

STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES IN A POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

SETTING: IDENTIFYING THE MOST SIGNIFICANT SUPPORTS

by

Daniella F. Giordano

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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APPROVED BY:

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Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenology was to understand the perceptions that postsecondary students with learning disabilities have in receiving academic supports and accommodations from their institutions in alignment with their educational goals. A significant disparity has occurred between the number of students with disabilities in higher education and the support services available to them. The central question of this study is: What are the experiences of students with learning disabilities in receiving academic support services from their institution? The theory that supports this central question and guided this study is Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory. The design of this study is a hermeneutical phenomenological design with various units of analysis. The data was collected through interviews, a focus group interview, and a series of journal prompts. The participants consisted of 10 postsecondary students with learning disabilities who all attended private universities in the northeastern United States. The research revealed the importance of postsecondary students with learning disabilities utilizing academic support centers to achieve academic success. A recommendation for future research is to explore the perceptions that professors have toward their students utilizing the academic support centers by employing a similar qualitative method.

Keywords: Postsecondary education, academic support services, self-determination, academic support services, learning disabilities, higher education

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to God, my creator, who has granted me wisdom, knowledge, and understanding. He has been my strength and guidance throughout this journey as I have overcome all the hurdles of my academic pursuit. With God, anything is possible!

To my parents, Anthony and Teresa. You have been my source of inspiration, everlasting love, and acceptance. You have taught me to be determined, strong willed, but most of all, to be myself, and to always persevere through challenging moments. I am honored to have you as my parents.

To my sister, Frances. Thank you for allowing me to find happiness throughout this challenging journey and for reminding me that my accomplishments are worthy. I love you forever!

To my dearest friend and colleague, Maria. You have inspired me to enhance my education by pursuing a doctorate degree. I am fortunate to have you in my life.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my academic chair and committee members, who have helped me overcome challenges and have given me critical advice on writing a clear and concise dissertation. I am grateful for all the support I have received.

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List of Abbreviations

Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA)

Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD)

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Individualized Education Plan (IEP)

Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)

Self-determination theory (SDT)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The enrollment rate of postsecondary students with learning disabilities is increasing each year. Postsecondary students with learning disabilities make up about 18% of full-time undergraduate students, 12% of full-time graduate students, 21% of part-time undergraduate students, and 12% of part-time graduate students (The Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2022). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES: 2022), 19.4% of the postsecondary student population in the 2015-2016 academic year possessed a learning disability. NCES also reported that postsecondary students with learning disabilities encompassed comorbid disabilities consisting of speech and language impairments and mental, emotional, or psychiatric conditions, such as attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD) and autism spectrum disorder (ASD: NCES, 2022). These learning disabilities hinder the academic success rates of postsecondary students, as well as their self-determination and motivational behaviors. To ensure academic success, faculty will provide students with learning disabilities with the most appropriate academic support, with a focus on the student's learning disability and their educational goals. The need for additional, more appropriate academic support is evident as postsecondary students perceive their academic accommodations as not being met (Newman et al., 2018). This lack of support directly and adversely affects their self-determination and behavioral motivators. Deci and Ryan's (1980) theoretical approach to self-determination focuses on the motivational behaviors that affect postsecondary students' perception of their academic success.

Chapter One of this hermeneutic phenomenology covers the background of postsecondary students with learning disabilities experience, focusing on their academic support

and accommodations for their learning disability. The problem statement, purpose statement, and research questions are also discussed in Chapter One, thus providing insight into the significance of this study. The explanations of the keywords throughout this dissertation and the chapter summary will be identified.

Background

As more students with learning disabilities enter higher education, many perceive their academic support as not being met at the postsecondary level (Weis et al., 2021). It has become a crucial issue in higher education because students with learning disabilities do not receive appropriate support at the collegiate level (Long, 2014). The completion rates for students with a learning disability are pertinent, as the graduation rate is about 50%, compared to about 70% of students without learning disabilities (Lipka et al., 2020). A significant reason for this is that most of these students are uninformed of the educational support and accommodations available due to the lack of advocacy.

Historical Context

The term *learning disability* was coined in 1963 by Samuel Kirk, referring to children who possess learning disabilities in their cognitive functioning skills, socio-emotional skills, and executive functioning skills (Waber, 2011). Various definitions of learning disabilities have been identified, one specifically being individuals who exhibit substantial differences while existing upon their expected abilities of academic performances (Gordon et al., 1999). Patal et al. (2022) identified students with low to average intellectual and academic abilities compared to those without educational limitations, which impede their ability to meet the standard expectations of students without learning disabilities (Patal et al., 2022). However, two indicators initiated a reconsideration of the concept, which defines learning disabilities and the governing laws

protecting students with learning disabilities. The first factor identified was the economic factors that initiated federal funding budgets in the school districts that would provide special education services to students. The second factor was instituting antidiscrimination laws that protected students with learning disabilities in an educational setting (Patal et al., 2022).

The learning-disabled population in postsecondary education settings has increased since learning disabilities were identified in the mid-1970s, which caused a spike in postsecondary educational enrollment (Gordon et al., 1999). In place of this significant increase in postsecondary students with learning disabilities, laws were initiated to protect the civil rights of students who encompass imitations in their cognitive and social abilities in obtaining an equitable education (Volino et al., 2021). Such laws initiated are Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1975-2004, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, which implement extended services to accommodate the student's academic goals.

The laws that protect students with learning disabilities in educational settings are Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1975-2004 (IDEA), and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990-2010. These laws initiate civil protection and equality for students with disabilities and have evolved over the decades to uphold new laws and regulations for various other identified disabilities. Section 504 provides civil protection to all individuals with disabilities in programs that receive federal funding, which includes most public schools (Lewis & Muñiz, 2023). Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act ensures that federally funded programs are provided to schools within their budgets to secure special education services to students who obtain 504 accommodations in support of their educational requirements. The ADA of 1990 is a broad law that provides civil

rights protections to all individuals with disabilities in the United States in many different aspects of life. "Title II of the ADA prohibits discrimination by state and local governments, which includes public schools" (ADA National Network, 2018, p. 1). This law enables the protection of all students with learning disabilities in a wide range of educational settings, including private and public. In contrast to Section 504 and ADA, IDEA is not an antidiscrimination law, "It is a statute that mandates free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) for students with disabilities eligible under IDEA" (ADA National Network, 2018, p. 1). Concerning Section 504, IDEA provides federal funding to schools to support eligible students under IDEA. This law enables students with learning disabilities to obtain academic accommodations in their educational instruction from birth to 21 years of age. All three of these laws protect the academic education of students who possess any type of learning disability in an educational setting.

Social Context

To abide by the students' educational plans pursuant to the IDEA of 2004, postsecondary education attainment is a primary goal for 80% of high school graduate students who possess one of the 13 education classifications with learning disabilities (Shaw & Dukes, 2013). The 13 education classifications in The Big State consist of autism, deafness, deaf-blindness, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, and visual impairment, including blindness (New York State Education Department, 2023). About 11% of incoming first-year students report possessing a learning disability, which is a percentage that has tripled since 1978, and about 44% of students with learning disabilities are enrolled in postsecondary education, whereas only 26% was reported in 1990 (Shaw & Dukes, 2013).

Although the enrollment rate of students with learning disabilities has increased over the years, students transitioning from a K-12 educational setting to a postsecondary setting may experience difficulties for several reasons. The federal policies in obtaining academic support for these students are implemented in various mandates of IDEA, including the transition plan in assistance of the student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Despite these legislative attempts, researchers Shaw and Dukes (2013) shared concern that students are not receiving adequate accommodation and support to transition from secondary to postsecondary education. They noted that further investigation into effective academic support practices for postsecondary students with learning disabilities was needed.

Postsecondary students with learning disabilities are accommodated in various ways, such as instructional and testing accommodations. Not all academic accommodations for students with learning disabilities are similar, as each student with learning disabilities varies. Special education clinicians in postsecondary settings recommend appropriate accommodations according to a student's learning disability (Weis et al., 2016). However, researchers Weis et al. (2016) have found that students who possess a diagnosis from their mandated education plan in their K-12 setting may not always receive the appropriate academic accommodations from higher education institutions. As a result, many students may be left with having to advocate for themselves.

Self-advocacy is an unfortunate reality and an unnecessary hindrance for students transitioning from secondary to postsecondary education. It is often necessary, and in some cases crucial, for students to secure advocates to secure the educational support that is needed pursuant to an IEP or 504 plan. However, many transitioning students are not provided with an advocate and are left having to advocate for themselves when they are not prepared to do so (Field et al.,

2003). Many students entering postsecondary education surpass the age of 21, beyond IDEA's age limit. Students under IDEA are supported academically from birth to the age of 21, leaving these adolescent students with learning disabilities to advocate for themselves (Field et al., 2003). Researchers Field et al. (2003) found that adolescent students with learning disabilities harbor concerns regarding their level of preparedness, which impedes their ability to obtain educational success. Additionally, Sitlington (2010) emphasized concerns regarding the transitional phase of students with learning disabilities from a secondary to postsecondary setting through their preparation and preparedness in their higher education setting. The educational training of these students in a postsecondary setting enhances their preparedness through the enrollment of programs that will integrate post-college preparation (Sitlington, 2010).

Theoretical Context

Vygotsky's (1966) theory of metacognition and self-regulation is based on the psychological perspectives of self-awareness and control of one's own mental processing abilities, presented in the works of Vygotsky's *Play and It's Role In the Mental Development of the Child*, where the metacognition and self-regulation of the mental development of the child are analyzed. Vygotsky's theory of metacognition and self-regulation is based on the development of human beings and how they orient themselves in learning. Vygotsky's (1966) theory capitulates how humans are born ready and prepared to utilize conventional tools and signs through the internalization of social interactions inherent in language whereby they can develop metacognition and self-regulation, awareness, knowledge, and control of thoughts in knowledge-induced situations, such as school (Fox & Risconscente, 2008). Coupled with Vygotsky's theory in his related work, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Vygotsky, 1978), presents an understanding that young children

emerge in their ability to take ownership of their learning, being able to utilize their own mental powers of manipulation of knowledge and skills when given a particular task, as evidenced by adult learning patterns. Interestingly, children exhibit what is considered voluntary attention, which is a form of controlled thoughts and actions, all involving language-based social interactions (Fox & Risconscente, 2008). According to Vygotsky (1966), play (an activity of voluntary attention) is crucial in the development of self-regulation because children have been studied to transfer and apply knowledge learned through play in controlling their own behaviors and responses.

Vygotsky's (1966) theory of metacognition and self-regulation also relates to this topic because it presents a framework that I used to explore his theory through investigative methods inherent in the psychology of learning, as well as the psychological tools and social relations found in goal-directed learning, relating to student self-regulation and metacognition to enhance reading skill development. The language-based social interactions children portray through voluntary attention are an essential component of study in my work, as I aimed to further understand the specific ways in which students develop learning through motivating activities.

Additionally, Atkinson's (1964) expectancy-value theory (EVT), which was later adapted by Wigfield and Eccles (2002), focused on the choices that students make during their academic and career trajectories in pursuit of success. This theory values the extrinsic and intrinsic motivational decisions that postsecondary students make regarding their academic success. However, intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors are dependent upon the importance or how valuable the student considers the activity or goal that they are striving for success. By way for students to reach academic success, the theorist relayed that the students' expectation for success depends on their self-perception regarding their own values, beliefs, experiences, and other

contextual factors which contribute to their own decisions making instead of their education attainment (Eccles, 2009).

Researchers Daley and Zeidan (2020) applied the EVT in their study regarding the expectations, values, and determinants among postsecondary students with learning disabilities. The postsecondary students recruited for the study possessed learning disabilities such as ADHD, dyslexia, dysgraphia, language processing disorders, as well as executive functioning disorders. Daley and Zeidan (2020) investigated the self-perception of these students concerning their college experience and persistence towards their academics, as well as their roles towards their motivational values and beliefs and their academic trajectories of graduation. The results indicated that each student contributed their own sense of motivational values and beliefs to enhance their academic stance in their college setting and presented the idea of making decisions relating to graduating and obtaining careers post-graduation (Daley & Zeidan, 2020). However, a few participants relayed similar expectancy values of graduating and obtaining careers post-graduation.

Problem Statement

The problem is students with disabilities are not receiving adequate academic support at the postsecondary educational level (Weis et al., 2021). Between the years 2015-2016, the National Center for Education Statistics (2022) estimated that about 19% of undergraduate postsecondary students have been documented as possessing some type of learning disability, which is equivalent to more than two million students enrolling each year with a learning disability. Gaps in literature have demonstrated that many postsecondary students are not receiving adequate academic support, which may affect their extrinsic motivational capabilities, causing debilitating postsecondary learning experiences (Reinschmiedt et al., 2013). The

experience of postsecondary students with learning disabilities, in relation to the academic support they are receiving from their institutions, was explored. Significantly, the institution's willingness to understand and support their students in accommodating postsecondary students with learning disabilities is not yet ascertained (J. W. Madaus et al., 2022), thus making this an imperative topic to research.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenology was to examine the lived experiences of postsecondary students with learning disabilities and how they receive academic support in alignment with their academic goals at Big State. The effectiveness of student progress through academic autonomy and evidence-based practices is generally defined as identifying the relationships of the extrinsic motivational values that are represented through the use of academic learning centers, peer tutoring, professional tutoring, and writing centers, as well as identifying a sense of connectedness to their environment.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this qualitative study was to investigate the motivational attributes of postsecondary students with learning disabilities and how they acquire self-determination methods toward their academic goals. The Postsecondary National Policy Institute (PNPI, 2022) reports statistics presented by the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPSLS: 2022) that 23% of undergraduate students who reported having a learning disability in the year 2012 attained their degree completion and graduated with a bachelor's degree in 2017. Postsecondary students aged 18-24 under IDEA ascertained a transitional plan from their secondary educational setting in support of their educational goals in their postsecondary

educational setting. However, most adolescent students lack the motivational tendencies required to receive appropriate academic support from their institution's academic services.

A considerable aspect was formed from the perception that postsecondary students with learning disabilities are independently working towards their academic goals, securing the appropriate supports stated in their K-12 IEP and 504 plans. Therefore, the perception of how these postsecondary students can express their educational needs and preparedness regarding their learning disability was an issue addressed in the literature. Researchers Quinlan et al. (2012) expressed their concerns regarding postsecondary students with learning disabilities as being discriminated against by their academic faculty for not understanding the learning disability they inherit, as many students disclose or fail to announce that they have a learning disability. Despite the importance of students disclosing their learning disability to their instructional faculty members (Quinlan et al., 2012), the faculty should be aware of the students who possess a learning disability with the response of academic support and accommodations.

Research Questions

The focus of this study is based on the lived experiences of postsecondary students with learning disabilities and how they are inheriting academic supports in alignment with their academic goals and self-determination values, which will be investigated through the following research questions:

Central Research Question

What are the experiences of students with learning disabilities in receiving academic support services from their institution?

Sub-Question One

What are the experiences of students with learning disabilities using the writing center?

Sub-Question Two

What are the experiences of students with learning disabilities using peer tutoring?

Sub-Question Three

What are the experiences of students with learning disabilities using professional tutoring?

Definitions

1. *Academic accommodations*- Legally mandated modifications, adjustments, and aids that provide students with a disability with equal opportunities to benefit from the educational process (Stanford University, 2022).
2. *Postsecondary education*- An educational setting that occurs after high school, involving trade schools, vocational schools, community colleges, 4-year institutions, and post graduate institutions (Dean et al., 2020).
3. *Self-Determination Theory*- “An approach to human motivation and personality that uses traditional empirical methods while employing an organismic metatheory that highlights the importance of humans’ evolved inner resources for personality development and behavioral self-regulation” (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 68).
4. *Motivation*- Pertains to the energy, direction, persistence, and equifinality, which are all elements of intent (Deci & Ryan, 2000).
5. *Intrinsic motivation*- the innate human nature to seek out positive challenges and to extend one’s learning capacities through the exploration of ample learning opportunities (Deci & Ryan, 2000).
6. *Extrinsic motivation*- “Refers to the performance of an activity in order to attain some separable outcome” (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 71).

