Attitudinal Barriers Experienced by College Students with Disabilities

Kristen Powell, B.A., CAT & Dr. Jill Bezyak, Ph.D., CRC, LP

CU Anschutz — JFK PARTNERS

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

ABSTRACT

College students with disabilities face challenges beyond academics, including attitudinal barriers from peers and faculty. About 20% of students have disabilities, often experiencing isolation and anxiety that impact social and academic success. This study surveyed 117 students at a public university in the Rocky Mountain region to assess perceptions of campus accessibility, social stigma, and faculty attitudes. Results highlighted negative attitudes impacting academic self-confidence and social integration, highlighting the need for disability awareness, sensitivity training, and improved support services for improved campus access.

OBJECTIVES

Research Questions: What attitudinal barriers do students with disabilities face on campus?

How can findings inform campus policies and accessibility efforts?

METHODS

Participants Sample Size: 117 college students

Inclusion Criteria: Students who self-identified as having a disability or chronic health condition

Data Collection: Survey-based study using both quantitative and qualitative responses

Measures

Quantitative data was collected using a modified version of the Social Attitude Barriers and Facilitators to Participation for Individuals with Disabilities (Wong et al., 2021). Qualitative data was collected using open-ended responses about personal experiences on campus.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics (frequency, mean, standard deviation) were calculated for responses.

QUALITATIVE RESPONSES

Examples of Limitations on Opportunities

"It's like pulling teeth to get an interpreter for an event, so most people just don't."

"Since I am high-functioning and my chronic illness is invisible, I am treated like a normal person, which is great—until I show my symptoms, and I am expected not to have differences."

Examples of Exclusion from Campus Activities

"I wanted to participate in the 'Take Back the Night' walk but am not able to walk all across campus. Most activities on campus are very active—activities that have less physical activity would be beneficial."

"People tell me I should go home because most likely it's not wheelchair accessible. Like Haunted Harrison—they hadn't even checked to see if the event was accessible."

