

LEARNING DISABILITIES AND SUCCESS IN POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION: HOW
STUDENTS MAKE SENSE OF THEIR EXPERIENCES AT A CANADIAN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Dr. Robert DeBard, Advisor

The purpose of this research paper was to understand how students with learning disabilities made sense of their experiences in post-secondary education. More specifically, this study aimed to identify what students with learning disabilities perceived as the challenges and successes they encountered in higher education at a university in Ontario. In light of the epistemology of constructivism, this study operated from an interpretivist theoretical perspective grounded in the phenomenological paradigm using qualitative methodology.

To understand the essence of the of students' experiences, six students with learning disabilities from a post-secondary institution who were in line to graduate were recruited to contribute to this study. Participants volunteered to participate in a face-to-face, in-depth interview and to share their stories with the researcher. Because this researcher wanted to discover what aspect of participant's collegiate experiences allowed for their success, six women whom were close to program completion at the time of the study were chosen to participant in this study. However, their experiences in higher education were not always pleasant.

Findings indicated that the participants faced two key challenges while at university: They had to cope with parental separation and learn to become more independent as they adapted to the university life; and they had to come to grips with their learning disabilities and deal with preconceptions of parents, peers, and faculty as well as their own in order to succeed in higher education.

In terms of success, four themes emerged from the research findings: the influence of family and school personnel motivated the students to enroll in a post-secondary institution; support from faculty, who reduced barriers and made learning more accessible, facilitated the students' positive achievements; strong support through an office of disability services was key in the students' success; and, most importantly, the value of the participants' own determination and desire to succeed was indispensable in their academic journeys.

Post-secondary institutions should work in partnership with K-12 teachers and administrators to facilitate the identification and transition of students with learning disabilities to higher education. Faculty should receive professional development on hidden disabilities and strategies for reducing the stigma of learning disabilities. Federal and institutional funding to support disability service providers is critical.

It is the researcher's hope that this study serves to open the door for future exploration and research in the area of disability and higher education. Further, this research may be useful to service providers, faculty members, and administrators to improve the services rendered to students with learning disabilities in post-secondary institutions.

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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

The Development of Special Education Services

In Canada as recently as the 1960s, individuals with disabilities were excluded from society and required to live and receive their education in residential facilities. With the emergence of the normalization movement, individuals who had been institutionalized for most of their lives returned to their communities (Smith, Polloway, Patton, Dowdy, & Heath, 2001). The normalization principle worked from the premise that individuals with disabilities, with an emphasis on mental retardation specifically, should have access to “patterns and conditions of everyday life which are as close as possible to the norms and patterns of the mainstream of society” (Nirje, 1969, p.181). Even though education was to be provided in the community, in light of the normalization movement, students with disabilities were still being placed in self-contained or isolated classrooms within the educational system. Also, many students were educated in residential programs where, depending on the severity of their disabilities, contact with their non-disabled peers was minimal or non-existent. In 1970, a landmark report by Roberts and Lazure, entitled *One Million Children: A National Study of Canadian Children with Emotional and Learning Disorders*, called for inclusion of students with disabilities in regular classrooms (cited in Smith, et al., 2001).

The history of special education services in Canada shows that services provided to individuals with disabilities changed as the definition of disability was analyzed under different theoretical frameworks. Rioux and Valentine (2006) stated that “how disability is perceived, diagnosed, and treated, scientifically and socially, is reflected in assumptions about the social responsibility toward people with disabilities as a group” (p.

50). They further noted that there are two main frameworks in which to contextualize and understand disabilities: individual pathologies and social pathologies. The individual pathology framework sees disability from a biomedical or functional approach. If society views the individual with a disability under the biomedical lens, the individual is considered exempt from social obligations until full recovery is achieved. The individual is expected to assume “the sick role” since he or she is considered a patient. This line of thinking explains the institutionalization of individuals with disabilities and their exclusion from society. An individual seen under the functional limitation model, which focuses on limitations and inabilities, is likely to be perceived as lacking the ability and skills to be an active member of society.

The social pathology framework assumes an environmental and human rights approach to understanding disabilities. From this perspective, “disability is not inherent to the individual. Rather, they assume that the disability is a consequence of the social structure” (p. 51). The social pathology model, which focuses on the interaction between individuals and the environment, assumes that if the environment is modified, for example, by removing physical and communication barriers and providing access to public facilities, people with disabilities can become active members of society. This can be accomplished foremost through reformulation of policies.

Rioux and Valentine (2006) analyzed how theories affect the rights of individuals with disabilities in Canada and concluded that “a lack of consensus exists at the intersection of approaches to disability, equality, and citizenship with respect to persons with disabilities...we have confused law and confused policy concerning the meaning of disablement and its intersection with equality” (p. 66). From this idea, it becomes evident

that different factions of society perceive disabilities in very different ways. Delvin and Pothier (2006) synthesized this division in perspective in noting that “historically, we have tended to adopt a binary conception of disability: there are the disabled (them-us) and the able-bodied (us-them)” (p. 5).

The concept of disability can be viewed as socially constructed. Ferguson and Ferguson (1995) stated “Disability is rather an experience waiting to be described or, more precisely, a multitude of experiences waiting to be described” (p. 113). They recommended that one should ask different questions in order to understand the meaning of disability. Instead of being concerned with the definition of disability, one should question the experience of disability. To clarify, Ferguson and Ferguson (1995) described an event that took place in 1973, when the diagnosis of mental retardation was changed when Intelligence Quotient (IQ) scores were lowered:

With a stroke of Herbert Grossman’s pen, thousands of people became normal; ‘cured,’ as it were, not by changing *things* or *facts*, but by changing the socially agreed-upon rules that identify some people as mentally retarded and others as not. (p. 113)

According to Grossman (1973), a revision of the manual on terminology and classification in mental retardation was necessary for the following reason: “since 1959 numerous changes have taken place in the field and in society” (p. 4). Further, it is stated that the revision deleted the Borderline category:

The category of Borderline Retardation used in the 1959 and 1961 manual has been dropped and the upper limit of retardation in measured intelligence is set at two standard deviations below the mean rather than one as used previously. It is

suggested that the term Borderline Intelligence rather than Borderline Retardation is a more appropriate term for describing the group between one and two standard deviations below the mean of the particular test. (p. 15)

Changing the definition of borderline retardation, as discussed by Grossman (1973), is a remarkable example of disability being socially constructed. At that time, many individuals became “normal” overnight, simply because of this new definition of retardation.

Individuals with disabilities have faced various challenges in rights to accessing services in society in general and services in education in particular. Throughout history, “able-bodied” individuals have been determining how the “disabled” should be perceived and what services should be available to them. Delvin and Pothier noted (2006):

North American societies take pride in promoting themselves as bastions of liberty, equality, and inclusion...the majority of North Americans do enjoy a high standard of living...however, not all share equally in the good life, or feel adequately included. Among those who face recurring coercion, marginalization, and social exclusion are persons with disabilities. (p. 1)

It appears that there are diverse theoretical definitions of disabilities and views of how these individuals are treated in society. Legislation has also played an integral role in defining disability in terms of establishing guidelines and policies to protect the rights of individuals with disabilities.

Legislation and Disabilities in Educational Settings in North America

Canada parallels the United States in relation to services provided to students with disabilities in educational settings. However, there are two major differences between the

two countries. In Canada, there is no federal law that mandates access to special education services. Further, each province has the autonomy to determine the provision of services available to students with disabilities.

In the United States, education is regulated by federal legislation. In 1975, Congress passed the Public Law 94-142, otherwise known as Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which gave children the right to a free and appropriate public education. In 1977, regulations were first issued to post-secondary institutions regarding responsibilities under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Section 504 prohibits discrimination based on disabilities in all institutions that receive federal funds, which included most colleges and universities. In 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed. This statute re-affirmed the rehabilitation act and extended the protection of civil rights of individuals with disabilities to include public and private institutions (Rothstein, 1997).

In Canada, the Constitution Act of 1982, including the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, protects the rights of individuals with disabilities. In Ontario, the legislation that protects individuals with disabilities is the Ontario Human Rights Code of 1981. The Code is a provincial law that gives individuals equal rights and opportunities without discrimination on the basis of race, color, sex, disability, and age. This legislation was expanded in 1989 to address issues of undue hardship, academic demands, and standards in post-secondary education (The Ontario Human Rights Code, 1981).

Even though each province in Canada has the autonomy of service provision and delivery for students with disabilities, all provinces have developed Education Acts and post-secondary guidelines to address services provided to students with disabilities, in

order to be compliant with provincial legislation and the Canadian Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms.

Disabilities in Post-secondary Institutions

There is evidence suggesting that the number of students attending higher educations will continue to increase in years to come. The enrollment of full-time students at Canadian universities increased 16%, from 499,500 to 580,400 students between 1988-1989 and 1998-1999 (Statistics Canada and Council of Ministers of Education, 2003). It is expected that the number of students planning to enroll at universities in Ontario after high school graduation will continue to grow in the next few years. This trend is a direct consequence of three factors: 1) population growth (it is projected that Ontario will be the home of 190,000 youngsters by 2010); 2) rising higher education participation rates; and 3) secondary school reforms aimed at better preparing students for higher education. Thus, it is expected that in Ontario an additional 88,900 students will be seeking university opportunities by the year 2010 (Council of Ontario Universities, 1999).

There are indications that the challenge of meeting the educational needs of post-secondary students with disabilities is increasing. Post-secondary institutions in Canada provide support services to students with diagnosed disabilities through offices of disabilities. The Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (2004) noted that in 1989-1990 approximately 3.03% of the student population identified themselves as having a disability. Further, it was stated that:

In 2002-2003, more than 460,000 full-time equivalent students were enrolled in Ontario's post-secondary system. The number of students who identified

themselves as having a disability to the Offices for Students with Disabilities at colleges and universities was approximately 24,300 or 5.3%. (The Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2004, p. 4)

It is expected that the number of students with disabilities attending post-secondary institutions will continue to grow as student enrollment increases in the province of Ontario.

Purpose and Guiding Questions of the Study

The growth in academic access of students with disabilities in general, and learning disabilities in particular, is a positive movement in extending opportunity in higher education. Still, it must be recognized that accommodating such students requires a more sophisticated perspective toward how such students can best learn and what implications institutional practices have for providing the necessary services to these students. Rath and Royer (2002) reviewed the literature related to disability services in post-secondary education and found that “the bulk of research in the field of learning disabilities has concentrated on children and adolescents, with comparatively little research involving adults” (p. 354). Further, they analyzed learning disability through a content analysis of material in scholarly journals and concluded that “it seems that the emphasis on adult populations, and specifically college students, is not increasing” (p. 354).

The purpose of this study was to identify the challenges and successes faced by students with learning disabilities in higher education at a university in Ontario. To achieve this purpose, this study aimed to answer the following research question: How do

students with learning disabilities make sense of their experiences at a post-secondary institution in Ontario?

To help facilitate the emergence of meaning on the part of the participants, a set of secondary research questions were included:

- a. How well prepared do students with learning disabilities perceive themselves to have been upon entering university?
- b. How do they interpret their relationships with their parents regarding their learning disabilities?
- c. How do they interpret their relationships with peers regarding their learning disabilities?
- d. How do they interpret their relationships with faculty concerning their learning disabilities?
- e. How do they interpret their relationships with disability services personnel regarding their learning disabilities?
- f. What out-of-class experiences were most meaningful to students with learning disabilities at university?
- g. What accommodations were provided for their learning disabilities during their post-secondary experience?
- h. What faculty teaching attributes experienced by students with learning disabilities have proven to be the most beneficial in facilitating their learning at university?
- i. What personal attributes did they come to find were important to the attainment of their academic goals?

Definition of Terms

This section will serve to clarify the meaning of specific terminology used throughout the discourse of this manuscript. The definition of terms is specific to the province of Ontario.

Assistive Technologist refers to a person with expertise in assistive software and hardware who works with individuals with learning disabilities in a post-secondary setting.

Colleges and *community colleges* are sometimes used interchangeably to refer to institutions of higher education offering technical programs of shorter duration in which students earn a diploma or a certificate upon completion.

Honors programs refers to an additional year of university studies in which students concentrate in a specific subject area.

Learning disabilities refers to a number of disorders which may affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding, or use of verbal and nonverbal information as defined by the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (2002).

Learning Strategist refers to a person with expertise in learning strategies who works with individuals with learning disabilities in a post-secondary setting.

Ontario Academic Credits (OAC) is also referred to as grade 13. Prior to 2003, high school students planning on attending universities in Ontario were required to complete six OAC level courses in order to apply for university.

Universities refers to four-year institutions of higher education offering degree-granting programs.

Organization of the Dissertation

This study is organized in five distinct chapters. Chapter One has presented an introduction to the research problem, the purpose of the study, and the research questions to be addressed. Chapter Two contains a review of the literature, which offers a broad overview of the history of Canadian higher education, explains the definition of learning disabilities and service provision in Ontario, discusses the legal implications of accommodation services, presents a review of issues concerning the experiences of students with and without learning disabilities in post-secondary settings, and brings to light the social construction and awareness of disability. Chapter Three describes the methodology used in this research study encompassing epistemology, paradigm assumptions, participant selection, data collection, and phenomenological analysis. Chapter Four reports the emergent themes of the study. These findings are organized in two main categories: challenges faced by post-secondary students with learning disabilities; and factors that students with learning disabilities attributed to their academic success. Chapter Five synthesizes the importance of the main research findings and discusses the implications of the study for future administrative practice and research.

CHAPTER II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Historical Context of Canadian Institutions of Higher Learning

Canadian higher education was modeled on two colonial presences: the British and French. In both French and English speaking Canada, higher education focused on “the training of clergy and the general education of the future leaders of society” (Harris, 1976, p. 27). Further, Harris (1976) stated that:

Higher education in Canada is dated from 1635, the year when the Jesuits established at Quebec a college which eventually offered the...classical college course that until the 1950s constituted the required course of study for the B.A. degree in the Canadian French-language universities. (p. 14)

Harris (1976) explained that the college established by the Jesuits in French Canada was “essentially an elementary school...where children of the colonists...and the native Indians could learn the three Rs” (p.14). Later, theological training, Greek, grammar, humanities, rhetoric, and philosophy courses were introduced to the classical college curriculum. In the establishment of higher education institutions, both English and French Canada sought to maintain their traditions in light of external threat: English Canada was tied to the preservation of British tradition and was threatened by a republican United States, and French Canada was threatened by a predominantly Protestant English speaking Canada (Harris, 1976).

In 1787 and 1789, the first two secondary schools, which would eventually become colleges, were developed in English speaking Canada in the provinces of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia respectively. The King’s College in Nova Scotia obtained degree-granting powers in 1802 and began to exercise them in 1807. The College of New

Brunswick in Fredericton was chartered in 1800, but it continued to offer instruction in just secondary education until the 1820s. Further, in 1829 it was renamed King's College, Fredericton. The third King's College was launched in the province of Ontario and became the University of Toronto in 1850 (Harris, 1976). In terms of curriculum development at Canadian universities, Harris (1976) observed that:

There was nothing notably Canadian about any of the institutions with degree-granting powers in 1849. What was being done at Arcadia, Bishop's, McGill, Queen's, Victoria, and the three King's colleges was an imitation of what was being done at Oxford or at Edinburgh or at a New England college, and the instruction offered was confined to the liberal arts and to the traditional professional fields – theology, law and medicine. By 1860, however, a French-Canadian university had been established, the King's colleges at Fredericton and Toronto had been reorganized as provincial universities, agriculture, engineering, and commerce had been added to the curriculum, and there begun to emerge an arts and science curriculum that could be described as distinctively Canadian. (p. 37)

According to Harris (1976), July 1, 1867 was an important date in the history of higher education in the province of Ontario. On that date, the British North American Act created the Dominion of Canada and “responsibility for education was assigned to the provinces” (p. 108). Further, it was stated that “one of the first actions of Ontario's first government was to announce that the annual grants to denominational colleges, which ...had been granted since 1842, would be stopped at the end of 1868” (p. 108).

Over time, federal legislation gave power to the provinces to determine the future of universities in Canada, as Dennison and Schuetze (2004) stated:

Canada is a federal system in which the constitution, enacted in 1867 and revised in 1982, provides for distribution of powers between the national government and its ten provinces. Although conscious of the need for strong central authority in essential arenas such as defense and trade, the architects of confederation were equally sensitive to regional diversity in religious, socio-cultural, and linguistic traditions. Hence education, broadly defined, was placed under the jurisdiction of provincial governments. (p. 15)

Egerton Ryerson, from Victoria University, believed that Canadian universities should pursue their own course as he stated in his address as first principal of this institution: “Education is designed specially to fit the student for activity and usefulness in the country of his birth or adoption....youth should be educated for their country as well as for themselves” (Harris, 1976, p. 44). An example of the unique qualities of Canadian education was the creation of an honors program at the University of Toronto where students were given “options.” More specifically, after the completion of their second year of studies, the president or professors provided students advice about which courses to take based on their life goals. Therefore, if the individual intended to be a “medical man” he would be advised to drop Greek and Latin and focus on the natural sciences and modern languages (Harris, 1976). Between 1860 and 1890, the honors course evolved significantly. According to Harris (1976) “the honours candidate, rather than being excused any pass work in deference to his additional obligations in honours, was required to do more pass work than the pass candidate” (p. 131).

Priestley (1964) described the University of Toronto's honors courses as an expensive system, and he anticipated forthcoming changes to the program in stating:

It is also a system that has to be installed as a totality, since it involves its own pattern of relations between departments, its own system of examinations (based on a whole year's work rather than individual credits-and no supplemental examinations), and its own kind of inflexibility (movement from general course to honours or back from honours to general becomes impossible after first year except by repeating a year). For these reasons I do not expect to see any extension of the Toronto scheme to other institutions. (p. 13)

Priestley's assumptions were in fact correct as the honors courses evolved in the last four decades. However, other universities in Ontario were forced to adopt the honors course into their curricula to secure registrations of the "best students." Otherwise, these students would likely enroll at University of Toronto. Priestley (1964) explained the difference between general and honors course work by stating that:

In distinction from the general course it requires the student to engage in detailed and independent research and, at Toronto, especially in the senior years to produce a number of essays each of which may be equated, not too fancifully, with projects like the Harvard Senior Thesis. (p. 10)

What emerges from this historical review is a tension that has run through Canadian higher education. On one hand, there has been the need for an expanded view of what is needed to expand educational opportunity. On the other hand, there is the constant concern for excellence. This tension also impacted societal demands and influenced the history of higher education in Canada. Cameron (2004) noted that prior to

the First World War the Canadian federal government was directly involved in supporting research in Canadian universities. The first formal contract between the federal government and Canadian universities emerged with the development of the National Research Council (NRC) established in 1916. Cameron (2004) explained that the “NRC was established to promote industrial research in aid of the war effort, but it was quickly and ineluctably drawn into support for university-based research, including the training of graduate students” (p. 2). After the Second World War, the federal government provided universities with more funding in support returning veterans. Cameron (2004) further explained that:

The federal government not only covered their [veteran’s] full tuition but also provided a weekly allowance and paid a grant on behalf of each veteran to the receiving university as well. The result was that university enrolment more than doubled, peaking at over 80,000 in 1947, with veterans making up a third of the total. Universities managed to accommodate the influx of veterans mostly through temporary means, renting space, increasing class sizes, and shortening the time required to complete a degree. (p. 2)

This illustrates how the government attempted to meet societal needs through higher education institutions even though universities in Canada continued to be considered elitist even after the Second World War (Dennison & Schuetze, 2004). Cameron (2004) further alluded to this phenomenon of societal needs being met through higher education initiatives in noting that “Then, as now, Canada’s private-sector capacity for research and development was limited and universities provided a willing receptor for federal aid” (p. 2). In this case, the issue at hand is that Canada’s industry was, and continues to be, ill-

equipped to manage its own research. Industry looks directly to Canadian universities to fulfill the needs of innovation in research. As a result of federal funding incentives towards research, Canadian universities are almost exclusively research-based institutions.

This tension between the research mission at the university level and the expanded need for educational opportunity through teaching at the undergraduate level was exacerbated during the 1990s when the federal government effectuated great reductions in funding. This affected universities in terms of numbers of faculty, physical capacity, facilities, and resources. In Ontario, the number of full-time faculty employed at universities declined by almost 2,000 from 13,714 between 1990/1991 and 1996/1997. Further, it was stated that Ontario's student/faculty ratio is the highest in Canada and 21% above the average of the other nine provinces (Council of Ontario Universities, 1999). It seems apparent that the universities' mission in Ontario is not one that values teaching but rather one with the emphasis on research.

The demand for expanded opportunities through good teaching will only expand in the future. The Council of Ontario Universities (2003) stated that enrollment at Ontario post-secondary universities has increased significantly in the past decade; student population on campuses is expected to increase by an additional 90,000 over the next eight years. Giroux (2004) further noted that:

During the next decade students from lower income backgrounds and other traditionally disadvantaged groups will increasingly seek the economic and social advantages that a university education affords. If universities are to ensure that

there is a place for these individuals, they must have the capacity to accept and support them. (p. 83)

Confounding though is the fact that “the operating grant per student for Ontario universities has declined by 24% from 1993-94 to 2003-2004 in constant dollars” (Council of Ontario Universities, 2003, p. 1). It appears that even though more students will continue to enroll at universities in Ontario, the governmental expectation is that students will be able to secure their own financial resources to fund their education. This lends to the argument that Canadian post-secondary education retains much of its elitist quality, particularly in terms of financial access.

This elitist quality continues to be a prominent factor in Canadian higher education in terms of academic access as well, and is embodied in the series of Secondary School Reforms that took place in Ontario in 1995. As a result of the reforms, high school students are tracked from grade nine through grade 12 as being on a community college stream or university stream.

The goal of these reforms was to phase out grade 13 or Ontario Academic Credits (OAC) which originated in the 1984/1985 academic year and to restructure the curriculum streams. Before the educational reform, students in grade nine had the option of taking courses in three streams: Basic, General, and Advanced. The school reform eliminated these streams and allowed students to take courses in only one of two streams: Applied or Academic (Anderson & Jaafar, 2003). In addition, prior to the Secondary School Reform of 1995, students were not required to complete the additional high school year in order to graduate from high school and receive the Ontario Secondary School Diploma. However, if they intended to apply for a program at an Ontario

university, students were required to complete six OAC credits. The 1995 reform eliminated grade 13, and students were placed in either university or community college track courses starting in grade nine. In 2003, a great number of students completed their high school studies; this group of students was called the “double cohort” and included the last graduating class of students under the OAC credit system and students with grade 12 credits under the new system (Anderson & Jaafar, 2003). These actions have had an impact on the level of access to be found in Canadian universities. Among the groups that have not been adequately served in higher education are students with learning disabilities.

For instance, university admission standards are currently based on high school grade point averages (GPAs). Upon entrance to Ontario universities, students must decide to complete a three-year general program or an honors program (four years). They must have an institutionally specified GPA in order to qualify for the honors program. It is important to note that, in Ontario, admission standards for the honors program vary by programs and university.

The University of West River (Faculty of Arts and Sciences) catalog explains the differences between General and Honors degree programs by stating:

Three-year General programs provide a moderate concentration in a specific subject, as well as a broad educational background. Students in these programs are encouraged to extend their studies over a wide range of subjects. Students are also encouraged to take courses which specifically address diversities of human experience, including culture, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation. Four-year Honours programs require the completion of a larger number of courses with

greater concentration in a specific subject area than do three-year General programs. (University of West River, 2006, ¶ 3)

It is important to note that students who complete high school, but without the requirements to attend university, have the option of attending community colleges in Ontario.

Under the OAC system, students who intended to attend community college were expected to graduate with grade 12 and were not required to take OAC credits. Colleges and universities are considered separate entities in the province of Ontario. More specifically, colleges are “technical institutes, hospital and regional schools of nursing, and establishments providing technological training in specialized fields” (Statistics Canada and Council of Ministers of Education, 2003, p. 202). Community colleges in Canada, specifically in Ontario, are viewed as offering technical programs of shorter duration where students earn a diploma or a certificate upon completion. In relation to universities:

There are 19 publicly assisted universities in Ontario. Each university offers undergraduate (bachelor) degrees, and most offer graduate (master's and doctorate) degrees. Each institution operates independently and determines its own academic and admissions policies, programs, and staff appointments. The ministry provides operating funding to the universities, and each university's degree-granting authority is based on its Act of the Legislature. (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, n.d.a)

In summary, there has been tension throughout the history of Canadian higher education between the focus of elitism and that of educational opportunity. Furthermore,

at the university level, emphasis has been placed on excellence in research rather than teaching. Although recent legal attention has been paid specifically to the needs of students with disabilities, the overall level of understanding and accommodation still depends on the discretion of the faculty member and the determination of the student.

Definition of Learning Disabilities and Service Provision in Ontario

This study focused on the experiences of students with learning disabilities in higher education. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to explain the evolution of the definition of learning disability in the province of Ontario. Klassen (2002) noted “In Canada definitions and practices of learning disabilities are at once both less protected (by federal law) and more flexible in reflecting theoretical shifts” (p.199). Wiener and Siegel (1992) provided an overview of how the services for individuals with learning disabilities emerged in Canada. The authors found that learning disabilities were first “recognized in Canada by a group of staff at the Montreal Children’s Hospital in the late 1950s” (p. 340). Further, Wiener, and Siegel (1992) noted that doctors were “puzzled by children who appeared to have only mild behavioral difficulties, seemed to have average intelligence, but had significant problems with school functioning...[doctors wanted] to determine the reasons for the children’s problems and appropriate treatment ” (p. 341).

The Montreal Children’s Hospital Learning Centre was established in 1960 by a group of psychologists. Wiener and Siegel (1992) mentioned that the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LADC), originally called the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities (ACLD), was established by parents of children with similar diagnoses in 1963. The authors noted that:

By 1967, there were chapters in all 10 provinces and work began to establish the Canadian ACLD, which was incorporated in 1971...in 1977, the Canadian ACLD moved to Ottawa, the nation's capital, in order to establish itself as an advocacy group at the federal level. (p. 341)

The Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC) developed a definition for learning disabilities in 1981. A new definition was established by the LDAC in 2002 which states:

'Learning Disabilities' refer to a number of disorders which may affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding or use of verbal or nonverbal information. These disorders affect learning in individuals who otherwise demonstrate at least average abilities essential for thinking and/or reasoning. As such, learning disabilities are distinct from global intellectual deficiency. Learning disabilities result from impairments in one or more processes related to perceiving, thinking, remembering or learning. These include, but are not limited to: language processing; phonological processing; visual spatial processing; processing speed; memory and attention; and executive functions (e.g., planning and decision-making). Learning disabilities range in severity and may interfere with the acquisition and use of one or more of the following:

- oral language (e.g., listening, speaking, understanding);
- reading (e.g., decoding, phonetic knowledge, word recognition, comprehension);
- written language (e.g., spelling and written expression); and

- mathematics (e.g., computation, problem solving).

Learning disabilities may also involve difficulties with organizational skills, social perception, social interaction and perspective taking. Learning disabilities are lifelong. The way in which they are expressed may vary over an individual's lifetime, depending on the interaction between the demands of the environment and the individual's strengths and needs. Learning disabilities are suggested by unexpected academic under-achievement or achievement which is maintained only by unusually high levels of effort and support.

Learning disabilities are due to genetic and/or neurobiological factors or injury that alters brain functioning in a manner which affects one or more processes related to learning. These disorders are not due primarily to hearing and/or vision problems, socio-economic factors, cultural or linguistic differences, lack of motivation or ineffective teaching, although these factors may further complicate the challenges faced by individuals with learning disabilities. Learning disabilities may co-exist with various conditions including attentional, behavioural and emotional disorders, sensory impairments or other medical conditions. (Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, n.d.)