Summary

The focus of this chapter was to provide a coherent understanding of the perception postsecondary students with learning disabilities obtain in support of receiving academic support. On behalf of the enrollment rate of students with learning disabilities making up about 30% of the postsecondary environment (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2022), students with learning disabilities at the postsecondary level are perceiving their educational goals as not being met by their institution, which may hinder their academic success. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenology was to examine the lived experiences of postsecondary students with learning disabilities and how they receive academic support in alignment with their academic goals at Big State. The following chapter presents a review of the literature. The remaining chapters present the research methodology, findings, and conclusion.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

A systematic review of the literature, as well as the utilization of the student's perspective, was conducted to explore the various supports that students with disabilities are receiving in postsecondary education settings. According to the Postsecondary National Policy Institute (2022), about 18% of students with learning disabilities are enrolled in postsecondary institutions each year, but about 12% of these students attend their institutions full-time, and only about 50% of the students enrolled full-time graduate. This chapter presents a review of the current literature related to the topic of study. In the first section, the theory that is identified regards the concepts of the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1980). Lastly, the literature surrounding the factors that lead to the development of intrinsic motivation and academic competence are addressed, including the laws relating to the educational opportunities for students with learning disabilities, characteristics of students with learning disabilities, the pedagogical development to support their learning needs, and current intervention practices. A gap exists in the literature pertaining to the accommodations that are necessary for students with learning disabilities at the postsecondary educational level, supporting the imperative need for the current study.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of Deci and Ryan's (1980) self-determination theory is based on an expansive framework for understanding various circumstances that may promote intrinsic motivation, autonomous extrinsic motivation, and psychological wellness. This theory presents the importance of obtaining ownership in one's actions in pursuit of academic accommodations towards 'best practices' and educational outcomes for postsecondary students with learning

disabilities. The theory of self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1980) within this study helped examine and investigate how the identified academic supports were aligned with the three components of self-determination theory. This study involved postsecondary educational students with learning disabilities in ascertaining their perception of how their postsecondary educational institution supplied them with academic support and accommodations in alignment with their academic goals. Additionally, the literature review helped to support the phenomenology of academic support surrounding the legal factors that support the academic goals of postsecondary students with learning disabilities and how these students perceive their academic accommodations as being fulfilled. The theory of self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1980) was explored, as this theory was relevant and applicable to the understanding of how postsecondary students with learning disabilities acquire short-term or long-term learning goals relevant to their transfer of motivational behaviors and how they are entitled to receiving academic supports and accommodations on behalf of their documented learning disability.

Self-Determination Theory in Post-Secondary Education

Deci and Ryan (2000) defined the self-determination theory (SDT) as "an approach to human motivation and personality that uses traditional empirical methods while employing an organismic metatheory that highlights the importance of humans' evolved inner resources for personality development and behavioral self-regulation" (p. 68). This theory helps investigate the fundamental growth tendencies of the psychological needs that make up the foundation regarding self-motivation through the integration of personality development. Personality development is integrated through the empirical process of identifying the three major "needs," which compromise the needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 68).

These needs are crucial for the social and constructive development of personal well-being, specifically regarding postsecondary students.

Deci and Ryan's (2000) SDT indicates that the approach in guiding motivational tendencies may affect an individual's personality traits that relate to empirical methods, which support the development and behavior of self-regulation. The SDT targets three attributes that promote intrinsic motivation, autonomous extrinsic motivation, and wellness. This theory presents the importance of the fundamental growth aspects in promoting motivational values in support of competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Motivation is considered a 'singular construct' (Deci & Ryan, 2000) as individuals experience motivation differently in relation to various aspects of intention. Motivation, in relation to self-determination in the field of education, refers to the academic and social constructs that are generated from the educational environment. The self-determination theory is imperative for transitioning postsecondary students with learning disabilities, as many students may feel discouraged in ascertaining self-motivation. Long-standing research demonstrates that students with learning disabilities are not receiving the appropriate academic support for their educational goals in their postsecondary educational endeavors in the ways in which they were supported in their former secondary education setting.

The empirical methods associated with guiding the research for self-determination examine a plethora of environmental factors that lead to the prevention of self-determination, specifically in a postsecondary educational setting. Such factors may consist of social functioning and personal well-being, which delineate the physiological aspects of a person's internal development (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The experimental paradigms that were utilized to explore how these features affect self-determination were examined through three main motives:

the nature of motivation, intrinsic motivation, and self-regulation of extrinsic motivation. Each of these self-determination attributes is fundamental, especially concerning autonomy, competence, and relatedness in social development and psychological development (Deci & Ryan, 2020).

These features are imperative in the post-educational field as students can become more intrinsically motivated to achieve their academic goals and uphold a sense of value and interest in their educational outcomes (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Additionally, emotional support from instructors is crucial for student motivation and engagement, which links student intrinsic motivation and self-determination attributes (Ruzek et al., 2016).

The postsecondary education period is crucial for all students, as these young adults are transitioning into the next phase of their lives, and their self-independence and self-determination values are heightened (Binghashayan et al., 2022). Postsecondary students with learning disabilities should be aware of the type of disability that they possess, as they are required to enhance their learning through self-advocating the supports that are necessary for achieving academic success. Along with the integration of student self-advocacy skills, faculty instructors should also be aware of the appropriate support for their students with learning disabilities so that motivational values are integrated into students' academic learning plans pertaining to their learning disability (Binghashayan et al., 2022). Specifically, instructors should seek to understand how the motivational values that are attributed to the educational learning experiences of postsecondary students with learning disabilities are obtained, which would be through vast motivational values consisting of the nature of motivation, intrinsic motivation, and self-regulation of intrinsic motivation.

The Nature of Motivation

Motivation, as defined by Deci and Ryan (2000), pertains to energy, direction, persistence, and equifinality, which are all elements of intent. Deci and Ryan (2000) communicated motivation as a perennial issue in the psychological field concerning the biological, cognitive, and social regulatory aspects. Motivation is considered an issue in this aspect, as it is treated as a "singular construct," which is a subjective outlook, as many people experience motivational factors differently. This aligned with the current phenomenological study as motivational factors are experienced differently depending on the role a person plays in society, which may alter the motivational stance perceived by each individual postsecondary student who possesses a learning disability. Deci and Ryan (2000) expressed the contrasting perceptions associated with motivation as authentic and controlled motivation, commonly known as self-motivation and external regulation. Authentic motivation is when a person is self-endorsed and has more interest or excitement and confidence in the performed tasks, whereas a person who engages in controlled motivation is only motivated to complete a task in a controlled environment with little persistence and confidence. Each concept of motivation results in a distinct type of personal experience, articulating the principles associated with identifying the psychological growth and wellness pertaining to self-determination in postsecondary students with learning disabilities.

Intrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic motivation, as defined by Deci and Ryan (2000), is the innate human nature to seek out positive challenges and extend one's learning capacities through the exploration of ample learning opportunities. Deci and Ryan (2020) explained that "intrinsic motivation pertains to the activities done for 'their own sake,' or for their inherent interest and enjoyment" (p. 69).

Intrinsic motivation relates to this study because autonomy and competence refer to the behaviors that exude the willingness to enhance self-endorsing abilities, specifically towards self-advocations for one own educational values. Behaviors that exemplify intrinsic motivational qualities are portrayed through traits of curiosity and exploration. However, the behaviors are not dependent on environmental or social pressure but are followed through for one's own self-satisfaction and enjoyment. Intrinsic motivation has significant benefits in relation to education and school achievement. A meta-analysis conducted by Taylor et al. (2017) exhibited that motivation was associated with high academic performance rates at a consistent rate, which controlled the baseline achievement in high school and college students in Canada and Sweden (Deci & Ryan, 2020).

Contrasting the benefits of intrinsic motivation with the focus on autonomy, the motivational status depends upon the environmental competence associated with the task being conducted. The controversial reason why the motivational status depends on the environment is due to the extrinsic traits associated with the environment. Intrinsic motivation is diminished by the tangible rewards contingent upon task performance pressures, deadlines, threats, pressured evaluations, directives, and imposed goals (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Findings from multiple countries imply the decline of intrinsic motivation in all school entities in relation to the absence of supportive accommodations in support of the psychological needs and satisfactions of students pertaining to school activities. (Deci & Ryan, 2020). However, Deci and Ryan (2000) revealed that when intrinsic motivation is acknowledged with opportunities for self-direction, people encounter increased feelings of autonomy. Unlike educators who possess controlling qualities of their environment, educators who exude autonomous support can activate their students' sense of intrinsic motivation through confident desires to explore and learn. Similarly, autonomous

supportive parents, instead of controlling parents, bear children intrinsically motivated in their interests and educational studies (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Self-Regulation of Extrinsic Motivation

In contrast to associating self-determined motivation with intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation also exists in this theoretical framework of self-regulatory motivation. Unlike intrinsic motivational qualities of self-determination through the engagement of cognitive interests, extrinsic motivation concerns how the individual will obtain motivation and how it will affect their behavioral quality and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). As defined by Deci and Ryan (2000), extrinsic motivation "refers to the performance of an activity in order to attain some separable outcome" (p. 71). This definition contrasts the definition of intrinsic motivation by means of autonomous engagement in an activity for the inherent satisfaction of completing the task. Although non-autonomous perspectives relating to extrinsic motivation may be the perceived notion, in retrospect, extrinsic motivation represents intentional behavior, which alters this contradictory perspective of autonomy. In relation to the current study, extrinsic motivation related to the students' self-regulatory attributes relating to self-advocating for their own learning. Many postsecondary students who possess learning disabilities lack the motivational values to withstand the psychological attributes involved in maintaining positive learning experiences.

Most students who possess learning disabilities at the postsecondary education level experience an educational stigma relating to the barriers they face daily (Ehlinger & Ropers, 2020). Literature indicates that the students who comprise the educational stigma of low motivational values encompass low rates of self-acceptance, interpersonal skills, and developmental attributes of self-efficacy, self-advocacy, and self-determination abilities

(Barnard-Brak et al., 2010; Hong, 2015; Timmerman & Mulvihill, 2015). Such 'negative' stigma limitations are represented through various experiences that these students encounter in their postsecondary educational settings, which concedes with the factors leading to the portrayed extrinsic motivational tendencies that educators can identify in their courses (Barnard-Brak et al., 2010; Kranke et al., 2013; Thompson-Ebanks & Jarman, 2018). It is imperative for educators to provide the mandated accommodations for their students with learning disabilities, as federal laws are a critical component in obtaining the appropriate education for these students (Thompson-Ebanks & Jarman, 2018).

Among the extensive factors contributing to extrinsic motivation, motivation, which is "the state of lacking the intention to act" (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 72), is accompanied by the stigma of only completing tasks without embracing the value of it. Four extrinsically motivated behaviors range from least to most autonomous, with the least being referred to as *externally regulated*. Apparent behaviors result in an external demand or reward for the performed task, and individuals who experience this motivational behavior feel controlled or alienated by the task (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The second type of extrinsic motivation is *introjected regulation*, which involves a controlled self-regulatory behavior of completing tasks to "avoid guilt or anxiety, or to attain ego enhancements such as pride" (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 72). Individuals who exhibit this extrinsic motivational behavior are only motivated to complete a task to avoid failure and maintain a feeling of worthiness that demonstrates a specific ability. The third behavior of extrinsic motivation is labeled *regulation through identification*, which is more autonomous, and the individual is able to recognize and identify with the value of the activity in relation to their goals and interests (Deci & Ryan, 2020). The final and most autonomous extrinsic motivational behavior is *integrated regulation*, which occurs when individuals are completely engaged

mentally within themselves and the proposed task and have evaluated their congruent values and needs. Although this type of behavior exudes qualities pertaining to intrinsic motivation, individuals emanating integrated regulatory behaviors are considered extrinsic because tasks are only being completed to arrive at a desirable outcome rather than for their inherent interests (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Deci and Ryan's (1980) SDT helped justify the relationship between motivation, interest, and cognitive development, which is most associated with postsecondary students with learning disabilities receiving appropriate academic support. The SDT is a major component in obtaining motivational values toward postsecondary students with disabilities who receive academic accommodations aligned with their postsecondary education goals. This theory also supported this topic as it related to the importance of metacognition and self-awareness in developing skills and knowledge. As such, postsecondary faculties must be knowledgeable and equipped to ascertain academic support and accommodations for students with learning disabilities.

Related Literature

There is a significant amount of research related to students who possess learning disabilities, as well as the laws and history pertaining to students with learning disabilities. The related literature investigated in this study was based upon research findings regarding the most significant supports that students with disabilities obtain, how self-determination theory attributes of motivation affect these students, as well as the laws that protect them. These laws initiate different attributes pertaining to protecting all students with disabilities. The legalities of these laws investigated help provide postsecondary students with learning disabilities the necessary information needed to obtain an appropriate education in alignment with their executive functional goals. Such legal laws include Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of

1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004, the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) of 2008, the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD), and Students with Learning Disabilities in Postsecondary Education. Student self-advocacy was also measured within these laws, along with how students with learning disabilities obtain the appropriate accommodations pertaining to their learning disability.

Students with Learning Disabilities in Postsecondary Education

Since the turn of the century, an increased number of students with learning disabilities have entered the realm of postsecondary education (Harrison et al., 2007). As a result of the increase in postsecondary students with learning disabilities, educational reforms and mandates should align with their academic provisions of special education supports and services (Harrison et al., 2007). There are a plethora of attributes and characteristics relating to learning disabilities that are present in many students in postsecondary educational settings. Such learning disabilities entail executive functioning disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity disorders (ADHD), autism, dyslexia, and reading disabilities (Sheppard-Jones et al., 2021). These learning disabilities hinder students' learning experiences, personal skills, self-advocacy abilities, and self-motivation attributes when academic supports and accommodations are not provided (Grigal et al., 2019).

Attributes of Specific Learning Disabilities

The most common learning disabilities of those with special needs in postsecondary settings are attention deficit disorder (ADD), ADHD, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), dyslexia, as well as language-based processing skills. However, according to the National Center for Learning Disabilities (2022), ADHD has affected more than 6.4 million people and is a common comorbidity of other learning deficits. Learning disabilities are derived from multiple

neurological differences in the brain structures and functioning modalities, and each child who is diagnosed with a learning disability experiences the learning process differently.

The nature of learning disabilities hinders the executive functioning of a student who is presented with comorbid disabilities, such as ADHD. ADHD is a disorder that involves difficulty staying focused, remaining on task, paying attention, and controlling one's behavior and hyperactivity (USDHHS, 2018). Most ADHD symptoms entail traits of impulsivity, inattentiveness, and combined hyperactive-impulsivity and inattentiveness, which result in attaining services that modify and accommodate the educational exigence of the student (Harrison & Armstrong, 2022). Professionals of the American Psychiatric Association (2013) described students who possess ADHD as retaining a neurodevelopmental disorder. In lieu of most students with ADHD also possessing a learning disability, the comorbidity rate within the special education realm in higher education settings is increased. Researchers stated that about 15%-40% of students who are diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and learning disabilities are enrolled in postsecondary institutions each year (Goudreau & Knight, 2018). These students display attributes of the disorder that impair their self-regulatory behavior and executive functioning skills, which hinder their efforts towards participating in and completing task activities (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2018; Roberts, 2012).

Postsecondary students with ADHD may experience psychosocial issues during their transition phase as a result of inadequate structure and support that they were accustomed to in their K-12 educational settings (Goudreau & Knight, 2018). Researchers further stated that postsecondary students with ADHD expressed dissatisfaction with their grades and are obtaining lower grade point averages, resulting in lower retention rates (Goudreau & Knight, 2018). Accommodations regarding academic support to meet the needs of this specific population are in

high demand, whereas faculty are not providing adequate support for these students. The effectiveness of ADHD students is limited as these students require accommodations to improve their exam scores. Some accommodations may include testing in separate locations to reduce distractions and other accommodations that could alter the intended construct of the exam (Dembitzer & Kettler, 2018). Therefore, allowing students to complete tasks without time restraints and recalling information with memory aids or even modifying the grading systems will allow students to obtain an equitable learning experience (Harrison & Armstrong, 2022).

Harrison and Armstrong (2022) examined the accommodation decision-making for students with ADHD in their postsecondary settings and the importance of these students providing their postsecondary institute with documentation stating how to support and accommodate their requests while also including a most recent individualized education plan (IEP) and a summary of performance from their secondary school. By providing the postsecondary institution with documentation regarding their academic functioning and documentation regarding the history of accommodations that the student received, instructors are more competent in providing these students with disabilities with the proper academic supports and accommodations (Keenan et al., 2019). The effectiveness of accommodations for students who possess ADHD varies among students, as all students are different learners and require different methods of approach towards learning.

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is an additional learning disability that hinders the executive functioning of a postsecondary student with learning disabilities (Widman & Lopez-Reyna, 2020). The diagnostic criteria of ASD vary within a broad range of conditions characterized by the developmental disorder that affects the communication and behavior of an individual (NIH, 2018). Students with ASD who attend postsecondary education settings

comprise about 2% of the total student population of students who possess disabilities in 4-year postsecondary educational institutions (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2012). Students with ASD require specialized services to achieve their full social and cognitive potential, which are received during the early intervention phase of the diagnostic. Accommodations and modifications are imposed in higher educational settings for postsecondary students with ASD through Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the ADA of 1990. Such accommodations and modifications consist of reducing the workload in a course, priority registration, implementing recording devices, note takers, extending the testing time, integrating technological devices to guide students with reading, and other adaptive hardware (Widman & Lopez-Reyna, 2020). Despite implementing academic modifications and accommodations for these students, such accommodations may not benefit the needs of students with autism spectrum disorder, but most accommodations are offered through postsecondary institution's disability centers (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

Although ASD may pose developmental challenges, with the supports and accommodations instilled at a young age, students can adapt to a structured environment by developing and growing into their patterns and routines of everyday life (Hewitt, 2011). However, when a student with ASD is transitioning to a postsecondary environment, it is challenging for these students to obtain the appropriate social considerations, cognitive supports, and accommodations to enable success in their postsecondary environment (Hillier et al., 2018). The obligations regarding instructional supports and accommodations that a postsecondary environment inhabits compared to a K-12 environment are different for students with learning disabilities (Hewitt, 2011). When students with ASD transition to their postsecondary

environment, a plethora of resources should be provided to them regarding their previous intervention plan that was asserted in their previous educational environment.