"Sometimes there are bright fluorescent or flashing/moving lights and very loud sound—if I have an episode, I can't stay for the event. I'm not saying they shouldn't have lights, though. I think that's fun."
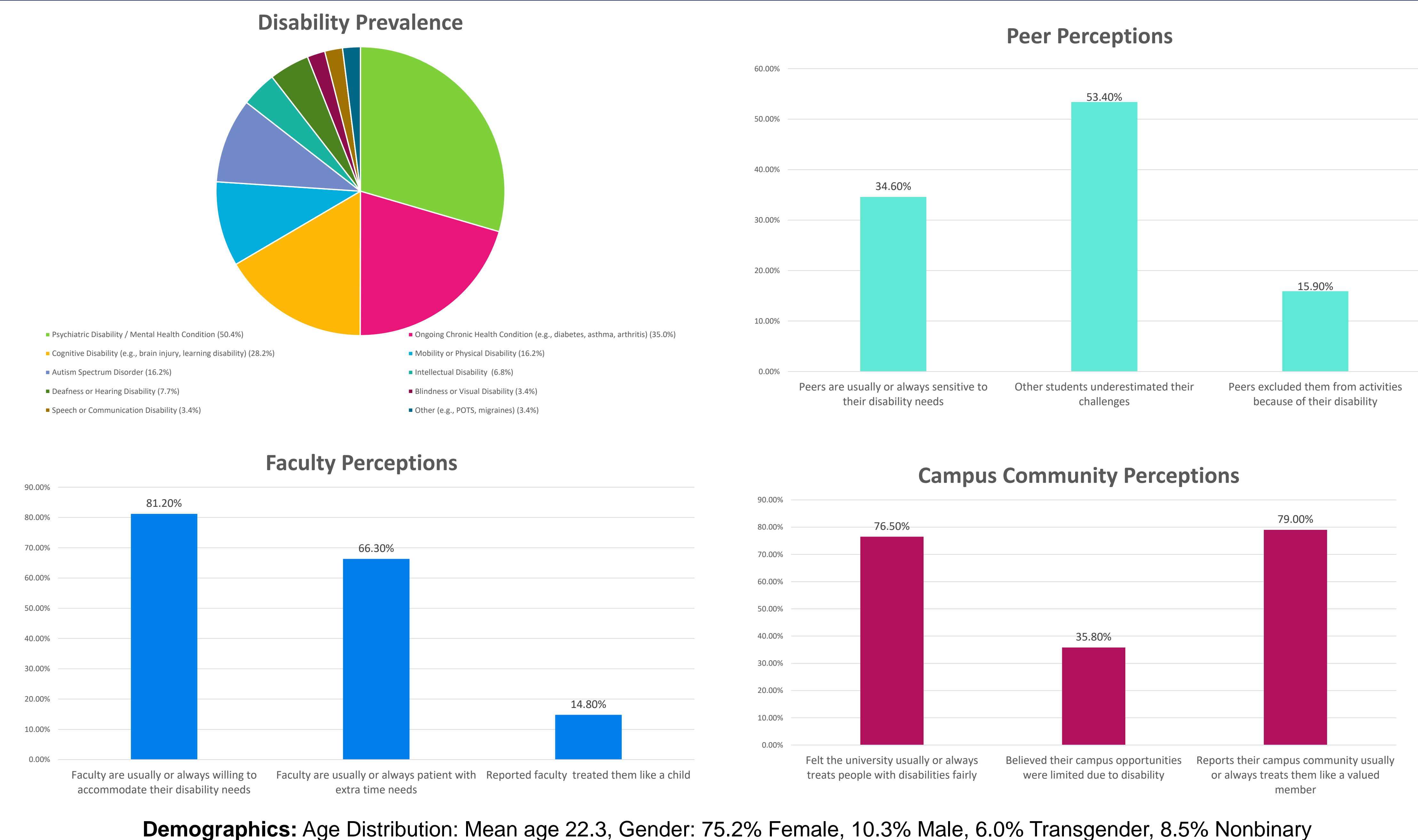
Campus Belonging Examples

"Engaging in the classroom and being treated with kindness by my peers. I don't get to attend events often, so this is the primary source of belonging to the UNC community for me."

"It helps me feel welcome when faculty treat me with respect."

"When people really make sure community events are 100% accessible."

RESULTS

Disability Prevalence

Legend: Psychiatric Disability / Mental Health Condition (50.4%); Cognitive Disability (e.g., brain injury, learning disability) (28.2%); Autism Spectrum Disorder (16.2%); Deafness or Hearing Disability (7.7%); Speech or Communication Disability (3.4%); Ongoing Chronic Health Condition (e.g., diabetes, asthma, arthritis) (35.0%); Mobility or Physical Disability (16.2%); Intellectual Disability (6.8%); Blindness or Visual Disability (3.4%); Other (e.g., POTS, migraines) (3.4%)

Peer Perceptions
Peers are usually or always sensitive to their disability needs: 34.60%; Other students underestimated their challenges: 53.40%; Peers excluded them from activities because of their disability: 15.90%

Faculty Perceptions
Faculty are usually or always willing to accommodate their disability needs: 81.20%; Faculty are usually or always patient with extra time needs: 66.30%; Reported faculty treated them like a child: 14.80%

Campus Community Perceptions
Felt the university usually or always treats people with disabilities fairly: 76.50%; Believed their campus opportunities were limited due to disability: 35.80%; Reports their campus community usually or always treats them like a valued member: 79.00%

Demographics: Age Distribution: Mean age 22.3, Gender: 75.2% Female, 10.3% Male, 6.0% Transgender, 8.5% Nonbinary

DISCUSSION

The majority of students felt peers and faculty respect their disability needs. Students with disabilities experience social exclusion. These findings align with studies on disability barriers in education. One limitation of this study is its reliance on self-report data, which may introduce response bias and limit the generalizability of findings beyond the surveyed population. Additionally, the relatively small sample size (N=117) may not fully capture the diverse experiences of all students with disabilities in higher education.

