

DISSERTATION

EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: FACTORS THAT  
INFLUENCE THEIR WITHDRAWAL AS BACCALAUREATE  
DEGREE SEEKING STUDENTS

Submitted by

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## ABSTRACT

### EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THEIR WITHDRAWAL AS BACCALAUREATE DEGREE SEEKING STUDENTS

This study explored factors those students with invisible disabilities (SWIDs) associate with their voluntary withdrawal from a mid-western state land grant university (LGU) after completing 60 or more college credits. Social constructivism, which assumes the existence of multiple realities shaped by individual experiences, is the philosophical framework that undergirds the methodology of the study, which is further framed from an ecological perspective. The ecological perspective provides a lens from which to understand the transactional context of the disability experience for SWIDs. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from the five participants, all former students with invisible disabilities. The data were coded and contrastive thematic analysis was conducted from an ecological perspective.

The findings resulted in a dynamic model that captures the layered contexts of the ecological model and the dynamic interaction among the factors. For example, individual factors included: personal characteristics related to disability, feelings of adequacy, sense of belonging, and students' expectations and perceptions of the university and other environmental systems. Environmental factors included: family system expectations, university system expectations and requirements, and community systems expectations. The complex interconnectedness of a number of the factors is a central idea in many of the participant's experiences. The inter-related, dynamic nature of the factors is

illustrated through descriptive case analyses of each participant's experiences. Implications of the research findings and recommendations for future studies are included.

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## DEDICATION

To my two sons: Olanre' and Akil—Dream big! If you believe it, you can achieve it! Tenacity, hard work, and a noble character will get you there!

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

### **Background**

The United States Department of Education concluded there are more than 1,400,000 students with documented disabilities in postsecondary education (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). A survey of students enrolled in postsecondary education in 2007-2008 indicated almost 11% self-reported having a disability (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2010), indicating a 2% increase of those identified with a disability from 1999 (NCES, 2000); there has been an approximately three fold increase in the number of students with disabilities (hereafter referred to as SWDs) in postsecondary education since 1978 (Lynch & Gussel, 1996). Such an increase has been attributed to several factors primarily, federal legislation. Two laws in particular, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, are designed to facilitate access to education for SWDs (42 U.S.C. § 12102). Other factors cited for the increasing enrollment of SWDs are activism of interest groups, political and media support (Paul, 2000), medicinal and technological advancement, expanded support services, higher expectations of what SWDs can accomplish (Corcoran, 2010), and an expanded definition of disability (Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments, 2008). For example, Autism, Asperger's Syndrome, and some psychiatric disabilities, are presenting more frequently in postsecondary education. There is debate concerning whether in the past these disabilities were rare, underdiagnosed, or underserved (Collins & Mowbray, 2005; Harbour, 2004; Henderson, 2001). This

research is designed to explore the experiences of SWDs who leave college studies before graduation.

A person with disabilities is an individual who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, has a record of such impairment, or is regarded as having such an impairment (29 U.S.C. § 705(20)(B) and 42 U.S.C. § 12102). The following sections will focus primarily on SWDs.

The number of SWDs who access higher education is expected to increase substantially given the recent passage of legislation such as the 2008 Amendments to The American with Disabilities Act (ADA), The Higher Education Act (HEA) new provisions, and the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act expanded educational benefits (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011). The ADA Amendments Act expands the definition of disability, extending benefits to a greater number of persons. HEA's new provisions are intended to increase access, retention, and degree completion rates of students with disabilities through (a) identifying and implementing effective transition practices, (b) increasing accessibility of instructional materials, and (c) disseminating best practices guidelines (Council for Exceptional Children, 2008). The Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act also expanded educational benefits to service members who were on active duty on or after September 11, 2001, which is anticipated to result in close to two million veterans pursuing higher education studies (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011).

However, increased enrollment of SWDs does not translate into increased graduation rates among this population (NCES, 2009). Although scant information exists regarding completion and non-completion rates for students with disabilities in postsecondary education (Wessel, Jones, Markle, & Westfall, 2009), the little that exists

indicates that dependent on the nature and severity of the disability, SWDs realize higher non-completion rates than their non-disabled counterparts (Fox, Hatfield, & Collins, 2003; NCES, 2009; Webster, Clary, & Griffith, 2005). For example, the NCES in 1995 reported that 14.6% of youths (ages 16-24) with disabilities dropped out of school, compared to 11.8% of their non-disabled peers. There is also notable variation in dropout rates when each disability condition is considered. For example, students within the stated age group with mental or emotional disabilities were more likely to dropout: 56.1% reported mental illness, 31.1% reported mental retardation, and 23.6% reported emotional disturbance.

