



From Classroom to Boardroom: Self-Advocacy and Navigating the Transition for Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

Purpose This article evaluates the effectiveness of Career Services in supporting college students with disabilities to self-advocate for their accommodation rights during the job search.

Method A qualitative case study was conducted at one university to examine how their Career Services unit educates, trains, and supports students with disabilities in their professional development. Two rounds of interviews were conducted: one with university staff responsible for such services to assess policies and practices in providing support, and one with students and alumni with disabilities to gather feedback on their experiences with career planning and employment.

Results Three key themes emerged from the data: (1) Disability stigma negatively impacts a willingness to self-advocate among participants (this is especially true among those belonging to multiple marginalized groups); (2) the lack of transition support by the university further entrenches this stigma; and (3) participants report subsequent challenges in the crossover to employment.

Conclusion These identified barriers discouraged participants from planning for and seeking workplace accommodations and highlighted the need for universities to provide more comprehensive support for their professional development.

Keywords Disability · Self-advocacy · Career Services · Professional development

Introduction

The unemployment of working-age people with disabilities has been widely recognized as bias-driven [1]. For young adults with disabilities, this bias is incredibly challenging as they navigate the job hunt [2] and face higher rates of ableism than older people with disabilities [3–5]. Considering these young adults are at a crucial stage in their professional development [6], one method to counteracting this disparity includes exercising self-advocacy—the ability to appreciate and diplomatically assert their rights [7]. This skill improves job opportunities for disabled people in general [8].

Enabling young adults with disabilities with the resources necessary to achieve proficiency in self-advocating is critical to their career success. Higher education can be the most appropriate environment for this effort, with training

curricula potentially empowering this group [9]. However, an inadequate knowledge base exists of how successful colleges and universities are in emboldening these individuals as they transition from academia to the labor market.

A case study was conducted within one university to explore how higher education helps young adults with disabilities develop the self-advocacy skills they need to succeed in their careers. Two waves of interviews were administered. Wave one unpacks guidelines within a university's Career Services unit designed to educate, train, and support this group's professional development. Wave two provides insights from students and alumni with disabilities about their experiences with career planning and employment to evaluate the effectiveness of Career Services and notes areas for improvement.

Literature Review

Titles II and III of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Sect. 504 of the Rehabilitation Act require all services, programs, and activities provided by public

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colleges and universities to be accessible. These institutions must all provide reasonable accommodations to ensure that young adults with disabilities (as students) have an equal opportunity to participate in their amenities. However, beyond legal compliance in assuring access, are these resources preparing students with disabilities for career readiness?

Higher education staff mainly provide traditional career services for all students (e.g., resume instruction, sourcing job opportunities, etc.) [10]. Targeted vocational training for those with disabilities, including self-advocacy instruction, is not as common [11]. For example, a survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) revealed that only 26% of participating two- and four-year degree-granting institutions offer specialized career services for students with disabilities [12]. Furthermore, it is uncertain whether students with disabilities take advantage of these services. As a result, without widespread access to or use of such formal training, young adults with disabilities may face greater challenges in landing a job, thereby contributing to their lower employment [13, 14].

Knowledge- and skill-based training interventions can be quite effective in building self-advocacy [9, 15]. Although findings on this topic are limited, there is some evidence to suggest that instruction in (1) self-awareness—appreciating one’s strengths and limits, (2) one’s rights—grasping disability legislation, (3) communication—being assertive, persuasive, and listening, and (4) leadership—knowing of and utilizing relevant resources [16] increase job preparedness and employment [11, 17]. If this approach is the grail in boosting confidence and determination [18], where young adults with disabilities can learn to assert their need for workplace accommodations tactfully [19], more insight into how higher education can ensure this is needed.

Methods

Two waves of semi-structured interviews were conducted, first to establish what a university’s staff delivers in disability employment training, followed by perspectives from students and alumni with disabilities as a reflection of this support. Forty-five (45) interviews were collected, with two corresponding to administrators in Career Services and Disability Services. The remaining 43 interviews included 22 students with disabilities and 21 alumni with disabilities.¹ These participants had officially registered with Disability Services, who also facilitated the recruitment process for this study. Three individual interview guides of open-ended questions were developed for both Career Services and

Disability Services, students with disabilities, and alumni with disabilities.²

For Career Services and Disability Services, topics included: (1) a policy breakdown for advising students with disabilities; (2) the frequency in which students with disabilities rely on these services; (3) advice given on disability disclosure and whether there are strategic differences in coaching students with visible versus invisible disabilities; (4) coaching on the workforce transition; and (5) collaborations across campus to improve training efforts.

