



STUDENT ENGAGED **Participatory Action Research Center**

Leveraging the Voices of Students with Disabilities at University of Wisconsin–Whitewater: A Research Brief on Preliminary Findings and Recommendations

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Introduction

This research brief reports research findings from a disability justice action research pilot project called Intersectional Action Research for Disability Justice (IARDJ), which has been at work at UW-Whitewater since January 2022. The purpose of this brief is two-fold: 1) to describe preliminary findings of a multiple case study design study (Stake, 2006) conducted by UW-Whitewater undergraduate researchers, and 2) offer recommendations for UW-Whitewater administrators. This ongoing study centers the experiences of students with disabilities attending college at UW-Whitewater to examine factors that have shaped these experiences and to address how UW-Whitewater's services and policies can best support them.

In this project, we foreground students with disabilities broadly, meaning we did not focus exclude persons with particular disability diagnoses or disclosure status, nor require participants to have (or have had) formal means of support (e.g., special education services or accommodations from the UW-Whitewater Center for Students with Disabilities). In doing so, we hold an inclusive perspective on disability which is needed to conduct a multi-dimensional analysis that accounts for intersecting identities and social factors that may impact how student experience college. Findings are based on in-depth interviews with a sample of six such disability self-identified college students.

Literature Review: Barriers and resources to success for college students with disabilities

The following sections situate this study in the research literature, focusing on the issue of barriers to college and career success for students with disabilities, and factors that impact the college experiences of those students. We also discuss the context of support for students with disabilities at UW-Whitewater.

The case of college internships: How disability may amplify existing barriers

In general, students with disabilities entering college face barriers within their academic experience, and there is a particular focus in the research literature on academic barriers and the role of academic accommodations (Scott, 2019). Barriers to college success for students with disabilities, however, is an underdeveloped area of research in general (Akram-Turenne et. al., 2022). The case of access to college internships for students with disabilities provides an example of how those challenges are structured of an important High Impact Practice (Kuh 2008) in higher education in the United States. In general, barriers to internships are high. As Hora and colleagues have argued, “There are significant barriers to accessing internships that can arise as a result of the student’s socio-economic status, their limited time, family obligations, academic commitments (Hora, et al., 2019), as well as raced, classed, gendered and other intersectional identity-factors” (Wolfgram et al., 2021, p. 2). This is relevant to our study because college internships often lead to higher-paying jobs and financial security is an important area of persisting struggle and inequity for adults with disabilities (American Community Survey, 2016). Students who do not get these internship opportunities because of these barriers are prevented from competing at a higher level for these better jobs.

When we consider one’s disability along with other barriers the student may experience, we see an amplification of challenges “including the potential amplification entailed by the experience of managing multiple disabilities along with other raced, classed, and gendered forms of marginalization (Akram-Turenne et. al., 2022). We explored this idea of intersecting forms of marginalization in our research. The term intersectionality stems from the work of Black feminist scholars, such as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), who established the term intersectionality to advance understandings of how racism and sexism intersect for Black women in employment settings. We found intersections relating to gender, socioeconomic status, the impact of space and place, and extra labor to obtain services. We also know that “more research is needed on how disability-stigma impacts students’ access to internships, especially for students who decline to disclose their disability to their potential or current internship supervisor” (Akram-Turenne et. al., 2022).

The case of college internship illustrates how disability can amplify barriers to success in college and careers. The research literature has identified several key factors important to students as they pursue their goals in college. While there are many instances of students with disabilities succeeding in these environments, our review of the literature identified three central factors that tended to increase the likelihood of these positive college experiences of students with disabilities: acceptance, resources, and adaptability.

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Acceptance. Studies on the experiences of college students with disabilities tended to emphasize the need for disability acceptance on campus (Barnar-Brak et al., 2014; Herrick et al., 2020). For example, Barnar-Brak and colleagues (2014) note that students with disabilities tend to be more successful at institutions of higher education when they have developed a sense of acceptance towards themselves and their disability, and that disclosing a disability on campus also affects the accommodations they can be provided to support their education.

