# COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES IN NEW YORK CITY: A MIXED METHODS STUDY OF SOCIAL CLASS AND SUCCESS

by

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Abstract

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This study explores ways in which socioeconomic status and disability shape the academic experience of New York City college students with learning disabilities. Despite laws and policies designed to provide them with accommodations, college students with disabilities do not attain higher education at rates equal to their nondisabled peers (NCES, 2000). This mixed methods study examines policies, practices and perceptions at four-year institutions in New York City, and explores how the socioeconomic class of students affects their experience in schools and indicators like attendance patterns, persistence and graduation.

Administrative data compiled and analyzed for a sample of baccalaureate-granting institutions in New York City (n=44) show that 43 percent of students city-wide qualify for and receive need-based federal grant aid. Colleges with lower percentages of Pell-usage (higher student body SES) have higher percentages of students with disabilities. Numbers of students with disabilities in New York City are largely underreported at about 3 percent, falling short of state and national averages. Survey data from Disability Services Officers at these institutions (n=21) and interviews with staff and students (n=19) provide supporting quantitative and qualitative data to demonstrate the ways colleges create environments that enable or hinder student success. Theoretical considerations of political economy and meritocracy interrogate the notion of how

students are judged to be academically successful. Informed by these data and perspectives, recommendations for policy and practice focus on constructive ways to identify and support all students with disabilities in order to help them succeed in higher education and realize stronger economic futures.

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## Abbreviations

| | |
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| ADA | Americans with Disabilities Act |
| ADHD | Attention-deficit/Hyperactivity disorder |
| ASD | Autism Spectrum Disorders |
| ASL | American Sign Language |
| CUNY | City University of New York |
| DSO | Disability Services Officer |
| ELL | English Language Learner |
| FTE | Full-time Equivalent |
| IDEA | Individuals with Disabilities Education Act |
| IEP | Individualized Education Plan |
| IPEDS | Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System |
| K-12 | Kindergarten through 12$^{th}$ Grade (primary and secondary education) |
| LD | Learning Disability |
| NCES | National Center for Education Statistics |
| NYC | New York City |
| SES | socioeconomic status |
| SSI | Supplemental Security Income |
| SUNY | State University of New York |

## Chapter One: Introduction

On any given day in New York City, news about disparities in urban education makes headlines. Less than two weeks after the 20th Anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act, an August 6, 2010 story in The New York Times described former New York City Department of Education Chancellor Joel I. Klein's decision to disregard a state ruling and displace children with autism from their elementary school in order to expand a charter school (Otterman, A19). A day before, the newspaper's front page detailed the turmoil that ensued at the city's elite Hunter College High School after the school's 18-year-old black and Hispanic graduation speaker, Justin Hudson, cited the school's lack of socioeconomic and racial diversity (Otterman, A1). Hudson had admonished the school, stating, "Hunter is perpetuating a system in which children, who contain unbridled and untapped intellect and creativity, are discarded like refuse. And we have the audacity to say they deserved it, because we're smarter than them" (Hudson, 2010). The next day the school's principal stepped down. Weeks later alumnae Elena Kagan was sworn in on the Supreme Court of the United States.

Stories depicting the amazing spectrum of the most vulnerable students to the highest achieving may be expected in urban, public K-12 schools. One might assume that these disparities are less pronounced in post-secondary settings. But in a nation where less than a third of the adult population boasts a bachelor's degree (U.S. Census, 2010; Bowen et al., 2009), disparities in educational attainment by race, class and dis/ability are often reinforced in higher education. Research in this area serves an important function because as Michael Apple notes, "Education is a site of struggle and compromise. It serves as a proxy as well for larger battles over what our institutions

should do, whom they should serve, and who should make these decisions" (2006, p. 30). The study which follows explores the ways in which factors like socioeconomic status (SES) and disability affect the academic success of New York City college students.

**Statement of Purpose**

My personal and professional experiences inform this dissertation. As an administrator within the City University of New York (CUNY) Central Office of Academic Affairs, I have overseen several undergraduate and graduate programs in Disability Studies, the executive office of the Society for Disability Studies, and large federal and state grants targeted at youth and adults with disabilities. This intersection of disability and higher education aligns with another nexus in my professional work: the perspectives of students, faculty and administrators. I experience on a daily basis the ways in which university staff and structures facilitate or hinder student success.

My work, both professional and academic, is grounded in concerns for social justice. Certainly people with disabilities are presently an underserved population, and like other groups in the United States who fought for their civil rights, myriad laws protect them. But I often witness in education how advocacy becomes reduced to compliance, and how the desire to understand ability becomes reduced to stock accommodations in the classroom. Additionally, I'm involved in various quantitative and qualitative research studies; methodological choices determine findings.

It is in these disconnects and fissures that I aim to make a contribution, both to higher education through policy recommendations for administrators, and to students with disabilities who struggle with access to and persistence in educational institutions

that influence their economic futures. Increasing numbers of students with disabilities will be entering college over the next decades. For Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) alone, research shows a 57 percent average increase in the identified prevalence of ASD between 2002 and 2006 (CDC, 2006). I hope this dissertation results in meaningful recommendations for both institutions and consumers of higher education.

**Structure of the Dissertation and Chapter Overview**

More of a painting than a photograph, this dissertation describes experiences around disability on college campuses in New York City, employing a variety of methods and interpretations to create a portrait. The project first outlines the complex and varied contexts which surround this topic. For example, this research would have a very different tone in another geographic setting: New York City presents a unique situation where dozens of schools are so close in physical proximity and yet worlds apart in character and feel. These contexts are laid out in Chapter One, and culminate in the introduction of my two key research questions and views on the significance of this study.

Chapter Two presents a review of literature which contains three main threads. Factors shaping the experiences of students with disabilities in higher education are important for the reader to understand, and run the gamut from civil rights legislation to faculty attitudes. The confluence and conflation of social class and disability, two phenomena fundamental within American society and yet socially constructed in very particular ways, take certain shape within the framework of higher education. Meritocracy and political economy provide theoretical lenses to undergird this work and are woven throughout the data presented in subsequent chapters.

Chapter Three describes the methodology employed. The mixed methods design uses techniques such as inferential statistics and inductive coding to approach three tiers of data collected: administrative data (n=44), survey data (n=21) and interview data (n=19). Research conducted with staff and students across high-, medium- and low-SES colleges presented various challenges, not the least of which is a highly confidential and legally-driven system of service delivery.

Quantitative data findings are outlined in Chapter Four. Administrative data present a demographic picture of the diverse undergraduate students who attend college in New York City. A central outcome of this particular aspect of the research project is an approach for gauging the socioeconomic status of the student bodies of 44 baccalaureate-degree granting institutions. Administrative data lend the framework for understanding the human subjects research. Survey data depict factors which shape the work environments of college Disability Services Officers, and offer a first glimpse of their views about students and accommodations.

Chapter Five presents summaries of interviews with Disability Service Officers from nine colleges. Perspectives here reinforce literature presented in previous chapters, like the high cost of disability evaluations or barriers to student persistence. Staff from high-SES and low-SES colleges alike discuss personnel shortages and campus auxiliary services. Important themes such as parental expectations, institutional relationships and the increasing complexity of diagnoses are explored.

Two of these nine campuses, one high-SES and one low-SES college, are the sites of student interviews. Ten students with learning disabilities provided a total of 11 interviews which are summarized in Chapter Six. Their personal stories are equal parts

triumph and heartache, but their voices and determination to graduate with a bachelor's degree are strong. They describe common processes: applying to college, requesting accommodations, choosing majors, struggling with professors and thinking about life after graduation. Themes explored in this chapter include stress, entitlement, stigma and a sense of belonging.

Chapter Seven connects data with theory. The first section, "Averting Damage", explores the perils of presenting data without the meaning making that is both critically important and also commonly lacking from much empirical work. It asks researchers to confront the lasting damage done to subjects when a study is over and they are left to embody the premise of research— that they are somehow less than. The second section positions educational discrepancies resulting from social class as economic, political and institutional dysfunction. It is in this chapter that I offer answers to my research questions.

Chapter Eight provides actionable steps for author and reader alike. Recommendations for policy and practice provide a concrete framework on the part of colleges to interrogate their support of students with disabilities. Though several well-developed policy papers with similar aims are available in the literature, the seven steps discussed here come directly from my data and their New York City context. Aware of the limitations of any research study, I pose questions for further exploration and ideas for future study. Among them are cost-benefit analyses and a multidimensional look at socioeconomic class and students with disabilities to include other frames such as gender or sexual orientation.

This dissertation required engagement with robust disciplines like higher education, disability studies, social science and legal theory, among many others. It does not attempt to provide an exhaustive analysis of any of these. It is in the overlaps and fissures of this mixed method, multidisciplinary work that I hope to contribute to the literature in innovative ways.

## Contexts

Numerous contextual factors provide important background crucial to understanding the depth and breadth of this topic. College students with learning disabilities in New York City are positioned within a complex socioeconomic and legal framework outlined by issues of place.

### Geographical Contexts.

Official figures from the U.S. Census Bureau (2009b) estimate New York City (NYC) as home to 8,391,881 people. Comprised in 1898 of five boroughs, now each their own county, the city claims more than 40 percent of New York State's population yet only 303 square miles of land (U.S. Census, 2000a). Lenape Indians inhabited the area before Dutch explorers established a trading post in New York City at the start of the 17th Century; it became a British Colony in 1664, and was named the new nation's first capital in 1785 (Gotham Center, 2010). While the city has long since relinquished this title, it remains arguably the most vital city in the United States if not the world. Nearly one in every 36 Americans resides in New York City and unlike other older large cities in the Northeast which have lost population, the city continues to draw residents at a steady

rate (NYCDCP, 2010). Its Fiscal Year 2011 budget stands at more than $63 billion, reflecting the sheer modern day scale of this urban center.

American Community Survey data (U.S. Census, 2009c) depict the diversity of residents. The majority of New York City residents are people of color (54.6 percent), and 27 percent are Hispanic. Almost half speak a language other than English at home (47.1 percent), and 2.9 million residents are foreign-born (35.9 percent). According to the U.S. Census (2000b[1]), more than a fifth of NYC residents live below the poverty level (21.2 percent), and 1.8 million have a disability (24.5 percent). In a borough like the Bronx, these numbers for poverty and disability jump to 30.7 and 28.4 percent, respectively (U.S. Census, 2009a). The New York City Coalition Against Hunger cites that 1.4 million people live here in households that can't afford enough food (2010). The borough of Manhattan boasts the highest wealth disparity in the country (Blodget, 2006). New Yorkers may struggle but many persevere here. A tongue-in-cheek Yankees baseball slogan appeals to this loyalty: "27 rings but always married to the same city".

Despite its complexity and adversity, New York City is in some ways the protagonist of this story. It makes life both accessible and difficult for college students with disabilities. Interviewee narratives describe wanting to come to college in "the city" or hours spent commuting on the subway. As sophomore Christopher[2] remarked, "The city gives me a college education. The city gives me a safe place to live. And the city, overall, there's nothing like it – New York City" (C. Henry, personal communication, April 13, 2010).

[1] Numbers for disability are missing in the ACS data which is why data from the 2000 Census is used in this City/Bronx comparison.
[2] All student and staff names in this work are pseudonyms.

Despite students' feelings about living and going to college in New York City, issues like poverty and wealth disparity aren't restricted to demographic datasets. They play out in real ways across the city's colleges as diverse students try to earn a degree and gain a better life for themselves and their families. Many students, often the first in their families to attend college, make tremendous sacrifices to pursue this goal. One student interviewed in this study moved into public housing to enable her to afford college. Other NYC students encounter college through more traditional, privileged environments that facilitate stability and achievement. Like the scale of most phenomena in New York City, the range of college experiences is staggering.

**Educational Context.**

Against the backdrop of this vibrant city, hundreds of thousands of students attend college. Across the spectrum of 2-year and 4-year colleges, New York City-based institutions account for 42 percent of all college enrollments in the state, including 45 percent of all enrollment in the state's independent colleges and 70 percent of all enrollment in the state's proprietary colleges (NYSED, 2009). These for-profit colleges are likely more heavily concentrated in New York City for reasons of sheer demand. In the city's 44 baccalaureate-granting institutions alone, federal data show that 263,442 students enrolled during fall 2008 semester (NCES, 2010b).[3] Figure One depicts where these colleges are located within the five boroughs of New York City; the majority are situated in Manhattan. Public colleges[4] (n=13), independent colleges[5] (n=25) and

[3] The count of 44 used here is consistent with the number of baccalaureate colleges involved in this study. For criteria, see Methods section. NCES is the source of this datum, but the numbers are derived.
[4] 11 CUNYs and 2 SUNYs

proprietary colleges (n=6) comprise this group. New York University (NYU) is the largest of these, with 42,189 students in Academic Year 2008-2009 (NYSED, 2009).

The majority of undergraduate college students in New York State enroll full-time, and the average age of these students is decreasing. This also holds true for the City University of New York, the city's system of 23 public colleges. The percentage of undergraduates under age 20 has steadily risen each year for the past five years, from 29.4 percent of undergraduate students enrolled in fall 2005 to 32.1 percent of undergraduate students enrolled in fall 2009 (CUNY OIRA, 2006 and 2010). Looking at these data another way, students over age 30 represented 15.6 percent of CUNY undergraduate enrollments in 2009 compared to 19.4 percent in 2005. Proportional numbers of black and Hispanic students at CUNY's 4-year colleges are decreasing, from 49 percent to 44 percent between 1997 and 2007 (NYSED, 2009). Tuition is rising; average Academic Year 2008-2009 tuition for an independent college in New York State was $29,503, up 37 percent from Academic Year 2003-2004.

These trends signal a growing dynamic in the U.S.: education is becoming higher stakes. The payoffs of education are clear: people whose highest level of attainment was a high school diploma had average earnings in 2009 of $31,283 compared to $58,613 for those with a bachelor's degree alone (U.S. Census, 2010). Not collected by the U.S. Department of Education until 1996 (Cook and Pullaro, 2010) graduation rates are an obsessive topic in current discussion on higher education (Bowen et al., 2009; Brainard and Fuller, 2010). In an August 2010 address at the University of Texas at Austin, President Obama highlighted the trend: "In a single generation, we've fallen from first

[5] "Independent" is the nomenclature used by the state for what is often referred to as a private, not-for-profit colleges. Fordham University is an example.

place to 12th place in college graduation rates for young adults. Think about that. In one generation we went from number one to number 12."


**Figure 1. Location of 44 NYC Colleges Granting Baccalaureate Degrees**

So as university budgets tighten and institutional competition grows fiercer, colleges increasingly vie for high-achieving students who are likely to finish. Colleges know that low income levels, disability status, work and family responsibilities increase time-to-degree: younger and wealthier students are more likely to be counted as successes

in the flawed but common metrics used to track graduation rates nationally (Cook and Pullaro, 2010). As graduation rates become tied to students' college selection, federal funding or even a school's ability to compete in March Madness, admission trends like those seen in New York may increasingly tend to disfavor nontraditional college students, low-income students, disabled students and students of color without specific efforts to the contrary.

**Disability Context.**

As the gates to higher education seem to narrow for some, opportunities for students with disabilities appear to widen. In years before passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, the number of college students with disabilities in New York State hovered between one and two percent (NYSED, 2009). In 2007, these students numbered 42,821 or 3.7 percent of total students enrolled in New York State. CUNY cites that about 9,000 students in credited programs (about four percent) self-report having a disability (CCSD, 2010). According to the Institute for Higher Education Policy, this number is much higher nationally, with 9 percent of undergraduates self-reporting a disability (IHEP, 2004). NCES (2006) cites the national figure of college students with disabilities at 11 percent. This number lies within the numerical range of people with disabilities nationally, as disabilities tend to acquire with age. Individuals with disabilities represent 8.1 percent of five- to 20-year olds, 19.2 percent of 21- to 64-year-olds, and 41.9 percent of individuals age 65 and older (U.S. Census, 2000b).

The focus of this study, students with a learning disability, "a neurological disorder that affects the brain's ability to receive, process, store and respond to

information" (NCLD, 2010), comprise the largest percentage within this group, or 40 percent of freshman with disabilities, a number which "has increased by a factor of ten since 1976" (IHEP, 2004). While commonly associated with difficulties around reading, learning disabilities (LD) can also affect cognitive abilities in writing, spelling, math, listening, oral expression and executive functioning. Examples of specific diagnostic classifications in the DSM IV[6] for these differences in processes are dyscalculia (math process), dyslexia (reading process), and dysgraphia (writing process). For factors like phonological and memory issues, foreign language acquisition is also often associated with LD at the college level, as so many universities include foreign language courses among their undergraduate requirements.

Students may informally describe their learning/processing difference as the discrepancy between IQ tests and achievement tests: teachers notice the difference between the intelligence a student with LD demonstrates in the classroom and his or her academic performance on assessments. As college junior Alison described,

> I was diagnosed when I was in high school so it was pretty late and I had been very discouraged because I just wasn't showing the ability that I could... It took me so much longer and my writing didn't come out as fluidly as I would have wished. And so it was just frustrating because I was doing alright but my IQ just showed that it was a lot higher than what I was doing. (A. Hofmann, personal communication, April 14, 2010)

[6] The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM*) is currently in its fourth edition and is published by the American Psychiatric Association.

According to 2009 figures from the National Center for Education Statistics, 2,573,000 students with LD were served under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) legislation in 2007-2008. This makes LD the most common federal disability category, before speech/language impairments, mental retardation, emotional disturbance, hearing impairments, orthopedic impairments, health impairments, visual impairments, autism and developmental delays. Children with specific learning disabilities comprise 39 percent of all children ages 3-21 receiving special education services and 5.2 percent of all children in public schools pre-K-12 (NCES, 2009b). At the post-secondary level, learning disabilities are the most commonly reported disability category for college students, and represent about 3.5 percent of all first-time, full-time college students (Hock, 2005, p.233).

One staff at a low-SES NYC college describes this increase:

> We're learning about the trends and that learning disabilities is the disability that is growing. And in order for us in colleges to provide necessary services, we need to know what the trends are so that we're making sure our budgets adequately meet the needs of students. I would say this semester we interviewed, I don't know, something like 30 note-takers and hired the majority because it was – our requests were just – they were above the norm. So now we're doing more waves of interviews to just say, okay, we need to be ready for the next semester and the next semester. And I think students are coming. I mean, I've met with parents. I've met with parents and students. And they know what they deserve.

> They know what their rights are. And they come ready. (D. Johnson, personal communication, September 28, 2009)

This awareness of students' legal rights affects the ways that students, faculty and staff think about college resources.

**Legal Context.**

The numbers of students with disabilities in college continues to grow, and researchers attribute this in part to legislative changes over the past several decades (Jensen et al., 2004). U.S. universities' legal responsibility for students with disabilities is largely mandated by three federal laws: Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Title II and III of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), and Title IX of the 1998 Amendments to the Higher Education Act of 1965. These laws basically prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability and largely regulate the legal landscape for college students with disabilities. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act mandates that colleges which accept federal funds must provide academic adjustments to ensure that they do not discriminate on the basis of disability.

But because legislative language emphasizes a "reasonable accommodation", college staff are left to decide what they think is reasonable. As law professor Adam Milani (1996) describes,

> 'Otherwise qualified'; 'reasonable accommodation'; 'substantial modification'. The imprecision of these phrases from the statutes, regulations and case law prohibiting colleges and universities from discriminating against students with disabilities is a source of frustration for both administrators and students.

> Administrators complain that the 'laws often are vague about how far universities must go to accommodate students'. At the same time, 'the hazy wording makes it difficult for students to understand what they can expect from the university'.

As a result, much of the direction to colleges on how to implement the federal legislation has come from case law. Recent changes through the ADA Amendments Act of 2008 and U.S. Department of Justice revisions signed on July 23, 2010 have clarified and widened the federal regulations. Additionally, state laws, individual college policies, political climate and socioeconomic factors contribute to how services are imagined, funded and delivered. The broker of student accommodations, the campus Disability Services Officer (DSO), serves as advocate and gatekeeper. Considering this complex landscape, services received by students with disabilities stand to be widely variable in quality and content. I conjecture that socioeconomic status of students is a significant determinant of how accommodations are delivered to students with learning disabilities.

One legal issue to be noted here is how these laws which protect college students are markedly different from those regulating the K-12 environment, most notably IDEA. Enacted in 1990, IDEA governs special education services for children up to age 21, and has been amended several times and brought into line with other education law like No Child Left Behind (U.S. DOE, 2010). An Individualized Education Program (IEP) is mandated under IDEA; this document details which services are provided for a given student. In practice, the onus is on K-12 schools to provide services for students with disabilities under IDEA, while college students themselves must self-disclose and advocate for services under the ADA. This difference means that high school students

may reach the university environment not fully clear about their own limitations, which services they're entitled to receive, or how to go about getting them.

In a 2004 article for the *Vanderbilt Law Review*, Professor Craig Lerner undermines the legal context for learning disabilities specifically. He asserts that contrary to common practice, college students with learning disabilities do not readily qualify as disabled under the ADA for two main reasons. First, Lerner explains that the Supreme Court has established that whether or not a person is disabled under the ADA is judged on an individual, case-by-case basis and no general guidelines should necessarily be applied to a group of students. Second, he contends that the ADA's language that an impairment "substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of an individual" can rarely be met because the standard for this is an 'average' citizen, and the majority of average citizens don't attend college in the first place (Lerner, 2004, p.1091).

The question Lerner proceeds to ask, then, is why more colleges don't challenge a learning disabled student's claim for accommodations under the ADA when— according to his analysis— they don't have the "legal duty to accommodate" students with LD. He concludes that lawsuits are costly, and Disability Services Officers may not have an incentive to limit accommodations or wish to open themselves up to personal exposure on this issue; there's a "divergence of interests between educational administrators and educational institutions" (2004, p. 1123).

Lerner's interpretation of the law would prove incendiary in disability rights circles where advocates frame the ADA and Rehabilitation Act as sacrosanct anti-discrimination legislation, not just legal semantics. The NYC college students with disabilities and the staff who work with them who participated in this research study

perceive a strongly mandated legal environment. One Disability Services Officer shared, "And I've had faculty members say I don't agree with you but I understand it's my obligation. And I will certainly allow the academics adjustment because I know I need to" (A. Giordano, personal communication, February 12, 2010). A student with disabilities remarked, "A few teachers want it their way, but they have to always accommodate me because it's required by law. They have to," (C. Henry, personal communication, April 13, 2010).

Lerner's argument is included here not to question the legitimacy or power of important disability legislation, but to give an example of how the waters can muddy when it comes to a college's understanding of learning disabilities and how best to accommodate them. It's not uncommon to hear stories about a professor who refused to be audio-recorded or a student who is afraid to self-identify. Any vagaries in the law are exacerbated by a general lack of understanding about learning disabilities themselves. Lerner pinpoints another factor: a school's aversion to litigation. If staff doesn't have an incentive to limit accommodations as Lerner suggests, then the only limits would be budgetary limits, or the actual limits of what the college can afford to provide. In this space the differences between more- and less-resourced colleges would emerge. It would explain for the purposes of this study why students with learning disabilities at a wealthier college would have access to more supports, and why the students who could afford to would flock to them.

**Socioeconomic Context.**

Each of these previous discussions lends relevance to two widely-documented economic trends: people with college degrees earn more than individuals without a degree, and people with disabilities are generally more low income than people without disabilities. For these reasons, the ability of people with disabilities to earn a college degree becomes doubly relevant. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the August 2010 unemployment rate for people with disabilities was 15.6 percent, compared with 9.3 percent for people with no disability.

This discrepancy is reinforced by federal legislation. Supplemental Security Income, more commonly known by its acronym SSI, is the Social Security Administration's cash benefits system for low-income people with disabilities. In most states, including New York, eligibility for SSI also means eligibility for Medicaid, and benefits start concurrently (SSA, 2010). Especially for those individuals with disabilities with more intensive medical or health needs, the legislation often serves as a disincentive for work since recipients must maintain income and resources below a certain limit to qualify.

Interestingly in the case of LD, the link between disability and socioeconomics is often written about from the opposite end of the SES spectrum. While college students with disabilities on a whole are more likely to represent the lowest income quartile, dependent college students with LD specifically are more than twice as likely to represent the highest quartile (Wollanin and Steele, 2004). This federal disability and income data (NPSAS, 2000) analyzed by these authors at the Institute for Higher Education Policy presents other features of note: dependent students with the diagnosis of Attention-

deficit/Hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are three times more likely to be from the highest income quartile than the lowest, while independent students with mental illness are almost twice as likely to be from the lowest income quartile than the highest. These data reveal that income and behavior labels are undeniably related when there is societal stigma involved: for a category like visual impairments the distribution across income quartiles is nearly equal.

Described as "affirmative action for spoiled rich white kids" by one author (Katz, 2010), learning disabilities made front-page news when the Los Angeles Times ran a story about disability accommodations becoming a way for "privileged families to gain advantage on a high-stakes exam," (Weiss, 2000). The article includes analyses of College Board data which depict that while only about two percent of test-takers nationally receive accommodations, the percentage jumps "fivefold for students at New England prep schools," while not even one out of 1,439 students across 10 inner-city schools in Los Angeles received extra time or other accommodations on the SAT (Ibid). The author continues:

> Students who get such accommodations on the SAT are twice as likely to come from families that earn more than $100,000. They are much more likely to be male. Compared to regular test takers, they are also far more likely to have parents with either a bachelor's or graduate degree. And they are considerably more likely than other test takers to be white and attend either private schools or public ones in wealthy suburbs.

This rhetoric about appropriation of the LD label by socioeconomic elites has a long, scientific and political history which some writers trace to the landmark 1954 desegregation case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. While scientists and educators had been working with psychometrics since the 1920s, Sam Kirk, "the father of learning disabilities", and others offered definitions and approaches to learning disabilities in the early 1960s (Danforth, 2009). A radical structuralist critique paints the picture of a public education system with limited power and resources, thus the special education system was used as a vehicle for reproducing cultural inequality (Sleeter, 1995; Ferri and Connor, 2006). Sleeter posits that the label of "learning disabled" came about during the time after *Brown* to separate the white children with disabilities from the other racial groups with disabilities, and to differentiate the disabilities of the white children as being comparatively less severe (p.160). To support her argument, she cites the 1973 change when the IQ cutoff score for mental retardation was lowered from 85 to 70 (Hourcade, 2002), thus increasing the number of students considered to have a typical IQ and poised for the LD label.

Most mainstream special educators who watch their students struggle in classrooms would not subscribe to this critique of the LD label as mere resource allocation. But disability professionals across the board do acknowledge the high cost of evaluations, and the economic barrier that exists for many in accessing one. Costs for a psycho-educational evaluation needed to substantiate disability accommodations for school and high-stakes testing are typically estimated around $2,000. One staff interviewed at a competitive, private NYC college explains how she sees socioeconomic status play out in the context of testing:

> For our students with learning disabilities, when you want to go on to take the MCAT or the LSAT, these really high-stakes testing where the documentation is so – guidelines and standards are so rigorous, and not being able to afford an evaluation or only being able to afford an evaluation at a university testing center where they may or may not meet the guidelines for MCAT or LSAT or GRE. (C. Whitney, personal communication, October 2, 2009)

Before students can be evaluated someone must recognize the need for such evaluation. A majority of students are diagnosed with LD during K-12 years. Reading and math learning disabilities are often noticed in elementary school, and spatial or organization issues are diagnosed in middle school as classes get more difficult and students have to remember things like locker combinations (S. Olsen, personal communication, October 22, 2009). But socioeconomic factors can contribute to students not being diagnosed until college: cultural stigma, overcrowded K-12 classrooms where a teacher may not notice an issue, insufficient health insurance or lack of medical care, and lack of parental awareness or empowerment (Ibid). Language is another confounder of learning disabilities. Paradis (2005) explains that 'missed identity' is a false negative which occurs when a child's poor academic performance is attributed to being an English Language Learner (ELL), while 'mistaken identity' is the opposite phenomenon in school: a false positive occurs when a minority child or ELL is diagnosed as having a learning disability when in fact their learning issue is related to language acquisition.

