

BEYOND ACCOMMODATIONS: DISABILITY SERVICE PROFESSIONALS IN  
HIGHER EDUCATION AS CAMPUS CHANGE AGENTS

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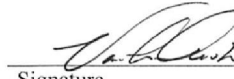
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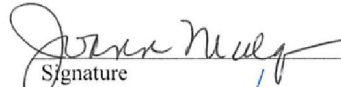
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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Wendy Ruoff. The older I get the more I appreciate just how much you've provided, guided, and sacrificed. Thank you for everything.

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## **Abstract**

### BEYOND ACCOMMODATIONS: DISABILITY SERVICE PROFESSIONALS IN HIGHER EDUCATION AS CAMPUS CHANGE AGENTS

The U.S. Department of Education statistics report increasing numbers of students with learning disabilities and other non-apparent disabilities enrolling in higher education. This change in student demographic presents new challenges to institutions and disability service professionals to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. The purpose of this study was to attain a deeper understanding of the decision-making experiences of the disability service professionals charged with making accommodation decisions with the intent of informing professional development opportunities that will help build the confidence and effectiveness of these high-stakes decision-makers. The research questions were addressed using a mixed methods research design utilizing a quantitative survey and qualitative interviews of disability service professionals in the northeast region of the United States. Major findings from this study included a surprising yet optimistic decrease in importance disability service professionals placed on specific documentation components in order to make accommodation decisions, the significance of building collaborative relationships on their campuses, and the considerable time and resources they devote to educating faculty on alternative methods of assessment to more effectively teach an increasingly diverse student population. The results of this study underscore the importance of disability service professionals on increasingly diverse campuses and the role they play in enhancing accessibility and ultimately contributing to the culture of diversity on their campuses. Professional

development opportunities for higher education administrators are discussed, which include shifting the training focus from documentation and accommodation decision-making to understanding learning and teaching styles, as well as developing soft skills related to interdepartmental collaborative problem-solving.

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Overview of the Problem**

There are currently 21.0 million students pursuing an undergraduate education in the United States. Based on the most recent U.S. Department of Education data (2011), institutions reported enrolling over 700,000 students with disabilities, 31% of them with specific learning disabilities, 18% with attention deficit disorders, and 15% with psychiatric conditions. These numbers reflect an exponential growth in students with non-physical, less apparent disabilities pursuing higher education, a reflection of the landmark civil rights cases, federal mandates, and changing social consciousness of the country over the last five decades. Improving access to college for students with learning disabilities is comparable to historical efforts to increase enrollment of underrepresented groups such as women, minorities, and first generation students (Palombi, 2000; Thomas, 2002; Zhang, 2005) and must continue to be a nationwide focus to ensure equitable outcomes for employment, independence, and quality of life for this population.

The challenges involved in properly identifying, documenting, and accommodating students with learning disabilities at the postsecondary level has been explored on a national level (Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD), 2012; National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD), 2007). College administrators face incoming freshman accustomed to being recipients of various services and publically funded resources throughout their K-12 years under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA) (Madaus & Shaw, 2006; Shaw, Keenan, Madaus & Banerjee, 2010). As students transition from the secondary school system into institutions of higher education, they

face new and potentially unclear requirements that shift the responsibility from the institution to the student. Consequently, student self-advocacy and communication skills are critical in order to ensure learning needs are identified and appropriately met (Foley, 2006; Hurtubis Sahlen & Lehman, 2006; Madaus, 2005; Shaw, Madaus & Dukes, 2010).

Documentation requirements vary significantly from secondary to postsecondary levels based on the different disability laws which govern students seeking learning accommodations (Gordon, Lewandowski, Murphy & Dempsey, 2002; Gormley, Hughes, Block, & Lendmann, 2005; NJCLD, 2007). Students in the K-12 school system who were entitled to learning accommodations under IDEA are sometimes not eligible to receive the same level of accommodations, if any, under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (Gordon et al., 2002; Madaus, 2005). These documentation discrepancies become further ambiguous due to the often limited understanding among the professionals who manage these services of the differences between the laws that apply to students with learning disabilities, what data is needed to identify an eligible disability and recommend appropriate learning accommodations (Brinckerhoff, McGuire & Shaw, 2002; Dukes & Shaw, 2004; Gordon et al., 2002; Madaus, Banerjee & Hamblet, 2010; Thomas, 2002).

This study explored the documentation challenges facing students with learning disabilities entering college and the experience of the disability professionals in the postsecondary environment who are charged with supporting them, and identified what opportunities exist for professional development. The unexpected outcome of this study was the profile of contemporary postsecondary disability service providers that emerged. These higher education professionals are not only involved in reviewing documentation

and making high-stakes accommodation decisions but also depended on to train faculty on disability law, adaptive teaching techniques, and ultimately helping students with learning disabilities become positive participants within the campus culture. The findings of this study shift the focus of professional development needs from documentation review to enhancing campus-wide collaborations and working with faculty to more effectively teach diverse student populations.

## **Background**

Much research has been conducted on the transitional challenges facing students with learning disabilities entering college and those of the personnel charged with accommodating them. However, the majority of this research has been from the perspective of the student (Finn, 1999; Getzel, 2008; Kurth & Mellard, 2006; Letchenberger, Barnard-Brak, Sokolosky & McCray, 2012; Lightner Kipps-Vaughan, Schulte & Trice, 2012; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007). The research that does exist pertaining to the experiences or training of postsecondary disability service providers (PDSPs) has been disproportionately quantitative in nature and collected by surveys (Dukes & Shaw, 2004; Harrison, Nichols & Larochette, 2008; Ofiesh & McAfee, 2000; Yost, Shaw, Cullen & Bigaj, 1994), thus limiting understanding of the variables behind participant responses. There is a depth of understanding facilitated by qualitative research which cannot be derived from surveys alone. In addition, several studies have identified the need for further research in the area of disability personnel training, the incorporation of a qualitative component, and a focus on smaller institutions (Dukes & Shaw, 2004; Dutta, Schiro-Geist, & Kundu, 2009; Mull, Sitlington & Alper, 2001; Yost et al., 1994). For example, in Madaus, Banerjee and Hamblet's (2010) study on

documentation decision-making, they identified an opportunity for future research, which was a critical factor in informing the direction of this study:

... it would be useful to examine the process by which disability service providers make eligibility decisions based on provided documentation. For example, if a service provider is presented with documentation that is strong in some areas, but compromised in others, what, if any, decisions can be made regarding student eligibility? Given the recent amendments to ADA, a study of how disability service providers interpret the new regulations in making eligibility decisions would also be important. (p. 77)

The goal of this study was to begin to fill this gap in the existing research by adding an additional layer of understanding regarding the experiences and decision-making processes of postsecondary personnel as they relate to supporting and accommodating students with learning disabilities in order to inform future professional development.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to explore the documentation and accommodation decision-making experiences of a sampling of disabilities services personnel at the postsecondary level to help inform best practices and improve professional development. Using institutions in the northeast region of the United States, specifically New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut, the researcher addressed four research questions:

1. What documentation do postsecondary disability service providers (PDSPs) in NY, NJ, PA & CT require from students requesting learning accommodations?

2. How do PDSP's in NY, NJ, PA & CT make decisions regarding documentation and accommodations?
3. How confident are postsecondary disability service providers in NY, NJ, PA & CT in their accommodation decisions?
4. What professional development opportunities exist for PDSPs?

### **Methodological & Theoretical Framework**

The study was conducted using an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, consisting of an initial survey of 2-year and 4-year private non-profit, private for-profit, and public institutions in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut that have small to mid-sized student enrollments (1,000 to 10,000), followed by interviews of a sampling of PDSPs who volunteered to take part in the qualitative component. The reason for focusing the research on these institutions was two-fold: first, it was a convenience sampling of colleges and universities within reasonable driving distance of the researcher's residence, and second, smaller institutions were more likely to have administrators functioning in several roles, theoretically increasing the likelihood that their professional backgrounds were in areas other than disability services. In addition, since the student population of these institutions were small, supporting students with learning disabilities among an already small population of students may not be seen as warranting focused personnel in this area, and access to resources may be limited (Dutta et al., 2009). Although the researcher included institutions within a specified enrollment range of 1,000 to 10,000, the pool included 2-year and 4-year private non-profit, 2-year and 4-year private for-profit, and 2-year and 4-year public institutions, incorporating a diverse student enrollment, which made the data more generalizable across postsecondary



sectors. Using the College Navigator tool available on the National Center for Educational Statistics website, this pool yielded a total of 321 institutions.

Mixed methods research design strengthens both data collection and validity, incorporates diverse perspectives on the research problem, and encourages a deeper understanding (Butin, 2010; Creswell & Clark, 2011). While an initial quantitative survey identified participants who were willing to participate in the qualitative part of the study and also served to suggest interview questions, the emphasis of the research design was qualitative, as the research questions were based in process theory, and sought to find meaning and context (Maxwell, 2005). The author intended to gain insight into the decision-making experiences of disability service providers in postsecondary settings with the intent of enhancing the professional development and training opportunities for disabilities service personnel in institutions across the country.

The researcher received permission to utilize a previously published survey instrument (Madaus et al., 2010), which was piloted and revised by the authors to ensure its validity. The researcher used data collected from this survey to identify those PDSP's who were primary reviewers of disability documentation and indicated a willingness to be interviewed. While the researcher initially intended to interview PDSPs who worked at institutions without centralized offices of disability services and whose primary job responsibilities were not limited to disability services, the survey participant pool did not yield enough PDSPs who fit this profile. Using semi-structured interviews, the researcher gained an understanding of participant experiences in assessing the documentation that is submitted to them, how they determine eligibility for disability services, and their confidence in this process.

The theoretical framework guiding this study was the pragmatist worldview, which rejects the existence of one “truth” and acknowledges multiple and sometimes opposing perspectives or “realities.” Pragmatism is a research paradigm founded in practical methodology that values both objective and subjective knowledge and has therefore been identified as particularly suited to mixed methods research design (Creswell & Clark, 2011; Johnson & Christensen, 2012).

### **Significance of the Study**

This section will outline the history of efforts in the United States to grant equal access to education, and the current context of those students with non-apparent disabilities transitioning into the postsecondary setting. A brief summary of existing research on the issues related to transitional challenges facing students with non-apparent disabilities and the postsecondary personnel charged with supporting them will be covered.

History illustrates that the U.S. has continued to seek access and inclusion in higher education, initially in regards to race, with *Brown v. Board of Education* and the civil rights movement, up to the present day in regards to equitable access for those with physical and cognitive challenges with the Americans with Disabilities Act as amended in 2008 (ADAAA). As a result of these changes in social and political perspectives on students with disabilities, there continues to be an increase in this population enrolling in college (Madaus & Shaw, 2004; Thomas, 2002; U.S. Dept. of Education, 2011).

Research spanning the last twenty years reveals that institutions continue to struggle with meeting the needs of students with disabilities; specifically those with

disabilities related to learning, attention deficit, and psychological conditions, which make up the majority of students with disabilities in higher education (Finn, 1999; Parker, Shaw & McGuire, 2003; Shaw, Madaus & Dukes, 2010). While there has been a significant increase in the number of personnel overseeing disability services as a result of this need, disability law does not require that those evaluating and accommodating students with disabilities have any specific training or certifications, resulting in varied backgrounds and experiences of these individuals (Brinckerhoff et al., 2002; Dukes & Shaw, 2004; Guzman & Balcazar, 2010; Madaus, 2005; Madaus, 2010). Furthermore, studies show that there are PDSPs who are themselves unclear on disability laws, lack confidence in their decisions regarding evaluating documentation and approving accommodations, and acknowledge the need for additional training and professional development (Dukes & Shaw, 1999; Dukes & Shaw, 2004; Gordon et al, 2002; Madaus et al., 2010; Mull et al., 2001; NJCLD, 2007; Tagayuna, Stodden, Chang, Zeleznik & Whelley, 2005; Wolforth, 2012; Yost et al., 1994).

Compounding the challenges facing institutions in regards to accommodating students with learning disabilities are the transitional experience of the students themselves. Extensive research examined the challenges facing students with learning disabilities entering college, including the shift in advocacy roles, the loss of the supports they had in the secondary system, and the fear of stigma and discrimination many of them face (Getzel, 2008; Shaw, Madaus & Banerjee, 2009; McGuire, 2011; Lightner et al., 2012). Furthermore, students with learning disabilities entering college submit varied and often inadequate documentation to facilitate accommodations. The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) issued a report in 2007 discussing the

“disconnect” between documentation requirements at the secondary and postsecondary level resulting from the change in laws protecting students leaving the secondary setting and entering college, the lack of guidelines for postsecondary personnel in interpreting documentation and making eligibility determinations, and the lack of training of those personnel charged with these decisions.

Prior research (Martin, Portley, & Graham, 2010; NJCLD, 2007; Shaw, Dukes, & Madaus, 2012) has clearly provided justification for the importance of providing equal access to students with learning disabilities in college. Studies (Dutta et al., 2009; Gregg, 2007; Hadley, 2007; Lightner et al., 2012; Smith, English, & Vasek, 2002) have validated the challenges facing students transitioning into higher education (i.e., change in laws, need to self-identify and importance of self-advocacy skills, loss of structured support system in place in the secondary environment) and disability service personnel charged with supporting them (i.e., lack of sufficient documentation, lack of guidelines in place for making accommodation decisions, confusion regarding laws, lack of training in disability issues). There is much at stake for these students to be successful. Data consistently show that individuals with a postsecondary education have far better outcomes than their counterparts with only a high school diploma, with outcomes for students with learning disabilities equal to that of their non-disabled peers (Shaw et al., 2010b; U.S. Dept. of Education, 2006). Thus, this study is significant in that it addresses a key component in successful higher education outcomes for this student population, by examining the ability of the postsecondary disabilities service providers to effectively interpret the documentation submitted to them and confidently make decisions based on their understanding of the law and the student’s needs.

## **Limitations**

Limitations to this study were the regional focus and the targeting of only those institutions enrolling a specified number of students, as this limited the response rate and resulted in less generalizable findings. Furthermore, the mixed methods research design is intrinsically complex and requires the researcher to be adept at both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analyses. Finally, the researcher had to make every effort to avoid personal bias, given her own position as higher education administrator charged with making accommodation decisions for students with learning disabilities.

## **Definition of Terms**

**First generation college student.** A college student who is the first in their family to enroll in postsecondary education. This demographic of student generally requires additional supports based on limited understanding and/or support from home of the demands, processes, and policies involved with higher education.

**Individual Education Program (IEP).** Required component for students receiving special education services at the secondary level under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The IEP is a document put together by a team of professionals, including special education personnel and school psychologists, incorporating academic goals, progress, and challenges. Assessments used in IEPs are more frequently based on classroom observations and standardized testing, rather than psychoeducational evaluations or other diagnostic tools.

**Non-apparent disabilities.** Disabilities related to learning, cognition, attention, communication, autism, and those psychological in nature. As these students do not

often have visible evidence of their disability, they are more difficult to identify, and the challenges they face academically may erroneously be attributed to ambivalence, laziness, and/or lack of ability.