Studies indicate that at the high school level, SWDs may have to “work harder, study longer, or possess greater academic ability than their peers, coupled with the experiences of the disability itself” (NCES, 1995, para.1). Students with disabilities may also face additional challenges while enrolled in college enrollment. Common frustrations include adjustment to a new environment, academic stressors, financial problems, personal problems, and balancing college life with work (Adler, 1999). Students with disabilities in college may also experience challenges such as lack of social integration (Enright, Conyers, & Szymanski, 1996; Gambrill, Florian, & Splayer, 1986; Mamieseishvili & Kock, 2011; Tinto, 1993; Yust-Dilger, 1999); lack of academic integration (Duquette, 2000; Mamieseishvili & Kock, 2011; Tinto, 1993); lack of knowledge, understanding, and cooperation from faculty, including academic accommodations (Greenbaum, Graham, & Scales, 1995; Hill, 1996; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Lehman, Davies, & Laurin, 2000; Wilson, Getzel, & Brown, 2000); health concerns and problems with medication (Adler, 1999; Weiner & Weiner, 1997); academic stressors such as difficulty concentrating, missing class, and incomplete

assignments; and social stressors such as isolation at home and lack of support (Weiner & Weiner, 1997).

Adjusting to a college environment presents challenges for all students. For SWDs however, the responsibility of managing needs associated with a disability and their accommodations along with their academic coursework present a set of challenges that are unique to these students (Getzel, 2008). Research suggests that SWDs are more likely than their non-disabled counterparts to delay college attendance a year or more after high school (43% versus 32%) which may place them at a disadvantage in college. Delaying college enrollment after graduating from high school can pose challenges as people may start jobs, families and/or commit to other activities. Demographic data indicate that SWDs are more likely to have dependents other than a spouse (25% versus 13%), and have financial and family obligations that conflict with their academic endeavors (Adler, 1999; Horn, Cataldi, & Sikora, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

Another factor associated with delayed college enrollment is inadequate preparation to enroll and succeed in college. Enrollment in remedial courses at two-year community colleges accounts for approximately 63% of enrollees (College and Career Transitions Initiative, 2003); SWDs enroll in more remedial courses than their counterparts in community colleges (Education Commission of the States Policy Brief, 2000). These data are often cited as substantive evidence of the lack of pre-college preparation. Noteworthy too is that 25% of these SWDs fail to complete all their remedial course work (Education Commission of the States Policy Brief, 2000). SWDs are also more likely than students without disabilities to have earned a GED or alternative high



school credential (12% versus 6%) that may not have provided the experiences necessary to be successful in college (limited opportunities for advanced placement classes, study and note taking skills, and extracurricular activities) (Adler, 1999; Horn et al., 2005). Research fails to make a distinction between students who acquired a disability after completing high school and students with disabilities identified before high school completion.

Several factors contribute to the limited information available on the number of undergraduate SWDs who do not remain enrolled. First, students applying to college in the United States are not required, in compliance with ADA regulations, to inform the educational institution of their disability except for in two instances. Disclosure may be requested by the institution if the intent is an attempt to correct previous discrimination at the institution, and as a voluntary action by the institution to rise above earlier limited participation experienced by SWDs (See Code of Federal Regulations: Title 34: Education, § 104.429(c)). Otherwise, the onus is on students to report their disability, supported with documented proof, to seek accommodations if necessary making it difficult for an institution to accurately determine the number of SWDs who do not request accommodations and who do not need to disclose their disabilities to anyone on campus. As a result, the data reflect only those SWDs who self-identify their disability status with the institution, compromising the accuracy of institutional data. According to the U.S Department of Education (2000), only one in four (26%) postsecondary SWDs self-disclose their disabilities to the campus disability services office.

Second, retention data are often collated across racial and ethnic groups, but often do not indicate retention information pertaining to students SWDs as a distinct population.

Efforts by The National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities (NDPC-SD) established in 2004 by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) to collect and analyze more accurate and reliable data on SWDs will hopefully increase.

It is also difficult to define the construct “dropout” with regard to SWDs. Dropout can have varied definitions depending on the stakeholder, the focus of the researcher, and the ease of access to data (Thurlow, Sinclair, & Johnson, 2002). Generally, the term dropout is used to refer only to students who discontinue enrollment at an institution. For example, a student who stops attending one university and transfers to another institution to complete the degree is considered an institutional drop-out (Tinto, 1993). Yet such a student would not consider him/herself a drop out as he/she has continued studies elsewhere (Tinto,1993). Students who withdraw from an institution may have dropped out from higher education with no desire to return, transferred to another similar institution, or “stopped out” for a while with the intent to resume studies either at the same college or another at a later date. Often these individuals are all categorized as drop-outs. This definitional challenge will be discussed further in Chapter 2.

The trend of increased enrollment of SWDs coupled with the high non-completion rate of undergraduate SWDs warrants further exploration. . In addition to the personal and emotional consequences of non-completion, financial cost is borne by all stakeholders when students do not complete their undergraduate studies. Non-completion of postsecondary education has implications for the individual, the institution, and society at large. At the individual level, successful completion of a college education can increase employment/income opportunities (DeLoach, 1992), which may have a positive correlation to the quality of life of the individual (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Stodden &

Dowrick, 2001; The College Board, 2006). This positive correlation suggests that further education may level the playing field regarding future opportunities between people with and without disabilities.

