I used to be able to go to the computer lab up the hill [walking], can you imagine me in this [wheelchair] slipping and sliding around…and the battery could go dead being in the cold.

**Meta-Theme 3: Investment in Campus Life and Academics has Enhanced my College Experience**

The majority of participants took a deliberate approach to actively engaging themselves on campus with extra-curricular activities, employment, service opportunities, and socializing—efforts that proved to be both rewarding and enriching. All of the participants lived on campus primarily for the convenience and proximity it offers to class, resources, and employment. Overall, they expressed enjoying being on campus, the other people they were able to meet, and the opportunities they were able to take advantage of. Whereas many of them did not describe their high school experience as being very socially positive, a fresh start afforded them much more positive experiences with a group of peers they described as generally more understanding in comparison. Three of the participants ended up finding self-professed “best friends” during their time at college.

**Theme:** I was surprised at how many friends I made at college.

It has been pretty successful. For a while I couldn’t believe how many friends I was making, it was hard to keep them all straight. Of course I couldn’t see them, so I had to ask who I was talking to. I even made friends with people from back home that I didn’t talk to when I was there.
Theme: I believe the exposure and interaction with people who are different enriched my college experience.

I feel like I’m much more well-rounded since I was able to learn in an environment of people from different backgrounds. I have an idea of what it would be like in the real world and I think it’s important. Everybody benefits from being around others who are different.

Theme: I have enjoyed and benefited from immersing myself in campus life.

I’ve lived on campus my whole time. It has been really nice, you know, I’ve received a bunch of awards and nominations [for involvement], it has been a great atmosphere.

Theme: I achieved things I did not believe were possible by becoming involved on campus.

Well, a lot of people were like, “Get involved, get involved!” and so I figured why not make the most of the experience. I regret nothing about my experience or activities. They’ve helped me meet people, network, and be academically successful. I’ve gained tools to further my travels in life, basically. I never thought I would be able to get all of those things out of it.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

This investigation explored the experience of five college students with physical disabilities enrolled at a 4-year Midwest institution of higher education, with the purpose of seeking a thorough understanding of the concerns they faced and how they navigated challenges. Reflecting on their experiences, participants offered advice to various institutional groups to consider at various stages of their college experience. Data revealed critical information pertaining to the challenges these students encountered, and offered enriching insight about how they attempted to maneuver these challenges while retaining their dignity in pursuit of their education. Participants varied in their demographic backgrounds, disability, and life experiences, which highlighted both the complexity and commonalities in navigating their experience in higher education. These experiences were captured through in-depth interviews that were categorized and distilled into three dominant and interrelated themes using an interpretive phenomenological analysis. Major findings highlighted a desire for greater self-reliance and independence, the need for improving accessibility and accommodations, and the importance of engagement with enhancing their overall experience. In this chapter, implications and limitations of the investigation are discussed. Recommendations for future research are suggested.

Independence and Self-Reliance

Among students with disabilities, the importance of striving to become self-reliant and independent (Brislin, 2008; Logan, Bogart, Ross, & Woekel, 2018) has been well documented and may include several other related constructs such as autonomy (Lindsay, 2013), self-determination (Chao, Berven, & Thomas, 2004; Field, Sarver, & Shaw, 2003; Parker & Boutelle, 2009), self-efficacy (Blake & Rust, 2002), attitudes and skills helpful in achieving these goals
such as self-advocacy (Fleming, Orlte, & Plotner, 2014; Kimball et al., 2016; Kinney & Eakman, 2017; Lynch & Gussel, 1996), and persistence (Knight, Wessel, & Markel, 2018). While each of these constructs is distinct and worthy of exploration, their collective emergence in this study acknowledges the importance of this broader theme. Simply put, it appears to be at the epicenter of understanding a significant motivating factor within the experience of college students with physical disabilities in helping to better equip them for success and create environments and systems that are conducive to their needs.

The results of this study are overwhelmingly consistent with previous literature, providing further evidence that if this subgroup of students, who are possibly at greater risk for disproportionately lower course completion, graduation, and retentions rates (Murray et al., 2014; Schechter, 2018; Sharkin, 2004), are provided with opportunities to develop the capacity for greater self-determination, taught advocacy skills and engaged humanistically (Evans, Assadi, & Herriott, 2005; Field et al., 2003), the likelihood they will be successful increases.

For example, Sarver (2000), later advanced by Field et al. (2003), identified a significant relationship between self-determination and academic success, autonomy, problem-solving, and persistence with college undergraduates. Similarly, Kimball et al. (2016) documented a relationship between self-advocacy and adjustment, persistence, and academic success. Not only do these outcomes demonstrate interrelatedness between constructs, they also suggest that individuals possessing these capabilities may be better positioned for even broader skill acquisition. Additionally, Brislin (2008) posited that a positive sense of self not only correlates with success, but also can positively influence social behavior.

Participants revealed that at the core of their motivation was a strong self-concept. The idea that setting goals and persistently working toward achieving them despite what obstacles
they encountered is consistent with what Bandura (1994) maintained was a high level of self-efficacy. Bandura (1994) believed that this was reflected in one’s selection of goals and their persistence in obtaining those goals. Regardless of their background, onset, and type of disability, each of the participants transitioned into the college environment. While those who were able to receive transition assistance prior to college found it to be helpful, those who did not receive similar assistance ultimately displayed a similar level of commitment toward achieving their personal goals and sense of worth, even if their process in doing so differed.