**Learning disability (LD).** A broad term used to cover any number of disabilities that impact learning, including but not limited to, deficits involving information processing, reading comprehension, written and oral communication and mathematics.

**Postsecondary disabilities service provider (PDSP).** The individual responsible for receiving, assessing, and evaluating disability documentation and approving requested accommodation at the college level. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) does not require the individual in this role have any specific training or certification, only that the institution assign this function to a “reasonable employee.”

**Reasonable accommodations.** Adjustments made to a program, course, or testing process, as well as the use of auxiliary aids, in order to provide equal access to eligible students with disabilities, as required by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The law does not require institutions to grant any accommodations that would fundamentally alter the curriculum or program requirements.

**Self-advocacy.** Ability to seek out assistance and support for oneself.

**Self-determination.** Knowing and valuing of one’s goals as exhibited through assertiveness and proactive engagement.

**Self-disclosure.** Students with disabilities in higher education are required to identify themselves as having a disability in order to be eligible for any accommodations. Institutions are under no obligation to identify or seek out students with disabilities.

**Self-efficacy.** Belief in one's ability to achieve determined goals.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

### Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the existing research and literature regarding documentation challenges facing students with learning disabilities entering college and those disability services personnel responsible for coordinating accommodations for them. A historical context of the progression of disability law will be provided, followed by a synthesis of the literature as it pertains to disability documentation issues, transitional challenges facing LD students, and studies pertaining to the decision-making processes of PDSPs.

The purpose of this study was to explore the documentation and accommodation decision-making experiences of a sampling of disabilities services personnel at the postsecondary level to help inform best practices and improve professional development. To address these issues, this study addressed four research questions:

1. What documentation do postsecondary disability service providers (PDSPs) in NY, NJ, PA & CT require from students requesting learning accommodations?
2. How do PDSP's in NY, NJ, PA & CT make decisions regarding documentation and accommodations?
3. How confident are postsecondary disability service providers in NY, NJ, PA & CT in their accommodation decisions?
4. What professional development opportunities exist for PDSPs?

Research in the area of transitional challenges of students with learning disabilities over the past twenty-five years has been extensive, but limited to student



perspectives on their transitional experiences and quantitative studies of documentation and support services. As illustrated in Table 2 (see p. 34), existing research in this area has been predominantly quantitative, and those studies that do incorporate a qualitative component focus on the student perspective. In addition, recent changes in legislation, most specifically the 2008 amendments to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADAAA), have served to broaden protection of people with disabilities, while also adding ambiguity to the eligibility and accommodation decision-making process (Madaus et al., 2010; Shaw et al., 2010a).

This study contributes to the existing literature by providing a mixed-methods approach that identifies what documentation is currently being submitted to institutions, who is responsible for evaluating it and making accommodation decisions, and how confident these personnel are in their ultimate decisions. While quantitative surveys are helpful in compiling information from a large pool of participants, including the qualitative component added a depth of understanding regarding the *experience* of making these high-stakes decisions.

### **Historical Context**

The progression of United States policy regarding equal access in higher education can be traced as far back as President Abraham Lincoln, who signed a bill approved by Congress in 1864 authorizing the establishment of a college within the Columbia Institute for the Deaf and Dumb, now Gallaudet University (Madaus, 2011). Veterans returning home from World War II, many with disabilities, resulted in a significant increase in college ranks, accounting for 52% of the total college population by 1946, a trend we are seeing again with the passing of the Post-9/11 Veterans

Educational Assistance Act of 2008 (GI Bill), 25% with hidden disabilities related to combat experiences (Madaus, 2011).

Improving access to college for LD students is comparable to historical efforts to increase enrollment of underrepresented groups such as women, minorities, and first generation students (Palombi, 2000; Zhang, 2005). The United States' efforts to provide education to students with learning disabilities continued to progress with the Civil Rights Movement and more specifically, *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954), which made segregation unlawful in public schools (Madaus, 2011). In 1975, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142) was passed, introducing the requirement of a "free appropriate public education" to meet student's needs in a "least restrictive environment" (U.S. Dept. of Education (USDOE), 2007). This terminology continues to permeate disability law to the present day.

In 1990, PL 94-142 was replaced by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), which most notably changed the terminology from "handicap" to "disability" and mandated transition services to prepare students with learning disabilities for postsecondary education, employment, and independent living (USDOE, 2007). The primary component of IDEA was the Individual Education Program (IEP), which outlined a student's learning challenges and required accommodations. IDEA specified thirteen categories of learning disabilities, including autism and traumatic brain injury, further broadening access to education for eligible students, and preparing them not only to succeed in secondary school, but in life outside of the classroom (USDOE, 2007).

In December 2004, President Bush signed into law the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (H.R. 350), also referred to as IDEA 2004, which was a reauthorization and modification of the original (USDOE, 2007). One of the most important changes in the revised statute involved the IEP, incorporating more authority to special education personnel in decision making, and the alignment with No Child Left Behind (NCLB), focusing on the Response to Intervention model (RTI). This association between NCLB and the RTI model focused outcomes on assessment and goal setting, with the ultimate intention being the reduction or elimination of special education services for many students with learning disabilities (USDOE, 2007).

While the historical progression of IDEA 2004 is parallel to our country's efforts to eliminate discrimination, inequality, and segregation of all people, and was therefore established with the most worthy of intentions, there are several concerns raised by stakeholders regarding the law and its impact on the educational experience of students with learning disabilities. Students who become accustomed to protection and services under IDEA in secondary school are found to be unprepared for the transition into college, where these laws are no longer applicable (Gormley et al., 2005; Madaus et al., 2010; Madaus & Shaw, 2006; NJCLD, 2007). Although transitional services are a key component of the statute, research (Gordon et al., 2002; Gormley et al., 2005; NJCLD, 2007) shows that practitioners at the secondary level, who are responsible for the coordination of these transition services, are unfamiliar with ADA requirements, which is what these students will need to follow to be eligible for accommodations in postsecondary institutions.

## Seminal Research

Prior to beginning a thematic overview of the existing literature in the field of students with learning disabilities transitioning into college, it is worthwhile to give a brief overview of those studies that are referenced most frequently, and have informed much of the literature synthesized in this chapter. Table 1 below illustrates the key studies that have highlighted the need for professional development among PDSPs within the last fifteen years.

Table 1

### *Seminal Literature*

Authors	Title	Key Points
Dukes & Shaw (1999)	<i>Postsecondary disability personnel: Professional standards and staff development</i>	Identification of professional standards, training, and future challenges of postsecondary disability personnel referencing AHEAD resources
Gordon, Lewandowski, Murphy & Dempsey (2002)	<i>ADA-based accommodations in higher education: A survey of clinicians about documentation requirements and diagnostic standards</i>	Study identified need for clarification and training on disability laws that govern secondary and postsecondary practices
Dukes & Shaw (2004)	<i>Perceived personnel development needs of postsecondary disabilities services professionals</i>	Specific recommendations for effective supports and professional preparation of disability service personnel in higher education
Gormley, Hughes, Block & Lendmann (2005)	<i>Eligibility assessment requirements at the postsecondary level for students with learning disabilities: A disconnect with secondary schools?</i>	Study illustrates the “mismatch” between documentation students leave high school with and what is required to receive accommodations in college

National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (2007)	<i>The documentation disconnect for students with learning disabilities: Improving access to postsecondary disability services</i>	Importance of personnel in both secondary and postsecondary institutions to understand documentation requirements of each to support more effective transition of LD students
Madaus, Banerjee & Hamblet (2010)	<i>Learning disability documentation decision making at the postsecondary level</i>	Differing assessment requirements at secondary and postsecondary levels indicate need for disability personnel in higher education to consider broad range of documentation to facilitate accommodation
Shaw & Dukes (2013)	<i>Transition to postsecondary education: A call for evidence-based practice</i>	Recommends specific evidence-based transition practices to promote full inclusion of students with LD into college

These seminal studies acknowledge the importance of accommodating students with learning disabilities in college and the resultant need to provide guidance to disability services personnel to ensure these students are supported in their transition from high school to college. In addition, many of these studies point to organizations such as AHEAD as important signposts to help direct the decision-making processes involved in accommodating students who bring in disability documentation. However, many researchers (e.g., Gregg, 2007; Guzman & Balcazar, 2010; Lock & Layton, 2001a) assert the need to evaluate documentation and determine accommodations on a case-by-case basis, rather than setting firm and fast policies regarding what documentation will and won't be accepted, a viewpoint adamantly emphasized in AHEAD literature. The

omission in this prior research is the investigation of whether PDSP's feel adequately prepared to make these critically important subjective decisions.

### **Transitional Challenges**

As this study explored the challenges facing students with learning disabilities entering college and the decision-making experiences of the disability services personnel charged with supporting them, it is of critical importance to understand exactly what barriers these students face leaving the secondary school setting. The most prominent issue is the fact that many incoming freshman with learning disabilities are not sufficiently prepared for the transition from secondary to postsecondary environments. Students and parents who had relied on resource rooms and district-funded assessments are left feeling abandoned in the postsecondary environment, which shifts the responsibility from the institution to the student (Madaus, 2005). Students are expected to identify themselves as learning disabled as well as to be able to clearly indicate the nature of their disability, the accommodations they require, and how these accommodations will benefit them. Considering that many students leave high school without ever having been diagnosed effectively and often lack the required documentation to facilitate college-level learning accommodations, this can be particularly challenging.

The nonacademic qualities required to be a successful college student with learning disabilities include knowledge of specific disability and learning needs, ability to communicate these needs to appropriate administrators and faculty, and generally to take a proactive and engaged role in the evaluation and discussion of requested accommodations (Foley, 2006; Hadley, 2007; Lock & Layton, 2001b; Martin, Portley &

Graham, 2010; Nielsen, 2001). Assuming a student chooses to self-identify, the challenge facing postsecondary academic personnel is the legal requirement to provide “reasonable accommodations” to students who submit appropriate documentation indicating a learning disability, the responsibility of which lies with the student (Wilhelm, 2003). However, if a student is not aware of the need to self-identify or is otherwise unclear regarding the documentation requirements, the college would not have the opportunity to review and grant learning accommodations.

Additional factors that come into play and further complicates successful transition for some students are race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status (SES). The Commission on the Future of Higher Education (USDOE, 2006) charged institutions nationwide to improve access for low income minority students, citing it as a priority towards our success as a nation. Furthermore, the Commission reported statistics that indicated that while more low income minority students are entering college, they are not successfully completing at the same rates as their peers. These data do not bode well for students with learning disabilities who are from low income families and who are minority students already facing challenges related to access. There has been much recent examination of the link between race, culture, and SES; specifically, the disproportionality of components related to learning disability diagnosis, transition planning, and successful adjustment to higher education for African-American and Hispanic students (Gregg, 2007; Kozleski, Engelbrecht, Hess, Swart, Eloff, Oswald, Molina & Jain, 2008; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007; Stodden, Stodden, Kim-Rupnow, Thai & Galloway, 2003; Zhang, 2005). Additional research (Rinaldi & Samson, 2008) shows that there is still much improvement needed to effectively address the needs of

English language learners (ELLs), who are often erroneously classified as having learning disabilities, due to the difficulty experienced by some ELLs in learning English.

While some researchers (Shaw, 2006; Rinaldi & Samson, 2008) point to opportunities in the recent Response to Intervention model (RTI), which utilizes strategies to eliminate the need for special education services, thus reducing the disproportional labeling of certain populations, others (Ofiesh, 2006; Shaw et al., 2010) indicate the RTI shift away from comprehensive psychoeducational assessments will result in more students with learning disabilities leaving high school without adequate documentation to facilitate accommodations in college. Thornton & Downs (2010) specifically address this shift away from learning disabilities as a medical problem to “fix”, but rather as a component of an individual’s diversity. While this social model of learning disabilities might have a positive impact on reducing stigma and discrimination, it also lessens the need for psychoeducational, diagnostic assessments, which are often still required at the college level. When low-income students with learning disabilities are taken into account, the high cost of attaining private evaluations to document a disability once outside the K-12 system could result in exclusion from postsecondary education, further limiting access to an already underserved population (Gregg, 2007). As a result, the RTI model, which was designed to address the disproportionate number of minorities placed in special education, might inadvertently limit their outcomes in higher education.

Stodden et al. (2003) reviewed the literature as it related to culturally and linguistically diverse students with disabilities and recommended further research be



conducted in regards to the fostering of self-advocacy skills and improving disability policies as they relate to this population. The existing literature related to students with learning disabilities and the additional challenges they face as a result of their race, ethnicity, or SES, has only been examined from the student or family perspective (Kozleski, 2008; Rinaldi & Samson, 2008; Zhang, 2005). As this study included institutions that are public, private, Associate's, and Bachelor's degree granting in the northeast United States, the resulting data comes from not only a diverse PDSPP participant response, but also a more diverse student population. The challenges higher education personnel face in supporting students with learning disabilities takes into account these additional factors, resulting in outcomes that are generalizable.

### **Documentation**

The first research question this study addressed is “What documentation do postsecondary disability service providers (PDSPPs) in NY, NJ, PA & CT require from students requesting learning accommodations?” The importance of this question cannot be overstated, as the academic success of students with learning disabilities in the postsecondary setting very likely hinges on the evidence they produce to identify their disability. Research (e.g., Harrison et al., 2008; Leconte, 2006; NJCLD, 2007; Ofiesh, 2006; Sitlington & Payne, 2004; Sparks & Lovett, 2013) regarding the nature of disability documentation submitted in higher education over the last ten years reveals that many students bring inadequate evidence of a disability.

Furthermore, documentation requirements vary significantly from secondary to postsecondary levels based on the different disability laws which govern students seeking

learning accommodations (Gordon et al., 2002; Gormley et al., 2005; NJCLD, 2007). Students in the K-12 school system who were entitled to learning accommodations under IDEA are sometimes not eligible to receive the same level of accommodations, if any, under ADA (Gordon et al., 2002). These documentation discrepancies become further ambiguous due to the often limited understanding of the differences between the laws that apply to students with learning disabilities among the professionals who manage these services. Surveys of secondary school clinicians indicate confusion regarding these differences (e.g., Gordon et al., 2002; Gormley et al., 2005). If the professionals guiding high school students with learning disabilities are unsure of disability law in higher education, it is unrealistic to expect students themselves to be adequately prepared.

Updated documentation presents a challenge during the transition into higher education because re-evaluation is not mandated prior to students graduating from the secondary system. Seminal discussions on this issue were held by the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) in 2002, 2005, and culminating in the 2007 report on this “documentation disconnect.” The primary issues identified in this report were (a) a lack of consistency in documentation requirements in both secondary and postsecondary settings; (b) a lack of understanding regarding the different laws that protect students with disabilities in secondary and postsecondary schools; and, (c) additional complications such as varied experience and training of postsecondary disability personnel charged with making eligibility and accommodation decisions. The end result of this confusion and disconnect is that the documentation students bring with them to college is often not adequate to grant them the learning accommodations they need (e.g., Gordon et al., 2002; Gormley et al., 2005).