For students and alumni with disabilities, areas covered were: (1) whether they were employed; (2) an awareness of their right to equal employment opportunity, including the ADA and its protections; (3) resistance that felt in conflict with those rights, including lessons learned; (4) perceived parallels between acquiring accommodations at the university and work; (5) how much disability played into their career planning, including consideration into their accommodation needs; (6) whether Career Services has been part of their professional development in general; (7) whether they disclosed their disability with Career Services for tailored job coaching, its effectiveness, and if they chose not to disclose, why; and (8) the ideal support plan.

As Career Services and Disability Services strictly reported on their guidelines in advising students with disabilities for employment purposes, this exploration begins with a review of their support. This is followed by a thematic analysis of the interviews conducted among students and alumni with disabilities. Interviews from this cohort were transcribed, summarized, and reviewed for themes [20]. Narratives have been categorized and sequenced using the following abbreviations for clarity: Undergraduate (U#), Graduate (G#), and Alumni (A#).

Results

Self-Advocacy Training: A Breakdown of Support Services

Career Services

The university’s Career Services helps students connect their academic and career pathways. Students who make appointments with this unit develop a personalized occupational playbook. This includes (1) undergoing a self-audit to bridge their values, skills, and professional options through a combination of personal and career-based questionnaires; (2) exploring

¹ See Table 1 in the appendix for a demographic breakdown.

² See the appendix for interview guides.

careers and academic pathways by connecting with alumni and referring to online databases; (3) gaining experience and develop skills through internships and other experiential opportunities; and (4) ultimately pursuing their goals.

In addition to these general services, their Associate Director (AD) provides students with disabilities “the tools needed to advocate for themselves throughout their career journey”. This guidance is offered on an individual basis and takes into account each student’s unique needs and circumstances. For instance, one common concern is the timing of disability disclosure. The matter is handled with sensitivity, as there is no universal answer. The AD helps students understand how their disability may affect their work and comfort level. It also helps them consider how disclosing this information on a job application may be perceived. Moreover, the AD advises students to research the organization and see how they have historically treated workers with disabilities. By weighing all these factors and providing education on the different considerations, the AD helps students with disabilities make informed decisions that best fit their situation.

Disability Services

Disability Services ensures students with disabilities have equal access to courses and other campus amenities at their request. A top priority is providing educational support, such as extended time on assignments, notetaking aids, and breaks during class to minimize or eliminate the impact of disability. As their Senior Director (SD) explained, “The bare-bones mission of our office and our legal obligation is to provide academic accommodations”.

In recognizing that many students with disabilities struggle to articulate their needs as they enter the job market, Disability Services has partnered with Career Services in an initiative that combines career and disability expertise while actively engaging the student in real time.

Disability Employment Counseling as Rare

According to the AD and SD, only some students with disabilities have taken advantage of these career initiatives. For example, within Career Services, students seldom make appointments for disability employment counseling. The AD attributes this to a fear of bias or “stigma internalized as real,” an argument that the SD also makes. “The word disability can be stigmatizing”, the SD described, acknowledging how disability labels perpetuate negative stereotypes.

Understanding the Discrepancy: Insights from College Students and Alumni with Disabilities

Despite the availability of assistance from Career Services, evidence suggests that most sample participants (approximately 65%) did not take advantage. Descriptions such as “nonexistent”, “unnoticeable”, “absent”, “none”, “minimal”, “nebulous”, and “missing” all demonstrate that the training provided by Career Services was not effectively reaching or meeting the needs of students and alumni with disabilities. This ineffectiveness-from-disuse is a baseline for appreciating the following three themes that unpack participants’ reasons for not utilizing these services and the resulting consequences.