At the institutional level, the withdrawal of a student represents loss of tuition and impacts an institution's graduation rate, which is one of the most common criteria used to rank the success of a college. This information may also have funding implications for the educational institution, therefore as a student withdraws, the institution makes great effort to replace that student (Wessel et al., 2009).

At the societal level, current and future taxpayers' dollars are at stake and the prospects of adding to the economic and social capital of the country can be remarkable. For instance, the federal government recently awarded \$10.9 million for 28 grants to create opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities to access quality higher education and successfully complete their studies (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). This notable investment is designed to increase favorable returns. Successful college completion can be a win/win process for all stakeholders.

### **Students with Disabilities: A Heterogeneous Population**

Thus far, this discussion has focused on SWDs as a single homogeneous group. Data were also presented from the perspective of a traditional college experience of four years of enrollment leading to a baccalaureate degree. Both SWDs and the college experience are complex and varied. For example, the type and severity of a disability can impact the college experience and completion rate. The length of time to graduation also can vary based on the access and availability of disability services and supports on a college campus. DeFur, Getzel, and Trossi (1996) stated that "the likelihood of earning a

degree is decreased by the presence of a disability” (p. 232). However this finding was challenged by other researchers who found that retention rates for students with and without disabilities were basically the same, except for variations during years four and five (Wessel et al., 2009). The researchers noted that some SWDs, namely those with learning disabilities, may take longer to graduate as they take the lowest number of credits possible to maintain their status as a full-time student (Wesselet al., 2009). Similarly, a 12-year longitudinal study at a large college in Quebec, Canada, also found that students with disabilities ( $n=653$ ) realized similar grades and graduation outcomes as students without disabilities ( $n=41,357$ ), but would typically take lighter course loads and one additional semester to graduate (Jorgensen et al., 2005).

### **General Retention Considerations**

For retention programs to be successful, efforts should to be informed by the population it serves, could potentially serve, or serves inadequately. This current study on SWDs explores factors associated with the voluntary withdrawal of a SWD from an institution after completing at least 60 credits. Sixty credits typically represent half of the academic requirements needed for a degree. This study focuses on factors associated with upper-class retention of SWDs from the perspective of SWDs.

Most research on the retention of SWDs focuses on first-to-second year retention (Baggot, 2005; Cocoran, 2010; Mamiseishvili & Kock, 2011). The emphasis of research and subsequent retention programs on successful completion of the first year in college and subsequent return to the second year is understandable. Early studies indicate that the largest numbers of students leave college during the first year or before entry into the second year (Iffert, 1956; McNeely, 1937; Pantages & Creedon, 1978; Tinto, 1993).

However, examination of national data in 1999, revealed 44% of all withdrawals occur after the second year (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009). This withdrawal pattern was highlighted in Stuart's (2008) study, which reinforced the need to address retention efforts beyond the first years of college. Her study indicated that over a 10 year period, an average of 350 students left University of New Mexico annually after successfully completing 98 credits or more. Some researchers assert that factors affecting junior and senior attrition are different from those affecting freshmen and sophomores (Neumann & Finaly-Neumann, 1989).

Numerous studies have focused on retention issues pertaining to SWDs with a new thrust to establish best practices, yet the views of the students are often unavailable. One of the primary challenges cited for this gap in the research is the difficulty to locate students who left an institution prior to completion. This is only one of the challenges faced by researchers who are interested in retention issues. To the author's knowledge, no research has been published that reports the views, perspectives, or lived experiences of SWDs who withdraw from college after successfully completing 60 credits of coursework. This is a critical component missing from research as the students themselves can be the best informants of their college experiences. So, even with better data collection and tracking systems, the detailed, rich, and contextual qualitative data from SWDs to augment existing quantitative data are needed.

### **Researcher's Perspective**

A researcher's perspective can influence what is found in a study. Metaphysical beliefs of what constitutes reality and how the knowledge of that reality is created provide the lens through which the research will be depicted (Anderson & Asernault,

2002). Further, a researcher should select a research paradigm that is congruent with his/her philosophical beliefs. I believe multiple realities exist that are socially constructed by individuals. The knowledge informing realities is contextual and emerges from interactions between people and their social and experiential interactions (Guba, 1990). Social constructivism is the methodology that provides an ontological and epistemological philosophy that fit with my beliefs, along with forming a paradigm that best answers the research question. In keeping with the social constructivist tradition, a qualitative approach that offers the opportunity to explore relationships and experiences in cultural contexts undergirds this study.