There has been some progress in this area due to the Summary of Performance (SOP) component of IDEA 2004, which requires that eligible students leave high school with a comprehensive overview of their academic accomplishments and goals, including recommendations for transition into higher education and employment (de Vries & Schmitt, 2012; Leconte, 2006; Shaw, 2006; Shaw et al., 2009). The SOP has been identified by many researchers (de Vries & Schmitt, 2012; Kochnar-Bryant & Izzo, 2006; Leconte, 2006; Madaus, Bigaj, Chafoulas & Simonsen, 2006; NJCLD, 2007; Shaw, 2006; Shaw, Dukes, & Madaus, 2012; Shaw et al., 2010a) as an opportunity to more effectively guide students with learning disabilities on what might be required of them in the postsecondary environment; specifically, what documentation and/or additional evaluations might be needed in order to receive accommodations in an adult environment no longer covered by IDEA. Improvement in the transitional components of IDEA 2004 are crucial to continuing the goals of equal access in education, and assist more students with learning disabilities to prepare for education past the secondary level, ultimately improving their opportunities in life (Shaw, 2006).

While there are many issues surrounding disability documentation in postsecondary education, this study focused primarily on the process of assessing this documentation, which is often incomplete or non-existent, and interpreting it in a way that will facilitate support services and accommodations for students with learning disabilities. Unlike the K-12 system, where eligible students are supported by a team of disability personnel to ensure their needs are being met and they are successful academically, the college setting has no such structure in place (Letchenberger et al., 2012). In fact, the laws governing disability services in higher education do not require

any specific training or expertise from those charged with making accommodation decisions, only that they are a “responsible employee” (Madaus & Shaw, 2004). This study gives voice to the experiences of those “responsible employees” to provide a deeper understanding of their sense of preparedness with the intention of informing professional development and enhancing training opportunities.

### **Postsecondary Disability Service Providers**

While significant research has examined the documentation postsecondary disability service personnel accept to determine eligibility for accommodations, almost all of it has been strictly quantitative in nature, dependent on surveys for data collection, as illustrated in Table 2 (p. 34), most recently by NJCLD (2007), Harrison, et al. (2008), and Sparks and Lovett (2013). While this strategy is an effective way to gather information of a superficial nature, it is limiting in regards to the examination of questions of decision-making experiences, and levels of confidence involved in the process of supporting this population of students. Two of the four research questions in this study such as, “what documentation do PDSPs in NY, NJ, CT & PA require from students requesting learning accommodations?” and “How do PDSPs in NY, NJ, CT & PA make decisions regarding documentation and accommodations?” were addressed by quantitative data collection. However, in order to address the levels of confidence in decision-making and the process these personnel go through when examining this often complex and incomplete documentation, a qualitative component is critical.

A review of the literature as it relates to the decisions of PDSPs falls into two categories: (a) those that advocate for more subjective decision-making based on whatever documentation can be evaluated, with an emphasis on the student interview,

and (b) those that argue that more consistent, policy-driven eligibility guidelines must be determined, based on specific documentation that includes psychoeducational, adult-normed assessments.

The Association on Higher Education and Disabilities' (AHEAD) revised *Guidance on Documentation Practices* (2012), stresses the need for accommodation decisions to be made on an individualized basis, rather than based on predetermined requirements based on disability. The guidelines refer to the use of a “commonsense standard” in determining eligibility for support services rather than depending on tests or diagnostic labels and do not necessarily need to be recent if they are still relevant to the individuals condition. Rather than struggling to interpret various psycho-educational assessments, medical records, and other materials, the guidelines urge personnel to make decisions based on the question of “Would an informed and reasonable person conclude from the available evidence that a disability is likely and the required accommodation is warranted?” (AHEAD, 2012). The AHEAD guidelines provide much needed reference and support for disability personnel who struggle with determining accommodation eligibility that aligns with institutional policy, student support, and disability law (Shaw et al., 2010a).

In line with AHEAD guidelines, researchers over the past ten years have reiterated the need for disability personnel to make case-by-case determinations regarding eligibility and accommodations for student with learning disabilities (Dukes & Shaw, 1999; Gregg, 2007; Lock & Layton, 2001b). On the other side of the spectrum are critics who argue that overuse of the learning disabled label has perverted the good intentions of protecting eligible individuals from discrimination (Crank & Deshler, 2001; Lerner,

2004; Ofiesh & McAfee, 2000; Sparks & Lovett, 2013; Vickers, 2010). In a lengthy article in the *Vanderbilt Law Review*, Lerner (2004) argues that

...an entire industry has arisen dedicated to the diagnosis and medication of any student falling short of Einsteinean mental prowess combined with Ghandian spiritual calmness. And, needless to say, there are the armies of lawyers who are prepared to do battle on behalf of the "learning disabled," and who have likened such efforts to earlier struggles for equality on behalf of disadvantaged groups such as African Americans, women, gays and lesbians, and the elderly. (p. 1043)

Lerner's (2004) reference to what he states as an inaccurate comparison to previous civil rights movements is an interesting contrast to several researchers who argue that access and inclusion are the common threads linking students with learning disabilities in higher education to historically discriminated populations (i.e., Madaus, 2011; Palombi, 2000; Zhang, 2005).

When viewed from a legal lens, Lerner's article makes for an ironic comparison with Thomas (2002), as both authors go through a categorical list of learning disabilities, although Thomas' intention is to guide disability personnel in how to accommodate individuals with specific disorders appropriately, while Lerner uses his to illustrate over-diagnosis and labeling. Take, for example, Lerner's commentary on attention-deficit disorders, including ADD and ADHD: "What is the difference, then, between the ordinary mix of mind-wandering, exuberance, and boredom that is part and parcel of "growing up," and the abnormal inattentiveness and jitteriness that merits accommodation and even medication (p. 1066)?" While Thomas also acknowledges the

overuse of ADD/ADHD diagnosis in recent years, he nonetheless justifies the need for support of college students who report these conditions:

The student's distractibility, lack of sustained attention, problems with organization, and hyperactivity represent functional limitations in an academic setting. Reasonable accommodation for students with ADHD should compensate for these limitations by providing alternative ways for students to access, as well as demonstrate their mastery of, required course material. (p. 86)

This lack of consensus among professionals contributes to the difficulties facing these personnel in making decisions on eligibility and accommodations, often resulting in the student being left to make their own way in the postsecondary setting (Dutta et al., 2009; Lechtenberger et al., 2012; Tagayuna et al., 2005).

### **Universal Design**

Although not initially incorporated into this study, Universal Design, or the use of adaptive, competency-based teaching methods, emerged as a key theme during the qualitative data analysis phase. Key themes which emerged from the qualitative components of this study will be further discussed in Chapter Four, but some background explanation on Universal Design concepts warrants some further elaboration here.

According to the National Center on Universal Design for Learning, the basic purpose of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is "to reduce barriers, as well as optimize levels of challenge and support, to meet the needs of all learners from the start." The organization's website provides guidance to college educators on how to implement "flexible approaches [to curriculum] that can be customized and adjusted for individual

needs” through the three tenets of UDL, which are to (1) present information and content in different ways; (2) differentiate the ways that students can express what they know; and (3) stimulate interest and motivation for learning (NCUDL, 2014).

Despite UDL being a relatively new philosophy in regards to teaching and learning, there has been considerable research (Edyburn, D.L., 2010; McGuire, 2011; McGuire, Scott, & Shaw, 2006) done on the use of UDL in the higher education environment, specifically focused on making course content accessible to diverse student populations, including students with learning disabilities. In their overview of UDL historical context and theory, Pliner and Johnson (2004) connect the importance of creating a more accessible learning environment to a more broad dialogue on diversity and inclusion of underrepresented groups in the United States:

In order to create inclusive environments for diverse student populations, the system of higher education must be totally reconfigured, which will require shifts in our educational practices that range from how we admit students, to the curriculum we teach, to pedagogical practices, to career placement, and so forth. These changes are not only desirable from an ethic of inclusion, they also are necessary because our higher education institutions cannot operate in a cultural vacuum: Educational institutions must engage in the same inexorable challenges for inclusion that our total society is facing, that is, full integration and nothing less. (p. 105)

The article continues to make the case for UDL in noting that while individualized accommodations have provided “basic access for specific individuals,” the



implementation of UDL principles into the curriculum not only benefits those students with identified learning needs, but all students within a diverse classroom environment. In addition, successful implementation of UDL or competency-based learning principles in general, theoretically result in less need for individualized learning accommodations (Lombardi & Murray, 2011; Pliner & Johnson, 2004, Vickers, 2010), which Pliner & Johnson (2004) indicate as a contributing factor in exclusion and “othering” within higher education institutions (p. 108). A key factor in bringing the principles of UDL from theory to practice within the higher education environment is the willingness of faculty to adapt their teaching methods (Embry, Parker, McGuire, & Scott, 2003; Lombardi & Murray, 2011). As will be discussed further in Chapters Four and Five, this educating of faculty emerged as one of the most prominent responsibilities shared among PDSPs in this study.

**Gaps in the literature.** While considerable research (Crank & Deshler, 2001; Dukes & Shaw, 1999; Gordon et al., 2002; Gormley et al., 2005; Madaus et al., 2010) has been conducted over the last two decades in regards to the importance of accommodating students with learning disabilities in college, as well as the acknowledgment of the need for professional development for PDSPs, very little research exists that gives a voice to the individuals charged with assessing this often problematic documentation, meeting with students who self-identify with learning disabilities, and the decision-making process involved in such a high-stakes issue. Many studies (de Vries & Schmitt, 2012; Dukes & Shaw, 2004; Dutta et al., 2009; Gordon et al., 2002; Guzman & Balcazar, 2010; Harrison et al., 2008; NJCLD, 2007; Ofiesh & McAfee, 2000; Spillane, McGuire, & Norlander, 1992; Yost et al., 1994) have surveyed PDSPs across the country and

concluded that there is a broad range of titles, training, experience, and understanding of disability documentation issues. Furthermore, as the laws protecting students with learning disabilities continue to evolve and become more broad and inclusive, the challenge of making consistent, confident decisions that take into account various ethical, legal, and social factors with minimal guidance is becoming an ever more critical concern.

As Table 2 illustrates, the collection of research on this issue has been wide-sweeping but surprisingly limited from the perspective of the actual individuals in higher education institutions making these accommodation decisions. This study adds to the literature on learning disability issues in higher education by giving a personal voice to the experiences of disability personnel in hopes of providing perspectives that will identify opportunities for professional development and ultimately improve the academic outcomes of this student population.

Table 2

*Summary of Research on Transition Challenges, Disability Documentation, and Disability Personnel*

Author	Focus	Participants	Method
Spillane, McGuire & Norlander (1992)	Admissions policies for LD students	PDSPs	Quantitative survey
West & Kregel (1993)	Satisfaction with support services	Students	Quantitative survey
Yost et al. (1994)	Intervention practices & attitudes	PDSPs	Quantitative survey
Finn (1999)	LD support programs @ community colleges & 4-year universities	Students	Qualitative focus groups

Ofiesh & McAfee (2000)	Documentation decision-making	PDSPs	Quantitative survey
Nielsen (2001)	Impact of LD on college experience	Students	Quantitative survey
Gordon et al (2002)	Documentation requirements/decision-making	PDSPs	Quantitative survey
Smith, English & Vasek (2002)	Transitional Experiences	Students	Quantitative survey
Dukes & Shaw (2004)	Personnel development	PDSPs	Quantitative survey
Powers, Gil-Kashwabara, Geenen, Powers, Balderan & Palmer (2005)	Secondary transition documentation	Documentation	Quantitative Analysis
Tagayuna et al (2005)	Support provisions granted	PDSPs	Quantitative survey
Zhang (2005)	Influences of culture and SES on parent's involvement in fostering self-determination skills	Parents	Quantitative survey
Kurth & Mellard (2006)	Student perceptions of accommodations	Students	Mixed Method; survey & focus groups
Hadley (2007)	Transition to college-level academic demands	Students	Qualitative focus groups & interviews
NJCLD (2007)	Disability documentation submitted	PDSPs	Quantitative survey
Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols (2007)	Self-advocacy skills	Students	Quantitative survey
Schreiner (2007)	Self-advocacy skills	Students	Quantitative survey

Getzel (2008)	Accommodations & support services	Students	Qualitative focus groups
Harrison et al (2008)	Disability documentation submitted	PDSPs	Quantitative survey
Kozleski et al. (2008)	Cultural and contextual influences on family involvement in Special Ed	Parents	Qualitative focus groups
Dutta et al (2009)	Quality and efficiency of postsecondary transition services	PDSPs & Students	Quantitative survey
Guzman & Balcazar (2010)	Disability Services' Standards and the Worldviews Guiding their Implementation	PDSPs	Quantitative survey
De Vries & Schmitt (2012)	Usefulness of Summary of Performance documentation	PDSPs	Quantitative survey
Letchenberger et al (2012)	Wraparound technique as support process	Students	Qualitative case study
Lightner et al (2012)	Self-advocacy skills	Students	Qualitative
Sparks & Lovett (2013)	Disability documentation submitted	Documentation	Quantitative analysis

In addition to the dominance of quantitative studies in this area, Table 2 also shows that the more personal, qualitative studies involving interviews, case studies, and focus groups, are concentrated on the perspective of the student. While the student's voice is a critically important one in the understanding of disability processes in higher education, this study provides not only a fresh perspective through mixed methodology, but also a shifting of focus from student to professional. The conceptual and methodological framework of this study was developed with the intent to give voice to the higher education personnel responsible for determining accommodations.

## **Chapter Three: Research Design and Methodology**

### **Introduction**

This chapter details the overall design of this study, including conceptual frameworks and practical procedures that were followed. The research questions this study addressed, the setting of the study, survey and interview participants, and procedures to ensure consent and confidentiality are reviewed. The survey instrument, interview protocols, data collection, analysis and validity are discussed, concluding with a summary of methods. The goal of this study was to gain insight into the decision-making processes and experiences of disability service providers charged with reviewing and approving accommodations for students with learning disabilities in order to identify opportunities for professional development and to inform best practices.

The researcher used a mixed methods design in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of the PDSPs in reviewing documentation and making accommodation decisions for students with learning disabilities. Since research (Dukes & Shaw, 2004; Guzman & Balcazar, 2010; NJCLD, 2007) and professional experience have indicated that PDSPs hold many different primary roles within higher education institutions, with exceptionally varied levels of experience and training in disability services, an initial survey was needed in order to collect quantitative data to inform the qualitative phase of the study, which was comprised of in-person interviews.

Prior research (see Table 2, p. 34) involving documentation and accommodation processes by PDSPs has been primarily quantitative in nature and does not allow for the complexities of the decision-making experience to be understood, a perspective which is critically important given the lack of formal guidelines governing the process and the varied quality of the documentation submitted.