CONCLUSION

Increased efforts in peer education on disability awareness are needed. Faculty attitudes were mostly positive; however, additional training on disability sensitivity is needed. New policy recommendations are suggested for improved campus access. Future research should aim for larger and more diverse samples. In addition, a longitudinal study would provide important data on student retention and outcomes, and attitude changes over time.

Call to Action

- Plan campus events to include quiet spaces, seating, and interpreters.
- Improve faculty training on teaching and accommodating disabilities beyond mobility concerns.
- Student organizations and leadership roles help foster connection for students with disabilities.

REFERENCES

Fox, A., Hedayet, M., Mansour, K. E., Kommers, S. & Wells, R. (2022). College students with disabilities experiences with financial, social, and emotional costs on campus in the United States. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education, 69*(1), 106-120. https://doi.org/10.1080/1034912X.2021.1966756

Herbert, J. T., Coduti, W. A., & Fleming, A. (2020). University policies, resources and staff practices: Impact on college students with disabilities. *Journal of Rehabilitation, 86*(4), 31-41. https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/university-policies-resources-staf practices/docview/2775236333/se-2

Heron, L. M., Agarwal, R., Greenup, J., Attong, N.& Burke, S. L. (2022). Leveraging the Design Thinking Model to address campus accessibility challenges and assess perceptions of disability awareness. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, Feb 2022. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2022.2041111

Hong, B.S.S. (2015). Qualitative analysis of the barriers college students with disabilities experience in higher education. *Journal of College Student Development 56*(3), 209-226. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2015.0032.

Marshak, L., Van Wieran, T., Ferrel, D. R., Swiss, L., & Dugan, C. (2010). Exploring barriers to college student use of disability services and accommodations. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability, 21*, 151-165. https://eric.ed.gov?id=EJ906688

Mischenko, E. D. (2013). Towards inclusive campus environments: Evidence-based research of a university campus. *Open House International, 38*(1), 31-42. https://doi.org/10.1108/OHI-01-2013-B0004

Nichols, A. H., & Quaye, S. J. (2009). Removing barriers to academic and social engagement for students with disabilities. In Harper, S.R., & Quaye, S.J. (Eds.) *Student Engagement in Higher Education: Theoretical Perspectives and Practical Approaches for Diverse Populations* (pp. 39-60).

Rodrigues, M.; Bernadino, J. L. F. & Moreira, M. V. (2022). Attitudinal barriers: The exclusion that limits the accessibility of people with disabilities. *Revista Ibero-Americana de Estudos em Educação, Araraquara, 17*(2), 1311–1326. https://doi.org/10.21723/riaee.v17i2.15058

Sánchez-Díaz, M. N. & Morgado, B. (2022) Moving toward the inclusion of university students with disabilities: Barriers, facilitators, and recommendations identified by inclusive faculty. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education, 70*(3), 175-191. https://doi.org/10.1080/07377363.2021.1946635

Simonson, S., Glick, S. and Ellen C. Nobe, M. (2013). Accessibility at a public university: student's perceptions. *Journal of Facilities Management, 11*(3), 198-209. https://doi.org/10.1108/JFM-06-2012-0025

Toutain, C. (2019). Barriers to accommodations for students with disabilities in higher education: A literature review. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability, 32*(3), 297-310. https://eric.ed.gov?1d=EJ1236832

• Wong, A. W. K., Garcia, S. F., Hahn, E. A., Semik, P., Lai, J. S., Magasi, S., Hammel, J., Nitsch, K. P., Miskovic, A. & Heinemann, A. W. (2021). Rasch analysis of social attitude barriers and facilitators to participation for individuals with disabilities. *Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, 102*(4), 675–686. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apmr.2020.09.390

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

www.PosterPresentations.com