

Identity, Intersections, and Students with Disabilities in Community Colleges

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Access and opportunity in U. S. society is often segmented based on group membership that influences social, political, educational, and career mobility. As U. S. institutions traditionally did not seek diversity or endeavor to broaden participation, stratification has been normative—particularly in educational contexts (Zamani-Gallaher, Green, Brown, & Stovall, 2009). Historically, postsecondary education was not open to the masses; rather, it was reserved primarily for able-bodied, middle-class, white males, whereby the massification of U. S. higher education took root with the invention of the U. S. community college (Zamani-Gallaher, 2016). As the principle sector of higher education that has sought to broaden participation and expand opportunities, community colleges have provided on-ramps to further education and gainful employment for significant numbers of students. For example, in 1920, there were 52 community colleges and enrollment was concentrated at four-year colleges as community colleges accounted for less than 10% of students. By 2018, there were over 1,100 community colleges educating nearly half of all undergraduates in the U.S. (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018; Synder, 1993; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1960).

Community colleges are essential to the educational enterprise as key gateways to opportunity (Beach, 2012; Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014) and purveyors of access for many students, particularly those from marginalized groups (e.g., first-generation, low-income, underrepresented racial/ethnic minority students, and collegians with disabilities). In fact, the opportunities for postsecondary education for the majority of students with disabilities are at community colleges. Of the 13 million students who attend community colleges, 12% are classified as a person with a disability (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018). People with disabilities attend community colleges in greater numbers than enrolling in four-year institutions because of their affordability, open-door policies, and support services (Bell & Zamani-Gallaher, 2017; Chang & Logan, 2002; Hoachlander, Sikora, Horn, & Carroll, 2003; Quick, Lehmann, & Deniston, 2003). Approximately 44% of persons with disabilities between the ages of 18 to 26 enroll in community college after they graduate high school (Newman, et al., 2011). In 2015, 10% of persons with disabilities completed some college, 8% completed an associate's degree, 4% completed a bachelor's degree, and 3% of those who had completed a master's degree or a higher degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Over four-fifths of people with disabilities who were employed held a postsecondary certificate or degree (Institute of Education Sciences, 2011).

Transitioning to Postsecondary and Navigating the Community College Context

Students with disabilities have less likelihood of attaining a high school degree than their peers who do not have a disability and are significantly underrepresented in the populations of community colleges due to lack of academic preparation, lack of college transition planning, and ineffective communication and support services (Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009; Oertle & Bragg, 2014). However, enrollment in Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs has been shown to increase the odds of high school completion for students with disabilities—nearly 70% are more likely to graduate from high school in four years than similar peers who enrolled in traditional comprehensive high school programs (Theobald, Goldhaber, Gratz, & Holden, 2017). High school CTE programs improve college and career readiness for participating students with disabilities, and those who are CTE concentrators have better educational outcomes than students with disabilities without a CTE concentration (Grindal, Dougherty, & Hehir, 2013; Theobald, Goldhaber, Gratz, & Holden, 2017). Nationwide, nearly one-fifth of



students participating in Career and Technical Education (CTE) in traditional high schools have a disability. Hence, CTE programs at the secondary and postsecondary level help students gain skills with labor– market value and expose them to trades. In addition, such programs assist students with disabilities in transitioning toward further education and/or gainful employment in the workplace.

For students with disabilities who enroll in a community college, a significant adjustment they face is the navigation of disability services. During registration, students with disabilities are required to provide corroborating medical documentation or assessments from professionals that describe the nature of their disability, how it impairs their learning, and why accommodations are needed (Gill, 2007). Once students provide sufficient evidence that they have a disability protected by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the disability specialist at the college is required to provide them with a letter that outlines their eligible academic accommodations. Subsequently, in many instances, students are required to present the letter to their instructors to receive accommodations. This is not a process required of other students and suggests that students with disabilities must deal with a responsibility for their equitable treatment and self–advocate. Thus, the norm in community colleges is that students with disabilities are being subjected to added requirements that create additional burdens during their college studies.