## **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to explore the documentation and accommodation decision-making experiences of a sampling of disabilities services personnel at the postsecondary level to help inform best practices and improve professional development. Survey questions and subsequent interviews were used to address the following research questions:

1. What documentation do postsecondary disability service providers (PDSPs) in NY, NJ, PA & CT require from students requesting learning accommodations?
2. What is the decision-making process followed by postsecondary disability service providers in NY, NJ, PA & CT?
3. How confident are postsecondary disability service providers in NY, NJ, PA & CT in their accommodation decisions?
4. What professional development opportunities exist for PDPs?

## **Hypothesis/Null Hypothesis**

The researcher approached this study with the hypothesis that PDSPs lacked confidence in their understanding of disability documentation, disability laws, and the accommodation decisions they make. This hypothesis was reached based on an extensive review of prior literature related to the backgrounds and training of PDSPs (see Chapter 2), as well as the researcher's own experience in the field of disability services.

## **Theoretical Design**

This study used a pragmatism theoretical framework, which is particularly conducive to mixed methods research, as it allows for the use of different types of

perspectives to more effectively address the specific research questions (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). The research design was structured using a pragmatist theory, which focuses on the significance of the human experience, with knowledge and truth being tentative and likely to change over time, analogous to the world we live in. The pragmatist theory uses a practical approach to problems, requiring adaptability of solutions based on “what works, what solves problems, and what helps us to survive” that ultimately will inform effective practice (Johnson & Christensen, 2012, p. 431).

The purpose of this study was to explore the documentation and accommodation decision-making experiences of a sampling of disabilities services personnel at the postsecondary level to help inform best practices and improve professional development. The pragmatic philosophy frames the research purpose and questions effectively as it does not require an ultimate “truth.” Rather, the pragmatism framework acknowledges that the human experience can often yield varied and even conflicting perspectives, which the researcher captured by collecting and analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell & Clark, 2011; Johnson & Christensen, 2012).

Finally, this study was developed with the Manhattanville College School of Education doctoral themes in mind, specifically, *Facilitating Responsive Education Programs* and *Developing Self & Others*. This study focused on the experiences and decision making processes of administrators in postsecondary institutions who are responsible for accommodating and supporting students with learning disabilities. These individuals hold positions that require them to wear many “hats” and juggle multiple roles within their organizations. Prior research (Dutta et al., 2009; Getzel, 2008; Hadley, 2007; Smith, English & Vasek, 2002) has identified the need for further examination and

improvements in supporting students with learning disabilities entering college. More specifically, there is a need for disabilities service personnel to enhance their understanding of the laws and individual learning needs when making accommodation decisions to more effectively serve this student population. This research provides an additional perspective on this issue by not only identifying quantitative data but also providing a deeper understanding of context and meaning through personal interviews. Contributing research to this issue helps to further guide and inform professional practices and processes of postsecondary institutions, allowing them to better meet the needs of students with learning disabilities.

As detailed in the AHEAD *Professional Standards and Program Standards and Performance Indicators* (1998), an important part of being a professional engaged in disabilities services is program evaluation and staff development. The author's work and research in this area allows for both personal professional enhancements of knowledge and skills as well as the sharing of experiences to identify opportunities for improvement and the informing of best practices with colleagues in other institutions.

### **Methodological Design**

This study used a fixed mixed methods design using an explanatory sequential approach, with the participant-selection variant, which is used when quantitative results are needed in order to select participants for a qualitative focused study (Creswell & Clark, 2011). Quantitative data from surveys was collected and analyzed first, a description of which will be detailed later in this section, followed by the collection and analysis of the qualitative data from interviews. The researcher then incorporated the quantitative and qualitative findings to address the research questions.



The survey was emailed to PDSPs from 293 institutions based on filtered search criteria through the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES). The NCES database was filtered using the following criteria:

1. 2-year/4-year institutions; Associate and Bachelor degree-granting
2. Public, Private non-profit and private for-profit
3. 1,000 to 10,000 student enrollment
4. Institutions located in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut.

These criteria were selected in order to draw from a diverse institution pool, while maintaining a convenience sampling in regards to location. Furthermore, limiting the institution size enhanced the chances that respondents worked in a small office and had responsibilities outside of disability services.

Using the institutional web addresses listed through this database, the email addresses of those personnel listed as the primary contact for disability accommodations was collected to ensure the electronic survey was sent to a specific individual. Although the NCES database yielded an initial pool of 321 institutions, the researcher was unable to locate a contact person for disability services from 28 institutions, resulting in a final survey participant pool of 293. The email addresses were not linked in any way to survey responses.

The survey instrument included an item at the end of the survey asking the participants if they would be willing to be involved in an interview. Based on the responses to the survey, the author identified eleven interview participants. Interview questions focused primarily on participants' personal experiences in making

accommodation decisions based on the documentation they receive and what professional development opportunities may exist to improve confidence in the decision-making process. Email addresses provided by survey respondents who indicated an interest in an interview were also not linked to responses during the quantitative or qualitative data analyses phases of the study.

### **Setting and Sampling**

Survey and interview participants were all disability professionals working in higher education institutions of varying size. In-person interviews were conducted based on convenience sampling of eleven survey participants who indicated an interest in being interviewed, worked within a 50-mile radius of the researcher's residence, and were primary reviewers of disability documentation.

Using the College Navigator tool available on the National Center for Educational Statistics website, the researcher filtered the database for postsecondary institutions in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut as a convenience sampling within driving distance. While the regional setting of this study presented a limitation in regards to findings, it could have also eliminated potential cultural variables that might have hindered effective generalizability. While the researcher offered participants either in-person or phone interviews, all eleven respondents agreed to be interviewed in-person, which resulted in more comparability of interview data. Furthermore, the theoretical framework of this study depended on finding meaning and exploring deeper understanding of personal experiences; conducting in-person interviews ensured interpretation of body language and participant relaxation through the building of rapport, all critical elements in successful qualitative data collection (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

The NCES database was also filtered for Bachelor's and Associate's degree granting institutions, public, private non-profit, and private for-profit institutions, including 4-year and 2-year colleges. Finally, the results were filtered based on undergraduate student enrollment of 1,000 to 10,000. The rationale for filtering based on enrollment was twofold; firstly, small to mid-size institutions were more likely to have administrators functioning in several roles and working with limited resources. The decision to set the minimum student enrollment at 1,000 was a result of the researcher's experience within a small institution of just over 1,000 students. Secondly, not filtering for enrollment size yielded an unwieldy number of well over 500 institutions which exceeded the amount of information viewable through the NCES database. Using the aforementioned filtered search parameters, the NCES database yielded a pool of 321 institutions.

### **Consent and Confidentiality**

The electronic survey included a statement of introduction, which summarized the study. A statement of confidentiality was included with the survey as well as an acknowledgement of informed consent, which was required prior to being able to continue with the survey. There was an opportunity at the end of the survey for the participants to indicate whether they were interested in being part of an interview and would then include their email address for future follow up. Participant email addresses were not linked to either quantitative or qualitative data and were used strictly for the purposes of contacting potential interviewees.

Quantitative data did not include any identifying information, and data was analyzed and reported on the group level. Transcripts of qualitative interviews were

identified by number, and hardcopies were stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's home office. All electronic files were password protected on the researcher's personal laptop.

### **Survey Instrument**

The researcher received permission to use a survey instrument previously published by Madaus, Banerjee and Hamblet (2010) (see appendices). The survey authors created the instrument to examine decision processes of PDSPs based on required documentation components. The original survey was piloted by the creators, reviewed by a panel of experts in disability documentation, and revised based on feedback. The survey contained demographic items related to institution type, educational background and professional experience, specifics regarding the documentation review process, and components of the disability documentation.

The survey instrument contained 32 items, preceded by a request for informed consent, which was necessary in order to be able to proceed with the electronic version, and statements detailing purpose and confidentiality. The survey began with two screening questions to ensure that the participant taking the survey was responsible for making disability accommodation decisions at their institution. The survey included twelve demographic questions related to participant institution, training, documentation requirements, and disability service program. Five survey items asked about the details involved in the review of disability documentation, followed by thirteen items which listed specific components of disability documentation and whether each item was required for accommodation eligibility. It should be noted that given the relatively up-to-date development of the original survey instrument (2010), as well as considerable

literature reviewed over the prior decade, the thirteen documentation components listed were determined to still be relevant and applicable to the current study.

### **Qualitative Interview Protocol**

The interview questions consisted of open-ended, semi-structured questions. Following the interview guide approach outlined by Johnson and Christensen (2012), the interview questions were pre-planned while allowing for flexibility in regards to order and wording, which also underscored the nature of human inquiry within the pragmatism theoretical research design. Interview questions were designed in order to effectively answer the four research questions, examining the participants' experiences as they related to working with students with disabilities, their level of confidence in documentation evaluation and disability laws, as well as their attitudes and opinions on training and professional development. As the qualitative component of the mixed methods research design was prioritized, special care was taken in developing interview questions that would access the participants' feelings and experiences in their daily roles within their institutions, while allowing for elaboration and redirection to permit emergence of divergent themes.

### **Data Collection**

Prior to beginning data collection, the researcher went through review and approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), which ensured confidentiality of participant responses, as well as ethical data collection processes. In keeping with the sequential research design, the survey responses were collected first in order to then establish the qualitative phase of the research. This method is in line with the participant-selection variant within explanatory sequential mixed method designs, which is used

“when the researcher is focused on qualitatively examining a phenomenon but needs initial quantitative results to identify and purposely select the best participants” (Creswell & Clark, 2011, p. 86). While Creswell and Clark (2011) suggest using the survey results to facilitate purposeful selection of interviewees, a convenience sample was used in this study due to the small pool of respondents that agreed to be interviewed. Out of the 102 respondents who completed the survey, 31 indicated a willingness to participate in an interview in-person or by phone and supplied their email address at the conclusion of the survey. The researcher identified those participants within a two hour drive from her residence and an email was sent to 16 respondents requesting an interview. Ultimately, qualitative data was collected from 11 participants, all of which agreed to a face to face interview.

Qualitative data was collected with the purpose of providing more in-depth understanding of PDSP experience that would clarify, support, and/or provide another layer of meaning. Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol, as detailed in the preceding section.

### **Data-Analysis Procedures**

The results of the survey were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics using SPSS software. Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted in order to identify participant characteristics. Demographic information such as position, years of experience, degree, area of degree, method of training, and type of disability services office were identified through frequency counts, as were documentation guidelines (type of guidelines used, currency of documentation and if discrepancy was required).

The demographic data, in addition to participant's indication of interest on the survey, determined the qualitative interview phase of the study. Those participants who identified themselves as primary documentation reviewers were the focus of the qualitative phase. In-person interviews were recorded and transcribed. Interview transcripts were manually reviewed and coded in order to identify themes. In line with the pragmatism framework of the study, the researcher examined interviews for any themes that emerged in order to build a meaningful picture of participant experience, although emerging themes that addressed the research questions were highlighted. The coding of "each passage of every interview...rather than develop[ing] a separate list of concepts and themes that are then applied to the interviews" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 222) is referred to as grounded theory of analysis, which allows for any new meaning to be captured through the evolution of the study.

### **Validity**

The researcher reviewed several peer-reviewed, published studies (Dukes & Shaw, 2004; Dutta et al., 2009; Madaus et al., 2010; Yost et al., 1994) in order to identify a survey instrument that related to the experiences and professional development of PDSPs. The survey instrument selected was piloted by the original researchers using a large group of disability professionals. The survey was then revised and reviewed by a panel of documentation experts, resulting in additional revisions. The survey in the current study yielded a 35% response rate.

Validity of the qualitative component of the study was ensured in several ways. First, the researcher implemented strategies to avoid bias such as self-reflection and negative case-sampling, which involved selecting interview participants who may

contradict the hypothesis of the study (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). Furthermore, the researcher ensured validity through participant feedback during the data analysis stage, as well as used verbatim interview transcripts to avoid misinterpretation of meaning. Finally, this study used criterion sampling to ensure that all participants met predetermined categories, ensuring cases were comparable on a basic level, which is important for quality assurance (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

### **Limitations of the Study**

There were two limitations to this study. First, the study was limited to participants in four states in the northeast region of the United States and those institutions who have a specific enrollment, restricting the ability to generalize results. Additionally, the complex nature of mixed methods design requires the researcher be capable of effectively navigating collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data, which is a consideration in regards to the validity of mixed methods studies (Creswell & Clark, 2011).

### **Summary**

This study intended to better understand the decision-making process and experiences of disability service personnel working in higher education in order to inform professional development and best practices. Using a mixed methods research design, this study utilized a survey to identify the demographic profile of PDSPs and the components of disability documentation they review. The survey results informed the qualitative interview phase of the study by identifying those respondents interested in participating and who fit predetermined demographic criteria. Using a semi-structured interview protocol designed around the four research questions, the researcher gained a



deeper understanding of the challenges and experiences of those professionals charged with making accommodation decisions in postsecondary institutions.

## **Chapter Four: Data Analysis and Findings**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore the documentation and accommodation decision-making experiences of a sampling of disabilities services personnel at the postsecondary level to help inform best practices and improve professional development. To address these issues, the study tried to answer four research questions:

1. What documentation do postsecondary disability service providers (PDSPs) in NY, NJ, PA & CT require from students requesting learning accommodations?
2. How do PDSP's in NY, NJ, PA & CT make decisions regarding documentation and accommodations?
3. How confident are postsecondary disability service providers in NY, NJ, PA & CT in their accommodation decisions?
4. What professional development opportunities exist for PDSPs?

In order to answer these research questions, a mixed methods study design was implemented incorporating a quantitative survey and qualitative interview. Using the College Navigator tool on the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) website, the researcher identified 321 institutions that met the following parameters:

1. 2-year/4-year institutions; Associate and Bachelor degree-granting
2. Public, Private non-profit, and private for-profit
3. 1,000 to 10,000 student enrollment

4. Institutions located in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut.

From the initial pool of 321 institutions, 28 institutions did not have a specific individual listed as the disability services professional, which yielded a final pool of 293 PDSPs. An electronic survey was sent to the primary disability service professional at each institution via email, using a Survey Monkey link. The survey was open for three months, and three reminder emails were sent in order to increase the response rate. Survey participants were given the option to volunteer for a follow up interview. The quantitative and qualitative data collection procedures were outlined fully in the prior chapter.

### **Pilot Study**

In order to contribute to validity, the researcher conducted a pilot for the qualitative component of the study. The survey instrument had already been piloted and validated by the original authors. The interview protocol was piloted with two higher education administrators who had minimal experience working with students with learning disabilities in order to ensure clarity and understanding of interview questions on a fundamental level. The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes each and were recorded.

The pilot interviews prompted the researcher to add more in-depth follow-up questions, specifically pertaining to faculty cooperation in regards to the accommodation process, as well as inquiries as to the transitional experiences of freshman students with learning disabilities.

### **Organization of Data Analysis of Current Study**

The data for the current study on disability professional's accommodation decision-making experiences were analyzed in several steps. Descriptive statistics were obtained from the survey results and examined for any missing data or questionable responses. Qualitative data analysis was completed through the coding of transcribed interviews, in order to identify emerging themes that related to the research questions. The remainder of this chapter presents a summary of demographic data on the study participants, quantitative and qualitative data results and findings, and concludes with a summary.