The emphasis on developmental language disorders and dyslexia is imperative in the postsecondary field as these are two types of specific learning disorders that are prevalent in students who possess learning disabilities (Del Tufo & Earle, 2020). Postsecondary students with reading disabilities, such as developmental language disorders and dyslexia, are also affected in their executive functioning abilities when they do not receive the appropriate academic support and accommodations (Zagona, 2022). A vital success factor for postsecondary students with reading disabilities is to ensure that they are active in developing their own self-determination strategies (Collins & Wolter, 2018). When a student encompasses developmental language disorders or dyslexia, their self-perception as a student is linked with experiences of stigmatism and may experience lowered self-concept (Gibby-Leversuch et al., 2019; Polychroni et al., 2006; Riddick, 2000). As such, it is imperative that the postsecondary faculty provide support for these individuals as they enable their legal rights to obtain an adequate education.

Researchers indicated that the enrollment rate of postsecondary students who possess learning disabilities related to language and processing in 4-year degree programs has increased by 60% from the 2007-2008 school year to the 2011-2012 school year, whereas only about 34% of students with specific learning disabilities do acquire a successful path towards their degree attainment (Conti-Ramsden et al., 2009; Newman et al., 2011; Snyder et al., 2016). Although most adolescent students possess specific learning disabilities, such as language and processing and written language and reading function, the executive functioning component of the disability refers to the cognitive processing skills that are being utilized toward the student's working memory (Del Tufo & Earle, 2020). Working memory, as described by Baddeley and Hitch

(1994), involves the manipulation of information that is contingent upon short-term memory, which is prevalent in both spoken and written language and reading function, as it is crucial to obtain these skills to construct the importance of the executive functioning progression in a student.

Additionally, students who possess the developmental language disorder of dyslexia experience similar attributes toward obtaining success regarding their executive functioning skills. Reading comprehension and fluency skills should be implemented into the developmental language curriculum to support the literacy component for postsecondary students who have developmental language disorders. Del Tufo and Earle (2020) described reading comprehension as a crucial, complex skill that refers to students' "ability to extract meaning from connected text, to draw inferences, and to surmise the macrostructure of a narrative" (p. 230). Reading fluency, an additional skill interlaced with reading comprehension, is the cognitive ability to read quickly with accuracy (Kim et al., 2012).

The educational experiences regarding language-based processing skills in postsecondary students are predicated upon the students' innate ability to develop fluency, reading, writing, spelling, and comprehension (Brunswick & Bargary, 2022). When a student endures developmental language disorders, their self-perception and self-determination values are regarded as being lower concerning their academic achievement. Postsecondary students who possess such developmental language disorders identify as engaging in behaviors pertaining to low self-esteem and low self-efficacy. These negative self-connotations affect the emotional well-being of these students, as they have now identified themselves as being vulnerable readers (Brunswick & Bargary, 2022). According to studies conducted by Alves and Nakano (2014), adolescent students with dyslexia exhibit creative abilities, which are related to visual learning

strategies, thus allowing these students to perform academically in a more creative perspective. By way of students with dyslexia performing academically in a more creative stance, they can acknowledge their strengths, which increases their motivational tendencies and values.

Barriers To Gaining Access and Equity in Higher Education

Researchers Heiman and Precel (2003) conducted a study on postsecondary students with and without learning disabilities and how their institution perceived them regarding their social, emotional, and academic stances. Their findings revealed that students with learning disabilities exhibited lower grades, lower test scores, and lower academic perception of their academic and intellectual abilities than those students without learning disabilities. Additionally, research established that students without learning disabilities experienced lower acceptance rates and lower academic support from their schools than students with learning disabilities did. The significance of their findings was, as hypothesized, that students with learning disabilities reported experiencing difficulties socially, academically, and cognitively. However, a difference in grade point averages was not detected, as the students with learning disabilities experienced intense study habits in lieu of the academic support they received.

Researcher Denhart (2008) conducted a study on the barriers that students with disabilities face regarding their academic expectations in their postsecondary setting. These students were interviewed to obtain information relating to the study. Their findings revealed that the 18 participants shared their perception as negative instead of the lack of academic accommodation they received in their institutional courses. Additional barriers these participants expressed on enduring was the sense of being misunderstood in the portrayal of exhibiting lazy tendencies, as well as being labeled as 'disabled' instead of 'different.' The significance of their findings was, as presumed that students who possess learning disabilities are viewed as not being

socially accepted amongst students who do not possess a learning disability, which establishes the barriers between students with and students without learning disabilities.

Intrinsic Student Motivation and Student Achievement

Intrinsic motivation, as previously stated and defined by Deci and Ryan (2000), is the innate human nature to seek out positive challenges and extend one's learning capacities through the exploration of ample learning opportunities. Students who acquire intrinsic motivation behaviors perform at a higher academic level than those students who do not acquire the same motivational qualities. Intrinsic motivational behaviors entail an innate desire to engage in an activity out of enjoyment (Daniel & Cooc, 2018). However, a gap in intrinsic motivational behaviors exists between students with learning disabilities and students without learning disabilities. Intrinsic motivation exists in students with learning disabilities, as some students report having a more positive outlook toward school in comparison to students without disabilities. However, the overall academic reports were significantly lower in students with learning disabilities (Daniel & Cooc, 2018). Deci and Ryan's (1980) SDT reported the attributes associated with intrinsic motivation as obtaining academic competence, establishing healthy relationships, establishing a sense of independence, and a sense of connectedness to one's environment. On the contrary, postsecondary students with learning disabilities have trouble when exuding self-determination attributes because they are not as motivated in their academics due to their low competence levels, which impedes their psychological needs, such as competency and autonomy, which must be met (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Deci and Ryan (2000) provided insight regarding autonomy in an educational setting as students engage in vast activities under their own will to explore new concepts without any external influences. When students with learning disabilities are accommodated with autonomy

support, such as faculty and student pairings who possess intrinsic motivation behaviors, students' intrinsic motivation is increased as their autonomy and competence needs are reached (Daniel & Cooc, 2018). Through the positive implementation of intrinsic motivation, postsecondary students with learning disabilities are more equipped to establish academic competence and increase their sense of connectedness to their environments.

Researchers Bardorfer and Dolenc (2022) expressed the importance of educators establishing a positive rapport with their students to foster positive learning experiences. When positive relationships are established, positive student motivational outcomes are achieved, such as actively participating during instructional and self-perceived learning (Bardorfer & Dolenc, 2022; Frisby & Martin, 2010; Wilson et al., 2010). The motive for establishing positive rapport between educators and their students can be expressed through an autonomic supportive teaching style (Black & Deci, 2000; Williams & Deci, 1996). The concept of autonomic supportive instruction is initiated through vast motivational tendencies that ensure growth and students being able to overcome any challenges that were instigated through their environment, thus allowing students to desegregate new experiences into their daily lives (Bardorfer & Dolenc, 2022; La Guardia & Patrick, 2008). As explained by Deci et al. (1981), autonomy support corresponds to the individual who is in the authoritative position, such as the educator, who is seeking the perspective of another individual, such as the students, by recognizing how to minimize the use of "pressure and demands" in the learning environment by offering choices and providing emotional support.

Through autonomic support, positive rapport is established between educators and students. Researchers Culpeper and Kan (2020) communicated empirical findings regarding the significance of student and educator rapport and how it can foster students' autonomic regulated

learning behaviors by providing appropriate social contexts, such as engaging learning environments, appropriate accommodations, and open lines of communication. From the perspective of the SDT, the importance of intrinsic motivation, reminiscent of autonomic support, allows students to engage academically in their higher education learning environment through regulated learning behaviors (Bardorfer & Dolenc, 2022; Culpeper & Kan, 2020).

Teacher involvement is essential in fostering self-motivational values for students who possess learning disabilities, especially in a higher education setting (Deci et al., 1981; Grolnick & Ryan, 1987).

Academic Accommodations and Transition Planning

Students with learning disabilities in postsecondary educational settings have stated their academic concerns regarding the difficulties they have encountered when applying to receive appropriate academic accommodations in their postsecondary institution. In essence, Harrison et al. (2007) relayed that students have expressed their concerns regarding faculties being unable to provide them with the appropriate academic support and accommodations because of their lack of awareness and knowledge about their learning disabilities. Collins and Wolter (2018) explained that the foundation for developing self-determination is the skill of self-awareness, where the student must identify a realistic understanding of their own strengths and limitations pertaining to their learning disability. When postsecondary students are aware of their learning disabilities, they should be able to advocate for themselves in obtaining the required services, support, and equal learning opportunities that will reflect their achievement abilities (Collins & Wolter, 2018). However, most postsecondary students transitioning into their postsecondary environment never had to advocate for themselves in their previous educational settings, so the process of self-advocation for their academic accommodations might be intimidating for them

(Ostrowski, 2016). As a result of students advocating for themselves, they acquire the confidence to ask their professors to accommodate their learning disability by demonstrating the content knowledge to ascertain their academic goals. This self-awareness promotes self-determination skills, enabling students to become more independent in problem-solving situations and exert increased control over their academic success (Collins & Wolter, 2018). In lieu of postsecondary students with learning disabilities advocating for themselves, their sense of self-efficacy and self-determination values increase as they lead themselves toward making independent decisions of positive academic outcomes. Additionally, postsecondary institutions provide academic accommodations that are available for all students who attend the institution, such as writing and tutoring centers. Newman and Madaus (2015) expressed that when students with learning disabilities endure access to academic supports, such as tutoring and writing centers, their outlook toward their academic success is improved, and their school outcomes are more positive.

To ensure postsecondary student success and positive retention rates, faculties should ensure various strategies that accommodate the learning goals. Students with learning disabilities face many challenges regarding their academics, which hinders how successfully they may navigate through their postsecondary career; therefore, these students require academic accommodations for success (McKenzie & Tuck, 2015). Many students with learning disabilities require additional time in facilitating their academic tasks and assessments, whereas faculty members should be aware of their students' learning prognosis to accommodate them with the necessary support. An imperative academic support that faculty can integrate into their student accommodation criteria is the implementation of technology. Assistive technology is beneficial in providing postsecondary students with reading and writing-related disabilities as computer-supported accommodations increase independence, as it does not require personal faculty support

(Bolt et al., 2011). Assistive technology is advantageous as it compensates academic success for students with learning disabilities and improves the concepts of 'reasonable accommodations' and 'least restrictive environment' (Mull & Sitlington, 2003). The integration of technology is beneficial in providing students with learning disabilities the opportunity to obtain an equitable education, as instructors are able to provide students with differentiated methods of learning, which will increase the motivational and self-determination values toward the outcome of their academic goals (Zainuddin & Perera, 2019).

Self-Advocacy & Student Success

Additionally, when students with learning disabilities are presented with support to improve their academic qualities, their retention rates in their postsecondary settings are increased (Newman et al., 2018). Newman et al. (2018) indicated that students who received special educational services in their high school districts are more inclined to self-advocate for themselves by requesting specific accommodations and support to meet the needs of their learning disability. Postsecondary institutions provide students with learning disabilities who also experience comorbid disabilities, such as reading disabilities, ADHD, and ASD, with programs and services that are anticipated to recognize the various supports for each student (Lipka et al., 2019). These programs, which are also viewed as interventions, are designed to address the ongoing learning challenges for all postsecondary students with learning disabilities throughout the course of their postsecondary academic career (Lipka et al., 2019). When instructors can recognize the learning needs of their students, they are equipped with various modalities to support and enhance the functional capabilities of the students with learning disabilities that will promote improvement in academic skills consisting of compensatory strategies (Lipka et al., 2019). Strategies, such as the integration of technological programs and

devices, will provide students with learning disabilities with various supports and accommodations to help them address differentiated learning strategies pertaining to their organizational skills, reading, and writing strategies, as well as address emotional and social factors, which will alter their self-recognition to achieve academic success.

Law Considerations for Students with Learning Disabilities in Postsecondary Education

Legal protection in the form of laws and acts related to students with disabilities in postsecondary education has been established since the turn of the century due to the vulnerability of those who possess disabilities in educational settings. Such laws have been designed and established to protect all students in all educational settings by providing them with a formal diagnosis of the possessed disability, along with legal documentation stating that these students will receive appropriate accommodations and related services for their diagnosed disability (Floyd, 2012). A formal diagnosis is usually conducted at an early age to increase the functional advantages for these students by the time they reach their postsecondary education setting (Weis & Bittner, 2022). Students with learning disabilities encounter significant challenges regarding the supports and services that are implemented into their learning curriculum at their grade level, which is why the demand for integrating special educational laws into postsecondary settings is crucial.

Over the last few decades, the demands for student academic support and accommodations have increased due to an influx of students with disabilities entering the realm of postsecondary education settings. Instead of this influx, students with learning disabilities will require increased academic support and accommodations from their educators to ensure equality and equity in their learning (Gordon et al., 2016; Lovett, 2014; Reinschmiedt et al., 2013). Santos et al. (2019) expressed that about 96% of colleges and universities have students with

learning disabilities. Researchers indicated that faculty members and instructors encounter difficulty accommodating the individualized learning needs of these students and require adequate training (Santos et al., 2019). However, students with learning disabilities are supported through vast legal aspects, including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004, the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008, the Association on Higher Education and Disability, and Section 405 of the Rehabilitation Act. These governing laws establish protection for students who possess all disabilities that hinder their learning.

Federally Mandated Academic Support Services

In virtue of the special education laws that are represented in all educational entities, the U.S Department of Education (2022) relayed critical information regarding the enrollment of students with learning disabilities in higher educational settings by providing them with inclusive educational experiences, such as the ones that were experienced in their K-12 settings (Scheef et al., 2020). The educational experiences provide students with learning disabilities opportunities to succeed in higher educational settings through intellectual and developmental support services (Scheef et al., 2020). Researchers have indicated that students with learning disabilities enrolled in higher educational settings are expected to perform academically at the same level as their peers who do not possess learning disabilities (Sachs & Schreuer, 2011; Santos et al., 2019). Therefore, this rationale makes a compelling reason as to why faculty members and instructors should be adequately trained in providing the appropriate academic accommodations for these students, as many students with learning disabilities are not receiving the differentiated instruction that is needed for success (McTighe et al., 2004; Santos et al., 2019).

According to the U.S. Department of Education and the National Center for Education Statistics (2022), there was a 17% increase in higher education enrollment for students with

learning disabilities between 2004 and 2014 and about an 11% increase in 2012. Since then, the percentage of students with learning disabilities has increased, which has shifted the focus of many instructors to address the learning challenges for the specific learning disability that the enrolled students possess (Kartovicky, 2020). Most instructors are required to receive adequate training to address the perceptions of the stereotypes that accompany learning disabilities, as well as any negative feelings that may arise towards students with learning disabilities, which, unfortunately, is a barrier most students face in most educational settings (Kartovicky, 2020; Michael & Zidan, 2018). Instructors are also required to receive specific training to obtain suitable knowledge as to how to work with students with disabilities settings (Kartovicky, 2020; Michael & Zidan, 2018). It is imperative for educators in postsecondary settings to become adequately knowledgeable in working with students with learning disabilities, as there are laws established that are crucial to mandating students with learning disabilities with the differentiated accommodations necessary for success.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2006) defined Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 as "protecting qualified individuals with disabilities," whereas individuals with disabilities are defined as "persons with a physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more major life activities." Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 protects individuals with learning disabilities within federal funding programs by prohibiting discrimination from occurring (Murphy, 2021). The implications of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 assure that the federal funding programs are providing individuals with the support and accommodations that are stated in their 504 plans, and if this act is not established legally without further documentation, then the funding may be rescinded (Murphy,

2021). In order for students to receive services through IDEIA, a 504 Plan must be administered, and the student must meet the criteria for one of the 13 categorized disabilities, which is attributed to a psychological evaluation that demonstrates the specific impairments relating to the learning disability (Hustus et al., 2020).

Federally Mandated Academic Accommodations

Research conducted by Hustus et al. (2020) indicates that students with learning disabilities, specifically those with ADHD, demonstrate impairments pertaining to their academic performance. Students with ADHD possess a neurodevelopment disorder that is characterized by their levels of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity that impact their behavioral, social, and academic functioning performance (Barry et al., 2002; Hustus et al., 2020). There are many challenges associated with ADHD that could hinder the academic, social, and emotional success of students in their educational settings. With the implementation of a 504 Plan, these students will receive services to accommodate their learning disability. Each 504 Plan that is initiated for students differs according to the learning disability that the student possesses, and each service is assessed through evidence-based observations (Hustus et al., 2020).