Weiner and Siegel (1992) noted that “the LDAC definition continues to be recognized and has influenced several of the definitions adopted by provinces” (p. 342). It is important to note that the LDAC’s definition of learning disabilities is accepted by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) in Ontario.

In 1997, the MTCU supported the initiation of the Learning Opportunities Task Force (LOTF) which under the leadership of Dr. Stephenson, a former minister of

education in Ontario, informed colleges and universities that the Task Force would fund projects that supported the following mandate:

Improve the transition of students with specific learning disabilities from secondary school to post-secondary education, and to enhance the services and supports that students with learning disabilities receive within the post-secondary educational sector, such that they can complete their education successfully.

(Learning Opportunities Task Force, Summary Report, 2002, p. 1)

After extensive review of the proposals, “LOFT established eight pilot projects in thirteen post-secondary educational institutions” (p. 1). The LOFT project determined the diagnostic criteria to be accepted as learning disability in order to participate in the project. The LOFT Final Report (2002) stated that staff in pilot institutions reported that “many students (over 80% of the pilot students) arrive at the college or university with inadequate documentation of their learning disabilities. This is in spite of the mandated identification and special education service provision of the Ontario’s Education Act” (p. 16). Therefore, the LOFT established guidelines for colleges and universities in Ontario on appropriate documentation of learning disabilities: (1) only psychologists registered with the College of Psychologists are considered a qualified professional to conduct learning disabilities evaluation; (2) the testing must be current, between three and five years old; (3) the documentation must be comprehensive; it must include three main sections: information about educational history, information on medical/ developmental history, and it must include appropriate measures of aptitude and cognitive ability; (4) the student’s intellectual ability must fall in the average range or above; (5) the report must include appropriate measures of academic achievement; (6) the report must include

appropriate measures of information processing; (7) the report must show evidence of significant discrepancy between aptitude and academic achievement or information processing; (8) evidence that other possible explanations such as emotional, health problems, etc. were ruled out; (9) an indication of how the observed pattern of abilities and achievement demonstrate the presence of a specific learning disability; and (10) the report must include a specific diagnosis. (Learning Opportunities Task Force, Final Report, 2002, p.17)

Universities in Ontario follow the guidelines provided by the MTCU, LOFT, and LDCA in the provision of services to students with learning disabilities. Also, disability offices in the province of Ontario are expected to submit a yearly report to the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) on the number of students with disabilities served by the office and type of services provided to these students, especially students with learning disabilities.

In 2002, the LOFT recommended to the MTCU that colleges and universities in Ontario have staff members with expertise in technology and learning strategies to assist students with learning disabilities. Therefore, a project called Enhanced Service Funding (ESF) was funded by the Task Force to provide individualized learning strategies and assistive technology to students with learning disabilities. As a result, colleges and universities in Ontario have individuals with expertise in learning strategies and/or assistive technology who work only with students with learning disabilities (Learning Opportunities Task Force, Final Report, 2002).

In addition to providing funding to disability offices across Ontario, both the provincial government of Ontario and Canadian Federal government offer financial

assistance through the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) to students with diagnosed disabilities. College and university students may qualify for the following financial assistance:

Ontario's Bursary for Students with Disabilities (BSWD) and the Canada Study Grant for the Accommodation of Students with Permanent Disabilities provide non-repayable financial assistance to full- and part-time students for disability-related services and equipment that they need to participate in postsecondary education. (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, n.d.b)

Legal Aspects in Disability Accommodation in Ontario

The rights of individuals with disabilities in Canada are protected under the constitution. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982), section 15(1) states that:

Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.

Each province or territory has its own Educational or School Act that governs education in schools. In Ontario, the Ministry of Education (2000) noted that "school boards must comply with the requirements for special education plans set out in Regulation 306 under the Educational Act, entitled 'Special Education Programs and Services', and in this policy document" (p. 3). Further, "The Education Act includes provisions to address the needs of students with disabilities who have been identified as 'exceptional pupils.' School boards must provide special education programs and services to these students"

(Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2001, S.O.2001, c.32). The purpose of The Ontarians with Disabilities Act of 2001 “is to improve opportunities for persons with disabilities and to provide for their involvement in the identification, removal and prevention of barriers to their full participation in the life of the province” (Ontarians with Disability Act, 2001, c. 32, s. 1).

Recently, a new legislation came into effect – the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act of 2005. This act recognizes the history of discrimination against individuals with disabilities in Ontario and aims to benefit Ontarians by:

(1) developing, implementing and enforcing accessibility standards in order to achieve accessibility for Ontarians with disabilities with respect to goods, services, facilities, accommodation, employment, buildings, structures and premises on or before January 1, 2025; and (2) providing for the involvement of persons with disabilities, of the Government of Ontario and of representatives of industries and of various sectors of the economy in the development of the accessibility standards. (Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005, c. 11, s. 1)

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the Ontarians with Disabilities Act and the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act apply to all realms of society including elementary, secondary, and post-secondary education settings. However, the Ministry of Education defines through the Education Act “the legal obligations of school boards regarding the provisions of special education programs and services, and prescribes the categories and the definitions of exceptionality” (Ministry of Education, 2000, p. 19). Post-secondary institutions follow the guidelines established by the Ministry

of Training, Colleges and Universities. There are differences in terms of documentation requirement between K-12 and colleges and universities. Another important difference worth mentioning is that curriculum in a post-secondary institution cannot be modified to satisfy students' needs; students are expected to fulfill all requirements for program completion to the same standard as students without disabilities.

Research in the area of learning disabilities in higher education has a tendency to focus on legislation, services offered by disability service providers, and students' rights and responsibilities in terms of transitional issues. Beale (2005) outlined the rights and responsibilities of students with learning disabilities and suggests that to have a successful transition from high school to college, students should be aware of their rights and responsibilities. Five rights of students with learning disabilities are listed by Beale: (a) students with learning disabilities may receive accommodations when taking college entrance exams, (b) students with learning disabilities have the right to academic accommodations in higher education, (c) students have the right not to inform post-secondary schools of their disability, (d) students have the right not to be asked to identify their disabilities, and (e) students have the right to be heard if they believe their rights have been violated.

In terms of responsibilities, Beale (2005) recommended that: (a) students with learning disabilities should become familiar with federal legislations, (b) students must know what kind of assistance they will require in higher education, (c) students must become their own advocates, (d) students are required to submit documentation substantiating their disabilities, (e) students should become familiar with support services on their campus, (f) students must self-identify with the institutions' disability office, and

(g) students should contact their professors in the beginning of the semester and explain their needs. The Disabilities Act legislation plays an important part in understanding the rights and responsibilities of students with learning disabilities upon their enrollment in post-secondary institutions.

Characteristics of University Students

To understand the challenges perceived by university students with learning disabilities in Canada as well as appreciate how they have overcome these obstacles, some review of the characteristics of today's college students is needed. There is a dearth of literature about characteristics of Canadian students, so this review will take into consideration what has more generally been advanced about university students in general as members of the Millennial generation. Studies on generational characteristics indicated that individuals who were born between 1982 and 2002 are called the Millennials (Coomes & DeBard, 2004). Howe and Strauss (2000) identified seven characteristics that help describe the Millennials. These include being special, sheltered, confident, conventional, team-oriented, achieving, and pressured. These individuals are characterized as special because of their protective parents. Further, Millennials have been sheltered by their parents and society. Therefore, they have learned to expect structure if rules are to be followed (DeBard, 2004). Millennials are also team-players, as shown by their preference for working together in groups and relying on others for support. They are described as being conventional in their beliefs. DeBard (2004) noted "Millennial students have learned that one of the best ways of getting along is to go along" (p. 37). In terms of achievement, confidence, and pressure, Millennials expect to achieve high academic standards and they "feel pressured to perform; they want a

structure enforced to ensure that compliance will lead to achievement” (DeBard, 2004, p. 38).

Millennial parents have been important role models in their children’s lives. The relationship between parents and children seems to be one of acceptance and reciprocity. Therefore, when Millennials begin their post-secondary education, their parents find it difficult to detach themselves from their protected and sheltered children. Daniel, Evans, and Scott (2001) discussed family involvement in the education of college students. The authors stated “Parents who regard college-age students as children rather than adults will become more involved in students’ lives...some students come to campus never having interacted with the university personnel” (p. 7). As a result, college student affairs professionals are developing orientation programs for parents to deal with parental involvement in campus settings.

Longitudinal studies have shown that the attitudinal and academic profiles of the American college students have changed in the past three decades. Astin (1998) identified four characteristics in terms of attitudes of college students. These included “abandonment of the ‘liberal’ political label; increasing ‘liberalism’ on issues of students’ rights, gay rights, and gender equality; increasing ‘conservatism’ on ‘law and order’ issues; and disengagement from politics” (p. 126). Further, it was noted that in terms of academics, students were more competitive, there was greater optimism about academic performance in post-secondary settings, and students were more interested in pursuing graduate work. Another important trend found by this longitudinal study was grade inflation. According to Astin (1998), “In just six years since 1990, the proportion of freshmen with ‘A-’ or higher grade average in high school has increased by nearly half

(from 22.6 to 31.5%) and the percent with 'C+' or lower grade averages has declined from 19.2 to only 14.6%.” (p. 130). Further, it was stated that, due to grade inflation, student expectations of achieving high academic standards in post-secondary programs have increased. Astin (1998) also found that current college students experience high levels of stress. The number of students reporting feeling overwhelmed and depressed has increased significantly in the past thirty years. A great number of these students seek counseling services during their college years. Benton, Robertson, Tseng, Newton, and Benton (2003) examined counseling center client problems across 13 years and found that current college students “have more complex problems that include both the normal college student problems, such as difficulties in relationships and developmental issues, as well as the more severe problems, such as anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, sexual assault, and personality disorders” (p. 69).

Summarizing, Millennial students are marked by increasing personal and academic expectations as demonstrated through grade inflation within higher education institutions. Frequency and complexity of psychiatric pathologies are being demonstrated through manifestation of increasing instances of reported anxiety and depression. Even though this generation has been described as “healthier than most previous generations, they also bring with them higher incidences of asthma, obesity, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder” (Strange, 2004, p. 53).

Characteristics of Students with Disabilities

Not surprisingly, many characteristics of Millennial students are also embodied in students with disabilities coming to post-secondary institutions. Troiano (2003) found that college students, with disabilities, whose parents had played a major role in support

during their educational careers, were more likely to succeed academically and have stronger self-advocacy skills than those whose parents did not.

Henderson (2001) found that in terms of characteristics, students with learning disabilities, when compared with other freshman with disabilities, were most likely to be from a Caucasian heritage and be 19 years or older. Parents of students with disabilities and parents of students without disabilities were found to be similar in terms of education and employment factors. Both groups of parents were likely to have graduated from high school, and half of the parents completed a college education. In terms of careers, Henderson (2001) found that 15% of mothers were business managers, 11% were full-time homemakers, 11% were elementary education teachers as opposed to 10% (mothers of students without disabilities), and 9% were nurses. Among fathers, the study found that 31% of the fathers of students with disabilities were business managers compared to 29% of fathers of students without disabilities. Eight percent of fathers of students with learning disabilities were engineers, and seven percent of the fathers were skilled workers compared to eight percent of fathers of students without disabilities. Further, this study showed that “Freshmen with disabilities were slightly more likely to come from higher income families. The median family income of freshmen with disabilities was \$66,794, compared to \$64,500 for other students’ families” (p. 9). From this data it can be observed that little difference exists in the demographics of parents of students with disabilities and parents of students without disabilities.

Hughes and Smith (1990) analyzed empirical reports on the academic achievement and cognitive abilities of college students with learning disabilities and found that “the levels of intellectual functioning of college students with learning

disabilities are comparable to those of nondisabled students; however, LD students' performances may be more variable" (p. 69). Further, Vogel and Adelman (1992) examined the success of college students with learning disabilities by comparing the educational attainment of college students with learning disabilities to peers. The result of this study indicated that the two groups of students were alike in relation to their academic preparation for higher education. However, students with learning disabilities were observed to take a lighter course load when compared to their peers.

In terms of academic performance, Hughes and Smith (1990) found that students with learning disabilities express difficulties in reading, mathematics, and writing. In relation to reading, it was found that "college students with LD do not read as well as their nonhandicapped peers...given the high volume of reading required in postsecondary setting, college students with LD are at a distinct disadvantage" (p. 71). In the area of mathematics, it was found that students with learning disabilities experience difficulties in basic computations and application to more complex and abstract mathematics such as algebra and geometry (Hughes & Smith, 1990). In terms of written expression, Hughes and Smith (1990) found evidence in empirical research that "written expression appears to be one of the most pervasive problems for college students with learning disabilities" (p. 73). It is important to note that not all post-secondary students with learning disabilities will demonstrate difficulties in all the areas listed above. However, Hughes and Smith's (1990) study aimed to "composite a picture of students who have been or are being served through university-based program" (p. 66). Henderson (2001) found that students with learning disabilities, when compared to other students with disabilities,

were more likely to “rank themselves lowest on math ability, intellectual self-confidence, academic ability, and writing ability” (p. 22).

Cosden and McNamara (1997) compared the self-perceptions of college students with and without disabilities. It was found that “college students with LD had lower GPAs and lower standardized test scores, overall, than college students without LD. Students with LD also had lower self-perceptions of their scholastic and cognitive abilities than did their nondisabled [*sic*] peers” (p. 8). Further, it was stated that students with learning disabilities identified the campus disability office “as the organization that lent them support” (p. 9). Similarly, Vogel and Adelman (1992) also identified having “highly trained academic advisors who maintain close contact with their advisees benefits all students, but, especially benefits high risk students with and without disabilities” (p. 438). Similarly, Cowles and Keim (1995) examined graduation rates for students with learning disabilities and found that graduation rates for these students were lower than the general student body; 24% of the students with learning disabilities compared to 43% for their peers without disabilities. Further, it was found that students with learning disabilities who successfully graduated from their programs of study were more likely to receive special support services while at post-secondary institution.

Henderson (2001) found that students with learning disabilities, when compared to their peers with other disabilities, were more likely to consider majors in the arts and sciences. Research in higher education has found that students with learning disabilities tend to select academic careers that avoid their areas of weakness such as reading and writing (Johnston, 1984). Rath and Royer (2002) found that students with learning

disabilities “self-select into fields that have a tendency to minimize the academic impact of their disability” (p. 357).

Students with learning disabilities attending post-secondary institutions need to consider their learning disabilities in order to choose a suitable career of studies that places emphasis in their strengths rather than their limitations. Further, research indicates that students, with learning disabilities who are most successful in higher education are those who seek academic help from support services.

Theories of How College Impacts Student Learning

Aside from the characteristics of current college students in general and those with learning disabilities in particular, another major variable in determining academic success is the learning context in which such students find themselves in college. What students need to thrive in the collegiate environment has been a topic of concern to student development theorists. Astin (1987) proposed a theory of involvement which states that “students learn by becoming involved” (p. 133). The theory presents five propositions:

(a) involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects; (b) regardless of its object, involvement occurs along a continuum; (c) involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features; (d) the amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program; and (e) the effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement. (p. 135)

Astin (1993) studied the effects of student involvement and found that students' affective and cognitive development can be enhanced by participation in various academic and non-academic activities during their college experience. Research on student involvement has analyzed the areas of academic involvement, peer and faculty involvement, and extracurricular involvement of college students. Results of these studies have shown that positive student involvement contributes to the development of college students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Astin, 1993). More specifically, in terms of academics, Astin (1993) concluded that:

Student development seems to be facilitated if the student spends a considerable amount of time studying, attending classes, and using a personal computer, as well as engaging in academically related activities that would be inclined to elicit a high degree of student involvement: honors courses, interdisciplinary courses, study-abroad programs, college internship programs, racial or cultural awareness workshops, independent research projects, class presentations, and taking essay exams. (p. 382)

In terms of development of verbal, quantitative, and subject matter competency Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) noted that informal interaction with faculty may not impact student learning as much as intellectually focused interactions. In relation to peer involvement, it was found that “students with high level of engagement in their academic experience during college also tend to be highly engaged in nonclassroom pursuits” (p. 122). Further, it was noted that not all peer interaction may have a positive impact on learning. Activities that have no connection to the students' academic program may in fact “inhibit knowledge acquisition and the development of academic skills” (p. 122).

However, Astin (1987) noted “the greater the interaction with peers, the more favorable the outcome...peer group is powerful because it has the capacity to *involve* the student more intensely in the educational experience” (p. 126).

Student involvement may help researchers understand the factors that influence student outcomes in college, such as retention and attrition. However, other factors such as the environment and the level of student engagement also influence the first-year experience of college students. Astin (1993) developed a conceptual framework called the Input, Environment, and Outcomes (I-E-O) model for studying college student outcomes. The Input refers to the characteristics college students bring with them when they enter college. The Environment “refers to the various programs, policies, faculty, peers, and educational experiences to which the student is exposed [in a post-secondary setting]” (p. 7). The Outcomes are the characteristics that emerge as a result of the exposure to the environment. According to Astin (1993), to understand college student development, one must look at all three elements of the framework.

A significant amount of research has focused on environmental conditions that promote learning on the college campus (as cited in Kuh, 1996, p. 136). Further, Kuh (1996) suggested that “what was once believed to be separate, distinct parts (e.g., in-class, out-of-class, academic and non-academic, curricular and cocurricular, or on-campus and off campus experiences) are now of one piece, bound together so as to appear whole or continuous” (p. 136). Further, it was noted that in a “seamless learning environment” students are encouraged to take advantage of the available resources in order to enhance their learning experiences. Kuh (1996) suggested six guiding principles for institutions to create an ethos of learning. These include (1) generate enthusiasm for

institutional renewal, which implies that all campus constituencies must work collaboratively to create a seamless learning environment; (2) create a common vision of learning; (3) develop a common language; (4) foster collaboration and cross-functional dialogue, the importance of an open dialogue throughout all levels of the institution is reinforced in this section; (5) examine the influence of student cultures on student learning; and (6) focus on systematic change.

To further illustrate the impact of environmental conditions, Terenzini, Pascarella, and Blimling (1996) reviewed the literature in relation to out-of-class experiences and their influence on learning and cognitive development. It was concluded that out-of-class experiences such as living in residence halls, working part-time on campus, socializing with others from a different racial or ethnic background, doing an internship, studying abroad, and interacting with peers and faculty members on academic related topics have a positive impact on academic and cognitive abilities of students. Conversely, it was found that out-of-class experiences such as living at home, working full-time, living in a sorority or fraternity, socializing with friends, and participating in intercollegiate sports such as football and basketball, among others might have a negative impact on student learning.

To address academic environmental conditions, Blocher (1978) proposed seven measures of classroom climate. These included involvement, challenge, support, structure, feedback, application, and integration. These conditions or characteristics were suggested to be optimal for the construction of a learning environment that facilitates growth and development of college students.

An overview of involvement and environment theories shows that students and the environment are constantly in exchange with each other. To have a positive post-secondary experience, the environment needs to enhance learning and the student needs to get involved physically and psychologically in the learning experiences offered by the college community. In essence, this status of reciprocity between the student and the environment elicits learning.

Stigma Versus Awareness of Disabilities

In addition to involvement and environmental theories, the impact of social interaction of student with learning disabilities and those who do not have such affliction is important to consider. Goffman (1963) theorized that individuals with disabilities feel obliged to “pass” as individuals without a disability to avoid social reprisals. Further, Olney and Kim (2001) stated “people with less apparent disabilities maintain control of their identities and, by extension, the perception of others” (p. 564). Students with learning disabilities may feel uncomfortable in integrating with the college community for several reasons including the stigmatization of being considered *disabled*. To discuss the psychological accommodation of stigma in individuals with disabilities, one must first approach the topic with a discussion of identity. The concept of identity is a highly intangible one. Beart, Hardy, and Buchan (2005) stated that:

Although identity is a term that is well used, both in every day life and within psychology, paradoxically it remains difficult to define... [principally because] ...having a continued sense of who we are across a lifetime of social roles and biological changes [confounds the issue]. (p. 41)

Individuals are aware of the stigma attached to their social identity both explicitly and through the way they recognize others' negative views (Beart *et al.* 2005, p. 54).

It is commonly believed that “negative evaluations of people with intellectual disabilities abound in society” (Craig, Craig, Withers, Hatton, & Limb, 2002, p. 61).

Green, Davis, Karshmer, Marsh, and Straight (2005) further clarified the issue of negative evaluations in stating that:

People with disabilities... are generally perceived to possess traits that others do not want to acquire. Others may consequently feel sadness and pity in the presence of individuals with disabilities and these feelings can further interfere with the shared meanings needed for ordinary social interaction. Seeking to avoid these feelings, others may even avoid individuals who possess the difference they dread. (p. 202)

Not surprisingly, because of such negative evaluation, people with disabilities may go through a process of denial and non-acceptance of the label. Craig *et al.* (2002) explained that “...people with intellectual disabilities are aware of the stigma associated with their intellectually disabled identity and are uncomfortable with discussions that allude to this identity” (p. 70), and that they “...often struggle with accepting that they are intellectually disabled” (p. 69), as well as the idea that they “sometimes appear bothered by involvement with a ‘learning disability’ service” (p. 69), which acts to confirm the label.

Hartman-Hall and Haaga (2002) further discussed this notion by stating that “for some students, a stigma may be attached to using services, or some students may perceive use of services as indicating a lack of ability” (p. 272). Therefore, it is likely that students

with learning disabilities might avoid engagement in the campus community as to not be identified as *disabled* and thus suffer the consequences of stigmatization and the social sanctions that emerge from it. This stigmatization and being identified as having a learning disability is paradoxical in nature. From a legal stand point in higher education, students with disabilities can only receive academic accommodations if they self-identify to the disability services office of their institution. Without self- identification, no services can be provided to students.

Transition Issues for First-Year University Students with Learning Disabilities

The legislative acts that address the issues of disabilities in high school and post-secondary institutions vary in several ways. In high school, parents are involved in the identification process and in the preparation of Individualized Education Plans (IEP). Without parental consent, services and testing may not be rendered. However, in post-secondary settings the student, rather than the parent, must self-identify as having a disability and request appropriate and reasonable accommodations.

Essential Elements in Student Transition

Gartin, Rumrill, and Serebreni (1996) suggested three essential curricular elements that contribute to a successful transition of students with learning disabilities from high school to post-secondary settings. The first element involved a psychosocial adjustment that included the development of self-advocacy and social skills. The second element was identified as academic development which aimed to prepare students to set their career goals and develop learning strategies such as test taking skills, note-taking, and study skills. The third element was composed of college/community orientation.

Students were encouraged to take advantage of college services, resources, and to participate in college activities.

Self-advocacy

In high school, parents, teachers, and school personnel are the ones who determine appropriate accommodations for the students in the special education programs. However, upon entering post-secondary institutions students become responsible for explaining their disabilities and requesting services. Students with disabilities in post-secondary settings are expected to become their own advocates. Smith, English, and Vasek (2002) studied student and parental involvement in the transition process for college freshmen with learning disabilities and found that these students lacked appropriate self-advocacy skills. Results indicated “A significant portion, 22 out of 61 [students] felt like they were ‘no good.’ Also, 25 out of 61 felt ‘useless at times.’ This type of negative self talk is not indicative of a confident self-advocate” (p. 501). Also, participants reported that they relied on their parents to help them stay on track. The authors concluded that “Parents on the other hand unknowingly contribute to an unsuccessful transition. They mean to be nurturing caretakers, and in doing so, deprive their child of independence. They instead promote this image of powerlessness and dependence on others” (p. 501).

To become effective self-advocates, students with learning disabilities must be able to define and explain their disabilities to others. Troiano (2003) interviewed nine college students with learning disabilities and concluded that “the experiences of college students with disabilities are as unique and varied as the students who make up this particular population” (p. 407). As a result of this study, the author developed a

conceptual model of an emergent theory. According to the author, the self-style learning disability is produced by factors such as time of diagnosis, perceived support, level of stigmatization, and attributes personality. As a result, the self-style disability model shapes the consequences associated with individual interactions such as: willingness to disclose, ability to self-advocate, and the level of self-determination.

Perceptions of Being Stigmatized as ‘Disabled’

Troiano (2003) observed that individuals identify various degrees of stigmatization associated with their learning disabilities, which took place initially during childhood. Participants also reported stigmatization in the post-secondary settings especially when explaining about their disabilities and the accommodations they required to professors:

Stigmatizations lead to feelings of hopelessness, and at times a loss of self-confidence, for students who were singled out or labeled different. Students who experienced a high degree of stigmatization were more likely to allow the learning disability to define their weakness, rather than their unique learning style. These students also tended to view their disability as a permanent condition that would continue to affect every aspect of their academic and social lives. (p. 412)

Ellis and Abreu-Ellis (2006) proposed a curricular intervention to reduce stigma of those living with disabilities on college campuses. They noted that faculty can serve to maintain stigma through openly identifying individuals with disabilities and through a lack of information regarding the importance of academic accommodations. They further implored that institutions of higher education constituencies must become aware of the consequence of stigmatizing individuals with disabilities.

In post-secondary institutions, students have the option of self-identifying or not self-identifying as having a learning disability. Students who choose not to register with the disability service provider at the post-secondary institution might face greater academic challenges, and they might also demonstrate low academic performance during their first-year university experience. It is possible that students avoid interaction with the disability office due to a series of factors: not being aware of the legislation and support available on campus, lack of disability understanding and desire to avoid the label and stigmatization associated with having a disability, or the aspiration to try it on their own without help or support.

Faculty Accommodation of Learning Disabilities

Another issue faced by students with learning disabilities that takes place after registration with the disability service providers on campus is that they need to be able to explain to professors that they have specific needs and that they require accommodations. Wolman, McCrink, Rodríguez, and Harris-Looby (2004) examined faculty attitudes toward university students with disabilities and accommodations in the United States and Mexico and found that in both countries faculty members were willing to accommodate students with disabilities. More specifically it was found that “faculty [members] were more willing to accommodate students with LD or students with deafness or blindness than they were willing to accommodate students with emotional problems or students with physical disabilities” (p. 292). On the contrary, Burgstahler and Doe (2006) analyzed faculty and students responses and concluded “accommodations for students with learning disabilities are sometimes seen by instructors as arbitrary and ‘unfair advantage.’” (p. 140).

Nelson, Dodd, and Smith (1990) surveyed faculty members in order to assess their willingness to accommodating post-secondary students with learning disabilities. Findings indicated that faculty members seem to be willing to accommodate students with learning disabilities. However, faculty members reported concerns about maintaining academic integrity while providing accommodations. Further, it was found that “student’s attitudes would influence whether or not they would provide him or her accommodations” (p. 188). Salezberg (2003) suggested that most faculty members are willing to cooperate with instructional accommodations. However, they are “largely ignorant of the legal and programmatic issues that affect students with disabilities and have received little or no training in that regard, and further that this creates unnecessary obstacles to students with disabilities who are attempting to pursue college degrees and higher-level careers” (§ 9). Similarly, Burgstahler and Doe (2006) interviewed faculty members and administrators concerning the service delivery of post-secondary students with disabilities and found that they:

Reported little knowledge about legislation and expressed a need for clarification on their legal obligations to provide reasonable accommodations as well as the rights and responsibilities of students with disabilities. They also reported feeling ethical tensions when providing accommodations to students with disabilities, suggesting that training should address perceptions of classroom inequality while providing accommodations to students with disabilities. (p. 140)

Research in the area of post-secondary experiences of students with learning disabilities is warranted (Rath & Royer, 2002). The transition from high school to post-

secondary education for students without disabilities is a complex phenomenon.

Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg, and Jalomo (1994) noted:

The nature and dynamics of the process [transition] vary according to the student's social, family, and educational background; personality; educational and occupational orientations and aspiration; the nature and mission of the institution being attended; the kind of peers, faculty, and staff members encountered; the purpose and nature of those encounters; and the interaction of all these variables.