**Quantitative data analysis.** Two of the four research questions were addressed through quantitative data analysis:

1. What documentation do postsecondary disability service providers (PDSPs) in NY, NJ, PA & CT require from students requesting learning accommodations?
2. How do PDSP's in NY, NJ, PA & CT make decisions regarding documentation and accommodations?

Research Questions 1 and 2 were addressed by descriptive statistics collected from the survey data. The survey was sent to 293 postsecondary disability service providers who fit the research parameters outlined previously. Of the 293 potential participants, 125 attempted to take the survey, and 103 completed the survey, yielding a complete survey response rate of 35%. Participants were asked their professional job title, years of experience in disability services, highest earned degree, and area of highest earned degree. As shown in Table 3, survey respondents were well represented in regards to

reported years of experience in LD services, with 43.6% having more than 10 years' experience. The vast majority of respondents hold Master's degrees (70.3%), without any predominant degree area indicated. Survey respondents reported varying sources for training in LD documentation review, with the majority citing professional development opportunities, such as workshops and conferences, as primary source (56%).

Table 3

*Descriptive Statistics for Experience and Training of Survey Participants*

Characteristic	Count (%)
<b>Years of experience in disability services</b>	
Less than 5 years	27 (23.1)
5-10 years	39 (33.3)
More than 10 years	51 (43.6)
<b>What is your highest earned degree?</b>	
Bachelors	7 (5.9)
Masters	83 (70.3)
Professional Certificate	9 (7.6)
Doctorate	19 (16.1)
<b>In what area is your highest degree earned?</b>	
Psychology/School Psychology	29 (25.6)
Rehabilitation Counseling	10 (8.9)
Elementary/Secondary/Higher Education	22 (19.5)
Special Education	20 (17.7)
Other	32 (28.3)
<b>How did you receive your primary training</b>	

in reviewing LD documentation?	
Academic Degree Program	37 (31.9)
Professional Development (e.g., workshops, conferences)	65 (56.0)
Have not received formal training	14 (12.1)

Participants were also asked to identify their institution type (Two year community/technical school, Four year college/university, or other); whether their institution was public, private non-profit, or private for-profit; approximate undergraduate enrollment; and characteristics of their disability service office. As seen in Table 4, the majority of survey respondents came from four year colleges/universities (79.5%), with an undergraduate enrollment population of 1,000 to 3,500 students (61.1%). Survey respondents reported working in a centralized office/center for students with any type of documented disability (70.4%), which prompted a revision of the initial qualitative data collection parameters for this study, which will be discussed further. Participants reported varying caseloads of registered students with learning disabilities, with 53.9% responding that they had over 90 registered students, although 54.9% of survey respondents reported reviewing 11-50 cases of LD documentation annually, as seen in Table 4.

Table 4

*Descriptive Statistics of Institutions/Programs of Survey Participants*

Characteristic	Count (%)
<b>Type of Institution</b>	
Two year community/technical college	23 (19.7)
Four year college/university	93 (79.5)
Other	1 (0.9)
<b>Is your Institution public or private?</b>	
Public	41 (35.3)
Private, non-profit	63 (54.3)
Private, for-profit	12 (10.3)
<b>What is your approximate undergraduate enrollment?</b>	
Less than 1,000	1 (0.1)
1,000 to 3,500	69 (61.1)
3,501 to 6,500	27 (23.9)
6,501 to 10,000	12 (10.6)
More than 10,000	4 (3.5)
<b>Which of the following best describes your office/center?</b>	
Office/center for students with any type of documented disability	81 (70.4)
Office/center for students with documented learning disabilities only	1 (0.9)

Student affairs office that also provides disability services	11 (9.6)
Academic affairs office that also provides disability services	15 (13.0)
Other	7 (6.1)
<hr/>	
Approximately how many students with learning disabilities are registered with your office annually?	
<hr/>	
Less than 10	0
11-50	25 (22.1)
51-90	27 (23.9)
91+	61 (53.9)

Table 5 shows the sources of guidance used by survey respondents during the documentation review process, which addresses research question 3: How do PDSPs in NY, NJ, PA & CT make decisions regarding documentation and accommodations? This research question was also addressed through qualitative analysis, which will be detailed later on. As shown in Table 5, cumulatively 56.6% of respondents reported turning to AHEAD materials during the documentation review process, with 28.3% of referring to the AHEAD *Guidelines for LD Documentation Review* and 28.3% utilizing the AHEAD *Best Practices* guidance.



Table 5

*Statistics for Documentation Review*

Characteristic	Count (%)
<hr/> Approximately how many cases of LD documentation do you review in a year? <hr/>	
Less than 10	3 (2.7)
11-50	62 (54.9)
51-90	23 (20.4)
91+	25 (22.1)
<hr/> Which statement best describes your documentation review process? <hr/>	
Review by me	58 (51.3)
Review by me with external consultation if needed	41 (36.3)
Review by committee/group	7 (6.2)
Other	7 (6.2)
<hr/> Which statement best describes your institution's requirements related to recency of test data in LD documentation? <hr/>	
Testing must be completed within past three years	23 (20.5)
Testing must be completed within past five years	23 (20.5)
No formal institutional requirement regarding recency (decisions made on case-by-case basis)	66 (58.9)
<hr/> Are you guided by any of the following documentation criteria or guidelines during your review process? <hr/>	

AHEAD Guidelines for Documentation of LD	32 (28.3)
AHEAD Best Practices	32 (28.3)
State/Regional AHEAD Guidelines	8 (7.1)
ETS Guidelines	6 (5.3)
Institutional specific guidelines	19 (16.8)
No set criteria or guidelines	16 (14.2)

Research questions 1 and 2, which are related to the components of documentation required, and those that are used to determine accommodations, respectively, are addressed in Table 6 below. This table indicates the requirements of each type of documentation component, with survey respondents indicating whether each component was Required, Preferred but not required, or Not Required. The only documentation component that was predominantly required was a clear LD diagnosis (71.6%), followed by 40.8% who required background information. Documentation currency was predominantly preferred, although only a quarter of respondents required certain components to be within 3 years old.

Table 6

*Statistics for Type of Documentation Components Required*

<u>Component</u>	<u>Count (%)</u>		
	<u>Not Required</u>	<u>Not Req, but Pref</u>	<u>Required</u>
Background Information	3 (2.9)	58 (56.3)	42 (40.8)
Clear diagnosis of a LD	0	31 (28.4)	78 (71.6)
DSM IV statement of LD	17 (15.9)	69 (64.5)	21 (19.6)
Test measures normed on	8 (7.5%)	68 (64.2)	30 (28.3)

## adult populations

Current (3 years old or less) measure(s) of aptitude	8 (7.4)	73 (67.6)	27 (25.0)
Current (3 years old or less) measure(s) of achievement	7 (6.5)	76 (70.4)	25 (23.2)
Current (3 years old or less) measure(s) of information processing	9 (8.4)	74 (69.2)	24 (22.4)
Information on behaviors during testing	23 (22.6)	75 (73.5)	4 (3.9)
Copy of IEP	26 (23.9)	68 (62.4)	15 (13.8)
Copy of secondary 504 Plan	24 (22.0)	69 (63.3)	16 (14.7)
Copy of summary of performance document	26 (24.3)	68 (63.6)	13 (12.2)
Letter from disability service office at another institution explaining services used (for transfer students)	26 (24.1)	69 (63.9)	13 (12.0)
A personal letter from student	76 (71.7)	22 (20.8)	8 (7.6)

**Qualitative data analysis.** The qualitative data component of this study was the predominant focus of the mixed methods research design, and addressed the following research questions:

2. How do PDSPs in NY, NJ, PA & CT make decisions regarding documentation and accommodations?
3. How confident are PDSPs in NY, NJ, PA & CT in their accommodation decisions?

#### 4. What professional development opportunities exist for PDSPs?

Out of the 103 respondents who completed the survey, 31 indicated a willingness to participate in an interview in-person or by phone and supplied their email address at the conclusion of the survey. The researcher identified those participants within a two hour drive from her residence and sent an email requesting an interview to 16 respondents. Ultimately, qualitative data were collected from 11 participants, all of which agreed to a face to face interview. Table 7 indicates the demographics of the 11 interview participants:

Table 7

#### *Demographic Components of Interview Participants*

Interview	# of Years in Disability Services	# of Years in Current Position	Highest Degree	Institution Type	State	Campus Setting	Undergrad Enrollment (approx.)
1	Over 10	5	Masters	4 Year Private	NY	Large Suburb	7,000
2	Less than 5	Less than one	Masters	4 Year Private	CT	Small City	3,500
3	Less than 5	1	Doctorate	4 Year Private	CT	Large Suburb	4,000
4	5-10	5	Doctorate	4 Year Private	NY	Large Suburb	2,000
5	Over 10	Less than one	Masters	4 Year Private	NY	Large Suburb	1,500
6	5-10	1.5	Masters	4 Year Public	NJ	Large Suburb	6,500
7	Less than 5	5	Masters	4 Year Public	NY	Large City	8,000
8	5-10	9	Masters	4 Year Private	PA	Large Suburb	2,500
9	Less than 5	1	Masters	2 Year Public	NJ	Large Suburb	9,000

10	5-10	7	Masters	4 Year Private	PA	Small City	2,000
11	Less than 5	9	Doctorate	4 Year Private	NJ	Large Suburb	3,500

As shown in the above table, 5 out of 11 interview participants (45%) reported having less than five years' experience in disability services, which is considerably higher than the percentage of "green" PDSPs who participated in the survey (23.1%). The majority of interview participants (73%) reported holding a Master's degree, which was also the predominate highest earned degree for survey participants (70.3%). The majority of interview participants worked in institutions within large suburbs, as classified by the NCES database (73%), but were from states that were represented evenly across the region: NY (36%), NJ (27%), CT (18%) & PA (18%). Finally, a slight majority of the interview participants came from institutions with undergraduate enrollments of 1,000 to 3,500 (55%), which was also the predominant institution size for the survey participants (69%).

### **Key Themes**

Interview transcripts were manually coded, and five key themes emerged: (1) Flexibility in Documentation Requirements, (2) Emphasis on Student Interview, (3) Collaborative Problem-Solving, (4) Educating Faculty on Competency-based Assessment, and (5) Building Relationships and Impacting Campus Culture.

(1) **Flexibility in documentation requirements.** The most significant theme that emerged through all eleven interviews was a conscious effort on the part of the participants to be as flexible as possible when reviewing documentation and making accommodation decisions for students with learning disabilities. Several interviewee

participants indicated the use of “temporary” or interim accommodations, if the documentation a student provides is inadequate or completely missing:

**Interviewee #1:** We know that students are going to come here with what they have and we don't want services to be interrupted to the extent that we can possibly accommodate them. So, we have a system set up so that if the student registers with our office and provides us with something, we can provide what's called temporary accommodations, and generally speaking, when I approve those accommodations, they're for the semester.

**Interviewee #6:** The way I work with the students is if you have no documentation, but you present here and we have a conversation regarding your history of accommodation use or we talk about how your faculty referred you to me because something's up, I will place the student on an interim services agreement for at least one semester. Sometimes that's enough for the student to say I can get documentation. I try to be really flexible with this piece. Certainly, from my own perspective and from our perspective as an institution, we don't want students to be without the services, so the interim services agreement has worked out quite well in that regard.

**Interviewee #10:** I did work with one student who went through - we put in a temporary accommodation plan in place for the semester while she was going to be evaluated, and then she came back and changed her mind about all of it, and that sort of felt like, oh, we went through a whole lot for nothing, but I'd rather air on that side than the other, and find out that the student left or failed out or

something like that because I was digging my heels in, and wouldn't put accommodations in place before I had enough information.

For some of the participants, the need to be flexible came from the knowledge of the expense of receiving private, external evaluations, which would be cost prohibitive for many of their students, or avoiding a burdensome process:

**Interviewee #8:** When I'm deciding about documentation, I accept older documentation, I don't want to push people to go back to have testing done because they can't afford it oftentimes. They don't even realize how expensive it is until I tell them. So, we have documentation from students in elementary school, middle school, and high school.

**Interviewee #4:** What we ask for is a detailed report with diagnosis. We almost never get that. We usually get – what we got then and still what we get now, even though I actually tell myself I need to be more flexible, too...standards pretty much are – three years is not – it's a rule of thumb but we're flexible with that, especially if they're an older student or there's other factors. And it's so expensive to get testing.

**Interviewee #7:** We have a form that verifies disabilities, and that could be given to psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers and medical doctors as well. And sometimes they will write letters on letterhead. They will bring something, because, with the changes in the law, we've been a little bit more flexible within the timeframe. Because we used to stick to that three year rule, so to speak, but

now, as long as they have some history – something that documents it officially, I can use that to start off the process.

Finally, being flexible for some interview participants was synonymous with being creative in the evidence they required to determine accommodations, in addition to the accommodations themselves. This approach is directly in line with the AHEAD Guidelines on Documentation, which were referenced directly by five of the eleven interview participants, in regards to reviewing requests for accommodations on a case-by-case basis:

**Interviewee #5:** I want you to tell me what's worked for you, what did you experience in high school? A lot of students are handed the set of platter accommodations in high school and these are the choices, that's it. I think there definitely can be more creativity there, more options, just think a little bit.

**Interviewee #2:** I mean I base a lot of what I do off of if I have a history of accommodation what can we do. I'm following a lot of the AHEAD guidelines of documentation so if I've got nothing else but student self-report and my own observances then what else am I going to do? You've got to do the best you can for what you've got in front of you and I can't it would be an undue burden on a student to be like well, you need this and this and this and this.

**Interviewee #5:** I'm also paying attention to the law because I'm like the AHEAD interpretation of the ADA, we all looked at it as a group a few years ago and we had long discussions about it and there were some in the room who were not letting go of their documentation requirements, and there were us in the room who were like, "I'll take what I can get from the student," get them started



on accommodations or their narrative if they come in and they tell me they have a history of receiving accommodation. That was my philosophy in my office.

(2) **Emphasis on student interview.** One of the other most significant components of the updated AHEAD Guidelines is the importance of the student self-report in terms of evidence used to establish a qualifying learning disability. Even those participants that did not reference the AHEAD Guidelines directly made mention of using the interview with the student as the primary component of their accommodation decision:

**Interviewee #9:** When we're doing the intake, I'm asking detailed questions in terms of their interview to see what they know about their learning style and what they don't know about it. Where do they think their academic strengths are, but where do they think their academic weaknesses are? Because it's important to remind them that they do have academic strengths...I'll go based on my interview and my student's self-report and a lot more based on that, and if we end up a student goes for further testing later on, then we can always work with that later on, but it's a lot more based on the individual than what the reports are and – than what the documentation would state in this case.

**Interviewee #7:** Having conversations with the students [is important]. What is it that they need? And if it's reasonable, then we should be able to advocate to make that happen. And I think that's also very important. What do you need? What are the issues? And by knowing that, that sort of guides what my possible next steps would be, based on their situation.