This study privileges the stories of SWDs who did not complete their undergraduate degree, providing an emic perspective of the participants' experiences (Anderson & Arsenault, 2002). The research illuminates SWDs' understanding and interpretations of their undergraduate experiences and factors they associate with non-completion of their college degrees (Merriam, 1991). My experience as a social worker who has worked with several *voiceless* and vulnerable populations provides the stimuli for wanting to illuminate the stories of undergraduate SWDs. Furthermore, the impetus to advance the well-being of persons with disabilities also stems from personal lived experiences with family members with disabilities.

Being the main instrument for data collection and analysis, I am aware that the findings are filtered through my lens, described by Guba and Lincoln (2005) as a co-construction of findings. Constructivism acknowledges the subjective interrelationship between researchers and participants in the research process, whose values must be acknowledged by the researcher and readers as an inevitable part of the outcome (Guba &

Lincoln, 2005; Stratton, 1997). However, giving voice to the participants was the central focus of the research. I adopted a *not-knowing stance*, recognizing the participants as the experts on their lives. In-depth interviewing, employing open-ended questions, was used to obtain as many details about the experience as possible.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The literature identifies factors associated with students leaving higher education prematurely, including financial, personal, and stress of school (Stitchman, 1999). Some factors reportedly unique to SWDs include medication concerns and side effects, faculty lack of knowledge, and understanding regarding disabilities and SWDs needs, lack of cooperation from faculty including academic accommodations, and students' ability to manage their disability while navigating the academic environment (Adler, 1999; Greenbaum, Graham, & Scales, 1995; Hill, 1996; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Weiner & Weiner, 1997). A number of studies have explored attrition and retention issues among SWDs in their first year (Stitchman, 1999; Wegner, 2008; Williamson, 2000) and second year of postsecondary education. Yet, few have investigated the reasons SWDs voluntarily leave college after successfully completing two or more years. This study addresses this largely unstudied non-completion phenomenon as it applies to SWDs who have not completed an undergraduate degree.

The constructs, non-completion and drop-out, are complex and context relevant (Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE], 2000) with non-standardized definitions. Additionally, there are challenges in locating and accessing students who drop out of college (Janosz, Le Blanc, Boulerice, & Trembley, 2000; Kortering, Brazil, & Tomplim, 2002). The unavailability of the perspectives and stories of postsecondary

education SWDs leave many questions unanswered. Understanding the factors impeding completion of the bachelor's degree is imperative to furthering access and success for SWDs.

### **Significance of the Study**

The primary purpose of the study is to illuminate emic stories of undergraduate SWDs who have discontinued enrollment before completing their undergraduate degree. This study explores factors undergraduate SWDs associate with voluntarily leaving an institution after completing at least 60 credits, which represents at least half or more of the academic requirements. This commitment represents two or more years of financial, social, physical, psychological, and emotional investments, while the student deals with the disability itself.

A number of studies focus on retention issues pertaining to SWDs with a thrust to establish *best practices*, yet the voices of these students are often not available because their lived experiences are not included in published research (Rossett & Schafer, 2003). This study offered SWDs an opportunity to provide their perspectives. Institutions of higher education and prospective students may gain a greater understanding of strategies that work or do not work in the undergraduate environment. Notably, this is a study designed to hear the voices of those not adequately heard such that issues of equity, access, and social justice can be better addressed. It intends to privilege the perspectives of SWDs in an attempt to counter the relative invisibility of this population (United Nations, 2002).

The views of SWDs may also inform institutions in developing, implementing, and refining retention and other supportive programs to address the diverse needs of this



population and bolster their retention programs in more strategic manners. For retention programs to be successful, strategies may benefit by being informed by the population they serve or could potentially serve. It is imperative that educational institutions provide access to the growing population of SWDs (NCES, 2011), but more importantly, assist them to successfully complete their undergraduate studies.

### **Research Questions**

The following questions drive this research in a quest to unravel why SWDs voluntarily withdraw from baccalaureate education after earning 60 or more college credits.

1. What are the experiences of SWDs during their first 60 credit hours while enrolled as a baccalaureate degree student at LGU?
2. What influences SWDs to voluntarily withdraw from LGU after completing 60 or more credit hours?

### **Definition of Terms**

To ensure clarity throughout the study, a common understanding of some relevant terminologies used in the study is prudent. The following are terms that may connote different meanings in other contexts:

1. Students with disabilities (SWDs): students are considered to have a disability if they experience functional limitations that significantly restrict one or more of life's essential activities such as walking, seeing, and learning (ADA Amendments Act, 2008). SWDs may be diagnosed with conditions including, but not limited to, intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, mental or psychiatric disabilities, or physical disabilities. Institutions of higher education typically evaluate SWDs' needs on an individual basis.