Interestingly, children of color are placed in special education in disproportionate numbers, a trend which is often noted. Anyon references the Gautraux Program in

Chicago: as children of color relocated to suburban schools, a disproportionate number of them were placed in classes for learning disabled students (p. 97). Theresa Perry cites the 1978 court case *Martin Luther King, Jr.* v. *Ann Arbor School Board*, in which a Michigan school had labeled or attempted to label two-thirds of the black children as learning disabled (2003, p. 65). Danforth (2009) shows that Dr. Sam Kirk acknowledged misdiagnoses as an issue decades ago:

> School districts have identified many children as learning disabled simply because they did not perform at grade level. Many of these children are slow learners, culturally or linguistically disadvantaged, or have had inappropriate instruction...If this practice continues, the learning disability programs are in danger of becoming dumping grounds for all educational problems. (p. 184)

Aware of this literature, Blair and Scott (2002) employ epidemiological statistics to analyze birth and school records in a Florida sample to analyze the connection between low SES and the LD label, using indicators like maternal education, marital status and late prenatal care. While careful not to attribute a causal relationship to low SES and LD, the authors do find "that 30 percent of LD placements among boys and 39 percent of LD placements among girls were attributable to what can be considered low-SES markers." Blair and Scott hedge whether this LD label derives from increased risk from environmental factors associated with low SES or low SES itself, yet still differentiate between learning issues associated with socioeconomic disadvantage and those associated with cognitive processing deficits. They conclude by comparing their 30/39 percent figures with those from another study of the same data set which found that 100

percent of special education placements with a label of "mild mental retardation" were attributable to low-SES indicators. Class and gender here, and not race, are highlighted.

Scientists, academics, the media, classroom educators and other stakeholders run the gamut on if or how they connect SES and LD. For this study, the connection between them is made after the point of diagnosis— all the students interviewed were labeled as having a learning disability. I'm not a pyschometrician, and made no attempt to judge whether students' learning disabilities were comparably legitimate or severe. Using the LD label as an equalizer positioned me to perceive differences in college environments and experiences of students, and words and actions of staff. The socioeconomic context of learning disabilities fundamentally framed this study and my research questions.

There's no question that disability labels, necessary for receiving support services, have been used as a mechanism to stigmatize and segregate, and conversely, to advantage and privilege. In this way, learning disability research affects a broad range of students and these multiple contexts demonstrate the complexity of the label. Federal legislation is designed to level the socioeconomic playing field so that all qualified students with disabilities have the accommodations necessary to gain access to college, earn success through college, and make their way into the job market. But for many reasons presented in this study, the process sometimes resembles more of a labyrinth than a road.

**Statement of the Problem**

How do socioeconomic and disability status affect the lived experiences of NYC college students? Are higher SES students with disabilities represented in larger numbers in elite NYC colleges? And are they able to continue this advantage into success through

college courses? For wealthier students, does disability act as a resource, and not a barrier? How do colleges deal with these issues, especially considering their own limited resources? And how does university practice resonate with or contradict federal disability law? I situate these questions within a Disability Studies framework by focusing on variables external to disability, "the social, political and intellectual contingencies that shape meaning and behavior" (Linton, 1998).

This study addresses college students with learning disabilities in New York City who are enrolled at four-year institutions. In contrast to students who are blind, deaf or use a wheelchair and for whom accommodations are more straightforward, students with learning disabilities fall across a spectrum where labeling and perception by others affects so much of what students can or do advocate for. It is in this space that I assert that socioeconomic class is a chief determinant of outputs— labels represent resources for some students and stigma for others. I focus on four-year colleges because two-year colleges claim another literature altogether. The students featured in this study all have jumped a variety of academic hurdles and are on their way to a baccalaureate degree.

The data presented here offer a response to two main research questions:

1. Are federal policies with regard to students with learning disabilities implemented differently in institutions of higher education in New York City with different socioeconomic class populations? If so, how?

This question seeks to understand the playing field on which college students with learning disabilities operate, and supposes that the playing field will be variable, not

level. Administrative data, surveys and interviews provide the evidence necessary to address the various issues and stakeholder groups implicated in this question. I cast a citywide net to answer this question, and chose a subset of schools for case studies.

2. Does variance in policy implementation and student body social class impact the college experience of students with learning disabilities? If so, how?

Data generated by this question bring together the lived experiences of staff and students with theory. I argue that the impacts range from concrete to subtle, and are both academic (GPA, time-to-degree, choice of major, classroom experience) and social (segregation, self-esteem, peer groups, expectations, attitudes). I theorize my quantitative and qualitative data to answer these questions.

In October 2008 while I was developing the proposal for this study, I visited a unique college on a professional visit. The mission of this two-year college is to educate learning disabled and autistic students and equip them with study skills, advocacy skills and assistive technology so they can successfully transfer to four-year colleges. Students at this small, rural college have everything from pre-loaded laptops to weekly life coaching. Faculty is trained in 'Universal Design in Instruction' and multimodal teaching. Tuition for this residential college is estimated at more than $56,000 for Academic Year 2010-2011. The majority of its students use medication, and their IQs range from borderline to gifted. As I spoke with the college's top administrators and toured the campus with its students, I felt strongly that my dissertation topic was on the pulse of an important issue in higher education. Money can facilitate success in college, even for students with significant difficulties. The challenge for this study was to demonstrate

how that happens.

## Chapter Two: Literature

The literature review presented here responds to research questions situated within the intersection of three main bodies of scholarship:

1. Students with disabilities in higher education: context and experiences
2. Social Class and Disability
3. Theoretical Approaches: Meritocracy and Political Economy

These literatures outline a framework for understanding what plays out when New York City colleges educate learning disabled students. And while the federal laws remain constant, college practices and student experiences— from Barnard College to York College— are not.

### Students with Disabilities in Higher Education: Context and Experiences

The history, legislation and statistics about students with disabilities in higher education are paramount for understanding the context of this research. Postsecondary services for individuals with disabilities found their beginning in the 1857 origins of Gallaudet University for deaf students. Later, veterans returning from World Wars I and II inspired legislation to push disability services forward: The signing of the Vocational Education Act in 1917 and the Serviceman's Readjustment Act (more commonly known as the G.I. Bill) in 1944 are two examples (Madaus, 2000). The landmark legislation of the 1964 Civil Rights Act prohibited discrimination in the U.S. based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin. People with disabilities were certainly part of this civil rights movement, visibly advocating for their rights. The Rehabilitation Act, prohibiting

discrimination based on disability, followed in 1973. IDEA and the ADA strengthened this legislation. And similar to people of color, people with disabilities continue to advocate for civil rights. Of the almost 20 million students currently enrolled in higher education, students with disabilities number more than 2 million (NCES, 2008b). These students struggle for access and opportunity, accommodations and success.

Jensen et al. (2004) gives three reasons why these numbers of postsecondary students with disabilities are growing. First, the aforementioned federal legislation increased the possibility that students with disabilities could attend college. Next, K-12 students with learning disabilities and ADHD are growing in number not only because diagnostic techniques are becoming more available, but also because of increased awareness and acceptance of these "hidden disabilities" (Madaus, 2000). Lastly, advances in medicine mean that more people live with disabilities across the life cycle.

Students with disabilities are struggling for equal success in higher education at the same time that support services are more widely available in colleges than ever before. Of the more than 5,000 two- and four-year colleges in the U.S., 72 percent of these enroll students with disabilities, and of these schools, 98 percent provide at least one support service or accommodation to students (NCES, 2000). Public colleges are more likely than private colleges to provide accommodations (Ibid). Private college students interviewed in this study had the opposite impression, however. One describes, "I really liked that it was a small school so I thought maybe I would get more attention paid here and just from the impression that I had was that it would be fine; that they would really help me," (A. Hofmann, personal communication, April 14, 2010).

But despite this overall growth in accommodations, college students with disabilities do not attain postsecondary education at rates equal to their non-disabled peers. According to the same NCES report, 33 percent of students with disabilities earn a bachelor's degree from public four-year colleges in the same time 48 percent of students with no documented disability earn a degree (2000). At private four-year colleges, this percentage gap is 57 percent compared to 67 percent for the completion of a bachelor's degree.

**Table One**
**College Students and Degree Attainment (NCES, 2000)**

| | None | Certificate | Associate | Bachelor's |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Public 4-year: | | | | |
| no disability | 44 | 3 | 5 | 48 |
| has a disability | 55 | 8 | 3 | 33 |
| Private 4-year: | | | | |
| no disability | 28 | 2 | 3 | 67 |
| has a disability | 35 | 6 | 2 | 57 |

Table One includes figures over a five-year period, so it's likely that students who had not yet done so were on their way to attaining a degree. Several factors may address this differential: this study's qualitative research presents examples. First, students with disabilities often take longer on time-to-degree for reasons like medical issues. One staff interviewed shared, "I feel like our students probably take a greater number of leaves than probably the rest of the [undergraduate] student body," (C.Whitney, personal communication, October 2, 2009). Additionally, students who were diagnosed with LD in college talked about failing courses multiple times before being evaluated and receiving a course exemption. As Jenny recounts, "Somebody told me to take it

again…And I took it twice, and it still was no help. So I got that second F," (J. Gardner, personal communication, April 13, 2010). Two students interviewed required a 10- or 20-year horizon for time-to-degree for additional reasons which include work and raising children. Graduation aside, overall persistence in the national study was 53 percent for students with disabilities, compared to 64 percent for typical students (NCES, 2000).

These numeric data describe only part of the picture: thousands of daily interactions in classrooms play an important part in shaping the student experience. Federal, state and university policies are implemented alongside deep institutional prejudice (Hill, 1994). To exacerbate this bias, "learning disability" as a disability category is growing in both numbers of diagnoses and public awareness. But as largely "hidden" disabilities, learning disabilities engender different reactions and realities than physical disabilities like blindness or paralysis, or an intellectual disability with physical features like down syndrome. For these reasons of relative newness and invisibility, they are often less likely to be understood or validated by university faculty. One student interviewed in this study recounted an exchange with a professor. When she explained her accommodation of extra time on a test, he responded, "Well, what are you gonna do when you're out there in the real world, and they tell you that you have to do a report by 2:00? They're not gonna accommodate you," (M. Diaz, personal communication, April 13, 2010).

Jensen and her colleagues (2004) conducted a mixed methods study using both survey and interview data to explore faculty attitudes towards students with learning disabilities in the state of Kentucky. Two framing questions emerged from their findings: "How Do I Know 'Invisible' Disabilities Are Legitimate?" and "How Do I

Know They're Not Just Trying to 'Beat the System?" Colleges continue to wrestle with the conundrum of how to ensure access while not unfairly facilitating success (Duffy and Gugerty, 2005, p.90). In other words, how do Disability Services Offices strike the right balance between giving students reasonable accommodations to even the playing field without going too far and giving disabled students an academic advantage over their non-disabled peers?

This abstract line is constantly tested through concrete examples. *Guckenberger et al. v. Trustees of Boston University* (BU) was argued in 1997 in the U.S. District Court. Elizabeth Guckenberger, a student with learning disabilities, argued for the university to waive certain math and foreign language requirements. BU, despite the long tradition of a highly respected disability program, questioned her documentation, and asserted that these substitutions would "substantially alter minimal standards". The court decided that BU could indeed mandate the essential components of their curriculum, but that their stringent documentation process discriminated against students with disabilities (Madaus, 2000).

These contextualized findings engender larger questions for U.S. higher education. Jensen and colleagues ask, How much of student achievement is actually about meeting the expectations of 'academic behavior'? And ultimately, who 'belongs' in college? These issues of student persistence, faculty attitudes, and questions of legitimacy are just a few of the dynamics that make studying college students with learning disabilities an interesting and important topic, and not just within the walls of the university. The 2010 disability amendments to the Higher Education Act and ADA

Amendments Act signal that these issues have consequence on the federal policy level, too.

**Social Class and Disability**

To build on the section about economic context presented earlier in this work, numerous factors, both philosophical and practical, confound the relationship between socioeconomic status and disability. As a multifaceted construct, disability embodies not just physical or intellectual impairments but also a conceptual construct, a legal environment and a complicated benefits system. Political scientist Deborah Stone (1984) writes about the "distributive dilemma" that disability status presented in the Pre-ADA Regan era. When societies distribute resources based on work or need, they are forced to set boundaries about who qualifies for which system. Stone asserts that strict definitions of disability were not important before resources (like SSDI) were attached to them. Stone points out:

> A social observer cannot fail to notice that disability entails (or may entail) at least as much political privilege as it does social stigma. It is political privilege because, as an administrative category, it carries with it permission to enter the need-based system and to be exempt from the work-based system. It can also provide exemption from other things people would normally consider worth avoiding: military service, debt, and criminal liability. Disability programs are political precisely because they allocate these privileges. (p. 28)

While these benefits remain true from a sociopolitical perspective, one interesting thing to note about disability as outlined under the ADA is that accommodations are not connected to these work- or need-based systems. Reasonable accommodations are provided to all qualifying people with disabilities as a civil right. Without a means test, those with the socioeconomic and cultural capital to appropriate resources do so.

Models in educational theory support this idea. Shavit et al. (2007) discuss the hypothesis of Maximally Maintained Inequality (MMI) based on socioeconomic class: inequality of access to education and opportunity does not lessen until the privileged group reaches the point of saturation. In other words, opportunities remain for everyone else only after the elites have taken what they want. University admissions are then available for the middle and lower classes like a pyramid: few slots are available for them at elite colleges, and the majority gains admissions to lower-tier schools. Disability is usually examined in its own silo, as if the divide exists between typical college students and college students with disabilities. As depicted previously with enrollment data, MMI helps explain how the true divide may actually lie between rich and poor college students with disabilities. High-SES groups are able to access education without disability presenting a barrier.

Apple (2006) describes:

> Middle class parents have become quite skilled, in general, in exploiting market mechanisms in education and in bringing their social, economic and cultural capital to bear on them. Middle class parents are more likely to have the knowledge, skills and contacts to decode and manipulate what are increasingly complex and deregulated systems of choice and recruitment. (p.61)

Apple is describing the public K-12 system, but this idea that disability and class may reinforce each other in higher education is ripe for empirical study. How does this play out on college campuses? Through student support services and per-student expenditures? Parental expectations or interference? Variance in disability documentation? Survey and interview data gathered from a wide variety of four-year colleges in New York City explored these questions.

On the ground, these theories and questions are lived out in college campuses around the country. National data from the U.S. Department of Education reports that college students with disabilities are qualitatively different from their non-disabled peers. Students with disabilities are older, with an average age of 30, though almost 25 percent are older than 40. Compare this with the average age of 26 for typical students, of whom only 12 percent are 40 or older. Interestingly, they are also more likely to live off-campus, attend school part-time, and have children (NCES, 2008b).

Table One in the previous section illustrated that within the same tier of institution, students with disabilities are less likely to persist and graduate with a degree, and disability-related explanations for this were presented. But socioeconomics prove the bigger determinant in explaining how students get to those institutions in the first place. Students with disabilities are less likely to attend public 4-year colleges and more likely to be enrolled public 2-year institutions or "other" institutions, which include for-profit vocational institutions. They are as likely as their non-disabled peers to enroll in private 4-year colleges: 14 percent of students with disabilities and 15 percent of students without disabilities attend private 4-year schools nationally (NCES, 2000).

Given that low-income students are less likely to attend private, not-for-profit colleges generally (Kahlenberg, 2008), these national data suggest an interesting effect of socioeconomic status on disability. For those with greater financial resources, students with disabilities are on par with students without disabilities in terms of enrollment at four-year private colleges. For those with fewer financial resources (in the public colleges), students with disabilities are more likely than students without disabilities to be enrolled in 2-year institutions than 4-year institutions. Socioeconomic status seems to facilitate equal access to private higher education for those students with disabilities who have resources. For those who don't, disability seems to present an even greater barrier in getting into a four-year school. This effect has significant repercussions: community college students are far less likely to graduate with a degree than their peers at four-year institutions (NCES, 2008a).

In light of the data illustrating that resourced students with disabilities have equitable access to private colleges, I expect this dynamic to result in more robust disability services on these campuses. Certainly students with disabilities persist at lower rates in every college category. But the difference in degree-attainment between disabled and non-disabled students in private four-year colleges is only 10 percent, compared with a 15 percent difference at public four-year colleges. From all of these data one can infer that elite students with disabilities do better academically overall. Michael Apple describes this stratification as "school-mediated forms of class privilege" (2006, p. 68).

Fundamental questions surface: is the difference inherent in the students, or in a college's response to its students? In their book After Admission: From College Access to College Success, Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen and Person take an "institutional approach"

to their analysis of why students succeed or fail in certain schools, careful not to place blame at an individual student level. This concept falls right in line with Disability Studies, which argues that disability is socially constructed. A Disability Studies approach would emphasize colleges adjusting to the needs of the student rather than asking the student to adjust to the college. In fact, Skrtic (2005) uses the social construction model to describe school failure as a disabling condition for students.

Early writing in Disability Studies by Irving Zola (1982) asserts that the American social perception is to regard being disabled as both a "personal and social failure". Tom Shakespeare uses this lens to describe disability as “an interaction between impaired bodies and excluding environments” (2005, p. 147). These ideas challenge university policies and support services, and provide another important empirical lens: how does socioeconomic class fundamentally change the way an environment does or doesn’t exclude a student? An institutional approach makes sense for me as I explore class and disability, especially in light of my wanting to examine and affect university policy and practice.

These issues will only become more complicated and salient in the years ahead. NYACTS, New York State's Autism Initiative, cites the CDC statistic that one in 110 children have an ASD, a number which has grown significantly over the past two decades (OPWDD, 2010). This epidemic in the diagnosis of autism is currently an urgent issue for the K-12 system, but more and more of these children will be looking to enter higher education in the near future. Equity in college persistence and completion rates for students with disabilities will represent a larger social justice issue as these numbers skyrocket.

**Theoretical Approaches: Meritocracy and Political Economy**

A theory of meritocracy sheds light on the question of who gets in and succeeds in college, and class is certainly at play here. Jerome Karabel takes up the historical question of merit and who belongs in college in The Chosen (2005). In his introduction, he writes about the theoretical framework of meritocracy, expounding on the distinction between equality of opportunity vs. equality of condition. For Karabel, the principle of equality of opportunity contends that an individual should not be limited by social origins or by ascribed characteristics, whereas equality of condition prescribes that inequalities of wealth, power and status should be kept to the minimum level possible (p. 4).

In other words, merit is fluid, and the onus rests on either the student or the structures to overcome/reduce disadvantage. In the end, Karabel takes the side that the notion of equality of opportunity has triumphed in line with the markets. Societal structures still favor socioeconomic elitism, a "just byproduct of the American system of free enterprise" (p. 541), and what is perceived as merit is not necessarily academic merit at all. Based on Karabel's view, this dynamic would work against non-elite students with disabilities who rely on (typically legally-mandated) forms of equality of condition. Karabel demonstrates that the idea about who belongs in college has continued to evolve over the past century. These data show that merit is indeed fluid: I expect that social class exacerbates the challenges of disability and significantly affects how students experience college.

Additionally, political economy provides another key theoretical lens for understanding how and why certain students with disabilities persist in certain college environments. Higher education becomes increasingly linked to neo-liberal capitalism as

economic markets grow more global and job markets become more technologically-involved. Meyer and Schofer (2005) explain historical shifts in views of models of society throughout the last century. From human capital theory to democratization, scientization and international development, these various global shifts have encouraged both the growth of and need for higher education.

The question of who belongs in college is largely rhetorical, but its political-economic effects are anything but symbolic. Shavit and colleagues argue that, "Higher education is the gatekeeper of managerial and professional positions in the labor market" (2007,). They further contend that the growth of the higher education sector does not necessarily result in more equitable opportunity. This gatekeeping has real world consequences for students with disabilities, especially low-SES students. Meyer and Schofer highlight "the absence of particular groups from higher education" as a social problem (p. 903).

The economic impact of access to postsecondary education, or lack thereof, is measurable and widely cited. In their award-winning book Passing the Torch (2007), Attewell and Lavin examine national (National Longitudinal Survey of Youth or NLSY) and CUNY data for their 30-year longitudinal study on women who enrolled in CUNY during its period of open admissions in the 1970s. Census Bureau data show that women of all races with a bachelor's degree earned a median income of $40,000 working full time, compared to $23,211 for women with a high school diploma (p. 37). These numbers show that questions of enrollment and persistence carry long-term economic consequences.

The Brookings Institution underscores the economic impact of higher education in their February 2008 report "Getting Ahead or Losing Ground: Economic Mobility in America". In accord with Attewell and Lavin, the report's authors cite higher education as a positive factor for economic mobility across generations. Across Income Quintiles, 74 percent of children with college degrees earned incomes higher than their parents (p. 94). Only 16 percent of adult children with a college degree remained in the bottom quintile: "education contributed to a boost in economic status for children from poor families" (p. 95). In addition to economic impacts, Wehman and Yasuda list several of the benefits of participating in postsecondary education in their chapter "The Need and the Challenges Associated with Going to College": more stable health benefits, career advancement, status, marketability, improved social skills, content knowledge and networking (2005, pp. 6-11).

While political economy theory typically provides a vehicle for macro-level critique, it finds its place in this smaller study embedded within the examination of socioeconomic and disability status as well as U.S. higher education. In the face of global recession, colleges in the U.S. must respond to forces in the world economy like never before. Shavit et al. (2007) make a distinction between the market-based private financing of universities vs. public financing. With "the growing dominance of market liberalism" (Skrtic, 2005), public money does not necessarily imply public interest. Both are dwindling. U.S. colleges rely on revenue from private sources, including fundraising and growth in online and international ventures. Ultimately and again, access to education relies on economic access.

Jean Anyon examines macroeconomic federal policy in Radical Possibilities, paying specific attention to how these policies sustain urban poverty and inequality "that no existing educational policy or urban school reform can transcend" (p. 2). Essentially, these macroeconomic policies represent the "proactive role of the government in maintaining poverty" (p. 17), even as the U.S. workforce becomes increasingly educated (p. 29). How do Pell, SSI or the ADA stand up against this theoretical backdrop, and how do they set the stage for what colleges do or don't do, and who ends up getting what? Can disability legislation supersede economic factors? The thread of political economy analysis runs throughout this work.

## Chapter Three: Methodology

Mixed methods research is utilized in this study. Different methods answer different questions; not only do various methods allow for the exploration of a vast range of interests here, but they also bridge distinct camps in education. As Picciano explains, "With so much debate in educational research circles regarding qualitative versus quantitative approaches, a combined approach might take advantage of the best aspects of the two" (2004, p. 28). Creswell's description of a mixed methods approach affirms the methods charted in Table 3: "The study begins with a broad survey in order to generalize results to a population and then focuses, in a second phase, on detailed qualitative, open-ended interviews to collect detailed views from participants" (2003, p. 21).

### Design

The complexity of the topic and research questions required a mixed methods approach. Qualitative and quantitative processes yielded three distinct types of data in this study: administrative data, survey data and interview data. This design, outlined in Table Two, was created in hopes that this mix of quantitative and qualitative data would lead to a rich understanding of how universities publicly project, internally interact with, and inwardly perceive students with learning disabilities on their campuses. While my research questions specifically mention federal policy, it is the implementation of these policies— or practice— that I intended to document. Qualitative data offer the key to understanding the interesting and often counterintuitive patterns offered by the quantitative data included here.

First, comparison of administrative data examines the demographic of students at New York City colleges. Data like enrollment, financial aid and disability are collected for schools, and statistical methods help establish relationships between these factors. The raw data are publicly available and de-identified, and their analyses set the stage for understanding the situation of college students in New York City. Next, human subjects research provides a rich source of meso- and micro-level data.

**Table Two**
**Dissertation Methods**

| **Method** | **Approach** | **Sample** | **Focus** | ***Research Question*** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Statistical Analysis | Administrative Data | N=44 4-year NYC colleges | 4-year NYC colleges | *How do student body SES and disability, etc, breakdown across NYC colleges?* |
| Survey | Quantitative Analysis of data | N=21 4-year NYC colleges | 4-year NYC colleges | *How do DSOs perceive their students? Who succeeds and why?* |
| Interview with College Staff | Qualitative Case Studies | N=9 NYC Disability Services Officers, subset | Survey respondents from range of colleges | *Expand on survey findings* |
| Interview with College Students | Qualitative Case Studies | N=10 NYC College Students with Disabilities, subset | Referred by survey respondents from range of colleges | *See how above data is lived out for students* |

**Administrative Data**

The National Center of Education Statistics (NCES) serves as the "primary federal entity for collecting and analyzing data related to education" and maintains

numerous public datasets for researchers. NCES's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) served as the source of administrative data utilized in this study, and features federally-mandated self-report data from postsecondary institutions around the country. As of fall 2009, 44 colleges in NYC met the criteria to be included in this analysis[7]:

1. Enrollments of 500 students or more
2. Granting a baccalaureate degree
3. Categorized in IPEDS as a public/private 4-year institution
4. Feature a website, report data to IPEDS, and share PELL data[8]

Social class provides the lens for the analysis in this study on college students with learning disabilities, and as such, Pell data is used here as an indicator of students' socioeconomic status (SES). Legislated as part of the *Higher Education Act of 1965*, the federal Pell Grant program provides need-based assistance to low-income, mainly undergraduate college students based on a variety of factors, including tuition costs, enrollment status and the student's expected family contribution (ED.gov, 2009). Because these disbursements are grant funds, students do not need to pay them back.

Data from these 44 colleges were then culled from IPEDS (Data Center and College Navigator) and compiled in Excel. Data gathered included numbers for enrollment during fall 2008, number of students at a given institution who received Pell grants in academic year 2008-2009, and percentage of undergraduate students self-reporting as students with a disability. Percentage of students receiving Pell at a given campus was also extracted from the College Navigator tool in IPEDS, for both full-time, first-time freshmen and the undergraduate student body as a whole. The 44 schools were

[7] The list of colleges included in this sample with some raw and derived data are included as Appendix A.
[8] This search generated a list of 47 schools. Two rabbinical schools and the CUNY Graduate Center were deleted from the sample for not meeting criterion four in this list.

ranked in order of this percentage for full-time, first-time freshman from highest (most students receiving aid) to lowest (fewest students receiving aid). These colleges were then labeled according to a normal distribution: 16 schools were labeled as "high-Pell", 12 as "medium-Pell" and 16 as "low-Pell." Descriptive statistics were generated in Excel, and inferential statistics were performed using SPSS.

**Survey Data**

Each of these 44 schools was contacted during the next phase of research: survey. Contact emails were collected via internet search for the Disability Service Officers (or comparable job function) at each college. In most cases these emails were publicly available on the college's website within pages describing services for students with disabilities. In several cases, these pages did not exist, and other types of web searches were used. For example, some information was available through the New York State Education Department website, www.nysed.gov.

A research Gmail account and dedicated phone line was established for this process. An advance letter explained the study and was sent electronically to these 44 staff. The survey was identified as research from students at the CUNY Graduate Center's Urban Education Department.[9] A phone number was provided for questions or additional information but no calls about the survey were received. The letter contained a link to enter the survey, also electronic and hosted on Survey Monkey. Alternate formats of the survey (like a paper copy or phone survey) were offered; none was requested.

[9] My committee had not wanted me to introduce the survey using my own email or name because I am an administrator for the CUNY system.

The first page of the 27-question survey presented a consent statement, and by clicking yes and proceeding with the survey, respondents gave consent. (See Appendix D.) Respondents could skip some questions in the survey, and could stop at any time. The survey could be completed anonymously, and three respondents did so. The sample (n=21) was comprised of survey data collected in fall 2009 from named respondents. An incentive of a $10 Starbucks gift card was offered to these respondents who provided a mailing address, and was sent with a thank you letter.