The legal legislation relating to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 consists of laws that prohibit discrimination from occurring among students who possess various learning disabilities (Floyd, 2012). Additionally, Wilhelm (2003) expressed that there are specific guidelines within this law that embody the responsibility of the postsecondary entities in which students with disabilities are obtaining their education and how these entities are receiving federal financial assistance for their students with learning disabilities. Students with learning disabilities are a growing population in postsecondary settings, with students who encompass various comorbid disabilities; therefore, employing the importance for postsecondary entities to

be equipped in supporting these students is crucial, as they should identify the specific disability and apply the appropriate accommodations and practices to meet the learning needs for these students at the postsecondary level. Although the population of students with learning disabilities has increased over the last few decades, students with learning disabilities who enroll in postsecondary entities are still lower than those students who are typically cognitively functioning (Gregg, 2007; Madaus & Shaw, 2006).

Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 is a law that establishes equal opportunities for individuals with disabilities (U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, 2023). People with disabilities are subjected to discrimination. Therefore, the United States Congress declares that any person who possesses a disability of any sort is not to be discriminated against from obtaining an education, housing, transportation, health services, access to public services, and employment opportunities (sec. 12101, 2023). In relation to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the laws under the ADA require modifications at the postsecondary education level pertaining to the type of disability the student possesses (U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, 2023).

Advocates, including the students and instructors, should be aware of the laws representing Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, as they cover state-funded programs for transitioning students from k-12 settings to postsecondary settings (Pacer's National Parent Center on Transition and Employment, 2015). Modifications are presented to postsecondary students with learning disabilities as an accommodation practice for the use of alternative methods of instruction, including assistive technology devices, which is an implication for self-motivational approaches (Lindstrom, 2007).

To avoid instructors making assumptions regarding whether a student requires academic accommodations or not, postsecondary students should self-advocate for themselves by informing their instructors of the necessary information regarding the disability they possess (ADA National Network, 2018; Harrison et al., 2013). With this knowledge, postsecondary educators should accommodate their students through appropriate interactive approaches that fundamentally alter the academic criteria requirements for academic success (ADA National Network, 2018). Through this approach of providing transitioning students into postsecondary educational settings with academic modifications, students with learning disabilities are at the advantage of shaping their own academic environment through motivational behaviors of autonomy (Little et al., 2006; Shogren et al., 2019; Wehmeyer & Shogren, 2017).

The ADA affects postsecondary educational programs in various methods and resources. According to Pacer's National Parent Center on Transition and Employment (2015), Title II of the ADA safeguards state-funded postsecondary educational programs for students who possess learning disabilities, and Title III of the ADA safeguards privately funded postsecondary educational programs to make these programs accessible to students who are qualified with disabilities. Professionals from Pacer's National Parent Center on Transition and Employment (2015) explained how postsecondary programs would modify their policies, practices, or procedures to make the programs accessible for their students. Such modifications will vary, depending on the specific disability that the student possesses. Some modifications may entail early enrollment, substituting specific courses to accommodate the students' learning disabilities, providing students with a syllabus prior to the start of the course, integration of assistive technological devices, as well as note-taking accommodations (Lipka et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2017). Therefore, students with learning disabilities are entitled to equal learning opportunities

through modifications provided to them to promote inclusion in postsecondary education (Maggiolini & Molteni, 2013).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004

In alignment with the special education laws governing those with learning disabilities, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004 (IDEA) is a reauthorized law from 1975 and 1990 that governs a free and appropriate public education that is eligible for students with disabilities with related services that accommodate specific learning needs throughout the nation. Before this law was reauthorized, children were denied access to educational opportunities to learn in a public education setting, and most schools only educated one out of five students with disabilities (Ed.gov, 2023). Since the reauthorization of the law, major goals were initiated and established to implement programs that integrated early intervention, special education, and related services to students who possessed disabilities, along with specialized intervention plans that went according to the disability they possessed (Ed.gov, 2023).

As of the 2020-2021 school year, it was reported that agencies nationwide have supported more than 7.5 million students with learning disabilities with academic support, accommodations, interventions, and other related services, which are stated in a student's Individual Education Plan (IEP: IDEA, 2004). This law establishes mandatory academic support for K-12 students with learning disabilities, which impacts their ability to pursue an equitable education. This law also describes that the disability categories that label students with learning disabilities in their postsecondary educational setting are applicable as being a direct diagnosis to receiving academic accommodations (IDEA, 2004). Instead, these diagnoses constitute a reference for postsecondary institutions to assist the students in being assigned accommodations and support to attain their educational needs (USDOE, 2022).

In reference to the IDEA of 2004, postsecondary students with disabilities ensure mandated educational goals. Therefore, educators should provide students with practical guides and resources through the use of evidence-based practices (EBP). EBPs include inclusive education, interagency collaboration, and social skills, which enable the autonomy of the student's academic abilities (Shaw & Dukes, 2013). Webb et al. (2008) indicated that when evidence-based practices are instilled in the student's educational reform, student retention, motivation, and autonomy toward their academic goals increase.

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004), students with learning disabilities are mandated to obtain complete access to a general education curriculum as well as be provided an education in the least restrictive environment (LRE: Papay et al., 2018). The movement of providing students with general education instruction in an inclusive setting has developed tremendously over the past 40 years and has generated successful outcomes for students with learning disabilities (Mazzotti et al., 2016; Papay et al., 2018; Ryndak et al., 2013). Researchers indicated that students with learning disabilities who received accommodations in an inclusive educational setting are well-equipped to transition out of their higher education setting and into real-world situations, such as employment (Papay et al., 2018). The retention rate of students with learning disabilities who are enrolled in colleges and universities in the United States has exceedingly increased since 2004, with more than 260 programs offering these students employment opportunities post-higher education (Think College, 2018).

Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) of 2008

The Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) of 2008 was signed to be in compliance with informing postsecondary education students of imperative information concerning their current prospective educational courses in their attained institutions. Corresponding information

consists of the academic program requirements, retention rates, graduation rates, crime reports, and financial aid procures that adhere to fairness and transparency for all postsecondary students (HEOA, 2008, PL 110-315). In support of this law being passed to advocate equality for all postsecondary students, students with disabilities are also required to obtain equal learning opportunities that require socialization, independent living skills, academic enrichment, and work experience that facilitate skills that are applicable to careers in obtaining employment (HEOA, 2008, PL 110-315).

Postsecondary education entities provide their students who possess learning disabilities with heightened academic knowledge through enrichment programs that employ career training opportunities as well as independent living instructions, which are crucial when transitioning into postsecondary settings (USDOE, 2022). These transitional structures provide students with learning disabilities opportunities to collude with faculties and peers with the appropriate supports and accommodations for their intellectual abilities. However, these programs that assist students with academic support must meet the requirements to access funding to be approved financially through the United States Department of Education (2013) Office of Federal Student Aid. Through the provision of state funding, students with learning disabilities will obtain equitable learning opportunities.

Under the HEOA law, students with learning disabilities in higher educational settings have been provided with educational opportunities since the 1970s, which entailed community-based instructional programs (Neubert et al., 2002; Neubert & Moon, 2006; Scheef et al., 2020). Such programs included job sampling, employment experiences, and accessing community resources (Neubert et al., 2002, p. 2). Scheef et al. (2020) explain that the reauthorization of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA, 2008) initiated a foundation that provides higher

educational settings with opportunities for students with learning disabilities with comprehensible transition programs that will ensure federal financial aid funding except for student loans (p. 529). Students with learning disabilities will also receive continuous support through inclusive accommodations pertaining to their specific learning disability. Many benefits may arise from the accommodations provided to students to support their learning needs, such as independent learning skills, social and emotional skills, community access programs, self-advocacy skills, and employment opportunities (Papay et al., 2018; Scheef et al., 2020).

Association on Higher Education and Disability Act (AHEAD)

The Association on Higher Education and Disability Act (AHEAD) is defined as "an international, multicultural organization of professionals committed to full participation in higher education for persons with disabilities" (AHEAD, 2020). The ultimate mission of this association is to provide postsecondary students with learning disabilities an equal opportunity to obtain an education. These opportunities represent "promoting excellence through leadership, education, communication, and training" (AHEAD, 2020). The association serves as an organization providing a plethora of opportunities for faculty to gain knowledge on how to guide students with disabilities regarding education, leadership, and professional development with anticipation of providing encouragement to strengthen one's competency and expertise (AHEAD, 2020, sec. 1). With the implementation of these training, faculty can commit to providing students with learning disabilities with the academic supports and accommodations required. Nonetheless, the Association on Higher Education and Disability Act (AHEAD) (2020) relays that postsecondary institutions accommodate their students with learning disabilities in accordance with the various accommodations offered.

In relation to the AHEAD, Thompson et al. (2009) explained that students with learning disabilities experience disparity between their "personal competencies and environmental demands," which alters the magnitude of the specific supports that these students require. Supports may be enclosed as various strategies and resources that promote enriching opportunities toward academic functioning that are implemented into the student's IEP (Frielink et al., 2021). Regarding students with disabilities obtaining support in alignment with their disability, the notion of postsecondary students seeking their own academic support is an intrinsic motivational social value, as these students are aware of the types of support necessary to enhance their instructional learning. Deci and Ryan (2000) expressed this motivational approach as part of the self-determination theory, as it posits a "typology of motivation." Deci and Ryan (2020) based the "typology of motivation" on two sub-theories relating to intrinsic motivation and cognitive evaluations. Both sub-theories examine the functionality of postsecondary students with learning disabilities and how support relating to the diagnosed learning disability encourages motivational attributes with the outcome of academic success (Frielink et al., 2017).

Researchers Newman and Madaus (2015) conducted a study on the widespread importance of postsecondary students receiving appropriate academic support, modifications, and services in their academic settings, as little knowledge has been obtained regarding which students at the postsecondary level utilize specific accommodations. The researchers also investigated how the accommodations between secondary and postsecondary settings differ for specific students with learning disabilities. Their findings revealed that although 100% of the student participants received support in place of their learning disability in their secondary settings, only about 35% of the students informed their postsecondary setting about their learning

disability, and for the students who disclosed their learning disability to their school, only about 24% of those students received accommodations and modification support. The significance of their findings was perceived based on the implications regarding the students' lack of knowledge about their legal rights to obtaining an equitable learning experience in their postsecondary setting, as opposed to their secondary setting. Additionally, the students admitted to not obtaining the self-advocacy skills to disclose their learning disability to their school to request academic accommodations, as these students also relayed their concerns about enduring a fearful stigma relating to their disability. The researchers also explained the importance of providing students with learning disabilities with accommodations, modifications, and support, as it will increase their retention and succession rates.

Additional research conducted by Weis et al. (2016) presented the importance of postsecondary students with learning disabilities receiving accommodations for academic success, as well as which accommodations are most beneficial for these students. Special education clinicians in various postsecondary settings recommend varied modifications for students with learning disabilities to enhance their academic retention rates. Such recommended modifications include additional time towards completing exams and assignments, allowing technological access for class instruction and exams, using calculators during math exams, and using word processors or spellchecks. Their findings revealed that about 90% of the clinicians who recommended additional time for students were successful with that implementation, 70% who recommended technological supports for students were successful with that implementation, and about 53% who recommended modification pertaining to assessments for students were successful with that implementation. The significance of their findings was perceived upon evidence supporting student academic accommodations in alignment with the laws that govern

the provisions of accommodations in college and how they are misinterpreted, as most laws are governed to protect students from being discriminated. Additionally, the researchers established data on the effectiveness and validity of providing students with accommodations as an adequate mode for achieving student success and high retention rates. It has been firmly established that those who receive appropriate accommodations and services in a postsecondary setting succeed with the use of such services. However, 55% of students with learning disabilities are not receiving the appropriate accommodations necessary due to their inability to access skills to self-advocate for their needs.

Summary

The focus of my research was on connecting the theories and frameworks presented in this study to ultimately enhance the students' acquisition of intrinsic motivation at the postsecondary educational level. By applying the theoretical framework of self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1980), I was able to examine the perceptions that students with learning disabilities have regarding the academic accommodations and supports that they are being offered at a postsecondary educational level. I also examined the effectiveness of student progress through academic autonomy, technological integrations, and evidence-based practices. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenology was to examine the lived experiences of postsecondary students with learning disabilities and how they receive academic support in alignment with their academic goals at their private universities in the Northeastern United States.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenology was to examine the lived experiences of postsecondary students with learning disabilities and how they received academic support in alignment with their academic goals in private universities in northeastern United States. This study was conducted at a university in in private universities in northeastern United States with postsecondary students with learning disabilities. Postsecondary students with learning disabilities were identified for their perceptions regarding their self-determination values in acquiring academic support in their institution.

Chapter Three provides the reader with the design of the research that was conducted, the research questions relating to the design, the setting and participants, the positionality of the researcher, as well as the procedures following the design with a focus on the various data collection methods. This research investigation was pivotal in understanding how students with learning disabilities are academically supported by their institutions and how these students perceive their educational goals being met. The findings may help guide postsecondary environments in developing self-determination skills for learning-disabled students by justifying the relationships among motivation, interest, and metacognitive development, which is most associated with meaningful learning experiences, a requirement of children in the 21st century.

Research Design

The design supporting this study was the phenomenological approach to collecting data. Phenomenology is a type of qualitative methodology that "describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lives experiences of a concept of a phenomenon" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 146). The goal of this study was to examine the perceptions of postsecondary students

with learning disabilities and how to best connect the cognitive, social, scientific, and psychological aspects of learning with the supports provided through academic accommodations and supports from the institution. This specific hermeneutic phenomenology research design was set in real-time, real-life learning situations explored within the context of educational curriculums geared towards postsecondary students with learning disabilities. The goal is to provide academic support to postsecondary students with learning disabilities through the promotion of extrinsic motivational attributes in ascertaining self-determination.

Within a hermeneutic phenomenology, the researcher focused on the phenomenon itself due to the unique aspects that it presents (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This hermeneutic phenomenological study was based on the lived experiences and perceptions that postsecondary students who possess learning disabilities have towards receiving academic support from their institutions, which was investigated through research questions designed to uncover motivational and extrinsic learning opportunities. The main goal was to understand the ways in which institutions present motivational opportunities for students through academic support. These research questions were designed to reveal further research questions related to student motivation, measurement of institution effectiveness and knowledge of academic supports, and how postsecondary students with learning disabilities perceive the academic support they receive in alignment with their learning disability. Through purposeful and snowball sampling, I examined how postsecondary students who possess various learning disabilities perceive the academic support that they receive according to their educational goals on their IEPs and 504 Plans. The rationale behind conducting a hermeneutic phenomenology study was to evaluate the extrinsic motivational attributes of postsecondary students with learning disabilities relating to the academic supports they are receiving in lieu of their learning disability.

This study was conducted at a university located in in private universities in northeastern United States. The population consisted of postsecondary students ranging from 18-24 years old. The researcher examined the ways in which postsecondary students who possess learning disabilities perceive the academic support that they receive from their institutions and how these best practices guide the students with motivational and self-determination values.

Research Questions

The focus of this study is to understand how the perceptions that postsecondary students with learning disabilities obtain in receiving academic support and accommodations by their instructors in alignment to their educational goals which will be investigated through the following research questions:

Central Research Question

What are the experiences of students with learning disabilities in receiving academic support services from their institution?

Sub-Question One

What are the experiences of students with learning disabilities using the writing center?

Sub-Question Two

What are the experiences of students with learning disabilities using peer tutoring?

Sub-Question Three

What are the experiences of students with learning disabilities using professional tutoring?

Setting and Participants

The rationale behind conducting a hermeneutic phenomenology was to evaluate the academic support received by postsecondary students with learning disabilities pursuant to their

IEP and 504 plans in terms of motivation and engagement. In a hermeneutic phenomenology study, the researcher is only focused on the study itself due to the unique aspects that it presents (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study was conducted in private universities in northeastern United States. The population consisted of postsecondary students ranging from 18-24 years old. As the researcher, I examined the specific supports that institutions are providing to their students by monitoring student achievement, motivation, and engagement through the investigation of best practices, as compared to the ways in which students display self-determination attributes regarding their education.

Site

The sites in which the participants will be selected in conducting this study and gathering data will be from private universities located in the Northeastern United States. These universities offer a plethora of undergraduate degrees, graduate degrees, doctorate degree programs, and pre-professional and certificate programs, as well as offering full-time online academic courses.

Participants

The selected participants for this study will be postsecondary students with learning disabilities who attend or attended private universities in the Northeastern United States, with ages ranging from 18-24. Of the postsecondary students who possess learning disabilities enrolled in the university, the selection of the participants was through purposeful sampling, also known as selective sampling, which refers to the availability and expertise of the selected participants of my qualitative case study (Coyne, 1997).

The participants in this study fit the criteria for research questions, which focused on the perception that students with learning disabilities have in relation to the academic supports they

receive from their institution. Proficient evidence-based teaching methodologies related to the educational accommodations stated in the students' IEPs and 504 Plans, as well as student self-determination towards their academic support, will be investigated. The purpose of this study is to better understand the support that students with learning disabilities receive at the postsecondary educational level. This research study will help to uncover the phenomenology associated with student and institution effectiveness as related to student outcomes in fulfillment of providing ethical assurance in all phases of the study.