Faculty–Student Interactions and Student Support Services

Research has found that three–fourths of faculty members have limited contact with students with disabilities, as well as a vague understanding of the accommodation process and/or disability laws (Baggett, 1994; Leyser, Vogel, Wyland, & Brulle, 1998; Murray, Lombardi, Wren, & Keys, 2009). Strong interpersonal connections help students and faculty have interactions that are meaningful. Faculty members must be aware of how their reaction to accommodations affects students in their

classes. The perceived stigma or potential for negative interactions is a disincentive for collegians with disabilities to seek support services (Hartman–Hall & Haaga, 2002), especially when an individual has a hidden disability. Studies (Baggett, 1994; Gitlow, 2001; Hadley, Hsu, Addison, & Talbot, 2017) have noted that faculty are more willing to provide accommodations to individuals with visible conditions, such as mobility, physicality, hearing, and visual impairments, than those with invisible conditions.

Students with disabilities experience many barriers within the campus environment including ones that are both institutional and attitudinal (Nichols & Quaye, 2009). Institutional barriers associated with disability accommodations and attitudinal barriers can make disclosing one’s disability extremely challenging, especially for people with invisible disabilities. Individuals may elect to hide their disabilities or fail to seek accommodations because of the perceived stigma associated with having a disability that is invisible (Barnard–Brak, Lan, & Sulak, 2010). The lack of willingness to accommodate people with invisible disabilities could be attributed to faculty members having limited contact and/or understanding of their experience. The lack of willingness to make accommodations along with what students with disabilities contend is faculty and staff ignorance regarding reasonable accommodations makes some individuals less forthcoming in disclosing their disabilities, which adversely affects their educational experience and having their needs met (Gasgreen, 2014).

Student Identities and Intersections of Self

The needs of collegians are as vast and diverse as the students and institutional contexts they are surrounded by. More study is needed in furthering the understanding of the experiences of college students with disabilities across the spectrum of difference (i.e., race/ethnicity, gender, religion, class, sexuality, nationality, etc.). Relative to access policies, even within the larger policy context of disability as a social–justice imperative, disability



legislation (Rothstein, 2004) has moved at a much slower pace than other civil rights initiatives (e.g., the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504), Subpart E (Pub. L. No. 93–112, 34 C.F.R.), the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 (Pub. L. 101–336 [July 1990]; 42 U.S.C. 12101) and the recent ADA Amendment of 2008 (Pub. L. No. 110–325 [S 3406]). For instance, the ADA does not infuse racial, gender, class, or sexuality routinely into policy regulation and compliance for hiring or college admissions decisions (Zamani–Gallaher et al, 2009). Overall, disability rights in the U.S. have been stagnant as policies and practices that ensure full inclusion and produce equitable educational and employment outcomes (Kim & Aquino, 2017; Shapiro, 2011; U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission [EEOC], 2008).

When considering issues of equity and inclusion, namely for students with disabilities, there are intersections of identity and ways in which some identities are dominant and privileged while others are considered less salient as they are not the “norm” by which all others are compared; subsequently, constructing individuals as disabled people subjects them to multiple forms of oppression across the multiplicity of their identities and further normalizes exclusion (Oliver & Barnes, 2012). “We have a much clearer collective notion of what it means to be a woman, an African–American, a gay person, or a transgender person than we do of what it means to be disabled” (Garland–Thomson, 2016), p. 1). One way of furthering the understanding of intersectional identities is through applying critical disability studies theory to situate and contextualize the significance of race and gender (Tong, 1999). Critical disability studies problematizes the framing of disability as a singular identity or condition that does not intersect with other aspects of self that inform identity and experiences with oppression, whereas identity is fluid and multidimensional.

Core to disabilities studies is identity work that developed from the disability rights movement and the application of critical theory, which has diversified critical disabilities research in situating multiple–group membership, identity salience, and intersectionality relative to minoritized–status persons with disabilities experience (Campbell, 2008; Garland–Thomson, 2016; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2016; Miller, Wynn, & Webb, 2017). Critical disabilities studies has provided a space to acknowledge and discuss cultural identification in a broader fashion and beyond disability categorization and marginalization of identities that are racialized, gendered, sexualized, and class–based. Gibson (2006) identified three stages of disability identity development: passive awareness, realization, and acceptance. The first stage of this model is

called passive awareness and occurs early in people with disabilities’ lives but can continue into adulthood. During this stage, a professional treats an individual’s disability, but family and friends otherwise overlook it. Consequently, an individual does not have a role model or source of support who understands disabilities. The second stage of this model is called realization. Typically, individuals at this stage are in their adolescence or early adulthood. While in this phase, a person begins to acknowledge that he or she has a disability. This self–acknowledgement is preceded by negative feelings about his or her identity. While in this phase, a person has unrealistic personal expectations or goals and a hyper awareness of his or her appearance. The last stage is called acceptance. At this stage, a person with a disability has begun to accept his or her disability and no longer views differences from others as a negative condition. As well during this phase, the individual with a disability has developed meaningful relationships with other persons with disabilities and has potentially become a disability advocate and/or activist.