The survey design was cross-sectional and comparative, capturing information at a particular moment in time and making it possible to compare responses by institution (Fink, 2006). Several questions were open-ended. The survey was designed to get at the following issues:

- How do disability services officers describe the students they serve?
- How do they compare with the rest of the student body?
- Which learning disabled students succeed at college and which do not? Why?
- How does staff walk the line between providing sufficient accommodations to students without giving them an academic advantage over their typical peers?
- How does staff perceive their students and how they move through college?
- Does college staff believe their university does enough for students with learning disabilities? Too much?
- How would they describe the ways in which disability status acts as a barrier? A resource? And for whom does this hold true?

While confidential, the survey was not anonymous. This allowed for data to be analyzed in light of the size and demographic composition of the college from which it came. Lack of anonymity may have affected the response rate or the content of answers. Respondents represented a general cross-section of schools, though, including all Pell-usage groups and city boroughs. Survey responses were tallied, and descriptive statistics were generated using excel.

**Interview Data**

The mailed thank you notes explained that a subset of survey respondents would be contacted for an interview, which they would be welcome to accept or decline. Using typical case and maximum variation sampling based on university-type and Pell category to select interviewees, nine staff from around New York City comprised this subsample. Semi-structured interviews lasted approximately one hour in length, were audio-recorded and transcribed. (See Appendix E and F for interview consent form and protocol.) These interviews provided a good opportunity to confirm or expound information collected from administrative and survey data.

Subjects were given the option to choose their interview site; six chose to be interviewed in their own office, one chose to be interviewed at the interviewer's CUNY office in midtown, and two chose to be interviewed by phone because of scheduling constraints. Fieldnotes were generated for the majority of interviews. Interviewees were given the option of receiving a summary of their interview for review and comment as a vehicle for member checking. These summaries were derived from the interviewer's fieldnotes. No comments were submitted back from those who received summaries.

Staff interviewed was asked to recommend students with learning disabilities to participate in interviews. During Academic Year 2009-2010 student interviews were conducted with 10 students at the students' own campus[10]. (See Appendix G and H for consent and protocol.) Similar to the staff sessions, semi-structured interviews lasted approximately one hour in length, were audio-recorded and transcribed. Fieldnotes were generated for several of the interviews, summaries were offered, and no follow-up comments were received from interviewees. For the 20 interviews conducted, 18 interviewees received a $25 American Express gift card in appreciation of their time. Given the choice, two students opted for $30 in Starbucks gift cards instead.

Considering the sensitive nature of this research topic and in accordance with IRB protocol, every attempt has been made to protect human subjects and maintain confidentiality. Raw survey data was also password protected. Hand-written interview notes were shredded. Audio files were separated from transcripts and fieldnotes, and all of these were stored on password protected computers in locked offices.

All 20 de-identified transcripts were entered into Atlas.ti 6 software, and were tagged inductively using an open coding approach. Some transcripts were coded multiple times as additional open codes emerged. Codes, their descriptions and number counts are included as Appendix I.

**Limitations**

While originally it was thought that the staff who participated in interviews would nominate a corresponding student to be interviewed, this was not the case. Instead, the

[10] One student was interviewed twice. An office fan running during the first interview made the student particularly hard to hear and the interview was only 37 minutes.

majority of staff from private and public colleges alike did not recommend any students, perhaps out of concerns about confidentiality or liability. One remarked, "I spoke to our vice president and we believe at this time we have to decline the offer" (C. Brady, personal communication, February 28, 2010). I considered examples like this a rich source of meta-data. I placed one paid ad in the daily newspaper at an elite, low-Pell school, thinking I might find students directly. No responses resulted from this effort.

Luckily two schools proved an exception, and represented the high-Pell and low-Pell categories, respectively. Interestingly, not only were all of the students I did contact from these schools excited to be interviewed, but I had to turn away students. While the incentive may have played a part, many were eager to have their voices heard and shared that they hoped policy changes would result from my research. As one student asked me hopefully about my dissertation project, "Will this make an impact?" (C. Henry, personal communication, April 13, 2010).

In consultation with my committee, the decision was made to focus on these two schools that were willing to provide access to students and that fortunately represented the student body SES spectrum which comprises a major lens of this research. 'Depth more than breadth' characterizes the methodological approach to student interviews.

The methods utilized in identifying these two groups of student interviewees differed slightly. The low-Pell, high-SES school shared the contact information of five specific students, who were subsequently emailed by the interviewer and with whom a location, date and time were arranged. Plainly, the college selected the students. It is unclear whether or not these students reflect selection-bias, or if the college may have wanted to select only its most successful students. These students did represent a variety

of class years, academic majors and backgrounds; all of them were Caucasian. The possibility that the college selected its best students with learning disabilities does not skew the data presented here, as the aim of my qualitative research was not to generalize findings but to present phenomenological portraits of college experiences. All students were interviewed on campus: two at the library, two students outside on a park bench, and one in a computer lounge.

At the high-Pell, low-SES school, the Disability Service Office sent an email to hundreds of students with disabilities in its distribution list, and the students contacted me directly. I received calls and messages from more than 20 students there. I randomly selected the students with learning disabilities who I spoke with first, and these students represented a wide range of ethnicities, city neighborhoods, ages and backgrounds. I interviewed each of them on campus in a private office within the suite occupied by the Disability Service Office. Students selected dates and times convenient to their schedule.

I wish to address one final limitation. As findings from administrative and survey data contradicted each other I was asked if perhaps the reason for this was a difference in the assumptions around or use of the word 'disability'. I did not provide a clear definition of the term in any of my human subjects research for several reasons. First, people are 'disabled' in the U.S. per the legal definition offered by the ADA and claimed by individuals. It is by its very nature a mutable, individual term. Disability Services Officers are familiar with the legislation and are adept at using the label. More importantly, leaving 'disability' unrestrained as a term is a useful process for this study. Yanow (2000) writes, "In conducting an analysis of contemporary American uses of 'race,' 'ethnicity,' and their associated categories, I was interested in what people using

race-ethnic terms and concepts mean, as these meanings are reflected in and shaped by policy and administrative practices" (p. 49). As such, paying attention to syntax is useful. I do not believe the word is vague in a disability services context or that vague use of the word resulted in discrepancies in the data; I address this further in the following section.

## Chapter Four: Quantitative Findings

### Administrative Data

New York City is ripe with a wide range of post-secondary institutions[11] to meet the higher education demand of its more than eight million residents. From the largest urban, public college system in the nation to newer proprietary schools to an Ivy League institution with pre-Revolutionary origins, the baccalaureate-granting institutions within the five boroughs educated more than 260,000 undergraduate students in fall 2008.

Aside from their degree of urbanization categorized uniformly in IPEDS as "City: Large", these 44 schools represent the spectrum of higher education options in the United States. Their 2008-2009 acceptance rates for first-time full-time students ranged from 8 percent (The Juilliard School) to 98 percent (CUNY's College of Staten Island). Tuition rates for 2008-2009 spanned just above $4,000 to almost $40,000. The students within these institutions are equally diverse. For example, CUNY represents 11 colleges or 25 percent of this sample, and draws students from 210 countries of ancestry; 44 percent of undergraduates have a native language other than English, and 43 percent of first-time freshmen are born outside of the United States (CUNY OIRA, 2011).

The use of Pell data to indicate SES is admittedly problematic. First, some students eligible for Pell may not apply. Additionally, students may have enough financial need but not the required documentation to meet the citizenship requirement. Some colleges are very aggressive in helping their students apply for Pell in hopes that this aid will increase their enrollment numbers; in fact, proprietary colleges have been especially cited in the news for enabling students to assume more financial aid debt, often resulting in defaulted loans. (Kiley, 2010). At a school like Cooper Union, students

[11] In this chapter, the words "school", "college", "institution", and "university" are used interchangeably.

receive significant institutional aid, and Pell is less relevant. Next, the number of family members attending post-secondary education is a factor in the Pell formula, so a more middle-class student might qualify for Pell if he had several siblings in college concurrently. However, unlike other kinds of institutional assistance or financial aid, Pell is the one national, standardized assessment of student financial need. Pell percentage at a given institution is also reflected in IPEDS as data for both the entire student body as well as first-time, full-time freshmen. But research does reinforce that it corresponds strongly with SES: an analysis of post-secondary students who received federal grant aid (like Pell) in 2007-2008 showed that 80% of dependent recipients were from "low-income" families (NCES, 2010a). Almost 90 percent of dependent students who received Pell in 2005-2006 came from families with incomes under $40,000 (College Board, 2008). In these ways, Pell is a useful and consistent indicator for this study.

Ranking these 44 colleges by the percentage of first-time, full-time undergraduate students who received Pell Grants for the 2008-2009 school year yields the greatest range (83); the median number was 42 percent and the mean was 43 percent Pell-recipients. (See Appendix A for raw data.) These descriptive statistics are worth noting: for the majority of colleges in New York City as well as city-wide, almost half of the freshmen student populations are poor enough to receive need-based aid they won't have to pay back.

To provide some context, national numbers of students who access federal grant aid (including Pell and adding other grant programs like FSEOG) are much lower than these NYC numbers. About 32 percent of all first-time, full-time college students nationally accessed federal grant aid in 2006-2007 (NCES, 2009a). Even with the

inclusion of community colleges and aid beyond Pell in the numbers from NCES, NYC students' access of federal grant aid far outweighs their peers nationally, as depicted in Table Three. About 31 percent of public college students nationally access federal grant aid compared to 49 percent in the NYC public colleges; 45 percent of students at proprietary colleges nationally compared to 61 percent in the NYC proprietary colleges; and 26 percent of students at private, not-for-profit colleges nationally compared with 36 percent in New York City's independent colleges. This analysis by college type also enables comparison among NYC students: students attending proprietary colleges represent the lowest SES group and those at private, not-for-profit schools represent the highest.

**Table Three**
**Percentage of First Time, Full Time College Students**
**Who Accessed Federal Grant Aid[12] in 2006-2007**

| | NYC | U.S. |
|---|---|---|
| Proprietary Colleges | 61% | 45% |
| Public Colleges | 49% | 31% |
| Independent Colleges | 36% | 26% |

For the purposes of this city-based analysis, it was helpful to assign categories to these colleges in terms of high-, medium- or low-usage in terms of Pell funds. Schools like Monroe College, DeVry College, Lehman College and John Jay College (50%-100% of students on Pell) are labeled "high-usage". Schools like Hunter College, St. John's College, Pace University and Queens College (25%-50% of students on Pell) are "medium-usage" Pell colleges. Fordham, Barnard, Yeshiva and Juilliard are examples of

[12] For NYC data in Table Three, Federal Grant Aid is Pell at 4-year colleges. For national data, Federal Grant Aid includes Pell and other sources (NCES, 2009a) for all colleges. As explained in the preceding paragraph, the difference between NYC and U.S. numbers is even larger than depicted here and figures in Table Three are meant to give readers a sense of the differential.

colleges which comprise the “low-usage” group (0%-25% of students receive Pell). This grouping is illustrated in Table Four.

**Table Four**
**Categorization of Pell Usage, 2008-2009**

| Assigned Pell-Usage Category | Number of NYC Colleges in Category | Percentage of First-time, Full-Time students receiving Pell Grants | Total Undergraduate Student Enrollment |
|---|---|---|---|
| High | N=16 | 50%-100% | 99,391 |
| Medium | N=12 | 25%-50% | 87,484 |
| Low | N=16 | 0%-25% | 76,567 |

With this categorization, one can see that the largest group of students attends high-Pell institutions. There are public and independent colleges in each of these usage categories: there are no proprietary schools in the medium-usage group.

Some urban education researchers bristle at the use of 'first-time, full-time' as an indicator since so many students who attend college today do not fit either descriptor. But data gathered on what happens to students once they enter college provides substance to the decision for basing the ranking of schools' Pell-usage on this population. Withdrawal rates are a significant issue: many more students enroll in college than graduate, and the effects of SES, parental support and employment contribute to this differential (Bowen et al., 2009). Bowen and colleagues' research on public colleges shows that withdrawals continue to increase steadily from semesters one to 12. The numbers of withdrawals are smaller at more selective institutions where retention is higher. Accordingly, diversity is captured most robustly across schools for this largest, freshman cohort.

As such, when the sample shifts from full-time, first-time students to total student body, the Pell-usage percentages also shift. Overall there is a decrease: for total undergraduate students enrolled in these 44 NYC colleges during 2008-2009, Pell-recipients number 88,734 or 34 percent of NYC college students (compared to 43 percent of first-time, full-time students). The usage at high- and medium-Pell colleges declines consistently, while the usage at low-Pell schools declines, stays the same or increases. One could surmise reasons for this. As described in the preceding paragraph, the most economically vulnerable students may leave college altogether: six-year retention rates average 22 percent nationally at proprietary colleges for students enrolled in four-year degree programs, for example (Kiley, 2010). In contrast, students from higher SES backgrounds may need more financial aid as they progress through college and expenses climb. But this overall drop in Pell-usage is still cause for notice. As Bowen et al. write, "Indeed, there is growing awareness that the proper role of financial aid lies in enabling students not simply to attend school but to finish their degrees" (2009, p. 149). Their figures show that for students in the lowest income quartile, a small net increase in college tuition price results in declines in the graduation rates and increases time-to-degree (p. 184).

For the first time in fall 2009, numbers of students with disabilities who self-reported in fall 2008 appears as a variable in IPEDS. The smallest category groups “3 percent or less” of undergraduates at an institution; above 3 percent, colleges report the actual percentage. Ten colleges in this sample (23 percent) reported enrolling students with disabilities above this 3 percent benchmark, with between 4 percent and 11 percent of their students having a disability, depending on the school. Notably, 60 percent of

these schools with higher disability percentages are low-usage Pell schools, that is, they enroll wealthier students. A simple cross-tabulation created with SPSS illustrates this point in Table Five.

**Table Five**
**Cross-tabulation: Pell-Usage and Disability Status**

| | | Percent of Students with Disabilities | | | | | | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | .03 | .04 | .05 | .06 | .07 | .09 | .11 | |
| Pell-Usage | High | 14 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 16 |
| | Medium | 10 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 12 |
| | Low | 10 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 16 |
| Total | | 34 | 4 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 44 |

A Pearson test shows this inverse relationship between student SES and disability status: as Pell-usage percentage at a school increases, its percentage of students with disabilities decreases. This correlation is not statistically significant.

These data suggest that students with disabilities are more likely to self-report at a NYC college with a wealthier student body. Student-level effects could account for this: Chapter One describes why low-income students may be less likely to be diagnosed with a learning disability (S. Olsen, personal communication, October 22, 2009) or that they may not request accommodations at the same rates as their higher-SES peers (Weiss, 2000). College level effects may also contribute: colleges with few disability resources to offer may give students little reason to self-identify. These themes are explored in Chapter Five.

But these IPEDS disability data appear inherently problematic. The national averages for undergraduate college students with disabilities as cited in Chapter One vary

between four and 11 percent. This means 77 percent of colleges in NYC report well below the national average. It seems likely that the reporting is low, and not the actual figures of students with disabilities attending NYC schools. Colleges may be understaffed and not able to collect proper data or use sufficient data systems. Timing of reporting to IPEDS may not sync with the Disability Services Office's data gathering, or schools could perceive stigma in reporting a more robust number. Both IEPDS and survey data are based on academic year 2008-2009. The design of this study facilitates cross-checking the student count in IPEDS with a count directly from Disability Services Officers in the survey data in subsequent paragraphs.

**Survey Data**

In addition to collecting administrative data on this sample of 44 NYC colleges, I also conducted survey research during fall 2009 semester to learn more about the views of disability service officers on students with learning disabilities, specifically. (See Appendix D.) An email directed to DSOs informed them about the purposes of the study and directed them to a link to access an electronic questionnaire in Survey Monkey. Emails were sent to DSOs up to three times over the course of several months. Because Survey Monkey is not accessible to all users, alternative formats of the survey were also offered. Three groups of DSOs submitted responses: DSOs from CUNY community colleges who comprised a pilot sample to be used as a possible comparison group; DSOs from 4-year institutions, and office colleagues referred by the DSO. Results discussed here are from the 21 DSO respondents only so that responses would not be weighted by some schools more heavily than others.

From the city-wide sample of 44 schools, 21 schools submitted responses, resulting in a 48 percent response rate. This survey was cross-sectional and comparative (Fink, 2006). Three individuals completed the survey anonymously, and their responses are not included in the data tally shown in Appendix D. The remaining 21 survey respondents received $10 Starbucks gift cards as a thank you for their time. This response rate is strong, given the sensitive and litigious nature of the topic and DSO's potential fear of the perception that they're providing too few or too many services compared to the standard of "reasonable" accommodations.

Interestingly, these surveys are not normally distributed across SES categories. More than twice as many low-Pell, high-SES schools completed surveys (n=10) than high-Pell, low-SES schools (n=4). Perhaps these colleges, all private, feel more protected from external judgment or internal lawsuits. They could also have more resources and availability for completing surveys. Colleges that participated in the survey are described in Appendix C.

Question 8 of the survey asked, "Please estimate the number of students with a disability who attend your institution." This straightforward question yielded interesting results, when compared with the IPEDS administrative data discussed earlier, describing the majority of NYC colleges reporting in IPEDS well below the national percentage for students with disabilities. In all but a handful of cases, the numbers reported through the survey are higher than the IPEDS numbers. By multiplying the percentage number reported by the enrollment reported, I generated a count of students with disabilities for each school which participated in my survey. I then compared this number with the responses from Question 8. Most colleges in this IPEDS sample used the "less than 3

percent" reporting option, which I treated mathematically as 3 percent, and should result in a higher number of students than the range would imply. But even with this calculation, numbers were underreported in IPEDS, according to survey results.

For example, The Cooper Union wrote in "103" as the answer to Question 8, but IPEDS data for Cooper Union would show the college as having less than 30 students with disabilities. Similarly, School of Visual Arts reported 225 students with disabilities in their survey, but less than 110 in IPEDS. Perhaps CUNY's City College is the most striking example: while 1,000 students was the count given in the survey, which would represent about 9 percent of City College's students, IPEDS data for City College states that less than 3 percent of students have disabilities at that institution. In more than half the cases, schools had more than twice as many students with disabilities as reported in the survey than in IPEDS. When I calculated disability numbers at 10 percent of enrollment, three of the colleges that gave the "less than 3 percent" response in IPEDS came to match their survey numbers.

Analysis based on survey data shows that the mean number of students with disabilities in NYC is 6 percent. There is reason to believe that the survey data is more accurate than the IPEDS data. Survey data came directly from the Disability Service Officers who meet with students most often; IPEDS "key holders" who enter data are usually staff in a campus's Institutional Research office.

Learning Disabilities were cited by 95 percent of respondents as the most frequently self-reported disability category for students (Q.10). This finding is in line with national data. The findings for this question were cross-tabbed with Question 12, “Do you feel your office is equipped to provide sufficient accommodations to meet the

academic needs of your students?" Only one DSO responded that her school was not equipped to meet the needs of students, and the disability category reported most frequently there is LD. This is interesting, because not only are accommodations for these disabilities among the least costly (compared to sign language interpretation, for example), but this respondent was from a medium-usage Pell school.

In line with LD being the most commonly reported disability category, extra time and notetaking represented 100 percent and 71 percent of the most requested disability services, respectively (Q.11). Another question asking colleges to describe students with disabilities using their own words resulted in very few negative labels like "needy" or "nervous"; only three respondents answered this way (Q.21). The majority of descriptors were positive like "inquisitive", "bright", and "hard-working". Another group of respondents described students in terms of their disability. Neither the positive nor negative responses used any disability labels in their text.

Only 43 percent of colleges' DSOs track graduation rates of the students they serve, and of these, graduation rates ranged from 10 percent to 90 percent of students within six years (Q.13). Less than a fifth of schools' DSOs (19 percent) collect data on the race/ethnicity of their students with disabilities (Q.14). These data would be captured through a school's institutional research office, but were not largely tracked by the Disability Services Office. An overwhelming 81 percent of respondents said students with disabilities on their campus reflected the race and class demographics of their campus community on a whole (Q.15). Of the four respondents who believed their students to be different, two trends emerged: fewer Asians and more whites, especially

white males. Culture and class peek out from these responses, and are described at greater length in Chapter Five.

When asked which students with learning disabilities succeed academically, almost all respondents described them as motivated self-advocates who use the support services available (Q.18). Only one mentioned lack of success in conjunction with severity of a student's disability. These comments place success in the hands of the student. My theoretical lens of meritocracy (Karabel, 2005) juxtaposes "equality of opportunity" (onus on student) with "equality of condition" (onus on structures) in locating the site of disadvantage for individuals. On the issue of institutional challenges that students face, a question written to get at issues related to equality of opportunity (Q.7), an overwhelming majority attributed deficiencies to the institution, citing barriers like funding, staff shortages, unpreparedness from the K-12 system, and inaccessibility of buildings. Only two placed shortfalls upon students, and both cited disability-related challenges.

The questions designed to get at the issue of whether wealthier students receive extra support yielded notable findings, too. Almost all respondents agreed to various degrees that students get more than what is legally mandated (Q.24). Question 25 asked "Why do you think some students are able to access services beyond what is deemed 'reasonable'?" The respondent from a well-funded, private, low-Pell school offered:

> The law can take a very cramped view of what is reasonable. We are more interested in creating a true path to student success. For example, we chose to give a 28 year old transfer student with [multiple sclerosis] on-campus housing and rearranged the schedule of every student in his major so that the classrooms he

> was assigned to were contiguous so that he could be a true part of the student community, rather than waste energy on commuting and waiting for the endlessly slow elevators. We rebuilt a dorm room to accommodate his needs and recruited suitemates who would be ok with using the hall bathroom rather than the apartment bathroom when he had an emergency. Sometimes "reasonable" is not the same thing as "sufficient." (J.Nowicki, personal communication, October 28, 2009)

This response captured what a wealthy progressive school might be able to accommodate.

On a whole, quantitative data derived from IPEDS and surveys depict a diverse range of colleges and students in New York City, almost half of whom rely on federal grant-based aid. Students with disabilities attend low-Pell schools disproportionately, but the majority of schools underreport percentages of students with disabilities. When Disability Services Officers are given a voice however, almost all describe their students in a positive way. When viewed in terms of this study's first research question, survey data might lead the reader to believe that federal policies with regard to students with learning disabilities are implemented similarly across institutions of higher education in New York City regardless of socioeconomic class populations: almost all DSOs feel they provide adequate services to these students. Qualitative data reveal a more unlevel playing field. We look to the next chapter to see what this might actually feel like on the ground.

## Chapter Five: Notes from the Field, Institutional Perspectives[13]

Analysis of these quantitative data laid fertile ground for speaking with staff and students across these 44 campuses. The staff summaries which follow here reflect interviews conducted at three low-Pell colleges, three medium-Pell colleges, and three high-Pell colleges. The profiles of staff from high-SES Commonwealth College and low-SES Livingston College, the two schools where students were interviewed, are presented in slightly more depth than the others. Common themes emerge from these nine Disability Services Officers interviewed: parental involvement, high-cost testing and concurrent psychiatric disabilities are highlighted. The tones of these interviews are markedly different, however, and block quotes in each summary provide a sense of the interviewee's own voice. Summaries are discussed as a whole at the end of this section.

### Interviews with DSOs at Low- Pell, High-SES Colleges

#### Staff Profile: Clare Whitney, Liberty University.

For about five years Clare has worked as the Disability Service Officer at a competitive, private college in New York City where she serves about 500 students across the university, and half of these have learning disabilities. A low-Pell school with tuition exceeding $40,000 a year, Liberty University is able to provide coaching and time management strategies to students, in addition to the more common requests for extended time, note takers and a separate, proctored testing location. Her sense is that students

[13] All college, staff and student names in Chapters Five and Six, including the case studies on Livingston College and Commonwealth College, are pseudonyms. Any data included in this section in terms of enrollment or tuition are included by the author to give the reader a sense of the college's student body. All are taken from the schools' websites, and none are specifically cited in this section because of confidentiality.

graduate at equal rates to their non-disabled peers at Liberty, but undergraduates with disabilities are more likely to take a semester leave.

Dozens of students each year come to Liberty undiagnosed. As "gifted LD" students who are exceptionally smart, their memory or verbal skills have masked the presence of LD until the rigors of college. Her office gets a lot of referrals from the school's counseling center for students with disabilities exhibiting depression or anxiety. Clare increasingly interacts with parents, a new phenomenon she attributes to students born in the early 1990s for whom parents play a more central role.

At Liberty, at least half of undergraduates are students of color. Clare thinks that students with learning disabilities are similar to the general student body in terms of demographics and intelligence. She notes that sometimes self-esteem and identity issues can represent a difference; very few LD students identify themselves outwardly as having a disability. She talks about her students with disabilities in terms of race and class:

> I think what's probably interesting and – in the five years that I've worked at Liberty, I've never had a student who was – who had – I know your focus is on learning disabilities – but who had a very severe disability like used a wheelchair, blind or deaf other than White students. I've had one student who used a wheelchair that wasn't White…There are probably a lot of factors. I think for students with very significant disabilities it's hard to go to school far away, and probably socioeconomic status has a lot of influence also. I think people with lower socioeconomic status have less access – I mean definitely less access to resources, but more likely to rely on family as caregivers, have less access – I

mean just everything that comes with that. (C. Whitney, personal communication, October 2, 2009)

Clare's professional philosophy for providing accommodations to students is to facilitate access and create opportunity: success or failure is based on student merit. She feels it is important to balance academic integrity and program standards with disability rights. "I think a lot of disability service directors get themselves into trouble when they feel bad for a student and that's the basis from which they make a decision," she comments.

**Staff Profile: Jeremy Kenny, Atlantic College.**

Jeremy learned about accommodations from the ground up at a community college where he performed various roles like note taker, scribe and reader for students with disabilities. He became a full-time employee there, and moved to Atlantic College in 2006 where he now serves 250 students across Atlantic's various schools. A private college located in several buildings along a busy avenue, Atlantic charges tuition exceeding $35,000 per year. Jeremy uses Atlantic's website as well as Twitter to do outreach, and boasts a good rapport with most of his students.

Some students he works with are very independent; others contact the office for assistance on a constant basis. Jeremy sees parental involvement with younger students as a source for this difference; parents will call him or students have come to depend on the support. Families are accustomed to the legal environment which governs K-12 and college represents a transition to greater self-advocacy. He gets a lot of calls and emails

from students and parents when they're looking at colleges during junior year and again in the summer before fall semester starts. After a freshman orientation session for example, he might get an entire family meeting with him in his cubicle. According to Jeremy, many LD students choose to come to Atlantic because of its small class sizes and a pedagogical emphasis on class discussion rather than tests.

He provides accommodations to female and male students at a ratio of three-to-one. There are more female students at Atlantic to begin with, and Jeremy thinks women may also be more willing to seek out help. Students with learning disabilities represent the largest disability category at 30 to 40 percent of those served by his office. A few students each semester come to his office undiagnosed; some are referred by faculty or other student service offices. He mentions that some of his Asian students have not been diagnosed for stigma and family issues. Jeremy's insights here are substantiated by research: Mak and Kwok (2010) state that Chinese parents, in particular, are subject to an increased sense of stigma resulting from concerns of social identity, value and "face".