(p. 61)

Students with learning disabilities have a plethora of factors to consider during their first-year experience in higher education. In addition, students with disabilities must address issues of eligibility to receive accommodations in a post-secondary setting. Gormley, Hughes, Block, and Lendman (2005) found that there is a discontinuity of the documentation required for services in high school and the documentation required by post-secondary institutions in order to ensure eligibility for services. Students must also learn self-advocacy skills during a short period of time between high school graduation and the day they begin their studies at post-secondary institutions. It is important to remember that students' parents are their advocates for all their early lives. But even though parents of the Millennials are considered very "present" and "involved" at a higher education level, the students are adults in the eyes of the institution and are expected to advocate for themselves.

To summarize, students with learning disabilities coming to university are marked by characteristics similar to the millennial generation in that they (1) have a high level of parental support and involvement, (2) come from educated parents to a large extent, and

(3) feel high levels of performance anxiety because of high levels of academic expectation. However, these students differ because they are placed in a paradoxical situation: by self-disclosing their disabilities, they risk being subject to stigmatization as a tradeoff for legal accommodations and services. This self-disclosure and stigma effect is further confounded in relation to students' possible reluctance to become involved in the campus community which could be the key to ensuring their academic success. It is of utmost importance that challenges to academic success, in individuals with disabilities, are further clarified so that higher education institutions may progress toward removal of these barriers.

CHAPTER III. METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Research

To identify the experiences of students with learning disabilities in higher education, the researcher was not interested in confirming an existing theory but in the process of knowledge construction that can emerge from the interaction between researcher and participants. Therefore, a naturalistic or constructivist investigation was determined to be the most appropriate mode of inquiry for this study. Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993) noted that naturalistic researchers,

Assume that human beings must operate within realities they themselves have constructed. Further, the constructed realities of no two human beings are identical...the process of inquiry for the naturalistic researcher becomes one of developing and verifying shared constructions that will enable the meaningful expansion of knowledge. (p. 21)

Further, because of the uniqueness of the participants' experiences within the context of having a learning disability and being able to complete post-secondary studies a qualitative methodology was identified as the best approach to serve the purpose of this study by providing the researcher with "depth of meaning and richness of understanding" (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 30) of the participant's experiences in post-secondary education.

Epistemology

This study aimed to identify the experiences of students with learning disabilities in higher education at a Canadian university in Ontario. This research used qualitative

methods grounded within a constructivist paradigm. Guba and Lincoln (1989) explained that there are three assumptions within the constructivist paradigm.

The first assumption addresses the nature of reality (ontology). The constructivist paradigm assumes that there are multiple realities. Further, relativist ontology asserts “that there exist multiple, socially constructed realities ungoverned by any natural laws, causal or otherwise...these constructions are devised by individuals as they attempt to make sense of their experiences, which, it should be recalled, are always interactive in nature” (p. 86). Given the relativist ontology, this study assumes that the process through which students with learning disabilities construct their experiences is dependent upon their personal histories and their social exchange with other members of the campus community. Therefore, this study aimed to elicit as many of those constructions as possible to understand how students perceived their experiences in a post-secondary setting.

The second assumption of the constructivist paradigm, stated by Guba and Lincoln (1989), addresses the relationship between the knower and the known (epistemology) and asserts that they are indivisible and that one impacts on the other. Further, it is stated that “it is precisely their interaction that creates the data that will emerge from the inquiry” (p. 88). Therefore, the researcher will acknowledge personal values that might influence the research process.

The third assumption of this paradigm speaks to hermeneutic methodology, which addresses the development of shared constructions. Guba and Lincoln (1989) observed that hermeneutic methodology “is dialectic in that it involves the juxtaposition of conflicting ideas, forcing reconsideration of previous positions” (p. 90). Such a premise

forms into the idea that “one must know about the researcher as well as the researched to place any qualitative study in a proper, hermeneutic context” (Patton, 2002, p. 115). The emphasis, as Eichelberger (1989) discussed, is that reality is interpreted through the researcher and participants’ interactions.

The three assumptions listed above helped set the stage for this research study. Further, Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that positivistic research has focused on *etic* research “...research carried out with an outside (objective) perspective – to the virtual exclusion of emic research – that is, research carried out with an inside perspective (subjective)” (p. 27). The intention of this study is to put a face, and give voice, to students with disabilities in higher education. It is the intention that this study be emergent, not confirmatory and, hence, the emic perspective must be embraced.

Theoretical Perspective

In light of the epistemology of constructivism, this study operated from an interpretivist theoretical perspective. More specifically, it was grounded in the phenomenological perspective. Patton (2002) stated that there are two implications for using the phenomenological perspective. The first relates to the fact that people’s experiences and their interpretation of the world is vital for a phenomenological inquiry. The second implication relates to the methodology. Patton (2002) urged that “the only way for us to really know what another person experiences is to experience the phenomenon as directly as possible for ourselves” (p. 106). Further, it is noted that this can be achieved by “participant observation and in-depth interviewing” (p. 106). This phenomenological research explored the experiences of post-secondary students with learning disabilities and how they experience and interpret the world. It was not the

researcher's intention to engage in purposeful observation in an attempt to gather data for this study. This research focused on the participants' interpretations of their experiences, carried out through hermeneutic dialectic exchange during individual interviews. Van Manen (1990) further clarified the meaning of the phenomenological perspective by stating that, from a phenomenological perspective, the researcher is "less interested in factual status of particular instances: whether something actually happened, how often it tends to happen, or how the occurrence of an experience is related to the prevalence of other conditions or events" (p. 10).

A fundamental aspect of the phenomenological perspective is the assumption of essence. Patton (2002) noted that "*there is an essence or essences to shared experience*. These essences are the core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced" (p. 106). Moustakas (1994) further suggested that the conceptual framework of transcendental phenomenology incorporates the qualities of essence, intentionality, and intuition. Essence, as defined by Husserl (cited in Moustakas, 1994), is described as "that which is common or universal, the condition or quality without which a thing would not be what it is" (p. 100). According to Moustakas (1994), the concept of intentionality "refers to consciousness, to the internal experience of being conscious of something; thus the act of consciousness and the object of consciousness are intentionally related" (p. 28). Further, Moustakas (1994) noted that "knowledge of intentionality requires that we be present to ourselves and to things in the world, that we recognize that self and world are inseparable components of meaning" (p. 28). Finally, Moustakas (1994) wrote that intuition is the origin point for constructing knowledge of the human experience, because it is "free of everyday sense impressions and the natural

attitude...whatever else may enter into my awareness, my intuitive knowing of myself and what presents itself of its own accord does not betray me” (p. 32).

For this study, the researcher attempted to determine the common experiences of students with a learning disability in a university environment. Extrapolating from this focus, the researcher recognized that there can be no separation in the dynamic between self and world; thus, the researcher shared in the construction of this knowledge of essence through her own intuitive interpretation of what is real. At the same time, the researcher was self-aware and placed contextual parameters on personal bias and pre-conceptions.

Researcher's Reflection

To address the assumption that there is a relationship between the knower and the known and that one impacts the other under the constructivist paradigm, in this section the researcher will discuss her experiences, values, assumptions, and biases that could have had an impact on her interviews and the interpretation of transcripts. Please note that this section is written in the first person because of the personal nature of this essay.

Over the years, I have developed a passion for working with individuals with disabilities. I first came in contact with individuals with disabilities during my undergraduate experience. As a student of psychology, I wanted to apply my textbook knowledge and I began working, through an agency, with individuals with cerebral palsy, autism, Downs's syndrome, and other various disabilities.

After graduation, I taught at an American school in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil for five years. In the Brazilian education system, children with identifiable disabilities until recently have been excluded from mainstream schooling and placed in special schools.

Recently, the concept of inclusion has begun to emerge as new educational policies develop.

In the beginning of my career as a teacher, I had the pleasure of working with very bright children who faced behavioral and academic difficulties. As a regular education teacher, I always believed that my students were capable of accomplishing great things. I was influenced by a fourth grader who made an immense difference in my profession. This student wrote a science test and performed extremely poorly. When I asked her what had happened, her response was “I don’t know, I studied, I was ready for it.” I could see in her eyes that she was being truthful. So, I picked up her exam and gave her the questions orally; she gave me all the right answers. I was intrigued that this student knew all her material, but she could not express herself as well in writing as she could verbally. From that moment forward, I was forced to re-evaluate my teaching philosophy, and I learned to adapt my teaching methods to accommodate the needs of the students in my class.

In this context, I recognize the reality that faculty may not be aware of disability issues related to instructional delivery. I also recognize that my perception may be swayed through empathy for students with special needs similar to the fourth grade student who led me to the epiphany that students have varying needs.

I perceive learning as a process, involving interaction amongst students, teachers, and peers. It requires active participation of the learner through inquiry, self-reflection, and the ability to make connections between the newly acquired concepts and previous knowledge. Further, I strongly believe that fairness is related to individual needs, and I am comfortable dealing with students who have different levels of abilities and skills. I

have a global outlook that allows for a vast understanding of diversity which I embrace in the classroom setting. At the same time, I recognize that not all individuals who act in instructional positions work from this perspective.

In the past, I have used a variety of teaching styles to enhance student learning, and I feel that a balance of strategies benefit the group as a whole. I expect the classroom environment to provide a positive experience for students as they learn to accept diversity, providing them a sense of security, and enabling them to actively and realistically participate in the learning process. My philosophy of education may influence my expectations of faculty members who interact with students with disabilities in their classrooms.

In the past two years, I began working in the disability office at a university in Ontario, Canada, providing services for students with psychiatric and chronic medical conditions. I have heard stories from students who struggle every day to attend classes, to get their assignments done on time, and to study their lecture notes. The problems are countless and their stories are disconcerting at times. Such stories include students who prefer to omit the “truth” about their disabilities to peers to avoid discrimination, or students who choose not to exercise their right to accommodation because of stigma. Many others drop classes because faculty members create barriers instead of accommodating and understanding of their needs. These experiences may influence my interpretations as well.

I also bring to the table my values: education, dedication, and persistence to succeed in higher education. It is my hope that this dissertation will give students with

learning disabilities the opportunity to share their sagas so that society can become more aware of their struggles and successes in their higher-education educational endeavors.

Institutional Selection

Participants in this study were recruited from the University of West River (a pseudonym) in Ontario. This institution was selected because the researcher was an employee at this institution during the time of the study.

University of West River is located in an industrial city, with a population of 200,000 people, influenced by the automotive industry. The university's mission states:

The University of West River is Canada's most personal comprehensive university. It combines a strong and focussed emphasis on the learning experience of every student with a very broad range of graduate, undergraduate, and professional programmes. Uniquely accountable in specifying learning outcomes for each academic programme, the University has an exciting commitment to research in a richly diverse community. A special focus on automotive, environmental and social justice interdisciplinary research reflects the priorities of the surrounding region. (University of West River, n.d., ¶ 1)

The disability office at the University of West River was founded in the early 1980s. At that time, only a few students were served by this office. In the 1991/1992 academic year, 123 students were registered with the disability program and only 52 students were served based on a diagnosed learning disability (Special Needs Program, 1991). The program was overseen by a coordinator who acted as the first contact for students with disabilities at the university (Special Needs Program, 1992). In the past four years this program has grown immensely. It now serves 356 students, including 126

students with diagnosed learning disabilities. The office receives government funding through the Enhanced Services Project, and 112 students were seen by a learning strategist and an assistive technologist during the 2005/2006 academic year (Student Disability Services, 2005).

Cunningham (2002) analyzed the perceptions of disability service administrators and faculty members in relation to services provided to post-secondary students with learning disabilities in an array of higher education environments. Findings suggested that “faculty members adapt to their institutional environment when it comes to dealing with students with learning disabilities” (p. 158). Therefore, it is important to give a context in order to understand the experiences of students who participated in this study.

The University of West River was founded in the late 1800s and it was directed by Jesuits, Benedictines, secular clergy, and the Basilians.

The curriculum consisted of classical and commercial courses providing a complete high school and Arts program, primarily designed to prepare students for theological seminaries, although many alumni entered business and professional spheres. (University of West River, n.d., ¶ 5)

In the early 1900s, a Faculty of Arts and Sciences emerged. Curricula included “general and honours courses in Arts and Sciences leading to Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science degrees” (University of West River, n.d., ¶ 5). Also, other programs emerged such as graduate work in philosophy (Masters of Arts Degree) and pre-professional programs in medicine, law, and engineering (University of West River, n.d., ¶ 5.).

In the late 1960s, the University of West River became the first autonomous degree granting institution in its region, and the university became a member of the

International Association of Universities in 1964 (University of West River, n.d., ¶ 12).

Today the campus covers 51 hectares of land. The university offers:

More than 140 undergraduate and graduate programs across nine faculties for 16,000 full-time students. It offers nine cooperative education programs for 1,100 students. More than 80,000 individuals around the world are proud to call the University of West River their alma mater. (University of West River, n.d., ¶ 18)

Participant Selection

This study aimed to analyze the phenomenon of the experiences of students with learning disabilities in post-secondary education. Two advisors from the disability office at the participating institution acted as gatekeepers in the recruitment process. A list of students with learning disabilities who were close to program completion was generated, and twelve names were identified. All students were contacted by their advisors requesting their participation in this study.

An introduction letter (please see appendix A) was provided to gatekeepers to assist the researcher in the recruitment of participants. Also, the gatekeepers received a script (please see appendix B) which was read to the prospective participant before the introduction letter was given. This script explained to the prospective participants that they would not be affected by their decision to participate or not participate in the study and, that if they chose to participate, their identity would remain confidential.

The researcher used a style of purposeful sampling called *information-rich cases* to screen the participants. Patton (2002) described that the goal of this purposeful sampling is “to select information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study” (p. 230). Participant characteristics acted as a selection criteria to ensure

that any shared themes which emerged to be all the more significant for having come from a small, heterogeneous sample. Students who were interested in participating were asked to contact the researcher directly. Prospective participants spoke with the researcher over the telephone or in person to discuss the nature of the project prior to scheduling an interview. This served as a screening process to ensure that participants were willing to share their sagas and contribute to the research project.

It is imperative to note that both men and women students were contacted by their disability advisors with a request to participate in this study. However, only women participants were willing to share their experiences with the researcher. Thus, the researcher followed-up with the participants to determine if their experiences in higher education were influenced by being women.

Participants were registered with the University of West River as either full-time or part-time students, and they were enrolled in their last year of course work during the time when this study took place. They were identified as having a variety of different learning disability diagnoses according to their psycho-educational assessments. All students were registered with the institution's disability office, and they received services according to a learning disability diagnosis.

More specifically Alicia is a 28 year old woman who majored in psychology. She aspires to become a teacher. She was originally diagnosed in grade 11 and was re-assessed during her university career. She described her learning disability as "they diagnosed me with short-term memory loss of some sort...perceptual problem, an auditory perceptual problem, and something about background sound...the new diagnosis

is phonemes and graphemes problems and ...something to do with memory” (Alicia, 28-31).

Samantha is a 23 year old woman who majored in history. Samantha was identified with a learning disability in kindergarten. She was initially referred to a speech pathologist because she had difficulty pronouncing her Rs. Later she was diagnosed with a learning disability in the areas of reading and writing as she noted “I don’t understand what I am reading some of the times” (Samantha, 159).

Ashley is a 25 year old woman who graduated with an honors degree in drama education. Ashley was diagnosed with auditory processing disorder (APD) at university. She further explained how APD affected her academic studied as she noted “with APD you hear everything around you so the way someone with APD ...processes music doesn’t allow them to count music the way other students do... the way other people hear music is completely different than they way I hear it” (Ashley, 41-44).

Lorene is a 30 year old woman who was enrolled in teacher’s college. Lorene was diagnosed with a reading and writing learning disability. She explained “you know all of this information but when you write it down it's not there, you have no grammar structure, your ideas don't get out, it's messy everything is scratched out, things are flipped around” (Lorene, 551-553).

Rachel is a 23 years old woman who graduated from the human kinetics program. She was diagnosed with a learning disability in mathematics, reading, and spelling. Rachel was required to take a course in statistics during first year at university and her lack of knowledge about her disability resulted in disappointment as she noted “I met with the teacher assistant and I tried to do things especially for math, statistics, when I

realized that I might not pass that class. I definitely tried to get a tutor and I met with the teacher assistant. They tried to help me, but when it came to the test day I just couldn't do it" (Rachel, 385-387).

Patricia is a 25 psychology major. She was diagnosed with a reading and writing learning disability at university. As she noted "I try to avoid courses that require advanced level of reading...unless I have to I would find a way to get around it" (Patricia, 262-264).

Data Collection

A face-to-face, individual in-depth interview was the main mode of data collection for this study. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), in a naturalistic inquiry the researcher:

Elects to use him- or herself as well as other humans as the primary data-gathering instruments...because it would be virtually impossible to devise a priori a nonhuman instrument with sufficient adaptability to encompass and adjust to the variety of realities that will be encountered...only the human instrument is capable of grasping and evaluating the meaning of the differential interaction; because the intrusion of instruments intervenes in the mutual shaping of other elements and the shaping can be appreciated and evaluated only by a human; and because all instruments are value-based and interact with local values but only the human is in the position to identify and take into account (to some extent) those resulting biases. (p. 39)

It is important to note that the researcher is capable and qualified to act as a human instrument due to her educational background, training in qualitative methodology, and

professional experience as an educator, disability advisor, career counselor, and publication of research based in qualitative inquiry.

Data collection was terminated after the sixth interview due to saturation. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested “sampling is terminated when no new information is forthcoming from newly sampled units; thus redundancy is the primary criterion” (p. 202). Further, this research study did not intend to make broad generalizations of findings, but to concentrate on particular cases, the idiographic experiences of students in higher education.

The Interview Process

An interview guide (please see appendix C) was developed for this study. Lancy (1993) discussed the importance of obtaining information in the interview process, but simultaneously being wary of not constraining the interviewee’s responses to a predetermined framework. By letting participants stray from guiding questions, the interviewer allows participants to bring forth their conceptualization of the phenomena. Open ended questions were used during the interview to facilitate the exploration of the emic perspective. Patton (2002) stated that truly open ended questions allow participants to respond in their own terms. Further, Patton (2002) suggested that open ended questions do “not presuppose which dimension of feeling or thought will be salient for the interviewee...[which] allows the person being interviewed to select from among that person’s full repertoire of possible responses” (p. 354). Individual interviews lasted 50 to 90 minutes. The researcher requested permission to audio-tape the interviews to ensure the participants’ responses were accurately recorded for later analysis.

Phenomenological Analysis

This study used phenomenological analysis to understand the phenomenon, more specifically the experiences of students with learning disabilities in a post-secondary setting. The following methodological steps were incorporated into this study. Moustakas (1994) suggested three phases to analyze a phenomenon, which included Epochè, phenomenological reduction, and structural synthesis.

The first phase suggested by Moustakas (1994) was called Epochè in which the researcher reflects upon his/her personal bias and aims to reduce or gain clarity about his/her preconceptions. Patton (2002) stated that “rigor is reinforced by a ‘phenomenological attitude shift’ accomplished through *Epochè*” (p. 485). Further, Epochè is defined as a fluid, ongoing analysis of self (Patton, 2002). To address the Epochè recommended by Moustakas (1994) for phenomenological analysis, the researcher shared her personal story with the aim of identifying personal preconceptions that might influence the research process.

The second phase of the phenomenological analysis is called phenomenological reduction. The steps of phenomenological reduction, as described by Moustakas (1994) incorporate:

Bracketing, in which the focus of the research is placed in brackets, everything else is set aside so that the entire research process is rooted solely on the topic and question; *horizontalizing*, every statement initially is treated as having equal value. Later, statements irrelevant to the topic and question as well as those that are repetitive or overlapping are deleted, leaving only the *Horizons* (the textual meaning and invariant constituents of the phenomenon); Cluster the Horizons into

Themes; and Organizing the Horizons and Themes into a Coherent Textural Description of the phenomenon. (p. 97)

The third and last phase proposed by Moustakes (1990) was the development of structural synthesis. Patton (2002) described that the essence of a phenomenon is revealed when the researcher looks “beneath the affect inherent in the experience for deeper meanings for the individuals who, together make up the group” (p. 486). It is recognized that essence is never truly exhausted in that the meaning that the researcher finds is simply the “essence at a particular time and place from the vantage point of an individual researcher following an exhaustive imaginative and reflective study of the phenomenon” (Moustakes, 1990, p. 100).

Lancy (1992) described the challenge to the qualitative researcher as being systematically analyzing a substantial body of data. Glaser and Strauss (1967) recommended a bottom-up approach in which data is broken down into its smallest units, systematically coded and collated into categories which are extrapolated into meaningful aggregates or themes. This study works from the belief that “the human instrument allows data to be collected and analyzed in an interactive process” (Erlandson *et. al*, 1993, p. 39), and within the phenomenological analysis clear steps are taken to ensure a systematic analysis through the constructs of Epochè, reduction, and synthesis (Moustakas, 1994).

The researcher transcribed verbatim transcripts from the recorded individual interviews. According to Creswell (2002) “coding is the process of segmenting and labeling text to form descriptions and broad themes in the data” (p. 266). This study employed the bracketing procedures suggested by Husserl (cited in Patton, 2002) and

Janesick (1994) for phenomenological research. Within the process of bracketing the researcher holds “the phenomenon up for serious inspection” (Patton, 2002, p. 485). The following procedures outline the steps of bracketing:

1. Locate within the personal experience, or self-story, key phrases and statements that speak directly to the phenomenon in question.
2. Interpret the meanings of these phrases, as an informed reader.
3. Obtain the subject’s interpretations of these phrases if possible.
4. Inspect these meanings for what they reveal about the essential recurring features of the phenomenon being studied.
5. Offer a tentative statement, or definition, of the phenomenon in terms of the essential recurring features identified in step 4. (p. 408)

Upon completion of the bracketing the researcher categorized, grouped, and clustered the data in order to interpret them. Constant comparative analysis was used by the researcher to look for occurrences of statements and instances of behavior over time that appear in the study (Janesick, 1994).

Methods of Verification

Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended the following criteria for establishing trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. To address trustworthiness, the researcher used peer debriefing, member checking, and a reflexive journaling.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested peer debriefing “helps keep the inquirer ‘honest,’ exposing him or her to searching questions by an experienced protagonist doing

his or her best to play the devil's advocate" (p. 308). The Director of the Disability Services, at Bowling Green State University, served as the researcher's peer debriefer during this research project. The researcher shared transcripts, data analysis materials, and constructions of the emergent themes with the peer debriefer who in turn offered constructive feedback when appropriate.

Member checking was used to ensure credibility of the study. Participants were asked to review the researcher's constructions of the interview and offer feedback according to their own interpretation of their experiences as post-secondary students with a learning disability.

The use of a reflexive journal is fundamental in naturalistic inquiry to establish trustworthiness of the study. Therefore, the researcher used a reflexive journal for the entire period of the study. Journal entries were representative of the researcher's reflections, questions to follow-up with the participants, and realizations of emergent themes.

Transferability was ensured by the use of purposeful sampling and thick description, Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted "the description must specify everything that the reader may need to know in order to understand the findings (findings are *not* part of the thick description, although they must be interpreted in terms of the factors thickly described)..." (p. 125).

The purpose of this study was to capture the essence of the experiences of students with learning disabilities while in university. The methodology described above allowed the researcher to discover these factors by using a constructivist epistemology.

As participants shared their university experiences, the multiple “truths” of the participants emerged during the research process.

The findings of this research project will assist the university community to understand the reality of students with learning disabilities in post-secondary education. Disability services providers will be able to act with this information to ease transition from one segment of education to another and possibly improve retention and learning outcomes of students with learning disabilities in post-secondary settings.

Ethical Concerns

This research project received approval from two independent institutional review boards (please see appendices D and E). Prior to the beginning of the interview process, participants signed an informed consent form (please see appendix F) which explained in detail their rights in the study. Participants were informed that their participation was strictly voluntary and that they might withdraw at any time during the study. Further, it was explained that no risk was associated with the study. The participants were also informed that due to the nature of the constructivist methodology used in this study, the researcher would share her constructions of the emergent themes with the participants to ensure that their stories were appropriately represented. Therefore, there was no harm or deception associated with this study.

Participants’ confidentiality was preserved by using pseudonyms throughout the manuscript. It is important to note that the researcher was employed at the disability office where the study took place. To address issues of power, the researcher did not recruit participants to whom she was the advisor. Further, participants were informed

prior to the interview that their advisors would not be informed of their participation or non-participation in the study to ensure confidentiality.

Summary

This chapter described the theoretical perspective applied under the qualitative methodology. It provided a personal researcher's reflection of contextualized historical events which could have influenced her interpretation of the research findings. This chapter described the researcher's process of participant selection, data collection and analysis, methods of verification, and ethical concerns involving the participants. In chapter four, the emergent themes of this study are reported. In chapter five, themes are aligned with experts' writings in the field of providing disability services to students in higher education. This section is followed by a presentation of relevant implications for practice and research.

CHAPTER IV. EMERGENT THEMES

Individual Participant Profiles

There were six participants in this study. Participants are described in a case study format to help the reader understand the unique characteristics of each student. Patton (2002) explained that each case study “must be represented and understood as an idiosyncratic manifestation of the phenomenon of interest” (p. 450). In this case, the phenomenon to be understood is the experience of students with learning disabilities in a post-secondary institution in Canada.

Alicia

Alicia is a 28-year-old, friendly, and outgoing woman. During an informal conversation, while setting up the tape recorder for the interview, the student noted that she had written the room number on her hand to remind herself of where to go. This first interaction with Alicia was very representative of her self-regulatory strategies as she later stated:

In high school, I would write out everything and I would write, write, and write and my parents wouldn't understand why I have to spend so much time writing, but that's how it got to me [I was able to memorize it] ...While some students would only have to do it once or twice I would go over it more often. (Alicia, 331- 335)

Later she noted, “I am the Post-it queen, I put them everywhere...I write notes a lot. I have things posted all over my computer. I HAVE TO in order to remind myself” (Alicia, 338-342).

Alicia is a psychology major who graduated with a general Bachelors of Arts degree. She graduated from an academic high school in a city located forty-five minutes from the university. After graduation, her higher education journey began at a university in Mississippi, United States, where she attended a program for two years. At that time, she played varsity volleyball which she described as her passion. Alicia then went to a community college for a while, later took off three years from school and recently decided to transfer her credits to the university to complete a three-year general arts program.

Alicia was diagnosed with a learning disability when she was in grade 11 as she noted “I was actually the first person in our school board that was in advanced standing to be diagnosed with a learning disability... so my parents had to fight for me, for them to give me accommodations” (Alicia, 23-25). Alicia registered with the disability office at the university in Mississippi, and she did receive accommodations. However, she explained “I was just like a number...I was at a small school of 3,000 [students], so I shouldn't have been just a number” (Alicia, 95-97). At the college, she felt that:

They were surprised that I had a learning disability...I don't know if at a community college people that have learning disabilities like, there is more severe than [those who attend] university...I don't know, but I found ... they weren't worried about me so... I wrote [my exams] in the class and it was fine with them...it was almost like mine [learning disability] wasn't as noticeable or severe enough that they were concerned. (Alicia, 108-114)

Alicia struggled to accept her learning disability as she noted “I wasn't supposed to have a learning disability” (Alicia, 144-145). However, with help from the disability office she

learned to understand it and accept herself for who she is as she stated “they finally took the time to explain to me what was wrong with me...I think I became more accepting and open about it” (Alicia, 200-203).

Alicia has a clear vision about her future and stated that her ambition was to become a teacher. She knows what she wants in terms of vocation, and she has a strong commitment to do whatever it takes to attain her goals. Alicia applied for teachers’ college. However, because she is graduating with a general three-year Bachelor’s degree, she knows that she might not be admitted into the program this year. Her determination to become a teacher is so great that she is prepared to return to university to complete her Honors degree so she can re-apply to teacher’s college the following year. “I am going to be a teacher” (Alicia, 431-432).