Explored from a different perspective, other theorists believe that the process for seeking independence is a developmental task that all students must resolve. Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) model of college student development described the third developmental vector as moving through autonomy towards interdependence, during which students transition toward assuming more responsibility for their goals and future direction, and are less consumed with reliance on parents or peer group approval as they learn to function on their own and commit to their own decision making. While the reality with some physical disabilities is that the student does in fact rely on various forms of practical assistance, assuming as much control over their daily lives as possible was an evident desire among the participants even if it was, at times, at odds with the amount of assistance needed. While this vector is a credible developmental task for traditional college students, resolution may not be necessary for non-traditional college students who have likely already resolved this developmental task, whether they have spent time on a college campus or not. Carl, for example, after acquiring a disability, returned to college having already established clarity about his goals and did not allow others’ opinions to alter his desire to proceed with attaining his goals. The acquisition of the disability was not only what prompted his return to school, it also shaped his perspective by prioritizing his education over social
interactions and other developmental challenges more typically associated with traditional age college students. For the remaining four participants, the presence of a physical disability appears to have accelerated the process by which they began to establish goals and grapple with balancing the practical needs of parental support with their quest for as much autonomy in their future as possible.

There is evidence of this when examining education literature among high school students with congenital or acquired physical disabilities who are planning on enrolling in college. While IDEA and Section 504 mandate many accommodations (fair and appropriate public education) through secondary education, research among this group does not always consider the impact of parental engagement throughout the primary and secondary education, or the value in the process by which students with physical disabilities have to learn, out of necessity, their physical limitations and skills for navigating environmental barriers. Often times after years of learning and adapting, by the time these students reach college they are already somewhat comfortable requesting assistance, have a thorough understanding of their disability and limitations, and are better positioned to play central roles in creating their own plan for success because they are equipped to do so. Students with physical disabilities often do not have the privilege of being able to conceal an impairment, or choose when to disclose that particular disability. Whereas, literature involving students with “invisible” disabilities, often describe the increased challenge of having to disclose a disability in order to receive services (even though no student is required to disclose unless they are requesting an accommodation).

Counselors and other personnel working with these students should exercise awareness and caution with assumptions and prejudice pertaining to requests for services or accommodations. Results of this study demonstrate that while they may need help with the
process about how and where to obtain assistance, these students were not ignorant of their functionality, or at the mercy of the institution to help them discover that. Work by Torkelson and Gussel (1996), for example, reveals a much more capable and knowledgeable student than the portrayal of a stereotypical clueless student doomed without the help of parents or others to help them understand their limitations. As seasons, semesters, and healthcare needs change among students with physical disabilities, so might the assistance they need. Adaptability to these changes is a potential strength of these students, and generalizable to other areas of their experience.

Having a physical disability may indeed accelerate the process by which these students come to understand their needs, and by extension it may also strengthen coping mechanisms and clarity about solidifying other forms of support. This striving for self-autonomy continued once these students arrived on campus in every facet of their college experience. For these students, gaining more self-sufficiency and independence meant continuing to gain as much physical skill and mobility as possible, seizing opportunities to learn and expand their experiences, possessing their own space, and becoming their own source of encouragement and motivation.

Other theorists have considered the impact of other factors on students’ ability to develop strong self-concepts and assume more responsibility. Schlossberg (1989) considered concepts of mattering and marginality, and the role of the institution itself with helping students to feel as though they feel noticed, important, cared about, empathized with, and appreciated. Persons with disabilities still hold a marginalized status in society and the institution does have a responsibility to assist these students; yet, the varying perceptions about the extent to which the institution helped them feel as though they mattered ultimately had little deterrent on their quest to accomplish their goals. Feeling noticed, cared about, and appreciated by the institution was not a
prerequisite for success among participants who believed the institution could improve its assistance of students with disabilities. Some participants persisted despite feelings of invisibility and discrimination, and were anchored by other sources of support and encouragement when they felt that the institution did not provide an adequate amount (Gulp, Rojas-Guyler, Vidourek, & King, 2017).

Schlossbergs’s (1995) transition theory considered a broader perspective that included “any event, or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles” (p. 27), with particular attention given to context and impact. She later simplified the presentation of the theory as having three components: (1) approaching change, (2) taking stock, and (3) taking charge. Although participants arrived from different backgrounds, all of them shared the commonality of support and experience with having to learn to advocate for themselves prior to arriving on campus. This provided a secure and established foundation with which to begin their experience in higher education. In their disclosures about their experience prior to arriving at college, it was clear that their secondary education experiences proved to be a valuable training platform (Elliot, Herick, & Witty, 1992). All college students arrive at institutions at various stages of development, bringing different life experiences and different ideas about the purpose and function of seeking a college education. Many students with physical disabilities have been introduced to doubt from school staff, peers, and even well intentioned family about their ability to attend college, let alone be successful in doing so. The student is no stranger to having their likelihood at being successful questioned, and even guardians can cast doubt, often in an attempt to realistically weigh the feasibility of service delivery, available support, costs, etc.
Overcoming these doubts and obstacles, and in some cases convincing understandably wary parents, the decision to attend college was initiated by all participants. Often times, this decision was met with reluctance or discouragement from concerned parents who were understandably hesitant about allowing their child to attend college, typically at some distance from home. While multiple concerns exist pertaining to the transition students with physical disabilities make from high school to college, including the delivery of service, all of the traditional students in this investigation successfully advocated for their own admittance, despite discouragement from parents. In making the transition to college, it may be a smoother developmental transition for students with physical disabilities considering their preparation and support. This sense of self and ability to self-determine is a central theme in humanistic approaches of counseling, and may provide a helpful framework in better understanding their desire for purpose.