Jeremy can refer students for testing internally. Through one of Atlantic's academic departments students can receive a full psycho-educational evaluation for $300. He talks about this arrangement compared to the typical high cost of evaluations:

> And I don't like – if I'm sitting there talking to a student and I recognize these things, and I say, "Well, you know, you probably should get tested. And by the way, here's a list of places." And some of them take insurance and some of them don't. And even if they do take insurance, you may still have to pay out of pocket, and there's a waiting list, or oh, it's $2,000.00. It's sort of this circuitous thing to say, "Oh, we can help you, but you gotta have money." So this is

something that's a lot more reasonable, to be able to help those students. (J. Kenny, personal communication, April 12, 2010)

Tutoring and writing support is available to all students, and Jeremy is working on establishing a computer lab with assistive technology exclusive to students with disabilities. He gets lots of accommodation requests for texts in alternative format, largely electronic and audio, as well as note taking services. He does not find that stigma is a big problem for his LD students; that's more present for students with psychiatric disabilities. He tries to instill self-advocacy skills in his students, but a few come with expectations that exceed what Jeremy sees as reasonable. He describes this conflict: "I have to temper that, and say, 'Well, this is what we can and can't do, and this is why. And what you're asking for is basically for us to tell your professor that you can have an extra two weeks to do this paper. And it's just not gonna work that way.'"

**Staff Profile: Amy Giordano, Commonwealth College.**

Before our interview Amy Giordano explained to me that the beginning of a semester at Commonwealth College is so busy for her that she doesn't even make appointments with students. She has worked in disability services there for almost two decades, after some time working at a community college. About 125 students count as "active" users of support services, which means they are enrolled and attend full-time. Some students only need services for fall or spring semester, depending on the courses they're taking. She says that LD is the most prevalent disability diagnosis at Commonwealth College, with ADHD as the second most common.

Amy doesn't go after students to recruit them, but her contact information is in all the catalogs and school literature, some faculty put disability language in their syllabi, and students refer other students through word of mouth. Networking happens informally, and it's a small school so everyone knows her. The vast majority of students have documentation, but a handful is diagnosed for the first time with psychiatric issues or ADHD, typically referred to her by faculty or the counseling center. Commonwealth doesn't evaluate students internally, so they refer them out to a local medical center or Amy tells them to go to their pediatrician and use their parents' insurance. For example, one student was just tested and diagnosed with anxiety and reading disorders, thought he isn't sure which one is the primary diagnosis. The mom can remember that reading was always a struggle.

Some students come in knowing exactly what they need and can advocate for themselves. Asperger's is becoming more prevalent, as is test anxiety. More faculty members are aware of these signs, and are increasing their referrals to the counseling department. The vast majority of faculty is supportive, but a small number are still wary, especially in the science and engineering departments. It's not that they don't recognize disabilities as legitimate, but perhaps question whether or not they should be accommodated considering the real-life demands of those fields. Amy is also aware of instances of competition, when some students may perceive that another student who receives an accommodation has an edge.

The most common accommodations are extended time, note taking and a separate location for testing. I ask Amy if there is stigma about separate location, of students wondering why certain peers are absent on test day. She says this is an issue, especially

for freshmen who are trying to fit in or want to leave their disability identity behind in high school. She thinks the issues for "hiding" are strictly social. Students who have been diagnosed for a long time are less affected by this.

She thinks students with disabilities at Commonwealth College are from all walks of life and represent the student body, but she does note that the student body at Commonwealth College is not that diverse. There used to be more boys than girls requesting services, but it's becoming more balanced as ADHD and psychological diagnoses increase for girls.

When Amy came to Commonwealth College two decades ago she worked on a separate fee-based program for LD students which offered enhanced services above what was legally required. The program ended in 1996, and since then, students have progressed with reasonable accommodations. Amy's office is adjacent to resources like tutoring and writing help. She assists students who have temporary disabilities like a broken leg; Athletes trying to stay eligible also visit Amy. Commonwealth College has a growing population of international students, and services like notetaking and ESL support can be provided to them if the faculty want it. "It's just a varied number of people in here, so we try to make it as easy as possible for them not to feel uncomfortable," Amy remarks (A. Giordano, personal communication, February 12, 2010).

Amy has a part-time, 20-hour per week graduate assistant, as well as her own budget. She reports directly to the provost. By default she talks to a lot of parents, which she describes as a "difficult relationship." She describes parental expectation:

So there's at least a conversation going to keep an eye, but I explain to parents that it's strictly a student-centered help center. I can help anybody who walks in here, but if they don't walk in here I'm not reaching out…There are parents that will want you to call their son or daughter, make sure they're up, and basically become a surrogate parent, and that's something that I have to let them know right off the bat that's not a possibility.

…A student can go for office hours to see their professor and this has small enough classes. And those are all very positive things for every student, but there is that disabled student parent who feels as though they would get lost in the shuffle in a CUNY or somewhere in a larger environment, which they may have. So I would say a small number there is an expectation that you can take care of him or her because that's what we thought we were going to get.

And I think what they're getting is an informal form of that because I wouldn't know the student or an academic advisor wouldn't know a student well enough to call me and say, "You know what, Amy, Johnny's not doing too good. What do you know about him? What's going on?" But truly yes I would say that parents find a small private college a safer environment for a student who has needs. (A. Giordano, personal communication, February 12, 2010)

One service students and parents would like to see added is one-on-one coaching. Students can meet with her twice a week if that is part of their accommodation and she's available. The school's smallness and array of services like tutoring and a writing center provide good support. Students who advocate for and access the supports they need are the ones who succeed academically. Amy thinks factors that separate students who are

successful at Commonwealth College from those who aren't are the same factors as for typical students, and mentions drugs and alcohol especially as they relate to students with mental health issues. She says the majority move through Commonwealth in four years, and most take a full load which they might have to augment with summer classes or winter intercession.

## Interviews with DSOs at Medium-Pell, Medium-SES Colleges

### Staff Profile: Clark James, Sierra College.

Clark James is a veteran in disability services, but a relative newcomer to Sierra College, a medium-Pell school in a less densely urban setting. His office relies on mainly part-time staff to serve more than 500 students, the majority of whom have learning disabilities. They recruit students aggressively, attending high school transition and college fairs, visiting 100-level classes at Sierra and setting up information tables in the library and student center. They also visit college departmental meetings to encourage faculty to put disability statements in their syllabi, and offer workshops with more general titles like "Learning Strategies" to find students with disabilities who may be struggling academically but haven't yet identified themselves to his office. He thinks these outreach efforts result in their serving a relatively high number of students.

Most students come to Sierra College with medical documentation of their disability, and the two most requested accommodations are extended time and separate location for tests. Freshmen served by their office are able to meet regularly with mentors and academic counselors who are able to monitor students' use of accommodations and address any concerns about stigma in accessing services. This

special program tracks four student learning outcomes: understanding of one's disability, familiarity with academic supports on campus, self-determination and an engaged college experience. Clark sees an increase in students with functional limitations and concurrent mental health diagnoses like anxiety. Students are asked by the office to sign a release, so disability services can contact professors and vice versa, in order to create a "web of support" around a student.

Clark comments that while some students expect to get intensive services like they did in high school, others thought they would be on their own in college and are pleasantly surprised to get more than they expected. He thinks this difference between the expectations of students may be a result of differences in parental expectations and attitudes. Clark describes the integrated relationship between federal policy and advocacy:

> I think students have to get used to the idea, though, that they have to self-manage, and that they have to ask for services, and they have to be present in their education in a way that – present in managing their education in a way that they might not have ever had to do before. (C. James, personal communication, February 19, 2010)

The students served by the Disability Services Office at Sierra College are similar demographically to the general student body, but Clark does know that his retention rates are higher: almost 90% of freshman students served by the Disability Services Office continue on to their sophomore year. He believes that the robust use of support services distinguishes the students with disabilities who are successful and those

who aren't. He also acknowledges that some students with disabilities may not be a good academic fit for college: they were able to graduate high school in inclusion classrooms with intense supports that just aren't available in college.

**Staff Profile: Cynthia Brady, Downtown College.**

Cynthia Brady is a senior administrator at Downtown College; she oversees more than Disability Services, though she happens to be the point person for that, too. A small, not-for-profit college in an urban setting, Downtown College boasts a diverse racial and ethnic mix of students. Most families are not wealthy and many students struggle to pay tuition, but Cynthia shares that the parents feel it's important for their children to attend a private four-year school. About 75 students there receive disability accommodations, and while she notes that this is a relatively small number, the students' needs are becoming more complex and represent a range of learning, psychiatric and medical disabilities. Cynthia thinks the students with disabilities at Downtown are demographically similar to the student body, though she thinks she meets with more White, male students with LD. The parents who call her tend to be the more affluent White parents.

She works constantly with faculty, educates them on the ADA, and often gets students in her office as a result of a faculty referral. Most students with learning disabilities at Downtown come to college already diagnosed, documented and equipped with individualized learning strategies. She thinks because of the age of onset and new stressors in college, students with psychiatric disabilities are typically being diagnosed for the first time. Cynthia says audio books and note taking are the predominant accommodations needed at Downtown College. Because the school is so small, they're

rethinking the way they provide the accommodation of a separate testing location—students worry about confidentiality when their peers notice they are absent on test day.

Students with problems at Downtown get to see a dean, which she notes is not something that would likely happen at a bigger school. Parents and students perceive a difference in sending their children to small, private school where they'll get more attention in smaller classes. She is stringent in her requirement for documentation, but beyond that, really believes in an individualized approach with students:

> I learned to get over thinking of it one size fits all and to literally sit with him and say 'What do you need? What do you need to be successful?' And that's what I start out most of my conversations. So to me it's 'Here are the things that we can do that are kind of like the things that we can give you in the way of accommodations, but what else is it that you need?' (C. Brady, personal communication, February 9, 2010).

Her office monitors midterm grades and use of accommodations. Cynthia feels that Downtown has a moral and ethical responsibility to ensure that students do well.

**Staff Profile: Jessica Norton, Klapper University.**

Jessica is new to Klapper University; she recently was hired here after several years in the Disability Services Office at a high-SES university. A private college in a very urban setting, Klapper is smaller than her previous institution, and Jessica finds it a more relaxed atmosphere. About 150 students with disabilities receive services at Klapper's main campus, and the majority of these are labeled with a learning disability.

Most come in with disability documentation, and those that don't are referred out for evaluation since Klapper considers it a conflict of interest to test their own students.

The most commonly requested accommodations at Klapper are extended time, note-taking and permission to audio record. She also gets requests for housing. Jessica acknowledges that disabilities are becoming more complicated and require more accommodations; students come to her with multiple diagnoses, and she gives examples of LD with chronic medical conditions or psychiatric issues. She comments that students who have been diagnosed for a while are mostly comfortable receiving accommodations, but those who are more recently diagnosed get worried about giving an accommodation letter to a professor or being conspicuously absent on test day. She thinks the difference in comfort stems not just from history with a label but more with how the disability was explained to the student at whatever point he or she was diagnosed: you're the same person, this label just validates the difficulty you've experienced. Jessica finds that some students know surprisingly little about their disability or why they receive accommodations.

She acknowledges that because Klapper is a private school with tuition exceeding $30,000 per year she feels a sense of expectation from some parents about the services their child will receive there. She talks to a lot of parents and enjoys it, but notes that the laws and accommodations process in college is an adjustment for some parents who attended IEP meetings and were very involved in their child receiving services during K-12. She expounds:

> But they have to relinquish that control, and some parents just cannot handle that. And some kids can't handle it, and then the parents really get nervous and upset.

> That's kind of when they have to come to terms with what their kid can and cannot do. (J. Norton, personal communication, February 12, 2010)

Conversely, Jessica has seen students during her career who are being diagnosed for the first time and are afraid to tell their parents. "One can sometimes be like, 'I can't go talk to my parents about this. They don't believe it exists. They'll think I'm stupid,'" she describes.

The students who do well academically at Klapper are those who utilize their accommodations and take advantage of resources like the writing and tutoring centers, which are available to all students. Her students who take fewer credits and move through college at a slower pace do so not for disability reasons but for financial reasons, as they are working.

## Interviews with DSOs at High-Pell, Low-SES Colleges

### Staff Profile: Mary Coen, Arthur College.

Mary is a veteran Disability Services Officer who fought for and experienced firsthand more than three decades of federal disability legislation. She describes the historical moment saying, "We were carving out a way together, and we were very close and we were very dedicated and we were very ethical and purposeful and real champions of the movement," (M.Coen, personal communication, August 26, 2009). She has worked at Arthur College for several years and says two things have surprised her. First,

faculty and staff are extremely welcoming, student-oriented, and go the extra mile. Second, students love their experience at Arthur.

Mary serves about 350 students with disabilities through her office; she thinks about a third of these are labeled LD. She believes that retention and graduation rates for students with disabilities meet or exceed those of the general population at Arthur, because most students have passed through a community college on their way to this four-year school. They are extremely motivated and have learned how to advocate for themselves. Mary sees college as an important credential for people with disabilities, who have fewer alternatives to participate in the world of work and society at large.

She notices that many students with learning disabilities at Arthur try to 'pass', and they don't come into the office to self-identify until they're not doing well. Most of these received accommodations during K-12, but a smaller percentage of foreign-born adults have never been diagnosed and Mary refers them out for testing. "I've had grown women and men cry in my office, saying, 'Thank God you sent me for testing. Now I know I'm not stupid,'" she recounts. She cites few options in NYC for low-cost evaluations as a real problem.

Her office scans materials for LD students, follows up with faculty, and works with campus resources like tutoring so that students get maximum usage, but she says, "There's not that much support for students." Budgets are tight. She describes the students at Arthur as "poor", and knows that some of her students with disabilities receive SSI. About 90 percent of students at Arthur are students of color. Students aren't pushy about their accommodations.

Most students progress through their semesters consistently. Students who truly understand their disability are going to succeed. She brought on a part-time learning specialist, and aspires to do more for LD students. She fought for three bus shelters on campus for students who use para-transit. Most Arthur College students with disabilities come without knowledge of assistive technology, and Mary thinks this is connected to SES. She elaborates:

> You talk about economics – I would even put in another thing, awareness of the possibilities of what's available. That's a whole different thing. It's like how do you know what to task for? And I think there's a poverty in that, in that there's such a lack of awareness. Whereas in other places – I just spoke to a student who went to school in [a wealthy county in New York State], and he told me that the last year he was there, they introduced technology for people with learning disabilities. I'm hoping that that's going to happen more and more, but certainly, I haven't yet met a student who came out of the New York City [public K-12] school system who had access to technology for somebody with a learning disability. (M. Coen, personal communication, August 26, 2009)

Mary has worked to open a state-of-the-art computer lab on campus.

**Staff Profile: Suri Greene, Townsend College.**

Suri specializes in learning disabilities at Townsend College, a selective but low-SES school serving mostly minority students, 40 percent of whom attend part-time. Her goal is, "to help the students with learning disabilities get whatever extra help they need to be on par with the rest of the students in their class," (S. Greene, personal

communication, September 24, 2009). She works to educate faculty and staff about LD in areas such as documentation, accommodations and confusion between LD and ADHD. She remarks that students with disabilities themselves often need education to understand their disability. Suri illustrates:

> I had a student when I was doing the accommodations – came to me and said, 'Here's my information. I need a calculator for my math classes.' So I looked through his documentation and I see he has clear ADHD, no questions about that. I don't see anything about any learning disability, let alone the math disability. So I said, 'Well, unfortunately for your request, you don't have anything showing that you have a math disability or any kind of learning disability for that matter and I can't provide the calculator.'
>
> He threw a stink. 'I have ADHD. It means I have LD. It's the same thing. I need a calculator for my class. I can't concentrate.' 'I'm sure you can't concentrate enough. I can definitely give you some pointers on how to help you with that, but giving you a calculator is really not going to be the solution to your disability.' And he went on and on so I referred him over to my supervisor who basically said the exact same thing I did. (S. Greene, personal communication, September 24, 2009)

This example highlights her belief that some Disability Services Offices give out stock accommodations without really reviewing the paperwork. "I think it's become a little bit more uniform like, 'Oh, you have a disability, extra time. You have a disability, private

setting.' It's a little bit of an issue, but then again, if they have the disability, they're entitled to it by law, there's nothing I can do about it," she says.

Townsend provides services to a few hundred students with disabilities, and about half of these have LD. She says the students who truly couldn't pass a course without an accommodation often have concurrent psychiatric disorders. She sees students who choose to go on academic probation rather than self-disclose. She also sees students on the other side of this spectrum:

> Some students are very self-advocating. They identified themselves early on. They've had the support by their parents. They've had the support from their institutions from their schools and they come into college and they've been basically spoon fed from high school and from their parents and from everybody else that they are entitled to everything. And here's everything you could possibly want. I had a student who had a shadow in school [K-12], and then they come into the college experience expecting exactly what they had in high school and elementary school. Expecting everything their mom provided for them. That's where the problem lies.
>
> The college is supposed to be a little bit more, 'you stand on your own two feet,' type of thing and we help you. We don't do it for you. There's a fine line between 'here's your degree, you have a disability,' and 'here, let me help you to obtain it yourself.' (S. Greene, personal communication, September 24, 2009)

She says the biggest problem facing students is their ability to prove they have a learning disability: they can't afford the evaluation. Her office refers students to state-

funded programs. Once students are diagnosed, common accommodations at Townsend include extended time and separate location for exams. Calculators and audio recorders are also used as accommodations.

**Staff Profile: Donna Johnson, Livingston College.**

Donna Johnson is relatively new in her role as the Disability Services Officer at Livingston College, but she has long known what it's like to provide accommodations to someone. She grew up living with a neurological disorder alongside a cousin with autism, though neither one of them received support services in high school. For her, working with students with disabilities feels natural and personal, and she brings to bear a master's degree in public health as well.

With two other full-time staff and a part-time learning specialist who focuses on LD testing, Livingston's Disability Services Office serves more than 500 students who have registered with the office. Some have been tested for a math or foreign language disability very specifically, while others need more ongoing services. Many students don't come in during the semester until they need something; Johnson thinks a number of them have developed their own strategies for navigating school successfully. Some just need a quiet place to study. She thinks about the students who don't know about the office despite her staff's presence at orientation and open houses. Donna knows some will never come for services because of the stigma they perceive will come from being defined as a student with a disability.

About 75 percent of the self-identified students with disabilities at Livingston have learning disabilities, and most receive note-taking, tutoring and extended time.

Johnson shares that the majority of these LD students come ready with their IEPs from high school and other documentation. The students are trending younger and those coming straight out of high school have a lot of parental involvement. She'll often have to refer older students out to be re-tested since their documentation is outdated. She says there's a different level of demand from the younger students, a need for quick information and instant gratification. One trend she sees is that, "the males and their parents advocate a lot harder than any other population" (D. Johnson, personal communication, September 28, 2009). She expounds,

> Actually I should say white males in particular. The number of students that we've had come to us with their parents, it's been white males. And I did a quick survey from orientation of, like, our department, and each person was like, 'That's who I saw.' Students will come alone, by themselves, but there definitely was a pattern. I came back to work and I sat there, and I was counting. And I was like, 'Came with parent. Came with parent.'
>
> And sometimes, it's both mom and dad. It's not just mom. But it was mom and dad many times. But I was very fascinated by the number of white male students that came accompanied with their parents. (D. Johnson, personal communication, September 28, 2009)

White students are not the demographic majority at Livingston, and her office serves a good racial and ethnic mix of students. Socioeconomic status of students also reveals a mix: some students rely on the services the school can provide, while some parents offer to pay for their own tutors or testing. Lately she's been seeing a few more requests that fall outside what she judges to be ‘reasonable’ and so she asks for additional

documentation. For her a guiding principle in making these determinations is whether the requested accommodation will help this student to academically be successful and then beyond.

Students press for accommodations beyond what's reasonable, and in case-by case examples the office could typically afford to accommodate them. The question of scale arises, balanced against what the office decides is necessary for students to succeed. In accordance with their mission statement, it's also important that they're equipping students for the outside world and helping them become more independent. This has required an adjustment from former students and staff alike. Donna doesn't want the disability office to take on the role of financial aid or career services or the registrar. But part of that means educating her colleagues in those offices to appropriately serve students with disabilities.

Johnson believes utilization of support services separates students who are academically successful and persist in college. When students are dismissed for academic reasons, appeal and are re-instated, it becomes mandatory for those students to come see her and she appreciates the opportunity to counsel them. She tells the story of one of these encounters:

> I had one family in here that made me just want to break down and cry because it was a mother and a son. And she knew that her son had a learning disability in high school but never got him tested because she just was like – she started crying. She was like, 'I was scared for him. I didn't want people to label him.' And he did get – he was dismissed, then he appealed. He came back. And guess what? He's being tested. So she's ready now, and that's pretty much what she

said. And he was like – he, on the other hand, to me, I feel like was like, 'No big deal, I'll get tested.'

So I do think that, as parents, it's a tough decision to – it's a tough decision, and you decide to – you make it or you don't. And you pray that, if you make that wrong decision, your kid will just be successful and skate by. And I think that mother and son were a perfect example of a mother knowing, but it was – it was clearly painful to her, otherwise she wouldn't have been crying. She knew and now the evidence was really there because her son wasn't doing well in school. He needed additional services. So he is going for time management. She agreed to have him fully tested. So he will be tested, and we will now get the resources he needs to be successful. (D. Johnson, personal communication, September 28, 2009)

In order to catch struggling students before they are caught in the appeal and readmission process, Johnson wants to implement a policy that any of her students who have a 2.3 GPA have to come in for a meeting since one F could put them below a 2.0, the minimum grade point average required for continued enrollment. They've created a listserv for students. The office has a writing specialist on staff and an additional tutor so students can sign up for the extra support that they need. They offer support groups in partnership with the counseling department. She credits her dean and vice president for the collaborative environment. Johnson does training with faculty, too, and is trying to identify those professors who might serve as departmental liaisons with her office or mentor newer faculty.

She references a nearby high-SES school whose Disability Services Office has the same budget as Johnson does, but for one-third of the students. She knows the DSO at another high-SES, elite school and comments that their office staff is huge compared to hers. Johnson has a wish list that includes personalized coaching for students and a full-time learning specialist who doesn't have to focus on testing. She thinks about what success means for her LD students, and how her office can help them reach their next goal.

**Summary: Staff Interviews**

Running a Disability Service Office is a difficult, complex job; the issues and anecdotes shared in interviews reflect this. Directors interact with a range of stakeholders including parents, faculty, technology staff, legal counsel, college administrators, counseling and other health service providers plus students. They're constantly exercising their professional judgment and weighing needs which sometimes contradict, like student requests and budgets. In each interview, a sense of personal advocacy for students with disabilities came through. Many of these staff had worked with together at other campuses, resulting in a tight professional network which seemed to both create and reinforce a dedication to the disability service field within higher education.

Staff interviewed all recognized the growing complexity of disability services as numbers of students with psychiatric and chronic conditions increase. Yet these increases in student numbers and involvedness contribute to staff job security and office budgets determined by FTE counts. Staff's main deterrent to denying accommodations

(Lerner, 2004) would be the subsequent financial impact of setting a precedent they can't replicate or maintain.

## Themes from Staff Interviews

Within this broader professional context several important themes emerge.

### Parental Involvement and Expectation.

Parental involvement emerges as a prominent theme in both student and staff interviews, and was the most commonly cited inductive code. Table Six illustrates that parents were five times more likely to be discussed in an interview with staff from a high- or medium-SES college than a low-SES college. This could in part be explained by that fact that more students at the low-SES schools visited are older and parents themselves. But writing in Chapter One explains that the average age of college students in New York State is decreasing: age alone does not account for this sizeable difference in code frequency. SES is the clear marker, and wide writing on the effects of parent social class on students supports this. Two well-known writers in education are cited here. Apple (2006) describes how middle class parents are more likely to have the knowledge and skills to manipulate educational environments. Annette Lareau and Erin McNamara Horvat (1999) employ a Bourdieuian lens to demonstrate how middle-class parents activate cultural capital to support their children's elementary education in a school-based ethnography. As Ferri and Connor (2006) point out, "It is clear that dominant-group parents expect schools to mirror, rather than disrupt, the social stratification in the larger community" (p.11).

**Table Six**
**Count of "Parental Involvement" Code from Staff Interview Transcripts**

| SES Category | Code count | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| **High SES** | | |
| Clare | 3 | 7% |
| Jeremy | 8 | 19% |
| Amy | 7 | 17% |
| | | |
| **Med SES** | | |
| Clark | 1 | 2% |
| Cynthia | 9 | 21% |
| Jessica | 7 | 17% |
| | | |
| **Low SES** | | |
| Mary | 1 | 2% |
| Suri | 1 | 2% |
| Donna | 5 | 12% |
| | | |
| **Total** | **42** | **100%** |

Cutting across lines of social class, campaigns in K-12 schools actively solicit parental involvement, and special programs in New York City schools recruit parents of children with disabilities to volunteer for the Committee on Special Education (NYC DOE, 2011). Croke and Thompson (2011) demonstrate the benefits of communication between individuals with disabilities, their families and educators. Recognizing the important role of parents, Linda Ware (2002) situates their narratives within a Disability Studies framework to problematize societal norms around independence: parents of children with disabilities are often the first to understand the importance of interdependence. She cites parental perspectives as "counternarratives" and explains,

> Taken together, these disability counternarratives mark a significant departure from the traditional narrative of disability grounded in the biological, social, and cognitive sciences that have shaped education, rehabilitative medicine, and social work practice. As counternarratives, they disrupt the received messages about

> disability that we have inherited from institutions, they incite our imagination about those we name disabled, and they demand self-critical analysis of the meaning of humanity. (Ware, 2002)

The important role of parents as advocates butts up against college culture where a student should "stand on your own two feet" (S. Greene, personal communication, September 24, 2009). Various staff interviewed described parents as "very scary", "extremely challenging", and "in denial". One interview exchange characterized a lack of student advocacy as a result of parental over involvement, quoting a common student refrain as, "My parents handled it and they never told me anything." Parental involvement also contradicts federal policies. Title II of the ADA mandates that "in postsecondary schools, the students *themselves* must identify the need for an auxiliary aid and give adequate notice of the need" (US DOE, 2005; emphasis added). Ware theorizes, "Education's twin goals of efficiency and equity have proven increasingly paradoxical and antithetical, to inclusion, and yet the system's pathology continues to be recast as student pathology" (Ware, 2002).

I would argue that the system's pathology is also recast as parent pathology. The effects of "affiliate stigma", stigma internalized by parents of children with disabilities, can be severe (Mak and Kwok, 2010). The findings depicted in Table Six suggest that higher-SES parents may be more tolerant of or less susceptible to affiliate stigma. As staff interviewed from a medium-SES college confirms, "The parents that call are definitely the more affluent White parents."

Parental involvement in college surfaces in connection to parental expectation of an institution. Jessica from medium-SES Klapper University provides her own example:

> I think there's definitely that expectation… I spoke with an incoming freshman and his mom yesterday. Mom is definitely involved, checking up on things, asking most of the questions, wanting to know what she is going to be getting for the money essentially. She didn't say that, but that's always an undertone. (J. Norton, personal communication, February 12, 2010)

Each staff interviewed from high-SES colleges consistently acknowledged an awareness of these expectations. Jeremy from high-SES Atlantic College describes the sense of *quid pro quo* that can derive from paying high tuition:

> The parents may kind of have this sort of, 'I'm paying X. I should be getting Y for my son or daughter, and I sort of don't care what the ADA says,' or whatever it is…Sometimes it does happen, and there are students that will definitely play that card, and say, 'Well, I'm going to this school, and I'm paying all this money, and I should be getting blah, blah, blah, and you need to advocate for me, and you need to do this.' And they're confusing the advocacy with what they really want, with what's appropriate. (J. Kenny, personal communication, April 12, 2010)

As Jeremy's mention of the ADA in this excerpt highlights, funding models in U.S. higher education make disability law complicated to implement. Arum, Gamoran and Shavit (2007) assert that higher education in the United States is demand-driven and responds like other market commodities. In a decentralized system where colleges rely largely on tuition revenue and private support, the authors describe universities as "client-

seekers" or "status seekers". Client-seeking schools rely on enrollment to survive and engage in advertising and specialized programs. Conversely status-seeking schools pursue prestige through top faculty and competitive admissions. The majority of colleges in New York City could be classified as client-seekers. As such, 'buyer' expectations are bolstered by the messages of the free market: you get what you pay for. As higher education becomes increasingly commodified, parents and students alike expect more than a quality education. They expect good services, facilities and jobs after graduation.