Samantha

Samantha is a 23-year-old woman who graduated with a general Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in history. She is highly interested in advocacy and social justice. She plans on furthering her education in the area of social work after obtaining some practical experience at a community college.

Samantha comes from a family of academics, noting that of “all my aunts and uncles including my dad and my mother, only one of them has not attended university. There are many doctors, lawyers, business man, a lot of people have at least...a Master’s [degree]” (Samantha, 77-79). Samantha’s father was a very influential person in her academic career. She describes her father as “... a professor, and he knew me better than the people at school because I moved around a lot in high school” (Samantha, 64-66), and

that he “taught for almost 40 years, he knows the system well enough to advise me [in] what I should do or who should I go see” (Samantha, 121-122).

Samantha was first identified with a learning disability in grade one. “The school that I was going to noticed that I had a problem with my Rs and how I pronounced them...in grade three I was put into a special education class for English” (Samantha, 5-8). Samantha felt that having the support from the special education teacher was a very positive experience for her. However, in her later academic grades, she realized that being pulled out from the regular class and placed in a special education room was detrimental to her socially:

From about grade five to grade eight. Those were the worst years of my life! I would come home every day and cry because of the names and the teasing and I mean, being put in a special education class, unless it is to learn English, is the kiss of death in grade school or in high school, because people avoid you like a plague. If you are put into a special education class and I was put in when people were forming friendships...from about grade one to grade three. I wouldn't say that I was popular, but I would hang out with the so called, or who will become the popular kids and then when I was put into the special education class and people were making their friendships and people were fighting for a position it became the kiss of death. (Samantha, 496-504)

These negative experiences affected Samantha's self-concept. “By the time I reached high school, my self-confidence had become so low that I didn't know how to act around people...I didn't trust people” (Samantha, 515-516). Samantha found herself while in high school by getting involved in sports. “I joined the rugby team...I was able to get a

lot of my aggression out that way” (Samantha, 518-519) and “I started a lot of my self-advocacy work and it was healing, because by talking about my experience I was able to give them a voice” (Samantha, 522-524).

At university, Samantha contacted the disability office upon her arrival and submitted the appropriate documentation to receive disability-related services. Samantha’s university experience was filled with pleasant and unpleasant experiences. She was discriminated against by peers who called names such as Forest Gump. She also encountered faculty members who were very accommodating of her needs and ones who made her learning experience very difficult. Samantha believes that mentoring can help students with learning disabilities to adapt to the university life as she concluded:

If you have first-year students to interact with fourth year students or third-year students who were somewhat like me, who came to an understanding and at peace with it [learning disability] then I think it might be beneficial to have a mentorship program. (Samantha, 410-413).

Ashley

Ashley is a very well spoken 25-year-old woman who graduated with an Honors Bachelor of Arts degree in drama education. She described her motivation to attend university: “I am very much the kind of person who can do something innovative, or be a teacher, or a researcher or a leader of an organization...and that is really hard if you don’t have a post-secondary education” (Ashley, 109-111). Ashley is originally from a mostly White town. In a place with 21,500 people, only six people were people of color. Ashley was delighted to move to a city where diversity was valued in society.

Ashley did not receive identification of a learning disability in grade school. Like many children and youth in her position, she was told to try harder as she stated, “I wasn’t trying hard enough, or I am putting it off” (Ashley, 86-87). Ashley’s parents were not very understanding of her needs as she noted “my parents are not very knowledgeable of learning disabilities and about learning, they don’t know what it is” (Ashley, 87-88). Without parental or professional support, Ashley was not identified as having a learning disability until her second year of university.

She was referred to the university disability office through contact with a student whom she had met during a train ride home. “I met her on the train and she was talking about exams, and I was telling her how I had these problems and I didn’t know what to do about it, and she said ‘*hey that sounds like what I have!*’” (Ashley, 67-69). That was when Ashley discovered the disability office and was referred for a psycho-educational assessment which later confirmed the presence of a learning disability.

Ashley chose to attend her current university because of the program of study, and she expressed great affection for this institution in stating “I love my program. Within my department I found teachers who practiced what they preached” (Ashley, 127). Unfortunately, not all faculty members in Ashley’s path were accommodating to her needs. “Some professors are not thrilled about having to accommodate students with learning disabilities. I have a list longer than my arm” (Ashley, 155-156).

Ashley stated that she was “always a very studious student in high school” (Ashley, 199) and that she received a very sound piece of advice from a high school peer who had graduated before her that involved finding a balance while at university between “your academic and your social life” (Ashley, 203). Ashley came to university “with the

attitude, I wanted to learn” (Ashley, 211). She perceives that these factors helped her to focus on her studies and contributed to her success.

Lorene

Lorene is a 30-year-old woman who has an Honors degree in Fine Arts and just completed the teacher’s college professional program. She attended a rural high school and has been at university for seven years. She received government assistance, through loans, to pay for her education:

It is pretty frightening for someone with a disability to have...I am 30 and I just graduated, everyone else...normal [students] graduated when they were like 24 or 25. So they have those extra five years of income to pay their loans. (Lorene, 1068-1070)

During her first few years at university, Lorene worried about her ability to complete her higher education degree and to have a successful career for herself. She feared failure, but this same fear kept her motivated to succeed:

I find that [it is] good too that we are finally graduating and [that] we are not flunking out. Great! I am going to be a triple disappointment to my family, myself, and society because I have an LD and I flunk out of school, which is not the case now, but at that point that's what I thought. I was like, no. I have to succeed! I have to do better! I have to succeed...I finally got what I wanted, I've made it through teacher's college, I am where I wanted to be. It took me ten years, [sight of relief] and a lot of money, but I am here, so it's a new chapter. (Lorene, 646-652)

Lorene was first identified with a learning disability when she was at university, during her undergraduate program, at the age of 24. Lorene's experience at university was filled with disappointments. She was relieved to discover that she had a learning disability since all her life teachers called her lazy as she stated "they said '*you have a learning disability,*' and I was like '*really! That is a load off of my shoulders because I have been told that I was lazy all my life*'" (Lorene, 22-24). However, being identified did not solve Lorene's problems. The university environment was not an enjoyable place for her. She felt discriminated against by faculty and peers which made it difficult for her to accept her disability:

It's such a strain to be in the university setting and being kicked out all the time verbally and emotionally, it just drains you! You think *okay, I suck!* So you don't want to accept that part of yourself because it is so painful, because you are living with it every day, it affects every part of your life. (Lorene, 667-670)

Lorene hated school, but she loved learning and now she is excited about making a difference in the lives of children with disabilities as she stated, "I want to be the best role model that I can be for my students" (Lorene, 657). Further, Lorene explained that what had motivated her to continue her studies was her desire to become a teacher. "I wanted to go to university because I wanted to be a teacher. I didn't want people like me going through what I did" (Lorene, 140-141). Lorene had two dreams: one was to become a teacher, and the other was to meet her future husband at university. She has accomplished both. She is engaged to be married to a man she met at university.

Rachel

Rachel is a young woman, 23 years of age, who comes from a close-knit family in a small town of 3,000 people in northern Ontario. Rachel is graduating with a Bachelor's degree in Human Kinetics. Rachel's high school was small and not sophisticated in terms of diagnosing learning disabilities. She explained "I thought maybe there might be something wrong, but nothing that I needed to come and get assistance for. That's what I thought. It's manageable, like everyone has something that they are not good at, right?" (Rachael, 58-60).

Rachel's learning disability was not identified until the end of her first year at the university, even though her parents were dedicated to her success. In fact, at one point during her high school, her father would come to the school in the morning and sit in the back of the room to observe her within the classroom situation. "He sat in the back of the class because he thought...he didn't understand why. I mean, I wasn't a bad kid and I wasn't talking that much in class" (Rachel, 135-136). Her father even thought that perhaps it was the fault of the teacher in her mathematics class "He wanted to see...maybe the teacher's style was outdated. He was an older teacher. [My father] didn't know. He just wanted to figure out why I couldn't grasp the math concept" (Rachel, 145-147).

When Rachel was finally diagnosed with a learning disability, her mother "was really upset and she cried about it, and she said that she could not believe that we let it go on for this long" (Rachel, 119-120). Interestingly, Rachel's story seems typical of many students with learning disabilities who have caring families with high expectations for their children. In fact, when her mother finally found out about Rachel's learning

disability, aside from being upset, she was “so happy that you’ve made it to the university without ever having any help along the way” (Rachel, 121). Rachel discovered during her learning disability assessment that she was able to pursue higher education because she learned to adapt to her learning disability:

I think I compensated in other ways...if I had to do math questions or things that I was weaker at, I was always so much more vocal and so the teachers didn’t think that it was an issue...I compensated with my strengths, trying to make-up for my weaknesses. (Rachel, 122-125)

During her first semester at university Rachel could tell that her friends did not work as hard as she did and got better results as she noted, “my marks were so much lower than theirs [friends] ...teachers would look at me like you are not trying hard enough...but I thought that I was trying hard” (Rachel, 217-220).

Rachel did not want to disappoint her parents or be shown up by her friends, and this pride tended to get in the way of seeking help. With regard to interacting with faculty at the university:

I was trying hard so I didn’t want to go and have them [faculty] say that I wasn’t trying or I was embarrassed if a TA [teaching assistant] or a GA [graduate assistant] was there. They are closer to our age...they are going to think that I am stupid. (Rachel, 220-222)

Her assumption was that her university teachers would classify her as a slacker student:

Because they don’t study enough and they want extensions. I think that students go [to talk to their professors] because they procrastinate and they wait to talk to the teacher about things, and I felt like if I went to talk to them...that I couldn’t

get it done in time, like on a test or something, that they would think that I am a procrastinator or that I don't know the answer...I felt they would look at me that way because a lot of students try to cheat the system to get extra time. (Rachel, 249-253)

Unfortunately, this lack of diagnosis caused Rachel psychological hardship:

I would feel so sick before I had to write a test, maybe because I was doing poorly first year that upset me every time a test was coming. I would have test anxiety, like I felt like I was going to do really bad and I would be anxious. I felt like I couldn't perform. (Rachel, 175-178)

The result is typical of students with learning disabilities, "I have really low self-esteem when it comes to school...I really get nervous" (Rachel, 97).

Similar to other participants in this study, one of the primary ways that students were led to seek diagnosis and eventual accommodation services was not through faculty intervention but rather peer identification:

My roommate...was also experiencing similar feelings, like, I don't know, if is the feeling of being overwhelmed about being at university and getting lower grades, that she felt something was wrong, but she also got tested and I think that kind of what pushed me to look into it a little bit more... So, if it wasn't for her, I wouldn't come over just because I really didn't know that there was such program such as this. (Rachel, 72-77)

Patricia

Patricia is a 25-year-old woman who immigrated to Canada when she was nine years old. Her first language is Gujarati and she is of East Indian decent. Patricia

explained that her parents were very protective of her. “My parents weren't too keen about me leaving the house...they were like stay home! Go to [community] college, you don't need to go” (Patricia, 94-95). Due to Patricia’s culture and beliefs, she would have stayed home if it wasn’t for a very close friend of the family who she compassionately calls uncle. “My uncle was ... fighting my battles, he was fighting with my parents, *she needs to get away from this situation, she needs to do it on her own*” (Patricia, 97-99). Patricia’s uncle encouraged her to pursue higher education to have a better future. She noted that in her culture “either you become a doctor or you become nothing” (Patricia, 135), Patricia didn’t have the grades to become a doctor. Therefore, she was advised to go into other fields such as accounting or computer sciences.

Patricia learned about her learning disability during her first year at university when she was first diagnosed. At that point she really struggled with anxiety as she explained, “this whole, learning disability and anxiety is all new to me, to my family, and to my culture. I was doing coding [computer programming] and stuff, I didn’t know about disabilities...I knew numbers...so it was really hard” (Patricia, 208-210). Patricia was able to switch majors, learn new strategies to cope with her disabilities, and as a result, she became successful at university and was able to build a future for herself. She graduated with a general Bachelor’s degree in psychology.

Making Sense of their Experiences

Participants in this study were all women with a variety of personal characteristics and experiences in higher education. It is essential to mention that this study intended to focus on the success of students with learning disabilities in post-secondary education;

however, participants also discussed the challenges they encountered to contextualize what success meant to them and the process they went through to achieve success. To understand how students with learning disabilities make sense of their experiences at a university in Ontario, this chapter is divided in two main sections: (a) challenges faced by post-secondary students with learning disabilities and (b) factors to which students with learning disabilities attributed their academic success. However, challenges and successes are not considered separate entities; their interaction allowed participants to learn from the obstacles they faced and achieve success.

Challenges Faced by Post-secondary Students with Learning Disabilities

Despite the essential fact that each of the participants in this study has achieved a level of success in higher education, the academic journey for all of the students was sometimes unpleasant, difficult, overwhelming, and challenging. They had to learn a great deal about themselves and others to achieve their ultimate goal of graduation.

Level of Preparedness for Higher Education

The following categories emerged from the findings in relation to college preparation for students with learning disabilities: (a) importance of support unit, (b) academic preparedness, and (c) preparedness in dealing with a learning disability in higher education.

Importance of Support Unit

Many of the challenges faced by the students with learning disabilities who participated in this study are similar to the challenges faced by all new students in higher education. Their unique challenges are related to the frustrations they encountered in trying to assimilate information.

Participants in this study expressed difficulties maintaining contact with family members during their first year of post-secondary studies as they had to move away from home to further their education. Alicia attended a university in the United States which was 16 hours away from home. In describing her first-year experience she said, “I couldn't come home to see my parents...I didn't see my family for four months, so it was difficult in that extent...adapting to the distance was very difficult” (Alicia, 77-79). Rachel also discussed her lack of preparedness in living away from home in noting, “I don't think I was prepared at all, it was my first year away from home...” (Rachel, 47). Patricia explained that her parents did not want her to move out of their home. They would have preferred that she not attend a post-secondary institution rather than allowing her to leave. As Patricia stated:

Just stay home and do whatever you want, but don't go away. And my uncle was ... fighting my battles, he was fighting with my parents, [he explained] she needs to get away from this situation she needs to do it on her own.... (Patricia, 97-99)

Not having support and adapting to a new setting contributed to the students' lack of preparation for university life as Ashley stated:

Because I am away from home, my parents are not here, I didn't have family here, none of my friends from high school came here, so I was very much here on my own. I had no one else to take care of me or to help me, no one to cry to. I had no one to have my back. I didn't have any ins or hook-ups anywhere... (Ashley, 428-431)

In this observation, Ashley noted her lack of support and the possibility of isolation in acculturating to higher education.

To further complicate matters, the students who were living independently had to adapt to a new living environment and self-regulation. Rachel shared that when she lived in residence during her first year, her classes were scheduled for early morning while her roommates and the people on her floor had classes only in the afternoon. As a result, she stated, “I didn’t feel like I got a lot of sleep” (Rachel, 50). Samantha acknowledged the detrimental effects of newly-found freedom in observing that students who move away from home to study as she noted “...also living alone or living with other young people and they start to do crazy things” (Samantha, 95-96). Alicia addressed social pressures faced by traditional first-year students in noting that, “When I was a traditional university-age [student], it was different. There were the social hurdles that you want to be social all the time, and you don’t focus on your school work ...” (Alicia 136-137). Students were aware of the social pressures that can emerge while at university as Patricia described: “I was told there will be a lot of parties going on and you will be influenced by it” (Patricia, 183-184). Ashley was told that people need to find a balance between partying and studying.

Lorene did not move away from home during her first-year university experience. However, while attending teacher’s college she found herself two hours and 30 minutes away from her home city. Lorene encountered difficulties with her roommate, and to resolve the situation she went home for part of the week. As she noted, “I was living in two different places because my roommate situation was a little awkward, so I would leave and go home, like every Thursday and come back [to campus] Monday or Sunday” (Lorene, 852-854). Alicia also explained that she went home on the weekends. She lived with her parents in a city located 45 minutes from the university, and she stated “I go

home on the weekends and I socialize with my friends that are my age. So it is different!” (Alicia, 410-411).

Students in this study identified the absence of parental and peer support as a challenge to their university experience as they had moved away from their established support unit to pursue post-secondary education. As well, many participants noted having to make trade-offs between social life and academic work.

Academic Preparedness

Students in this study indicated that they did not feel that their high school prepared them academically to undertake the demands imposed by post-secondary education. Rachel reported that her high school did not offer a strong academic background or a variety of OAC level courses to assist her in her first-year university experience. She noted:

Because my high school was smaller, I only had a few options for OAC classes...even the classes that I was taking here [university level] my high school didn't really prepare me for... but I know that some schools ... have so much more opportunities. Students can take classes from different programs...it was hard. (Rachel, 51-55)

Samantha explained that she almost failed her first year of university and that she was not ready to deal with the academic demands imposed by higher education as she noted:

I did not understand the quality of the work that I would have to do and the study schedule that I would have to do. In high school, they literally keep after you until you hand in assignments, and you have homework everyday, where at university

you might have five assignments due. They give you the due date and then you have to do them, so it is a very different system. (Samantha, 90-94)

Lorene explained that she enrolled in general level courses while in high school and registered in OAC level courses after high school graduation. At that time she decided to take some time off from school and later decided to attend a community college as she explained:

I went to college because one of my cousins had done the same thing. He had a hard time in high school, he hated high school and I did too. He went to Shaw College and he could get a general arts and science diploma there. You can do one year or two [years], if you do one year and some of the university courses you can get into Central University and skip your first year, so ... if he did that I can do it [too]. I am going to go do that! So I did, he did the one year, I did the two years, because ... I didn't feel competent. (Lorene, 152-158)

Some of the participants felt that they were academically prepared for university; however, as they progressed in their academic careers, they began to question their preparedness. Ashley noted, “I was always a very studious student in high school. They would say that your grades usually drop [during first year], and mine didn't. I went to a B average in high school to a B average at university” (Ashley, 199-200). However, as she explained “half way through second year...all of a sudden...the level of difficulty increased and I found it very difficult in some areas to keep up” (Ashley, 216-218). Ashley’s poor academic performance was influenced directly by her lack of knowledge of her learning disability. Similar to Ashley’s second-year crisis, Alicia, who attended an academic high school and who went to university out of the country, found that taking

OAC level courses in high school had prepared her for first year of university studies in the United States. She explained that, “school was fine because, in reality, the first year ...in the States was pretty much like our OAC year, so I did well in my first year...” (Alicia, 79-81). However, after first year her grades dropped significantly as she noted “but in my second year is when it dipped down” (Alicia, 82). Patricia explained that she was prepared in terms of academics. However, she noted being unprepared in dealing with her disability in stating that: “I was very unprepared because I was working really hard, I was doing all the things...I was told to do...but at university my anxiety got really bad” (Patricia, 182-185). Further, she stated that she was not prepared “to work with [with her] disability” (Patricia, 197).

Preparedness to Deal with a Learning Disability in Higher Education

One of the fundamental differences among the participants that affected their preparedness to deal with a learning disability in higher education was their level of knowledge of their disability. For instance, Samantha was first identified with a learning disability in grade one, and since she had received special education services throughout her academic career, she was aware of the procedures and documentation required to ensure registration with the disability office on campus. As she explained:

I had another assessment done in high school, the year before I went away to university, because I took upon myself to tell my father that I wanted it done... I wanted to use the services at the university to help me, because my marks were not great in high school. (Samantha, 50-53)

Since Samantha knew the system well, due to her prior personal academic experiences, and she had the guidance and support from her university professor father, she registered

with the disability office before the beginning of her first semester to guarantee the provision of services.

Alicia, who was identified with a learning disability in grade 11, also registered with the disability office prior to the beginning of her first semester. However, due to her late identification, Alicia was not very familiar with the procedures of the university's disability services. Therefore, she relied on the guidance of her athletic director. Alicia was recruited to play sports, and she was advised by the athletic department to register at the disability office. As she explained, "I registered right away. I had to because my athletic director knew [I had a learning disability] so she made me go. We were actually there two weeks ahead of time, so I got to know the staff more than a regular student would..." (Alicia, 104-106).

Unlike Samantha and Alicia, Patricia was not diagnosed with a learning disability when she first came to university. She received help from a medical doctor who assisted students with disabilities in her high school resource room. She met with this person regularly during her free periods and lunch and received academic assistance from him. The aid she received from this office was not considered a service under special education provision because, at the time, Patricia did not have a diagnosed disability. The medical doctor advised Patricia to seek help from the disability office on campus. As she observed, "I knew that there was an office that offered this help [accommodations]. In high school they said that there was one [disability office] in every university" (Patricia, 257-258).

Students who came to university without a prior diagnosis faced a greater challenge than students who were familiar with services provided to individuals with

disabilities. They failed to seek services from the disability office since they were not aware that such services existed on campus and, in some instances, did not fully realize that they needed such services. Ashley described how she learned about the disability office during her second year university experience:

I didn't even know about the department, no one ever told me that [it existed]. I met a girl [registered with the disability office] on the train and she was talking about exams and I was telling her how I had these problems and I didn't know what to do about it. She said '*hey that sounds like what I have! Did you know about this place on campus...*' and I said '*what are you talking about?*' She said '*you have to talk to the [coordinator] ...*' that's why I came to the department. (Ashley, 65-72).

In the previous observation, Ashley noted the dissonance associated with facing academic challenges and lack of awareness of disability and academic supports available at a post-secondary institution.

Aside from the level of sophistication these various students had toward their learning disability, a major part of their initial higher education experience involved frustration over their academic performance at university. Academic problems started to emerge. Ashley observed:

It was actually half way through second year...all of a sudden ... the level of difficulty increased and I found it very difficult in some areas to keep up, because some of the stuff that [the professor] was giving me, challenged my disability. At that point I didn't know about it, so I was getting so frustrated! I couldn't understand why I couldn't do it. (Ashley, 216-220)

Patricia described her difficulties when she first arrived at university in stating, “I was working really hard, I was doing all the things I was told to do. I started to drop courses...” (Patricia, 182-185) and “started studying more, and more, and more to the point that I would never go out on the weekends and I was [still] dropping courses” (Patricia, 192-193). Patricia stated that she was not prepared “...to work with my disability...” (Patricia, 197).

Rachel believed that she would have been more prepared for university if she had been identified with a learning disability in high school. She explained:

I would have been more prepared. I failed a math class first year. I had a 48 in the class. It made me so upset because I tried so hard and to get a 48 and not have apparently the capacity to do math. It just frustrated me ... now I have a full-time job, I could have finished [the degree] sooner...if it didn't hold me back. (Rachel, 106-109)

Ashley explained her academic difficulties when she was not aware that she had a learning disability:

I had problems with some of the readings. We had so much reading! It would take me an entire day to read a psychology chapter ... an article that took everyone else five minutes took me five hours, because it took me so much more time to do everything it meant that I didn't have time to go out, partying anymore, I had no time to have a social life ... 100% of my time was devoted for school. [Before] I could go to bed at 10 or 12 and now I had to go to bed at 3 or 4 am. The amount of time that I had to devote to everything was just so much...There are some students, [who] I know, they procrastinate. I've never been a procrastinator, but

I've always been in the same position as a procrastinator, because I can't do anything ahead of time ...day to day basis type things ... I end it up doing everything the night before for everything. (Ashley, 224-233)

In her observation, Ashley noted the amount of time it takes for students with learning disabilities to accomplish a task. This is further confounded if they have had a late identification of having a disability or have not been accommodated by the institution.

Lorene had a similar experience during her first year at university: "...I didn't really know what I was doing" (Lorene, 445). Further, she explained:

...I was in my first year university, I had five courses [and] realized I can't do this, I am not reaching my potential, I know that I am smarter than this, but I am not getting the grades that I should be getting so I went to the [disability office]. (Lorene, 18-20)

Lorene had a plan of action, and she knew what she needed to do to be prepared for university: "I would have to get my books earlier so I can start the reading, and this was before I was diagnosed, I knew I needed to do that because I was so slow at reading" (Lorene, 453-454). However, her plan fell apart as she noted:

No they didn't work out, I was being so overwhelmed ...with reading and having to write stuff that I dropped down to three courses...because I couldn't handle it...I thought I could manage this, I managed it, but not as well as I thought I would be able to.... (Lorene, 501-503)

Similarly, Samantha almost ended her university career at the end of her first year as she explained, "I essentially failed first year university and I was asked to withdraw and the only reason why I managed to stay in was [the fact] that I ...re-took two intersession

courses and I got an A- and a B and that brought my mark up” (Samantha, 84-86).

Further, Samantha described her difficulties in noting:

I was not emotionally ready. I did not understand the quality of the work that I would have to do and the study schedule that I would have to do. In high school they literally keep after you until you hand in assignments and you have homework everyday, where at university you might have five assignments due. They give you the due date and then you have to do them, so it is a very different system. (Samantha, 90-94)

Once again, Samantha noted issues of being able to self-regulate, in this instance in accommodating for not having instructors in higher education who check for missing work and communicate that matter to their students. She also noted the difference between high school and university in instructors’ expectations in the quality of work. Samantha’s experiences allowed her to construct a new understanding of what it is to be a university student and she learned that autonomy and independence are key factors for academic success.

Transition from High School to University

Participants shared the challenges they encountered during their transition from high school to university. One theme emerged from the participant’s responses; it concerned the adequacy of accommodations services.

Samantha was first diagnosed with a learning disability in grade one and she immediately registered with the disability office on campus to receive accommodations. She attended a private high school where she did not receive special education services.

Therefore, when she decided to attend university, she made sure that she had the proper documentation to receive accommodations:

I knew that in high school [it] was tough without the services and I knew that if I wanted to do well at university that I could not just rely on getting through and on barely finishing essays on time... (Samantha, 183-186)

Samantha noted that her diagnosis entitled her to the following accommodations at university: “all I need is a note-taker, extra time, and a computer for essay questions on exams” (Samantha, 198). Further, she noted that note-taking was a primary obstacle at university as she explained:

There are a lot of students in a lot of classes that are willing to be ... a note-taker, and sometimes professors will not even make an announcement for a note-taker.

For me note-taking was the biggest obstacle that I faced. (Samantha, 128-130)

Alicia explained that she only received one exam accommodation while in grade 11. “All they gave me was a quiet room and that was it” (Alicia, 22-23). Further, it does not seem that her high school was fully prepared to serve students with learning disabilities as she stated:

I was actually the first person in our school board that was in advanced standing to be diagnosed with a learning disability so they didn't, it didn't make sense to them so my parents had to fight for me for them to give me that accommodation. (Alicia, 23-26)

At university in the United States, Alicia was granted a note-taker and extra time to write exams. However, she noted:

I didn't use the accommodations, the only thing that I used was the carbon paper [note-taker]...I just felt well, why am I going there [disability office] when I can be in my class and it is quiet anyway, so I really didn't use it that much. (Alicia, 56-58)

Only during her third year in her current program did Alicia receive additional accommodations which included the use of assistive text-to-voice software, Kurzweil, and she was allowed to tape record lectures.

In high school, participants noted that accommodations were, to a large degree, decided for them and provided to them in a systematic fashion. Some participants observed initially struggled to achieve accommodations but most noted a caring climate in their secondary education where they felt that professionals wanted to accommodate their needs. Challenges in relation to accommodations at university were related to the quality of services received in several different manners. While Samantha felt that professors did not want to make an announcement for note-takers during lectures, Alicia expressed that at the university in the United States she felt unwelcome and unimportant when accessing services from disability services. She noted, "I was just like a number and we were at a very small school...so I shouldn't have been just a number" (Alicia, 95-97). This perception influenced her decision not to exercise her right to accommodations as she chose to write exams in the regular class without receiving additional time.

Students who went undiagnosed from kindergarten to grade 13 did not receive "official" accommodations in the school system. However, these students did, in fact, receive some form of assistance along the way to complete their high school requirements and to apply to university. The assistance provided included exam

accommodations. These took the form of extra time for exams, the ability to write in a quiet area, and the use of a computer for tests and exams.