Resources. Studies identified resources as impactful when analyzing the experiences of students with disabilities in higher education (e.g., Fleming et al., 2017). This perspective acknowledges the concept of disability as an institutional concern rather than relying on the individual with the disability to be the sole advocate for themselves. However, disability services are largely focused on providing resources to students that meet legal requirements for access (Fleming et al., 2017), potentially under-acknowledging the many outside factors that affect experience. Fleming and colleagues advance a holistic approach of campus-wide acceptance and perception in order to support students with disabilities at their respective institutions that includes addressing system-wide barriers and their solutions. This approach moves away from leaving it up to individual students themselves to find acceptance in their environments.

Adaptability. The adaptability of students to college life (Herrick et al., 2020) combined with the adaptability of college environments and people within those environments (e.g., flexibility among professors, Fleming et al., 2017) facilitated positive outcomes. Adaptability, then, refers to the relationship between student responses/adaptation to university life and university responses/adaptation to the voices and needs of students with disabilities. As Herrick et al. 2020 noted, "College support professionals must actively advocate for students with disabilities on their campuses and work to remove physical, technological, and most importantly attitudinal barriers to higher education for their students" (p. 618).

UW-Whitewater support services and their effectiveness

Supports for students with disabilities have been a part of students' success. It has been found that there are links between the availability of the services to students with disabilities and their overall success. The University of Wisconsin-Whitewater has provided over 2,540 accommodations in 2021 (UW-Whitewater faculty newsletter). These services range to support a variety of different students with different abilities. In the Center for Students with Disabilities (CSD) institutional research data, they have grown over the years to support a larger volume of students. In the 2013-2014 academic school year they served 876 students and in the most recent year recorded 2020-2021 they served 1,070 students. This growth indicates a wider availability of services to the student population, which adds to the overall success of students. In every year of recorded data, the CSD retained 50% of students served over 4 years, indicating that services are both available on campus as well as long lasting, supporting students throughout their entire academic careers. These services support all students with disabilities and influence their overall experiences on campus.

While the overall student population, as well as the Underrepresented Minority (URM) on campus has declined for each fall semester over the past five years, the population of students served by the CSD has continued to increase. There seems to be little negative impact from the pandemic on the rate of enrollment for students served by CSD. If anything, enrollment rates have been growing. Similarly, the rate of retention between overall student population and URM population has generally declined following the onset of the pandemic, dropping more drastically in the overall student population. Yet the rate of retention for students served by CSD does not follow this trend in declining retention rates. One hypothesis regarding the relative persistence and resilience of students with disabilities during the pandemic that is worthy of further investigation is that they may have flourished in the online learning environment during the pandemic—or at least not experienced as many barriers to accessibility—as did their peers. This brief overview highlights the strength of UW-Whitewater in serving students with disabilities—a core mission of the university.

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Method: Participatory Action Research

Participatory action research (PAR) is a framework for conducting research centered on the voices of those most impacted by the research itself. In this way, the benefits and insights that stem from the research directly contribute to the communities and individuals involved in the work—from developing research questions through reflection and identification of problems needing solutions, to the design, methods, and analysis. This work recognizes the need for prioritizing marginalized voices, populations, and struggles (Center for Community and Civic Engagement, 2023). Historically, PAR research involves multiple traditions of activism or problem-solving with intent to act (Zeller-Berkman, 2014). In the case of this pilot study, the research team members were UW-Madison students who identified as allies of students with disabilities on campus, and their research mentors. One of the goals of the pilot phase of the study is to increase the participatory aspect of the research by promoting and recruiting the project among students with disabilities on campus.

Recruitment & Participants

Participants were recruited through email and participant connections with the support of professors and offices/groups on campus, such as the CSD. Six participants—five undergraduate and one graduate student—engaged in one interview each. Each participant reported identifying with one or more disability categories (e.g., autism, anxiety, cerebral palsy) and intersecting identities (e.g., gender, sexuality, course of study).

The research team analyzed each interview as a single case first, then engaged in across case analysis in which connections between themes were organized and rearranged (Stake, 2006; Saldaña, 2015). One of members of the research team worked as UW-Whitewater Campus Assistant Tour Guides and all of them serve as Peer Mentors. Thus, the research team holds experiences as students, student workers, and leaders within the UW-Whitewater culture and community.