Cynthia from medium-SES Downtown College describes her response to these expectations. "I have parents who e-mail, call me on weekends. Not that I encourage it but I have to work with the parents as much and sometimes even more than the students to get them to allow their student to start advocating for themselves," she says. Cynthia regards parents as an important partner in her goal of supporting students. Other staff interviewed expressed an affinity for speaking with parents and understood it as part of their job. But none of them acknowledged the parent role as a necessary response to a fractured legal and disability service system that's driven by advocacy. The adverse effects as a result of parents and students not advocating surface in student interviews and are described in Chapter Six.

**Relationship with Institution.**

College staff shared many interesting perspectives which collectively describe their relationship with their institution, a second theme from staff interviews. Topics include staffing patterns, budgets, reporting structures, communication with faculty and students, peer networks, and perception of college legal environments. Viewed together,

these administrative structures provide insight about how colleges regard and direct resources to students with disabilities. “Administrative Response Positive” overwhelmingly outnumbered “Administrative Response Negative” as an inductive code (28 to 2).

One major factor affecting how Disability Services Officers are able to support students is how robustly their offices are staffed. Staffing patterns seemed to have more to do with the size of the population of students with disabilities and less to do with the SES category of an institution. While the most staff were located at the wealthiest college, most of the other high- and medium-SES colleges were one-person shops, and all of the low-SES colleges had several full-time staff in the office. One high-SES school and one low-SES school had a learning specialist, though the learning specialist at the high-SES campus was full-time while the learning specialist at the low-SES school was part-time. All of the colleges relied heavily on graduate assistants and part-time staff, many of whom functioned as tutors and notetakers. The number of part-time staff at some schools was so large (30 or more) that DSOs described spending a great deal of their time managing them.

Some schools were able to use students as notetakers for their peers with disabilities. Schools from high- and low-SES categories alike talked about not having adequate budgets to pay for notetakers, and used creative strategies like offering campus bookstore gift cards or priority registration. One college DSO felt that using students as notetakers violated confidentiality; students with learning disabilities expressed anxiety about their peers knowing they had a disability. In order to accommodate this feeling, the campus hired external part-time staff to take notes.

Survey questions #13 and #14 asked staff about tracking data like graduation rates and race/ethnicity of students. The majority of survey respondents answered "no", they did not maintain data on these outcomes and demographics. Interviews provided me with the opportunity to ask staff about this, and staff from both high- and low-SES colleges admitted to not having time to spend on these 'extras'. As Mary commented, "We're just so busy on the campuses putting out fires and trying to get students the services they need. But it really should be looked at. We really should be looking at retention and whatever." All DSOs felt understaffed and one shared that her office was "spread very thin". Another DSO even tutored students herself and described her job as doing "everything and anything".

Most staff managed their own budgets and had discretion about how these funds were spent. A few acknowledged a universal fear in disability services: having to arrange for American Sign Language (ASL) for students who are deaf or hard-of-hearing can easily overload an entire budget. As one commented, "You get one deaf student, you can't do anything. All your money goes there."

DSOs reported directly to college vice presidents; one high-SES DSO reported directly to the college provost. This high-level reporting structure reveals that disability services are visible within the university's portfolio. It may also reflect the perceived litigious nature of disability services, and college administrators' concerns about complying with federal laws. Even during the interview process, some staff voiced certain comments "off the record".

Surprisingly, mention of the threat of lawsuits was at the bottom of the frequency list for inductive codes. A DSO from a high-SES college shared that she works more

closely with the General Counsel's office now than she did at other colleges where she has been employed. Staff from a medium-SES school also talked about calling the General Counsel for advice, and one staff from a low-SES school described how, "Legal…gets involved." Conversely, another staff from a low-SES school described trying to stay below the radar of her administration and its 504 office. "If we have plans in place and we don't execute it, we're worse than if we don't have a plan," she offered.

The larger the school's budget the more damaging lawsuits can be. Because the litmus test for the ADA is that reasonable accommodations must be provided "unless to do so would cause undue hardship" (EEOC, 2002), a small, private college would have a better chance of defending this hardship threshold. A college in the CUNY system, for example, would almost never be able to justify this argument since a university-wide budget approved in fall 2010 exceeded $2.8 billion (CUNY, 2010). With such a large budget on paper, few accommodations would be considered unreasonable from an institutional standpoint.

That said, the law is clear that the onus is clearly on students to request accommodations and provide adequate documentation of their disability. Staff seemed clear that this was an administrative line in the sand. One DSO from a medium-SES college articulated, "One area that I do draw the line on is they must provide documentation. I will not put accommodations in without documentation because I have a philosophy in all aspects of what I do. If I'm willing to do it for one I have to do it for all." Many DSOs echoed this criterion. Some students are able to advocate more aggressively than others, and this is explained in Chapter Six.

But the federal law makes it clear that accommodations still vary from student to student. Staff must exercise personal judgment, and the extent of what resources the school can offer does become a factor. Interview excerpts in Table Seven give examples of how staff perceives the availability of such resources.

**Table Seven**
**Staff Interview Responses about Approach to Providing Accommodations**

| College SES Type | Quote |
|---|---|
| High-SES, Low-Pell | It's pretty clear as to what is expected and what's provided through Disability Services. The website is pretty clear. Our language is pretty clear. When I explain it to people that contact us, I try to be very clear about what we can and can't do. Sometimes it's kind of a situation that just can't really be envisioned, and say well, we have to look at it and take it on a case by case basis. But I don't think that there's - more often than not, things work pretty smoothly, and it's not usually somebody that's asking for something that's really out of the ordinary. |
| Medium-SES, Medium-Pell | I think what - it makes it hard especially for somebody that's new to disabilities because I think somebody that's new to disabilities tends to go more by the letter of what the law is and what other schools are doing. I learned to get over thinking of it one size fits all and to literally sit with him and say "What do you need? What do you need to be successful?" And that's what I start out most of my conversations. |
| Low-SES, High-Pell | I guess because we don't have that many resources to give people. I guess if we had more resources, maybe students would be more aggressive…But if we don't offer tutoring, we don't offer tutoring. It's not a matter of, we decide who gets it – we don't offer it… So I mean our students are grateful, pretty much, for what we can give them. |

Most staff expressed working well with faculty, but most expressed facing an occasional nay-sayer. As Cynthia expressed, age may be an issue:

> I think it helped me understand more about faculty when I really looked at when the American Disabilities Act was passed. I've always known about the American Disabilities Act but I haven't been teaching for 30, 40 years before it was passed. So some of these professors we really had to educate them on what the law is and when it was passed and what it means. And they're receptive to it. (C. Brady, personal communication, February 9, 2010)

Amy relayed an exchange with a professor asking her what the student was going to do in the 'real world'. Students conveyed that they also were confronted with this response from faculty, and examples follow in the next chapter. Faculty resistance to learning disabilities specifically has been linked with mistrust around how they are assessed and should be accommodated (Jensen et al., 2004). Students expressed few examples of resistance from faculty, but those incidents they did cite were vivid and upsetting.

**Psychiatric Diagnoses.**

A third consistent theme mentioned by staff was the growth in psychiatric diagnoses as a stand-alone label as well as a concurrent diagnosis for students with learning disabilities. Depression and anxiety were mentioned specifically in interviews. The common age of onset for mental health disorders is adolescence and early adulthood. In a multinational study Kessler and colleagues (2007) cite the age range for onset of schizophrenia as 15 to 35-years old, for example, while signs of mood disorders and anxiety disorders begin to appear between the ages of 15 and 25. For many students the college years fall right in the middle of these developmental stages, and college is rife with triggers. Not only is college full of new social and academic pressures, but students

living away from home lack family members to notice new behaviors that might be atypical. Students enjoying the freedom of being away from home might resist taking their medication.

More than half of the inductive codes about psychiatric diagnoses were from transcripts of staff at high-SES schools, as depicted in Table Eight. The low-SES schools have a smaller on-campus residential population that the high-SES schools here, which may contribute to the differential.

**Table Eight**
**Count of "Concurrent Mental Health" Code from Staff Interview Transcripts**

| SES Category | Code count | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| **High SES** | | |
| Clare | 6 | 29% |
| Jeremy | 1 | 5% |
| Amy | 4 | 19% |
| | | |
| **Med SES** | | |
| Clark | 1 | 5% |
| Cynthia | 6 | 29% |
| Jessica | 1 | 5% |
| | | |
| **Low SES** | | |
| Mary | 1 | 5% |
| Suri | 1 | 5% |
| Donna | 0 | 0% |
| | | |
| **Total** | **21** | 100% |

Clare from high-SES Liberty College describes this phenomenon on her campus:

> And we have a lot of students that have multiple disabilities, both LD and psych… I think as psychiatric treatment improves, you'll see more and more of

those students. I also think that because it's a residential school, that - and because the age of onset for these severe disorders is the college age - it's more impactful at Liberty because they're away from their families. (C. Whitney, personal communication, October 2, 2009)

Jeremy from high-SES Atlantic College describes the fear of stigma students' feel about having a learning disability and compares that with disclosing mental health needs:

> There are some students that are definitely concerned about that. I think that comes into play on the mental health side more. And sometimes these are co-morbid. Not always, but sometimes the LD will have a stigma, but maybe not quite as much as a strict mental health kinda thing. You know, if there are students where it's more mental health related, they may be much, much more private, and much more reserved, and much more conservative about what kind of information they want out. 'I wanna make sure nobody's gonna know.'
>
> I have had students where they decline to even give any information on anything. They say no, you know, I'm gonna do it myself. Because they're just too private about what's going on, or it's just too personal, and they're just not comfortable with it. I don't think it's as much as - there's probably a little bit with the LD, but there's more information out there about it. If somebody says, well, I have dyslexia, or a learning disability, I don't think that it would be looked at - if you're talking about on the scale of stigma or whatever that would be, I think there would be still more acceptance for that. I'm not saying it's right or it's wrong. There may be more acceptance for that, as compared to the student who has bipolar disorder. And those friends in their residence hall or other students

> are like oh, you know, that's the kid that went nuts and went to the hospital last year, or was cutting himself, or whatever. That kind of stuff.
>
> So I think that still holds much more because you say LD, the crazy doesn't come in, you know, if we're talking colloquially. But if somebody is diagnosed with something on that continuum of like bipolar disorder or schizo-affective disorder, different things like that, more of the psychosis kind of things, that's much more like, 'Oh, yeah. He's out there. He's nuts. Stay away from him.' That kinda thing. (J. Kenny, personal communication, April 12, 2010)

While this theme runs somewhat outside the lines of my gaze at students with learning disabilities, I include it here for several compelling and timely reasons. Increases in concurrent mental health diagnoses are programmatically important for colleges to pay attention to because perceived stigma may deter students from seeking accommodations and/or treatment. Not only might this affect students' academic performance, but individuals with mental illness die on average 20-25 years younger than the general population due to concurrent medical disorders (NASMHPD, 2006).

Lastly, the January 2011 shooting of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and others in Tucson, AZ brought national attention to Jared Loughner's experience at Pima Community College. A vivid YouTube video released to the media displays Loughner's rants against the school which suspended him in 2010 after multiple episodes of disruptive comments and behavior. The Chronicle of Higher Education subsequently featured back-cover commentary from Emory University professor Benjamin Reiss, who compared the Arizona incident to the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting and speculates about

the future trend of campus responses to students with mental illness. Reiss cites the tremendous growth of threat-assessment teams on campuses, and wonders what consequences mental-health profiling will have on students.

Staff interviewed in this study are aware of the growth of this facet of the disability community; their comments reflect that. This issue resonates with a broader theme in this work about who belongs in college, and what colleges will do to help certain groups succeed. Taylor and Adelman (2000) describe how the topic of students' social and mental health has been largely excluded from conversations on K-12 school reform because little attention is placed on activities that are not perceived to directly impact achievement on high-stakes tests. But at the college level, mental health and retention/graduation are more closely linked. Mary from low-SES Arthur College acknowledges the barriers to academic progress that students with mental health issues face in contrast to other students with disabilities. She comments, "But for the most part, the stops and starts are the psychiatric. Not being able to function and have to take a withdrawal, be hospitalized. They're a tough population to work with." This thematic discussion is undergirded by the notion of meritocracy. After all, one's qualification to enter college is based on the premise of an able and healthy mind.

**Conclusion**

The staff I interviewed generously shared candid thoughts about the colleges for whom they work, about their students, their budgets, about what makes them hopeful in their work as well as what presents a struggle. In my hundreds of pages of interview transcripts, the three themes highlighted here represent a small portion of what was

relayed, and yet I discuss these specifically because they were mentioned in almost every interview and resonate with current educational rhetoric. Conversations about parents, home institutions and psychiatric disabilities depict symbolically how staff is positioned at the center of a competition for scarce resources: parents who justifiably want to support and protect their children, colleges who feel pressure for students to succeed while facing budget crunches, and students whose needs present as increasingly complicated to university structures. In each of these scenarios, students are framed like problems to solve. Yet staff do the best they can with the resources they have. The lived effects of this political economy is described in Chapter Six and theorized in Chapter Seven.

## Chapter Six: Notes from the Field, Student Perspectives

Student interviews yielded significant, insightful data in this research study. Five students from a low-SES school (Livingston College) and five students from a high-SES school (Commonwealth College) participated; all had a learning disability. Each one brought anecdotes about his or her own unique personal and academic journey, and all 10 students were on track to graduate with a bachelor's degree. Two students representing the greatest socioeconomic extremes— from the Captain of the Tennis team whose parents were paying his tuition and dorm expenses to a middle-aged woman living on Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and in public housing— are presented at greater length. I include verbatim quotes from interview transcripts as much as possible so the students can speak to the reader for themselves: I pull from phenomenology and aim to capture the lived experiences of these students (Van Manen, 1990). Excerpts from fieldnotes compiled from my campus visits introduce the summaries of students from each campus. Key themes from student interviews are discussed after the student and college summaries presented here.

### Livingston College (High-Pell, Low-SES)

Livingston College is almost indistinguishable from the other city buildings which surround it, except for the group of students with backpacks who talk and laugh in groups outside of its main entrance. I enter and show the security guards an ID so I can walk through the guest gate since I don't have a Livingston ID to swipe through the turnstiles. It's loud and full of life in the main building's lobby. There's a line of students to pay tuition, another for the coffee cart, and posters up announcing College Republicans and

other clubs. I'm meeting students in a computer lab, and I decide to stop in a restroom to regroup since I'm already lost in the maze of offices. A low-SES school, Livingston feels urban and diverse they way I expected it would. I finally find the accessible computer lab, introduce myself to the woman at the information desk, and sit at a computer. These are specially loaded with assistive technology software, and I find myself wishing I had a Livingston computer log-in so I could poke around. Instead, I look at the disability-related magazines on a wall display and pretend to be busy with my blackberry while students work away. I go through this basic routine each time I come to campus for an interview. After my first few interviews with students, I start to recognize them in the lab with each subsequent visit. It seems like a safe haven, a quiet hangout.

My interviews at Livingston College all take place in vacant staff offices. One has a loud fan; one has an unopened case of bottles of water. At an urban campus where space is at a premium, I'm just grateful that an interview location has been arranged for me by the staff. Staff also sent out an email to students on their Disability Services Office listserv soliciting volunteers for interviews. The first time the email went out I got 13 calls for two interview slots; some calls were repeats from eager students. Donna, the Disability Services Officer at Livingston, joked to me that students say all the time that they don't get the listserv emails, and this email from me is good proof that in fact they do— when there's an incentive involved!

**Student Profile: Jenny Gardner.**

Jenny Gardner is a 36-year-old student at low-SES Livingston College, the third college she has attended over the past two decades. She is a fit, attractive African-

American woman who grew up in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan in an extended family unit with 15 children. She never knew her father and her mother passed away several years ago from AIDS. Even though Jenny spent time living in a group home, she is close with her siblings, and mentions that a few of her brothers have been incarcerated. She will be the first of them to have a bachelor's degree, which she is scheduled to receive in a few months.

After high school Jenny went away to college on a volleyball scholarship, which she lost after an injury meant she could no longer play. She returned to the city and started working at a nursing home, where she stayed for ten years. Passed over for a promotion despite satisfactory job performance, she decided to quit her job and re-enroll in college to get an associate's degree. "That was the only thing that was gonna save me," she comments about going back to school (J. Gardner, personal communication, April 13, 2010). She earned her degree without accommodations, and applied to Livingston because she had a friend who worked there. She has a 2.35 GPA, thinks about graduate school, and shares her hope that she can find a job that allows her to be an advocate for her community.

Though she had received special education services in school, she was never privy to her IEPs and her high school records were shredded long ago. She was receiving disability services at Livingston because of a health condition, but nobody noticed she also had a learning disability. After failing math twice at Livingston despite seeking tutoring, a friend suggested she get tested. She was diagnosed with LD this year, a semester before graduation. Jenny describes her frustration in getting lost in the system:

> I was like all these years that – now I'm getting tested and I have a disability. Like it could have been caught early on in the years. I knew that they did IEP at high school, but I was living in a group home then, so they don't give that to the students. They give that to the group home staff, so I didn't know what it was when they tested me then. Like it could have helped me out as I kept going with my schooling.
>
> I mean like I said, the professors usually are the ones that come down and say, 'Listen, [DSO], this client of yours is having trouble.' All they said was go to tutoring. So there's a communication breakdown somewhere. It shouldn't be the – it shouldn't be me getting advice from another student to say oh, go to Dr. Smith. It should be the staff members to say listen, all right, well – they could have looked at my transcript before I got to Livingston. I got to Livingston with a 2.89 average. So somewhere down the line, they – when I got here, something within the course here, they can see that it's bringing my GPA down. So they should have been able to identify with that already. (J. Gardner, personal communication, April 13, 2010)

Her accommodations include extended time, a note taker, a reader, and a separate location for tests. She describes the students and staff in Livingston's Disability Services Office as friendly and with open arms. She sees Livingston as divided between 'disabled' and 'regular' students. She notes that her peers with disabilities understand her academic frustration and suggest professors to take. She doesn't disclose her disability to many other people.

To finance her education, she gets Pell and takes out loans. Her New York State TAP[14] aid ran out before she got to Livingston. She lives in public housing, receives a monthly SSDI check, qualifies for another program through 'welfare' and uses a Reduced-Fare MetroCard for her public transportation. From her years of higher education, she owes more than $20,000 in student loans. Her dream is to move down South and buy a home with a long hallway and some stairs. Jenny is hopeful as she concludes her interview, "The doors is gonna open for me."

**Student Profile: Reid Wisler.**

Reid commutes via subway from home to Livingston College, where he's a 20-year-old sophomore with a 2.4 GPA. He was born in Lithuania, speaks three languages and is majoring in International Relations. Reid attended a NYC public high school and received special education services there; he comments that high school didn't prepare him for college. Livingston College was his first choice four-year school; he wasn't sure he would get accepted into a four-year institution and applied to community colleges also. He receives several accommodations at Livingston like extended time, a tape recorder and a separate location for testing, and is comfortable accessing services even though he says that his mom gets embarrassed and worries about school bullies.

Reid has a lot of friends on campus and in the Disability Services Office, and describes faculty and staff as supportive. He mentions several times that college is stressful, and offers, "The only thing I would change is making the college cheaper, and the budget" (R. Wisler, personal communication, October 6, 2009). He receives

[14] Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) is a New York State grant program based on taxable income (HESC, 2010).

financial aid and has a work study job. He's applying to internships and wants to pursue a career in the Foreign Service.

**Student Profile: Melissa Rodriguez.**

With a part-time job and five children, Melissa is an attractive 37-year-old junior at Livingston majoring in Sociology and taking 12 credits. Financial aid through TAP and Pell pays part of her tuition, and she works to earn the rest. Melissa was born in the Dominican Republic, attended public vocational high school in New York City, and dropped out in the 10th grade to get a job. Melissa earned her GED years later, and attended a few colleges before ending up at Livingston which she loves. She thinks she had an IEP in grade school, but her mom didn't keep those papers. Melissa wasn't re-diagnosed with a learning disability until a few months ago when a friend in her math class suggested she get tested. She tears up as she describes the testing process and how it made her feel like she should be ashamed.

Melissa has a 2.4 GPA, and refuses to request any accommodations even though she's entitled to them. "I'd rather not be labeled," she offers. "I'm trying to see if I can do it on my own... Some people tend to feel sorry for people that have a learning disability and give them a higher grade than what they really deserve, and I don't want that. I don't want a pity grade, I want to earn it" (M. Rodriguez, personal communication, October 9, 2009).

She commutes to school from Brooklyn, and wants a good career so she can provide for her family and move away from the drugs and violence in her neighborhood. She describes the other mothers in her neighborhood on welfare watching soap operas,

and says she wants to be a good example for her children and hopes to earn a master's degree. She describes her family as her source of strength and motivation:

> I try to be the mother that I wanted to have and I didn't have. I had a lot of issues growing up, so I try not to have so many issues for my children. But the one thing I noticed that parents that push their children and are supportive of them, their kids become someone. They have a career, they finish school, they're educated. Whereas, you have those parents that all they do is bitch and moan and complain and stay home and do nothing. They want to complain about the kids dropping out of school. But if I push my kids and they finish school, I don't become one of those parents. (M. Rodriguez, personal communication, October 9, 2009)

Three of her children have various disabilities, and she is a strong parent advocate for them to access all the services they can.

**Student Profile: Christopher Henry.**

Christopher spends an hour on the subway or bus commuting from the Bronx to Livingston, where his courses start at 9:40 in the morning and end at 7:40 at night. He carries 12 credits as a sophomore Psychology major. He enrolled in college straight out of NYC public high school, and Livingston was his first choice. He received special education services in high school for his learning disability, and provided his documentation to Livingston before starting as a freshman. Christopher receives extended time on tests, a separate location for testing, and a course exemption for math. He describes his accommodations as a legal right, and is frustrated with those few

professors who give him a hard time. He relives an exchange with an instructor who told Christopher to stop asking stupid questions:

> You just don't say that to a student, especially one like that. Not – sometimes you ask stupid questions. I said, 'I'm sorry I've been asking a lot of questions today. I just wasn't understanding.' 'It's okay. Just don't ask stupid questions.' No questions are stupid, so that's why. I felt very hurt by it. I felt very hurt by what he said, and I wrote a letter. I told him first time in my life I felt – I felt crappy. You just don't say just because you got a PhD, just because you got a master's, just because of that, just because you're a professor making $160,000.00 doesn't mean you can put down a student. You're not better than anyone. (C. Henry, personal communication, April 13, 2010)

Outside of class, Christopher is a volunteer firefighter; he believes in the importance of helping people in their worst moments. But he considers college his full-time job. He started with a 2.1 GPA as a freshman and has worked hard to bring it up to a 3.5, but comments, "There's a lot of stress involved. There's a lot of high anxiety" (C. Henry, personal communication, April 13, 2010). TAP and Pell pay all of his tuition, and his uncle helps pay for some books. He thinks coursework should be relevant to a future job, and is impatient with required courses teaching him things he'll never use in life. He wants to work in civil service, a respected profession with benefits where he can give back to New York City.

**Student Profile: Marissa Diaz.**

Marissa is a fifth-year senior at Livingston, where she has a 2.0 GPA and carries 16 credits as a political science major while working full-time, 40-hours per week, in the Bursar's office. She describes this challenge:

> So I think that's what has helped me here. I have struggled a lot because it hasn't been easy working full-time and going to school full-time and trying to maintain a GPA. Because there are so many things going on personal-wise as well, but I've tried my best even though I've been wanting before to give up. But just looking for the future and trying to graduate. (M. Diaz, personal communication, April 13, 2010)

Marissa was tested twice and diagnosed with a learning disability in middle school. She didn't tell anybody about her disability until she got to Livingston and needed extended time on placement tests. She felt very welcome in the Disability Services Office, and with the help of the counselor at her Catholic high school, was able to provide her documentation before fall classes began. Only one professor has given her a hard time about using extra time, asking her what she's going to do at her job in the real world when she has a deadline. Marissa remembers, "I wanted to tell him that I was, like, 'You're the first professor that has treated me in a way that, wow, I felt really, really low. I felt I was retarded. I was, like, wow'. I did really bad on the test, actually because I took the test right after he told me that. And I felt disgusted in a way" (M. Diaz, personal communication, April 13, 2010).

But for the most part, Marissa has a great time in college at Livingston. She has tons of friends and belongs to an off-campus sorority. She rents a room in Harlem and commutes to school. Her tuition is paid for through TAP and Pell, and her income covers her living expenses. She struggles to do everything on her own, but knows a degree is important for her future.

**Summary: Livingston College.**

The students interviewed at Livingston College represented a wide variety of experiences, but shared several traits: earnestness, determination and struggle. The source of struggle varied from student to student, but aligned in terms of making significant sacrifices to attend college. Financial hardship was an issue mentioned in each interview; every student received grant-based aid, and Jenny relied exclusively on public assistance. Family obligations in the case of Melissa, work demands for Marissa and Melissa, and long commutes for Reid and Christopher (though all students commuted) represented external barriers to be overcome by these students. Except for Christopher, the students had about a C average. The two students who didn't come to Livingston straight from high school (Melissa and Jenny) were both tested and diagnosed with a learning disability more than half way through their college experience at Livingston. All mentioned a specific moment at Livingston of feeling stressed, ashamed or embarrassed in conjunction with their disability.

At the same time, each of them had come to Livingston as their first choice school, loved being at Livingston and felt supported there. Marissa spoke about her first impressions of the Disability Services Office and recalled, "I felt I was very welcome,

and it was a warm welcome. I felt I belonged there." They expressed a sense of gratitude towards Livingston. Jenny offered, "I was blessed to go here," and Reid volunteers in the Disability Services Office because he likes "doing community service and helping people." Christopher shared this sense of personal responsibility: "But it's nice if during someone's free time they could – they could help out – something to give back."

Each came to Livingston because of the academic programs they offered: none mentioned disability services as a reason for choosing Livingston. These students talked in specific terms about jobs and their future with a sense of hope and willpower.

**Commonwealth College (Low-Pell, High-SES)**

The first time I travelled to Commonwealth College via subway to interview a student, the snow-rain mix coming down was formidable. As I sloshed to campus, I thought about the muddy sludge on the train car floor contrasting with the pristine snow-covered brick buildings I could see in the distance. If you didn't know that Commonwealth College was situated in the middle of New York City, you'd never guess it from standing at the center of campus. I wondered how the neighborhood interacts with the campus community, and if the administration worries about outsiders like me wandering around lost on campus. After getting directions from a pleasant security guard inside a residence hall, I arrived early to the front gates of Commonwealth College, and spent the time watching students walk in and out of the gate. Parents dropped off students out of cars and SUVs, and faculty and staff drove through the gate and into the parking lots. Being a low-Pell school, the students were more racially diverse than I

expected they'd be. Except for the two security guards, the staff pulling up in cars was all white, and most were men.

During the months that I travelled to Commonwealth for interviews, the weather changed to warm, sunny days, but my impression of the school didn't change much. I met all the students at the front gate, a perfect vantage point for people watching. By my third trip to Commonwealth, I found the spot easily. I waited there with two white men, one older and one younger but both in wheelchairs, who I guessed were waiting for Access-a-Ride or some other transportation. A few students walked in or out of the entrance, and one white male student with a physical disability walked unsteadily toward me for a moment, but it turned out not to be the junior I was scheduled to interview. I stood there and watched a squirrel go into a garbage can and emerge victoriously with most of a hard taco. In this way I'd wait for students and calm myself down after rushing to Commonwealth from work.

Two of my interviews took place in the library, a modern building with the smiling faces of its donors at the entrance. The other interviews are in more public, outdoor spaces. None of the students seem to have a strong opinion about where we meet.