Ashley shared that she received accommodations during her last year of high school. As she stated:

...I asked my history teacher if it would be okay to work in the counseling centre, to...have [a] room to myself to take my test, and she told me that originally they were not going to let me do this, but there was a huge difference on my test just by taking it outside the classroom, by myself. (Ashley, 58-61)

Patricia received help from the special education office in her high school, and she also received extra time as an accommodation. However, because she did not have a diagnosed disability she believed that:

...they figured that extra time did improve my grades, we did not have ESL [English as a Second Language] so...maybe they gave me extra time because of the language issue, that's what I am assuming. Because when they gave me extra time, that's when my marks started to improve, but that was at the same time that I dropped everything and all I did was study.... (Patricia, 34-38)

Rachel also received exam accommodations in high school due to her difficulty with English. She explained “I didn’t know the proper punctuation and things like that...I got to use a computer for one of my English tests” (Rachel, 161-162). Further, Rachel explained the reason why she believes she was provided with this accommodation:

Maybe they started to think that ...there might be something, but it was never a formal [assessment], they never sat down with me and my parents to talk about what some of the issues were...[no explanation of] why I could use a

computer...maybe because I could go for math in the resource [room] that they allowed to accommodate me for another subject too, I am not sure. (Rachel, 163-170)

In this observation Rachel puts forth the lack of communication between high school personnel and her family. The school provided accommodations to the student without prior discussion with her parents about the difficulties she was encountering in mathematics and English. It is interesting to note that Rachel's father worked for the school board, and he was very involved in her education. She described an occasion in which he came to her math classes to observe her and the dynamics of the class in an attempt to assist her with her math difficulties. As Rachel described:

I would go early to meet with the teacher before school started, on my spare I went to the resource, and tried to have them help me before basketball practice...I would go in and try to get math help three times a day, and it actually got to a point where my dad would sit in the class with me in the morning because they [parents] thought that I was talking too much, they didn't know what it was, why I couldn't pick up on the math, they didn't know what it was. (Rachel, 127-132).

Rachel received assistance from teachers outside the classroom. Similarly, Patricia described her experience in stating that:

I started studying a lot more. I used all my free time to study, including spares. That was for all my subjects... I used to go to the resource room, to the teachers...during my lunch, spare, if I had essays or something to do, I always used to do all my assignments a week ahead, I mean all I used to do was study, and then that's how I ended up coming to university. (Patricia, 16-23)

Students who did not have a diagnosed learning disability during high school received help from teachers after and before regular classes. They also received exam accommodations. However, they were unable to explain why these accommodations were provided since there was no communication between the school board and parents. Upon their arrival at university, students who did not have an official diagnosis of a learning disability did not seek support from the disability office on campus since they were not aware of their disabilities. Patricia was the only participant who did not have a learning disability diagnosis but who contacted the disability office right away as she noted:

That doctor [from high school] wrote a letter saying *she needs extra time*. I got the letter, brought it to them [disability office] and they were like *we can't just give you extra time, you have to be diagnosed*, so that's what happened. (Patricia, 50-52)

In this instance, Patricia notes her confusion in trying to understand the process and protocols in receiving accommodations from service providers on post-secondary campus. The challenge lies in the lack of continuity between services provided at the high school level and higher education.

Primary Obstacles in Higher Education

Participants identified what they perceived to be the primary obstacles they faced during their post-secondary experience. Two emergent themes from the findings have been identified: (a) stigma consciousness, and (b) negative faculty interaction.

Stigma Consciousness

Stigma Consciousness was a term coined by Pinel (1999) who stated that targets of stigmatization “differ in the extent to which they expect to be stereotyped by others”

(p. 114). Participants in this study shared their sagas describing how they developed a sense of disability awareness and how others, such as faculty and peers, perceived them due to their “invisible” disabilities. Therefore, in this section the challenges can be viewed in terms of two categories: (a) disability awareness, and (b) stigmatization by faculty, peers, and parents.

Disability Awareness. Students were identified with a disability at different times during their academic careers. However, they all discussed their struggles to understand and accept their disabilities. This phenomenon is described as disability awareness.

Alicia described her feelings when she discovered that she had a learning disability: “when I first got diagnosed ...it wasn’t right, I wasn’t supposed to have a learning disability” (Alicia, 144-145). At university, she continued to struggle with her identity as someone with a learning disability as she noted “I didn’t understand what a person with a learning disability look like...before I thought I don’t want to be a person with a learning disability, but now I don’t know” (Alicia, 164-166). When asked if she sees herself as an individual with a learning disability, Alicia explained:

I didn’t until I came here [university]. I knew I had one ...but I didn’t look like a person who I thought was supposed to have one. If that makes any sense! But now I see that there are other people that look like me, they are social like me, and they do okay in school...I think going to the high school I went to, an academic high school, was a snotty high school ...and then you look at other students when you volunteer at other schools and those children had special needs, but they weren’t in my mind. I didn’t think they were learning disabled, they were more special ed and that is what I perceived as a learning disability and I think that a lot of people

do. They don't understand how someone normal, who does well in school, could have some sort of learning disability, it just doesn't go hand in hand, so I think I have learned a lot about that now. (Alicia, 168-177)

Alicia's reflection indicated her original perception of someone with a learning disability as having low cognitive and intellectual functioning, which contributed to her denial of her disability. However, her experiences led her to change her original perception and to begin to accept that she could in fact have a learning disability. Alicia explained that while she was at university she learned more about herself and about her disability:

I think that now I am more proud to tell people ... I think ... [in the disability office] they finally took the time to explain to me what was wrong with me...before, I had people [at the high school] fighting and saying '*no you can't have that because, you are here* [in an academic high school].' But now they [individuals in the disability office] are saying '*you have this and you are doing good.*' I think I became more accepting and open about it. (Alicia 199-203)

Having individuals who explained to Alicia what a learning disability is has helped her to understand herself and accept her learning disability. Further, she noted that taking courses in the area of psychology was also very enlightening.

Samantha noted that at university she "was still struggling with...accepting my disability" (Samantha, 133-134). Further, she explained "I am comfortable [with my disability] because I have to be comfortable with it. It is a part of me that I cannot get rid of it" (Samantha, 154-155). On several occasions, Samantha stated that she is at peace with her disability, as she explained:

All I can say is that I wouldn't be the person that I am today without it. I don't think I would be interested in self-advocacy work or social justice or any of that if I did not have a learning disability and if I had not gone through some of the experiences that I have gone through, because living in a periphery society and specially family...I am the only one in my immediate family that has a disability, ... in fact, both of my sisters have gotten scholarships to go to university and one of them is at an Ivy League school and the other is ...[on] scholarship to do her Ph.D. [Having a disability] teaches you what is important in life and what is worth fighting for and I think that even though I shed many tears and I was frustrated a lot I would not change [anything] of what I went through because it has made me the person who I am today and it has given me the courage to survive and to learn how to excel, and do well, and beat the odds. (Samantha, 416-427)

Patricia observed that she was not aware of her disabilities. It was novel to her; however, she was able to overcome her anxiety and understand more about her learning disability as she noted:

I overcame my anxiety, and I see more of my [learning] disability, before I didn't. I did not know what it was. I did not know how it affected me until I went to counseling...I was on all sorts of medication...and then when I knew I had to drop out of school, I was like crying constantly, I could not stop crying...I felt helpless I felt out of control, like my life is out of my control. That was really scary.... (Patricia, 216-223)

Patricia noted that "I learned strategies and I built on them myself, like I read psychology books, I took courses to do with disabilities and I take [these] things from my classes and

I incorporate [them] into what I am doing...” (Patricia, 407-409). Patricia learned about her strengths and limitations and decided to learn new strategies and build on them to learn how to cope with her anxiety and learning disability.

Rachel sees her late identification of a disability as a challenge because not knowing that she had a learning disability affected how she perceived herself as a student. She noted:

I wouldn't say there is a blame on anybody, but I don't understand how my teachers in high school couldn't have thought that maybe something was wrong... our high school was small... it surprised me that I had to wait this long. I think that, because it took so long to be identified that I did a lot poorer in school. I have really low self-esteem when it comes to school... I get really nervous...I have test anxiety, because I am afraid that I am going to perform badly like I have in the past. I think that my biggest obstacle would be... not knowing that there was something wrong. (Rachel, 93-100)

When Lorene was identified with a learning disability she felt relieved as she stated, “[When] they said ‘*you have a learning disability...*I was like *really! That is a load of my shoulders*’ because I have been told that I was lazy all my life...” (Lorene, 22-24). Lorene had suffered a great deal through her academic endeavors as she described:

These kicks in the head, I call them kicks in the head because they really are. If you could physically translate they would be like [a] shot in the head or hurt physically, and there are just so many punches you can take before you start bleeding... It is hard to say *just brush it off*, but if you do it as much as you can, it is still weak in there, because it is constant and it is always happening. It's pretty

tough... You know humiliation is not a good thing, and I didn't really know how to deal with it, and I believed that I was lesser so I never did anything about it.

(Lorene, 720-727).

As a result of her life experiences, Lorene is more accepting of the fact that she has a disability and she developed her own way of explaining it to people:

I always thought that I was a faker, you know like a good actor or something. I never even knew, I have problems owning that I am intelligent because I have been told all my life, you are lazy...and then with getting labeled, well labeled and yet mislabeled because I wasn't really told what I had ... I know labeling is kind of bad in some instances, but I wouldn't mind having something that I can tell people. I always say that I have a rare type of dyslexia. It is what I tell people because I came up with my own theory about it and they don't know any different. Most people, they go, if I [say I] have a LD [learning disability] that means that you are mentally retarded. (Lorene, 250-257)

Lorene's story shows how she learned to perceive herself through social influences.

Teachers, for example, called her lazy through out her academic life. As she explained,

"I've always validated myself through others" (Lorene, 662). Recently she realized that

she needs to self-validate as she noted, "now it's up to me" (Lorene, 662). However,

Lorene accepted that "I don't know why I haven't fully accepted [my disability] yet, but I

will get over it. I am working on it. I want to be the best role model that I can be for my

students and I want it, that's my motivation" (Lorene, 656-658).

Like Lorene, Samantha also expressed difficulty in explaining her learning disability as she stated:

My disability, I cannot even explain it to myself ... if you have depression or you have schizophrenia there is one name... I have a bunch of things that are not, that need explaining, like fine motor problems. I can't do geometry very well, reading maps is difficult, spatial perception, I need lots of repetition. My long term memory is fantastic, but I need lots of repetition, so there is really not one specific name. (Samantha, 368-373)

Ashley, on the other hand, decided to use a classroom opportunity to teach her peers about her learning disability. She has internalized what it is, and she understands it so well that she created a workshop in which her classmates were required to go through a normal class routine, but with a disability. She shared her friends' reaction stating that:

Very quickly they learned that if they couldn't understand the instructions they would have to watch somebody else, and when we were done, one of the girls, ripped the head phone off because she couldn't take listening to the noise. They had to play the game, and listen to the sound the whole way through, just like I would everyday. And she couldn't listen to it. She got really upset because she couldn't understand it... You have to learn to adapt, find a way to deal with it. (Ashley, 345-356)

Further, Ashley explained that her friends understand her learning disability:

They will turn off the radio, they will make sure that we are in a room where I can't hear the refrigerator or they will turn off the TV...if we are outside they will take me away from other people. They take me somewhere where there is very minimal amount of noise. I was actually told a lot of times, '*don't tell anyone that you have a learning disability, there is the stigma, people won't understand it*' and

in some ways that has, you know, telling people has had a backlash, but the other half of the time people were really glad that I tell them. And they don't make fun of me, they don't have problems with me, they don't think I am stupid or fragile or incompetent. They are actually very interested in understanding and they are really glad that I tell them. (Ashley, 371-379)

Students in this study have struggled with the understanding of their learning disabilities and their ability to accept it as a part of themselves. Further, they strived to be understood and accepted by others, such as peers.

Stigmatization by Faculty, Peers, and Parents. Participants in this study felt that stigmatization was an obstacle for them during their post-secondary experiences.

Samantha spoke about stigma and learning disabilities:

To an average person walking down the street, unless they hear me with my slight speech impairment, I don't look like someone who has a disability. People still look at disability [as needing a] wheel chair, hearing impaired, anything that visibly you can see that they need help [with] ... a lot of people don't believe that there are learning disabilities out there ... I have quite a number of friends who have depression or other ... psychiatric disabilities, and those are even more stigmatized... a couple of years ago there was this doctor in [town] who got stabbed by his son who happened to be schizophrenic, and people are always showing the bad side of disabilities. They don't understand that everything can be managed; if society would just wake up and pay attention...I think society is getting better, but I don't think society is there yet.... (Samantha, 271-282)

Alicia further explained the challenges of invisible disabilities:

...[it] does make it very, very hard on people to see a person that looks normal, but yet you have some sort of a disability...I think it is very hard for a lot of people. I think people do not understand when you explain it to them. (Alicia, 293-295)

She had contact with a faculty member who asked her to explain her learning disability, her professor told her “*I just don’t see it in you...I have difficulty when it is not a visual. If you can’t see something wrong with the person, I really have a hard time understanding it*” (Alicia, 286-289). Lorene described a negative experience she had with a faculty member. As she noted:

She insulted me and embarrassed me in her class all the time, she would say stuff like ‘*are you okay, do you need more time?*’ In front of everybody, during quizzes, and ‘*are you okay? Is everything going okay? Are you sure you are doing all right?*’ I would be like yeah ‘*I am fine!*’ (Lorene, 394-397)

Rachel believed that if she had approached professors for help that they would have reacted as if there was nothing wrong with her and, therefore, not believed that she required accommodations. Rachel explained:

[Faculty] have the mentality that if anyone took their test there is going to be things that they are lower at and things that they are better at...I think that just by talking to me, people are not going to think ‘*there is something wrong with her!*’ I think that they thought that I might be trying to ...work the system, like I am trying to get something that I really don't need, like I've made it this far why start now? (Rachel, 410-416)

Rachel had a professor who told her that she had some material available in the office for students working on a class project. So she decided to go to the professor during office hours and request to borrow the material. However, Rachel left the office with her feelings hurt and without the promised resources, as she noted:

I explained to her what I thought it was clear and what I wanted, and she said to me *‘maybe next time when you come to talk to me, think about what you want to say first because I don't understand you ...’* [it] put me back a little bit, and that had been on my write up after I had taken the test [learning disability assessment]. I might need a little more time to formulate answers or things like that... I was always a little bit insecure in her classes, and I didn't want to ever talk in class because she was kind of like *‘think of what you want to say because you sound stupid when you come in here.’* That's how I felt. (Rachel, 305-311)

In terms of stigmatization from peers, participants indicated that sometimes some of their friends did not perceive them as having a disability and therefore frequently accused them of taking advantage of the system to receive accommodations, an advantage on tests and exams, and getting equipment through the bursary for students with disabilities. Patricia illustrated this point by stating, “I think it was a problem for some of my friends when I was getting accommodations, they thought it was unfair...they thought that they would do much better in ...math courses if they had more time” (Patricia, 473-475). Rachel experienced a similar reaction from her friends as she noted, “a lot of our friends, they say, *‘everybody has something that they are not good at...I am going to take the test [assessment] too, [and] I am going to get something wrong too, I am going to have time and a half [on tests and exams]’*” (Rachel, 445-448).

Lorene and Samantha also had friends who did not believe that they had a disability. Samantha noted:

A lot of my friends don't believe I have a disability because I have an above average IQ. I speak very well when I am comfortable... You would not necessarily associate me with someone who has a disability and in fact sometimes they [friends] ask for proof because they are like, *'that's impossible! You can't have a disability!'* (Samantha, 357-359)

Lorene's friends also did not understand how she could have a learning disability since she looks "normal" as she stated:

When I say...I have a learning disability then they think that I am a big fat liar, *'you don't look like you are disabled'* and I go *'what does that mean?'* They say, *'you look normal'* and am like *'really! I look normal!'* Then they are like, *'from talking to you, you don't seem stupid'* and I say, *'actually it has nothing to do with that, if you ask me a math question and then I wouldn't be able to answer it, then you would think I am stupid.'* (Lorene, 259-263)

Participants indicated that on some occasions peers used offensive language and made unpleasant remarks. Participants referred to these comments as "snickering."

Lorene described an event that happened during one of her classes:

Timmy on South Park... he is in a wheel chair, he has an intellectual disability, and all he can say is his name and they constantly make fun of him... and to my face in my gym class [a couple of my classmates] ... said I was Timmy. (Lorene, 405-408)

Samantha experienced the same type of disrespect from peers while volunteering at a booth during the orientation for first-year students, as she described:

It was really snickering, but in first year I got [called] ... *retard*, and *idiot* and other examples I also got [called] *Forest Gump*. That is a common name that I use to get as a child. I still got it in first year. (Samantha, 337-339)

Participants indicated that, on several occasions, peers would speak to them slowly, as if they are unable to understand, such as “Are-you-sure-you-can-handle-that?” (Lorene, 366) or “Are-you-listening-to-me- Ashley?” (Ashley, 396-397).

In relation to family, Alicia shared that her boyfriend’s mother did not understand the fact that she had a learning disability, as she noted:

She is like, ‘*you don’t seem like one of them* [someone with a disability]’ ... a lot of people think [of a] learning disability they don’t think [of] learning, they think more...a physical or mental disability than a learning problem, so I think it is a perception of a lot of people so it is kind of embarrassing. It is like they think that you drool ... [that you have] a physical or mental [problem]. I really, really think that. (Alicia, 149-156)

Ashley’s parents do not accept the fact the she has a learning disability as she noted:

My parents are not very knowledgeable about learning disabilities ... they don’t know what it is. I am still trying to convince my mother that learning disabilities are not [a] disease and that I can turn it off, and if I just try harder that it will get better because ... it is not going to. She hasn't figured that out yet! I am still working on this! (Ashley, 87-91)

Ashley elaborated further on her mother’s reaction to her learning disability:

My mom had a very difficult time believing that I have a learning disability. It wasn't until she held the documentation in her hand. Even when she read it, there were things that she would... [say] *'that is not true, you don't have problems with this, you don't have problems with that.'* I said, *'mom go look at my old high school report cards, you will find spelling problems, you will find reading problems.'* And even though she knows about it now, she still doesn't understand it. It doesn't mean that there is something wrong with me, or that I am sick, it is nothing that I can turn on and off, or something [on which] I can just try harder.

(Ashley, 389-395)

Participants in this study have suffered stigmatization from faculty, peers, and family which makes the motivation to learn a challenge given that these individuals represent the support system that contributes to the fabric of the educational experience.

Impact of Negative Faculty Interaction

Faculty members are expected to comply with legislation and accommodate students with disabilities in their classrooms. However, students who participated in this study faced many obstacles in their interaction with faculty during their post-secondary experiences.

Ashley noted that “some professors are not thrilled about having to accommodate students with learning disabilities” (Ashley, 155-156). Participants discussed classroom accommodations and exam accommodations. Samantha stated that some professors are not willing to make announcements for a note-taker, as requested by the disability office, as an accommodation for some students. She noted, “There are a lot of students in a lot of classes that are willing to be ... a note-taker... sometimes professors will not even make

an announcement for a note-taker” (Samantha, 128-130). Lorene explained that one of her professors was reluctant to provide appropriate exam accommodations as she noted:

I said, ‘here is my letter I am going to need accommodation for the final test,’ and he said, ‘it is just a quiz,’ and I said, ‘okay I understand that, but in order for me to show my full potential, I need extra time and it's probably going to be in Kurzweil,’ and he said, ‘but it's multiple choice.’ ‘I understand that, but this is the accommodation that I require.’ He was like, ‘well I find that very irritating, can't you just write in my room I'll give you extra time,’ and I said, ‘no I need to read it in the computer’ and he said, ‘well fine, it's going to be irritating but fine.’ I said, ‘thanks!’ (Lorene, 746-752)

Students indicated that some professors choose teaching methods that work for themselves and do not take into consideration that students have different learning styles. Ashley noted, “One professor I had, he taught completely orally. He didn’t use slides and his exams were multiple choice” (Ashley, 158-159). Samantha noted that students with learning disabilities benefit from the use of Power Point notes as she explained:

I sometimes wish that professors would do more Power Points [notes] and would actually have them on websites. I find that not a lot of professors use technology and put it on a website so that students can print them out and then write additional notes... I find that helps, because either they have Power Point, but you have to sit and copy [it] and I am missing big chunks of information because I am not quick enough, or they don’t do it at all [post Power Point notes]. I find that it is actually easier just to listen to them than to copy Power Point, but if they had

Power Point I wish that they would put it on a website so that students who were slower could benefit from that. (Samantha, 307-315)

Similarly, Alicia had a professor who, as she explained, “was not accommodating to his students period” (Alicia, 374). Further, she explained, “If you could not make his office hours, and I unfortunately had class during his office hours, he would not re-schedule the time. It wasn’t even myself, [someone] with a learning disability, it was just in general” (Alicia, 374-376). This kind of attitude makes is difficult for students. However; it is even more challenging for students with disabilities, since a great number of students rely on individual contact with faculty to grasp the content taught during lectures.

Due to the nature of Ashley’s disability, she has the right to an alternate format of exams (no multiple-choice questions) which professors are made aware of at the beginning of every semester. However, they wait until the last minute to let her know the specifics of her exams, as she described:

Everyone else in the class knew all semester that they were going to have a multiple choice final exam. They knew what chapters it was on. I only found out what my final was on the last Tuesday...that was the essay. I found out that I had to go out and find, not just use my lectures and the textbook like any other kid, I had to ... look for articles, look for websites and look for books... and of course I had another final last night as well so it wasn't like I actually I had all, complete seven days, part of that had to be directed towards my other finals too. But it was more than everyone else had to do. They only had to review the four chapters and then pick one of the four answers [on a multiple choice exam]. (Ashley, 263-268)

Participants also found that the attitude of professors was a barrier in their post-secondary experience. Ashley noted:

I would say that it is the attitude of professors, not all professors, but enough of my professors have had a bad attitude toward students and making accommodations ... sometimes I feel like banging my head on the wall or I get physically ill or get crying because I ... am so frustrated of how they choose to deal with it, rather than being open minded and accepting and realizing that I am their student too. Some of them are so concerned with being fair to all their other kids that they overcompensate by giving me maybe a harder exam because they want it to be fair. (Ashley, 253-258)

Rachel also discussed the issue of fairness as she noted, “some teachers...were very strict on how they interact with students ...some teachers don't want to help some students more than others” (Rachel, 405-406). Patricia also commented on the fact that faculty members would not understand her disability and stated “it’s not fair to other students” (Patricia, 330-331).

Rachel had a professor who always made the process difficult for her as she stated “she didn’t have a lot of faith in me... she always gave me a hard time about it, even signing letters, she always...took the extra time to just make sure I wasn’t being [sneaky]...maybe she just didn’t like me” (Rachel, 270-273). Lorene had a professor who did not want to meet with her privately to discuss her accommodation letter. This professor lacked information about confidentiality and created a social barrier for the student as she explained:

There was...ten more minutes of class left, there was a class of like 300 people or something, there was tons of people still getting their books, backpacks, and stuff so I met with her at the stage...and I said "I would like to meet with you in your office in about ten minutes" and she said "I don't have time for that," well [I said] *'I would like to talk to you privately then. No, no what is it about?'* I said, "well I have accommodations because I have a learning disability" and I had to say that while there were still people around. And she was like, "it is important that we just talk about it now in front of your peers because this new inclusion policy would be really good for them to know that there is someone in the class that has to have accommodations and who has a learning disability." (Lorene, 293-301)

Lorene described an instance when her professor embarrassed her in front of the class:

He said in front of everybody "...I don't care if you have a learning disability, if you can't use proper grammar on an exam and articulate your ideas; you are not going to get a good mark on my test." That's what he announced in front of the whole class, so I was like, I guess I did bad on the test, he couldn't say, "hey can you talk to me after class" or e-mail me and say "okay there are some issues that we need to talk about." No, he had to humiliate me. He didn't say my name, but ... that was enough and he was really angry when he said it. (Lorene, 696-702)

Participants shared that they felt intimidated by their professors, as Ashley described, "I am really intimidated and very hesitant about standing up for myself with teachers, because I've had such crazy experiences" (Ashley, 285-286). Rachel also described feeling intimidated during her first year experience in post-secondary education as she noted:

I think first year I was intimidated and if I did poorly on a test, or they said you could come and talk to the teacher about the test, I don't think I would really go unless my roommates were going to check their tests, than I would tag along too, but my marks were so much lower than theirs that I didn't want to go. I think that the teachers would ... look at me like '*you are not trying hard enough*' like, '*you got one of the lowest marks in the class*, like, *what are you doing?*' I really thought that I was trying hard, so I didn't want to go and have them say that I wasn't trying or I was embarrassed if a TA or a GA was there, they are closer to our age. They are going to think that I am stupid, I don't want them to know who I am and that I did so poorly on this test, so I kind of held back a little bit. (Rachel, 215-223)

Ashley concluded:

I don't think any of them [professors] hated learning disability kids... I don't think some of them truly understand what it is that they are being asked to do. I don't think that they understand that all they have to do is to try to be creative and even the playing field, that students with disabilities are not asking for special favors. All we are asking is to be able to start at the starting line like everybody else. We are not trying to get an easier test or an easier project. We work in a different way and we want to feel like we are doing it like everybody else. You know the other kids are not being disadvantaged because we are being accommodated. (Ashley, 312-318)

Faculty members were compliant with the duty to accommodate students with disabilities; however, they created social and emotional barriers that hindered the student's ability to perform in their classes.

Out-of-class Experiences

In terms of out-of-class experiences, some of the participants in this study indicated that they did participate in out-of-class experiences. However, most chose not to get involved in out-of-class activities. Further, out-of-class experiences were identified as a challenge for these students rather than a factor that contributed to their academic success.