While striving for independence and self-reliance was a desire that was shared by all participants, there were varying degrees of dependence or some combination of assistance in order to be successful both inside and outside of the classroom. These supports manifested in the form of various types of accommodations, financing, and general assistance acclimating to the geography and campus personnel. The helpfulness of the office responsible for oversight of student disability related issues has yielded mixed results across students with various disabilities. Consistent with some literature on the usefulness of a disability services entity on campus (Geblar et al., 2015), many participants described the ongoing helpfulness of the disability services office with assisting them to secure accommodations, connect them with community resources, serve as intermediary with faculty or staff, find employment, and help them acclimate to campus. Other forms of necessary assistance came from other places, which
included their family and friends, government and local agencies, and university faculty and staff.

Participants offered unanimous feedback regarding the challenges they faced with accessibility and seeking accommodations, which often times is more challenging than in secondary education settings. This experience is overwhelmingly consistent with literature among students with physical disabilities. The transition from high school to college and the accompanying challenge of obtaining and paying for all of the necessary services that are needed to be successful have been well documented. Mandates under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act are only able to be received during primary and secondary education. Services covered under IDEA do not extend into higher education. Arranging and paying for services that were once the responsibility of a school district, now fall on the resourcefulness and creativity of students and their families, state agencies, and/or the institution. The participants were unanimous in their evaluation of interactions with disability services. Research has provided mixed results on student perceptions about using their local office designated for disabilities (Madaus, 2012). Although some of the students were initially reluctant or unaware of the existence of the office, once contact had been established, it proved to be a helpful resource in mitigating the difficulty with coordinating services.

Of all the participants, Mark’s experience provides the closest example of an ideal transition and acquisition of resources. His high school staff including his counselor were proactive and well connected, and he had a number of personal and private resources he could access. He participated in a transition program in conjunction with a local agency that allowed him to live on campus, find employment, and work directly with disability service office prior to his arrival. Literature suggests that if a student can familiarize themselves with a college campus
and host city prior to the onset of their first academic semester, this facilitates a smoother transition prior to campuses becoming more crowded, which ultimately better positions the student to develop autonomy earlier in their higher education experience.

As class schedules change, disabilities improve or worsen, or locations of classes change, a continual re-evaluation of needs each semester is necessary in order to be most successful. Of all the supports, none perhaps were more conspicuous than the use of a wheelchair or motorized scooter. While these served as practical transports, they also conserved essential physical energy for all of the participants. It illustrates an excellent example of the variety of equipment used by students who at face value were utilizing the same resource. It leaves the impression that the same resource is in some way standardized, when in reality they are not. Thomas, for example, had a powerful motorized wheelchair that resembled a small all-terrain vehicle. It was durable and had large wheels with a low center of gravity. He also possessed a back-up pedal bike, an adult tricycle of sorts, that was stored inside his residence in the event his motorized chair stopped working, even if it had to be physically powered. The power chair made otherwise impassable curbs passable and could navigate the worst weather conditions, including snow, with relative ease.

A campus with uneven topography added to frustration with trying to find reliable transportation. While the need for wheelchairs was clearly evident, when equipment failed it had consequences, despite efforts from participants to try and offset the setback. For some of the students it meant literally not being able to go to class. Eve described the spring semester as “dreadful,” stating, “I always do worse in spring semester.” Yet, even in worse case scenarios, tremendous effort was made to notify professors, walk to class, and find creative ways to attempt to get caught up on material that was missed. Charles described his desire to attend class no
matter what challenges arose. He described an instance after his chair broke of walking to class. Upon arrival, he was so exhausted and his muscles were so cramped that he had difficulty focusing on the material that was being taught. While these examples clearly support literature on the importance of self-efficacy, initiative, etc., it is contrary to some research that suggests students with physical disabilities are not as adept as their able-bodied counterparts at exercising it.

This is another instance where having a physical disability may accelerate the implementation of what Chickering and Reisser (1993) referred to as *establishing competence*—intellectual, physical, and social. For students with physical disabilities, learning how to effectively communicate about needs and the desire to learn and acquire skills may come out of necessity given the unique challenges they face. It also speaks to this group of participants’ self-directedness, confidence, and sense of worth and value. Other accommodations and services that were provided included the integration of various forms of hands-free technology, computer adaptations and software programs, scribes, readers, Braille, service animals, canes, and personal aides—all things designed to assist with the physical space or use of items.

While the institution is able to supply some services and provide accommodations to students at no direct cost, there are other services that the institution does not offer and will not pay for, such as personal aides. Many studies document the financial hardships of college students and of college students with disabilities, previously covered under IDEA, making the transition to college and having additional costs for maintenance of equipment and services (Geblar et al., 2015). The participants in this study were no different. The experiences were consistent with this literature. Like many college students, they too sought out ways to offset the financial burden of attending college with a physical disability (Kim & Williams, 2012). The
majority of participants held jobs while on campus. While this supplemental income was helpful, there were instances where it was still not sufficient and students had to exercise creativity with securing additional funds. Collectively, these data suggests that regardless of onset or type of disability or stage of education, equipping students as early as possible with a sense of purpose is of paramount importance. This has implication for parents/guardians, care providers, school and college counselors, and others that students are likely to have contact with.