Theme 1: Disability Stigma Negatively Impacts a Preference to Self-Advocate

For most students and alumni, the decision to ignore their disabilities in career planning or seeking employment has been driven by stigma. Both groups shared a comparable understanding of their disabilities in the job context: They were undesirable and should be hidden. A1 characterized this as “silently suffering” yet necessary to avoid rejection. According to U1, being excluded was not an option. The everyday mantra, “Fake it till you make it”, inspired them to cultivate a non-disabled persona to set a good impression in job interviews. “I’ll do what I have to do”, they said. Similar attitudes were shared among participants, with phrases like “playing the game”, “walking the tightrope”, “blending in”, “brute forcing it”, or “getting my foot in the door”. The fear of employer treatment contributes to this stigma. “That’s the world we live in”, U2 reported. For some participants, this fear was learned through advice given. For example, G1’s physician advised “never tell anyone” about their disability, which resulted in remaining unemployed for a while. Others, like A2, developed this fear after hearing about the experiences of their peers who were denied workplace accommodations. Several grew fearful as their disabilities were often misunderstood and invalidated at work. In living with narcolepsy, G2 explained this challenge best:

Saying I need accommodations is awkward because I feel I have to justify myself and my needs as legitimate. A typical response I get is, ‘Oh, I’m tired all the time, too’. Because my disability is neither seen nor very well known, I worry that people, in misunderstanding it, won’t believe me or think it’s enough to need accommodations.

Those with related narratives described this dismissal as demoralizing, with nearly none wanting to continue self-advocating or to become a “crusader of the ADA”, as U3 put it.

Fear seemingly led numerous disabled alumni with advanced degrees in STEM to pursue jobs as bus drivers, baristas, etc., that technically qualify them as underemployed. “It’s a little weird having all this education and working in a field where others don’t”, said A3, a postal carrier. However, this decision to work in a less competitive field has ensured their well-being. “I made this pivot because of my disability. I was not about to put myself through fighting for accommodations, and I feel a level of security”, they shared. Participants like G3 also preferred this sense of security as they pursued a second graduate degree to avoid the job market altogether. “Knowing people and businesses, they will discriminate”, G3 stated.

The challenge of self-advocating can be even greater for those affiliated with multiple marginalized groups, as they risk facing intersecting biases. For example, an emerging idea among some female participants with disabilities described how gender norms have blurred the line between asserting their rights and being considered difficult to work with. As G4 rhetorically questioned, “When do you become a self-advocate versus a pain in the ass”? A4 expanded that being considered a “pain in the ass” seems to be a common experience for women with disabilities: “When you have any sort of health need, it’s almost like you’re not taken seriously”. For this reason, A4 has begun to “police” themselves and regularly asks, “Do I really need this”? A5 similarly clarified that speaking up as a young, disabled, immigrant Latinx woman is akin to being “out of line” in a male-centric workplace, suggesting a female-dominated environment is perhaps more receptive and accepting of human variation—this is informed by the experience of many women with care responsibilities that create a greater appreciation for the value of flexibility and other accommodations at work [20, 21].

Self-advocating as a disabled woman of color appeared even more intricate. As U4 indicated, “I have to be cautious. I am black. I am a woman. I can’t hide this away. The anxiety, I can”. Ironically, having a less apparent (invisible) disability was considered a “privilege” in avoiding the potential triple bind despite resulting in reduced work productivity. For instance, G3 preferred to keep their PTSD private as it was one less part of themselves to worry about being judged for. “I need to keep that back to get ahead”, G3 described. “I’m already black. I’m already female. I’m already 52 years

old. There’s no way I’m gonna come out there and say, ‘I have a disability!’” they continued to share.

Theme 2: There is a Lack of Transition Support for Students with Disabilities, Furthering Stigma

For students and alumni, the goal was strictly to graduate while ignoring the future. A6 characterized this mindset as “not getting stuck in the weeds”. U5 shared in this tunnel vision, never considering accommodations beyond the classroom. “It wasn’t on my radar”, they stated. Some expressed that the university culture may have contributed to this attitude, inadvertently prioritizing academic support over professional support for students with disabilities. The culture shock in moving from school to work was thus something few felt equipped for.

In the case of A7, departments, faculty, academic advisors, and Disability Services all did their best to prepare them to graduate. However, A8 did not appreciate how their academic accommodations might carry over into their professional life and what Career Services could do to help with this transition. “The school did not prepare me for job success”, they stated. Regardless of having a degree in engineering, they consciously decided to become a professional mover upon graduating: “I couldn’t just walk off the podium and go into any job. I had to be aware that this was not something I could do right now”.