**Student Profile: Mark Fox.**

Mark greets me at the main gate of Commonwealth College. He's White and about 20-years-old, dressed preppy, and leads me through campus to the library. Mark reserves a room with the librarian, and in two minutes flat we have a sound-proof and

private interview room. He exudes confidence and enthusiasm, and I see how he is Captain of the Tennis team.

Mark is a junior business major with a 3.4 GPA. He carries 15 credits, and lives in the dorms which he likes since it means he doesn't have to worry about cooking. He thinks he'll graduate in four years and wants to work in finance like his family. He's has an internship in the industry now and enjoys it. He knows from experience that he has better access to his Dean of Students than those at larger private schools. He thinks it's the small size that gives Commonwealth students easy access to administrators, and explains:

> They don't even ask what it's regarding. They'll meet with anyone. It's a very open campus. It's also because of how small we are in some sense we can meet with – and you can walk into the president's office and he's been very open with us and saying, 'Sure, we can meet with you right now,' or 'No, something else I have to do.' So it's – I love it how you have that ability because that's like what I love about my high school. You can go into anybody's office, and you can have in-depth conversation with them about something other than school, and then when you need something in school you have any problems, you can go right to them and ask them. They're very open to meeting with you, meeting the criteria that you need, classroom, in the dorms from the president all the way down. (M. Fox, personal communication, March 11, 2010)

Mark grew up in Philadelphia where he attended a private high school where he tells me his family has been legacy for more than 100 years and has "a longstanding

history". His family paid additional fees for his LD services in high school. Luckily, his teachers and services there were great. "I'm very open with my learning difference," he states. He describes how he was diagnosed with dyslexia in fourth grade after he left books at the beach house on purpose so he wouldn't have to read them. He hated reading. He remembers having to sit through those draining evaluations all day long. Mark shares that he thinks his uncle has dyslexia, too.

Mark wanted to come to college in the city. He came to visit Commonwealth as a high school junior and "felt at home". Commonwealth's Disability Services Officer was the selling point. The DSO sat down with Mark and looked at his disability documentation before he was accepted to the college. Mark describes the process, "And he looked at them while I was sitting there, and he more was on the thing what do you receive now, what accommodations would you like to see, is there anything that you haven't had and that you want, and he just went off of that" (M. Fox, personal communication, March 11, 2010).

He thinks disability services are easier to get at some schools. He instructs that it's important to be a self-advocate, which helps at Commonwealth where it's all on his shoulders. His perception is that at bigger schools, state schools, it's more difficult to get services. I ask him where he developed this notion and he said his teachers told him.

Some teachers allow for accommodations more easily than others; some are set in their ways. He gives his disability letter to all his teachers, whether he thinks he'll need accommodations in their class or not. At a smaller school people know you and you see the same people. You're always able to talk to someone. All of Mark's friends know about his learning disability. They are jealous they don't get extra time.

Mark gets extra time, a private testing location, types all his test essays, and gets audio books. He prefers to take his own notes. He uses assistive technology software for writing papers. He has taken alternative assessments like papers in lieu of tests. For studying he handwrites his notes. He has no internal voice when he reads. He transposes letters but he realizes this as he writes them. The process to get services at Commonwealth was more comfortable than he expected it would be. It's a relaxed atmosphere. Mark explains that one disadvantage to a separate testing location is that you can't ask the teacher a question when you're taking a test. But he calls professors on the phone during the tests if he has a question. He comments on his learning disability, "It's part of my life and something that I over – I feel like I've overcome it. But if I didn't have my accommodations, if I didn't have the resources that I had prior, I wouldn't be in the position that I'm in now."

Mark describes college as the most fun he's had, and says the typical Commonwealth student is a pretty good student. Students who aren't successful don't meet with their teachers or use other available resources. He has a small scholarship, and his parents pay for the balance of his tuition so he won't have any loans. He appreciates the spectrum of socioeconomic backgrounds at Commonwealth. He sees the economic discrepancies, and thinks it's good for the school's mission to focus on educating all people, including those who "would not be able to receive it to begin with."

**Student Profile: Megan O'Malley.**

Megan is a fifth-year senior at Commonwealth College, where she majors in social work. She was diagnosed with a visual processing issue as a young child, and attended private K-12 schools in suburban Rockland County, NY. She chose

Commonwealth because of its social work program; her uncle went there, too. Her mom helped her get her disability documentation together before coming to Commonwealth, and Megan's accommodations where in place when she started as a freshman. She receives extra time, a note taker, audio books and a separate location for testing. She hasn't told anyone at Commonwealth that she has a learning disability for the fear of being perceived as stupid, despite her 3.86 GPA and full courseload including three graduate classes. Not even her roommates know. She values the support she receives from the Disability Services staff at Commonwealth:

> Amy is very, very nice, and I feel like I can always go up to her, and I talk to her if I have any problems. They've been really helpful all my years here, and they're always willing to find a solution. If you're struggling in the class they'll try to find you a tutor. (M. O'Malley, personal communication, February 25, 2010)

Megan used to commute to school, and she still spends most weekends at home. She moved to on-campus housing her junior year, and finds it easier to make friends and participate in school-sponsored activities like community service. Petite, blond and in her early twenties, she talks enthusiastically about her internship experiences working with children, and hopes to find a job working in the foster care system. She likes how nice the people are at Commonwealth, and describes her peers as caring and hardworking. She finances her education with a mix of Pell, loans, scholarship and parental support.

**Student Profile: Brendan Symon.**

Brendan, a junior accounting major from Connecticut, chose to attend Commonwealth because of its Disability Services Office. "You could tell he wasn't going to leave you out to dry," Brendan remembers about speaking with Commonwealth disability staff (B. Symon, personal communication, March 4, 2010). He received robust special education services in his public high school, and met Amy's staff on a college visit while he was still in high school. His dad came with him the first time he met her, but his high school helped him get his paperwork together and arranging for accommodations was easy. At Commonwealth he gets extra time, a note taker, a computer to type on for tests, a calculator for math and a separate location for tests. He explains his various learning disabilities, including dyslexia and a spatial disorder.

A laid-back guy with shaggy brown hair, Brendan lives in the dorms and shares that some friends know he has a learning disability, some don't, and it really doesn't faze him. "I guess but I feel like it's so common now, it's not even, it's like the new thing," he comments about LD. He has a 3.3 GPA, and meets with the Dean each semester to choose his classes. Brendan describes, "I do go see the dean at the beginning of the semester and the dean usually insures that I get into the classes, like classes with professors that are supposedly more accommodating to this when I register." He doesn't have financial aid, and funds his education through loans and parental support. Brendan wants to live in New York City after graduation and work for a high-tech company because of the growth potential of the sector.

**Student Profile: Carrie Berrett.**

Carrie grew up in Westchester County, NY, not far from Commonwealth College. The school wasn't her first choice, but now the slender, blue-eyed 21-year-old can't imagine having gone anywhere else. A junior majoring in advertising, Carrie has a 3.1 GPA but still worries she won't do well. She has always gone to small private schools, and a fifth grade teacher suggested she get tested for a learning disability. Carrie was diagnosed with a processing issue, started receiving supports, and her grades improved dramatically. Disability services played into her college application process; her mom made contact with the Disability Services Office at Commonwealth during Freshman Orientation before classes started. At Commonwealth she gets extra time, a separate location for tests, a notetaker and a calculator for math. Carrie didn't get services her first semester because she didn't understand how the process worked; it was her best semester academically.

She says her professors are very willing to help her, with the exception of one who would embarrassingly announce "Carrie, extra time!" at the start of a test session. She describes the learning environment at Commonwealth, saying "At least here it's very small, very intimate like they accommodate me in my learning disability" (C. Berrett, personal communication, April 14, 2010). But she doesn't want her peers to know she has a learning disability, and says only her closest friends do:

> I feel like because they're such – at least in college I feel like it's so competitive and there are such high standards and people are so judgmental and I just don't wanna be judged by my peers for being different but I'm really not that different. I'm doing fine in school. (C. Berrett, personal communication, April 14, 2010)

Beyond the small scholarship she has through New York State, Carrie's parents pay her tuition and she won't have any school loans. She finds her current internship in the fashion industry too cutthroat, and is hoping to work for an ad firm in Manhattan once she graduates.

**Student Profile: Alison Hofmann.**

Alison is from Long Island, a 20-year-old junior who came to "the city" a lot when she was younger and always wanted to live here. She majors in philosophy, and isn't sure what she wants to do after graduation so she's applying for internships. From the time she learned about Commonwealth at a college fair at her New England boarding school, she has wanted to be enrolled here, and loved the college from the minute she walked onto campus. “I think probably just the fact that it’s a small school makes people [with learning disabilities] more comfortable with coming. I just felt more comfortable coming here,” she remembers (A. Hofmann, personal communication, April 14, 2010). She lives in a residence hall with the same women who were her roommates since freshman year. Her mom pays her tuition.

Alison wasn't diagnosed with a learning disability until her junior year of high school. Her mom suggested she get tested when her grades just weren't matching up to her IQ. Her school experience changed dramatically after being diagnosed, and because she learned about it so recently, she doesn't feel embarrassed. She was worried about what college would be like and her mom sent Alison's documentation in before she started Commonwealth. The Disability Services office told them "they would like meet

my needs and do whatever they could." Her courses are demanding, but she's doing well; she receives extra time, a notetaker and a separate testing location.

**Summary: Commonwealth College.**

The students interviewed at Commonwealth were all traditional students in their early 20s who came straight to college from high school. They all lived on campus; none mentioned having to work except in the context of internship experiences. All of them had applied to private colleges. All diagnosed with a learning disability before coming to college, disability services played a substantial role in their decisions to enroll at Commonwealth. They expressed comfort with their disability to varying degrees, and those who struggled with this did so for fear of being judged academically by faculty and peers even though each of them had above a 3.0 average GPA. Mark and Brendan mentioned having access to high-level administrators for guidance. Stress was described in terms of academic pressure. Though they used different adjectives to describe their meaning, each of them agreed they felt like a "typical" Commonwealth student. They talked about jobs after college in terms of preference and vagueness; none expressed urgency.

## Themes from Student Interviews

Across the range of college experience described by students several important themes emerge.

**Stress as Internal vs. External.**

College students perceive life as stressful. Whether they're roommate troubles, making friends, juggling work and school, negotiating being away from home, tough coursework, paying tuition bills or staying academically eligible, concurrent worries compete. Brougham et al. (2009) maintain that these stressors for college students result in difficulties with cognition (like concentration), illness, anxiety and impaired academic performance. Certainly dealing with a disability represents another possible source of stress for students. Holding disability constant, one interesting difference between the students' experience of Livingston and Commonwealth is the placement of those stressors as external or internal.

Students interviewed from low-SES Livingston College more wholly discussed barriers to their success as external. Reid expressed worries about the New York State budget and whether tuition funding for students with disabilities, upon which he relies, would be continue to be appropriated. He described track fires on the subway's G-train that make him late to class. Jenny was frustrated at faculty and staff who didn't notice that she was struggling because of an undiagnosed learning disability. Marissa and Christopher talked passionately about faculty who affected their self-esteem and undermined their academic success. Christopher complained about courses not being available at convenient times, and the expensive textbooks assigned by the professors who wrote them. Melissa described the challenge presented by her husband and five children:

> No, when I do homework, my biggest fight now is I can't get any peace and quiet in the home. And I keep saying I'm gonna stay in school until I get my

> assignments done. But because I feel bad, being that he's always with the children, I end up staying home and I leave everything to the last minute, and then you see me stressing out, and I feel like I want to pull out my hair because I know I have to have this work done for school. (M. Rodriguez, personal communication, October 9, 2009)

At the same time they conveyed general feelings of insecurity about the forces which affect their academic lives, all had already overcome struggles to come this far. So while the frustrations and stressors were expressed as external, students at Livingston expressed determination to finish college and amazing resourcefulness. Their actions demonstrated internal locus of control: they would fight for successful outcomes. Marissa expresses, "I think that the difference is that even though it hasn't been easy for myself because I've been to that point that I just wanted to say, 'I wanna give up. This is not for me. I can't do it.' I just know that at the end of the day or in the future that I need a degree in order to move on," (M. Diaz, personal communication, April 13, 2010).

Interview rhetoric of the students at Commonwealth also conveyed a high internal locus of control. They all described developing compensatory strategies and study techniques as their personal keys to getting through college. Mark uses a pen with green ink; Megan moved her desk into her bedroom so she can shut the door for absolute quiet. Alison describes her approach to school work and places the onus for success on herself:

> I feel so confident…I just have come up with many strategies and just am a better student now as a result of knowing all this…Yeah, with studying I guess I know that because my memory is a little wishy washy sometimes it's better for me to go over my notes; like re-write them all which I had never done before…And just

> like taking extra time to go over things has really helped me. I used to speed through things. And starting earlier; just blocking out my time more. And actually just – I feel like I was so discouraged when I wasn't doing as well as I thought I should so that I just didn't really do the reading or do what I should have done. So I do the reading and I go prepared to class and I participate more. That's pretty much it. (A. Hofmann, personal communication, April 14, 2010)

Commonwealth students made little mention of external barriers impeding success. In fact, only two students used the word "stress" in their interview at all. Many of the external stressors the Livingston students experienced were non-existent for the Commonwealth students, and basic material differences account for this. None of the Commonwealth students had to commute long distances, for example: all lived in dorms or nearby campus apartments. None of the Commonwealth students were parents. While some were involved with internships and campus activities, none had significant full-time or part-time jobs. None relied heavily on external tuition funding. Christopher from low-SES Livingston described not being able to get the classes he needed and struggles physically with a 14-hour day, while Brendan from high-SES Commonwealth described, "I do go see the dean at the beginning of the semester and the dean usually insures that I get into the classes." Aware of the effects of stress on academic achievement per Brougham et al. (2009) this difference in external barriers could account for noted differences between the Livingston and Commonwealth students interviewed in factors like time-to-degree and GPA.

**Identity and Personal Motivation.**

This clear difference between how students experience the exacerbation or mitigation of external stressors reemerges when students were asked to describe a typical student at their college. Their comments spoke loudly about demands on their time and the nature of the school. The Commonwealth students spoke positively and invoked student personality traits. Alison described a typical Commonwealth student as "Pretty hard working; sociable, involved," and Megan's response was very similar: "Probably a hard worker but they like to have fun, and most of the people here are caring." Carrie used the adjectives "nice, outgoing", and Brendan describes them as "easy going for the most part. Goes to class and has fun on the weekends." Their comments are largely insular to the campus experience.

Livingston students, more of whom balance work and family obligations, recognized these realities when describing a typical Livingston student. Marissa acknowledges out-of-school demands and says of the typical student, "There are so much students here that either work full-time and go to school full-time or go to school full-time and work part-time, who have kids or are in service." Reid acknowledges this vocational orientation and describes the typical Livingston student by saying, "They wanna get a good education to prepare them to get a job after this," and Christopher reiterates this focus on the future with the descriptors "intelligent, stressful, and trying to get ahead".

Jenny and Melissa seemed unclear as to their sense of a typical Livingston student, indicating that they felt less social inclusion and more on their own. Jenny states, "I've never felt like a typical anybody. I just feel like Jenny. Like I don't even

know what a typical Livingston student is." Melissa's remarks mirror this self-reliance as she discounts herself as a typical student:

> I don't know, either. I can't answer that one because I need to know what's a typical Livingston student. I mean, I do see a lot of people standing in front of the building smoking and socializing, but I also see a lot of students that go to the labs, go for tutoring, go to their classes, so I don't know. I probably would say no because, like you said, I just come here, do what I've got to do and run home.

Christopher from Livingston also shares that he doesn't have many friends: "I seen them, but I never really approached them…We're in college…You just want - it's a big school - you just want - do that hour and a half and get out."

Each Livingston student describes going to college for a purpose, more of a means to an end. They are goal-driven and job-driven; higher education represents the path to a better life beyond present circumstances. Melissa describes her experiences as a parent at her children's school:

> And I tell my husband, these people at the school sometimes think that because I live around here that I'm uneducated and I don't know my rights as a parent or just as a person. And then, when they realize, the way I speak to them and the way I tell them I'm not one of these people that stay home, I work. I know my rights. I go to school. And I explain to them, they treat you differently. (M. Rodriguez, personal communication, October 9, 2009)

For her, the fact that she works is the first characteristic that separates her from the other moms. She wants to get ahead and move away from the drugs and violence in her

neighborhood and says, “I mean, personally, like I tell my husband, I want to save money and do what I have to do to move my children out of that area.”

Jenny is also explicit about wanting a better future for herself what finishing college will mean for her financially: “I just go to school because I have to go to school...I go to school just to have my degrees because I have to have my degrees, for me to get a good job and to accomplish to buy my house in five years.” This emphasis on employment might surely derive from the students’ present financial insecurity. In his interview Christopher asserts, “College is my full-time job,” as if the job and not college is the higher good, or that he has to justify the fact that he doesn’t work. Christopher specifically mentioned wanting a job with [health] benefits. These Livingston students are supremely in touch with economic survival. This underlying motivation colors how they view themselves within the college experience.

**Stigma and Disability.**

There was less difference noted across schools when it came to how students felt about their disability label. Students at both Livingston and Commonwealth felt embarrassed or stigmatized for having a learning disability, whereas others seemed unfazed. Interestingly, “stigma” appeared in Atlas.ti 6 as one of the most frequent inductive codes emerging from the transcripts of the 20 staff and student interviewed in this study. As an “invisible” disability, learning disabilities claim a unique trait compared to other disability categories: student stigma results from self-identifying. Though as Simi Linton (1998) points out, there is nothing invisible about the real impacts of disability on outcomes like graduation rates or employment as described in Chapters

One and Two. This section portrays how some students would rather struggle in coursework without needed accommodations rather than open themselves up to stigma.

Stigma is a theme associated with early writings in Disability Studies. In his seminal 1963 work Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity, social theorist Erving Goffman defines stigma as, "the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance." Goffman writes in a pre-Civil Rights era and contrasts "the stigmatized" with "we normals". Even though much of this rhetoric doesn't resonate today, his core ideas remain relevant and lend insight to excerpts from students included here.

No clear patterns emerged for this difference in terms of socioeconomic status or age of diagnosis, but gender seemed to matter. Of the six women interviewed across the two colleges, only Alison seemed untroubled by the label although she acknowledges the potential stigma:

> You probably feel weaker if you have a disability but I think the fact that I didn't know for so long and then I knew and so much changed as a result is probably why I'm not upset about it just because I have no reason to be embarrassed. It's just natural. (A. Hofmann, personal communication, April 14, 2010)

The other women did not share Alison's equanimity. Even Megan's closest friends didn't know she had a learning disability. Megan describes, "I don't want anybody to know I have a learning disability. Because, I don't know – some people might think just because you have a learning disability you're stupid. I have a little bit of concerns with that with my professor now." Carrie, also from Commonwealth, shared,

> Yes but I'm still like to this day kind of embarrassed like I don't like telling a lot

> of people. Close friends – I guess I shouldn't feel ashamed of it because a lot of people tend to have learning disabilities I think but it's something that I still hide from a lot of people. I feel like some people just it's none of their business for them to know…at least in college I feel like it's so competitive and there are such high standards and people are so judgmental and I just don't wanna be judged by my peers for being different but I'm really not that different. (C. Berrett, personal communication, April 14, 2010)

At Livingston, not only did female students express not feeling comfortable with the label, but this discomfort affected their willingness to request accommodations. Even though she has been tested and diagnosed with a learning disability, Melissa refuses to access disability services. She comments,

> I guess, maybe, because my sister made it seem like it's something to be ashamed of and embarrassed, even though I told her it's nothing to be embarrassed about, so maybe, in some ways, I feel the way she does. And as far as a pity grade, when you have an IEP and you're in public school, they put you in a smaller class, but they tend to throw in children that have more than just a learning disability.
>
> And growing up, you get to hear other children call you names, even if you don't have a mental disability, they try to say that you do have a mental disability, and that's why you have the learning disability. So just, I guess, not to be labeled, basically, that's it, just not to be labeled. I'd rather not say. I'd rather just do what I have to do to earn my grade. (M. Rodriguez, personal communication, October 9, 2009)

Jenny also admitted not wanting to tell people about her learning disability and said, "I don't really disclose it to a lot of people, but because maybe because they're not gonna understand." Melissa and Jenny voice what Goffman described 50 years ago as "displeasure in being exposed" (p. 16).

Similarly, Marissa did not access disability services at the beginning of her college career at Livingston and expresses embarrassment and even guilt:

> There was a semester when I first started here at Livingston, I don't remember if it was the first semester or second semester, I did not do a contract because I felt – I got to a point, I don't remember why, I felt embarrassed. Because I wanted to be – I felt like I was not normal. And it wasn't fair to other students that I got extra time and they didn't. And they were trying to struggle to finish and meet the time. (M. Diaz, personal communication, April 13, 2010)

Conversely the men did not share feelings of being stigmatized by their disability label, nor did it affect their willingness to access services. Reid said, "No, I never get embarrassed," when asked about going to the Disability Services Office at Livingston. Brendan was very casual about whether his friends knew he had a learning disability: "I think some of them did but not all of them did. It wasn't really something. I guess it wasn't talked about, just normal." Mark seemed the most unguarded of the students interviewed:

> I'm very open with my learning difference. I have no problem telling the teacher the first day of class hey I have dyslexia, so when you see numbers or my handwriting they know ahead of time. So I've been a very big self-advocate, and that's what I like here you have to be – you don't have to be a self-advocate, but it

> helps because you set up the time to take your tests separately if you need them. You ask for extra help. It's all on our shoulders, which I like. (M. Fox, personal communication, March 11, 2010)

His use of the word 'difference' in the first sentence might signal an attempt to distance himself from having a 'disability', but he makes an immediate connection to self-advocacy, a hallmark of the disability rights movement.

This interesting variance shows that women may experience stigma more acutely because gender and disability render them members of two non-hegemonic groups (Boylan, 1991). Adrienne Asch and Michelle Fine write, "Disabled women are arguably doubly oppressed" and discuss findings about their lower levels of self-esteem than both disabled and non-disabled men (1997, p.241). My focus here is not to portray these students as disempowered objects of stigma, but to bring attention to the societal processes which result in these students' statements: Stigma is a contextualized feeling, a relationship between stigmatized and nonstigmatized (Coleman, 1997, p.218).

Goffman describes another facet of feeling stigmatized: "Members of a particular stigma category will have a tendency to come together into small social groups whose members all derive from the category" (p.23). This leaning is evidenced in interview data from Jenny. When she talks about her friends at Livingston Jenny remarks, "I say our world, because our world down here is different from the outside world of Livingston…So I can say Livingston is divided from disabled students, and from regular students." Most of the other students interviewed had friends both with and without disabilities.

**Entitlement.**

While worries about stigma from peers or faculty surface at both colleges, student word choice reveals that expectations of support from faculty and staff more clearly bifurcate across lines of school socioeconomic status. The confidence Commonwealth students express that they will be successful in college and that faculty and staff will help them is reinforced by their own telling language.

"Accommodation" is a noun used in the ADA legislation to describe a "modification or adjustment" (DOJ, 2008). Students at Commonwealth misappropriate this word by using the verb 'accommodate,' defined as "to do a kindness or a favor to" or the adjective 'accommodating,' which means "easy to deal with," (Dictionary.com, 2010). In this use, the people, not the disability, are accommodated. Carrie describes staff at Commonwealth with, "they *accommodate* me". Alison says, "he just completely *accommodated* to everything I needed." With the dean's assistance, Brendan finds "professors that are supposedly more *accommodating*," and Mark describes the Disability Services Office with, "They're very *accommodating* up there".

Christopher is the only Livingston student to use this verb, but he does so in referencing the ADA language: "They have [to] always *accommodate* me because it's required by law." Mark from Commonwealth echoes this legal mandate saying, "No, I give [my accommodations letter] to them, so then I have no problem because if I want the extra time, I had the documentation in, they have to give it to me in some sense. So I'm not gonna be withheld from it."

This insistence from Mark that accommodations will not be withheld from him is akin to what is characterized by staff as a typical response from a student at a high-SES

college. Donna from low-SES Livingston relays an anecdote from a colleague about a transfer student:

> Somebody mentioned that they got a family who was at - I want to say it was [high-SES college], and they came like expecting all of these bells and whistles that we don't have - you know, she didn't have...But it was telling because she was like, 'We can't' - she didn't necessarily talk about the services but she definitely mentioned that they came with this high level of expectation that they were not able to meet the same level. (D. Johnson, personal communication, September 28, 2009)

She references another high-SES college that Donna knows has the same budget that she has for one-third the number of students with disabilities. She acknowledges that students with disabilities at the high-SES college receive more robust supports and admits, "obviously, with the same budget we have for a smaller number, you can provide so many more services to your students." Staff are aware of the material differences between college Disability Services Offices across the SES spectrum in New York City.

Students who are in the position to choose perceive this material difference as well. Compare the comments by Brendan and Jenny in Table Nine. Both students express what is available to them as a matter of fact, and there is an implicit difference in not only what they're getting but what they demand they get.

**Table Nine**
**Contrast in Student Comments about Services Available to Them at Their College**

| Student | Comment about services available at their college |
|---|---|
| Brendan (at high-SES Commonwealth) | My public high school was known for having good, excellent special services. That was something I wanted to make sure I had the same thing. |
| Jenny (at low-SES Livingston) | So I'm struggling in his class now, but I need it, and there's no tutoring, there's nothing for this class. |

The students at Commonwealth describe the robustness of support services available to them outside the bounds of reasonable accommodations. With one quarter of the students and five times the tuition of Livingston, Commonwealth College envelops undergrads in a safety net of administrator concern, writing and tutoring services and open-door faculty offices. Brendan recounts:

> I used to use the writing center a lot, sometimes tutoring for Economics or Math. Usually for those things I just go see the professor. [They're always available.] Sometimes if a tutor's not available, the SRC director will find someone for me, which is I guess another perk. (B. Symon, personal communication, March 4, 2010).

Alison described how the Disability Services Officer "went like way beyond his duties there and helped us" to intervene in a conflict with her college dorm roommates. She continues, "They'll basically do whatever you ask them to help you with if it's like within the area that you need help. But they go over and beyond what they have to do I think to help you." Carrie expressed, "I still freak out all the time," and works hard to do well. When she doesn't get the results she wants she tells herself she'll just have to try harder

next time. But while she conveys an attitude of pulling herself up by her bootstraps, this perspective is scaffolded by support she receives from Commonwealth staff. She describes an anxiety attack she had when she first started college:

> My mom called [Commonwealth staff] the next day and explained how I was so overwhelmed and how I didn't know how to like time manage myself well at all. And she called him and like explained the situation and he called me and was like 'Carrie you're done with midterms. You're almost – you're half way there.' He was just so reassuring. He was such a nice man and he really made me feel a lot better. He was really just like so caring. (C. Berrett, personal communication, April 14, 2010)

The students at Commonwealth described routine supports beyond reasonable accommodations. This contrasted sharply with an exchange with Melissa at Livingston, who didn't want to request any accommodations at all, and was sure that this was the norm in culture and practice: "Yeah, but I'm sure there's a lot of other people you're going to hear them say the same thing, they don't want to feel like they're a burden to someone." Melissa is far from entitled; she barely feels deserving. Her peer Christopher does admit to being entitled in his response to my question of how he knows so much about the disability laws:

> I think it's experience dealing with all the special services I had throughout my life. I think I've become a whiz of what I'm entitled to and – but that's basically how I – how I became a – not an expert – but as a citizen, you gotta be aware of your rights, and I made sure that I'm aware, what I'm entitled to, and what I need to succeed. (C. Henry, personal communication, April 13, 2010

His tone is more pugilist than privileged: he's talking about advocacy within the bounds of what is legally provided under the ADA.

The Commonwealth students discuss the level of services they receive as being an important part of their college decision process. Some even met with the DSO at Commonwealth before they were admitted. None of the Livingston students did this. Brendan from Commonwealth shared, "I met the director of the SRSC prior to coming to Commonwealth College. Actually, that's what made my decision to come here." Before Mark got accepted into college there, he remembers that disability services staff asked him, "What accommodations would you like to see, is there anything that you haven't had and that you want?" The emphasis is on opportunity and preference, not limits.