**Accessibility**

Perhaps the most frequently studied challenge pertaining to students with physical disabilities is the very practical issue of accessibility, which also manifested as a significant theme. Despite over 60 years of knowledge about the experience of students in higher education, the passage of three major pieces of disability legislation (Rehab Act, ADA, IDEA) and their subsequent amendments, and a new proliferation of studies about the experience of these students in both qualitative and quantitative research, improvements to the physical accessibility to campus spaces continues to be one of the most frequently cited frustrations among this group (Scott, 2019). The findings in this investigation sadly echoed those same frustrations unanimously. Since the 1950s when veterans first arrived on college campuses, being able to gain physical access to classrooms, cafeterias, housing, athletic venues, theatres, and other necessary buildings whose sole purpose is to either directly educate or engage students is still not completely accessible. For example, in their meta-analysis of scholarly articles pertaining specifically to college students with physical disabilities, Geblar et al. (2015) clearly show that accessibility continues to be a popular topic of investigation. This may be in part due to the tremendous impact that a lack of accessibility potential has on the daily experience of these students. Despite legal mandates under ADA and the Rehabilitation Act, colleges continue to be
challenged by issues of accessibility in antiquated buildings, renovated buildings, and newly constructed facilities. All of the students in this investigation described ongoing and pervasive problems with accessibility. Thomas captured the scope of the problem describing his difficulty getting inside an academic building where his wheelchair would not fit through the door. He would have to walk the remainder of the way, exhausted by the time he actually arrived to his classroom. He was then expected to focus for two hours after being physically drained of the energy spent of actually walking to a class seat. In addition to entering academic buildings, classrooms, hallways, and other administrative buildings were also a challenge to navigate. Charles described his frustration with not being able to gain access to the student center without having to go to the opposite end of the building to access the ramp because every other entrance had at least two flights of steps. It did not appear that any buildings on campus, including newly constructed ones were designed with a student with a physical disability in mind.

Research suggests that the previously described scenario is not all that uncommon. Typically, institutions are guided by “cost effectiveness and efficiency,” which often means fulfilling the absolute minimum requirement with meeting standards put forth in disability legislation. Be that as it may, there are institutions that market themselves in part based off external appraisals of their appeal to students with disabilities. However, these rankings typically consider all types of disabilities. For example, College Choice provides yearly rankings of institutions that are considered the most disability friendly in the United States. The formula used to produce those rankings considers a wide range of criteria. This may be only partially useful to students with physical disabilities, as so much of the formula considers non-physical disabilities. For example, in 2012, the University of Michigan was the highest rated campus in their ranking;
however, the institution was the defendant in multiple lawsuits all centered around physical accessibility between 1995 and 2010 (Shulz, 2010).

Weather also proved to be a challenging adversary, especially during the winter months when snow not only obstructed sidewalks but made visibility difficult to see if paths were not cleared of snow. There were some instances that participants described discovering that their normal route to go to class was being blocked by plowed snow. This is consistent with numerous qualitative studies conducted with participants who utilized wheelchairs (Gelbar et al., 2015; Rice et al., 2015). In some climates, winter months are physically difficult to navigate, which can have a profound impact on students’ ability to arrive at class in person or on time. Some studies have documented the decline in academic performance during spring semester and third quarter terms due to weather-related issue. For example, Eve explicitly discussed how she expected her grade point average to go down every spring semester as a result of snow. Institution location, therefore, maybe a factor when selecting a school; although Thomas moved from a warm southern climate to the Midwest because his sense of adventure trumped the practical consideration of colder weather.

**Engagement**

The third meta-theme was the importance of involvement and engagement with enhancing their overall experience. Although evidence is incomplete about the direct relationships between frequency, type, depth, and outcomes (Webber, Krylow, & Zhang, 2013), literature does suggest that involvement can potentially lead to desirable outcomes including broader social networks and meaningful relationships, stronger academic performance and integration of curriculum into real-world applications, leadership development, greater support and satisfaction, and higher GPA (p. 591). The participants’ experiences were consistent these
findings. In his scholarship of college dropouts, Alexander Astin’s (1975, 1999), developmental theory of student involvement sought to identify factors that contributed to college students remaining or departing from college. In short, factors that were believed to assist with retention constituted activity now associated with involvement. Factors that increased a student’s likelihood of dropping out implied a lack of involvement. Astin identified that factors like residing on campus, participation in athletics or student groups, and being employed on campus were all associated with positive outcomes. Peer relationships and faculty/staff interactions were also identified as potential contributors to satisfaction.

Sadly, literature regarding peer relationships was consistent with initial social experiences of most of the participants (Fleming et al., 2017). Despite generally strong academic performance, residing on campus, holding campus jobs, and involvement in various extracurricular activities, participants discovered challenges with creating meaningful friendships. This was even truer when attempting to pursue more intimate relationships, often to their frustration. Literature suggests that many people with disabilities have difficulty making friendships for many reasons previously mentioned (Squires et al., 2018). This underscores the importance of continuing to actively engage students with disabilities, humanize them, and bring opportunities to increase general awareness about their experience. Opportunities to implement universal design and be inclusive of students with physical disabilities will help demystify their experience and normalize and strengthen perceptions, while reducing stigma and stereotypes.

Whether faculty, staff, or peers are engaging students effectively in any environment may require a deliberate effort to put prejudice, stigma, and stereotypes aside. For counselors working with these students, a humanistic approach is appropriate considering the historical oppression and marginalization of people with physical disabilities. Johnson (2016) reintroduced the concept
of somebodiness as a culturally relevant and humanistic means of examining the psychological functioning of African American men, a group that has been historically demonized and marginalized. Being deeply rooted in African American history and the civil rights movement, the concept of somebodiness is concerned with “self-determination, self-definition, self-acceptance and self-love” (p. 333). While disability status and race are by no means mutually exclusive, nor is the distinct historical experience of these collective groups the same, the concept of somebodiness is useful in helping to make sense of the experience of these students.