Among the approximately 35% of participants who actually relied on Career Services, their experience was mostly limited to resume and cover letter support or sourcing job opportunities using sponsored software. Disability employment was hardly ever discussed, according to participants, as they had low expectations of Career Services and felt this unit did not create the right “environment” to raise the subject. Statements such as “I feel like a number here”, “It seemed very basic and not personal”, “It didn’t seem to be within their purview”, and “It’s just not part of what Career Services does” illustrate this point. The same skepticism is true for those who opted *not* to visit Career Services at all. As A8 indicated, their motivation behind avoiding this unit was attributed to the belief of being steered away from their career goals: “They might be like, ‘Well, if you have this issue, maybe this is not the right career for you’”.

For those few participants who actively sought guidance in disability employment (approximately 9%), their experience was considered “useless” and “non-supportive”. As A9 explained, meetings with Career Services were “all about assimilation. I was taught to hide my disability by over-compensating”. Some were told to withhold their disability

without any education about why, like in the case of A10, who was left feeling discouraged: “At that point, I didn’t know if I should really ask how to get accommodations if they encourage me not to disclose it”. Others were only referred to job fairs involving employers who were receptive toward disability inclusion and, as A11 pointed out, offered work opportunities that did not “align with what I plan to do career-wise”. A12 expected “more help than that”. “I don’t think they were prepared at all to deal with any kind of disability issues”, A12 mentioned, referring to this gap as “being thrown to the wolves to figure it out”.

Theme 3: Crossing Over to Employment Has Been a Consequent Challenge

Alumni with disabilities reported distressing transitions from academia to employment due to a lack of support. A13 characterized these difficulties as a “baptism by fire”. They learned the hard way that employers could be unpleasant and that navigating employment, in general, can be more challenging. Without adequate preparation in self-advocacy, A13 encountered resistance in multiple jobs and was unaware of how to assert their rights. One negative experience with an employer (who dismissed their needs and questioned their competence) discouraged them from speaking up indefinitely.

Others, including A14, naively accepted their termination without due process in having an epileptic seizure at work. They initially believed themselves to be the problem and conceded. Discovering, however, that this was an act of discrimination felt like “a slap in the face”. A15 likewise assumed their disability was not legitimate enough to be protected by the ADA and felt powerless. Without formally requesting accommodations, they relied instead on compensatory techniques (taught in primary education) to remain productive at work, though to their detriment. “I felt like I couldn’t excel”, A15 indicated. For A11, the story was similar. “Job hunting is competitive in general, but for me, it was harder. My first job was in a toxic environment where they did not understand me. I was yelled at, at times. It was mentally difficult”, they explained.

Even students with disabilities reported feeling vulnerable. U6 had no grasp of the ADA and other comparable laws, which triggered anxiety about how their current employer might react toward them. “When I was on the job, I thought, ‘If I tell them this, would they fire me?’” U6 described. U7 also questioned what rights they were entitled to while job searching. “I’ve sent a lot of applications over the years and always wondered in the back of my head if checking the ‘I

have a disability box’ was just a source for not getting hired”, they indicated. U8, whose disability results in cardiac arrest, preferred their future employer witness their symptoms in action rather than request accommodations more objectively. “They have to see with their own eyes to be more flexible. I know that’s not a smart idea, but I don’t know how else to go about it”, U8 shared. These anecdotes underscore students’ low proficiency in self-advocating, which, as evidenced by alumni, can be damaging if not confronted sooner.

Discussion and Conclusion

Results from both students and alumni found that stigma prevented them from job planning around their disabilities. Participants experienced fear over pride regarding this aspect of themselves, and this feeling was further entrenched or perpetuated when Career Services was not as present or as high touch as they arguably should be. Although this unit’s guidelines indicated opportunities for students with disabilities to develop the determination necessary for safeguarding workplace accommodations, with support from Disability Services, interviews with students revealed a considerable gap in their understanding of what Career Services could do for them. Some participants misunderstood Career Services as a place for resume instruction (a skill that can be studied online, according to some) and job fairs only. Even among the few who relied on Career Services for disability employment training, the experience was suboptimal—more attention was paid to assimilation than self-advocacy. The environment was not quite right, perhaps bringing meaning to why Career Services rarely met students for disability employment training and why these students subsequently focused only on their education.