2. Intellectual Disability: is one type of a larger universe of many types of Developmental Disabilities. Developmental disabilities are defined as severe chronic disabilities that can be cognitive or physical or both. The disabilities appear before the age of 22 and are likely to be lifelong. Intellectual Disability encompasses the “cognitive” part of this definition, that is, a disability that is broadly related to thought processes characterized by significant limitations in intellectual functioning (reasoning, learning, problem solving) and in adaptive behavior, which covers a range of everyday social and practical skills. Intellectual and other developmental disabilities often co-occur (American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities [AAIDD], 2011).
3. Invisible Disabilities are disabilities that are not immediately apparent to others. Invisible disabilities can include learning disabilities, traumatic brain injury, psychiatric disabilities and chronic illnesses that limit a major life activity for an individual (adapted from: <http://www.disabled-world.com/>).
4. Learning disability: a general term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition or use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities. (The National Joint Committee for Learning Disabilities, 1994a, pp. 65-66).
5. Mental disability: a term that refers to having any mental or psychological disorder or condition, such as mental retardation, organic brain syndrome, emotional or mental illness, or specific learning disabilities, which limits a major life activity (Enforcement Guidance on the Americans with Disabilities Act and Psychiatric Disabilities[EEOC], 2009).

6. Psychiatric disabilities: a generic term used to refer to a variety of conditions involving psychological, emotional, and behavioral disorders and syndromes. Diagnoses are provided in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fourth Edition DSM-IV-TR or the International Classification of Diseases Manual, Tenth Revision ICD-10.
7. Physical disabilities: refers to any long-lasting condition that substantially limits one or more physical activities such as walking, climbing stairs, reaching, lifting, or carrying (Erickson & Lee, 2008).
8. Dropouts: Generally, the term dropouts refer to students who discontinue enrollment at an institution before completing the requirement for earning a degree. The calculation of dropout rates varies according to how the purpose of the data collected.
9. Non-completion: the proportion of students who fail to graduate within six years of entering college/university.
10. Persistence: the re-enrollment of a student from one semester to the following semester at an educational institution (Summers, 2003).
11. Retention: completion of a certificate or degree program at the same institution (Berger & Lyon, 2005).
12. Stopouts: students who fail to register for a semester or more at an educational institution, but re-enroll at a later time (Berger & Lyon, 2005).
13. Transfers: students who begin studies at one institution and then transfer to another. From the student's perspective, transferring is normal progress. From the

perspective of the institution where the student first enrolled, the student has dropped out (Jones, nd.)

### **Delimitations**

This study is delimited by demographic features specific to the public four-year land grant university attended by the participants. Participation in this study is open to SWDs who have successfully completed 60 or more credits of their academic requirements, but chose to discontinue enrollment at this university before graduation. Participants also registered and were eligible for services at the Resources for Disabled Students Office (RDS). The researcher is aware that a number of students choose not to disclose their disability status to the university; these students were excluded.

## **CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

This chapter provides a review of the literature to contextualize and integrate diverse bodies of knowledge and their relevance to this study. The purpose of this literature review is threefold. First, it illuminates the theoretical framework that undergirds the research study. Presenting the underpinning theory and its conceptual structure provide readers with the lens through which the researcher is analyzing the study and elucidates rationales for philosophical assumptions made. The theoretical framework informing this study is the ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner (1979 & 1993).

Second, the literature review serves to present a global and historical perspective on SWDs and their involvement in higher education. To accomplish this objective, the university context is explored as it pertains to SWDs. The perspectives of SWDs in higher education are also presented with particular attention to university supports and barriers to college success as identified by SWDs.

Third, to further frame the context of the study and illustrate its need, retention and persistence issues are explored. The literature most relevant to retention issues is explored: (a) definitional considerations, (b) theoretical bases of retention and persistence studies, (c) undergraduate retention, and (d) persistence and retention of students with disabilities.

### **Theoretical Framework: Ecological Perspective**

The theoretical framework underpinning this study is the ecological perspective. The ecological perspective provides a context from which to understand the transactional context of the disability experience for college students ((Ebersold & Evans 2003). The ecological perspective illuminates internal aspects of a disability that are unique to individuals. These internal factors work in tandem with external aspects to the disability experience. All these influences are viewed in relation to the environmental systems. This perspective provides a theoretical framework from which to organize a more complete understanding of retention issues relating to SWDs. Given the complex intersections and interdependent nature of reciprocal forces impacting students lives, an organizing framework is necessary (e.g., Berger, 2001; Braxton, Bray, & Berger, 2000; St. John, Cabrera, Nora, & Asker, 2000). While being cognizant that this study focuses on the university context, the ecological perspective suggests that to develop a holistic understanding of students, their academic lives must be examined within the context of interconnected structures beyond the confines of the campus and its networks. Ungar (2002) postulates that individuals are constantly shaping and adapting to the environment as the environment is influencing them. Thus, in addition to be shaped by the college campus and educational environment, one would expect that SWDs impact systems within higher education. The nature of these influences, however, is beyond the scope of this current research study.

The ecological perspective made prominent by Bronfenbrenner (1979 & 1993) provides a useful framework to examine interactions between students and the other system levels within which they engage and/or are directly or indirectly impacted.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) framework is comprised of five levels of ecological components indicating a tiered environmental system in which individuals function. Figure 1 provides a graphic illustration of Bronfenbrenner's conceptualization of the five components of the ecological perspective: the microsystem, the meso system, the exosystem, the macrosystem and the chronosystem.