Findings: Key Takeaways

In this section, we highlight key points across four emerging themes: (a) gender and disability intersections, (b) extra labor of obtaining services and navigating siloed university entities, (c), impact of space and place and (d) the importance of advocacy and representation.

Theme 1: Gender and Disability Intersections

Gender identity and expression was found to intersect with how students with disabilities were perceived by others when advocating for themselves and their needs. Overall, male participants experienced fewer barriers when advocating for themselves with professors, instructors, and advisors than their peers who identified as women. For example, one male participant described not having “any significant challenges” when it came to accessing his disability accommodations. Two of the female participants, however, described the need to recruit a *legitimizing source*—a male classmate or “higher up person” in the college community, such as an advisor, to have their voices heard and needs met. These legitimizing sources would stand up for them and assure the challenging party that their support needs/claims were accepted.

Accordingly, female participants were also more likely to be positioned as less believable or too emotional when advocating for their well-being and educational support needs. For example, one participant, Isa (all names pseudonyms), described meeting with her professor after class to discuss needed accommodations she had been trying—unsuccessfully—to receive. Her professor told her, “I’m going to speak to you truthfully: In the future you shouldn’t be crying like this. You’re a girl. No one is going to take you seriously”. This example illustrates how female students may be framed as less rational when displaying emotion, possibly impacting the perspectives and opinions of gatekeepers granting disability services and supports in college settings.

Importantly, interviewees reported that other personnel did respond effectively to support their students with disabilities, regardless of gender expression, after they experienced undue barriers to receiving proper supports; however, locating these responsive people required extra labor (and a bit of luck).

Theme 2: Extra Labor of Navigating Siloed University Entities

This theme identifies that the *atomization* of university entities (i.e., the process or state of fragmentation or disintegration into smaller parts) creates gaps that, in our findings, students with disabilities are having to bridge on their own. This creates extra labor that their peers without disabilities may not experience and compounds the challenges faced by students with disabilities in university settings.

An example was the Financial Aid Office not recognizing students with disabilities receiving reduced course loads as an accommodation as full-time students, which impacted their financial aid and required appeal on the part of the student (there may be federal policies that impact this situation). Additionally, not being recognized as a full-time student (due to disability accommodation) impacted student eligibility for academic recognition, such as making the Dean's List. Applying for services through the CSD sometimes required costly or difficult to obtain paperwork/diagnosis, which are more costly for individuals who face financial barriers to health care. These barriers represent a hidden cost due to socioeconomic, labor, and emotional demand that can result in path-altering consequences for students with disabilities. Additionally, some students with physical disabilities, such as wheelchair users, experienced day-to-day barriers to easy access to classroom spaces. This is surprising, given UW-Whitewater's commitment to accessibility, yet illuminates the ongoing work and reality of navigating campus spaces. For example, accessible entrances or pathways to classrooms may involve lengthier routes, locked doors, or the need to pass through other classroom spaces that may be in session to get to the destination.

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Theme 3: Impact of Space and Place

Campus life holds multiple, intersecting cultures that differ across the various places (e.g., offices, colleges, living spaces) and the people/groups who occupy them. We found that campus spaces had a significant impact in shaping experiences for all participants. Spaces were defined by both their *physical and tangible aspects*, and the *interactions and experiences* that took place within these specific places. Overall, the students interviewed for this study felt that the University Center proved to be a comfortable space for almost every participant based on dimensions of both physical space and social belonging within the building. The Center for Students with Disabilities was also proven to be a welcoming and reliable space for *all* participants who received CSD services based on dimensions of physicality, interaction, and experience. Located in an easily accessible location on campus, the CSD is where many of our participants felt, "...really listened to," and supported. From counselors to coordinators, participants noted that the staff members they worked with presented them with resources and opportunities to succeed, which positively impacted their overall feelings towards the space.

We found that the infrastructural characteristics of accessibility do not inherently generate inclusivity. For example, Grayson, a non-binary senior majoring in special education, noted the College of Education and Professional Studies building was not as modern as other campus buildings but housed "...a lot of pleasant experiences" regarding the classes they took and the experiences and interactions they had with their professors and peers in that space. Thus, this illustrates how space is socially constructed in ways that go beyond simple physical attributes.