**Interviewee #3:** One of the best things that I've heard this year, and I can't remember if it was at the conference or in an email or on a website, but it stuck with me, was that you can never second guess your professional judgment in these cases. They're difficult and the ones coming in are – they're bigger, they're very co-morbid so you don't just see attention deficit. You see it with anxiety, depression, sometimes bipolar or borderline personality or with a medical condition. Of course you second guess yourself and think, well, is this the best by the student, am I enabling them, am I giving them the ability to do what they need to do in a reasonable accommodation setting? It's thinking about – well, usually if it's that difficult I'll call the student in before I make any determination and really meet with them and say...”why do you feel that you need that, why do you feel that that would be helpful?” I think, at this point especially with the new amendments that keep saying, you know, primary support is the student and then the history and then the documentation, so I've been trying to wrap my mind around that because *when I was trained obviously that wasn't the case.*

(researcher emphasis)

This last statement made by Interviewee #3, which has been italicized, further reflects the shift away from stringent documentation requirements for the accommodation approval process. Interestingly, this interviewee was one of the less experienced participants, having been in her position, and in disability services in general, for just under one year at the time of the interview. This would seem to indicate this shift as a relatively recent one.

One interview participant from a private institution in upstate New York acknowledged the shift from stringent documentation requirements to the student interview, but expressed challenges in making that happen within his institution:

**Interviewee #4:** I know some people at community colleges are trying to [sic] these kind of standard you should interview everyone and have kind of a – for part of the decision of accommodations. And we are not there, some for distance...AHEAD has now said, “Well, documentation should be like third down on the list,” so someone’s doing very in depth interviews of everyone. That’s just not realistic for us...And I do have a lot of other responsibilities. So to have everyone come in for a meeting would just become prohibitive. I just can’t do it.

It bears noting that this interviewee was the only one out of eleven who did not require direct interviews with students as part of the accommodation approval process.

(3) **Collaborative problem-solving.** Whether describing in-the-moment conflict resolution, or more strategic efforts to expand faculty and/or student perspective on disability services issues, all eleven of the interview participants referenced the importance of working collaboratively to effectively reach conclusions that took into account multiple and varying factors:

**Interviewee #10:** So it’s just certain situations like that would take-would take a lot of energy, and kind of a lot of – like I don’t know the right answer, so let’s talk and see what we can figure out is an appropriate answer for your course, or for this student in this scenario. And that same solution might not work in another scenario.

**Interviewee #7:** And I will get involved, and I will speak with the professors via email. Go to their office; arrange a meeting, so that we can further discuss what the compliance issue may be and how we can do that. But I try not to address it, necessarily as, “this is the law and you have to comply.” How else can we work together, when a student is part of our program, and as partners – all three of us – to get – to give the students what they need?

**Interviewee #6:** Yeah, there are times when I get what some would call pushback, but I really tend to look at those, or try to look at those as just opportunities to make effective and educational outreaches and build that relationship and rapport with the faculty. So, if they’re having questions or concerns they know to just give me a call and we can just sort of walk through it. Oftentimes, the faculty here at the college will contact me and they’ll be frazzled. They’ll say, “You know, I got this memo and the student gave it to me and I just don’t know what to do. I have all these other students to worry about, so just tell me what to do, how can we work through this?” They’re sometimes feeling like that’s a weight on them as a faculty, so we’re kind of working on that shift that it’s definitely collaboration and a partnership.

**Interviewee #1:** We developed an accommodation called possible attendance modification and with that we gave the student and the professor a list of guidelines to follow, and really it’s a list of questions, to get the student and the professor engaged in a conversation about alternative methods for assessment, alternative methods of imparting information, and really get the professor to answer questions like, why do I require attendance? Why is being part of my

classroom a critical piece of success in this course? Most often, the professor realizes that there are some – especially with technology the way it is now, there are some ways that they can bend, and the student realizes that they have to do their part.

While ten out of the eleven interview participants described an institutional culture that did not tolerate faculty disputes in regards to accommodation compliance, one of the interviewees from a large suburban campus in New York talked about working in an environment that defers to faculty as the primary authority and how she manages that during the accommodation process:

**Interviewee #1:** It's completely at the discretion of the faculty, as are most things. That's the culture here is the faculty is in charge, so we do everything that we do, sort of, within that framework, within that mindset of, okay, we can't tell a professor how they have to teach, but how can we get the student what he needs knowing that that's the case? To me, that's sort of fun. One of the things I like about our job is sometimes there are no clear cut answers. It's three people sitting in a room coming up with a solution to a problem...I love those things because that gives us a chance to say, you know, just because this is how you've always done it doesn't necessarily mean that this is the way you have to always do it, and that's fun, you know?

A very similar sentiment was expressed by a PDSP within a private institution in a large suburb of New Jersey, in regards to feeling a sense of enjoyment from the intrinsic challenges involved with problem-solving among faculty and students:

**Interviewee #6:** There are some days you just go home and you're like, what the heck just happened? My day was all planned out and then X,Y, and Z happened and I just got thrown totally off into some other realm, which is fine, but I think we're always doing good work, so. But some of that good work comes with pushback and with those educational moments for the people that may not buy in, and so it's not for the faint of heart, I don't think. We're all works in progress, so just keep it moving.

**(4) Educating faculty on competency-based assessment.** When asked about the general faculty response to the accommodation process within their institution, all eleven interview participants referenced their efforts to educate faculty on disability services, including case-by-case dialogue to larger scale, formal training sessions and presentations. As one interviewee put it, "I take the time to preemptively educate our faculty and our adjunct faculty and our different departments on campus, so that we don't have disputes over accommodations." This kind of strategic, anticipatory approach to the accommodation process was described by several other participants:

**Interviewee #3:** We do outreach training, so I think that has really helped. We pushed letters to all adjunct and full-time faculty about what our office is, what we do, what they're federally mandated to comply with, if they have any questions, fundamental alterations of courses, anything like that. So, I think the more information we can get them the more empowered they feel. I did training last week where we talked about academic deference in the courts, that a lot of the time courts are going to side with what the professor feels is a fundamental alteration or not, and I think giving the faculty that sense of I'm not taking

something away from you and we're not giving the student an advantage, this is about equal access and trying to provide the material in a way that they can understand.

**Interviewee #2:** I need buy-in from above to say, hey, we need more training. Because our faculty and staff have not been trained on disability services in years. I'm starting to hit departments I have a meeting next week and the one after where I'm starting to meet with departments...my hot topic is coming up with a consistent process and policies and making sure everybody's bought in and all of the faculty and staff are brought up to speed with the education piece.

**Interviewee #1:** We say, if you schedule us we will come and do a mini workshop for your department faculty at your faculty meeting on whatever topic you want us to discuss and here's a list of potential topics that we're ready to talk about...we'll come in and we'll do a twenty minute song and dance on, you know, how to modify your assignments for students who are visually impaired. Simple, twenty minutes, here are ten things that you can do. Or we talk about more philosophical kinds of things sometimes, you know, why is extra time fair, what's the definition of fairness, those kinds of things.

This "philosophical" approach was very often within the framework of Universal Design theory. Although only two interview participants referenced the term "Universal Design" during the interview, the importance of competency-based learning was described by ten out of the eleven interview participants, particularly in regards to helping faculty find alternative methods of assessment within their curriculum:

**Interviewee #9:** This individual student was eligible to take full notes in with him for his tests. They give double time on the test for processing delays. Between these two and the use of a computer for typing out his essay responses, he really did much better in his classes...and it wasn't something that was impossible because in daily life, you can reference notes. In daily life you can use Wikipedia or Google and you can find out answers to things that you're going to do right before your presentation. You can bring some note cards with you, you know? So I think that a lot of times, people get overwhelmed by that in terms of is that reasonable and is that appropriate. But I think, in some circumstances, if the student is able to demonstrate they can do the work and they can do the competency, why are we going to tell the student that they can never pursue college?

**Interviewee #8:** I do very brief presentations but I've tried to – what I'm trying to do is set up a website; work on a website where faculty could get instruction from other sources. What I'd most like to do is to have faculty be able to experience what it's like to, say, be dyslexic, or have a processing disorder where you're only allowed to – your mind is only letting you do so much at a time.

The interview question which tended to elicit participant commentary on guiding faculty through alternative teaching and assessment methods was the one that inquired about the presence of faculty “pushback” in regards to approved accommodations. Most of the interviewees reported that when faculty did come across as resistance to accommodations, it was most effectively addressed through a broadening of perspective and understanding:



**Interviewee #8:** My predecessor worked very hard to get Universal Design understood among faculty, but that was seven years ago. One of the first things I was told by several faculty members was, “We don’t want to hear anything about Universal Design, we’ve heard enough about it.” So, what I am trying to do is encourage faculty members to be aware of the legal aspects of things and students have these as rights.

**Interviewee #11:** I would say there’s some pushback. For the most part, I think, their hearts are in the right place, like no one is like “Well, I don’t want to help them.” They don’t seem to have that attitude but I think sometimes they just disagree with it. “Well, why do they need that?” Or some will even approach me with their own interpretation of what they think is a reasonable thing...to ways that they think that in the real world this will not help them.

**Interviewee #10:** I don’t experience a lot of resistance, but I think there’d be even less if they knew a little bit more about where this office is coming from and that their concerns were valuable. I think some of them feel, like, “Well, she gave me this format, I have to do whatever it says,” and they sort of put their hand up, like, “I just have to get this student an A,” and that’s not it at all.

This theme of PDSPs guiding faculty towards alternative teaching and assessment methods in order to successfully reach diverse learners, such as students with learning disabilities, is synonymous with the principles of Universal Design detailed by Pliner and Johnson (2004). In her qualitative study of how faculty and staff responded to a large-scale program to improve campus climate for students with disabilities, Aune (1995) reflects:

Faculty members need to feel empowered to act without the continual input of service providers. Faculty and service providers must develop collaborative relationships so that faculty members begin to see students with disabilities as “their students” not simply students “belonging” to a service program or office. (p. 168)

Based on the feedback from the interview participants, the relationship between disability service providers and faculty is certainly a prevalent factor on the campuses that the researcher visited. However, the more significant campus-wide culture shift to full inclusion, which the faculty are so central in, emerged as one that the PDSPs themselves were essential in making happen.

**(5) Building relationships and impacting campus culture.** Almost all of the interview participants made reference to daily collaboration with other campus departments, whether it was academic advising, counseling services, or residential life. When talking about these collaborations, the interviewees used phrases and terminology that depicted their role as one that was wide-reaching and integral to the diversity of their campuses:

**Interviewee #8:** We recently actually started a group, I know the University of Michigan has had one for five or six years for Aspies and they get together and they’re meeting and they’re sharing concerns and it’s being led by two of the more high-functioning – we have one fellow here who is very involved in student government, in leadership activities and so on, so we’ve encouraged him in that regard.

**Interviewee #9:** I run a social group...so that's where any student who just kind of is looking for connections on campus, perhaps needs a little development in social skills. The ones who don't need development in social skills really get a chance to be leaders in a group setting. It's specific to ODS [Office of Disability Services] students with the idea that once it is something that ODS students are comfortable enough with, we'll invite friends of ODS students, so it can be more of an awareness and tolerance and diversity group on campus.

**Interviewee #7:** I've tried to encourage our students. We have a club for students with disabilities. And I said, you need to speak. You need to – as our office, we're obviously the liaison, and we advocate on your behalf, but there's nothing more powerful than students coming together and talking about how certain things are impacting them. And so, besides the networking and social events, we've encouraged them to try to take on at least one real issue per semester, per year that they can address...we gently try to say “always try to take something on, so that you – so make a difference while you're here, and then for the rest of the students that follow.” We need more people to talk about these things. I don't think it's enough that it comes from our office.

**Interviewee #1:** We have really gone out of our way to make ourselves just another office in Student Affairs. We do everything else that everybody else does. We participate in the fun events and we have fundraisers that our office is a major sponsor for. We even have – to dispel this myth that students with disabilities are not as good as other students in terms of their academic performance, we have our own honor society chapter... more and more students

with non-apparent disabilities are buying into that identity piece and wanting to be part of that group and wanting to be part of the fundraiser, so it's working, slowly, but it's working. The culture is changing.

A primary factor in promoting a more inclusive campus environment, which emerged in many of the interviews, was purposefully creating and nurturing relationships with other campus resources and departments. Several interviewees not only referenced these relationships as a practical part of their daily interactions on their respective campus, but, more importantly, identified these interpersonal skills as integral to getting what they needed to effectively serve their students:

**Interviewee #6:** So, I think one of the really awesome things about my job too is that there is not anybody on campus that I don't know in terms of tapping into resources. I get to work with so many different people, and risk management too, all these different departments. So, I think that's really awesome. I don't think there's another position on campus probably that allows an individual to intersect with so many different departments within the community.

**Interviewee #3:** When I started a year ago, that was one of the primary priorities was just to get the word out, we're under new management, we're redoing policies and procedures, we are the number one stop on campus for any disability related questions, so we put together new brochures, we revamped the website, I went into all the faculty meetings for all the different departments on campus, I presented to the athletics department, career placement, admissions, advising, the Dean's offices, and just did my best to say this is what we are, this is what we are going to be doing.

**Interviewee #1:** I figured out what offices were absolutely crucial, both from an academic and resident's life, what offices were crucial for me to have a really good relationship with in order for things to go smoothly for our students. Then, in that office I would pick one person...and I maintain those relationships very intentionally. We have lunch, I call to say hello, happy birthday, whatever, and that has been – and turns out that that was a very wise move on my part because this is an enormous institution with lots of moving parts...the very first thing you need to do is establish good relationships with people on the campus because if you don't accomplish that, nothing that you need to do is gonna get done. Because you are going to be in a position often that is gonna appear to be adversarial, and if you don't have relationships with these people they're gonna shut down. The minute you walk into their office to ask for something they're gonna shut down, so the first thing you need to do is have good relationships, and listen to people. Faculty that are barking about not wanting to do this, that or the other, you have to listen to them and know why they're complaining. Why are they complaining? What could we maybe do differently to make it easier on the professor to provide testing accommodations, how can we make it easy? You have to listen to everybody's – you have to appear to be on everybody's side at the same time.

It is worth noting that this last statement was made by an interview participant who was one of the two more seasoned PDSPs involved in the qualitative component of this study, with over ten years' experience in disability services in higher education. While many of the interviewees made reference to this theme of developing collaborative relationships

on their campuses, this particular PDSP was one of the few that really acknowledged the importance of doing so in a strategic sense, which emerges as valuable guidance for those newer to the disability services field.

### **Quantitative and Qualitative Data Connections**

In line with the sequential mixed methods research design, it was imperative to connect quantitative and qualitative data at the conclusion of the respective analysis phases. The pragmatism theoretical framework required the researcher to maintain an adaptable and practical approach to the study findings, allowing for the identification of any themes that may emerge and ultimately inform effective practice (Johnson & Christensen, 2012).