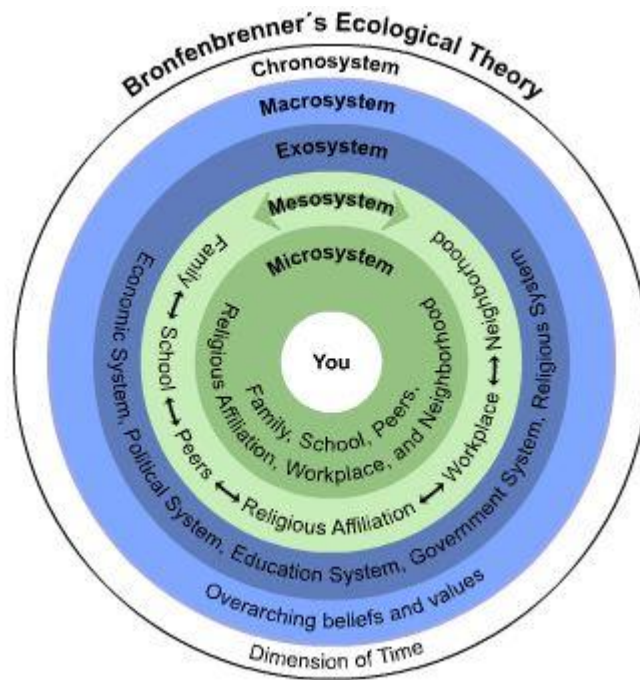


Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory. From <http://faculty.weber.edu/tlday/1500/systems.jpg>

The first system, microsystem refers to the individual's biological, psychological, and emotional systems and the relationship between an individual and the immediate environmental systems within which transactions happen such as the family. The second system, mesosystem refers to a system of microsystems. Bronfenbrenner (1979) conceptualized the mesosystem as the transactions that occur between two or more micro systems in which the individual is situated. In this research study mesosystem connotes interactions that SWDs have with the university (i.e., peers, campus climate, faculty,

administration) and others in their immediate sphere of influence such as parents, spouses, dependents. The third system, exosystem, refers to the linkages and processes that occur between two or more settings, that indirectly influences the individual. This system includes major systems that a student does not directly engage, but by which the student is nonetheless impacted. For this study exosystems could be the work environment of a student's spouse or parent, the state's higher education system which governs the university the student attends, or a community disability organization of which the student is not a member but whose policies may indirectly impact the student. Brofenbrenner's (1979) fourth system is the macrosystem. The societal cultural or subcultural systems with particular focus on beliefs, values, ideologies and bodies of knowledge that are embedded and transmitted for generations that can affect all systems with which individuals interact. For SWDs an example of a macrosystem includes the culture of an institution and the processes put in place to engender acceptance for diversity. The fifth and final system postulated by Brofenbrenner's (1986) ecological perspective is the chronosystem. The chronosystem refers to the change or consistency that occurs over time at the individual level and also at the other environmental system levels over their life span and across socio-historical situations. An example of the chronosystem within the context of this study is the recognition that institutions develop a life of its own over time which changes and students are inherently shaped in part by the era in which they attend university. A befitting example of a chronosystem is the amendment of the legislation Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 2008 which expanded the definition of disabilities and by so doing potentially increases the number of students that will be protected by the law. Another example of the chronosystem is the



Universal Declaration of Human Rights, with particular reference to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities which promotes the rights of people with disabilities.

The ecological perspective provides a lens through which SWDs retention issues can be examined taking into considerations the individual student's attributes in reciprocity with the multiple environmental systems with which a student impacts and is impacted. Students in higher education are impacted by multiple systems that can either hinder and or enhance their academic success.

### **Global and Historical Perspective:**

#### **Students with Disabilities in Higher Education**

A global and historical profile of key legislation and social movements that have impacted students with disabilities is presented, providing an overview of the major factors that influence the inclusion of SWDs in higher education and the evolution of such programs since the early 1970s. Illuminating this major body of knowledge sheds valuable insight on the current status of programs for students with disabilities in higher education.

#### **The Current Status of Higher Education and Students with Disabilities**

The number of students with documented disabilities in post secondary education has increased exponentially by some estimates since 1978 (Barnard-Brak, Lechtenberger, & Williams, 2010). The two pieces of legislation germane to understanding the responsibilities of post secondary institutions in providing educational opportunities and accommodation for SWDs are Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (1990). Prior to the advent of Section 504 of the

Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (National Council on Disability, 2000) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, SWDs had limited access to higher education (National Council on Disability, 2000). The Rehabilitation Act was designed to prohibit discrimination against persons with disabilities in public and private programs that receive federal financial assistance (29 U.S.C), inclusive of higher education. Section 504 is a civil rights law that seeks to ensure that an individual with a disability has equal access to an education (See Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, 45CFR Subtitle A § 84.12, and the Americans with Disabilities Act SEC.101 [9]) and SEC. 3 [1]).