Researcher Positionality

As the researcher of this hermeneutic phenomenology relating to the supports that students with disabilities receive at the postsecondary educational level, my positionality regarding my values and beliefs, as well as my philosophical approach to conceptualization, helped shape the nature of this study. Many personal perspectives have guided the blueprint for this study, including my philosophical and theoretical beliefs regarding social constructivism and varied philosophical assumptions: ontological, epistemological, and axiological. When reflecting upon how I would carry out my reflexive empirical research, it was imperative that the methodological research process explained the study's outcomes using a comprehensible approach, which was aligned with my positionality of the study. Holmes (2020) explained that, in support of the preconceptions that may be brought to the attention of the reader by the participants, the concept of reflexivity is necessary for articulating the importance of the conduction of the study. Through my personal experiences and perceptions regarding the conceptions of this study and the perception of the participants involved in the study, it is imperative that the reader of this study recognize my positionality in obtaining a complete and

unbiased understanding of the data and the conclusions formed through the embedded data analysis used to promote validity in this study.

Interpretive Framework

The social constructivist approach in education was the interpretive framework that fit within my philosophical assumption of influencing theories pertaining to qualitative research. Educators are social constructivists, meaning they seek to understand the world in which they live and work in through various modes of learning and experiences, thus shaping these experiences into productive teaching moments (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through the constructivist approach, educators attempt to apply meaning learned through prior experiences and interactions. As a constructivist, my approach and perspective towards education are shaped by purposeful connections with students and their experiences. This subjective approach to research allowed me to further my understanding of such experiences, shaped by both a social and historical lens in how I apply my knowledge, skills, and disposition in my related field of study. The constructivist approach allows the researcher to generate their own perspective of the world in which they live.

Philosophical Assumptions

Qualitative researchers utilize various research features combined with certain philosophical beliefs and assumptions. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained the importance of articulating the philosophical assumptions that I believed in establishing the layout of my research design. By formulating the problem of my study, I attained my research goal through various influences of philosophical assumptions, which helped to support my reasoning and data collection plan trajectory. The ontological, epistemological, and axiological philosophical assumptions are incorporated into the research study to address specific outcomes. As such,

research experiences help to establish an evaluative criterion by which research decisions are made (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ontological Assumption

One method of research commonly used in the qualitative research process is ontological assumption. Ontological assumption is defined as “the study of being” (Crotty, 2003). The study of being refers to the nature of reality, which involves the researcher’s thoughts and beliefs pertaining to that specific nature of reality. Qualitative researchers often question if there is one universal study, as opposed to multiple realities, in seeking truth (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a qualitative researcher, ontological assumptions allowed me to explore perceptions regarding the reality of providing postsecondary students with pedagogical approaches to meeting the needs of those with learning disabilities. As such, a complete curriculum was tailored to address the different perspectives and realities discussed. Therefore, investigations into learning best practices for these postsecondary students regarding students' self-determination and motivational abilities were studied through journal prompts, student interviews, and focus groups.

Epistemological Assumption

The second feature of qualitative research is an epistemological assumption. Creswell and Poth (2018) defined epistemological assumption as a way of comprehending the knowledge that is known through subjective experiences that people experience. These epistemological assumptions helped improve my study's intention to form an unbiased understanding of the outcomes of the study. As a qualitative researcher, it was imperative to question what counts as knowledge, how knowledge claims are justified, to identify what the relationship is between personally held beliefs and perceptions, and to understand the perceptions of my participants

analyzed through the collection of data used in my study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To gain a deeper understanding of the knowledge, it was recommended to apply an extended amount of time to investigate my study as well as the implications of my study to gain insight from the subjective experiences of my participants.

Axiological Assumption

The third feature of qualitative research is axiological assumption. The axiological assumption is imperative in qualitative research in terms of the researcher making their values well known in a study. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained axiological assumption as characterizing qualitative research through specific study-related values. The values of the study also coincide with the values of the researcher, where many researchers portray their positionality and subjective values concerning the topic of the study as being unbiased (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The positionality of the researcher should not hold them back from conveying their values and beliefs towards the study. However, it is important that researchers be aware of how personal perspectives can ultimately lead to bias, thus affecting the exactness of the research gathered. As the qualitative researcher, it was imperative to acknowledge the study's values through the identification of bias or subjective aspects in the study, as well as to acknowledge the differences that others may experience to gain a new, enlightening perspective.

Researcher's Role

Throughout this hermeneutic phenomenology study, I assumed the role of the full researcher, participant, and human instrument to identify how to understand the perceptions that postsecondary students with learning disabilities obtain in receiving academic support from their institutions in alignment with their educational goals. My role as the human instrument was to obtain the trust of my participants by adhering to the highest standards of ethics in safeguarding

privacy and promoting trustworthiness in data collection, specifically during the interview phase. My role was to assure participants that the information presented was devoid of biased assumptions. As such, I ensured that participants were protected against the portrayal of unauthoritative influence that could alter the data and conduction of my study (Liberty University, 2022). As the human instrument, all data that was collected in the study was mediated through me, which resulted in the data that was collected in the study being mediated through me, which resulted in the data being investigated through inventories of interviews, physical artifacts, and survey questions.

Procedures

The initial step in conducting this study was to formulate a central research question based on the topic of the study. After gathering research on the subject, I identified the sites and settings from which I would collect data from. I first gained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). After I received permission from the IRB, I reached out to participants who attend private universities in the northeastern region of the United States. Once the participants contacted me, I took a purposeful sample of students with learning disabilities from private northeastern universities. After receiving permission and consent from 10 participants, I conducted my first round of data collection through a series of individual interview questions. The purpose of these initial questions was to gain the participants' trust, to gauge their level of openness, and to understand their personal experiences in receiving an education with a learning disability. Participants who were willing to continue to participate were included in the second round of data collection, the focus groups. I then collected the third round of data with the remaining participants by asking them to complete journal prompts. Finally, I analyzed the data I received to obtain a reliable outcome of my findings.

Permissions

To ensure a solid, ethical study, researchers require cooperation from participants involved in the study as well as on-site participation. A vital obligation was my commitment to adhere to specific guidelines before administering any portion of my study and obtaining permission from my participants. I obtained permission by providing my participants with a consent letter that clearly stated what my study would entail. It was at this stage that I would include my procedures as well as my data collection plan. In addition to requesting permission from my participants, I stated precisely what I was asking permission to do in the learning center in support of my being able to facilitate the research. Furthermore, I clearly stated what was expected of my participants in the study by presenting my participants with informed consent forms prior to participating while also letting my participants know that taking part in the study was entirely voluntary and they were welcome to discontinue at any time (Liberty University, 2022). Before initiating efforts towards collecting data, all participants signed for permission on-site and were asked to complete the IRB's permission letter. Thereafter, I provided the necessary officials with copies of such signed documentation.

Recruitment Plan

Eligible participants were invited to join my study and were provided with information regarding participant criteria, which was embedded into the recruitment plan, along with an explanation of the procedures. The sample size was also explained, consisting of snowball sampling. An estimated time for total participation was clearly stated, along with a survey that participants were required to complete. Additionally, I discussed my consent process in the final portion of my recruitment plan by clearly stating that an initial survey would be attached to the letter with a specified time frame for receipt. Participants were also provided with the option of

opting out of the study at any time. Once my participants read the consent form and the procedures and guidelines were clearly established, I began to collect the necessary data. I recruited participants from universities located in the northeast region of the United States by reaching out to the disability services and see if they were willing to share some people willing to talk to me about how they use the academic services provided on campus.

Data Collection Plan

Collecting data is an imperative approach in the data collection plan for conducting a compelling hermeneutic phenomenology. When collecting vast data approaches, it is imperative to obtain ethical measures, which include non-biased forms of data collection, while also protecting the identity of the participants to obtain anonymity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The intention of collecting data using a non-biased approach is crucial in terms of following a trustworthy research methodology (Yin, 2015). Each method of data collection utilized will provide the researcher with critical information regarding this study. As the prominent researcher of this qualitative study regarding the supports that students with disabilities receive at the postsecondary educational level, I utilized three different approaches in gathering my data. The three different sources of collected data were individual interviews, a focus group, and journal prompts. These data collection approaches supported this hermeneutic phenomenology study with explanatory measures relating to students' self-determination and self-advocacy approaches toward their educational goals.

Individual Interviews

When conducting individual qualitative interviews, it is crucial to create a safe space for the participants being interviewed. As the researcher, I ensured that purposeful sampling was conducted beforehand and that the interview was bounded by a specific time and place (see

Creswell & Poth, 2018). I also conveyed the purpose of the study to the participants so that everything would be clear regarding the nature of the study (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). The rationale for conducting individual qualitative interviews is to obtain various perspectives from postsecondary students regarding the academic support they receive in their institution. Before initiating my individual interview questions, I presented my participants with a grand tour question to engage them in exploring their teaching experiences in alignment with my study. I conducted this using a written script, which presented open-ended questions relating to the participants' learning disability and how it has/or has not hindered their educational career, what types of supports and academic accommodations they have received, and how they think academic supports and accommodations will affect their self-determination attributes as well as their autonomy skills relating to their learned knowledge. Through the individual qualitative interview data collection approach, I obtained the opportunity to conceive an understanding of the participants' perspectives relating to the support that students with disabilities receive at the postsecondary educational level (see Yin, 2015).

Individual Interview Questions

1. Can you please introduce yourself to me by including anything you think is essential, as well as your educational background up to today?
2. Please tell me how your middle and high schools helped you navigate your disability.
CRQ
3. What made you decide to go to a university? CRQ
4. Why did you choose your university? SQ1
5. What types of academic support does this university offer? SQ1
6. How often do you utilize these academic support services? SQ1

7. How have these academic supports helped your experience so far? SQ1
8. How has the university supported your needs concerning your learning disability? SQ2
9. Have you experienced any difficulty in receiving academic support from the university?
If so, how? SQ2
10. What academic support might you need that the university does not provide? SQ2
11. In what ways do your professors encourage you to utilize the academic support services?
SQ3
12. How well have you been assisted in transitioning to a career post-graduation? SQ3
13. What role has your self-motivation played in your academic success thus far? SQ

The open-ended interview questions asked of the participants were composed in such a manner that specifically addressed the main components of this qualitative study. Such components included establishing a positive rapport with the participants during a one-on-one interview in a bounded location, identifying the prior knowledge that the participants endure regarding their learning disability and how they receive academic support, as well as the informational collection techniques in alignment with the methodological approach to collecting the interview data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Some of the questions entailed the participants' perspectives on the support they receive at the postsecondary level, how it affects their motivational and engagement attributes, and their opinions on their self-determination attributes that may be achieved throughout their postsecondary career.

Questions One through Four helped clarify who the participants were by acknowledging why they decided to attend college and the specific college where the data would be collected. Question Five helped guide my understanding of how the participants perceived their academic expectations as being met or not. Questions Six through Nine were essential in obtaining clarity

regarding the academic support that the university offers and how the academic support has supported specific needs concerning the participants' learning disabilities. Questions Ten through Thirteen were critical in understanding how the participants perceived their personal experiences relating to the academic support they receive, as well as allowing me to understand what role the participants' self-motivation played towards their academic success. Researchers have associated self-advocacy with increased intrinsic motivational values, as students can seek out positive challenges and extend their learning capacities by exploring ample learning opportunities (Wang et al., 2019).

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

When conducting a data analysis plan for the individual interview data collection approach, the initial step is to analyze the coding system for the conducted interviews. Qualitative coding consists of short words or phrases with symbolic representations in alignment with the visual data's summative, salient, essence-capturing, and evocative attributes (Saldaña, 2016). The researcher must identify the data meaningfully by establishing patterns and relationships within the categories developed. Charmaz (2006) explained the concept of open coding as the process of exploring the theoretical possibilities of discerning data analytically and identifying gaps in the research. Open coding consists of multiple coding practices, which allow the researcher to code the data suitably regarding the perceived theme or themes of the topic. Axial coding relates to the categories and subcategories and resembles the data from the open coding process of the research, such as identifying the circumstances for this phenomenon to occur, identifying the strategies or actions the participants employed in responding to the questions, the context and intervening conditions that have influenced the specific strategies, as well as identifying what the consequences are as a result of the participants' strategies (Charmaz,

2006). When analyzing data, axial coding aims to answer interrogative questions to identify the relationships within the coding categories into themes (Charmaz, 2006).

Focus Groups

In support of conducting a hermeneutic phenomenology on the academic accommodations that students with learning disabilities receive at the secondary level, I conducted a focus group with my participants that provided me with sufficient evidence regarding their lived experiences of their education. Yin (2015) considered focus groups to be moderately sized groups where the researcher can collect various data types. The initial reason why researchers gathered their data in focus groups was to sample the participants' perceptions regarding the same phenomena and to gain an honest depiction of expression from the participants. When participants are interviewed in a 'group' rather than individually, they are most likely to readily express themselves regarding the focus topic (Yin, 2015). Yin (2015) also communicated the importance of collecting and examining data, as it can reduce any issues or challenges of reflexivity. Collective sampling was utilized through the participants' perceptions of the academic support and accommodations they receive from their instructors at a postsecondary level.

Focus Group Questions

1. How familiar were you with the academic support services offered by the university when you started as a student? CRQ
2. Describe a positive experience with receiving academic support services at the university. SQ1
3. Describe a negative experience with receiving academic support services at the university. SQ2

4. What are your feelings of support from the university regarding your learning disability?

SQ3

Questions One through Four provided the researcher with basic information about the participants in understanding their educational background, how they view their academic achievement, and how familiar they are with the academic supports offered by their university. These questions were imperative in understanding the participants' role regarding the academic support they receive pertaining to their learning disability. The aim of asking these questions was to understand the participants' experiences regarding the academic support services and their feelings regarding the support from their university in lieu of their learning disability.

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

In conducting research and collecting data, the researcher must gain insight into whether the participants provide sufficient data (Yin, 2015). Through this data collection approach, I obtained the 'bulk' of the participants' data, as focus groups provide sufficient information, also known as value, regarding the study (see Yin, 2015). Saldaña (2016) explained value as a process of the data attributing to the greater meaning of what the participants were able to portray and contribute to the study on a personal level. When analyzing data collected from focus groups in qualitative research, such as this hermeneutic study, discourse analysis is utilized to examine what the contents are, as well as in the context of how the focus group data is gathered (Krippendorff & Bock, 2009). Additionally, the process of open coding was utilized to analyze the data to identify the relationships within the coding categories of the collected data for each focus group question. Axial coding was then utilized to identify the categories and subcategories of the collected data that featured data from the open coding process to further investigate the relationship of the participants' strategies to responding to the focus group questions.

Journal Prompts

Journal prompts were utilized to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the participant's perception of the supports and accommodations they receive at the postsecondary level from their instructors after engaging in the focus group with their peers. The journal prompts consisted of open-ended questions that related back to the questions that were asked in the focus group, which were designed to understand the skills, strengths, needs, and expectations, as well as the students' knowledge that was gained through their experiences in their postsecondary setting. The postsecondary students were provided with prompted questions consisting of open-ended questions relating to relationships amongst intrinsic motivation, academic competence, building healthy relationships, establishing independence, and identifying a sense of connectedness to their environment. An open-ended prompt regarding the perceptions they endured as an adult learner was also asked to gain further insight into their self-determination and self-advocacy skills.

Journal Prompts Questions

1. Has your learning disability hindered your academic success in any way? SQ1
2. Describe the level of support you have received from the academic support services thus far. SQ2
3. Describe which academic support services were the most beneficial to you and why? SQ2
4. Describe which academic support services were the least beneficial to you and why? SQ3
5. Please explain how your institution can better support you through academic accommodations that will lead you to success. SQ3

The journal prompt questions addressed the participants' experiences and opinions regarding the academic support services they receive from their university. The journal prompted

questions also asked the participants to describe the level of support they have received from the academic support services thus far, including which support services are most and least beneficial. The journal prompts also asked the participants to share their opinions of how they can receive better instructional support through academic accommodations that will lead them to success.

Journal Prompts Data Analysis Plan

The purpose of conducting journal prompts was to evaluate the validity of data that I collected through individual interviews to the data collected through the focus groups and to gain a deeper understanding of the student's perceptions regarding the academic support they receive from their institutions. Conducting open-ended journal prompt questions was beneficial for providing unforeseen answers. Through this analysis, I was more likely to obtain various answers to the students' perceptions. Alongside, Krippendorff and Bock (2009) expressed an increased possibility that the open-ended journal prompt responses could be responded similarly to the responses given during the individual interview due to the relationship of the theme of the study. I posed open-ended journal prompts that were given after the procedure had been conducted so that an overlap in responses would be avoided. The journal prompt responses were structured using inductive coding through open, axial, and selective coding (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). Comparable to the individual interview data collection analysis and focus group data collection analysis, when analyzing the journal prompt data, I identified if the participants could answer interrogative questions in support of identifying the relationships within the coding categories into themes while also investigating the relationship within the coding strategies (see Charmaz, 2006).