Interestingly, the Commonwealth students also became assimilated to the amount of support they received. When asked specifically about their accommodations Brendan, Mark and Megan named discrete supports. Throughout the course of the interview additional accommodations emerged. I assert these students were so accustomed to receiving them that they had become internalized. Privilege is understood as the norm. When asked how he finances his education, Mark replies, "Just through *regular*: parents" (emphasis added).

In making sense of the patterns of entitlement, Commonwealth students' expectation of personalized benefits beyond accommodation, use of Bourdieu proves helpful. For Bourdieu the educational system is a site of symbolic power which "has become the institution most responsible for the transmission of social inequality in modern society" (Swartz, 1997, p.190). Bourdieu's concept of habitus would explain the disposition of students at a high-SES college to act in ways that reproduce distinctions of

class status. He describes the elite French universities' "consecration" of students, where "All activities are designed to nurture a charismatic quality of entitlement" (p. 205). Interview data excerpted in this section demonstrate how this Bourdieuian 'consecration' takes place at high-SES Commonwealth.

As largely first-generation college students, the low-SES Livingston students do not have the cultural capital to embolden them to make special requests. Nor does staff there have the budget to grant an individual request that they couldn't replicate. Donna, the Livingston DSO, gives an example:

> It's something that we can accommodate. We can do it. It's $25. I mean, right - now if we had, now, 50 more students coming to say, 'Oh, we need and we need and we' - you know, we would decide, for example, the note-taking...But it's becoming such a cost issue and the more students that come with LD the more we have to kinda rethink, 'Okay, what do we do?' (D. Johnson, personal communication, September 28, 2009)

Material constraints there mean that provision of services cannot exceed those required by law.

**Conclusion**

The students interviewed at Livingston and Commonwealth explored a wealth of ideas and memories about their families, schooling and learning disabilities. An emphasis on personal narrative is important here. Themes like stress, identity, stigma and entitlement pop out of these dialogues and I'd like to briefly theorize these as a whole. These interviewees are a sample of thousands of students with learning disabilities in

New York City for whom concepts like 'other' and 'normate' shift from one subway stop to the next. This diversity can be liberating, and yet difficult themes like stigma remain.

I posit that the processes by which students must self-identify in order to receive disability services in college exacerbate feeling ‘other’. Even if they reject a medical model of disability philosophically, students must subject themselves to the medicalization of disability by obtaining evaluations describing their cognitive limitations. It is no wonder, then, that embarrassment or entitlement is a reaction to this process as students negotiate their own power. As Shakespeare (1996) describes, “Social approaches [to disability] view negative self-identity as a result of the experience of oppressive social relations, and focus attention on the possibilities for changing society, empowering disabled people, and promoting a different self-understanding.” The students interviewed here seem to be in various stages of claiming their personal agency and making demands for political and social change.

## Chapter Seven: Theory Testing

### Averting Damage

In April 2010 I presented some preliminary data from this study at an international disability conference. The audience, a mix of college administrators, disability services staff, self-advocates and parent advocates, seemed interested in the research findings and asked engaging questions during the Q & A period. One mother raised her hand, stood up and stated, "So what I hear you saying is that my son is better off going to a private college than a public one."

I winced, knowing this was an unfortunate but fair response to my raw data. As Disability Studies scholar Rosemarie Garland Thomson (2001) reminds us, "All representations have social and political consequences." I thought about my work within and respect for CUNY, which provides quality educational and disability services to thousands of students. I also thought of my advisor and her insistence about the importance to work with theory robustly, which I had momentarily set aside in consideration of the conference's largely practitioner audience. No, the purpose of my research was never to reiterate that it's easier to go through life with resources than to struggle. From an academic perspective, it seemed clear to me that my study aimed to describe the texture of *how* things happen for students, of how they actually live their way through college, and how colleges address the needs of students with learning disabilities. In that exchange with this mother, I realized in a new and dire way that I owed it to every family who experiences disability to be able to communicate my findings effectively and with nuance to a broad audience. The "So what?" question loomed.

Coincidentally, I had recently read Eve Tuck's Fall 2009 article in the *Harvard Educational Review*, "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities". Tuck, on faculty at SUNY New Paltz, is a graduate of my doctoral program and a friend thought the piece may be of interest and sent it along. While Tuck's own focus is indigenous peoples, she calls on social scientists to become accountable for the ways they might conduct "research that operates, even benevolently, from a theory of change that establishes harm or injury in order to achieve reparation." In a quest for social justice, researchers "expose ongoing structural inequity" and are "testifying to damage so that persecutors will be forced to be accountable", but "after the research team leaves…all we are left with is the damage." I feared that my presentation had left that questioning mother with the damage that students with LD or from lower SES backgrounds were inherently 'less than'.

Tuck calls for an epistemological shift to a framework of desire. She explains that, "desire-based research frameworks are concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives," and emphasizes "wisdom and hope". I certainly saw desire in the students I interviewed: desire for a good education, desire for a meaningful career, desire to not be reduced to one's disability label, desire to create a better life for one's children, desire for a full social life. For these reasons mixed method research was important to me; the multi-faceted data in this dissertation present numerous stories of complex persons in even more complicated college and urban environments. To me, merely living in New York City can be a daily act of survival and triumph. For all of the students featured here, graduation day stands within reach.

For Tuck, a litmus test becomes "What can research really do to improve this situation?" I worry whether my own research will make any difference in the lived

experience of New York City college students with learning disabilities. And if not, is it ethical to conduct this research at all? Tuck's challenge affects not just the means, but the end. This was the students' challenge to me, too. At the conclusion of one of my student interviews, she thanked me for choosing this topic. Another student interviewee asked, "Will it change the way college is?" Marissa from Livingston emphasized the importance of disseminating information on people with disabilities:

> There hasn't been anything out there that educates people and gives them the knowledge of what a learning disability consists of because once you tell somebody you have a learning disability, they think either you're slow or you're retarded, and it's not that. It's just that some people need more time than others to get things, but that does not mean that they can't do everything else normal. . (M. Diaz, personal communication, April 13, 2010)

Several more students requested that I email my dissertation to them when I was done.

These were all humbling moments which furthered my thinking about the way in which my research might serve to honor the individuals I chose to engage in this project. After getting to know them, this aim seemed increasingly important. Could I imagine that my research might improve the situation of students with disabilities more broadly? I had hoped for it from the beginning. But these moments also reinforced for me that my choice to focus on the institution as my unit of analysis was the right one. In this study, deficits should be attributed to systems, not people. I have no interest in stigmatizing students; rather, my research questions aim to examine the way colleges' policy and practice impact students' experiences.

More personally, I have been a classroom teacher and interact consistently with college students in my present position. Being with them is a privilege and a thrill. I want all kinds of students to succeed in school and life, and I bristle at policies and rhetoric that seem to create barriers to this success. Interviewing students for this project was difficult and neutrality seemed daunting. How could I listen to students who were too afraid to request accommodations without coaxing them to advocate for themselves? How could I listen to students' self-doubt and hold back from reaffirming and encouraging them? I interrogate my own positionality and endeavor upon Tuck's framework of desire to present an adequately complex picture of subjects' lived lives.

To further support these methodological choices, I'd like to briefly discuss the perspective presented in William Bowen and colleagues' book Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America's Public Universities. Dr. Bowen, former President of both Princeton University and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, was invited by CUNY Office of Academic Affairs to present findings from this recent effort to a small group of faculty and staff on April 22, 2010. Certainly a well-respected giant in higher educational circles, Dr. Bowen's data did not resonate for me with the experiences of those students with whom I interact daily. While factors such as a student's having to work may increase time-to-degree, this need to work isn't typically based on desires for consumptive goods like flat-screen TVs as he suggests, but on truly making ends meet for one's family.

As I listened to Bowen himself describe the principle of "undermatching" and advocate for the need to raise expectations so that students attend more competitive colleges, I kept thinking about the responsibility of colleges to educate students well and

help them persist, regardless of the campus they attend. Success is a two-way relationship between student and college, after all. Susan Wendell (1997) calls for the questioning of our "cultural obsession with independence and ultimately replacing it with such a model of reciprocity" (p. 273).

This question of access— and the growing belief and practice that higher education can be accessible to everyone— is only viable if all kinds of students are supported across institutions of higher education. This could not be more true for students with disabilities. As Garland Thompson (2001) asserts, “Imagining disability as ordinary, as the typical rather than the atypical human experience, can promote practices of equality and inclusion that begin to fulfill the promise of a democratic order.” This democratic order is fundamentally challenged by the socioeconomic realities that face these students.

**Political Economy**

Political economy provides a compelling context for understanding the socioeconomic and legal boundary lines shaping higher education. The data paint a picture of students with disabilities as being more likely to attend community college than four-year colleges, less likely to stay in college, graduating at lower rates, and ultimately being under- or unemployed. These trends are also true for poor students. I have endeavored to describe how these factors are mitigated or exacerbated for students with learning disabilities across the spectrum of socioeconomic backgrounds.

Political economy theory underlies my findings and is also embedded within them. The distribution of economic resources makes a difference in every facet of

service provision and use. For scholars who believe it to be a powerful determinant in social events, this makes perfect sense. As Rothman (2005) states, "I once read somewhere that the United States doesn't have a culture; it has an economy. The values of the market are the dominant values, and they affect everything. Everything" (p. 30).

In this study, differences in the distribution of material resources affect where students go to college, how long it takes them to finish, their lived environments, how they advocate for themselves and the support services available to them. On an institutional level, these differences also affect tuition costs, university budgets and the resources available to Disability Services Officers. These are just a few examples that emerged from this research. I find that political economy theory provides a meaningful lens for my work in part because as it reveals problems it simultaneously reveals potential solutions. Resource allocation is malleable.

In President Obama's 2011 State of Union Address, he declared:

> To compete, higher education must be within the reach of every American…if we raise expectations for every child, and give them the best possible chance at an education, from the day they are born until the last job they take, we will reach the goal that I set two years ago: By the end of the decade, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world.

But President Obama is not speaking here about education for education's sake; this is education for the economy's sake. His powerful rhetoric underscores the principle that higher education is an attainable means by which individuals, "Americans" no less, can rise economically. And yet, the trends of disinvestment in public higher education are well-cited. The vast majority of Americans attend college at public institutions, and yet

federal and state funding for higher education is often seen as a privilege rather than an entitlement, and so competing demands for resources necessitate budget cuts (Binder, 2006).

This economic reality for institutions of higher education and the students who attend them has very real consequences, and these have been documented in Chapters One, Two, Four, Five and Six. In a neoliberal economy, economic competition dictates that there are winners and losers. As David Harvey (2005) describes:

> If conditions among the lower classes deteriorated, this was because they failed, usually for personal and cultural reasons, to enhance their own human capital (through dedication to education, the acquisition of a Protestant work ethic, submission to work discipline and flexibility, and the like). Particular problems arose, in short, because of competitive strength or because of personal, cultural and political failings. In a Darwinian neoliberal world, the argument went, only the fittest should and do survive. (p. 157)

The realities of our political economy are too often disguised as meritocracy, which leads us to the final piece of theory testing.

**Meritocracy**

It is worth mentioning first that low-SES Livingston College and high-SES Commonwealth College admit the same percentage of applicants, according to data reported in IPEDS. They have the same Carnegie Classification. Neither school is open admissions; presumably, the students who attend there are qualified to be there. The vast

majority of students from both schools move ahead from first year to second year, though retention rates are about 10 percent higher at Commonwealth than Livingston.

I include this comment because I want the reader to understand why meritocracy is a useful lens in this study. So often student achievement or failure is rhetorically attributed to students being prepared (or not) for college, working hard (or not) in college, or deserving to be (or not to be) enrolled in college in the first place. Problematizing the notion of meritocracy creates space for conceptualizing shortcomings as those of an institution like the government or a college, instead of assuming deficiencies are embodied within students. For example, Rosenbaum and colleagues (2006) effectively show how community colleges hinder student retention through hurdles like bureaucratic complexity and lack of counseling. Karabel's general point is to bring attention to the ways society raises an eyebrow when someone mentions he attended an Ivy League institution when history clearly tells us that access isn't determined by reaching some exalted criteria; the rules of the game shift to benefit those who best know how to play. As one recent study of legacy admissions at 30 highly-selective colleges revealed, a high school student applying to a parent's alma mater was seven times more likely to be admitted (Lewin, 2011). Maximally Maintained Inequality (MMI) discussed in Chapter One helps explain this: privileged groups have first claim on education and opportunity (Shavit et al., 2007).

Wrangling with these ideas enables the educator to break out of the tired refrain of 'My students aren't college ready' and instead creates an expectation for colleges on the part of students. The aim of my theory work is for colleges to better recognize and amend those practices that privilege some groups of students and not others. As Anyon

point out, "we are not after theory for theory's sake. We expect social products" (2009, p.5).

Karabel's treatment of meritocracy in The Chosen is gripping, for he's addressing more than just admission policies at Harvard, Princeton and Yale, the schools upon which the book is based. He's ultimately discussing the fabric of U.S. society and ideology altogether. When it comes to living the American dream through economic mobility, no city is more historically iconic than New York. It was New York City to where Horatio Alger himself relocated when opportunities in Puritanical New England dwindled. Similarly thousands of students enroll in college in New York City each year, many with the singular goal of getting ahead in life.

Karabel posits that regardless of societal context, the definition of merit that prevails "generally expresses the idea of dominant groups" (p. 4). These groups, which Karabel personifies as the elite colleges, reach out to the disenfranchised at their discretion in particular historical moments to reinforce the idea "that success in America is a function of individual merit rather than family background," a belief necessary to preserve the social order (p. 545). Unlike race, gender and ethnicity, social class has not been largely redefined as a source of inequality of opportunity (p. 539), and I would add, neither has disability. Most admission processes are need- and disability-blind; students apply for financial aid and disability accommodations through separate processes. This only serves to reinforce the belief that students from lower SES backgrounds or students with disabilities should and can compete equally with their peers even though national data show that the cards are stacked against them.

In line with Karabel, my interest lies with the institutional responses of colleges and its staff. Per Burawoy (1991), I reconstruct Karabel's theoretical discussion since this study examines the college experience after admissions. I also extend it here to encapsulate the basic tenets of the federal laws to which colleges are responding. It is through this exercise of theory testing that I intend to answer my original research questions.

1. **Are federal policies with regard to students with learning disabilities implemented differently in institutions of higher education in New York City with different socioeconomic class populations? If so, how?**

The meritocratic principle of equality of opportunity, again, "the principle that an individual's chance to get ahead should not be limited by social origins or by ascribed characteristics such as race or gender" (Karabel, 2005, p.4), is built into the federal legislation. Phrases in Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act like "otherwise qualified" and the focus on the individual's own unique disability and ability assume that once a reasonable accommodation provides a level playing field, a person with a disability should be able to compete for opportunities and resources with everyone else. Additional language is worth noting:

> [A]ids, benefits, and services, to be equally effective, are not required to produce the identical result or level of achievement for handicapped and nonhandicapped persons, but must afford handicapped persons *equal opportunity* to obtain the same result, to gain the same benefit, or to reach

> the same level of achievement, in the most integrated setting appropriate to the person's needs. (emphasis added)

The students interviewed in this study largely echo this philosophy, and understand the terms set out by the Rehab Act. Marissa from Livingston College describes her fierce determination to 'obtain the same result':

> I think it was the way I was raised with the disability. My mom knew I had a disability, but the disability was not stopping me from doing anything normal like everybody else... But a lot of people would say, “Oh, she has a learning disability, you could get extra money for her.” My mom never wanted that for me. “Oh, why are you buying her a MetroCard? She could get a special MetroCard for it.” I think that’s the reason why, the way I was raised, that I just don’t wanna bother with it even if I’m struggling with money. I just do everything on my own. (M. Diaz, personal communication, April 13, 2010)

Carrie from Commonwealth also asserts this desire to 'reach the same level of achievement': “I feel like anyone can do well if you just try your hardest. I think that there’s just a lot of people who just don’t put in the time. It’s up to the student to get their work done.”

While these two students are similarly determined to get ahead through their own hard work, the primary difference between Marissa and Carrie in this comparison is that Marissa really does have to do everything on her own. As an independent student, she works full-time and rents a room in someone else's apartment in order to put herself

through school. Carrie, on the other hand, describes her mother's request to Commonwealth staff to check up on Carrie when she was feeling stressed about school. The ways in which these two students practically tackle college to produce the same 'level of achievement' is markedly dissimilar.

The ADA also describes 'an equal opportunity' and feeds this view of meritocracy; this feature seems in line with its design as legislation for settings like the workplace. In the United States the higher education system operates very much akin to the free market and labor market; its corporatization has been well documented (Washburn, 2005). On a level playing field, those who work hard get ahead. Adrienne Asch and Michelle Fine recognize that this framework is an insufficient response to people with disabilities:

> We suggest that progress for disabled people will not be achieved through stress on equality of opportunity alone, no matter how crucial such equality is, and we believe that disability rights theorists and activities can borrow from socialist-feminists who call for societal transformation in addition to equality of opportunity within existing arrangements. (1997, p.252)

Thus the converse view in meritocracy, equality of condition, is "the principle that inequalities of wealth, power and status should be kept to the minimum level possible" (Karabel, 2005, p.4). For equality of condition to be implemented as a reality for college students, most everything about American higher education would need to change, from cost-prohibitive tuition to deep disparities in retention. As Karabel pessimistically comments,

> Those with greater resources— cultural, economic and social— will generally be able to ensure that the educational system will deem their children more meritorious. In this specific sense, the ideal of a meritocracy— a system in which power plays no role in defining 'merit' and in which rich and poor alike enjoy genuinely equal opportunities to succeed— is inherently unattainable. (p. 550)

Beyond education more generally, the focus of this dissertation is on college students with learning disabilities and the policies, practices or socioeconomic effects which shape their college experience. Interestingly, equality of condition's interest in mollifying the inequalities of wealth, power and status could be accomplished through mandated accommodations. A note taker is a note taker, and extra time is extra time; the students and staff interviewed in this study all talked about giving and receiving the same set of reasonable accommodations. Low-, medium- and high-Pell schools alike met the de jure needs of their learning disabled students.

But de facto, the Commonwealth students undeniably received accommodations beyond those typically provided, and described meeting with Deans to choose classes or being assisted far beyond the scope of their disability with issues like bad roommates. Repeatedly, LD students enrolled there expressed feeling a tremendous level of support from the Disability Services Office and made comments like, "He set me up with everything. He cared. You could tell he wasn't going to leave you out to dry" (Brendan); "He just told me what we could do to make things easier" (Megan); and ""You know if you ever need any help, if you just ever need someone to talk to I'm here" (Carrie).

Administrative, survey and interview data provided sufficient evidence to substantiate the answer that yes, federal policies with regard to students with learning disabilities are implemented differently in institutions of higher education in New York City with different socioeconomic class populations. As Ferri and Connor (2006) lament, "Although we may embrace equality and justice as a basic value, we do not expect to see it in practice" (p.12). In addition to accommodations or 'services', extra 'supports' are made available to students at schools with wealthier student body populations. From exhaustive student services to access to high-level administrators, auxiliary resources abound at Commonwealth. As a result, this feeling of being supported was pervasive for students there. In nearly every case, when asked what disability services students received, one or two services were mentioned and then later on in the conversation several more surfaced. Students had thoroughly assimilated to the level of support they received and perceived it as typical, not extra.

So what effect did this difference have? My second research question asked:

**2. Does variance in policy implementation and student body social class impact the college experience of students with learning disabilities? If so, how?**

Yes, the variance does impact the college experience of students with learning disabilities. The difference resonates loudly when students are specifically asked to describe their college experience. Examples of interview responses laid out in Table Ten depict the contrast in experiencing college as struggle or enjoyment.

**Table Ten**
**Contrast in Student Interview Responses about College Experience**

| | ***Q: How would you describe your college experience?*** |
|---|---|
| **Livingston** | |
| Christopher | Challenging, but rewarding because I know once I finish with the degree, I have a better chance of getting a job than other people that don't have a degree. And the reason I say it's challenging is it's hard. It's hard if you don't work for it. There's a lot of stress involved. There's a lot of high anxiety. |
| Reid | And last semester it actually got worse for me because it's my first year. You know when you start your first year it's gonna be hard. |
| Marissa | College experience, it's not – it hasn't been easy. |
| **Commonwealth** | |
| Brendan | It's great. I enjoy it. We have a lot of fun. Classes are good. |
| Mark | The most fun I've had in four years from being active, classes, teachers, friends, the atmosphere, the people, it's great. |

Comparing these responses is telling. The extra supports received by the Commonwealth students— and I would argue, the difference in the schools' socioeconomic environments— create a difference in what's at stake for these students. Given the robust supports at Commonwealth, one could surmise why GPAs and retention are high. The Livingston students don't have the same safety net; hard work alone separates them from not persisting in college.

In conceptualizing the binary theories of meritocracy as laid out by Karabel, it would seem as if a college facilitating equality of condition would generate the landscape necessary for students in low-SES colleges to succeed despite "inequalities of wealth, power and status". Equality of opportunity predicts that students from high-SES colleges

would better thrive when benefits from a socioeconomic advantage boost them above the crowd. The evidence and arguments in this chapter reinforce this.

But there's a dynamic evident in the data that undermines Karabel's principles: the schools and meritocratic principles actually seem to flip flop. In some ways, equality of opportunity can be seen through the environment at Livingston while equality of condition characterizes the landscape at Commonwealth. The students from Livingston were able to persist in college despite tremendous odds. In a kind of urban Darwinism, they knew how to survive if not thrive and were able to overcome significant obstacles. Livingston students relied on their own actions to make it through school and life, and succeed on their own merit, navigating college similar to the way they navigate life in New York City. In the end, the students with learning disabilities interviewed at both colleges will earn a baccalaureate degree. While each of their life paths will differ, they can expect to reap many of the economic benefits afforded to college graduates.

# Chapter Eight: What's Next?

## Recommendations for Policy and Practice

The recommendations included here are simple in light of the nuance and immensity of the challenges facing colleges. That said, certain features of disability services emerged repeatedly in interviews and merit discussion for college administrators looking to improve student outcomes. These recommendations do not presume to know what is best for people with disabilities but instead offer data-driven ideas for discussion and adaptation.

### 1. Location and Naming of Office

Stigma surfaced as a significant issue, and there seems to be conflicting wisdom between those who think Disability Services Offices should be clearly marked, and those who recommend they be more discreetly positioned. A difference seems to come from colleges wanting students to know about the availability of disability services versus students being able to access those services in a confidential way: these needs are paramount but competing. The New York City colleges visited during this study featured a wide, inconsistent range of options: placing the office in a counseling center, in a writing/tutoring center, in Student Affairs, as a stand-alone office, in a Dean's office, etc. Configuring office space where students with disabilities are able to access support services alongside their non-disabled peers seemed to encourage usage.

### 2. Early identification to Disability Services Office

Students in this study who identified themselves to the DSO, were tested and received accommodation determinations before classes were more likely to receive services or course exemptions in a timely way, and were less likely to fail or repeat a course. This has tremendous economic impact for students since courses carry a price tag. Colleges seemed to vary widely on whether they went after students or let students come after them: some actively marketed to high school students, while others made sure policies were printed in admissions materials. Some students mentioned that their high school counselors facilitated this transition. College admissions are typically disability-blind so even the most proactive university would not be able to identify students. As such, information directed at parents and high school counselors may enable traditional students to self-report sooner in the matriculation process.

### 3. Alerts for Non-Traditional Students

Non-traditional students over age 25 who are not coming to college directly from high school need their own system of information and supports. For those who may have attended some college before ADA legislation, they may be unaware of available services or even that they have a disability. Students may no longer have any or up-to-date documentation of their disability, making it difficult for them to request services. Colleges are now experimenting with early-warning detection systems for students who may be struggling academically (Brainard and Fuller, 2010). Special alerts should be placed on the records of non-traditional students who meet certain characteristics like failing a math or foreign language course so that targeted counseling services can be

enacted. A research effort including CUNY's Hunter College is exploring personal characteristics of people with disabilities to identify traits most likely to result in positive employment outcomes (J. Nelson, personal communication, December 15, 2010). Approaches like this should be coupled with disability education for classroom faculty, especially adjunct faculty who may not receive the same orientation information or be less aware of on-campus resources.

**4. Importance of Student Self-Advocacy**

Nearly all college students are legal adults, and the federal laws require students to self-identify in order to receive disability services. The onus is on students to advocate for what they are entitled to and need to be successful. One DSO interviewed from a medium-Pell school commented, "There's a direct correlation between students who robustly use our services and supports, and their success," (C. James, personal communication, February 19, 2010). Advocacy workshops would help all students, but especially at-risk students, to develop the skills they need to communicate and access supports and accommodations. Particular focus could be placed on female students and Asian students, as described in Chapters Four, Five and Six. Even if colleges are unable to fund incentives to students for their participation in such programming, they should remove barriers to participation and advocacy.

**5. Availability of non-disability support services**

As academic rigor increases when students get to college, many students are not equipped with the financial strength, knowledge and skills to be successful. A front-page story in

the Chronicle of Higher Education cited that an “analysis of nearly 1,400 four-year institutions shows that one-third reported lower graduation rates for the six-year period ending in 2008 than for the one ending in 2003” (Brainard and Fuller, 2010). Many factors such as rising tuition costs and increasing dependence on lower-cost adjunct instructors contribute to this issue, but student supports certainly are part of the equation to increase retention.

From research and writing skills, to citation or study skills, all students may need tutoring and other services throughout their college career. Opportunities for work-study, help with financial aid applications (Bettinger, et al., 2009), and education around financial literacy represent additional ways colleges should invest in the success of students and improve retention (Chen and DesJardins, 2010). Research in person-centered planning (Croke and Thompson, 2011) has also shown that individual meetings with youth with disabilities in which they are encouraged to express their goals helps them focus on personal strengths and priorities. Availability of supportive coaching sessions like these would improve students' focus on outcomes and identify necessary steps to achieve them.

**6. Access to no-cost evaluations**

One major barrier to the access of services is the huge expense of testing described in this study and referenced by several staff interviewed. Some colleges perceived testing their own students as a conflict of interest and it is the norm not to do so. This may also be attributable to schools' financial constraints. But a few schools provided testing as a key service for students who would not be able to readily access the service elsewhere. Even

sliding scale or low-cost providers often have long waiting lists or hours and locations that are difficult for students to get to during a busy day of school, work and family obligations. On-campus, no-cost testing by qualified personnel would increase the numbers of students with documented disabilities who are able to access accommodations.

**7. Education of and Communication with Faculty**

Students interviewed agreed that the majority of faculty were supportive of the provision of accommodations. Still, most students were able to provide vivid examples bordering on traumatic of the one or two isolated incidents where they believed faculty were disrespectful or dismissive. A recent survey of faculty highlights that faculty knowledge of legal responsibilities is an important predictor of whether they are willing to provide reasonable accommodations to students (Zhang et al., 2010). College administrators, Disability Services Offices, department chairs, faculty senate and professional associations should make increased efforts to educate faculty at all levels of rank about their responsibilities under the law. In addition, dissemination and implementation of pedagogical tools based on Universal Design in Instruction (UDI) may improve learning outcomes for all of their students.

These recommendations represent a robust approach to meeting students where they are and assisting them through the college-going process. Some are already in place in colleges across New York City. Despite costs, creative strategies should be carefully considered and implemented in appropriate ways for a given school's structure and

student demographic. As the prevalence of students diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders increases at record rates, for example, colleges that do not effectively address the needs of students with disabilities in targeted ways will find themselves ill-equipped to contend in the coming decades.