The American with Disabilities Act (ADA) is another civil rights legislation ratified to prevent discrimination in employment, public services, and the provision of services (access)solely on the basis of disability related to. Students with disabilities who enter higher education are covered under the ADA (NCES, 2004). This act provides a safeguard to ensure that individuals who are otherwise qualified for employment or educational programming are not denied access because of disability. Whilst the Rehabilitation Act is applicable to institutions that receive federal funds, ADA has a broader reach and applies to state, private-sector, and locally funded learning institutions, excepting only institutions those owned by religious groups (42 U.S.C. § 12101 et seq.).

Other legislation that has paved the way for formative educational opportunities for persons with disabilities is the Individuals with Disabilities Act, also known as IDEA (Thomas, 2000). IDEA, originally known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975), and amended four times since 1975, was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Act in 1990 (Lee, 1996; Thomas, 2000). Under this Act, students ages 3-21 must be provided free, appropriate education in the least restrictive environment with the

goal of ensuring educational benefits. Although IDEA is complementary in nature to Section 504, the eligibility requirements and benefits provided under each law are different. Section 504 offers a broader definition of disability than does IDEA. As a result, all IDEA students are covered by section 504, but not all section 504 students are protected under IDEA unless they qualify under a specific disability category listed in IDEA. Under the Individual with Disabilities Act (IDEA), schools are required to provide an individualized education plan (IEP) designed to meet students (K-12) needs, which is not required under Section 504 (Lee, 1996; Thomas, 2000).

IDEA is the groundbreaking law that sought to provide SWDs and their families' the same opportunities in education as afforded the non-disabled population. In elementary and secondary schools governed by IDEA regulations, the administration is required to seek out, identify, and evaluate SWDs and provide eligible students with individualized special education and related services (United States Government Accountability Office [USGAO], 2009). However, a student's rights under IDEA provisions end when he/she graduates from high school or reaches age 21 (20 U.S.C. §§1400 *et seq.*). Students in higher education must self-identify their disability status, seek out disability services, and request accommodations and services if eligible.

When the rights under IDEA end, students' rights may continue under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). Unlike IDEA and Section 504, which are used in the public K-12 education system, ADA is applicable to higher education (NCES, 2004). Regulations enacted by these laws prescribe minimum standards for colleges and universities in six areas: admissions and

recruitment, treatment of students, academic adjustments, housing, financial aid and employment assistance, and nonacademic services (Milani, 1996).

Along with the U.S. national laws, international human rights law states that countries have a legal obligation to protect the civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights of all human beings (Office of the High Commission of Human Rights [OHCHR], 1996-2012). This international law states that everyone should be afforded equal access to higher education (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948).

Therefore, higher education has an international legal obligation to provide equal access to students with disabilities as non-disabled students. To provide equal access to education, some students with disabilities may require accommodations (Morris, 2001).

In addition to the aforementioned laws, other factors attributed to the increased numbers of SWDs attending college and universities include enhanced technology, expanded support service programs, and higher expectations of what students with disabilities can accomplish (NCES, 2004). Heyward (1999) noted that for many institutions, the ADA served as a caution light regarding compliance requirements that were generally ignored or not fully attended to under Section 504. Post secondary institutions have encountered increased demands to adapt and adjust their programs and facilities (Kaufman, 1991) and according to Madaus (1998) at least 118 colleges and universities have responded by establishing programs since the passage of the ADA.

The George Washington University HEATH Online Clearinghouse on Postsecondary Education for Individuals with Disabilities, established since 2002, tracks disability information pertinent to SWDs in higher education (HEATH Resource Center at the National Youth Transitions Center: National Dropout Prevention Center for

Students with Disabilities, 2010). The HEATH Resource Center projects further growth in the number of SWDs accessing higher education with community colleges seeing the largest increases. Yet, much improvement is desired to accommodate SWDs in higher education. For example, a lawsuit filed against Pennsylvania State University (Parry, 2010) highlights some of the challenges SWDs face in higher education. The complaint accuses Pennsylvania State University of pervasive and ongoing discrimination against those who are blind (students and professors) due to the inaccessibility of technology used on the campus (Parry, 2010). The inaccessibility includes Penn State's course management software, library catalogue, and departmental web sites. Reportedly, even the web site for the University's Office of Disability Services is not fully accessible to the blind (Parry, 2010). This lack of access is noted as a violation of the civil rights of persons who are blind under the ADA.

### **Students with Disabilities in Higher Education**

Higher education is expected to provide SWDs the same opportunity to engage in the academic experience as students without disabilities (NCES, 2010). Students with disabilities are required to meet the same recruitment and admission standards as students without disabilities in post secondary education (U.S.GAO, 2009). Institutions are not required to lower admission standards to accommodate students with disabilities, but to provide reasonable accommodations in areas such as academic programming, examination and evaluations, housing, and recreational facilities (United States Government Accountability Office, 2009). Such reasonable adjustments do not entail modifications that would fundamentally adjust the nature of a program, lower or waive essential academic requirements, or result in undue financial or administrative burdens.