Data Analysis

In this hermeneutic phenomenology, I integrated qualitative methods of triangulation into my research by employing multiple data collection sources to understand the study phenomena. Method triangulation, as explained by Carter et al. (2014), is the connection of multiple data collection methods regarding the same phenomenon, which was portrayed by my execution of a data approach using individual interviews, a focus group, and journal prompts. To conduct proper methods of triangulation, it is essential that the researcher understands that fidelity must be adhered to in the collection of data (Shenton, 2004). Therefore, adherence to the specifications outlined in the SOE doctoral ensures the specific measures related to ethical practices to gather accurate findings. Trustworthiness can be adhered to only when there is a commitment to the assurance of ethical practices related to the collection of data as well as the interpretation of data whereby the researcher is not reporting biased information. For the collection of artifacts, the researcher should take the highest measures possible in grouping and categorizing information that supports the study's focus, once again helping to demonstrate trends and patterns emerging from the data.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative researchers are required to elaborate on the trustworthiness of their dissertation by identifying the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the research attributes. Lincoln and Guba (1985) constructed this methodological approach for researchers to elaborate on how these provisions have been appropriately employed throughout their study. The trustworthiness of qualitative research is imperative in ascertaining validity in practice. In contrast, Creswell and Poth (2018) explained validity as “an evolving construct means that a broad understanding of both traditional and contemporary perspectives is essential

for informing the work of qualitative researchers and readers of qualitative research" (p. 404). As such, it is the researcher's responsibility to provide their research procedures with validity to ensure a trustworthy dissertation.

Credibility

Credibility, as stated by Lincoln and Guba (1985), is an imperative factor in establishing the trustworthiness of the methodologies utilized in the study. Shenton (2004) elaborated on the provisions researchers should obtain to promote their confidence in accurately recording the data necessary for their phenomenological research study. Credibility should be addressed by the researcher by providing a thorough examination of the gaps in the literature, which supports validating the purpose of one's study to support the credibility and worthiness in examining the topic at hand. Throughout the duration of this qualitative study, I achieved credibility in three ways: (a) triangulation, (b) peer debriefing, and (c) frequent member-checking, all of which appear within the specific instinctive themes in the study.

Peer Debriefing

Peer debriefing is an essential component when uncovering bias and assumptions in the research. Peer debriefing was beneficial in improving the credibility of my research, as my peers could identify overlooked bias assumptions and vague study descriptions, as well as share analytical or thematic notations. Peer debriefing was pertinent in establishing credibility alongside the three different sources utilized through triangulation. As such, I elucidated the findings of my study through available data ascertained in the triangulation process, as well as an examination of literature supporting participant perspectives in similar studies (see Shenton, 2004). A cross-analysis of data helps to increase a study's validity and trustworthiness only when grounded in qualitative research-based practices.

Member Checking

In attempting to clarify and record authenticated conversations, it is important that stories are reported with accuracy (Shenton, 2004). Therefore, member checking can help to ensure that the researcher is capturing and understanding a true and meaningful representation of the participants' views regarding their involvement in the study. As such, it is recommended that the researcher provide participants with copies of their transcriptions, which can be reviewed and attested for accuracy. In addition, the researcher should ensure that trustworthiness is established by allowing participants to review salient points incorporated into the data analysis.

Trustworthiness must be established in the initial stages of the interview process and continued throughout the data collection process to ensure accurate reporting of interviews.

Transferability

When identifying the data collected for a qualitative study, the method of transferability is relevant in identifying how the researcher's findings may be applied to other situations that are similar to the proposed study (Shenton, 2004). Although the transferability of research-based practices may not be applicable to every phenomenon, conclusions may be transferable to other situations and populations (Shenton, 2004). However, researchers are held accountable for ensuring adequate information regarding the study within the same context of the collected data to establish trustworthiness within the accumulation of the research findings. Furthermore, it is imperative that the researcher gain insight into how the research may not be considered trustworthy when intended for other single-study phenomena (Shenton, 2004).

Dependability

To ensure that dependability is occurring and not affecting my research, I will have to be aware of my own biases. Dependability, as defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), is the

researcher's ability to portray consistent findings within the research with the intention of being repeated in the same context. Audit trails, which are kept records of how the study was conducted, were utilized to establish the trustworthiness of the qualitative inquiry. It was my responsibility to employ thorough, cohesive techniques within the same methods and participants to obtain similar results (see Shenton, 2004). Triangulation was utilized to establish dependability, as it is an important procedure for collecting data to ensure validity. Lincoln and Guba (1985) expressed that when a researcher is addressing the dependability of their gathered data, the issues must be presented in a direct manner with details to prevent future studies from repeating the same procedures and obtaining the same results.

Confirmability

Confirmability is the final perspective for the qualitative research study to be considered trustworthy. Lincoln and Guba (1985) construed confirmability as a neutral approach to the study, in which the findings of the collected data are perceived as being nonbiased by the researcher and shaped by the motivation and interests of the researcher. To ensure confirmability in my research study, I employed three techniques. The first technique was a detailed analytical investigation into the nonbiased methodological approaches that ensure trustworthy results. This was obtained through the second technique, triangulation, described above, which provided me with transparent results that could be traced to ensure confirmability in the study. Finally, I attained a reflexive demeanor towards the conduction of this study. According to Dodgson (2019), reflexivity in qualitative research is the assurance that the researcher ensures a rigorous approach to obtaining quality in the research for determining trustworthiness. By describing the contextual relationships between me and my participants, the study's credibility increased, as did the deepening of the understanding of why the study was initially conducted. This approach

helped determine the biases, beliefs, and personal experiences pertaining to the confirmability of the research study.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations in a qualitative research study were considered ahead of time, supported by many ethical assurances. Ethical considerations require the involvement of preliminary protocols pertaining to any issues that may be presented during the planning stages and throughout all phases of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I avoided obstacles such as issues that may disregard privacy and obtained the consent of the participants involved in the study. Additionally, caution should be given to concerns regarding the welfare and safety of participants to protect the augmentation of reciprocity, as well as the justice of equitable treatment and enhanced exclusivity of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To eliminate any deceptions or preconceived notions regarding the purpose of the study, the researcher must project the importance of the study to the participants and explain the purpose of the study as well as efforts taken to protect their identity by providing all participants with an alias or a number in which are identified by throughout study. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained an additional crucial ethical circumstance that must be taken into consideration is that the researcher should explain the importance of obtaining confidentiality within the study and not share any information off the record, for it could harm the welfare of all of the participants involved in the study.

Summary

The methodology of this dissertation supported the procedures and measures employed to identify the support that students with learning disabilities receive at the postsecondary educational level. The data analysis process of this study included the triangulation of data,

which consisted of individual interviews, focus groups, and journal prompts. Through the triangulation process, I identified the themes and patterns that have emerged from the data collection process. All data were analyzed and supported using credible fidelity standards. As such, data were represented in interview questions and various reporting methods (see Yin, 2015). All approaches to the collection and analysis of data support the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenology was to examine the lived experiences of postsecondary students with learning disabilities and how they received academic supports in alignment to their educational goals. The intention of this study was to understand the different experiences of each participant, specifically concentrating on what they reputed as being the most beneficial academic supports that are provided to them in their school setting. Enclosed in Chapter Four, I provide a brief description of each of the twelve participants. Succeeding the descriptions, I describe the various themes that emerged after thoroughly analyzing all the data collected from each participant. Finally, I conclude Chapter Four by answering the central questions and sub-questions of this study.

Participants

The participants who partook in this study were 10 postsecondary students, all of whom attended private universities in the northeastern United States. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 24, including full-time undergraduate and graduate students, as well as recent graduates from both undergraduate and graduate programs. Each participant in this study had an individualized education plan (IEP) or a 504 Plan when they were in middle school and high school. Each of the participants who engaged in the study participated in the data collection process, which consisted of individual interviews administered in person, a focus group interview with other participants, which was conducted in person, as well as journal prompts, which were dispersed via Google Docs. The following is a detailed description of each participant who partook in this study.

Table 1*Participants*

Participant	Age	Region of Institution	Disability Type(s)	Level of Current Education
Alessandra	22	Northeastern	Processing Disorder	Masters
Sophia	23	Northeastern	Speech and Language	Masters
Ava	24	Northeastern	Dyslexia	Masters
Madeline	24	Northeastern	ADHD	Master
Kristen	21	Northeastern	Dyslexia	Undergraduate
Alana	24	Northeastern	Dyslexia	Masters
Francine	22	Northeastern	ADD	Undergraduate
Jenny	18	Northeastern	ADD/Speech & Language	Undergraduate
John	23	Northeastern	ADD	Masters
Nicholas	18	Northeastern	ADD/Dyslexia	Undergraduate

Alessandra

Alessandra is a 22-year-old graduate student who is currently a pre-k 4 teacher while pursuing a master's degree in special education in a northeastern private university. She was diagnosed with a processing disorder, which is the inability to effectively apply the information gathered by her auditory and visual senses when she was 8 years old. Alessandra exhibited difficulty processing information that was taught to her, which often led to her feeling like she had low self-esteem in school compared to the other students in her class. Her disability was addressed with an IEP when she was in the 4th grade. She carried her diagnosis with her

throughout the rest of her educational career and was provided with academic support, which allowed her additional time to complete tasks, assignments, and assessments. When Alessandra entered her university, her professors were not aware of her learning disability, and she had to advocate for herself to receive additional support, such as asking for extended time on her assignments and assessments.

Sophia

Sophia is a 23-year-old Special Education major at a Northeastern private university. Sophia is currently working as a paraprofessional for special education students in a public school setting and is considering a full-time teaching career post-graduation. Sophia was diagnosed with a speech and language disorder when she was 5 years old. Her disability was addressed with an IEP, where she was provided with support from a speech pathologist to help her form the speech sounds that she needed to communicate with others throughout middle school and high school. Sophia required assistance with completing her assignments on time, and only some of her professors allowed her the extra time. She utilizes the writing center with a peer tutor to help her complete her assignments on time.

Ava

Ava is a 24-year-old graduate with a master's degree in special education at a Northeastern private university. Ava just graduated with a bachelor's degree in education and is a newly hired special education teacher in an elementary school setting. Ava was diagnosed with dyslexia when she was in the 2nd grade. Learning was extremely challenging for her, especially in middle school and high school, because she did not want to feel singled out by other students for having a learning disability. Ava's self-esteem was low because she did not want to be labeled by her peers. When she entered her private university, she did not take immediate action

to advocate for herself. By the end of her undergraduate career, she finally utilized the academic centers that were offered by her professors to enhance her abilities.

Madeline

Madeline is a 24-year-old graduate student from a Northeastern private university. She pursued a degree in education, is on her way to pursuing a master's degree in digital literacy, and is now a first-year educator in a public school setting. She was diagnosed with ADD when she was in high school. She had 'extreme' difficulty completing all her assignments on time, which was a similar trait that she carried with her in college, thus taking her 5 years to attain her bachelor's degree. Madeline almost failed her senior year of high school because she was not equipped with the required supports needed to help guide her academically. She was introduced to the tutoring center at her university by her professors and was offered time extensions on all her assignments.

Kristen

Kristen is a 21-year-old senior attending a private Northeastern university pursuing a bachelor's degree in psychology. Kristen grew up with a learning disability of dyslexia, which hindered her ability to grasp the meaning of words, phrases, and paragraphs. Kristen always aspired to attend a university but felt that her learning disability was holding her back from learning topics that interested her due to her inability to comprehend reading passages and reading with fluency. Kristen's first 2 years of college were at a community college in her city because she did not have the grades in high school to attend a university of her choice. After her second year of community college, she increased her grades and was able to attend the university that she initially intended to go to. Kristen is currently receiving academic help from her peers to sustain her grades.

Alana

Alana is a 24-year-old master's student from a Northeastern private university. Alana graduated from her 4-year university with a bachelor's degree in business and pursued a career in business within months of graduating. Alana was indifferent regarding what major she would study when she was an undergraduate student; therefore, changing her major three times before she was a sophomore and eventually chose a major that was suggested to her by her parents that she had some interest in by her junior year. After working in her field just for a few months, post-graduation, she went back to her university to pursue her master's degree in education. Alana was diagnosed with ADD and an anxiety disorder when she was in elementary school, which she believes hindered her decision-making when she was an undergraduate student.

Francine

Francine is a 22-year-old who recently graduated from a private Northeastern university and received her bachelor's degree in business and science. Francine was diagnosed with ADD, which hindered her ability to focus when she was in elementary school, and she has received academic support her entire educational career, such as receiving extended time on her assignments and assessments. Francine did not have difficulty obtaining a post-graduation career because she continued working as a bank teller from when she was an undergraduate student. In relation to receiving academic support, she felt supported by her university's academic centers and peer tutoring opportunities. Currently, Francine does not have any ambitions to apply for her master's degree.

Jenny

Jenny is an 18-year-old first-year college student who attends a private Northeastern University. She is currently taking education classes to fulfill the requirements for her early

childhood education major. Jenny was diagnosed with ADD and a learning disability, which impaired her ability to process newly learned information. Jenny received academic support in alignment with her IEP throughout her entire educational career and is currently receiving academic support through her university. Some academic supports that Jenny receives are peer tutoring, one-to-one support from her professors, and utilizing the writing center. Jenny aspires to become a special education teacher and plans on obtaining her master's degree post-graduation. She has aspirations of becoming a special education teacher to help children who had difficulty in elementary school, just as she did.

John

John is a 23-year-old first-year law student at a private Northeastern university. John received his bachelor's degree in sociology and is pursuing a career in law post-graduation. John was diagnosed with ADD when he was in elementary school and received academic support in middle and high school. John admitted that he did not self-advocate for his disability in college and rarely obtained academic supports from his university. He maintained a low profile to avoid raising suspicions about academic failure from his professors. Despite John not self-advocating for his needs, he was motivated enough to graduate college and then pursue an educational career in law school.

Nicholas

Nicholas is an 18-year-old first-year student in a private Northeastern university and is working towards obtaining a degree in liberal arts. Nicholas was apprehensive about his decision to attend a university because of his diagnoses of ADHD and dyslexia when he was in elementary school. His IEP supported his educational needs by providing additional time for assessments and assignments, as well as additional educational hours, which were supported by

special education teachers outside of his school through SETSS (Special Education Teacher Support Services). Nicholas felt embarrassed by his disability because he grew up feeling different than the other students in his classes. He is currently not utilizing the academic supports provided to him at his university, as he does not want his peers to see him gaining help from tutors.

Results

This section elucidates the purpose of understanding the lived experiences of postsecondary students with learning disabilities and how they received academic supports in their university. The major themes were developed and analyzed through triangulation of data from the individual interviews, focus groups, and journal prompt that were conducted by the participants of this study. This section will focus on answering the central research question of the study, as well as the sub-questions.

Table 2

Themes

Major Theme	Subtheme
Perceptions of Academic Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic Support Systems • Receiving Academic Support • Just Another Name
Perseverance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal Motivation • External Motivation
Self-Investment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal Well-Being • Social Function • Overcoming Fear

Perceptions of Academic Support

The first theme, *Perceptions of Academic Support*, was developed from the participants responses from the collected data. The participants shared their perceptions and experiences of utilizing the academic support programs in their universities. The participants expressed the

benefits and challenges they experienced because of their learning disability. Despite possessing a learning disability, these students faced academic hurdles and navigated their academic settings with the self-motivational intentions of graduating and achieving their goals of obtaining a career.

Academic Support Systems

Students with learning disabilities are required to access the academic tutoring centers on a weekly basis to maintain the continuity of their learning progression. Academic tutoring centers in most private northeastern universities consist of writing centers, peer tutoring services, and one-to-one professional tutoring services. Francine emphasized the importance of frequently utilizing the writing center as an academic support for writing, as she exhibited great difficulty composing research papers for her classes on her own. She expressed her gratitude for having access to the writing center and a personal peer tutor to guide her through the writing process for most of her classes. Additionally, Alessandra stated that the most beneficial academic support service was through peer tutoring and professional tutoring services. She described her tutoring experiences as being positive, as her professional tutor turned into her mentor from the relationship they had developed over the course of her college career.

Receiving Academic Support

Academic support was a prominent subtheme in this study, which was identified through the analysis of the data. Students who possess learning disabilities and have an IEP are academically accommodated through academic support systems when they are in elementary school, middle school, and high school. Academic supports give direction towards a differentiated approach to learning, which will help the students succeed academically, which will then result in increased competence in all academic subject areas. However, when students

enter their postsecondary schools, most students face challenges in requiring additional academic supports that are provided by their university, and others can navigate the support systems on their own or through the encouragement from their professors.

Alessandra and Sophia both expressed that they received academic supports through the guidance of their professors, as they were always willing to support their learning disability by providing them with the class notes beforehand. They also expressed that their professors promoted the academic centers that are offered in their schools, as well as frequently offering peer tutoring services. Jenny and Francine both expressed how they received additional time to complete assessments and assignments, as the content was difficult to understand and study for. Alessandra stated,

The academic support that has benefited me the most was extended time on all assessments, which alleviated any stress that I was going to run out of time; I could take my time and re-read the questions as many times as needed.

On the contrary, Ava and Kristen expressed their concerns regarding the lack of academic support offered to them at their universities. Kristen stated,

There were scheduling conflicts when wanting to attend office hours and the resource room, and professors weren't encouraging in utilizing the support given because most professors were not aware of the academic support that the university offered. Therefore, they should have encouraged or informed students who needed the support.

Kristen explained that her class sizes were much too large for her professors to engage with them on a personal level, therefore making it difficult for her to advocate academic supports for her learning needs. Additionally, Sophia stated that her professors never really mentioned or encouraged her or her peers to access the academic support services in her school.