One challenge to the prospect of change in higher education to improve outcomes for students with disabilities is the necessary paradigm shift it requires by those with power to make policy. "Disabled people are 'other ' to able-bodied people, and the consequences are socially, economically and psychologically oppressive to the disabled," writes Susan Wendell (1997, p. 271).

**Questions for Future Research**

As research proceeds there are always questions that go unasked and limits as to what can be included within a project's scope. A future study I'd be interested to pursue is a NYC-based cost-benefit analysis of robust disability supports and student outcomes. Dedicated college staff manages to stretch resources and meet the legal requirements to accommodate students. But budget was routinely cited as an impediment to services: wish lists included learning coaches, evaluators and assistive technology. One college, unable to pay its student tutors, worked with its Registrar to creatively offer them priority class registration. At the same time, larger colleges and systems invest millions of dollars on programs to improve student retention. Large states and cities like New York also spend millions of dollars on workforce development and cash benefit programs. Certainly there is an economic impact on the individual and societal level to having an educated, employed workforce. Since students with disabilities persist and graduate with

degrees at lower-rates than typical peers in both private and public college, this would be a logical group on which to focus. It is my hypothesis that robust investment at the college level is small compared to public and private costs expended over a lifetime in terms of factors such as lost earnings or the generational effects of higher education.

Next, because SES proves such a strong predictor for college enrollment, persistence and graduation (Bowen et al., 2009), disability is a less interrogated factor. The research cited throughout this study shows that students with disabilities persist and graduate at lower rates, but student-level analysis holding SES constant would be another important avenue for extending quantitative research about the effects of disability status on student success.

Additionally, disability and socioeconomic status of college student body were the binary lenses for this study. Future focus on specific characteristics like gender, age, race and ethnicity, language-group or sexual orientation would be important contributions to the field. The thematic discussion of stigma and women in Chapter Six provides a glimpse of this. In addition to disability and SES, these traits would be interesting to consider in light of dynamics such as access to accommodations and self-advocacy. For example, while gender was not largely interrogated in this project, 77% of the schools included in this study had larger, sometimes overwhelmingly larger, student populations of women than men. In addition to robust inferential statistics, qualitative data understood through the lens of Queer Legal Theory (Lugg, 2003) may allow for exploring how students' multidimensionality affects phenomena like self-identifying, passing and performance as students develop and enact an academic identity in college.

## Conclusion

This dissertation aimed to explore the ways in which factors like socioeconomic status and disability affect the academic experience of New York City college students. Data presented show that both affect their internal feelings and external actions, which interact in various ways with attitudes of college staff and the broader campus community. It is within the web of these relationships that students achieve varying degrees of success based on what they and others believe they deserve and can access. The supports they receive make an important difference, and these are surely dependent upon material resources. Both paradigm and policy shifts are necessary and I have attempted to provide insight into both of these as a contribution to the efforts towards more democratic schools and communities. As Danforth (2006) posits, "A knowledge–practice conversation that facilitates the widest range of discussion and interaction provides the greatest social hope and practical utility." At the conclusion of this research, hope and utility are my earnest offerings.

# Appendix A

## NYC Colleges in Study Sample
## Key Data as Self-Reported by College to NCES and Pulled from IPEDS

| | Name | Pell-Usage Code: 08-09 (Derived) | Percent of First-time, Full-time Freshman Receiving Pell 08-09 (IPEDS) | Percent of Total Undergrads Receiving Pell 08-09 (IPEDS) | Total Undergrad Enrollment Fall 08 (Derived) | Total Undergrads Receiving Pell 08-09 (IPEDS) | Percent of Students with Disabilities Fall 08 (IPEDS) | Type |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Plaza College | High | 94% | 84% | 724 | 607 | 5% | for profit |
| 2 | Boricua College | High | 90% | 87% | 968 | 839 | 3% or less | not-for-profit |
| 3 | Touro College | High | 90% | 54% | 7915 | 4286 | 3% or less | not-for-profit |
| 4 | Monroe College-Main Campus | High | 87% | 73% | 4520 | 3312 | 3% or less | for profit |
| 5 | Metropolitan College of New York | High | 76% | 65% | 582 | 379 | 3% or less | not-for-profit |
| 6 | Berkeley College | High | 74% | 50% | 3802 | 1918 | 3% or less | for profit |
| 7 | CUNY Medgar Evers College | High | 71% | 53% | 6036 | 3178 | 3% or less | public |
| 8 | CUNY Lehman College | High | 69% | 49% | 9569 | 4669 | 3% or less | public |
| 9 | Vaughn College of Aeronautics and Technology | High | 68% | 55% | 1088 | 596 | 3% or less | not-for-profit |
| 10 | CUNY New York City College of Technology | High | 66% | 49% | 14268 | 6954 | 3% or less | public |
| 11 | DeVry College of NY | High | 66% | 57% | 939 | 534 | 3% or less | for profit |
| 12 | CUNY York College | High | 60% | 43% | 7111 | 3051 | 3% or less | public |
| 13 | Long Island University-Brooklyn Campus | High | 60% | 50% | 3938 | 1990 | 11% | not-for-profit |
| 14 | CUNY John Jay College Criminal Justice | High | 57% | 46% | 12943 | 5939 | 3% or less | public |
| 15 | CUNY City College | High | 55% | 43% | 11977 | 5187 | 3% or less | public |

| | Name | Pell-Usage Code: 08-09 (Derived) | Percent of First-time, Full-time Freshman Receiving Pell 08-09 (IPEDS) | Percent of Total Undergrads Receiving Pell 08-09 (IPEDS) | Total Undergrad Enrollment Fall 08 (Derived) | Total Undergrads Receiving Pell 08-09 (IPEDS) | Percent of Students with Disabilities Fall 08 (IPEDS) | Type |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 16 | CUNY Brooklyn College | High | 53% | 41% | 13011 | 5386 | 3% or less | public |
| 17 | Polytechnic Institute of New York University | Med | 47% | 41% | 1541 | 628 | 3% or less | not-for-profit |
| 18 | CUNY Bernard M Baruch College | Med | 44% | 36% | 12731 | 4551 | 3% or less | public |
| 19 | Saint Josephs College-Main Campus | Med | 44% | 34% | 1033 | 356 | 3% or less | not-for-profit |
| 20 | New York Institute of Technology-Manhattan Campus | Med | 44% | 33% | 1855 | 605 | 3% or less | not-for-profit |
| 21 | College of Mount Saint Vincent | Med | 43% | 39% | 1539 | 602 | 3% or less | not-for-profit |
| 22 | CUNY College of Staten Island | Med | 42% | 32% | 12183 | 3885 | 4% | public |
| 23 | CUNY Hunter College | Med | 42% | 31% | 15698 | 4933 | 3% or less | public |
| 24 | CUNY Queens College | Med | 39% | 29% | 15262 | 4436 | 3% or less | public |
| 25 | St. John's University-New York | Med | 38% | 29% | 14816 | 4292 | 3% or less | not-for-profit |
| 26 | St. Francis College | Med | 34% | 30% | 2407 | 715 | 3% or less | not-for-profit |
| 27 | Pace University-New York | Med | 34% | 25% | 7807 | 1934 | 4% | not-for-profit |
| 28 | New York School of Interior Design | Med | 26% | 11% | 612 | 65 | 3% or less | not-for-profit |
| 29 | Laboratory Institute of Merchandising | Low | 23% | 23% | 1295 | 300 | 5% | for profit |

| | Name | Pell-Usage Code: 08-09 (Derived) | Percent of First-time, Full-time Freshman Receiving Pell 08-09 (IPEDS) | Percent of Total Undergrads Receiving Pell 08-09 (IPEDS) | Total Undergrad Enrollment Fall 08 (Derived) | Total Undergrads Receiving Pell 08-09 (IPEDS) | Percent of Students with Disabilities Fall 08 (IPEDS) | Type |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 30 | The New School | Low | 23% | 19% | 6375 | 1232 | 3% or less | not-for-profit |
| 31 | The Juilliard School | Low | 23% | 17% | 736 | 85 | 4% | not-for-profit |
| 32 | Fashion Institute of Technology | Low | 22% | 16% | 9854 | 1612 | 3% or less | public |
| 33 | Pratt Institute-Main | Low | 21% | 21% | 3307 | 706 | 9% | not-for-profit |
| 34 | Marymount Manhattan College | Low | 21% | 17% | 1988 | 335 | 3% or less | not-for-profit |
| 35 | School of Visual Arts | Low | 20% | 22% | 3539 | 784 | 3% or less | for profit |
| 36 | Fordham University | Low | 19% | 20% | 7994 | 1589 | 3% or less | not-for-profit |
| 37 | Manhattan College | Low | 19% | 17% | 3022 | 520 | 3% or less | not-for-profit |
| 38 | SUNY Maritime College | Low | 18% | 23% | 1446 | 335 | 4% | public |
| 39 | Barnard College | Low | 18% | 18% | 2359 | 419 | 7% | not-for-profit |
| 40 | New York University | Low | 16% | 15% | 21269 | 3197 | 3% or less | not-for-profit |
| 41 | Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art | Low | 15% | 15% | 920 | 134 | 3% or less | not-for-profit |
| 42 | Wagner College | Low | 14% | 11% | 1924 | 212 | 6% | not-for-profit |
| 43 | Columbia University in the City of New York | Low | 13% | 15% | 7495 | 1122 | 3% or less | not-for-profit |
| 44 | Yeshiva University | Low | 11% | 11% | 3044 | 325 | 3% or less | not-for-profit |
| | Total | | | | 263442 | 88734 | | |

**Appendix B**
**Geographical Representation of Colleges with Pell Categories**

## Appendix C
## Characteristics of Colleges Whose Staff Responded to the Survey (N=21)

| Institution Pell Usage | Count |
|---|---|
| Low Pell, High SES | 10 |
| Medium Pell, Medium SES | 7 |
| High Pell, Low SES | 4 |
| Total | 21 |

| Institution Type | Count |
|---|---|
| Public | 8 |
| Not-for-Profit | 12 |
| For Profit | 1 |
| Total | 21 |

| Institution Size | Count |
|---|---|
| Small:<br>Fall 2008 Undergrad Enrollment less than 2,500 | 7 |
| Medium:<br>Fall 2008 Undergrad Enrollment between 2,501 and 9,999 | 9 |
| Large:<br>Fall 2008 Undergrad Enrollment more than 10,000 | 5 |
| Total | 21 |

| Institution Location | Count |
|---|---|
| Bronx | 4 |
| Brooklyn | 4 |
| Manhattan | 11 |
| Queens | 1 |
| Staten Island | 1 |
| Total | 21 |

**Appendix D**
**Disability Services Survey with Tallied Data (N=21)**

This survey is part of research conducted at the CUNY Graduate Center, designed to better understand the experience of college students with disabilities. This survey is confidential, and the data will be used for research purposes only. Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions. The survey should take about 15 minutes. You can skip any questions, and write notes on the pages. If you do complete the survey, you'll be able to give your contact information at the end so you can receive a $10 Starbucks gift card.

If you would like to receive the survey in alternative formats, one can be mailed to you or administered over the phone. Call a researcher at 212.xxx.xxxx. Thank you!

**To continue with this survey, you must give consent. Your acceptance to continue indicates that:**
**• you are at least 18 years old;**
**• the research has been adequately explained to you;**
**• you freely and voluntarily choose to participate in this research project. Welcome!**
21 Yes, I agree to give consent and want to move on to the survey.
0 No, I do not want to take the survey.

**1. My undergraduate institution is a:**
2 2-year college
21 4-year college

**2. How would you describe the college at which you work?**
8 Urban, most students live on campus
12 Urban, most students live off campus and commute
0 Suburban, most students live on campus
1 Suburban, most students live off campus and commute

**3. Does your college have an official policy about students with disabilities?**
21 Yes
0 No

**4. If yes, do you know what this disability policy is?**
21 Yes
0 No

**5. Where is this policy stated? (Check all that apply.)**
8 University Handbook
9 Website
7 Materials Published by the Disability Services Office
17 All of the Above
2 Other (Admissions Materials, Catalog, Discrimination Materials)

**6. In your opinion, whose responsibility is it to improve the quality of disability services provided to students? (Check all that apply.)**

18 College administrators
21 Disability Service Office
18 Professors
13 Students
7 Parents
12 Legislators and Policymakers
3 Other (Professional Associations like AHEAD, community, campus community)

**7. What institutional challenges do the students you serve face?**

21 Various responses.

**8. Please estimate the number of students with a disability who attend your institution.**

| | |
|---|---|
| average | 323.7143 |
| median | 300 |
| mode | 300 |
| range | 970 |

**9. Approximately what percentage of these students utilize the disability services offered through your office?**

| | |
|---|---|
| average | 60.38095 |
| median | 52 |
| mode | 50 |
| range | 95 |

(For this question, I got numbers larger than 100, which I interpret to mean that some respondents entered the raw number of students, rather than a percentage. For these cases, I converted the raw number into a percentage, based on their response to Q.8.)

**10. What disability categories are represented most frequently? (Check all that apply.)**

5 Blindness/Low vision
6 Deafness/Hard of Hearing
6 Mobility Impairments
14 Medical/Chronic
20 Learning Disabilities
17 AD/HD
14 Mental Health
1 Other (asthma)

**11. Which disability services are requested most frequently? (Check all that apply.)**

15 Notetaker
5 Reader/Scribe
21 Extra Time
5 Scanning/E-text
1 Braille
10 Assistive Technology
4 Alterations to Classroom/Preferential Seating
4 ASL interpreter
4 Other (advocacy with faculty, advisement, audio books)

**12. Do you feel your office is equipped to provide sufficient accommodations to meet the academic needs of your students?**

3 Yes, always
16 Mostly
1 Sometimes
1 No, not usually
3 If not, why? (insufficient technology, understaffed, inflexible curriculum, no capacity for LD testing)

**13. Do you track the graduation rates of the students you serve through the disability services office?**

9 Yes
12 No
4 If so, what percentage graduates within 6 years? (50, 11, 10, 90)

**14. Does your office keep data on the racial and ethnic background of your students?**

4 Yes
17 No

**15. Do you think the students with disabilities who seek services through your office are representative of the general population of students at your college, in terms of race and class?**

17 Yes
4 No
4 If no, how are the students you serve different? (more White; fewer Asians, more White men; more non-Asian minorities; fewer Asians, fewer African-American males)

**16. What percentage of the students you serve are diagnosed as having a learning disability?**

| | |
|---|---|
| average | 42 |
| median | 43 |
| mode | 75 |
| range | 79 |

**17. Are the accommodations provided by your office typically sufficient to meet the academic needs of students with learning disabilities?**

18 Yes
3 No
4 If not, why? (need LD professional; need full-time LD specialist; more tutoring and coaching; more tutoring, time management and study skills)

**18. In your opinion, what is the biggest difference between students with learning disabilities who are academically successful at your institution and those who are not?**

21 Various responses.

**19. What is the profile of a student with a learning disability who is unsuccessful at your institution?**

21 Various responses.

**20. How would you rate faculty acceptance of students with learning disabilities at your institution? (Check all that apply.)**

10 Very accepting
11 Somewhat accepting
1 Somewhat unaccepting
1 Not very accepting
0 I just don't think they understand learning disabilities.
4 Please comment on faculty attitudes. (Some skeptical/concerned/don't understand LD; adjuncts resent staying late to give extra time)

**21. Overall, how would you describe the students who seek services from your office?**

21 Various responses.

**22. Are some students better able to access services than others?**

14 Yes
7 No
11 If yes, how would you describe them?

**23. Are there students with disabilities who are able to effectively use their disability status to access "reasonable accommodations"?**

8 Yes, all students can access what they need
11 Most students can access what they need
2 Some students can access what they need
0 Very few students can access what they need

**24. Are there students with disabilities who are able to effectively use their disability status to access resources in excess of what is "reasonable"?**

2 Most get more services than what is legally mandated
6 Some get more services than what is legally mandated
10 Few get more services than what is legally mandated
3 None get more services than what is legally mandated

**25. Why do you think some students are able to access services beyond what is deemed "reasonable"?**

16 Various responses.

**26. Is there someone who works in the disability services office or a related office at your college who you think may be interested in taking this survey?**

5 Various responses.

**27. Thank you so much for your time.**
**If you completed this survey you are eligible to receive a $10 Starbucks gift card in the mail. If you would like to receive a gift card, please complete your contact information below. You should receive your gift card in 7-10 business days.**
**Thank you!**

**Name:**
**Company:**
**Address:**
**Address 2:**
**City/Town:**
**State:**
**ZIP/Postal Code:**
**Email Address:**
**Phone Number:**

21 Various responses.

## Appendix E

Urban Education
Ph.D. Program at the City University of New York Graduate Center

### Interview about NYC College Students with Disabilities
### Consent Form for Staff

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I understand that:

- I have been asked to be in a research study because I work with college students with disabilities.
- The purpose of the study is to learn how university policy affects New York City college students with learning disabilities. As someone who works closely with these students in this setting, my views are important.
- The information may help others in the future. Staff from every four-year college in New York City will be invited to participate in some aspect of this research project.
- This study will take 60 minutes of my time.
- This study poses minimal risks. I may be fatigued, embarrassed or disclose personal information.
- The benefits of this study include being able to contribute to the research on learning disabled students, and to help colleges develop better policies and programs for students with disabilities.
- All the answers that I give during this and any subsequent interviews will:
  (1) be kept confidential. Confidential means that the data will be kept as private as possible. My name will not be used in any published documents.
  (2) be audio-recorded so that the researcher can check notes and transcripts for accuracy. Once this is done, audio recordings will be destroyed.
  (3) be used for research purposes.
- If I am asked to participate in any future interviews, I do not have to participate.
- I will receive a $25 American Express gift card as a "thank you" for answering questions.
- If I agree to participate in interviews, the researcher may use my answers. If I do not want to be in the study, the researcher will destroy my answers. I can stop answering questions at any time.
- I do not have to take part in this project and there is no penalty for dropping out whenever I choose.
- If I have any questions about this study, I can contact Ashleigh Thompson at xxx.xxx.xxxx. I can contact her dissertation advisor Dr. Jean Anyon at xxxxxx@xxx.com. To speak to an IRB Administrator, I can call Kay Powell at the Graduate Center at xxx.xxx.xxxx.
- I can keep a blank copy of this form.

□ Yes, I agree to participate in interviews.
□ No, I decline to participate in interviews.

Sign your name here:_____

Print your name here:_____ Date: _____

## Appendix F
## Interview Protocol for Staff

1.About how many students with disabilities attend here?
2. About how many of these students do you serve?
3. How do you reach out to students? Do students initiate contact or do you?
4. What percent is LD? Is this percentage historically consistent for you?
5. Do you diagnose a lot of students here for the first time, or do most come in with documentation?
6.Who are the types of students who are being diagnosed for the first time?
7. Which services are requested most frequently? Can you talk about the range of services you offer to students? Are there some newer services emerging as student needs evolve and change?
8. When in the admissions and enrollment process do new students typically contact you?
9. Are parents involved in this process? How?
10. What are the student expectations for services?
11. How would you describe the students you serve?
12. Do you keep records of racial/ethnic data? Do you have any data in terms of SES?
13. What's your staffing structure here? Do you feel your office is sufficiently resourced?
14. Are students with disabilities who seek services representative of the general population of your college, in terms of race and class?
15. Do you think students/families have an expectation for what disability services they'll receive here?
16. How does staff walk the line between ensuring access and facilitating success? Is this an issue?
17. What is the biggest difference between LD students who are successful here and those who are not? Who succeeds, who doesn't and why?
18. How would you describe the way in which your students move through college?
19. How accepting are faculty? Attitudes…Do they have different feelings about LD vs. others (blindness, deafness...)?
20. Are some students better able to access services than others? Do some access resources in excess of what is reasonable? Can you give an example? Why/when does this happen?
21. How did you get into this line of work?
22. Do you have any questions for me? Would you like to review a summary of this interview?

**Appendix G**


## Interview about NYC College Students with Disabilities
## Consent Form for Students

I understand that:

- I am over 18 years of age.
- I have been asked to be in a research study because I am a college student with a disability.
- The purpose of the study is to learn how university policy affects New York City college students with learning disabilities. As a college student with a learning disability, my views are important.
- The information may help others in the future. Staff and/or students from most large four-year college in New York City will be invited to participate in some aspect of this research project.
- This study will take 60 minutes of my time.
- This study poses minimal risks. I may be fatigued, embarrassed or disclose personal information.
- The benefits of this study include being able to contribute to the research on learning disabled students, and to help colleges develop better policies and programs for students with disabilities.
- If I agree to participate in interviews, the researcher may use my answers. If I do not want to be in the study, the researcher will destroy my answers. I can stop answering questions at any time.
- All the answers that I give during this and any subsequent interviews will:
  (1) be kept confidential. Confidential means that the data will be kept as private as possible. My name will not be used in any published documents.
  (2) be audio-recorded so that the researcher can check notes and transcripts for accuracy. Once this is done, audio recordings will be destroyed.
  (3) be used for research purposes.
- If I am asked to participate in any future interviews, I do not have to participate.
- I will receive a $25 American Express gift card as a "thank you" for answering questions.
- I do not have to take part in this project and there is no penalty for dropping out whenever I choose.
- If I have any questions about this study, I can contact Ashleigh Thompson at xxx.xxx.xxxx. I can contact her dissertation advisor Dr. Jean Anyon at xxxxxx@xxx.com. To speak to an IRB Administrator, I can call Kay Powell at the Graduate Center at xxx.xxx.xxxx.
- I can keep a blank copy of this form.

□ Yes, I agree to participate in interviews.
□ No, I decline to participate in interviews.

Sign your name here:_____

Print your name here:_____ Date: _____

## Appendix H
## Interview Protocol for Students

1. Tell me a little about yourself, where you grew up, etc. Siblings…
2. How did you hear about and why did you choose [college]?
3. What year are you at [college]? What are you studying? What is your GPA?
4. What high school did you go to? Was it private or public? Did you receive services in high school? What supports did you receive?
5. When do you hope to graduate? What do you hope to do when you graduate?
6. When were you diagnosed as having a learning disability?
    a. What was that like? How do you feel about being labeled as LD?
7. How did you arrive at the DSO? When/Why?
8. What did you expect?
9. What types of services do you receive? Do you use assistive technology?
10. What other types of college services do you utilize?
11. What was the process like? How did it make you feel to go through this process?
12. Was there anything you asked for that you didn't get?
13. Are you friends with other students with disabilities at [college]?
14. Do you identify personally as a student with a disability? Outwardly?
15. How would you describe your college experience?
16. Social acceptance of LD?
17. How would you describe a typical [college] student?
18. Do you think that describes you?
19. How would you describe your experience with faculty?
    b. Attitudes, Acceptance to people with LD
20. Have you known friends with learning disabilities at [college] that haven't been as successful as you? Why do you think that happened?
21. How do you finance your education?
    c. Do you receive any TAP or PELL? Did you apply for financial aid?
23. As a person who has a disability and receives support services from disability services, do you ever feel like you have an advantage over other students? How/why? Do you ever feel like you are at a disadvantage?
24. Ask Research Questions
25. Do you have any questions for me? Would you like a summary of this interview?

## Appendix I
## Alphabetical List of Open Codes in 20 Staff/Student Transcripts

| | Code Key Word | Description | count |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | academic struggle | Students with disabilities describe struggling in class; academic challenges related to disability | 43 |
| 2 | accommodations atypical | accommodations less commonly given; perceived as extra, unfair or beyond reasonable | 28 |
| 3 | accommodations typical | common accommodations, generally accepted | 49 |
| 4 | ADA | reference to the ADA, laws | 21 |
| 5 | administration response negative | college administrators' response to SWD is negative, aloof, litigious or suspicious | 2 |
| 6 | administration response positive | college administrators' response to SWD is positive, involved or concerned | 28 |
| 7 | age: nontraditional students | SWD coming to college as older students, not straight out of high school | 9 |
| 8 | age: traditional students | SWD in college straight out of high school | 12 |
| 9 | assistive technology | availability or use of assistive technology on campus | 15 |
| 10 | campus support services | services offered to all services regardless of ability, like free tutoring or writing center | 34 |
| 11 | choosing college | students talking about the criteria or process for selecting a college; the admissions process | 28 |
| 12 | college initiative | student does not seek out services; colleges seek out students; opposite of student initiative code | 17 |
| 13 | compensatory strategies | students with LD have figured out how to succeed on their own without accommodations | 19 |
| 14 | concurrent mental health | SWD with psychiatric disorder or mental health issue | 22 |
| 15 | decision making | colleges describe the basis for making accommodations; the access vs. success debate | 13 |
| 16 | disability advantageous | disability thought of as an advantage by other students or SWD themselves, or resulting in positive outcomes | 12 |
| 17 | disability disadvantageous | disability thought of as a problem by faculty, staf other students or SWD themselves, or resulting in negative outcomes | 9 |
| 18 | disability office resources | the staff, budgets and resources that support the disability services office; use of these resources | 54 |
| 19 | disempowerment | students don't feel empowered to ask for or use services; don't hold college accountable; opposite of sense of entitlement code; often linked to low SES | 8 |
| 20 | equality of condition | onus on college to create opportunity for SWD; facilitate access; Karabel theoretical framework | 12 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 21 | equality of opportunity | onus on students to create opportunity for herself; get by or fail on your own merit; student role; Karabel theoretical framework | 18 |
| 22 | extra disability services | disability services, for a fee or not, that are given to students beyond the reasonable accommodation | 32 |
| 23 | faculty response negative | college faculty response to SWD is negative or doubting | 23 |
| 24 | faculty response positive | college faculty response to SWD is positive or proactive | 30 |
| 25 | gender | mention of disability in terms of disparities between male and female students | 8 |
| 26 | high school | students' experience in high school affects college: preparedness, evaluations, college search, etc. | 35 |
| 27 | increase in LD | increase in number of students with LD and other disabilities in college | 9 |
| 28 | international students | international students who have disabilities or receive services based on ESL issues | 7 |
| 29 | new diagnosis in college | students diagnosed with disabilities for the first time in college | 25 |
| 30 | parental involvement | students who involve their parents in their disability services or depend upon their parents' resources; or parental effect on student | 69 |
| 31 | paying for college | how students pay for college; assume debt; financial aid; parents pay, etc. | 35 |
| 32 | private college perception | ideas by students, parents, faculty or staff that there is more value or support at a private college; sometimes related to values of Catholic identity | 31 |
| 33 | race and ethnicity | mention of disability in connection with issues of race and ethnicity | 12 |
| 34 | referrals and networks | people connecting students with LD to specific schools or resources | 23 |
| 35 | self-esteem struggle | SWD struggle with issues of self-esteem and identity, for reasons including disability and coming of age | 3 |
| 36 | sense of entitlement | students feel entitled to services; opposite of disempowerment code | 18 |
| 37 | SES and evaluation | the cost of disability evaluations and how SES affects access to these | 15 |
| 38 | SES high | higher socioeconomic class of students with disabilities or student body of college | 16 |
| 39 | SES low | lower socioeconomic class of students with disabilities or student body of college | 25 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 40 | social life | social issues and interactions impact student experience and success; positive or negative | 22 |
| 41 | stigma and embarrassment | SWD concerns about being perceived as a person with a disability, less than; embarrassed by disability; "in the closet"; opposite of student advocacy code | 52 |
| 42 | student advocacy | students speaking up about which disability services they need; open about disability; actively using services; opposite of stigma and embarrassment code | 43 |
| 43 | student initiative | student has to seek out services; colleges don't seek out students; opposite of college initiative code | 21 |
| 44 | student lack of success | reasons or examples of SWD who do not do academically well in college | 18 |
| 45 | student success | reasons or examples of SWD who do academically well in college | 32 |
| 46 | threat of lawsuits | litigation; colleges worried about getting sued or operating in that kind of environment | 4 |
| 47 | vocational goals | student with disabilities talk about the work goals they have, or the steps they take to be ready for the world of work; colleges talk about students and the world of work | 27 |

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