The most prevalent connection between the survey data and interview findings was the shift away from stringent documentation requirements when making accommodation decisions. The survey data clearly pointed to this shift in participants reporting only one out of the thirteen types of documentation components as predominantly “required.” Furthermore, the majority of survey respondents reported that their institutions do not have any formal policy on currency of documentation submitted. This quantitative data only emphasized qualitative data collected from interview participants who, almost without exception, described professional philosophies and practices that focused on the student self-report, rather than any specific psychoeducational evaluations or assessments in order to determine appropriate accommodations. Interviewees talked about the need to prioritize the student’s self-report of their academic and accommodation history, being flexible and creative in determining appropriate accommodations to meet student needs, and the importance of

working with faculty to develop effective and accessible methods to assess academic competency.

The paradigm shift away from formalized documentation requirements seen in the quantitative data was evident in the qualitative themes that emerged from the interview data. Rather than illustrating a need for PDSPs to become more proficient at disability documentation, the interviews highlighted the importance of soft-skills such as collaborative problem-solving and diplomatic yet assertive communication of disability issues, thus contributing to a change in the culture of disability, not only for the campus community, but often the students themselves.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to explore the documentation and accommodation decision-making experiences of a sampling of disabilities services personnel at the postsecondary level to help inform best practices and improve professional development. The quantitative survey, which was completed by 102 PDSPs from four states within the northeast region of the United States, reflected a marked shift away from specific documentation requirements, with respondents indicating the majority of listed components as “preferred, not required.” Qualitative data compiled from 11 interview participants also supported this paradigm shift from strict documentation requirements to a more flexible, student-centered review process, which prioritized the student interview as the most important component in making accommodation decisions. These components of the decision making process were reflected in two of the five key themes (*Flexibility in Documentation Requirements* and *Emphasis on Student Interview*). Analysis of the qualitative data also resulted in three additional themes: *Collaborative*

*Problem-solving, Educating Faculty on Competency-based Assessment and Building Relationships and Impacting Campus Culture.*

The key themes that emerged from the qualitative data analysis, which was the prioritized strand of the mixed methods design of this study, have significant implications for professional development. As both survey and interview participants indicated a moving away from specific evaluations and currency of the overall components required, there seems to be less of a need for training on disability documentation, but rather the enhancement of interpersonal and problem-solving skills, which are needed not only during the student interview and accommodation decisions process, but are also needed in order to effectively work with campus constituents to improve the overall experience of students with disabilities on college campuses. Additional elaboration and discussion on the implications and recommendations for professional development will be addressed in the following chapter.



## **Chapter Five: Conclusions, Discussion and Recommendations**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to better understand the decision-making challenges and experiences of disability professionals in higher education during the accommodation approval process. Prior research (Gormley et al., 2005; Harrison, 2008; NJCLD, 2007; Ofiesh, 2006; Sitlington & Payne, 2004; Sparks & Lovett, 2013) has chronicled the mismatch between what documentation students with learning disabilities have upon graduating the secondary school system and what colleges require in order to approve learning accommodations. Furthermore, research (Dukes & Shaw, 1999; Dukes & Shaw, 2004; Gordon et al., 2002; Yost et al., 1994) has shown that disability professionals in the higher education sector come from varied backgrounds with often limited training, resulting in further ambiguity regarding evaluation of disability documentation and approving appropriate and effective reasonable accommodations. While prior research in this area has been extensive, it has been primarily quantitative in nature and from the perspective of the student. The primary motivation for this study was to give a voice to the disability professionals in higher education charged with these high stakes decisions, with the intent of identifying professional development opportunities which would ultimately improve the outcomes for students with learning disabilities entering college.

Major findings of this study have suggested that disability service professionals in higher education have become (a) less dependent on specific documentation in order to make accommodation decisions, (b) more adept at building relationships on their

campuses and engaging in collaborative problem solving when approving reasonable accommodations for students with learning and (c) more aware of their primary responsibility when educating faculty on alternative assessment methods to more effectively teach students with diverse learning styles. This chapter will review the methodological approach used to address the stated research questions, the limitations and implications of the study, and recommendations for professional development and future research in this area.

This study proposed to address four research questions:

1. What documentation do postsecondary disability service providers (PDSPs) in NY, NJ, PA & CT require from students requesting learning accommodations?
2. How do PDSPs in NY, NJ, PA & CT make decisions regarding documentation and accommodations?
3. How confident are PDSPs in NY, NJ, PA & CT?
4. What professional development opportunities exist for PDSPs?

This study was guided by a pragmatist framework, which rejects the existence of one “truth” and acknowledges multiple and sometimes opposing perspectives or “realities.” While this framework required the researcher to be open to any and all possible themes and outcomes, the study was developed with the hypothesis that PDSPs lacked confidence in their documentation and accommodation decision-making and would benefit from professional development in these areas. Finally, this study was developed with the Manhattanville College School of Education doctoral themes in mind, specifically, *Facilitating Responsive Education Programs* and *Developing Self & Others*.

## **Methodology**

This study used a sequential mixed methods design to address the four research questions. Permission was granted to use a previously published and validated survey in order to identify demographic data and documentation components of PDSPs from four states in the northeast region. Survey participants were given the opportunity to indicate an interest in being interviewed for the qualitative phase of the study. The results of the interviews were then prioritized in order to gain a deeper, meaningful understanding of PDSP experiences.

**Research Question 1: What documentation do postsecondary disability service providers (PDSPs) in NY, NJ, PA & CT require from students requesting learning accommodations?**

*Conclusions.* This study explored the decision-making experiences of disability service providers in higher education in relation to freshman with learning disabilities requesting accommodations. In order to determine current documentation requirements, the quantitative survey asked a series of questions related to specific documentation components required when determining learning accommodations. Quantitative survey data indicated that 71.6% of survey participants required a clear diagnosis of a learning disability. However, there was no other documentation component that was consistently required from the 102 PDSPs who took the survey. In fact, out of the thirteen documentation components listed, participants indicated eleven were “not required but preferred,” indicating a general flexibility in the documentation needed to determine learning accommodations.

**Discussion.** The survey data indicated a significant paradigm shift in how PDSPs make accommodation decisions. In the study from Madaus, Banerjee and Hamblet (2010), which originally created the survey instrument, the use of tests normed on an adult population were cited as a dominant documentation component requirement (63%), while only 28.3% of the current study survey participants required this component. The participants of this study predominantly reported that adult normed tests were “not required but preferred” (64.2%). Also, while both studies reported the clear learning disability diagnosis as the most dominant documentation component required, the current survey data indicated a significant reduction in those that require it, with only 71.6% requiring it, as compared to 90% of survey participants from the 2010 study. This trend was also evident in the participants’ response to using current (3 years old or less) measures of academic achievement. While the original survey data showed that 51% of PDSPs indicated this component as required, the current survey yielded only 23.2% of respondents who reported current measures of academic achievement as required.

This quantitative data clearly indicate a change in the stringency of documentation guidelines in relation to determining accommodations in higher education. This conclusion is also supported by the qualitative data collected from interviews, which reiterate this general atmosphere of flexibility, which emerged as one of the five key themes in the qualitative data analysis stage. In regards to the lack of formal documentation submitted, one seasoned interviewee with over five years’ experience in disability services stated:

I'd rather air on that side than the other, and find out that the student left or failed out or something like that because I was digging my heels in, and wouldn't put accommodations in place before I had enough information.”

This student-centered approach to accommodation requests was a common thread among almost all of the interview participants, regardless of institution type, background, or years of experience. Sometimes this flexibility was referred to as the importance of being creative in determining what students need or a commitment to avoiding a burdensome process.

**Research Questions 2: How do PDSPs in NY, NJ, PA & CT make decisions regarding documentation and accommodations?**

*Conclusions.* The exploration and understanding of the decision-making process was one of the primary motivations of this study, as there has been significant research (Gordon et al., 2002; Madaus et al., 2010; Murray, Flannery, & Wren, 2008; NJCLD, 2007) done over the last decade that points to a sense of confusion and ambiguity among PDSPs interpretation of disability documentation and law in regards to making accommodation decisions. This research question was addressed using both quantitative and qualitative data, although the primary focus was on the data collected during the interview process.

Further supporting a shift away from stringent documentation requirements in order to make accommodation decisions, 58.9% of survey respondents reported that they have no formal institutional requirement regarding recency of documentation and make decisions on a case-by-case basis. This is a significant increase compared to the original survey data, in which only 34% of respondents reported having no formal requirements

related to recency of documentation. Qualitative data was even more indicative of the reduced need for formal evaluations, as ten of the eleven interview participants reported prioritizing the student interview in their accommodation decisions.

**Discussion.** Both quantitative data from the survey and qualitative data from the interviews indicate a shift away from the medical “discrepancy” model of disability to the social model, in which each student is viewed individually, rather than specific documentation requirements and/or diagnoses to warrant specific accommodations. This shift is directly in line with the AHEAD *Guidance on Documentation Practices* released in 2012, which recommends the student self-report as the “primary documentation” collected in order to make accommodation decisions. The AHEAD Guidance (2012) clearly advises that institutions not set age limits on documentation, stating that, “no third party information may be necessary to confirm disability or evaluate requests for accommodations when the condition and its impact are readily apparent or comprehensively described. No specific language, tests, or diagnostic labels are required.”

These findings were the most surprising and optimistic of the study. Not only did this data disprove the study’s hypothesis, but it reflected an overall change in the way PDSPs are making accommodation decisions, as compared to prior research findings. As one interviewee from a public institution with the largest enrollment of the participant pool stated,

**Interviewee #9:** So I think that a lot of times, people get overwhelmed by that in terms of is that reasonable and is that appropriate. But I think, in some circumstances, if the student is able to demonstrate they can do the work and they

can do the competency, why are we going to tell the student that they can never pursue college?

This general sense of the importance of focusing on what students can do, rather than what they can't was echoed by several other interview participants, many of whom also referenced the need to focus on competency-based assessments to more effectively teach all students. To this end, the data suggested a shift in the anticipated focus of professional development needs from documentation evaluation and decision-making skills to interpersonal skills and collaborative problem-solving, most importantly with college faculty in relation to the understanding of alternative, competency-based assessment methods.

**Research Question 3: How confident are PDSPs in NY, NJ, PA & CT in their accommodation decisions?**

*Conclusions.* The feelings of confidence and/or self-doubt were of particular interest to the researcher, and one that was most effectively addressed through qualitative interviews. As previously detailed in this study, much research has established that PDSPs come from varying backgrounds, with often limited formal training in interpreting disability documentation and understanding of the changes in law. The AHEAD *Guidance* (2012) includes a “commonsense standard” in regards to making accommodation decisions, in which it poses the query, “would an informed and reasonable person conclude from the available evidence that a disability is likely and the requested accommodation is warranted?” This guiding question was also referenced in another way by one of the interviewees, who, when asked whether she second-guesses her decisions, stated, “You can never second guess your professional judgment.” The

majority of the eleven interview participants seemed to echo this sense that despite the dynamic and challenging nature of their role within their institution, there was a surprising lack of frustration and negativity. Seven out of the eleven interview participants described the problem-solving nature of their jobs in positive terms such as “fun,” “awesome, and “good work,” and with few exceptions, the interviewees did not express feelings of anxiety or self-doubt, but rather the notion that ambiguous issues were just part of the job, but by reaching out to their professional network, referring to AHEAD guidance, and/or working directly with faculty, they made the most informed decisions they could with the information they had. This approach to navigating the often unclear disability services landscape emerged as the *Collaborative Problem-solving* key theme. Despite many interview participants being part of very small disability services office, or in some cases, the only disability services professional on their campuses, they described a day-to-day experience that was far from isolated, but rather rich with interdepartmental collaborations and dialogues regarding ways to best accommodate student needs.

When asked by the researcher, all eleven interview participants acknowledged second-guessing accommodation decisions in the past, but did not speak of these situations with any residual worry or regret, but treated them as learning experiences to file away for future reference. As one interviewee with just under five years’ experience in disability services put it:

**Interviewee #9:** There are always going to be new resources in terms of what’s considered best practice, what’s considered a best fit, what’s reasonable, what’s appropriate. So it’s something that’s not going to be an open and closed case and



so to say that I would know everything at any point in this career just means that I'm done.

This sense of confidence in their own professional judgment wasn't limited to the more seasoned interview participants. One interviewee who had been in their position for just under one year echoed this self-assurance and made reference to the importance of problem-solving skills, "I tend to just, again, trust that professional judgment of what did I see, how do we evaluate it, and just fall back on the skill of problem-solving from graduate school."

As seen in Table 7 (see p. 57), five out of the eleven interview participants had less than two years in their current role, which did not impact their initiative or expressed feelings of confidence. These five interviewees were doing all the same trainings, outreach, and engagement as their more seasoned peers, while expressing similar levels of support from their institutions.

**Discussion.** The data collected from the interview participants in relation to their levels of confidence in decision-making indicated an encouraging shift in the field of postsecondary disability services, which was evident in the *Flexibility in Documentation Requirements* and *Emphasis on Student Interview* themes that emerged, thus marking a moving away from the stringent documentation requirements evident in past studies, as detailed in Chapter Two. Furthermore, having a distinctive voice within their institution; control over expenditures; support from leadership; and the opportunity to seek out professional development opportunities such as conferences, webinars, and journals, contributed to the general impression that this pool of PDSPs were confident within their

roles, despite most of them being part of a very small disabilities services staff or on their own.

**Research Question 4: What professional development opportunities exist for PDSPs?**

*Conclusions.* This research question was addressed through the qualitative interview component of the study. Several questions in the interview protocol focused on participant experiences with professional development, including what resources they utilized during the decision-making process as well as advice they would give to fellow disability service professionals. All eleven interview participants referenced accessing a professional network of disability service professionals when unsure about an accommodation decision. Although the majority of interviewees utilized either a regional or national professional listserv, several noted their active participation on professional consortiums, which met informally to exchange ideas, pose questions, and discuss emerging hot topics and best practices.

*Discussion.* Interestingly, despite every interview participant making mention of educating faculty in disability service issues and alternative assessment methods as a prominent part of their work, none of them referenced having any specific training or professional development in this area. There were, however, several interview participants who seemed particularly adept at collaborative problem-solving techniques, as well as helping guide faculty to more flexible, adaptive teaching methods, without needing to invoke the specter of possible litigation or coming across as dictatorial. In regards to working with faculty, one interviewee from a public institution in New York City explained,

**Interviewee #7:** I try not to address it, necessarily as, “this is the law and you have to comply.” How else can we work together, when a student is part of our program, and as partners – all three of us-to give students what they need?

This delicate balance between advocating for students with disabilities and effectively communicating their needs to campus stakeholders, most often faculty, was a common thread among many of the interview participants. As one seasoned disability services director emphasized, “You have to listen to everybody-you have to appear to be on everybody’s side at the same time.” This ability to diplomatically navigate seemingly conflicting perspectives was echoed by several other participants, thus resulting in the *Collaborative Problem-Solving* theme that emerged from the qualitative data analysis. While the advantage of experience would seem to contribute to the development of these soft-skills, PDSPs of any level would benefit from professional development in this area.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There were several limitations to this study. First, restricting the participant pool to four states in the northeast region of the United States with a defined enrollment size may limit generalizability of the data. Furthermore, while efforts were made to interview PDSPs with varied experience from diverse institutions, the relatively small qualitative pool size provided a limited amount of data that may not be representative of professionals nationally. Finally, while mixed methods research design has the advantage of two strands of data to strengthen study findings, it is also a more complex design, requiring the researcher to be adept at both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis.