Lorene explained that teacher's college was "a pretty intense program...I didn't really go to any clubs here" (Lorene, 852-854). Further, she explained:

In my undergrad, I joined a philosophy club and we meditated, stuff like that ... that was something I did. Oh!! I volunteered a bunch of stuff at Central University, but I didn't have time during this one [teacher's college at her current university]. I did a radio show on women's issues for the radio station at school. That was fun! I made it quirky, to keep it interesting! ... I also volunteered with students with learning disabilities, partially to come in to university and also just to help them because I have always wanted to do it. I thought, you know, if I got through school then I can help them somehow. I found that very rewarding. I also tutored a kid with cerebral palsy. (Lorene, 858-865)

During Lorene's undergraduate program she gained a great deal of volunteer experience outside of campus, as she explained:

I volunteered a lot! I didn't do a lot on campus, because campus wasn't a very safe place for me. It was, like okay, I'll go there, to class, and then I am getting out of here. Here, and at Central University, except when I was doing the radio show, I would make myself do it through out the day, so I didn't have to go back, because I hated it, I didn't feel safe and just felt weird... because of the comments, interactions, basically that's why. If I had more time to make more friends, it would probably be different and I have explained to my family, and to my fiancé that it takes me so long to read stuff and to get it out into an essay that I seriously don't have time to do anything else. Even in this program [teacher's college] I would get up at 7 a.m., I would be here at 8 a.m. I would have a class for three hours and a four hour break, then I would have another three hour class, then I would go home, eat and then I would stay up until one o'clock in the morning trying to do stuff. Everyday was like this...and I am the type of person who needs extra sleep because of all the extra energy that it takes me to process stuff so I don't even know how I got through [it], but that's what I did. The same thing [happened] in my undergrad, I didn't even have time for friends and I think that my social skills are lacking somewhat, but I think that is a major problem that some other people might have too... So I didn't have time for extra curricular [activities]. (Lorene, 883-899)

Similarly, Ashley expressed that she did not participate in any out-of-class activities as she noted, "No. I did not find any student club that was interesting to me. I wasn't interested in politics or I am not Christian so, there wasn't any club here that played to my interests or my strengths" (Ashley, 601-602). Further, she noted that due to the nature of

her disability she finds it difficult interacting with people in groups; this aspect could potentially affect her participation in student clubs or other campus activities:

There weren't any clubs for me. Also, because it takes so long to do everything, means that there isn't any time. I don't have the ability to commit myself to something that requires me to be there every single week. There are clubs that you have to pay dues. I don't have money to do anything, I am on OSAP. I can't work because, with my learning disability, it takes so long for me to do anything and work would be indeed one more thing competing for my time. So, I have to save all my money ... so I couldn't afford to pay for clubs that I wasn't going to be able to go to every week. The way that my learning disability works, it could conflict with the way people in my group work. If we are doing a group project and we all have to do stuff. I do things differently than the way they do it. It sets me apart from everyone else in a way because I've had to take different attitudes towards learning. I can't just leave it to the last minute because [the group] wants to because I don't understand how to do things in a particular way. I found that I am strongest in my work by myself, so to be part of a club means I have to be part of a team and that is not the way I work best. (Ashley, 607-620)

Ashley expressed that her perceptions of team work are a direct result of her experiences, in describing that:

I also have the bad group gene or the bad group luck. I don't know what it is. I cannot get a group that just wants to work. I never get a group that can just do the job and all work together. They all work so they can't get together. I know what learning disability is and physical disability is and no one does. I find that people

who don't have to live with a learning disability they don't understand life or see the world the same way that we do. So they take it from a very dominant culture approach as opposed to the way that I do [things]. (Ashley, 622-627)

Rachel was very involved in sports in high school. However, at university, she decided to focus on her academics rather than becoming involved in the campus community, in noting that:

I was so active in high school! When I came here my mom said '*are you going to sign up for the basketball team? What's going to happen?*' When I started to do poorly at school I felt like I had no time for anything else but study. I would go out on Saturday nights, but I would try to be in bed early. I studied every night... I always had my books out. I always tried to be thinking of what I had [to do] next. I felt like I didn't have time, [but] like I would have liked to...I feel like I am an easy going person, that I could probably have done different things at the university...especially living in residence. We had so much [more] access to different programs that were available rather than living off campus when you are not aware, so I felt like I could have. I just really felt that school was the reason why I was here and if I really wanted to stay here I would have to at least pass, so that's where I put all my attention. (Rachel, 485-494)

Alicia, in contrast to Rachel, chose to participate in intramural sports and to participate in some out-of-class experiences. As she noted, "I work on campus, I work for a professor, and I played intramurals, other than this semester, and I work out [on campus]" (Alicia, 403-404). Further, she stated, "I go home every weekend, so I am here for four days to do school work and that is it. That is why I am here for this time" (Alicia, 404-405). Alicia is

not a traditional student, in terms of her age, and as she noted, “my goal here is to get my butt in teacher’s college. It really is. No dancing around or doing whatever!” (Alicia, 399-400). Alicia was not interested in making friends; therefore she avoided social activities such as participation in student clubs. She worked on campus on a job which was compatible with her personal interests and she chose to participate in intramural sports activities as opposed to varsity sports membership, as she did during her first year university, in order to focus on her academics studies.

Patricia was only recently able to participate in volunteer activities on campus as she noted, “I’ve helped out students, recently, this year who were failing courses and I used the strategies that I knew and I helped them to use those strategies” (Patricia, 462-464). Patricia was unable to participate in activities until recently when she learned to overcome her disability.

In terms of out-of-class participation, Samantha explained that she did some volunteer work in the community as well as founded a new student club on campus. This club was supported by the disability office, and the focus was to support students with disabilities through social activities. Samantha noted:

I would really have to say that the majority of what I did was through the disability office. [I started the] Student Disability Support Group with [a friend]... I also go back to my high school ... and I do motivational speaking on bullying, I did an interview for [a local] radio [station], participated in a bullying movie, and I am also an ambassador for Bully Busters, in high school. I help kids get through bullying by coming up with concrete solutions, things like that. (Samantha, 469-474)

However, since Samantha requires a greater amount of time to study due to her learning disability, she noted “I think it made it that much tougher because for me to do well it takes me twice as longer to do things” (Samantha, 100-101). She had to turn her attention to her academic career therefore, her participation and dedication to the new student club was diverted to her studies.

Some of the students in this study attempted to participate in the campus community and get involved in out-of-class activities. However, due to their academic difficulties, which were impacted by their learning disabilities, they opted to not participate, to postpone participation or to limit participation in those activities.

Lorene and Alicia’s experiences served as a way of measuring which activities were worth committing to and which ones were not. For other students, such as Samantha, activities had to be cut back after poor academic performance. Rachel and Ashley chose not to participate in any out-of-class experiences in order to ensure their academic successes and Patricia waited to participate in activities until she had a better grasp of her disability.

Summary

This section of the paper analyzed the challenges faced by post-secondary students with learning disabilities in higher education. The participants in this study indicated that their first-year university experiences were similar to other first-year students: they were required to move away from home to study, adapt to the academic and social demands of university life, and to develop a support system that could sustain their academic development.

Participants had to learn to live independently and to adapt to a new living environment. They had to manage their social and educational experiences on their own with fewer traditional support structures such as friends and family. Not having immediate parental assistance helped the students to become more independent and to rely on new friends and community resources to obtain the academic help they required. In addition to the expected challenges faced by most first-year students, several participants in this study had been newly diagnosed with learning disabilities.

Participants who were aware of their learning disabilities contacted the campus disability office upon their arrival to ensure access to accommodation services; however, most of the participants were not knowledgeable about their disabilities. This factor contributed immensely to the challenges faced by these students in higher education. Participants had to comprehend and accept the fact that they had a diagnosed learning disability to adapt to their new reality. This was very difficult for some of the participants because the label of *learning disability* did not fit their perceptions of themselves.

Students discussed being stigmatized by their families, peers, and faculty members. Learning disabilities are considered “hidden” or “invisible” disabilities because, unless the individual self-identifies, one cannot “see” the disability. Since the disability is not apparent, participants expressed that, in many instances, faculty members and peers demonstrated a certain lack of understanding of their academic needs. Some individuals in the campus community were described as creating attitudinal and educational barriers for these students which made social interaction and academic preparation more complex and strenuous for them. Individuals in this study felt that peers discriminated against them in group activities and in social situations. Faculty members

lacked understanding of the accommodation process and on several occasions made the participants feel uncomfortable in the classroom environment.

Participants in this study had little time for activities outside of class and expressed some resentment at the inordinate amount of time they had to spend studying compared to their peers. When they did get involved in campus activities, these activities were often tied to altruistic acts attempting to help others who had learning disabilities. As with many marginalized populations on college campuses, these students had to respond to the challenges they faced and, in turn, were motivated to help others overcome such difficulties.

Factors that Contribute to Academic Success

Participants in this study have been successful in their academic endeavors, and all are close to program completion. Some of the participants, at the time of the study, were completing their undergraduate degrees (three- or four-year honors programs), and some were returning to university to complete professional coursework, such as teacher's college.

Advice and Advising

To address the transition of students with learning disabilities from high school to university, the following category emerged from the findings in relation to advice and advising during the transition process to higher education: expectation to pursue post-secondary education.

Those participants who were not identified in high school as having a disability, they were expected to go on to either community college or university. Ashley noted:

The counselor at the school, she didn't know I had a learning disability either, everyone [thought] just because I am so smart in some areas, and I only tackled the stuff that I knew, I guess I came across as very intelligent and being capable to go to university...I applied to only programs in the directions where I got high marks in high school...I got high marks in drama, so I applied to drama programs.... (Ashley, 77-81)

Rachel discussed counseling advice and noted that “they definitely didn't tell me that I shouldn't try [to pursue higher education]. There was no one there to motivate me or to encourage me to go on; it's kind of, after you are done high school that's what you do...” (Rachel, 31-33).

Alicia was identified with a learning disability before she graduated from high school; similar to Rachel and Ashley, she discussed the expectation of continuing her studies in higher education. More specifically, Alicia addressed the issue of an academic high school and that university attendance was expected after graduation, in noting that:

The school ... was an academic school so they wouldn't take no [for an answer], I think that ... four or five years after I graduated from my high school no one even went to college... that wasn't even thought of ... you went to university and that was the end of the story...they didn't feel bad for me; they were just surprised more than anything so it wasn't '*oh she has a learning disability so now she cannot do anything.*' No, I was a regular, normal student and they expected me to go to university. (Alicia, 35-40)

Samantha noted that, in terms of advising, she perceived herself as being “on my own” (Samantha, 64). She relied on her father’s expertise and together they “...sort of

decided where to apply [to university] ...” (Samantha, 67-68). However, she noted that she became familiar with The University of West River because her school counselor was a graduate from this institution. Samantha also noted that because of her family’s history of academics, she was expected to pursue post-secondary education. In fact, it was made so implicit that she felt that, “it was university or probably get disowned by my family...when it is a given that you attend higher institution of learning, you learn to deal with that” (Samantha, 80-82).

Rachel’s family also had similar expectations as she noted, “Well...all my friends were applying to university; my parents were saying ‘*what university are you applying to?*’ It was never a thought in my mind not to apply to university” (Rachel, 35-36).

Similarly, Ashley’s parents also expected her to pursue post-secondary education as she stated, “They expected me to go to university” (Ashley, 85).

Lorene was advised by her grade eight teacher who had expectations that she would go on to university, as she recounts the story:

... in grade eight I had a really good teacher ...she advised me, you should be ... in all advanced courses [in high school] ... she said you should be going to grade 13 and you should be going on to college and I was like, ‘*whatever! What are you talking about?*’ And she said ‘*seriously*’ and she worked on me all year. She saw something and she, thank God, she worked on it, so I believed her (Lorene, 72-78)

Lorene’s grade eight teacher helped her see that she had strong skills in a variety of other academic areas, such as creative writing, reading, and mathematics – not only in drawing, which many other teachers had reinforced through elementary school.

Similarly, Patricia stated that high school teachers and counselors advised her to take certain courses and encouraged her to apply to university as she illustrated:

... I remember my teacher saying '*algebra is really difficult don't take that, calculus is very difficult don't take that,*' because they saw me working hard in math; in everything I worked extremely hard...so I guess they saw me working really hard during lunch time [and] spare time; maybe that's why they said '*don't take math*'... when I switched my high school and when I was applying [to university] I was so scared, all the teachers were like... '*you are going to be okay, you are going to be fine*'...I remember the guidance counselor in my new high school. I didn't fill out my university form. I was too nervous, so she sat with me and filled it out, she gave me an envelope and a stamp and she walked me to a mailbox. (Patricia, 69-80)

Students in this study applied to a post-secondary institution because of a greater societal expectation to attend institutions of higher learning. Participants were influenced by their teachers, counselors, and family members' expectations in order to pursue higher education.

Accommodations in Higher Education

Participants discussed the accommodation process in higher education. In order to address the accommodations provided for a learning disability diagnosis during their post-secondary experience the following categories emerged from the data: (a) academic accommodations, and (b) support services.

Academic Accommodations

The process of receiving academic accommodations at university begins with self-identification. Students must self-identify to the disability office, provide documentation supporting their disability, and collaborate with their disability advisor in order to determine the appropriate academic accommodations. The disability office prepares an accommodation letter which is given to the student. The student is expected to self-identify to professors and provide them with a copy of the accommodation letter. Students, staff, and faculty at the post-secondary institution have a shared responsibility in the accommodation process to ensure appropriate services are provided to students with disabilities.

There was little separation between challenge and success. Most of the participants struggled to achieve success in their academic goals. In terms of academic accommodations, Samantha explained that the challenges she faced with receiving accommodation services were caused by feelings of discomfort with her disability. Over the period in which she was studying at university, she learned from her mistakes, which can be considered as a success, in noting that:

I wouldn't make myself known early on, because I was still struggling with feeling or accepting my disability. So I would just hand it to them [the accommodation letter]. They wouldn't get to know me sort of by face and then they couldn't make the appropriate accommodations. So I think, that half of it was my fault, but half of it was theirs as well...I should have taken my letter to [professors'] office hours. I should have sat down with them [faculty] and explained my disability and explain to them why it would be beneficial for me to have these services. (Samantha, 133-141)

Similarly, Alicia's previous learning experiences contributed to her academic success; during her first university experience, she decided not to exercise her rights to accommodations which resulted in her poor academic performance and consequently the non-completion of her degree. Upon enrollment at the University of West River, Alicia was aware of the importance of communicating effectively with faculty and requesting accommodation services to succeed in her current program, as she stated:

They [professors] are all so very open to going to their offices and I am sure they are like that with the rest of the students, but I find that when you have a learning disability and you do meet the professor, [the learning disability] makes you meet the professor. And a lot of students do not meet their professor, because you are just a number, you don't have to go to class! But...you are responsible for yourself as a student with a learning disability so you sit in the front of the class and the professor knows if you are there or not. I think personally that you get to know them at a different level because you are a little bit more involved with them than a normal student; I think...you have to give them your paper work, so right away say that there are five people in the class who have a learning disability, so they know that. You sit in the front of the class, typically, most of us do. So you have that interaction with the teacher, when they come in they would say something to you, and I make the point of going to their office...prior to exams, and I mean all students with learning disabilities might not, I am sure, but I make the point of going before and after exams just to check on my exams and just to talk to them. (Alicia, 223-236)

In this instance, Alicia noted the success of social strategies that she has acquired through her experiences in higher education. Rachel similarly noted that she learned to communicate effectively with her professors, as she noted:

I was in the [sports] management class, and the classes were a lot smaller. The teachers knew who I was and because I had to come here [disability office]. They had to find my note-taker right, so already we have been talking about some of what my issues were. (Rachel, 238-240).

Students who received accommodations felt that it helped them to overcome their academic difficulties and achieve personal success, as Ashley explained:

I had my testing done last year and they found that, I had a learning disability, and I was able to get the accommodations that I needed. [Between the time] I came to this department, [until] now I have seen a huge improvement [in academic performance]. One of the accommodations that I needed but I did not have when I first arrived was not to have multiple choice tests. In first year psychology I got a D, the next semester with no multiple choice I got an A, that was from one semester to the next just by not having that format [of examination]. (Ashley, 15-20)

Lorene described having the accommodation of having access to a computer during essay exams as being an important accommodation during her academic career:

So my [learning] strategist ... eventually put me on a computer and that made [essay writing] better. [This way] I can type it, I can delete it, I can cut, and paste. Because part of ... my problem is organizing, so ... I start with my conclusion and then my intro, the title was in the middle somewhere. All this stuff [ideas] is

coming out at different spurts. It is like it's choosing when it's going to come out and I have to catch it as quickly as possible or it's gone...as it comes you spit it out and plop it all in there [on the computer] and you organize it later, that's how I've done all of my essays and everything. (Lorene, 585-593)

The use of a computer during essay exams has also helped Rachel as she described:

I felt like when I was writing at [the large hall with other students] I would be thinking of what I wanted to say, but I was like, I don't know how to spell those words. I am going to have to use a different word to try to explain myself ...there are a lot of big words that I don't know how to spell and they [professors] don't know what I mean, so to take the pressure off of thinking how to re-do words in my sentence, [the use of a computer makes] my paragraph so much easier just in a sense, because it takes me so long to go through the motions to figure out what I want to say and then when I figure out what I want to say, I have to try to substitute words and then it is not coming out how I want it to. (Rachel, 206-213)

Patricia was allowed to use assistive technology software in order to help her successfully decode text more effectively. This particular tool is classified as *text to speech* in that it reads through textual material in a synthesized voice; Patricia notes the effectiveness of this software in stating that:

I got software, which is pretty amazing, because I don't have to depend on other people and trying to make appointments. A lot of times I don't know how to pronounce a word or something and I just type it in...[Now] I plug in my headphones so people don't see that I am trying to pronounce [words], before I

used a dictionary, I use it all the time. Before I got this program, I used to go online and use the dictionary...this program is pretty good. (Patricia, 275-279).

Similarly, Alicia also uses the same genre of assistive technology in describing that:

Kurzweil is fantastic! I think it would help anybody, not only someone with a learning disability ... I find that if I am reading a book, but someone is also saying it to me, just sinks in a lot more...I think [it would be helpful] for any student to have that program ... it should be a requirement really. I think it keeps you on target; I think when you are reading it yourself you are reading, but it is not sinking in and you are thinking about other things...you are looking around and you are thinking about other things you need to do, but if someone is speaking to you and you have to look at it, it makes you concentrate a lot more...I think everyone would benefit from that.... (Alicia, 261-268)

Rachel explained that she uses the following accommodations “I’ve got to write in a room by myself, I use Kurzweil, a computer, and I get time an a half when I write [tests and exams]” (Rachel, 172-173). Further, she noted the importance of assistive technology software such as Kurzweil:

I find that when I do multiple choice [exams] ...I find that Kurzweil [is beneficial because] slows me down; it reads the multiple choice for me because I feel like I just want to answer a question and I don't know what it is, but I just want to get through [the exam], especially if it is really long multiple choice, I don't want to read it...I find that Kurzweil will read it for me and helps me understand [the questions]. It is a little bit better because I have to wait for it to read it and I kind of read it with it, so it slows me down. (Rachel, 186-199)

Ashley received a bursary grant for students with learning disabilities and she also uses Kurzweil. She explained:

I have the Kurzweil program...before [it] took me a day to read through a psychology chapter, I can get through two psychology chapters in eight hours using the Kurzweil program... it cuts down the reading time that takes me to do stuff, it just makes my life so much easier than before. Because I have difficulty telling the difference between different sounds, I couldn't sound out some of the words that I was reading, so I go through my reading, like "okay, I don't know what that word is and I might have to skip it," so I might miss something that the person was saying or arguing and I didn't understand what was said, so I would have to spend a lot of time looking up all the words and the Kurzweil program will say the words, so when I hear them I go, "Oh! I heard that before so I can now understand"...I can go back and read the same part again or it will make it so that I can keep up like this [snaps her fingers] rather than allowing me to get distracted and read the same thing five times. (Ashley, 440-453)

Rachel explained that her anxiety affects her performance on tests and that having accommodations, such as extra time on tests, helped her to overcome these difficulties, as she noted:

Well, I don't know if it was my learning disability or because I didn't have accommodations to begin with [first year] that I would feel so sick before I had to write a test. Maybe because I was doing poorly first year, that upset me every time a test was coming. I would have test anxiety, like I felt like I was going to do really bad and I would be anxious, I felt like I couldn't perform and they got

my results back on my test. I performed a lot better when I didn't think I was being timed, so they took the time restriction off, so I could relax. [In this manner] I can think about what my answers are going to be because in my classes there ... weren't a lot of multiple choice where I felt the right answer is there, I just have to find it...I have to think for myself and I guess the thought process takes a little bit longer for me. So I definitely [believe] that it has helped to have time and a half.

(Rachel, 175-184)

Samantha noted that she receives the following accommodations: “extra time and the use of a computer for essay questions” (Samantha, 194); she further, stated:

I think that without the disability office I would not have gotten some of the grades that I've gotten because of my fine motor skill problems. I write a lot slower than everyone else does, and I would not even finish the majority of my exams without the help of the disability office; with the extra time and use of computer. (Samantha, 186-190)

Participants in this study discussed the benefits of receiving accommodations; however, they also found that in order to be successful at university they relied on the services provided by the disability office on campus.

Support Services

Disability offices in higher education institutions are a key factor in the success of students with disabilities. Alicia explained her first interaction with the disability office on campus:

When I applied to the university, I contacted the coordinator of the program and we set up a meeting even before I actually came to the university. I brought all my

paperwork because she wanted to see everything, so they set up a meeting.

[During the period of my psycho-educational assessment], which happened late in the semester, they still gave me the accommodations of a quiet room...to write exams in the disability centre, and time and a half [for tests/exams]. But [this experience] was so ... different [from the institution I used to attend], like everyone knew that I didn't know about these resources, and the grants [bursary for students with disabilities] and all of these different programs, they were so helpful! So, so, helpful! (Alicia, 120-126)

Similarly, Samantha noted that the disability office helped her to become successful primarily through providing support services and accommodations. The disability office was “a place where I met a lot of my friends and that it had given me the tools to succeed scholastically. It was a positive experience for me” (Samantha II, 2-3).

Ashley discussed her interaction with the individuals who work at the disability office on campus as she noted:

I really love the people in the disability office, whether I see them in the office or whether I see them during their own time. They are always kind and respectful; it is not like I am not working right now so I don't have to talk to you. No, they still want to talk to you and they want to know that things are going well for you. That makes it really easy to come to them when you have a problem during academic class. They want to make sure you are taken care of even if they are not your advisor and you need help with something they are willing to take the time.

(Ashley, 137-143)

Ashley later stated, “they are all wonderful, I don’t mean it in a generic form, but they are wonderful in each of their special ways. All of them contributed to my experience here” (Ashley, 713-715).

Patricia noted that the “disability office definitely helped me the most ... More with my disability because they were the ones who taught me about my disability, what it is, how to play around with it and learn new strategies” (Patricia, 494-496). Rachel identified the disability office as her only source of support services, as she noted “they are pretty much my only support structure at the university, there is no one really out there I would have gone to. Like I have never gone to the Writing Center, like I haven’t done anything like that” (Rachel 498-500). Further, she noted “I know if I have any problems, I know I can call the secretary, she is so capable... [always] helping me out” (Rachel, 502-503). Rachel also noted:

I really feel that [by] having the support my grades have gone up. I feel more confident, I know that if I am ever feeling that I need help, I always have them, even if it's an issue like taking another class that might not have to do with the learning disability part. I know that they will always be willing to help me with anything that I need. (Rachel, 511-513)

The support provided by the disability office contributed to the success of students with learning disabilities; further, students identified the learning strategist as the main person who assisted them in their journey to success. Alicia noted:

The learning strategist...has been awesome. I didn’t get to meet with him until this summer, because I wasn’t given a learning strategist during my first semester here...he has a sports background and...he has done a really good job in relating

[information about] learning patterns to me...[by explain the information in terms of the training] preparations of going into a volleyball game. So it has been really neat that way; he has taken...my passion...of volleyball, and put it into my learning and I never thought about it that way. He is really inspiring and he is really neat...when I go in for a half an hour meeting it [ends up being] an hour and a half. I feel bad, but he is a really, really cool person and I think he really motivated me to be open about my learning disability, and to understand my learning disability; not to just say I have this learning disability. Yeah he is really, really cool. He is really excellent! Honestly, he has done a really great job.

(Alicia, 380-392)

Samantha noted the importance of having a learning strategist who “coincides with my needs” (Samantha, 451). Further, she explained that her learning strategist is also her advisor. This individual contributed to her success:

I finally have an advisor who instead of talking to me, actually advises me and gives me concrete things to work on, and my confidence level has risen. I have become more comfortable with having a disability because I am not frustrated so much anymore, when I have computer programs and other strategies to help me with the frustration. (Samantha, 162-166)

Ashley described the support she received from the learning strategist as she noted:

I had an essay on learning disabilities that I had to write. I only had a week and I needed resources [immediately] ...he [learning strategist] helped me to get resources, he took the time to talk to me about learning disabilities, and everything I needed to put this essay together. He met me early yesterday morning

to help me to go through it and to make sure that everything I was saying was accurate. When I didn't have enough information he made sure to give me more information right then so I could add it into the essay to make it better. He also cared about the mark that I was going to get and about my feelings and he checked up on me today to make sure that I was cool and that everything had gone all right...that meant a lot to me because there are many people who don't have an open mind approach or understanding about co-existing with people with learning disabilities. I wasn't an inconvenience to him. (Ashley, 143-153)

Rachel noted “the learning strategist is amazing, like he has done so much, like incredible” (Rachel, 501-502). Further, she explained the assistance she received as “planning with the learning strategist, because we did a lot of scheduling things to try to manage time, like learning strategies, and having him organize my midterms and exam schedule” (Rachel, 511-513).

Similarly, Patricia explained how the learning strategist assisted her in academic endeavors. This individual taught her study skills that she found to be very valuable during her university experience, as she noted:

I read the books, but I use techniques that I learned from the disability office...instead of reading the whole textbook I read the bold letters around the page. I read the teachers' notes because they are ... in a Power Point presentation, so I would use techniques to memorize those, and if I don't understand a word I would learn somehow to break it down. I try to remember where does the word come from, like that [makes it] more meaningful for me now...big words are more difficult for me to remember, so I break them down into smaller pieces of

the word and be like *pre* means this the next part means that so to use techniques like that help... I also use other techniques. I visualize it; what does it look like? [This way] it is easier to remember. (Patricia, 237-247)

Loraine commented on her learning strategist during her undergraduate program, as she noted:

I had one learning strategist ... who helped me to organizing [my] essays...she was pretty supportive and I learned a bit from her because she validated that I was smart. [She was helpful] just [by] her way of trying to teach me and inspired me. (Loraine, 819-822)

The support offered by the disability office played an important role in the successes of students with learning disabilities who participated in this study; more specifically the services provided by learning strategist helped students to understand their limitations and to develop strategies to enhance their strengths.

Faculty Teaching Attributes

Participants discussed their relationships with faculty members during their academic endeavor in higher education. They spoke of faculty in two ways: (a) impact of positive faculty interaction, and (b) faculty characteristics.

Impact of Positive Faculty Interaction

Students who participated in this study indicated that a positive interaction with faculty members made a difference to their learning experiences. Alicia noted:

Here ... the professors are so cool, when you hand them a note [accommodation letter] they are like '*so you write in the disability office*' and they are all very accepting. I have not had a bad, bad situation with a professor. (Alicia, 221-222)

Ashley noted that during her post-secondary experience she had “some professors who were very personal and they were very warm and they would be able to bend over backwards to help me and do work with me” (Ashley, 456-458).

Samantha discussed the importance of faculty members who are accommodating to the needs of students with learning disabilities in describing how one of her professors accommodated her in his class:

My participation mark in that class was low, because I didn't understand what I was reading, so I could not participate [in class] ...we figured out a solution to my participation mark ... every week I would write a summary of the article that we had read and I would write down a few questions that I had about the article...so he [professor] knew that I was thinking about the article and that I understood the article. (Samantha, 171-180)

Similarly, Ashley explained that she was able to work with faculty to receive appropriate accommodations in the classroom, as she explained:

[With] some of them I was able to sit down and ...work it out, I mean negotiate how things were going to work. What I try to do with every single professor is to form some kind of relationship with them, to help communication. I might do my own research on stuff that they are interested in, or stuff they've been talking about it in class, and then have small conversations with them about it...I just finished taking a class in the 'human meaning of death' and I was interested in pagan practices concerning death, she [the professor] didn't have any information on it...and because I had that information I was able to discuss it with her... or I ask how the weekend went or maybe I know one of their children from where I

work, so I would say, '*how is your daughter today?*' Or something like that.