The same sense of comfortability these students identified was not experienced within all social, residential, and academic areas at the university. The College of Business, for example, evoked more apprehensiveness from participants, especially with individuals who did not have classes or events in this building. Known for its new amenities and state of the art

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architecture, this particular space, as described by Mike, a second-year graduate student at the university, "...feels like it's been built for the modern day". Described by Grayson as a "...big and nice building," this *business-orientated space was pinpointed as an uncomfortable space on campus by multiple participants due to interaction and experience factors (e.g., judgement from peers)*. Ultimately, the findings highlight the socially constructed nature of space and illustrated how messages and infrastructures to support accessibility may not align with actual student experiences.

Theme 4: Importance of Advocacy and Representation

The students interviewed for this study noted the value of disability representation in the student body generally and in student leadership specifically. Some of them wanted to be engaged with advocating for disability rights and accessibility in their post-graduate careers, in settings such as social work, children's literature, and social policy. Related to their experiences on UW-Whitewater campus, they emphasized the importance of greater equality and understanding amongst faculty and peers was extremely important. Several participants expressed the need for greater understanding of 'invisible' disabilities. For example, one participant stated:

I think disability awareness is something that more people should be aware of. They exist. I think when they think of a disability they automatically think of a person in a wheelchair or a person who is blind or a person who is deaf. That is where peoples' heads go right away... There's physical and invisible disabilities. But I think people don't even think about... It gets even less visible perhaps. If that's possible from invisible.

Furthermore, participants wished to be treated as competent individuals and not put on a pedestal for their accomplishments as a person with a disability.

Together, these themes illuminate the need to approach inclusive university aims with an intersectional lens. Future directions for the research project include involving student researchers with disabilities and gaining more student perspectives.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are shared with the understanding that UW-Whitewater has tremendous strengths in the way of disability support services and an underlying commitment to inclusive higher education. These recommendations serve to further demonstrate that commitment and provide points of discussion and reflection.

1. Consider policies that impact opportunities of students with disabilities to be recognized as academic contributors. *For example, the Dean's List could include academically qualifying students who receive reduced course load as an accommodation. (At the time of the publication of this report, the UW-W Provost had directed to adjust the Dean's List policy to address this issue of the exclusion of students with disabilities.)*
2. Provide opportunities for instructors to reflect on their gender-based assumptions of student needs as it intersects with disability. *For example, how might instructor responses to students seeking support for anxiety and depression be impacted by student gender expression? How are students positioned differently (e.g., female student crying vs. male student crying)?*
3. Support UW-Whitewater entities to coordinate and work together on behalf of student needs to decrease the extra labor experienced by students with disabilities and reduce risk of attrition or failure.
4. Promote disability representation in all aspects of university life, including both strategic recruitment of students, faculty, and staff, but also pathways to leadership roles through mentorship and support.
5. Involve expansive notions of space in the UW-Whitewater experience and work to value students through. For example, work to meet the inclusive culture and comfortability of COEPS spaces (i.e., Winther) *with more accessible physical environments*; And conversely, work to meet the accessible physical spaces (e.g., Hyland Hall) with more socially inclusive and welcoming cultural aspects.

Limitations

This emerging study involved six participants interviewed one time each. This sample presents a significant limitation to both the breadth and depth of data collected. Furthermore, attention to interacting student characteristics, such as majors, was not sufficiently accounted for in recruitment and analysis, especially given the small sample size. Therefore, findings should not be considered generalizations nor typical experiences of students with disabilities at UW-Whitewater. Rather, these findings shed light on important issues that may be worthy of further investigation and consideration in forging equitable and inclusive services and supports. Finally, data on UW-Whitewater's retention rates, course format (e.g., online) and student characteristics (e.g., URM, receiving CSD services) should be updated and analyzed over time to better understand patterns and impacts on students with disabilities.

Conclusions

This research brief reports findings from a small pilot study, involving the work of a disability justice research group on the UW-Whitewater campus. There is a need for more research on barriers and factors that impact the education and career success of college students with disabilities; and the methods and findings of the study indicate that participatory action research approaches are a good way to recruit and engaged with college students with disabilities, who are an under-researched and difficult to engaged community. We recommend that research on this topic will be benefited by participatory approaches. Accordingly, future iterations of this project will focus on including student who identify with disabilities as a central feature of the research team and design process.

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