Accepting the personhood of students with physical disabilities is both fundamental and paramount to assisting and uplifting students as they strive toward their aspirations. All of the participants viewed themselves on a futuristic quest. They believed that they were worthy, intelligent, and capable people that worked diligently and purposefully toward their goals despite encountering obstacles—both physically and otherwise. By their own admission, participants viewed themselves as “normal people” who happen to have a physical disability. And as such, expected to be treated accordingly.

Colleges are microcosms of the broader society and often reflect those corresponding values. Understandably, addressing the challenges students face is often viewed in terms of focusing on external forces like ableism, racism, sexism, etc. These foci are indeed an important part of a broader strategy to improve campus climates; however, focusing on enhancing and reinforcing the intangible internal forces that motivate these students is equally important. Results of this study support Johnson’s (2016) conclusions about the core principals of somebodiness and provide more evidence that the concept has applicability with other marginalized groups. Participants all believed they were people of value and worth, had purpose, and saw themselves simultaneously as part a broader community. They were very conscious of
setting an example for others, educating others and “giving back.” One of the recruitment locations for participants was a students with disabilities group whose motto was “education through service.” This notion of giving back was true in terms of their status with having a physical disability but also true with race, at least for Carl as an African American man who spoke about his desire to give back to the African American community more than he did disability. Three our of the five participants spoke frequently about God or spirituality and either directly stated or implied that their worth was “God-given,” and that as such, their lives had purpose and meaning.

**Implications for Counselors**

Based on the narratives of the participants, it clear that the experience of college students must be viewed within the context of their entire educational experience. Considering the potential impact during formative years, a broader approach to understanding concerns of this population at the college level will allow counselors opportunities to intervene at other points during the education process. With the exception of educators, there are arguably no professionals better positioned to assist students with physical disabilities at all stages of their education. Professional counselors are likely to have a presence at every point of entry and transition in the realm of education from primary education through higher education and/or beyond with employment. The broad network of professional organizations (e.g., ACCA, ASCA, ARCA) and the wealth of partnerships position the profession to be leaders in this area. There are also few professions that have been as involved in the study of disability, especially within higher education, for as long. The timeliness and re-focus of disability issues within the counseling profession within the past few years has been evidenced in a number of ways. Noteworthy are the approved merger of accrediting standards for CORE and CACREP in 2017,
and in March 2019, the ACA governing council approved disability related counseling competencies (Chapin et al., 2018). This shift signals a renewed prioritizing of disability issues for all areas of the counseling profession; that is, for counselor educators, clinicians, and counselors-in-training (Coduti, Hayes, Locke, & Youn, 2016). Assuming that the currently proposed accreditation standards will become effective in 2023, the American Counseling Association will inevitably continue to invest in the revision of curriculum development and metrics to ensure counselors are familiar with the general needs of students with disabilities.

As explained in previous chapters, civil rights legislation and subsequent disability legislation are products of lengthy and ongoing battles to protect oppressed people. Regardless of setting, counselors should not assume, overlook, or minimize the importance of what may be seemingly obvious to some. If counselors are to become effective change agents with facilitating processes that strengthen internal mechanisms of self-worth, meaning, and purpose, or if they are to address external obstacles and systems that perpetuate the status quo, they must believe students with physical disabilities are human-beings; that is to say, they have worth, “feelings, needs, ideas, aspirations and insecurities…” (Johnson, 2016, p. 341). Counselor must make a deliberate effort to educate themselves about disability-related issues and conduct frequent self-appraisals and engage in supervision that helps identify areas that the counselor may not be aware of. This will help to minimize the biases, stereotypes, and prejudice that inevitably translate to damaging or irresponsible behavior when working with this group.

**School Counselors**

The experiences described in this research underscore the importance of the role of school counselors in both primary and secondary education settings. All of the traditional age college students in this investigation vividly recalled both positive and negative influences of
school staff including counselors. School counselors are uniquely positioned and trained to assist these students with advocacy, transition concerns, short-term mental health, and a focus on self-advocacy and self-determination (Milsom & Akos, 2003). The American School Counseling Association, a division of the American Counseling Association, revised their position pertaining to school counselors and students with disabilities in 2016. The ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success standards have been praised by other professional organization for its focus on persistence and self-management. The findings of this investigation provide more evidence of the need for school counselors to play an active role in facilitating and mobilizing other stakeholders in preparing students at all levels of education. Counselors working in secondary education should continue to connect families with each other for support and direct them to resources, which will enable students to plan in advance. Building partnerships with higher education institutions, both formal and informal, can also help facilitate the creation of programs to assist with early arrival, orientation, and accessing the campus office for disability services.

**College Counselors**

Professionals who identify as counselors in higher education, regardless of position, can be of assistance with improving the experience of college students with physical disabilities (Beecher, Rabe, & Wilder, 2004). Indeed, as early as the 1950s, there were personnel who were trained as professional counselors who were among the first to assist veterans who were returning to school with physical disabilities. This preceded all of the disability legislation now taken for granted within institutions of higher education. Although the next version of accreditation standards have yet to be finalized, they are certain to have implications for all cognate areas. Regardless of college counselors’ position on campus, whether in admissions, the counseling center, or financial aid, basic awareness, knowledge, and skills designed to be
considerate of this population will soon become fundamental training (Schwitzer, 2009). Because these students are likely to engage with every office on campus at some point during their matriculation, college counselors will be able to contribute in a variety of positive ways. In 1955, Ralph Beride discussed not only the need to provide assistance to students with physical disabilities, but to assess the effectiveness of counseling in doing so, arguing that as little attention has been given to evaluating counseling physically disabled students as has been given to the students themselves. Clearly the profession is mobilizing and preparing to continue positioning itself as leader with making progress in this area. Creating, assessing, and evaluating measures of effective strategies and theories in working with this population will become increasingly important as the profession seeks to advance its understanding and improve the climate. College counselors can expect to see more detailed guidance about expectations for their role with all categories of disability.