(Ashley, 459-471)

Further, Ashley noted that she meets with her professors during “office hours, or during the break, or after class” (Ashley, 464). She described an occasion in which she explained her disability to a professor using a computer metaphor to help him understand her limitations:

With my computer teacher I explained my learning disability to him in computer language...I explained my brain by making the analogy to a computer. If my brain was a computer, I would have no file folders in my brain. All the information is in there, somewhere, but I can't just locate it when I want to, because there is no file folders, there is no My Documents, no School file folder, there are no Icons on the desktop. I am like a computer that has never been defragmented... he completely understood what I was talking about. So he was able to, but then again he actually had a B.Ed. and has been to teachers' college so he actually understands how to teach and about learning disabilities and he believes in the necessity to make sure that you don't play [teach] to just one way. It is not about him it is about us. He knew about my type of disability so he was more than willing to do whatever he had to, include particular kinds of questions or not and he made sure that I knew what the format [of tests] were weeks in advance so I wasn't finding out a day before or at the exam. (Ashley, 473-488)

Further, Ashley explained that she only went to office hours under special circumstances:

Depends on the teacher and on the topic, if I need help with something [I would go to the office]. If I didn't do well on a midterm, I would go over my midterm

with them to find out what I wasn't doing well so I can do better on the next one or if I don't understand the instructions of a particular project, and I ask 10 billion questions until I understand exactly what they are asking for so I am not giving them something other than what they are actually asking for. (Ashley, 492-496)

Lorene described her interaction with one of her professors as she noted:

My music teacher was great she was really supportive, she even used hand gestures and stuff and she did that all the time, and she said '*I have the same kind of problems that you have*' so that's great. She was fine; she never embarrassed me or anything like that either, which is great. (Lorene, 741-743)

Rachel explained that "in human kinetics they haven't seen too many students with a learning disability so at first, they read through the letter with me and they talked to me about it" (Rachel, 257-258). Rachel further noted that having an accommodation letter facilitated the process with faculty members:

The teachers knew who I was and because I had to come here [disability office] they had to find my note-taker right, so already we have been talking about some of what my issues were, and so it made it a little bit easier to talk to them. (Rachel, 239-241)

Patricia explained that she had a very positive experience with her social work professor as she noted:

She sat down with me and she fixed the errors [on the essay] it's like she followed the same rule for every sentence, which I picked it up, because she did it so many times the same thing, so that helped. (Patricia, 326-328)

Participants discussed some positive interactions with faculty members. Individuals who were willing to understand the students' needs and to participate in the accommodation process were identified by the participants as part of a positive learning experience.

Faculty Characteristics

Students who participated in this study identified characteristics of faculty members who best accommodated their academic needs. These attributes embodied flexibility, and empathy, as well as an awareness of disability, accommodations, and instructional design. Rachel noted:

They were more willing to... help out. There were some teachers that were very strict, like how they interact with students because I know some teachers don't want to help some students more than others. (Rachel, 404-406).

Similarly, Samantha noted the fact that some faculty members were more willing and flexible in accommodating the needs of students with disabilities. She further noted that professors who are familiar with learning disabilities were more accommodating to students as she stated:

I found that a lot of [new] professors are probably more understanding. First of all they know what it [learning disability] is ... more people are talking about it, so I think they are more understanding and they like to listen. Like if you go into their offices and you talk about your disability or you talk about things that you are having trouble with, they actually listen and they will do it sympathetically. I really think that those are the two big qualities and the willingness to help. If you need extensions ...I find that some professors will give me extensions because I also get sick a lot with sinus infections and that prevents me from doing work, so,

I haven't abused that. I think that the more understanding professors, actually look at a student [as someone] who has a life as opposed to [the idea] that their number one priority happens to be ... one class... a perfect example was a... professor, who... gave me the opportunity to write summaries and write questions and boost my participation mark that way...I think that the understanding, the willingness to help, the actually getting their head around that, that there are people out there who have these invisible disabilities, that goes a long way to helping students.

(Samantha, 430-447)

Patricia also addressed the professors' willingness to help students with disabilities as an important faculty attribute in noting that:

I felt like they [faculty] understood me; they were willing to help. That was the most important. I didn't care if they weren't able to help, but just the fact that they tried; that was good...people who tried, they made my life easier. (Patricia, 456-458)

Ashley explained that professors who were most accommodating were the ones who discussed the accommodations with her and who used universal design methods of teaching. As she noted:

Some of them, would say '*what is best for you? And I will make the test that way. Oh, this didn't work? What did work? So I will give you more of that.*' They would modify it. One teacher was like, instead of asking me to describe this person or a time era, she asked me to tell everything I knew about them. And then you just write everything that you know. If you don't know anything, then you can't write anything. And then you get marks for it. It works very well because

then the way that they ask the question doesn't mess me up...sometimes I don't understand exactly what they are asking for in the question. Or they use synonyms ...I don't know what they are referring to. Just write everything you know, I can just write everything I know and I got above average. And everybody else had exactly the same test, so it wasn't like an accommodation for me. (Ashley, 565-574)

Alicia explained that faculty members were very accommodating as she noted, “I think they all let me meet my learning style” (Alicia, 351). She further stated that professors who were competent in technology, who posted notes online, and who “put their full lecture notes on slides during the lecture” (Alicia, 353) were observed to have positive characteristics that helped students with learning disabilities. Alicia also explained that she felt that professors who would lecture from their slides helped her to follow the class material, as she noted, “if they had their slides up and were lecturing on other stuff, that is when I would have difficulty” (Alicia, 355-356). Another attribute identified by Alicia was when faculty members clarified missing information, as she stated:

If there was a concept I didn't get I would always highlight a section and at the end of the class I go up to the professor and just say “I think I am missing a key section here, can you just fill it in for me?” So if they were able to, they did. And they were all really accepting of that so I had three classes that if I had to miss a section I would highlight and go back and talk to professors. (Alicia, 364-369)

Participants identified faculty members, and individuals who demonstrated willingness to help and listen as the key characteristics that facilitated the participants'

academic success. They also identified universal design methods in instruction as important in their educational process.

Personal Attributes

Participants identified personal attributes that assisted them in their academic success. The following categories emerged from the data: (a) personal coping strategies and (b) personal characteristics.

Personal Coping Strategies

Students who were identified with a learning disability at the end of high school or at post-secondary institution developed a series of strategies that helped them to be successful in their academic endeavors. Lorene described strategies and study skills that were effective in the community college:

I thought highlighting would help because one of my teachers in college...he just told all of us that ...when you highlight your notes you only highlight the main points and if you want, you should be able to summarize in one paragraph in about one or two sentences and that's it, and that is what you study from. You don't try to get into all the *ands* and *buts* and all that stuff, you just memorize the important concepts and I was like that makes total sense. That works for me because I can't memorize all those details anyways... I never had a problem knowing what the key points were, because I've always been good at that, but trying to prove, getting the evidence for the key points, sometimes I get a little off on that.... (Lorene, 454-464)

Ashley addressed the issue of being familiar with one's strengths and weakness as she developed an effective strategy that helped her select high school courses: "I wouldn't

take classes that I knew I would have conflict with... I had to avoid them [classes] or I would adapt to a point where I kind of worked around it” (Ashley, 37-39). Further she explained, “I took a lot of arts classes. So in arts classes a lot of it is kinesthetic. My strong suit is doing not auditory; in one of my tests [learning disability assessment] I am a super genius when it comes to this kind of setting...” (Ashley, 50-51).

Another strategy described by this student was the power of communication with teachers. By communicating effectively with teachers she was able to show them that she understood the concepts being taught, as Ashley described:

In math I would...go over my tests with my instructors, and they were able to explain step by step what I was supposed to do... and then I would realize that the answer I put down was wrong, and I would say, this is the answer, and they would say, *‘yeah okay she knew the answer, but for whatever reason she didn't do it on the test’*...they would give me extra credit, or assignments or something to do... (Ashley, 52-58)

Similarly, Rachel discussed the fact that she compensated for her weaknesses with her strengths as she described:

If I had to do math questions or things that I was weaker at, I was so much more vocal and so teachers didn’t think that it was an issue, they just [thought] that I talked too much ...so they [teachers] never caught any of the clues. (Rachel, 122-126)

Lorene also communicated effectively with her teachers in high school as she stated:

Depending on what teacher I had, it meant how well I did. If I liked the teacher I would try really, really hard and they would accommodate me, and they

knew...she is trying really hard, so they let some of this stuff slide. (Lorene, 70-72)

Alicia created several strategies during her academic career that helped her to compensate for her academic deficits. She believes that she was only identified with a learning disability in grade eleven because of those strategies as she noted:

That is why, when I was diagnosed in grade 11 that is why they said she can't have one [disability], you know she's got "Bs" and "As" in her OAC classes and how does she do this and then they found out that I made a list of things, I would and my parents never understood instead of just reading my notes I re-write my notes, so looking back on it I have done this all along and they just, no one ever caught on to it because they thought that was my learning it wasn't like a disability. (Alicia, 321-326)

Patricia alluded that she learned strategies along the way; however, she is successful because she learned to "build on them myself, like I read psychology books, I take courses to do with disabilities, and I take things from my classes and I incorporate [them] into what I am doing" (Patricia, 407-409). Further she explained "I want to build those skills, and do it myself, because I have improved a lot" (Patricia, 410-411). The strategies developed by students were helpful techniques in post-secondary education. However, they all had to improve upon those strategies to be successful in higher education because what observed to be an efficient method in high school or college did not transfer to university education.

Personal Characteristics

In terms of personal characteristics, participants in this study identified a series of intrinsic values as one of the main attribute for success. Alicia noted:

I am determined, I mean to go back to school at 27 to start a new career was kind of crazy. I think I am enthusiastic, and that I am outgoing...I am really determined to get into teacher's college. I know that if I don't get in this time, I know it was not because of my grade, it is just because I don't have my Honors, right, so I mean if I have to come back next year, I have to come back next year. (Alicia, 413-417)

Patricia explained why she succeeded at university:

Not giving up and hoping that I will have a really good future ... regardless of what disability I have. I don't look at my disability as a problem, but I look at it and I do consider it, I do have to work things around it to achieve my goal. Wanting to achieve the goal and having good problem solving skills, so the disability is not going to stop me because I have to work around it to get to my goal. (Patricia, 514-518)

Samantha described her personal characteristics that helped her to succeed:

I have a...instinct that I have to keep going, that even, I probably hit rock bottom a dozen times throughout my university career, and I keep going. I keep pushing myself...and I really think that, that my instinct for survival has kept me going. I am actually finding out what I really want to do which is policy work and advocacy work and if I have to fight big corporations to give us some money to build better buildings and make it more accessible and make it a better environment then that is great, because I will take on the world if I have to, to

make sure no kid faces what I faced. People have to listen, I think that it is about time and people have to listen. (Samantha, 542-549)

Ashley believes that her attitude is what helped her to succeed at university as she explained:

I take initiative. I will talk to the person I need to talk to, I will go find the book that I need to find, I will do the research that I need to do, whatever it takes to get me help with whatever problems that I am having. My school is first, I am not going to just give up, I am here to do what I want to do. I know exactly what I want and I am going to get it. (Ashley, 663-666)

Lorene's motivation to succeed was to prove others wrong and to find a career in which she can make a difference for children who have learning disabilities as she noted:

Stubbornness, big one, motivation, stubborn I don't know if they are related but stubbornness to prove them wrong, motivation to prove them wrong as well to be successful so that I can help other people. Since I was a kid I knew I wanted to be a teacher because I liked the teachers who did help me and learning that I had a disability I was like oh!!! Ultimate reason, so like the end goal, I kept that in sight. Having a sense of humor, that's a good one [and] perseverance. (Lorene, 924-931)

Rachel noted "I am very determined and persistent and I will do anything possible to succeed" (Rachel II, 14-15).

Participants in this study explained that they were able to succeed at university due to self-determination and perseverance. Their disabilities helped them to identify

career interests in which they can apply their personal experiences to help others like themselves, such as teaching, self-advocacy, and social justice.

Summary

Participants were not identified with a learning disability at an early age with the exception of one of the participants. More specifically, five participants were identified at the end of high school, in grade 11, or at university. One of the most challenging aspects of dealing with learning disabilities is the successful identification and diagnosis without feeling the effects of stigmatization by having others lower expectations of performance. Ironically, the fact that the participants' disability was not identified at an early age might have contributed to parental and school personnel's higher expectations which reinforced their participation in university education.

Further, participants identified the support and accommodation services offered by the office of disabilities and the assistance provided by learning strategist as important elements of their academic success. Unlike students who refuse to accept their disabilities and who decline involvement of services offered by the disability services on campus, participants in this study learned to accept their disability label and searched for a better understanding of their strengths and limitations. As a result, they effectively used the resources available to them in terms of technology bursaries, and learning strategies, which facilitated their academic success at university.

Just as negative interaction with certain faculty members created challenges to these students, positive interaction with faculty members was identified as very beneficial for the students. They identified professors who were active during the accommodation process as key to their success. Also, professors who were approachable, demonstrated

willingness to help, and who listened were perceived to be beneficial. In terms of teaching methods, participants indicated that professors who used the principles of universal design, such as reading Power Point slides verbatim when lecturing, were considered essential to their educational experience.

Participants with learning disabilities identified their personalities as vital to their academic success. They discussed their determination to succeed, perseverance, and their hope for a better future as being integral in their achievement in higher education. They also identified assertive characteristics, such as taking initiative, being stubborn, and a desire to prove others wrong as being important to their successes. Participants also noted the importance of having an instinct for survival and a sense of humor.

Finally, an interesting finding related to the success of these students is how they were able to turn their disability into a source of motivation in helping them define career interests. As with many individuals who are challenged by circumstances which they did not create, most of these women, in some fashion, now wish to help others with learning disabilities. Because their personal knowledge and experience helped them succeed in university, they now wish to transfer this perspective to others with similar needs.

CHAPTER V. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Organization of Chapter

Research in the area of disability and higher education has shown that the number of students with diagnosed disabilities attending colleges and universities in Canada is on the rise. Further, there is a gap in the literature pertaining to the experiences of these students. Therefore, this study aimed to understand the experiences of students with learning disabilities in a post-secondary setting in Ontario.

This chapter will address the macro-themes that emerged as representing the challenges faced by those college students with learning disabilities. The discussion of these challenges will then be followed by some strategies that have worked for the six students who participated in this study. These themes then will be aligned with what experts in the field have written about providing disability services to students in higher education. Finally, the implications for professional practice and suggestions for future research will be explored to help advance the field.

Themes Related to Challenge

Being a Woman with a Learning Disability in Higher Education

Although interviewing six women was not an explicit part of the original research design, the fact that all six participants were women requires some attention in the synthesis of the interviews. The first theme that emerged was not only that learning disabilities represent the hidden challenge for those who have them, but that it is even more challenging for women because learning disabilities are most often associated with men. Sauver, Katusic, Barbaresi, Colligan, and Jacobsen (2001) examined the interaction between gender differences and risk factors for reading disabilities (RD) diagnoses on

children and found that “boys and girls are significantly and differentially susceptible to potential risk factors for RD” (p. 793). Also, Henderson (2001) found that 37.4% of women with disabilities on campus reported having a learning disability while 43.2% of men with disabilities reported having a learning disability. Since the results of having a learning disability are often associated with low academic performance, the first impression many of these participants made on family and teachers was that they were lazy or indifferent to academic success.

Complicating this assumption is the issue of how hospitable higher education has traditionally been for women. Research in the area of gender equity in higher education has identified the campus climate as being “chilly” for female students. It was found that women are treated differently than their male counterparts “in ways that may lead women to lose confidence, lower their academic goals, and limit their career choices” (Hall & Sandler, 1984, p. 2). Further, research has shown that “when women are treated differently, they may be discouraged to seek help with academic concerns, making the best use of student services, and participating fully in campus life” (Hall & Sandler, 1984, p. 5). However, though this might be true for most women students, the findings of this research contradict the premise put forth that women are less likely to seek academic help. The women in this research project were very involved with the disability office on campus and met frequently with their advisors, learning strategist, and assistive technologist to ensure their academic success. This assertiveness will have implications for practice to be offered at the end of this discussion.

The focus of this research study was to learn about the experiences of students with learning disabilities in higher education. However, since only women volunteered to

participate, the author performed further investigation to see if their experiences were influenced by the fact that they were women. Emergent themes of this study indicate that the participants did not identify gender as a factor impacting their post-secondary experiences. Samantha noted “I really did not have any experiences that were influenced by being a female student. I think most of what I felt had to do with my disability as opposed to being female” (Samantha II, 4-5). Rachel clarified in stating that:

I don't think that I did anything different then I would have being female, male or a student who might need some extra help in any of their courses. As a female I wanted to ensure my safety so when signing up for night classes I would make sure I had someone to walk [with] to and from class as campus at night can be scary... I did not feel that I wasn't given any more or less opportunity while at the [university] due to my sex. (Rachel II, 4-14)

Further, Samantha and Alicia both enrolled predominately in women-dominated fields as they stated “I have decided to minor in women's studies” (Alicia II, 4). “I also took a lot of classes where the majority was female so it did not affect me as much as if I had entered a field that was predominately male” (Samantha II, 5-7).

The women in this study did not identify their experiences as being influenced by their gender. It is important to note, however, that even though participants did not identify the “chilly climate” as a barrier, a few issues addressed by this theory were mentioned by the participants during interviews. The issue of safety described by Rachel is identified by Hall and Sandler (1984) as a concern for women on campuses. Further, Kelly and Torres (2006) found that women have being socialized to be apprehensive about personal safety as stated in “being a women in society meant worrying about

personal safety, experiencing sexual victimization, and being blamed for attacks on their person” (p. 24). This might help explain Rachel’s concern for her safety of as a woman student on campus.

Hall and Sandler (1984) noted that women with disabilities seem to encounter “double discrimination based both on their sex and on their disability” (p. 12). Further, they stated that, when working with women with disabilities, individuals tend to avoid “eye contact, maintaining excessive distance, ignoring, and engaging in other behaviors that indicate discomfort or dismissal; over explaining, talking in a patronizing tone, treating the person like a child – as if physical disabilities imply mental limitations as well...” (p. 12). Participants in the study mentioned feeling dismissed and ignored by faculty members and peers at times. One example was described by Rachel when she met with her professor and requested to borrow a textbook and the instructor responded “maybe next time when you come to talk to me think about what you want to say first because I don't understand you. [This] put [me] back a little bit.” (Rachel, 305-307). Another example was expressed by Lorene. This student articulated that she had been ignored by peers as she stated, “I tried to get all their e-mails and everybody just ignored me and they were just physically not letting me be in the circle” (Lorene, 336-337) and by faculty members “I tried to talk to her about it and she just ignored me” (Lorene, 350-351).

Participants identified occasions in which they were patronized by others. Ashley described a co-worker who referred to her in the following manner “she would be talking to me and she leaned forward to me and say ‘Are you listening to me, Ashley?’ and I was like, ‘Yes, I can hear you.’ (Ashley, 395-397). Similarly, Lorene expressed that peers

would say to her ‘Are sure you are going to be okay with that?’ And they would talk slower too, ‘Are- you- sure- you- can- handle- that?’ And I was like ‘yah!!! I am pretty sure, I got it!’ And they were like ‘oh sure!’ And that’s how they would say it!” (Lorene, 365-367). Further, she also had a professor who said ‘are you okay? Do you need more time?’ (Lorene, 395-396). According to the student, this professor would make those comments to her on a regular basis during classroom interaction. To conclude, participants did not perceive these interactions as being a result of their gender, but rather a result of their disability.

Obviously, it cannot be concluded that these women represent the treatment of all women in higher education. What can be inferred is, in the instances of these six women, the challenges of being identified as having a learning disability could have been complicated by being women. However, it remains unclear the extent gender had on these individuals’ experiences.

Dazed, Confused, and in the Dark

When students transition from high school to university they feel “overwhelmed by the college experience: locating classrooms and buying books, learning to live with roommates and meeting other students in the dorm, making sense of multiple syllabi and completing assignments on time and more” (Kidwell, 2005, p. 253). The participants in this study encountered challenges similar to first-year university students without disabilities during their transition from high school to university.

All six participants moved away from home either during their undergraduate or professional programs, and they identified these experiences as challenging. Student development theorists have identified the development of autonomy and independence as

important steps in the process of individualization for college students (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Participants in this study had to adapt to a new living environment, to their roommates, and they had to rely on others for support. Research on the Millennial generation found that the current generation of students depend on parental support in every realm of their lives (Howe & Strauss, 2000). This study found that having to live independently and being responsible for themselves was an initial burden for these students. However, they were forced to communicate with individuals on campus to meet many of their unique needs and to secure help that ensured their academic success. Similarly, Henton, Lamke, Murphy, and Haynes (1980) found that family support needs to be carried out during critical transitions in order to facilitate the adjustment to college until substitute relationships can be developed.

Four out of the six participants were unaware that they had a diagnosable disability when entering university. This factor contributed greatly to the challenges they faced during their initial transition to higher education. Identification of a learning disability should take place during the early educational years (Steele, 2004). Participants in this study were not identified with a learning disability until later during their university careers. They faced the risk of being required to withdraw from their programs of study, due to poor academic performance, while they were unaware of their disabilities and their impact on their academic performance. Also, participants were unaware of disability-related support services available to them on campus. Findings suggest that peers were an integral part of the identification process of a learning disability, while faculty members did not play a role in the identification process for any of the participants in this study.

Vogel and Adelman (1992) analyzed the level of academic preparedness from high school to post-secondary education amongst students with learning disabilities and without learning disabilities and found that both groups were very similar in relation to their academic preparation. Further, Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger, and Alisat (2004) found that students were poorly prepared for university due to their lack of knowledge on how to deal with their personal and social difficulties. Participants in this study claimed that they were not academically prepared for university. Their lack of preparation could be related to their lack of knowledge about their learning disabilities and the resources available to them on the university campus.

Participants who were aware that they had a disability identified themselves to the disability office on campus as soon as they arrived at the university. However, their academic performances were not at the level they had expected. Their marks did not match their academic efforts. This finding is in line with research in the area of student experience in post-secondary education as Astin (1993) found that “student’s grades decline between high school and college” (p. 188).

Participants in this study struggled with academic and social decisions. In terms of social life, participants indicated that due to low academic performance they were required to eliminate social activities from their schedules in order to dedicate themselves to studying. Tinto (1975) developed a conceptual schema to explain college dropout. In this model, it was argued that individuals are more likely to stay in college if they are integrated in both the academic and social systems of college life. Tinto (1975) cautioned that “a person can conceivably be integrated into the social sphere of the college and still drop out because of insufficient integration into the academic domain of the college (e.g.,

through poor grade performance)” (p. 92). Participants in this study were challenged with great academic demands during their first-year university in trying to balance social activities and academic performance.

Findings of this study indicated that the post-secondary students with learning disabilities who participated in this study were reluctant to participate in campus activities. They stated that studying was their main priority and therefore they decided to dedicate most of their time to academics. Similarly, Trainnin and Swanson (2005) found that:

Students with LD spent considerably longer hours on schoolwork than their NLD [non- learning disabled] peers, most over 30 hours a week. In surveys students with LD reported starting to prepare early, avoiding last-minute learning (cramming), and, in some cases, adopting a pre-exam ritual. (p. 270)

Tinto (1975) found that persistence in higher education was influenced by students’ integration. By their last year of academic studies, participants in this study were more likely to be dedicated academically than to be involved in social activities at the expense of their academic studies. Further, Astin (1993) found that “hours spent studying is positively related to nearly *all* academic outcomes: retention, graduating with honors, enrollment in graduate school...and self-reported increases in cognitive and affective skills” (p. 375).

Researchers have discussed the impact of campus involvement on academic success (Astin, 1987, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The findings of this study indicated that campus non-academic involvement was a challenge for these students with learning disabilities. Participants indicated that the campus climate was not always

pleasant for the students who participated in this study due to their peers' lack of understanding of learning disabilities. Students' non-participation in student clubs and activities was explained as a necessity because, for some of the participants, group interactions were likely to challenge their disability.

Astin (1993) found that participation in intramural sports had "positive effects on physical health, alcohol consumption, and attainment of the bachelor's degree" (p. 386). Participants in this study concluded that athletic participation could potentially negatively impact their academic performance. Therefore, they preferred to avoid participation, or to play intramural sports, as opposed to varsity, which requires more of a time commitment.

I Don't Understand Because I'm not Understood

The transition from high school to university is complex for most students. However, the participants in this study were required to face a different reality. In an attempt to reach out for academic help, they discovered that they had a permanent disability: a learning disability. Some of the participants were confounded by the disability diagnosis. Their perception of themselves had to be modified, and in essence, adjusted to this new truth.

Participants in this study struggled to understand and accept their learning disabilities since their new awareness conflicted with their own previous knowledge of disability. Researchers have found that, upon receiving a disability diagnosis, individuals go through stages of denial and rejection of the label and how it affects one's identity (Craig et al., 2002). Conversely, one of the participants in this study expressed that she felt relieved with the diagnosis. However, acceptance of the disability was a difficult process for all of the participants, since disability carries predominantly negative

connotations to members of society (Craig et al., 2002). Thus, as Olney and Kim (2001) found, “being diagnosed with a hidden disability can be both troublesome and liberating to the individual” (p. 578).

Participants shared that they had to learn about their disability by taking psychology courses and communicating with the staff at the disability office. Involvement with support services on campus can act to confirm the label (Craig et al., 2002). However, participants in this study seemed to have learned, during their academic journey, to come to terms with their disabilities and to accept the help of support services on campus. The learning strategist, who works with the students in the institution where the study took place, noted the change in self-perception in stating that:

Many of our students with learning disabilities arrive here with significant baggage. They've spent a lifetime working harder and longer on schoolwork only to get poorer results, and after a lifetime of struggling academically they've begun to believe that maybe they really aren't smart enough or industrious enough to be in university. Our first and most important task is to change that perception, to convince them that, if they will only trust us, we will provide them with the tools and information they need to learn at their potential. This is sometimes more easily said than done, but it is only when students can make this shift that they can begin to approach their potential and that success becomes possible. They need to discover who they are and how they learn before any of this can happen, and as with any growth or change, that can be an uncomfortable process. The students who ultimately succeed here though, are the ones who can make this shift.

(R. Hayes, personal communication, October, 16, 2006).

Participants in this study were able to recognize the effects of their learning disabilities and decided to exercise their right to accommodation services which contributed to their academic success. This finding is similar to other researchers such as Vogel and Adelman (1992). Registration with disability services was the initial process of disability acceptance; further, they chose to disclose their disability to family, peers, and faculty members.

Family members were surprised to learn about the participants' disability diagnoses. One set of parents was upset that their daughter had not been identified earlier, and others looked at the psycho-educational assessment in disbelief that their child could have experienced the difficulties stated in the report. Another issue expressed by the participants was the difference in cultural values, since the concept of a learning disability was new to the individuals and their families.

The act of explaining their learning disability was identified as a very difficult task for some of the participants because it is a name given to an array of difficulties and there is a misconception that a learning disability is equivalent to a developmental disability. Further, participants expressed that "they did not look like someone with a disability." This notion was observed by Lehman, Davies, and Laurin (2000) in inviting 35 college students, with a variety of disabilities, to participate in a focus group. They found that students lacked training or experience in describing their disability to others.

Another facet to learning disabilities is that they are invisible in nature. Participants were perceived by campus peers and faculty as not requiring accommodation services and as taking advantage of the facilities offered to individuals with disabilities. Olney and Kim (2001) noted that "a hidden disability can present barriers to appropriate

assistance or accommodation because it may be considered less legitimate and less significant than an apparent disability” (p. 564).

Peer groups can be very influential during post-secondary education. Astin (1993) stated that “the student’s peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years” (p. 398). Further, he stated that “students’ values, beliefs, and aspirations tend to change in the direction of the dominant values, beliefs, and aspirations of the peer group” (p. 398). Participants in this study struggled with the disclosure of their disability to their peers. They shared that many peers did not perceive them as having a disability and, as such, held the belief that they should not qualify to use disability services on campus. During the time of the study, Patricia was not using the services at the disability office and stated, “I think it was a problem for some of my friends when I was getting accommodations, they thought it was unfair” (Patricia, 473-474).

Students reported that disclosing their disability or not disclosing it depended on the relationship they had with their peers. This finding is similar to research on self-disclosure and employment of individuals with learning disabilities. Madaus, Foley, McGuire, and Ruban (2002) found that employees with learning disabilities do not disclose their disability in fear of job insecurity and being negatively perceived by co-workers and supervisors. Further, Fitzgerald and Paterson (1995) noted that for hidden disabilities, preservation of self might act as a motivation for concealment.

In this study, it was observed that faculty members often provided students with learning disabilities with accommodations. However, they created social and attitudinal barriers that made students feel uncomfortable in the academic environment. In terms of

accommodations, some made the process difficult for students who participated in this study. They chose not to announce for volunteer note-takers during class, they did not inform the student about the format of the exam prior to testing, they refused to meet with students during office hours to discuss accommodation needs, or they gave assignments that required more work compared to other students in the class.