Just Another Name

Postsecondary students with learning disabilities are perceived as automatically requiring additional academic guidance and receiving it. Yet, Alana and Nick displayed emotions of disbelief regarding the personal involvement of their professors and universities. Alana stated, “I felt that there was a lack of encouragement from my professors because of how large my classroom setting was. As a person with ADD and a processing disorder, I didn’t feel like there was any personal support from my professors.” Alana also explained,

I felt that my professors were indifferent towards their students and didn’t take the time to look at each individual student and encourage them by giving them the extra attention they needed to succeed. It was hard to learn and understand the content in a large classroom setting without a personal interaction with my professors.

Furthermore, Nick also expressed his experiences concerning the detachment he felt from his professors regarding his academic success, “I feel like I am just another name to my professors. I only went to college because that is what all my friends were doing, and I didn’t want to be the only one who didn’t go to a university.”

Perseverance

For many of the students who possess learning disabilities, perseverance was a contributing factor toward their academic motivation. Most participants held themselves accountable when accessing academic guidance to improve their personal academic success. Perseverance was delineated in distinctive ways for these students, as they all shared their personal experiences regarding their academic journey while possessing a learning disability. Perseverance was common, as every individual’s motivational factors and environmental factors differed and were all contributors towards their own personal academic success.

Internal Motivation

Francine illustrated her experiences of intrinsic motivation by receiving guidance from her professors to utilize the support services and being dedicated to herself. She expressed that she regularly utilized the academic services that were supported by her university to achieve her academic goals so she could graduate within 4 years and then acquire a career in business. She expressed that even when her university did not offer tutoring services in specific content areas of difficulty, she pursued guidance from her professors and peers, demonstrating motivation being part of the academic journey for those with learning disabilities.

Similarly to Francine, Alessandra persevered in her studies by possessing effective intrinsic motivational values and regularly utilizing the academic support services in her school. She explained them as being helpful because they provided her with tools on how to navigate certain resources pertaining to writing research papers, learning communication skills for speaking in public, and learning test-taking tips and skills to apply to a post-college career. She emphasized the importance of her self-motivational values to accessing academic support in her school, as some of her professors were not accommodating and would just present the information for the class through a lecture that was not tailored for students who have learning disabilities. She went on to explain that she had to figure out the context of the content on her own to develop healthy life skills, whereas she stated, “in life, sometimes you have to be your own support.” Participant feedback provided insight into the ways college students persist and learn how to independently navigate college.

External Motivation

The participants of this study conveyed many experiences regarding their external motivational modes of achieving academic success. Jenny explained that learning in a small

classroom setting of only six other students has been beneficial to her since she can feel more confident in the questions she poses to her professors and peers, as well as her professors being more attentive to any academic issues she might have. She also explained that it is difficult for her to adhere to most of the deadlines for her assignments, as she does require additional support because of her learning disability. Through external modes of motivation such as rewards, praise and recognition of accomplishments, students with learning disabilities often benefit from being provided with special provisions provided to them. Jenny felt comfortable expressing her concerns to her professors, many of whom allowed her additional time to complete all assignments. However, group projects are excluded from receiving extended time, as her peers are considered as additional academic guidance.

Most of the students involved in this study expressed the assurance of receiving extended time on assessments and assignments by their professors, as they were always offered that accommodation throughout their academic journeys. Alana interpreted her experience of receiving the accommodation of additional time on assignments and assessments as being a ‘life saver’ towards her academic career. She explained that the accommodation of extended time is guiding her through her master’s program, as she requires extended time to process new information and apply the information accurately. She also explained that the accommodation of extended time has alleviated any stress and worries of thinking that she was going to run out of time; she is able to take her time and re-read the questions as many times as needed on assessments.

Additionally, Alana explained that her professors would motivate her and her peers to utilize the academic support services by offering them additional points toward their grades. She stated that the reward of receiving extra points towards her grade was the only reason why she

attended the academic support services in her school. In contrast to Alana's experience, Nick only utilized the academic centers because he was mandated by his professors to attend the tutoring centers, as it contributed to his class attendance.

Self -Investment

For students with learning disabilities who are navigating their academic journeys independently, self-investment plays a crucial role in acquiring academic success. John indicated that his self-motivational tendencies towards achieving his goals stemmed from himself. He explained that his own self-motivation was his primary source of motivation because other sources of motivation, such as his professors or student involvement, were 'lacking,' so he had to take it upon himself to achieve academically. John explained that he had to overcome his challenges and find the confidence and determination within himself. Madeline mentioned a similar connotation of her own motivational contributors toward achieving her academic goals. Although it took her 5 years to complete undergraduate school, she knew that she aspired to become an educator for children, so she regularly scheduled one-to-one guidance with her professors by asking them to share the notes for the upcoming lectures so she could better understand the content prior to class. She emphasized the importance of her own self-motivation and determination and how it was important for her to graduate and get a job.

Personal Well-Being

The postsecondary students with learning disabilities who participated in this study all shared the same aspirations of achieving academic success. These students managed their own academic workloads, whether it was by utilizing the academic accommodations, scheduling academic office hours with their professors, or even acquiring professional tutoring services; each student exhibited their own sense of acknowledging their academic strengths and

weaknesses. Francine emphasized that she had the ability to successfully further her education because she frequently utilized the academic supports in her school. She explained that her school has a tutoring center where you can make an appointment with one of the students who excel in a class or an upperclassman who is already academically experienced, and they will tutor you in the subject that you need. She also explained that she was able to make an appointment with her professors for additional help and utilize the tutoring rooms with smartboards and anything else that you would need to study. She also stated that this method was extremely helpful for her to achieve her academic goals.

Social Function

Most students with learning disabilities portray themselves differently than those students who do not possess learning disabilities. Nine out of 10 students who participated in this study graduated or aspired to graduate from their university. However, Nick had a different tone regarding his future ambitions regarding his academic journey. Nick is a student who always knew there was something different with him when compared to his other classmates. He engaged in conversation, encapsulating his negative feelings regarding his academic journey since elementary school and how he does not have the confidence in himself to even apply for the upcoming school year. He elucidated his feelings of embarrassment when wanting to receive academic help because he did not want his professors to think less of him for needing extra academic assistance, and he did not want his peers to view him as less than their equal. Nick expressed major concerns regarding his own motivational attributes towards utilizing the academic support systems in his school, as well as even speaking to his professors during private office hours due to his lack of confidence to approach them. He discussed moments of

experiencing self-doubt and insecurities regarding his academic goals because of his learning disability, which is hindering his ability to receive academic support.

Ava expressed a similar response regarding the stigma she possessed growing up with a learning disability. She stated,

Throughout middle school and high school, I struggled with comprehending what I was reading and how to overcome my learning disability. I was not given the proper guidance and support in the classroom. It was not until my adult years in college that I fully understood my learning disability and gained the confidence to utilize the resources given to me to be successful. However, despite having an IEP throughout middle and high school, I struggled in all subjects. I was ashamed to engage in the resources in place because they isolated me from the classroom, which then caused me stress during that time. After all, I did not want other students to know I "learn differently."

Ava and Nick are prominent examples that every student learns differently and requires a positive learning atmosphere to succeed with their academic goals.

Overcoming Fear

Despite the stigma that students with learning disabilities possess, the commonality of the responses from the majority of the students related to overcoming their fears of accepting and receiving academic guidance. These students persevered in their studies to achieve their goals by applying themselves to receive guidance and support. When they did receive the academic support and accommodations, their self-motivation increased, which led them to graduate with their bachelor's degrees, and some even moved on to earn their master's degrees and even law degrees. Alessandra expressed the importance of graduating from undergraduate school with a passing grade point average to get into graduate school to fulfill a master's degree. She stated,

I wanted to further my education. I grew up in a family that's very career driven and very hard-working. So, it was a must for me to further my education by attending college and graduating to pursue a master's degree. I really pushed myself, and I graduated with a 4.0 grade point average.

Additionally, Sophia stated that she does not think that her learning disability hindered her academic success; if anything, it made her the hard-working student she is today. She felt that because she constantly studied and worked a little harder than her other peers, her disability enabled her to always persevere and try her best. The students in this study set academic goals to achieve through their own motivational values, whether stemming from their professors or their schools, most importantly, through their own self-determination.

Outlier Data and Findings

Upon conducting research with the participants of this study, unexpected findings appeared that did not align with my study.

Study Groups

Two participants indicated that they would rather form study groups than utilize the student academic tutoring services offered through their universities. They specified that they found working with peers in study groups was easier to attain with their schedules and found them to be overall more effective than the school services. Alessandra stated that,

Study groups were definitely helpful when it came to those classes where you did not know how to study for the test, and you didn't know what to write for the paper. Group meetings like that, especially group meetings of like-minded people, were really good for me to attend at least once a week, maybe even more frequently, so that your workload wasn't so stressful.

Additionally, Alana explained that she worked on her assignments and studied for her assessments in study groups with her close friends. She declared,

I would meet up with a group of kids that were in the same classes as me, and we would study or maybe do homework together. I worked in study groups all the time because it was very easy to meet up with these kids because we would all hang out between classes and many of the projects and assignments were assigned in groups, so it kind of forced us to study and become familiar with each other.

Part Time Employment

Sophia discussed the hardships she endured by highlighting her financial struggles in making payments to her university. She explained that she had to work a part time job while she was a full-time undergraduate student, as well as currently while obtaining her master's degree. As a result of working a side job as a full-time student, she explained that it was hard for her to utilize a lot of the services that her school offered because she had to go straight to work after her classes and only had time late at night to work on her assignments or study for assessments.

Research Question Responses

This section of the study examines the central research question and the three sub-questions. The central research question and the sub-questions of this study were designed to gain an understanding of which academic support systems provided by the participants' universities were utilized and the perceptions that postsecondary students with disabilities had on them. The information to analyze the results of these research questions was derived from the individual interviews, focus groups, and journal prompts, which allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' perspectives in receiving academic support.

Central Research Question

The central research question of the study is: What are the experiences of students with learning disabilities in receiving academic support services from their institution? The participants expressed their personal experiences regarding the academic support services that are provided by their university as being a pivotal aspect of increasing their academic success. The academic support services provide postsecondary students with a plethora of resources pertaining to academic tutoring and mentoring. The support systems are implemented into postsecondary settings to support the learning styles and needs of all students and are offered to all students who are enrolled in postsecondary institutions. The participants of this study connected most of their postsecondary experiences of receiving academic support as being positive and beneficial towards achieving their academic goals. Francine stated, “Attending my school was a positive experience for me. They didn’t really make you feel embarrassed when you asked for extra help or when you admitted that you were struggling. They would suggest tutoring for everyone.” The academic support services offered students an advantage in increasing their grades, which essentially increased their motivational values toward graduating and moving toward a graduate degree or a career.

However, some participants expressed that they were reluctant to receive guidance from an academic support service due to their low confidence levels or because their schedules did not line up with the tutoring hours that were offered. Furthermore, these academic supports created a support system for students with learning disabilities, where they felt comfortable receiving academic guidance to enhance their academic grades throughout their academic journey.

Sub-Question One

What are the experiences of students with learning disabilities using the writing center?

The students' perceptions regarding the writing center varied. Most of the participants experienced the writing center as being positive and beneficial to their academic goals. Jenny stated in the focus group that the writing center had been the most beneficial source of academic tutoring for her because as she transitioned to her university from high school, she was "shell shocked" that she did not have the direct hands-on support from her professors in her classroom to help with her writing right there and then as it stated in her IEP. She knew that she needed assistance with her writing, so she utilized the academic center, which she said "improved my writing tremendously!" Francine mentioned that the writing center was easily accessible for her class schedule, as she had multiple hour gaps between her classes, and that was when she was able to utilize the academic support.

Contrasting the participants who were in favor of utilizing the writing center, several participants experienced challenges engaging with the writing center. Ava explained that she had to navigate writing support independently because her professors never recommended the writing center regularly to her or her classmates and were only encouraged to get support before final exams or papers. Additionally, she stated during the focus group that her schedule was never in alignment with the hours that the writing center promoted when she would independently seek assistance. Alana mentioned that she only utilized the writing center because her professors mandated that she enhance her grades in specific classes. She expressed that at first, she was hesitant to receive the tutoring services because she did not want her peers to see her, but she admitted that the service did provide her with positive guidance with her writing to increase her grades. However, John expressed that he did not acknowledge the writing center as

support because his professors did not really promote the services that were offered. and the ones that were offered had time slots that were not convenient for him.

Sub-Question Two

What are the experiences of students with learning disabilities using peer tutoring? All 10 participants were inclined to share their perceptions regarding peer tutoring services that are offered in their universities, and it was conclusive that all the participants utilized the support of peer tutoring. Kristen stated, “My classmates have been extremely helpful with helping me understand topics and lectures that I did not comprehend when my professor was teaching. Peer tutoring provided me with a lot of support, and they were very patient with me with any questions that I had.” During my interview with Kristen, she explained that she experienced self-doubt because of her learning disability of dyslexia and was always hesitant to ask her professors for help, but she always felt more comfortable asking her peer's tutors.

Madeline explained that she never utilized the writing center as a resource for help because she felt as if she was a strong writer, but she always utilized peer tutoring services to receive additional help with math. Jenny expressed that her university is well known for its education department, which supports students with various learning needs. She went on to explain that her school has peer tutoring and a writing center that all students are allowed to utilize, and many professors offer one-to-one help. John also elucidated his experiences when utilizing one-on-one peer tutoring as being beneficial for his learning style, as he requires additional time to process new information.

Sub-Question Three

What are the experiences of students with learning disabilities using professional tutoring? Many of the participants acknowledged that professional tutoring was a prominent

contribution to their academic success. Most students explained that they experienced a sense of self-doubt when they were faced with having to attend an academic service, but when they were offered professional tutoring from their professors, they felt more comfortable approaching them for guidance. Alana stated in the focus group that she was able to understand the content of most of her classes with better accuracy because she did not feel the judgment of needing additional help from her peers who were working in writing or peer tutoring centers. Like Alana's experience, Nick explained that he only felt comfortable receiving professional tutoring services because he did not want his peers to see him receiving academic help in the writing center or during peer tutoring service hours.

For all the participants in this study, engaging in professional tutoring was prominent in their learning process. Madeline relayed that she visited her professors during their office hours for support, mostly because she was not able to attend her peer tutoring sessions, and she thought the personal assistance from her professor was more constructive. Jenny also stated that using the office hours from her professors helped in understanding the content being taught in class, and she felt more prepared for the tests and projects that were assigned. However, a downfall she is experiencing is that the professional tutors are not helping assist her with managing her time in completing her projects on time. John stated that his professors encouraged him to go to after-school programs that were curated by a higher-level professional tutor who was able to assist him academically in consonance with his learning needs and learning styles. However, they were infrequent.

Summary

The purpose of Chapter Four is to provide an understanding of the perceptions of postsecondary students with learning disabilities in receiving academic support from their university. This chapter discussed each of the major themes and the subthemes, which were provided with examples and direct quotes from the participants. The results of the study revealed that most students with learning disabilities are utilizing some form of academic support service in their university. Most students indicated that they had a positive perception of the academic services offered through their universities; however, several students did not have a positive perception. The results of the study revealed that specific services such as writing centers, peer tutoring, and professional tutoring had a positive correlation with their perception of their universities' academic services. The study further revealed that the more impersonal the academic services offered, the more negatively the students perceived their universities' academic support. The study's findings indicate that most of the academic services offered through their universities were either too difficult or inconvenient to utilize. The findings suggest, however, that regardless of the inconvenience, students who utilized the academic services offered often saw greater academic success and had positively perceived the Universities' academic services.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

This study allowed students with learning disabilities the opportunity to express their own perceptions, experiences, and concerns regarding their academic journeys. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the experiences that postsecondary students with learning disabilities have in receiving academic support. Following the summary of the data that was presented in Chapter Four, Chapter Five discusses the interpretation of the findings, the implications for policy and practice, the theoretical and methodological implications, the limitations and delimitations, and will conclude with recommendations for future research.

Discussion

Students who possess learning disabilities and receive academic support often encounter more difficulties when faced with academic challenges than students who do not have learning disabilities (Weis et al., 2021). The students who participated in this study persevered through their struggles to achieve their personal academic goals. A crucial aspect regarding the students' perseverance is learning how to overcome and endure challenges pertaining to their learning disability and voicing their expectations for their own learning. The students' experiences were developed from the themes that emerged after analyzing the data from the participants and how they align with the literature. The findings align with the theoretical framework and the scholarly literature that was reviewed in Chapter Two. The interpretations of the findings summarize the themes that were found in the data. This section will discuss five major subsections including the interpretation of the findings, the implications for policy and practice, the theoretical and

methodological implications, the limitations and delimitations, and will conclude with recommendations for future research.

Interpretation of Findings

This study granted me the opportunity to gather data focusing on the participants' experiences through individual interviews, journal prompts, and focus groups. My interpretation of the findings begins with a summary of the study's thematic findings in Chapter Four, which are: Perceptions of Academic Support, Perseverance, and Self-Investment. Two outlier themes also emerged within the research, which are: study groups and part time employment.