The role of colleges in facilitating the preparation of students to find employment is central to their mission. Many students expect greater social mobility and job satisfaction after investing in higher education. The counseling profession has its roots in career development and vocational rehabilitation. All professional counselors receive training in career development and career development theory, regardless of their specialty area. This meshes well for counselors working within higher education, as some these goals are inherently aligned. Many institutions devote resources to a career development office, typically responsible for oversight of comprehensive career development opportunities for their campus, including job fairs, interviewing practice, internship pairing, etc. Counselors are again uniquely positioned to forge partnerships with such offices and provide a practical disability perspective to staff that can facilitate the evolution of curriculum to include disability-specific awareness, knowledge, and
skills for students, faculty, and staff utilizing their office. In her research brief on behalf of the National Center for College Students with Disabilities, Kate Pillette (2019) outlined fundamental job search skills that are critically important for all students with disabilities to be familiar with. These comprehensive skills can be integrated into advising plans or provided at multiple locations within a student’s experience such as the disability services office, new faculty training programs, etc.

**Implications for Institutions**

Despite having a broad collection of many individual differences, this group unanimously conveyed their critique of the university and offered meaningful suggestions for consideration. The most apparent among them was the need for institutions to continue to modernize their campus space so that it is conducive for people with physical disabilities. Participants mentioned classrooms, corridors, paths, sidewalks, doors, furniture, and methods of transportation to name several. If students are not able to physically arrive to attend class, eat, engage, socialize, or experience any facet of campus life due to not being able to physically access the space, the institution has failed a growing segment of the college student population. Students from all walks of life, as illustrated in this investigation, will continue to enroll at institutions of higher education. While retrofitting and modernizing older sections of campus can be costly, it should go without saying that all newly constructed areas and buildings should (a) make a concerted and deliberate effort to exceed the mandatory minimum requirements for compliance with ADA and Fair Housing Act, and (b) aspire to actively create an inclusive space, with persons with physical disabilities remaining a constant consideration. Steps should be taken to design and implement short and long-term universal design plans.
Consistent with previous research regarding interactions with faculty, staff, and peers, participants expressed variation among members of all three groups in terms of knowledge and willingness to provide assistance. If universities wish to attract and retain persons with physical disabilities, faculty and staff should receive some general training about mandatory accommodations and best practice for providing support services. Institutions vary with training programs for faculty and staff. These programs would be fairly easy to implement and minimal in costs. Although new faculty and staff are often overwhelmed with orienting and acclimating to their new role and environment, hearing directly from students with varying disabilities via sort panel would be minimally intrusive and provide a broad awareness of legal mandates not just for students with physical disabilities, but all students with disabilities. The creation of a quick-reference guide may also be helpful for faculty and staff who are unfamiliar about different types of services and accommodations that may be available or required to provide. The implementation of these should increase awareness among an integral group that can have a profound impact on these students’ success.

Staff at every level within the institution, especially at the senior leadership level (e.g., president, provost, deans, facilities/construction management) should minimally initiate and regularly maintain an open dialogue both with their disability services office, and more importantly, with some representation directly from students. These opportunities should be both seized and created. Accordingly, university leadership will have to financially invest and do more than pay lip service to reasonable student concerns. Searching for opportunities to build partnerships internally and externally to the campus would be mutually beneficial to the university and to students. The overwhelming majority of students know that they will not receive everything they need; however, there are some basics services, modifications, and
accommodations they should always have. The dialogue is requisite to identifying what those accommodations are and how to best achieve gaining them.

University staff must recognize that students with physical disabilities are highly individualized; that is, there are not two students that will have the exactly the same experience. Indeed, the participants in this investigation differed across age, onset and type of disability, ethnicity, life experience, upbringing, coping strategies, financial and emotional support, and the services and accommodations they required for success. The reality is that assisting these students can be incredibly complex when done effectively. While it is convenient, even necessary at times to lump all students with a physical disability into the same homogeneous group, in doing so the individual humanity, flexibility with distribution of resources, and continuity with building on knowledge about how these individuals navigate and negotiate these processes can get lost. This information will be critical to creating, allocating, and administering the finite resources institutions will have at their disposal to better serve this group. Assessing data directly provided by students about their experience will assist administrators at all levels and on both academic and student life sides of the institution make better decisions. The disability service office may be able to solicit anonymous feedback about how students feel the campus environment is assisting them in areas of accessibility, accommodations, relationships with faculty and peers, etc. Participation in campus climate surveys can also be a useful tool with gauging how this group perceives their experience.

College preparation programs have taken many different forms. For students with physical disabilities, this has been extremely helpful with acclimating to many facets of campus living. While these programs vary significantly in scope and administration, they often expedite the challenging initial task of learning the physical space of campus buildings and paths without
the congestion that typically accompanies the onset of a new academic year. It is often the time when students are introduced to whatever office is responsible for coordinating services and accommodations.