## **Implications of the Study**

The quantitative and qualitative data collected and analyzed for this study resulted in three major findings: disability service professionals in higher education (a) have become less dependent on specific documentation in order to make accommodation decisions, (b) more adept at building relationships on their campuses and engaging in collaborative problem solving when approving reasonable accommodations for students with learning disabilities and (c) more aware of their primary responsibility when educating faculty on alternative assessment methods to more effectively teach students with diverse learning styles. Despite the researchers hypothesis that the PDSPs needed training to improve their ability to evaluate disability documentation and make appropriate accommodation decisions, the qualitative data clearly indicated that one of the most important jobs these professionals have on their campus is educating their faculty on teaching diverse student populations, including students with learning disabilities. This finding informs the need for PDSPs to learn, or for many, further enhance their understanding of diverse learning styles and competency-based teaching methods.

While prior research has indicated that PDSPs come from varying backgrounds and don't necessarily have any formal training in education or pedagogical techniques (19.5% of survey participants in the current study had a degree in education, with 17.7% reporting an earned degree in Special Education), they would benefit from training opportunities in this area.

While this study indicated the importance of understanding teaching and learning styles as critical to the job responsibilities of a successful PDSP, the qualitative findings

also showed that the interpersonal “soft skills” that are essential for effectively managing accommodations for students with learning disabilities seem to be already existent in those individuals who gravitate to this field, specifically, collaborative problem-solving, appreciation for and support of diverse populations, and a commitment to student-centeredness. The findings of this research indicated that professional development that would further expand these skills, coupled with more formalized training on diverse learning styles and competency-based assessment methods, would be most beneficial to the practical responsibilities PDSPs currently have and the role they serve on their campuses. Professional development in the format of webinars, regional conferences, and open-houses hosted by institutions specializing in serving students with learning disabilities would be a relatively economical and easily accessible option for PDSPs in conjunction with or in lieu of pursuit of post-graduate professional certifications and furthering their formal education.

### **Recommendation for Future Studies**

This study was developed following an extensive review of the prior existing research in the field of disability services in higher education, taking into account recommendations to study disability services within smaller institutions, as well as filling the gap in the research through focusing on qualitative interview data to give a “voice” to the reality of what PDSPs experience when reviewing and approving accommodations and working with students with learning disabilities. However, the results of this study led to several recommendations for future research in this area. First, conducting a study on the confidence levels of PDSPs from a larger, national pool would provide more generalizable findings, and perhaps uncover additional meaning. Although a fully

qualitative study on such a large scale might be prohibitive for all but a fully funded research group, creating a survey that included items addressing confidence levels, as well as strategies used for expanding perspectives and increasing accessibility in the classroom would be interesting. Second, based on the finding from this survey that a significant responsibility of PDSPs is training faculty on competency-based teaching methods and diverse learning styles, it would be worthwhile to conduct a study on the effectiveness of these methods, possibly in regards to student outcomes, to further inform practice. Finally, since this study focused on four states within the northeast region of the United States, in lieu of an extensive national study with thousands of participants, a study focusing on a different region would allow for comparison of findings, which would also increase generalizability.

### **Summary**

While this study was conducted with the hypothesis that PDSPs lacked confidence in their documentation review process and decision-making regarding accommodations, both the quantitative and qualitative data refuted these suppositions. Both survey and interview participants put less importance on specific documentation components when making accommodation decisions, while deeper exploration through interviews indicated the student interviews as the most valuable evidence used by PDSPs. This is a shift from the discrepancy model of disability services to a more flexible, individualized social model, and thus corresponds to the guidance set forth by AHEAD, which encourages disability service professionals to prioritize their professional judgment over formal documentation when making accommodation decisions. Additional findings from the qualitative interviews highlighted the importance of PDSPs developing

collaborative relationships on campus and working directly with and training faculty, both formally and informally, to adapt their teaching style and utilize alternative assessment methods to more effectively engage with students with learning disabilities. The development of strategic professional relationships, the guiding of faculty, and often administration, toward a more inclusive and adaptive environment, which takes into consideration the diversity of all learners, can ultimately shift the very culture of a college campus.

This study portrayed a new profile of the disability service professional in higher education, from one who is lacking in confidence and needing guidance on understanding ambiguous psychoeducational evaluations, to one who excels at collaborative problem-solving and is in the unique and influential position of being able to directly impact the ways in which their institution responds to and educates diverse student populations.

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doi:10.2511/rpsd.30.3.154

### **Biography**

Daphne L. Galkin is currently the Dean of Academic Services at The College of Westchester in White Plains, NY. She began her career in higher education working in career services at Texas A & M University, before moving into academic advising and eventually student affairs administration at her current institution, where she has been recognized for her work with at-risk and non-traditional student populations. Daphne has presented on academic advising and retention initiatives at the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) national conference, as well as several regional higher education summits. Daphne earned her B.A. in English from the University at Albany and her M.A. in Humanities and Social Thought from New York University.

## Appendices

### Appendix A: Permission to use Survey Instrument

Re: Request for Permission  
 Madaus, Joseph <joseph.madaus@uconn.edu>  
 Sat 1/4/2014 8:30 PM  
 To: Daphne L. Galkin <galkind@student.mville.edu>;  
 Hi Daphne

Thanks for your email. Yes, please feel free to use it – I just ask that it be with appropriate attribution please.

Good luck with your research. I hope you'll consider submitting a proposal to our annual institute with your results at some point: [www.pti.uconn.edu](http://www.pti.uconn.edu)

Best wishes

Joe

Joseph Madaus, Ph.D.

Director, Center on Postsecondary Education and Disability  
 Associate Professor  
 Department of Educational Psychology, Neag School of Education  
 University of Connecticut  
 249 Glenbrook Road, Unit 3064  
 Storrs, CT 06269-3064  
 860-486-2785 (p); 860-486-5799 (f)  
[Joseph.Madaus@uconn.edu](mailto:Joseph.Madaus@uconn.edu)  
[www.cped.uconn.edu](http://www.cped.uconn.edu)

**From:** "Daphne L. Galkin" <[galkind@student.mville.edu](mailto:galkind@student.mville.edu)>  
**Date:** Friday, January 3, 2014 10:00 PM  
**To:** "[joseph.madaus@uconn.edu](mailto:joseph.madaus@uconn.edu)" <[joseph.madaus@uconn.edu](mailto:joseph.madaus@uconn.edu)>  
**Subject:** Request for Permission

Greetings Dr. Madaus,

I am a doctoral student at Manhattanville College in Purchase, NY, who is currently working on a dissertation exploring the decision-making experiences of disability service providers in postsecondary settings, with the intent of informing professional development and training opportunities for disabilities service personnel. I plan on conducting my research using an exploratory mixed methods design, consisting of an initial survey of 2-year and 4-year private non-profit, private for-profit, and public institutions. Using the information from the survey, I plan on then following up with individual interviews to provide more personal perspectives on the decision-making



process and experience of those charged with accommodating students with learning disabilities populations.

I would like to seek permission to use the survey that was created for your research as published in *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals* (2010). Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,  
Daphne Galkin

**Appendix B: Survey Instrument**

**This survey was created by Madaus, Banerjee and Hamblet and published in *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals* (2010). Permission to use this survey was granted by the primary author (see Appendix A).**

*Informed Consent*

## CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN A RESEARCH PROJECT

*Invitation to Participate*

You are being asked to participate in this study of postsecondary disability service providers. This study is being conducted in order to obtain current and comprehensive data related to how learning disability (LD) documentation is collected and reviewed in postsecondary institutions. Data from this study will be used to inform professional development opportunities for professionals in the field.

*Description of Procedures*

Please complete the attached electronic survey. It is anticipated that completion of this survey will take 10 minutes.

*Confidentiality*

There is no identifying information on the survey. All analyses and reporting of data will be done at the group level.

*Voluntary Participation*

Your participation in this research is voluntary. You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. If you agree to be in the study, but later change your mind, you may drop out at any time.

*Questions*

Take as long as you like before you make a decision. Your completion and submission of the survey will constitute your consent to participate in this research.

1. I wish to participate in this study\*

1. Yes
2. No

2. Do you work in a postsecondary office that provides services to students with disabilities?\*

1. Yes
  2. No
3. Are you the primary decision maker regarding student eligibility for LD services and accommodations (at the postsecondary level)?\*
1. Yes
  2. Occasionally
  3. No

**Respondent Information**

4. What is your professional job title?
1. Director/Coordinator of disability services
  2. Assistant/Associate Director/Coordinator of disability services
  3. Disability services specialist
  4. ADA Coordinator
  5. LD specialist
  6. Student affairs administrator
  7. Other (please specify)
5. Years of experience in disability services
1. Less than 5
  2. 5 to 10 years
  3. More than 10 years
6. What is your highest earned degree?
1. Bachelors
  2. Masters
  3. Professional Certificate
  4. Doctorate
7. In which area is your highest earned degree? (please select one)
1. Psychology/School Psychology
  2. Rehabilitation Counseling

3. Elementary/Secondary/Higher Education
4. Special Education
5. Other (please specify)

8. How did you receive your primary training in reviewing LD documentation? (select the single best choice)

1. Academic degree program
2. Professional development (e.g. workshops, conferences)
3. Have not received formal training

### **Institutional Information**

9. Type of institution

1. Two year community/technical college
2. Four year college/university
3. Other

If other, please specify

10. Is your institution public or private?

1. Public
2. Private

11. What is the approximate UNDERGRADUATE enrollment at your institution?

12. What is the approximate GRADUATE enrollment at your institution?

### **Program Information**

The remaining questions on the survey relate to decision making related to students with learning disabilities (LD).

13. Which of the following best describes your office/center?

1. Office/center for students with any type of documented disability
2. Office/center for students with documented learning disabilities only
3. Student affairs office that also provides disability services
4. Academic affairs office that also provides disability services
5. Other (please specify)

14. Approximately how many students with learning disabilities are registered with your office annually?

1. Less than 10
2. 11-50
3. 51-90
4. 91+

15. Approximately how many cases of LD documentation do you review in a year?

1. Less than 10
2. 11-50
3. 51-90
4. 91+

16. What statement best describes your documentation review process?

1. Review by me
2. Review by me with external consultation if needed
3. Review by committee/group
4. Other (please specify)

17. Which statement best describes your institution's requirements related to the recency of test data in LD documentation?

1. Testing must be completed within the past three years
2. Testing must be completed within the past five years
3. No formal institutional requirement regarding recency (decisions made on a case-by-case basis)

18. Are you guided by any of the following documentation criteria or guidelines during your review process? (Select one)

1. AHEAD Guidelines for Documentation of Learning Disabilities
2. AHEAD Best Practices
3. State/Regional AHEAD Guidelines
4. ETS guidelines
5. Institutional specific guidelines

6. No set criteria or guidelines

**Documentation Review**

19. What is your typical requirement regarding each of the following components of LD documentation?

- 1-Required    2- Not Required    3-Preferred But Not Required

Background information

Clear diagnosis of a learning disability

DSM IV statement of learning disorder

Test measures normed on adult populations

Current (3 years old or less) measure(s) of aptitude

Current (3 years old or less) measure(s) of achievement

Current (3 years old or less) measure(s) of information processing

Information on behaviors during testing

Copy of individualized education program

Copy of secondary Section 504 plan

Copy of summary of performance document

Letter from disability service office at another institution explaining services used (for transfer students)

**Discrepancy**

20. Do you require that a discrepancy between IQ and achievement test scores be clearly established for students with LD?

1. Yes
2. No

21. If yes, what is the level of discrepancy?

1. 1 standard deviation (e.g., 15 points)
2. 1.5 standard deviations (e.g., more than 22 points)
3. 2 standard deviations (e.g., 30 points)
4. Varies, based on a regression chart

5. Don't know

**Thank you for completing this survey!**

22. If you would be willing to participate in an interview, please provide your email address. This will be kept separately from your responses.

## **Appendix C: Interview Protocol**

### **Interview Protocol**

Thank you for agreeing to take the time to speak with me today. My name is Daphne Galkin and I am doing doctoral research at Manhattanville College regarding the documentation challenges facing students with learning disabilities entering college and the decision-making experiences of the disability services personnel charged with reviewing their requests for learning accommodations. You do not need to answer questions you do not want to and all responses will be strictly confidential, meaning I will not share your responses with anyone and anything included in my research will not identify you as the respondent. I will be recording our conversation today and taking notes.

1. How did you get involved in disability services?
2. What do you enjoy most about working with this population of students? What do you enjoy least?
3. In your opinion, are the students that you work with well-prepared for the transition into college?
  - a. How do incoming freshman with LD get connected to you?
  - b. What kind of communication, if any, is there between you and admissions?
  - c. Do you find that you mostly hear from parents, or are students able to initiate that communication?
4. What kind of training, if any, have you received in disability documentation?
  - a. Are you a member of any professional disability services organizations and if so, which ones?
5. Do you think you are given adequate support and resources by your institution to effectively support students with learning disabilities?
  - a. Do you have direct access to legal counsel, and if so, can you give me an example of when you've had to consult with them?
  - b. Do you have your own budget specifically for disability services?
    - i. Can you give me an example of a particularly costly accommodation you've had to approve?
6. What do you think are the most challenging parts of your job as they pertain to reviewing accommodation requests?
  - a. What do you do if a student self-identifies and requests accommodation, but does not have documentation?
7. Do you have colleagues you can turn to with questions about accommodations?
  - a. Are the accommodation decisions yours alone to approve or deny?
8. Have you ever second-guessed an accommodation decision after the fact, and if so, can you give me an example?



9. What kind of feedback, if any, do you receive from faculty regarding the effectiveness of approved accommodations?
10. How do you keep up with changes in disability law?
  - a. How do you interpret what constitutes a “reasonable” accommodation request?
11. What materials do you reference most often when you’re unsure about a particular accommodation request?
12. What would be your advice to a new disability services professional just starting out in his/her role?

**Appendix D: Institutional Research Board Approval Form****INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB)  
NOTIFICATION OF APPROVAL**

To: PI Galkin  
From: George Schreer, Chair, Institutional Review Board  
Date: June 24, 2014

The Manhattanville College IRB has reviewed your research proposal, *"Understanding the Decision-Making Processes Involved in Determining of Disability Accommodations in Higher Education."* I am happy to inform you that your proposal has been approved. This approval remains in effect until one year from the above date. As with all approvals, you are required to notify the IRB before making any significant changes to your protocol.

Regards,

George Schreer  
Chair, Institutional Review Board  
Manhattanville College

Cc: Provost, Prof. Wan  
OHRP IRB# 00007330, FWA# 00014945  
IRB application number: 1314/135