Without an appreciation for themselves and their rights, including how to assert and ensure those entitlements skillfully, students believed their disability was a problem worth ignoring. “If I don’t understand something, I won’t do anything about it”, was how U8 described it. This “out of sight, out of mind” outlook U9 expressed possessing was shared among most undergraduates and was precisely what alumni stated regretting in hindsight. These results stress the need for improved interaction by the university and its programs, including Career Services and Disability Services, in the interest of disabled students making a smoother transition into the outside world.

To enhance engagement with Career Services, Disability Services could act as a liaison, informing their students about the specific advice and resources available for life after university, similar to how they advise about academic accommodations. Furthermore, Career Services should acknowledge and address the perspectives and concerns of students with disabilities in preparation for their professional futures and involve them in the decision-making process. This is what U10 proposed in their *nothing about us without us* approach: “As close as able-bodied people can get to our perspective, they still can’t see things the way we see them. And as much as they’re like, ‘This should help, right?’ It doesn’t. Ask us what we want”. A move like this would help build an environment that trains students to self-advocate more effectively and mitigate quality concerns within Career Services specific to disability employment.

In addition, seeing as the stigma associated with disability has prevented students from taking advantage of Career Services, efforts should be made by the university to de-stigmatize disability by emphasizing that it is an integral aspect of human diversity, alongside race, gender, age, etc. This would help reject the notion that disability is a problem to be fixed or otherwise hidden and would foster a culture of belonging, empowering students with disabilities to reach their full potential. Practically, efforts can resemble university-wide campaigns led by Disability Services and Career Services that promote disability as a form of social identity and cultural difference and reach all students with disabilities. As U11 conveyed, a gesture of this kind would be a “nod”, as in, “We see you. We understand. We see what you’re going through. We are supporting you”.

The study adds depth to the existing literature on the challenges faced by people with disabilities as they advocate for themselves in career planning and the workplace. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the study design. As with any qualitative research, the findings are based on a small sample of participants and may not be generalizable to a larger population. Additionally, the interviews collected are based on self-reported experiences and perceptions, which may be subject to bias. Notwithstanding, insights from the findings should inform future research to explore the role of universities and their effect in providing personalized resources that enable students with disabilities to thrive in their professional pursuits.

Future research should also investigate self-advocacy from the perspective of individuals who are members of multiple stigmatized groups, as indicated by an emerging idea identified in this study under Theme 1. This would provide valuable insights into how different aspects of a person’s identity, including their race, gender, and disability status, can intersect and interact with each other to create unique experiences of discrimination. By understanding these intersectional experiences, university programs can better equip themselves to support such students with self-advocating in the workplace. Studying the long-term consequences of all these efforts in shaping reform is imperative and a step toward closing the disability employment gap.

Appendix

See Table 1.

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of study participants

Characteristics	Frequency
Students with disabilities	22
Year in school	
Freshman	1
Sophomore	6
Junior	3
Senior	2
Graduate	10
Alumni with disabilities	21
Employed	
Yes	18
No	3
Academic discipline	
STEM	19
Business	4
Humanities	8
Social Science	17
Undeclared	1
Disability categories	
Physical	
Sjogren's syndrome	1
Rheumatoid arthritis	1
Long QT syndrome	1
Epilepsy	1
Autonomic neuropathy	1
Juvenile idiopathic arthritis	1
Fibromyalgia	1
Sensory	
Vision impaired	1
Hearing impaired	1
Auditory processing disorder	6
Cognitive/learning	
Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder	18
Traumatic brain injury	4
Autism spectrum disorder	7
Nonverbal learning disorder	1
Dyspraxia	1
Psychological	
Post-traumatic stress disorder	5
Bipolar disorder	1
Narcolepsy	3
Cataplexy	1
Postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome	2
Chronic fatigue syndrome	1
Anxiety	11
Depression	5
Obsessive-compulsive disorder	4

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Data Availability The study transcripts analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, with redactions of all personal information.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval was granted by the Institutional Review Board of Rutgers University on December 13, 2022, Study ID Pro2022002238.

Consent to Participate Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Consent for Publication The author affirms that human research participants provided informed consent for publication.

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