**Implications for Parents and Prospective Students**

For all of the participants, parental (or equivalent) involvement throughout their lives was critically important even though they revealed a clear desire to continue learning as much as possible in order to position themselves for the most independent and self-sufficient future possible. Some explicitly mentioned anticipation of their parents not “being around forever” and wanting to make the most of their college experience so that they were able to live as independently as possible in the future. Multiple studies have demonstrated ongoing parental involvement as an important factor in student success. Parents of students considering higher education should expect there is some normalcy with their student having a desire to become independent and self-sufficient. Balancing expectations with needs and practicality inevitably takes some adjusting by all involved. Staying engaged with the career readiness and college planning/IEPs, and understanding that it may not always be possible to receive answers to the many detailed questions associated with a transition of that magnitude is also paramount. Research also suggests that familiarizing oneself with the process of requesting services prior to arrival so that both parent and student are aware frequently helps with transition planning and cost analysis. Lastly, making contact with the institution’s disability services office and subscribing to supports at local and state levels is recommended.

Participants were eager to impart advice for students who will inevitably continue following in their quest in increasing numbers. Overall, their collective advice reflects the themes that were distilled during the investigation. They collectively highlight the overall
experience of higher education as an exciting time, but a time that will realistically not be without challenge, physically and developmentally, both inside and outside of the classroom. They emphasized the importance of preparation and planning, but also the importance of being patient and adaptable. They encouraged all incoming students to register with the disability services office as soon as possible and to seek opportunities to garner support for both academic and extracurricular endeavors.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

In their interdisciplinary meta-analysis of 1,036 journal articles published between 1951 to 2012, Geblar et al. (2015) described research data pertaining to students with physical disabilities as “sparse, fragmented…and idiosyncratic” (p. 24). As discussed in previous chapters, counseling literature also reflects this trend. The counseling profession appears to be reversing this trend during the past few years. The participants in this investigation revealed several fundamental challenges with being fully recognized as equal members of their campus community. It is clear that despite almost 30 years since the passage of ADA, most institutions remain at the beginning stages of effectively meeting the needs of students with physical disabilities.

One of the most difficult methodological challenges is related to sample. Being able to isolate samples of students with physical disabilities is paramount to establishing research that directly speaks to their experiences and effective programs or interventions. Doing so is much more difficult with samples of students with disabilities that include only a small fraction of those with mobility impairments.

There have been very few longitudinal studies that track students with physical disabilities from high school or earlier through their higher education journey. The potential for
this type of investigation would provide exceptional data with which to observe students in a broad context over time. A design of this nature would allow investigators to access micro- and macro-level information about perceptions, decision making, strategies, costs, service utilization, and a number of other topics of interest that would be useful in generating theory and developing effective intervention strategies. This data would be extremely useful in generating revised training competencies and standards of practice. There is also very little data that distinguishes between congenital and acquired physical disabilities, and the details of supports and coping processes of these experiences. Qualitative studies on this subject may be useful in exploring another dimension of complexity and heterogeneity in the population.

One of the challenges with research on college students with physical disabilities is the very convoluted inclusion of this group within the broader demographic of all college students with disabilities. The practical needs of a student with a physical disability maybe quite different from an able-bodied student who has a diagnosable psychiatric or learning disability. While these are not mutually exclusive disabilities, the need for assistance among college students with physical disabilities is very individualized. The students in this study highlighted the challenging reality that although it may be convenient or even helpful at times to group all students with disabilities together, or all students with physical disabilities together, the type and onset of disability and access to resources have a profound impact on their coping strategies, assistance that is needed, and ultimately their likelihood to be successful. Each student detailed very different combinations of financial, emotional, technical, and spiritual supports at their disposal. Being able to see the individuality in each situation allows for flexibility in the service delivery structure and recognition of their individual humanity.
Limitations

This investigation was not without limitations. With regards to the sample size, the selection of candidates was deliberate. While the sample was inclusive of gender, disability, and culture, all participants were selected from the same campus. While parts of their experience were consistent with previous findings, the degree to which some part of their experience can be uniquely attributed to the institution is difficult to discern. Future studies may choose to include a sample from different institutions in the same region. Furthermore, this study focused on participants who held at least junior status or above due to the desire to include participants who could reflect thoroughly on their experience. Including participants who held underclassman status may reveal different outcomes and overall experiences, as they would not necessarily have had the advantage of having more experience or time for reflection.

Conclusion

Pioneering scholars began exploring the experiences of students with physical disabilities on college campuses nearly 65 years ago. While current enrollment and projections clearly point to forward progress legislatively, there are still major challenges these students face. Counselors are uniquely positioned to help facilitate development, cultivate partnerships, strengthen internal motivators and help dismantle systemic and other external forces that prevent students with physical disabilities from recognizing their full potential. Students with physical disabilities must be seen as fully human, which may require the individuals working with them to be self-critical of their own assumptions related to disability, and then actively working to educate themselves and change behavior. Facilitating progress towards concepts of universal design with physical space, availability of material, and pedagogy are beneficial to everyone. If institutions desire to attract and retain students with physical disabilities, it may require serious
assessment of both climate and physical space, as well as investing in short and long-term comprehensive planning to address deficiencies.
REFERENCES


Fair Housing Amendments Act of 1988, 24 C.F.R. §100.