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Little in the area of disability identity research deeply explored the intersectional identities and lived experiences of students with disability–navigating group membership in multiple marginalized, minoritized groups, particularly with regard to sexuality. In the past, research focusing on LGBTQ and disabled persons broadly focused on disability or queer status and failed to consider how belonging to both the LGBTQ and disabled population impacts students. Additionally, colleges and universities have historically overlooked the reality that their students may belong to or identify with multiple minority populations, which influences both their access to higher education as well as their collegiate experience. Intersectionality speaks to the challenges associated with belonging to multiple minority groups and how a person’s status as a dual minority influences his or her position within society (Crenshaw, 1989). Crenshaw (1989) contended that theoretical, political, and social perspectives of marginalized groups do not consider the experiences of subgroups with intersecting identities within society and suggested that persons who identify with more than one subjugated group should not have their experiences generalized based upon the experiences of the privileged members (e.g., white men, white homosexual men, white women). Acknowledging the intersectionality of identities allows the recognition of the uniqueness of experiences with discrimination that people identifying with multiple marginalized groups have. Her arguments regarding intersectionality apply to the experiences of LGBTQ persons with disabilities. Queer and disability theorists like Tobin Siebers (2008) argue that queer and disability theory can inform the theory of

intersectionality and vice versa because both disability and queer identities intersect with other identities. However, until recently, this position had not translated to research.

Like other minority groups within the U.S., discussions about the experiences of persons with disabilities occur from a broad perspective. For persons with disabilities who identify with a second minority group (e.g., African-American, Latino American, and Native American), higher education is more elusive. For example, six out of 10 undergraduate students with disabilities are members of a racial/ethnic minority group, and that figure rises to three out of four when including biracial and multiracial college students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). While the postsecondary presence of racially minoritized students with disabilities is limited, educational data do acknowledge their existence. Yet these statistics overlook the postsecondary access of persons with disabilities belonging to the LGBTQ population. Therefore, the educational participation of LGBTQ members identifying as disabled is statistically unknown. The intersectionality of identities within certain groups is overlooked when it comes to extant research focused on the impact of disability status, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

Conclusion

This article highlights some of the opportunities and the barriers facing students with disabilities. More specifically, the role of the community colleges in serving students with disabilities as well as CTE as a means of fostering more equitable outcomes for students with disabilities and underscoring the diversity within this student subgroup. There is incredible diversity among students with disabilities as they hold multiple identities outside of their disability status that are just as salient. Research has noted the harassment, discrimination, and other challenges that college students belonging to the LGBTQ and disabled community experience, which are reflective of broader social attitudes surrounding disability and LGBTQ status as undesirable (Harley, Nowak, Gassaway, & Savage, 2002). One buffer that aids in mitigating chilly campus climates are student-faculty connections, particularly where there is perhaps a more poignant effect upon the student experience in community colleges. There are examples and a valid argument for student, faculty, and staff interactions as these connections inside and outside the classroom improve student engagement and foster student development (Levin & Montero-Hernandez, 2009). Engagement of nontraditional students offers relational supports, and the interaction with faculty members in community colleges enhances students' academic growth and efficacy, especially as community colleges frequently promote sustained and caring relationships with diverse student bodies (Fleming, Oertle, Plotner, & Hakun, 2017; Levin, 2012).

Critical disabilities work alongside identity formation models such as Gibson's (2006) Disability Identity Development Model may provide student-affairs practitioners, faculty, and staff with useful frameworks that can inform designing comprehensive services, responsive programming, and practices that support students with disabilities across the spectrum of difference. It is important for disability-services personnel at community colleges to evaluate their practices and to delve into how the incorporation of theories and models such as universal design and student development can improve the services, curriculum, and programming offered by their respective institutions. Student-services personnel and academic-affairs professionals should explore potential collaborations with faculty and other university officials to work toward broadening the scope of disability services. In short, more faculty and staff need to be involved in the implementation of inclusive practices, policies, and programming throughout the community college context, and should consider intersectional identities in meeting the needs of student with disabilities.

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