Participants in this study were verbally offended by students in their classes and other students on campus. These attitudinal barriers made the campus environment and the educational experience very painful for some of the participants. Salezberg (2003) suggested that while most faculty members are willing to cooperate with instructional accommodations, they are not familiar with the programmatic and legal issues that impact students with disabilities on college campuses, which may result in the creation of unnecessary obstacles for these students. Further, faculty members can serve to maintain the stigma by openly identifying students with disabilities in their classrooms (Ellis and Abreu-Ellis, 2006).

Themes Related to Success

Learner-Centered Instruction

Bloom (1984) urged educators to use a variety of teaching strategies to satisfy students' needs. Further, Bloom observed (1984) that teaching professionals use traditional methods of lecturing. However, not all students in a class learn best by auditory stimulation. Therefore, he encouraged teachers to use a variety of teaching styles to enhance student learning. Similarly, Gardener (1993) suggested eight modalities of intelligence and explained that every learner may show evidence of competency in one or more of these eight facets. However, most individuals are more developed in some areas

as opposed to others. Brown (2003) stated “the premise ‘one teaching style fits all’ which is attributed to a teacher-centered instructional approach, is not working for a growing number of diverse, student populations” (p. 49). Further, Weimer (2002) called for a learner-centered approach to teaching. Five key changes to practice were recommended: (a) shared power between instructors and students, (b) course content as the means to knowledge, (c) the teacher as a facilitator, (d) a shift on the responsibility for learning, and (e) the use of evaluations that promote learning.

Participants in this study described their interaction with faculty members and with support services on campus. Findings indicate that professors who used teaching methods that did not take into consideration individuals’ learning styles and needs were the largest barriers for students with learning disabilities. Conversely, faculty members who were accommodating and tried to understand the student and her individual needs were considered very helpful in the educational process of these students. Instructional methods identified by the participants included: professors’ willingness to diversify the classroom assignments to benefit all students; reading Power Point slides verbatim when lecturing; and keeping a line of open communication with the disability office as well as with students.

The teaching methods described by the participants in this study are in line with the principles of universal design. Bowe (2000) describes seven principles of Universal Design, which included: (1) equitable use, (2) flexibility in use, (3) simple and intuitive use, (4) perceptible information, (5) tolerance for error, (6) low physical effort, and (7) size and space for approach and use. More specifically Bowe (2000) exemplified the

fourth principle “perceptible information” with an example recommended by one of the participants in this study, as he noted:

As do many professors, I often lecture with the aid of overhead transparencies and/or with Microsoft Power Point slides I make a conscious effort to read out loud each word on each transparency or Power Point slide. This is sometimes annoying for me, because I have not only already read these materials several times, I wrote them. I must remind myself that for my students they are new. The worst mistake I could make is to show a slide or a transparency and then, without reading it, use it as a springboard to launch into a discussion of what these presentations imply. My students would still be trying to understand the visual message, so they would not be able to process my auditory one. (p. 77)

Participants in this study felt that meeting with professors during office hours helped them to understand the materials as well as helped faculty understand their needs. However, it is important to note that how a student felt about meeting with faculty during office hours was determined by previous faculty/student interaction. If faculty made the student feel awkward during their initial meeting, the student might be reluctant to disclose her disability or explain accommodation needs to faculty members in the future. Similarly, Troiano (2003) found that participants reported stigmatization in the post-secondary settings, especially when explaining to professors about their disabilities and accommodation needs.

The Seven Principles of Effective Learning suggested by Chickering and Gamson (1987) were identified by the participants as essential elements in the learning process, especially the first and last principles, which examine student–faculty contact and

respect for diverse talents and ways of learning. Participants expressed that, because they required academic accommodations, faculty were made aware that these students had a learning disability. Also, some of the participants stated that they attempted to interact with faculty during office hours, to review tests and exams and to explain accommodation needs. The positive interaction between students with learning disabilities and professors was beneficial to the participants especially when faculty demonstrated respect for the diverse talents and ways of learning of the participants.

Samantha discussed an accommodation provided by one of her professors, which demonstrated the understanding of diversity and familiarity of student's needs. The instructor allowed the student to increase her class participation mark by allowing her a different evaluation method. "Every week I would write a summary of the article that we have read and I would write down a few questions that I had about the article" (Samantha, 176-177).

It is important to note that students with learning disabilities as well as other students in a class would benefit from these principles which involve: (a) student-faculty contact, (b) cooperation among students, (c) active learning, (d) prompt feedback, (e) time on task, (f) high expectations, and (g) respect for diverse talents and ways of learning (Chickering & Gamson, 1987).

You've Got a Friend

The disability office was identified by the participants as their main support structure on campus. Several participants reported that they did not feel like a number in the disability office. Alicia reported "I find that when you walk in to our center that everyone is like saying how is school going? You know, it is like, it is so positive..."

(Alicia, 97-98). They reported being treated as individuals by the front line staff and advisors and that people were always willing to provide them with assistance. As Ashley noted:

I have to say that I really love the people in the disability office, whether I see them in the office or whether I see them during their own time. They are always kind and respectful; it is not like I am not working right now so I don't have to talk to you. No, they still want to talk to you and they want to know that things are going well for you and that makes it really easy to come to them when you have a problem... They want to make sure you are taken care of even if they are not your advisor and if you need help with something they are willing to take the time...

(Ashley, 137-143)

The learning strategist in the disability office played an important role in assisting the participants in understanding their disability and developing self-confidence in their academic endeavors. He also assisted the students in developing more efficient study skills, time management, and organization skills to facilitate their performance at university.

The disability office offered academic support and resources, such as technology bursaries, classroom and exam accommodations, and a welcoming environment where students felt that they could share academic or disability related concerns. Therefore, it is possible to say that the affiliation with the disability office was an important element in the success of participants in higher education.

Determination to Excel; The Power to Succeed

Participants in this study identified their desire to complete a degree and their determination to start a new career as the main reasons for their academic success. Participants were very passionate about their future careers in the areas of education, human kinetics, and social services. They were determined to become teachers and aimed to have the opportunity of making a difference in the lives of their students. Others searched for involvement in the field of social work, providing advocacy, and seeking social justice. These career choices might be the result of their own personal experiences as individuals with learning disabilities who struggled academically and socially in order to succeed.

The participants' aspirations to accomplish their academic goals, in order to pursue their career goals, might have impacted their determination to succeed in higher education. Research in the area of career counseling discusses the impact of self-efficacy theory in determining individual's career goals. Bandura (1989) noted:

Those who have a high sense of efficacy visualize success scenarios that provide positive guides for performance, and they cognitively rehearse good solutions to potential problems. Those who judge themselves as inefficacious are more inclined to visualize failure scenarios and to dwell on how things will go wrong.

Such inefficacious thinking weakens motivation and performance. (p. 729)

Further, Multon, Brown, and Lent (1991) performed a meta-analytical investigation of self-efficacy beliefs to academic performance and persistence and concluded that "self-efficacy beliefs relate to important performance and persistence variables in academic contexts" (p. 36).

Intrinsic motivation has also been identified as a contributor to academic performance. Baker (2003) noted that “intrinsic motivation, that is, doing an activity voluntarily for its own sake and the pleasure and satisfaction derived from participation, has a positive influence on academic performance” (p. 571). Participants in this study had very clear career goals and were determined to succeed. They expressed their determination by acknowledging intrinsic values as critical to their success. These included determination, persistence, and the hope for a better future, an instinct for survival, initiative, motivation, being stubborn, and the need to prove others wrong. These personal attributes contributed to the achievement of the participants’ goals.

Similarly, Lent and Hackett (1987) noted that self-determination may only impact the individual when people possess adequate skills and incentives in order to perform. Further, they referred to the children’s poem, *The Little Blue Engine*: “If the track is tough and the hill is rough, thinking you can just ain’t enough!” (Silverstein, 1974, p. 158) and concluded: “Thus, a fair retort to the Little Engine admonition might be: ‘If you’ve got the skill, support, and desire, then ‘thinking you can’ could light your fire.’ (p. 577).

Implications for Practice

The purpose of this study was to identify the experiences faced by successful students with learning disabilities in higher education at a university in Ontario. Research findings illuminate a better understanding of the challenges and successes faced by the students who participated in this study. This section will discuss the implications for practice that emerged from the participants’ stories and may assist administrators, faculty

members, and service providers in developing better programs and policy to address the needs of students with learning disabilities in post-secondary education.

Identification of Students with Learning Disabilities

Most of the participants arrived at university without an official diagnosis of a learning disability. Therefore, it might be considered prudent that K-12 school systems in Ontario should become more proactive in the early identification process of students with learning disabilities. Further, participants acknowledged being recipients of accommodations while in high school, even though they had not had a proper diagnosis. This practice creates a problem for students when they reach post-secondary education because they do not have appropriate documentation to confirm their disability and therefore, do not qualify for services until a psycho-education assessment is performed.

The process of acquiring a new assessment is often lengthy; it may take up to two semesters for students to see a psychologist, complete testing, and receive feedback on the outcome of the assessment. During this time, students do not receive academic accommodations. It is imperative to take into consideration that students may seek help after a “trial” period on being on their own. However, by the time they reach the disability office, it might be too late to initiate the process for an assessment; they might already find themselves on academic probation or being required to withdraw. Also, it is important to note that since many students are unaware of their disabilities, they may never contact the disability office for support services. They may leave the education system due to poor academic performance.

Therefore, it is important to identify students who require learning disability accommodations at an early age and to improve communication between high school and

post-secondary service providers in order to close the educational gap between the two systems and improve the services provided to students with learning disabilities.

Transition Programs for Students with Learning Disabilities

Many universities across Canada offer transition programs for students with learning disabilities. These initiatives should include sessions on academic success and learning strategies that focus on the needs of students with learning disabilities. Further, psychologists who perform psycho-educational assessments might be invited to explain to students, in general terms, what a learning disability is and how it affects the individual. A session on self-advocacy skills might also benefit students with learning disabilities where they can learn to become more assertive and to develop self-worth. Role-play techniques can be used to practice explaining their strengths and limitations to others. These sessions might help students improve their understanding of learning disabilities as well as how to convey information to peers, family members, and faculty.

It is also recommended that graduating students with learning disabilities be invited to discuss their experiences with first-year students. This might facilitate the transition from high school to university and it might alert students of problems they might encounter as well as possible solutions.

During regular orientation programs, administrators might want to share information about transition programs for students with learning disabilities. This proactive initiative might help spreading the word about and reaching a greater number of students who might otherwise not consider self-identification with the disability office.

Reducing the Stigma on Campus

Programs involving peer mentoring can assist in reducing the stigma faced by students with learning disabilities on campus. Such programs can facilitate the interaction between students with and without disabilities as well as offer support during the transition from high school to university.

The disability service office can develop informational media explaining “hidden disabilities” and how individuals can be affected by these disabilities. Presentations on the topic should be developed and offered at different venues, such as at faculty meetings and to residence hall directors and students.

Concerned Peers

Students who arrived at university without the proper diagnoses were fortunate to meet a friend who helped them get the help they needed on campus. Participants shared that they became aware of the disability services due to their peers. A roommate brought home a brochure about the disability services office or they met someone on a train who expressed similar difficulties. Student organizations on campus for students with disabilities in general might help create campus awareness of disability issues and assist students who are facing academic difficulties due to an undiagnosed disability.

Professional Development for Faculty

Faculty members could benefit from professional development sessions in which the rights and responsibilities of students with disabilities and legislation supporting the services to students with disabilities in higher education are explained. Further, they might benefit from workshops that address the removal of attitudinal and physical barriers for students with disabilities.

Post-secondary institutions may require that new faculty members who are in tenure track positions demonstrate how they adapt their teaching methods/ environment to accommodate diverse students as part of their tenure evaluation. As a result of this initiative, faculty might be more motivated to participate in professional development opportunities on the principles of universal design and removal of barriers for students with disabilities. It is important to inform faculty that the disability service office can act as a partner and a resource in the accommodation process of students with disabilities on campuses. These initiatives can make the learning environment more accessible to students with learning disabilities.

Learning Strategist

The project Enhanced Service Funding (ESF) was funded by the government to provide individualized learning strategies and assistive technology to students with learning disabilities on post-secondary education campuses. As a result, colleges and universities in Ontario have individuals with expertise in learning strategies and/or assistive technology who work directly with students with learning disabilities.

The learning strategist was identified as a great support for the students who participated in this study. Individuals in this position must continue to receive training on up-to-date strategies as well as how they may act as educational mentors for students with learning disabilities. Government funding for this position must continue to exist to ensure that these individuals are present in post-secondary education settings. Students with learning disabilities require experts in the area of learning to help them improve their academic performance and increase their chances of success at university.

Partnership with University Offices

The disability office on campuses should develop partnerships with other offices on campus to ensure appropriate services for students with disabilities. These may include, but are not limited to career services, counseling services, and writing centers. These offices can assist students develop appropriate career goals as well receive academic, and emotional support. Students struggling with self-concept issues related to the identification of their disability as well as with stigma on campus might benefit from counseling in order to develop a better understanding of their disability and how to relate to others on campus.

Disability Office

Disability offices on campuses across Canada are facing greater number of students procuring services and a profound shortage of resources which includes lack of financial support, shortage of physical space, and lack of personnel. It is important to note that for many students these offices serve as the foundation and the only source of support at university. Therefore, it is essential that higher education administrators do not underestimate the value of the services provided by this office and allocate funding to support services provided to students with disabilities. Further, the disability office's mandate is to serve students based on their individual needs. It is a place where students feel welcome and where services are provided in a timely manner; it facilitates the provision of services and assists students in their academic endeavors.

Implications for Future Research

The present research provided information about the experiences of six successful students with learning disabilities at a particular university in Ontario. The purpose of this

study was to give a voice to students with learning disabilities who completed their degrees and who wanted to share their stories addressing the challenges and successes they faced, while in higher education. This section will outline recommendations for future research that emerged from this inquiry. Research in the area of learning disabilities and higher education is warranted so administrators and faculty can continue to improve upon services provided to students with learning disabilities in post-secondary education. Findings suggest the following questions merit future research:

1. It is recommended that future researchers focus on the experiences of students with learning disabilities who were identified in early childhood in their journeys to and in higher education.
2. It may be useful to conduct a qualitative inquiry including men and women participants.
3. A questionnaire may be distributed randomly to special education teachers in Ontario in order to understand the identification and accommodation process for students with learning disabilities in the K-12 system.
4. It is also recommended that faculty members be asked about their understanding of disability accommodations and legislation regarding the accommodation process. This information will help university constituencies develop further training that benefit faculty members serving students with learning disabilities.
5. Research evaluating the principles of Universal Design for students with and without learning disabilities might help faculty members prepare more accessible classes to the benefit all students.

Conclusion

This study aimed to identify the experiences of a group of students with learning disabilities in higher education at a Canadian university in Ontario. This research used qualitative methods grounded within a constructivist paradigm. Six participants volunteered to participate in a face-to-face in depth interview and to share their stories with the researcher. These six women were considered successful in higher education because they were close to program completion at the time of the study. However, their experience in higher education was not always easy.

It is the researcher's hope that this study serves as a snapshot of the lives of the participants that opens up the door for future exploration and research in the area of disability and higher education. This research might be useful to service providers, faculty members, and administrators to improve the services rendered to students with learning disabilities in post-secondary institutions.

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APPENDIX A. INTRODUCTION LETTER

March 9, 2006

Dear Student,

I am currently a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education Administration Program at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. Presently, I am in the process of identifying participants for my dissertation research entitled “Learning disabilities and success in postsecondary education: How students make sense of their experiences at a Canadian University.”

The purpose of this study is to identify the challenges students with learning disabilities face in higher education at a university in Southwest, Ontario. More specifically I want to learn about your experience as a university student with a learning disability. The intention of this study is to put a face, and give voice to students with learning disabilities in higher education.

Students who are selected to participate in this study, will participate in a face-to-face interview lasting approximately 60-90 minutes. After the interview is completed I will send you a copy of the transcription of the interview with my interpretation for your review. A follow up phone conversation may take place in order to clarify information from the interview. Interviews will be arranged at your convenience. I will request your permission to tape-record the interviews to ensure accuracy of the responses.

It is important to mention that I am currently working in the (Special Needs Program), however you are under no obligation to participate in this study. Your advisor, who is delivering this letter to you will not be informed of your choice to participate in

this study. Your name and university which you are currently enrolled will be omitted or substituted by a pseudonym (fake name) in order to ensure confidentiality.

If you are interested in participating in this study please contact me by phone (519) 253-3000 (3298) or by e-mail at carlaab@bgsu.edu by _____, 2006.

Students who are chosen to participate in this study will enter a draw to win a gift certificate from the bookstore.

If you have any questions or need clarification, please do not hesitate to call me at (519)253-3000 ext 3298 (work), (419) or by e-mail at carlaab@bgsu.edu or contact my advisor Dr. DeBard at (419)372-9397 or by e-mail at rdebard@bgsu.edu.

APPENDIX B. ADVISOR SCRIPT

Dear Student:

Carla Ellis is one of the advisor's here in the Special Needs Program at the University of Windsor, and she is currently working on her doctorate degree at Bowling Green State University. Her project is titled: Learning Disabilities and Success in Postsecondary Education: How Students Make Sense of Their Experiences at a Canadian University.

She is currently in the process of recruiting participants for this study. She asked me to approach students who I work with, who have a learning disability, and who are enrolled in their last year of academic studies. I thought you would be a good candidate for her study, so I am giving you a copy of Carla's introduction letter.

Also, Carla asked me to let you know that you are under no obligation to participate in this study and that I (your advisor) will not be informed of your decision to participate. If you choose to participate in this study, your identity will remain confidential.

For more information read the letter, I am giving to you. If you choose to participate you may win a draw for a gift certificate from the bookstore.

Thanks,

Advisor

APPENDIX C. INTERVIEW GUIDE

- A. Greetings. Thank you for participating in my dissertation study.
- B. I am a graduate student at Bowling Green State University currently working on my dissertation towards a doctoral degree in higher education administration. The intention of this study is to put a face, and give voice to students with learning disabilities in higher education. I want to learn about your challenges and successes related to your university experience since you are close to graduation and an individual with a learning disability.
- C. Before we begin the interview I will read the **Consent Form** aloud while you can read along if you like on your copy.
- D. I will now ask you to respond to a series of open-ended questions.
- E. Identification of a learning disability:
 - a. Tell me about when you were first identified as having a learning disability.
 - b. How did high school teachers, or other staff in high school, advise you about university?
 - c. What was your motivation to attend university?
- F. Preparation for University:
 - a. Reflecting back to your first year of university, talk to me about how prepared you were for university.
 - b. Tell me what lead you to become aware of the disability service office on campus.
- G. Challenges and Successes:

- a. What do you perceive as the primary obstacles that you have faced here at the university?

H. Services on Campus:

- a. At what point did you decide to register with the disability office? What motivated you to register?
- b. What kinds of academic accommodations have you received?

I. Student Involvement:

- a. How would you describe your interaction with faculty? Can you tell me more about how they accommodated your needs? What about out-of-class interaction?
- b. What were some of the attributes of those faculty members who you found best met your learning style needs?
- c. What out-of-class experiences were most meaningful to your success at the university?
- d. What kind of involvement in student clubs did you participate in during your academic career?
- e. Aside from faculty, who else on the campus helped you succeed in college?

J. Individual Characteristics:

- a. What personal attributes do you have that helped you succeed at university?

K. Other:

- a. Anything else you would like to add? (Probes will follow this line of inquiry)

APPENDIX D. INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



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February 22, 2006

TO: Carla Abreu-Ellis
HESA

FROM: Richard Rowlands ^{R²}
HSRB Administrator

RE: HSRB Project No.: H06D208GE7

TITLE: *Learning Disabilities and Success in Postsecondary Education: How Students Make Sense of Their Experiences at a Canadian University*

You have met the conditions for approval for your project involving human subjects. **As of February 22, 2006, your project has been granted final approval by the Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB). This approval expires on February 16, 2007.** You may proceed with subject recruitment and data collection.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is attached. Consistent with federal OHRP guidance to IRBs, **the consent document(s) bearing the HSRB approval/expiration date stamp is the only valid version and you must use copies of the date-stamped document(s) in obtaining consent from research subjects.**

You are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB and to use only approved forms. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures (including increases in the number of participants), please send a request for modifications immediately to the HSRB via this office. Please notify me, in writing (fax: 372-6916 or email: hsrb@bgnet.bgsu.edu) upon completion of your project.

Good luck with your work. Let me know if this office or the HSRB can be of assistance as your project proceeds.

Comments/ Modifications:

Internal BGSU HSRB conditions for final approval have been met. It is the understanding of the HSRB that research activities at the University of Windsor will not be initiated until approval from the University of Windsor's Research Ethics Board has been obtained. When this approval is obtained, please provide documentation of that approval to us for the file. Thank you.

c: Dr. Robert DeBard

APPENDIX E. INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



Today's Date: March 10, 2006
 Principal Investigator: Ms. Carla A. Ellis
 Department/School: Special Needs
 REB Number: 06-062
 Research Project Title: Learning disabilities and success in postsecondary education: how students make sense of their experiences at a Canadian university
 Clearance Date: March 9, 2006
 Project End Date: December 15, 2006
 Progress Report Due:
 Final Report Due: December 15, 2006

This is to inform you that the University of Windsor Research Ethics Board (REB), which is organized and operated according to the *Tri-Council Policy Statement* and the University of Windsor *Guidelines for Research Involving Human Subjects*, has granted approval to your research project on the date noted above. This approval is valid only until the Project End Date.

A Progress Report or Final Report is due by the date noted above. The REB may ask for monitoring information at some time during the project's approval period.

During the course of the research, no deviations from, or changes to, the protocol or consent form may be initiated without prior written approval from the REB. Minor change(s) in ongoing studies will be considered when submitted on the Request to Revise form.

Investigators must also report promptly to the REB:

- a) changes increasing the risk to the participant(s) and/or affecting significantly the conduct of the study;
- b) all adverse and unexpected experiences or events that are both serious and unexpected;
- c) new information that may adversely affect the safety of the subjects or the conduct of the study.

Forms for submissions, notifications, or changes are available on the REB website: www.uwindsor.ca/reb.

We wish you every success in your research.

Maureen Muldoon

Maureen Muldoon, Ph.D.
 Chair, Research Ethics Board

cc: Dr. Jonathan Bayley, Education
 Linda Bunn, Research Ethics Coordinator

This is an official document. Please retain the original in your files.

APPENDIX F. INFORMED CONSENT



Bowling Green State University

Higher Education Administration
330 Education Building
Bowling Green, Ohio 43403

Informed Consent

Principal Investigator: Carla Abreu-Ellis, M.Ed. Phone: (519) 253-3000
ext.3298

Project Title: Learning Disabilities and Success in Postsecondary Education:
How Students Make Sense of Their Experiences at a Canadian University

I am a graduate student at Bowling Green State University currently working on my dissertation towards a doctoral degree in higher education administration. The intention of this study is to put a face, and give voice to students with learning disabilities in higher education. You have been invited with no obligation to participate in an interview for the purpose of discussing your experience of being someone with a learning disability who is close to completion of your postsecondary education. Specifically, I am interested in learning from you what factors contributed to your academic success. The outcome of this study will help individuals with learning disabilities and other members of the campus community to understand the challenges and successes faced by students with learning disabilities in a postsecondary setting in Canada. This study might help administrators and faculty members to develop transition programs and campus wide services to better serve students with learning disabilities in higher education. Research findings for this study will be posted at <http://person.bgsu.edu/~carlaab>.

Participation in this project will involve one interview approximately 60 to 90 minutes long. The transcription of the interview with my interpretation will be sent to you. A follow-up phone call may take place in order to clarify your comments from the interview. This is done in order to ensure credibility of the study. You are under no obligation to complete the project; participation is strictly voluntary. Your decision to participate or not will not impact your grades, class standing or relationship to the institution. There are no anticipated risks involved with participation in this study. Furthermore, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to participate, your identity will remain confidential. Your identity will be protected by the use of a pseudonym. The

name of your institution will be changed or omitted. If you allow the interview to be audio taped, please note that the tape(s) will not be heard by anyone except the principal investigator and upon the completion of the study they will be destroyed.

Do you have any questions (please circle one)? YES NO

You are making a decision whether or not to participate in this study having read the information provided above. Do not sign this form until your questions have been addressed to your satisfaction. If you have questions about the study, you may contact the principal investigator at carlaab@bgsu.edu or at (519) 253-3000 (ext. 3298) or my advisor Dr. DeBard at (419) 372-9397 or rdebard@bgsu.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Chair of Human Subjects Review Board, Bowling Green State University at (419) 372-7716 or the REB office at University of Windsor at (519) 253-3000 ext. 3916 or at lbunn@uwindsor.ca.

Please retain a copy of this form (two have been provided) for your records.

I AGREE to participate in this study.

I GIVE DO NOT GIVE permission for the interview to be tape-record.
(please circle one)

The data gathered in this research may be used for subsequent pieces of research. Do you give consent for the subsequent use of data from this study (please circle one)? **YES NO**

Do you want your name to enter a draw for a gift certificate to the bookstore (please circle one)? **YES NO**

Date: _____

Participant's signature: _____

Participant's name (print): _____

Principal Investigator: _____



CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title of Study: Learning Disabilities and Success in Postsecondary Education: How Students Make Sense of Their Experiences at a Canadian University

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Carla Abreu Ellis, from the Higher Education Administration Program at the Bowling Green State University. Your participation in this study will help me fulfill the research requirements of my doctoral program.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Carla Abreu Ellis at (519) 252-3000 ext 3298 or by e-mail at carlaaab@bgsu.edu. If you have any further questions about this research project you may contact my faculty advisor Dr. Robert DeBard at (419) 372-9297 or by e-mail at rdebard@bgsu.edu.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The intention of this study is to put a face, and give voice to students with learning disabilities in higher education. You have been invited with no obligation to participate in an interview for the purpose of discussing your experience of being someone with a learning disability who is close to completion of your postsecondary education. Specifically, I am interested in learning from you what factors contributed to your academic success.

PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Participants will be asked to sign a consent form.
2. Participants will be asked to participate in a face-to-face, individual in-depth, 60-90 minutes interview.
3. Participants will be asked to review the transcriptions and researchers' constructions of the interview (member checking).
4. Participants might be asked to participate on a follow-up phone call to clarify their comments from the interview.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

There are no risks associated with this study.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

The outcome of this study will help individuals with learning disabilities and other members of the campus community to understand the challenges and successes faced by students with learning disabilities in a postsecondary setting in Canada. This study might help administrators and faculty members to develop transition programs and campus wide services to better serve students with learning disabilities in higher education.

PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION

Participants will not receive payment for participating in this study; however a draw for a gift certificate to the bookstore will take place at the end of the study.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. If you choose to participate your identity will remain confidential. Your identity will be protected by the use of a pseudonym. The name of your institution will be changed or omitted. If you allow the interview to be audio taped, please note that the tape(s) will not be heard by anyone except the principal investigator and upon the completion of the study they will be destroyed.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and still remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

FEEDBACK OF THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY TO THE SUBJECTS

Upon completion of the study research findings will be posted at <http://person.bgsu.edu/~carlaab>.

SUBSEQUENT USE OF DATA

Data from this study may be used in subsequent studies.

Do you give consent for the subsequent use of the data from this study? ☐ Yes ☐ No

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact: Research Ethics Coordinator, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario, N9B 3P4; telephone: 519-253-3000, ext. 3916; e-mail: lbunn@uwindsor.ca. You also may contact the Chair of Human Subjects Review Board, Bowling Green State University at (419) 372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu.

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH SUBJECT/LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE

I understand the information provided for the study: Learning Disabilities and Success in Postsecondary Education: How Students Make Sense of Their Experiences at a Canadian University as described herein. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

Name of Subject

Signature of Subject

Date

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

These are the terms under which I will conduct research.

Signature of Investigator

Date