Appendix A

Human Subjects Institution Review Board Approval
Date: April 12, 2012

To: Phillip Johnson, Principal Investigator
   Adam Wall, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number 12-02-77

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled “College Student Physical Disability: A Qualitative Exploration within College Counseling” has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note that you may only conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: April 12, 2013
Appendix B

Informed Consent Document
Western Michigan University
Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology

Principal Investigator: Phillip D. Johnson, Ph. D.
Student Investigator: Adam T. Wall, M.A.
Title of Study: College Student Physical Disability: A Qualitative Exploration within College Counseling

You have been invited to participate in a research project titled “A Qualitative Exploration within College Counseling”. This project will serve as Adam Wall’s dissertation research project for the requirements of the Doctor of Philosophy degree in counselor education. This consent document will explain the purpose of this research project and will go over all of the time commitments, the procedures used in the study, and the risks and benefits of participating in this research project. Please read this consent form carefully and completely and please ask any questions if you need more clarification.

What are we trying to find out in this study?
The purpose of this investigation is to better understand the general experiences of a small group of college students who self-identify as having a physical disability as they pursue an undergraduate education.

Who can participate in this study?
Students currently enrolled full-time at WMU who have sophomore, junior or senior class standing with a physical disability are eligible to participate in this study. For the purpose of this study, what is classified as a physical disability does not include low vision/blindness or deafness. There are a limited number of students who are able to participate in this study. An initial questionnaire will help insur any potential participants meet the requirements to participate.

Where will this study take place?
This study will take place on the main campus of WMU. Interviews will be conducted in an inconspicuous, mutually agreed upon location by the participant and student investigator.

What is the time commitment for participating in this study?
The total time commitment for participation in this study is approximately a minimum of 4 hours. If you are interested in participating, you will have to complete the demographic questionnaire and email it to the student investigator or return it to the address provided below. If you are selected to participate in this study after confirming you meet the above-mentioned criteria, you will be asked to be interviewed for a minimum of two 60 minute sessions.

What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?
You will be asked a series of broad questions related to your experience prior to enrolling at WMU and your experience at WMU. Each interview will be audio recorded and later transcribed. Additionally, you may be asked to meet after an interview has been listened to or
transcribed in order to clarify information to insure the student investigator has accurately understood what you have shared.

**What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?**
Information about your experience prior to attending WMU and while attending WMU will be obtained. After the interview is transcribed, the information you provided will be coded to identify similarities and differences in experiences of those who participate in this study.

**What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?**
As in all research, there may be unforeseen risks. Disclosures about past experiences have the potential to generate feelings of anxiety or a change in mood. If you express discomfort at any point during the data collection process, you are able to be debriefed and provided with contact information for resources if requested or deemed reasonable by the interviewer. Practically, participants will experience a loss of time (approximately 4-5 hours) as a result of their participation in this study. Every attempt will be made to minimize the risks to anyone who participates. The student researcher is available to answer questions daily at reasonable times throughout the day and evening. The student investigator will 'check-in' with participants regularly to insure they are comfortable and do not have any questions about the process.

**Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?**
There are no financial costs associated with participating in this investigation.

**Is there any compensation for participating in this study?**
Although there is no monetary compensation for participation, it has the potential to yield benefits. One way in which participants may benefit from participation is by having the opportunity to talk about their personal growth and development while attending college, along with the understanding that their participation will be used to increase knowledge, understanding and best practice in terms of addressing similar concerns among students in the future. The findings will begin to add to a growing literature base of disability theory, college student development theory and the development of a literature base outside rehabilitation counseling for other professional counselors to use.

**Who will have access to the information collected during this study?**
In order to keep participant’s identity confidential, an agreed upon pseudonym to protect identity will be used to identify participants instead of their real name. The only people who will have access to audiotapes or transcriptions will be the principal and student investigator. Research findings will be disseminated by publication of the dissertation. Additionally, the findings will take the form of professional conference presentations and also serve as the foundation with which to conduct future research studies. Pseudonyms will always be used for participants. Real names will never be shared or used. All participants will be notified of the publication of the dissertation.

**What if you want to stop participating in this study?**
You can choose to stop participating in the study at anytime for any reason. You will not suffer any prejudice or penalty by your decision to stop your participation. You will experience no consequences either academically or personally if you choose to withdraw from this study. The
investigator can also decide to stop your participation in the study without your consent in which case the participant would be notified in writing.

Should you have any questions prior to or during the study, you can contact the primary investigator, Phillip Johnson at 269-387-5123 or phillip.johnson@wmich.edu. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at 269-387-8293 or the Vice President for Research at 269-387-8298 if questions arise during the course of the study.

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. Do not participate in this study if the stamped date is older than one year.

I have read this informed consent document. The risks and benefits have been explained to me. I agree to take part in this study.

Please Print Your Name

Participant’s signature Date
Appendix C

Demographic Questionnaire
Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your current class standing at WMU?

2. What is your gender?

3. What is your ethnicity?

4. Do you live on campus?

5. Were you enrolled as a full-time student during the fall semester? Current semester?

6. How do you define your physical disability?
Interview Questions

What was your experience prior to arriving at WMU?

Describe your transition after arriving at WMU.

What types of challenges have you faced and how have you addressed them?

What advice do you have for faculty, staff and students?
Appendix E

Sample Recruitment Email
Hello [Name]:

My name is Adam Wall. I am doctoral student in the Department of Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology at WMU. I am beginning the process of conducting my dissertation study entitled “College Student Physical Disability: A Qualitative Exploration within College Counseling” and would like to discuss the possibility of assistance with participant recruitment for my study. My study will focus on the experience of college students with physical disabilities and the implications for professional counselors. Attached, you will the invitation to participate/informed consent document. Please review as I believe it is a thorough summary of the research project. If possible, I would like help from your office by disseminating the invitation to participate to students who have formally registered. I look forward to discussing the possibility with you soon. Please feel free to contact me via phone or email. My contact information is included below. Your help would be greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Adam Wall
Doctoral Student, Counselor Education