Summary of Thematic Findings

Themes and sub-themes were developed, following the axial and thematic coding. The major themes in this study are perceptions of academic support, perseverance, and self-investment. Two outlier themes also emerged within the research, which are study groups and part time employment. Each participant experienced their academic journey as being supported differently with respect to their vast learning styles, which established a deeper understanding of their academic perspectives. Each participant expressed their appreciation for this study, as they felt like they finally had a voice in speaking about their previous or current struggles in receiving support. Additionally, each participant expressed the importance of receiving academic guidance, as it led to their success in overcoming academic and social challenges.

Student Centeredness. Student-centered learning leads to higher levels of autonomy, which directs the students to become engaged in their studies, which leads to an increased desire to learn and fulfill their aspirations for success. The participants in the study expressed interest in academic services that focus on students on a personal level, which nurtures their intrinsic values to further their own self-motivational values. The students made it evident that the more

interpersonal the services were, the greater they perceived them to be. Interestingly, this correlates with researchers Bardorfer and Dolenc (2022), who stressed the importance of fostering a positive rapport with their students, and how the well-being of students improved when instructors established a rapport with their students, which correlates to a positive learning experience. Specifically, Black and Deci (2000) and Williams and Deci (1996) explained how positive rapport can be enhanced through autonomic supportive teaching styles, which focus on the interpersonal connection between students and teachers and would show students that they are supported and thus empower them to continue to strive for greater and better things.

A Thirst for More. Despite the many services offered through the participants' universities, the participants' responses conveyed the same message: they wanted more academic support. These findings make sense in the context of Deci and Ryan (2000), who explained that when learning opportunities focus on the individual's needs, it allows for the formation of students' intrinsic motivation. This, in turn, enhances the students' ability to self-motivate, which ultimately creates a greater, more enhanced learning experience.

Attention to Detail. Several of the participants expressed their concerns regarding their universities' inability to appropriately assess them individually, in which they perceived their academic needs as being hindered, presenting them with the feeling of being academically misplaced. The participants' concerns are hearkened to Harrison et al. (2007), who explained that students have expressed their concerns regarding faculties not being able to provide them with the appropriate academic support and accommodations because of their lack of awareness and knowledge pertaining to their learning disabilities. A focus on the individual's needs pertaining to their disability might be effective in recognizing and managing the students' disabilities.

Implications for Policy and for Practice

The implications for policy and practice emerged organically during the analysis of the participants' data. After carefully analyzing the data, the findings that were extracted from the experiences of the students revealed that their university instructors were not well-versed in understanding the requirements of teaching students with learning disabilities. The data from the participants also indicated that universities should engage in conferences consisting of collaboration and communication regarding the implementation of inclusive learning requirements for teaching students who require special education accommodations and support.

Implications for Policy

The research indicates that academic support systems should be offered to students more regularly. This will create a more equitable and inclusive learning environment. From the presented data, most students thrive academically when they have increased confidence in themselves, thereby having the ability to establish a positive rapport with their professors and peers. I recommend that policymakers of the universities advise their professors to speak to those students who possess learning disabilities individually to discuss their learning styles. Additionally, the guidance of academic advisors is critical for periodically discussing the progress or lack of progress of their assigned student. Thereby, students are aware of their educational advancements, as well as the guidance and support they might need along the way of their academic journey.

Implications for Practice

The findings propose that students are not fully aware of the services that are available to them; therefore, universities need to focus on sharing this information better within the campus community. Most students expressed that they were not aware of the services that their

university provided, which suggests that the most effective way of spreading this information is through the professor-student dynamic. This implies that professors who are better informed on student services should educate other professors on advocating how to access such academic support. The universities should offer students information regarding the locations of the academic centers, time schedules for each service offered, and specific times of each service. Therefore, a major implication of the findings is that universities may want to consider focusing on improving the professors' knowledge regarding ways in which to inform their students of the services offered by their institution.

Theoretical Implications

This study supports the validity of Deci and Ryan's (1980) self-determination theory for understanding various circumstances that may promote intrinsic motivation, autonomous extrinsic motivation, and psychological wellness in postsecondary students with learning disabilities. Most of the participants aspired to obtain a career and be successful despite the barriers they faced in receiving appropriate academic support and accommodation from their universities. Every participant discussed the importance of owning in their actions in pursuit of receiving academic accommodations towards best practices and educational outcomes. This theory is also relevant to this study regarding the transfer of motivational behaviors that some of the participants portrayed throughout the study.

Vygotsky's (1966) theory of metacognition and self-regulation implies that when students with learning disabilities can apply and transfer their knowledge that has been learned through active forms of learning, they are engaging in voluntary attention, which controls their own motivational behaviors and responses. This study elucidated the supports that students felt

were crucial in achieving academic success independently or with the help of their university and as such also supports the validity of Vygotsky's theory.

Empirical Implications

This study delved into the experiences that students with learning disabilities have in receiving academic resources in postsecondary schools. After surveying research regarding the services available to students with learning disabilities, it was apparent that the research lacked an introspective analysis of the experiences of these students in postsecondary schools and their perspective of the academic services offered. After a thorough analysis of the triangulation of the findings through individual interviews, journal prompts, and focus groups, it was evident that although most students achieved academic success, they also displayed concerns of dissatisfaction with their awareness of utilizing academic resource centers. The students expressed that their professors were deficient in advocating academic support at the university and that they had to seek assistance independently.

Additionally, the findings revealed that most of the students who participated in this study informed their professors about their learning disability and the accommodations they would like to receive, such as extended time on assignments and assessments. The findings also revealed that a minority of the students who participated in this study made the decision not to inform their professors that they have a learning disability and, therefore, not receiving adequate academic support. Newman and Madaus (2015) revealed that only about 35% of postsecondary students informed their institutions about their learning disability, and for the students who disclosed their learning disability, only about 24% of those students received modified support in their study. Most of the participants in the current study were more transparent in disclosing their learning disability to their professors because they had higher self-determination values toward

their personal academic goals. Alessandra explained that when she disclosed her learning disability to her professors, they were more inclined to supporting her with the academic support services, which increased her academic confidence. On the contrary, students who didn't disclose their learning disability to their professors struggled academically because they were not receiving adequate academic accommodations. Nicholas mentioned that he felt too embarrassed to disclose his learning disability to his professor, and because he didn't disclose such vital information, he felt that he didn't receive the proper academic supports necessary to help guide his academic achievements.

Furthermore, a theme that emerged from this study displays the continual support that students with learning disabilities require to achieve academic success, and how their self-motivational values were major contributors. The framework of this study incorporated Deci and Ryan's (1980) self-determination theory and Vygotsky's (1966) theory of metacognition and self-regulation.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study presented several limitations, contributing to potential weaknesses that I could not control. The research for the interview responses was conducted entirely in person, making scheduling time for the interviews and focus groups a limitation. Scheduling interviews for both forms of data collection required frequent follow-ups to ensure the participants would meet for the interviews and focus groups at the correct time, as many participants indicated conflicts with their schedules. The participant size was the most difficult to obtain, as a few participants opted out of the study on the day of their scheduled interview, as confidentiality became an issue for some. Ultimately, the time constraints on collecting research from the participants presented issues on account of the participants who opted out of the study.

Delimitations are purposeful decisions the researcher makes to limit or define the boundaries of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). There were three delimitations in this study. The first delimitation was recruiting participants who were post-secondary students with learning disabilities. Through snowball sampling, ten participants with learning disabilities were inclined to participate and seemed eager to be a part of this research study. The second delimitation was the site settings. The site settings of the participants who attended private universities located in the northeastern United States was a delimitation because it allowed me to choose different students from all the colleges in the northeast United States. The third delimitation was scheduling the journal prompt interviews remotely as it allowed me access and schedule the journal prompts, given the nature of the technology utilized.

Recommendations for Future Research

This phenomenological study focused on the perceptions of 10 postsecondary students with learning disabilities. The participants were encouraged to voice their lived experiences with receiving academic supports and accommodations through a qualitative methodological approach. As such, the results provided great insight into understanding the experiences of the students. However, a major concern from the participants indicated that most of their professors were unaware of the services that their university provided, as well as formally advocating the services to students. There are limited studies with research on the perspectives of post-secondary professors of teaching students with learning disabilities. Such a study may provide future researchers with greater insight into how faculty accommodate students with disabilities.

Conclusion

This hermeneutic phenomenological study was developed to understand the lived experiences of students with learning disabilities in receiving academic supports. The results of

this study indicated that there are gaps in external motivation emanating from either the professors or from the academic support that the universities offer. In correlation, students' internal motivational attributes of perseverance towards achieving their academic goals increased as they sought out academic supports independently. The participants of this study expressed their concerns regarding how their college experience would have been more prominent if they had received the appropriate academic support from the start of their academic postsecondary journey. These students determined their own academic experiences through other motivational outlets outside of the academic sphere.

Theorists Deci and Ryan (2000) expressed the differences between authentic motivation, which is a form of motivation that comes from inside of oneself, as well as controlled motivation, which is motivation stemming from the control of the external environment; the findings of the study signify just how different these forms of motivation are and their effect on an individual. The students who participated in this study found consistency and lasting motivation internally, which stayed with them throughout their academic journey and into their careers, despite the external motivational support they may or may not have received. A recommendation derived from this study is to self-advocate for your own personal needs to achieve your academic goals. When reflecting upon the outcome of this study, the term “inspired” comes to mind, as most of the participants who possess learning disabilities are capable of advocating for their own education to achieve academic success.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Letter

Dear Potential Participant,

As a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctorate degree to better understand a phenomenon. The purpose of my research is to examine the lived experiences of postsecondary students with learning disabilities and how they are inheriting academic supports in alignment to their academic goals, and I am writing to invite you to join my study.

Participants must be a current student or a recently graduated college student who possess a learning disability, has, or had an Individualized Education Plan or 504 Plan, between the ages of 18-24, and is familiar with their school's academic learning/tutoring centers. Participants will be asked to participate in a video recorded or in person one-to-one interview questions, participate in a small focus group, and complete a list of journal prompt questions that will be distributed via Google Docs. It should take approximately three hours spread across a four-week period to complete the procedures listed. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but participant identities will not be disclosed.

To participate, please email or contact me. If you meet my participant criteria, I will schedule an interview.

A consent document will be given via email after you contact me to discuss the research. The consent document contains additional information about my research.

After you have read the consent form, please contact me. Doing so will indicate that you have read the consent information and would like to take part in the study.

Sincerely,

Daniella Giordano
Doctoral Candidate

Consent

Title of the Project: Students with Learning Disabilities in a Postsecondary Education Setting: Identifying the Most Significant Supports.

Principal Investigator: Daniella Giordano, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education 2024, Liberty University

<p>Invitation to be Part of a Research Study</p>

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a current or recently graduated college student who possess a learning disability, has or had an Individualized Education Plan or 504 Plan, between the ages of 18-24, and is familiar with their school's academic learning/tutoring centers. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to examine the lived experiences of postsecondary students with learning disabilities and how they are inheriting academic supports in alignment to their academic goals.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Participate in an in-person or remote, audio-recorded student interviews that will take no more than 1 hour. If the remote option is preferred, all interviews will take place through the Microsoft Teams platform and will be recorded. In person interviews will be recorded through the Microsoft Teams platform as well. (this should take between 30 minutes to an hour)
2. Participate in an in-person or remote, audio-recorded student focus group interview that will take no more than 1 hour. If the remote option is preferred, all interviews will take place through the Microsoft Teams platform and will be recorded. In person interviews will be recorded through the Microsoft Teams platform as well.
3. Participate in student journal prompts where the participant will complete 5 journal prompt responses that should be about one paragraph in length, that will be sent via Google Docs link. (this should take between 30 minutes to an hour)

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include the potential to improve the academic services that are designed for improving academic accommodations for students.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.
- Data collected from you may be used in future research studies. If data collected from you is reused or shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed beforehand.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years or until participants have reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of the transcripts and then deleted. The researcher and members of her doctoral committee will have access to these recordings.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from the focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Daniella Giordano. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is

Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Appendix B

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) responded to criticism from positivists about a perceived lack of rigor, reliability, and objectivity by conceptualizing parallel terms for these characteristics of qualitative research, specifically, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This section describes the measures taken to assure a rigorous study through the lens prescribed by Lincoln and Guba. While these terms are, in many cases, synonyms for terms used in quantitative scholarship, these have different meanings and implications for the quality and rigor of a qualitative study.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the extent to which the study's findings accurately describe reality, at least according to the perceptions of participants, as a proximation of the truth of the phenomenon in question (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I achieved credibility in three ways: (a) triangulation, (b) peer debriefing, and (c) member-checking.

Triangulation

In this study, I undertook triangulation of qualitative methods, data collection methods, sources, and theories to explore the stories told by student veterans about their success. The methods included aspects of life history (Polkinghorne, 1995) narrative inquiry (Chase, 2005) a hybrid method created for this study in which I did not seek the entire life history of student veterans, but their influences from their military service on their experiences in college and I took up the role of narrator for the veterans' stories as they may not be prepared to tell their own stories (Chase, 2005). Data collection methods triangulation was achieved through using individual interviews of veterans, their success influencers, and focus groups of veterans. Source

triangulation was achieved through using the veterans and their staff or faculty success influencer's perspectives on the phenomenon of student veteran success. Theory triangulation was achieved through the use of Astin's (1980) I-E-O theory and Vacchi's conceptual model of student veteran support (Vacchi & Berger, 2014) as both organizing frameworks and analysis frameworks.

Peer Debriefing

A technique I used frequently during this study was peer debriefing (Marshall & Rossman, 2015) which allowed me to discuss emergent findings with colleagues to ensure my analyses were grounded in the data. Ideally, I would have had military veteran scholars triangulate results during this study through peer debriefing, but I did not have ready access to those kinds of peers. Still, there are some data available in the modest literature that provided some corroboration for my findings, in addition to peers in my academic program who are familiar enough with my research to provide important perspectives that helped elucidate my study's findings.

Member Checking

Having undergone many of the same experiences and transitions myself that student veterans experience before and during college gave me an insider's connection with my participants (Rossman & Rallis, 2016). This insider's, or *emic* perspective, which Rossman and Rallis (2016) suggest can be an advantage for researchers, allowed me to reflect back the meaning of the participants' words during the interviews; this immediate member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was important because, during the interviews, I confirmed some concepts by asking questions from various perspectives to ensure I captured the essence of an experience. After transcription, I clarified specific elements of data with the participants, thus

ensuring I accurately reflected their stories of success, which can also serve as member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Still, I was wary of falling into the trap of believing that I automatically understood what participants meant and forced myself to explain some concepts in participants' words that I believed I already understood. For further member checking, I provided willing participants a copy of their transcript, which they reviewed for accuracy. I also provided a copy of what I believed to be the main points of each participant's interview that participants also checked for accuracy.

Transferability

Transferability is showing that the findings may have applicability in other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which is largely achieved through the use of thick descriptions when describing research findings (Geertz, 1973). The descriptions I used to describe the experiences of student veterans at one public, and one private research university painted a robust picture of what success in college meant for my participants. The alignment of participant testimony across these two institutions was so similar as to suggest that the specific context of a college setting may not be the primary factor in what contributes to student veteran success. While a single institution of each type does not necessarily facilitate transferability of findings, the literature offers virtually no insights into factors influencing veteran degree attainment, so this study may offer an exploratory first step toward an improved understanding of student veteran success.

Dependability

Dependability is showing that the findings are consistent and could be repeated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Descriptions of my procedures, particularly the adaptation of the study once I discovered the significance of the success influencer, were comprehensive enough that this study could be replicated. Specifically, descriptions of the method I developed to undertake this study

are straightforward and supported by the literature, in addition to being fairly simple enough to repeat for student veterans, but this study could be replicated for any population. My committee thoroughly reviewed these procedures and deemed them sufficient to demonstrate mastery of the method as I designed it.

Confirmability

Confirmability is a degree of neutrality or the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I employed three techniques to ensure the confirmability of this study. First, I created a detailed audit trail through which my procedures, raw data, analyzed data, and the final report could be transparently tracked if necessary. Second, I employed the numerous aspects of triangulation described above, and finally, I was reflexive in the undertaking of this study. Reflexivity is an attitude of attending systematically to the context of knowledge construction, especially to the effect of the researcher, at every step of the research process (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). To achieve reflexivity, I drafted numerous memos comprising a reflexive journal of sorts. Memoing in this way helped to bracket my bias in this study, which was not difficult as my undergraduate experience was not as a student veteran, so I merely had to bracket my perspectives that veterans are generally successful and be open to contributing factors to their success. The fact that the success influencer emerged during data collection, and I changed the study to include the voices of these influencers, reflects that I had no preconceived notion of the contribution of these success influencers.

Appendix C

Phenomenological Research Questions:

Central Research Question

What are the experiences of students with learning disabilities in receiving academic support services from their institution?

Sub-Question One

What are the experiences of students with learning disabilities using the writing center?

Sub-Question Two

What are the experiences of students with learning disabilities using peer tutoring?

Sub-Question Three

What are the experiences of students with learning disabilities using professional tutoring?