The ADA Amendments Act (2008) set out guidelines to determine recognition as individuals with disabilities and provide a non-exhaustive list of “major life activities,” which include learning, reading, concentration, and thinking.

The laws define a person with disabilities as an individual who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, has a record of such impairment, or is regarded as having such an impairment (29 U.S.C. § 705(20)(B) and 42 U.S.C. § 12102). Importantly, not all SWDS are eligible for services at a university/college. The presence of a disability in and of itself does not guarantee disability services. There has to be evidence that the disability is substantially limiting for the individual to be considered eligible for accommodations and other related services (42 U.S.C. § 12102). Once students are determined to be eligible for services, professional staff will meet with them to determine reasonable accommodations. Postsecondary institutions are required to provide appropriate academic adjustments as necessary to ensure that it does not discriminate on the basis of disability (United States Department of Education: Office of Civil Rights, 2007).

### **Supports for Student Success**

Support needed and or desired by students with disabilities may be contingent on the individual’s unique and diverse characteristics. A support community has been cited as a key factor to academic success (Lock & Layton, 2001; Paul, 2000). The literature identifies a number of sources undergraduate SWDs can access for support: institutional, peers/friends, parental/family, and other social support systems.

## **Institutional Support**

To access support at the post secondary level, students have a choice to disclose their disability with the educational institution, provide documentation of their disability, and request accommodations and services. U.S Government Accountability Office (USGAO) delineates the possible steps involved in securing accommodations, which may vary across institutions based on policies and modus operandi (USGAO-10-33 Higher Education and Disability, 2009, p.5):

1. Register with the Disability Services Office;
2. Work with the Disability Services Office to determine what accommodations are available and may be needed;
3. Provide recent and appropriate documentation of disability
  - may need to visit a qualified professional for documentation
  - may need additional disability testing; and
4. Request accommodations at the Disability Services Office.

The literature indicates that an assortment of curricular, pedagogical, and technological services can be offered in a variety of configurations once a student with a disability is determined eligible for such assistance. Norris and Vasquez (1998) and Smith (1998) detail these services as follows:

1. Curricular: special course groupings and faculty training on strategies to integrate students with disabilities into their classrooms.
2. Pedagogical: providing oral testing, tutors, sign language interpreters, readers, and note-takers, or extended testing time.

3. Technological: books on tape, assistive computer technology, audio recorders, and magnifying devices.

Postsecondary schools use different approaches and accommodations to support students with disabilities. Schools are required to provide reasonable accommodations, such as note takers and extended time on tests tailored to individual student's needs. Further, some schools offer enhanced or more comprehensive services than are required by law. For example, some schools provide support on time management and study skills as well as voice recognition software which can help students prepare papers by "talking" to the computer (GAO-10-33 Higher Education and Disability, p. 5).

As U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan stated, students with intellectual disabilities should be provided with "quality postsecondary education with the support they need to attend, complete, and succeed in higher education" (Glickman, 2010, p. 1). However, despite legislative mandates for higher education to accommodate students with disabilities and provide special services, many such students are not utilizing the services. The literature indicates two main ways in which students with disabilities fail to maximize these services: (a) not seeking the services, and (b) seeking the services too late (Barnard-Brak et al., 2010). Some students may be apprehensive about seeking academic accommodations (Norton, 1997) and choose to assert a new identity and independence at the tertiary level (Torkelson, & Gussel, 1996). Students with disabilities also indicate that they do not disclose their disability identity because they do not think they need accommodations and/or will wait until they are experiencing academic problems before doing so (Getzel & Briel, 2006; Norton, 1997). Others choose not to disclose their disability status to the university in an attempt to avoid being labeled and being made to



feel that they are “advanced degree misfits” if they require specific services (Burgstahler & Doe, 2004; Getzel & McManus, 2005). According to Barnard-Brak et al. (2010), requesting classroom accommodations for SWDs requires the disclosure of personal and private information to faculty members, oftentimes with little or no prior relationship with them.

Persons feel differently about disclosing their disability identity. For some persons disclosing may be comfortable and therapeutic, for others the experience may be awkward and even intimidating. Some students may be reluctant to disclose their disability because they are ill prepared for the transition to postsecondary education. This view was illuminated in Janiga and Costenbader’s (2002) survey of disability providers and coordinators at 74 university and colleges. In this study disability providers reported “dissatisfaction with how well high school staff informed students of the services available for students with disabilities at the college level” (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002, p. 466).

### **Family Support**

Family support, particularly parental/caregiver participation, is considered to be one of the most important elements of high school transition programs (NCES 2010) that leads to positive outcomes for young adults with disabilities enrolled in higher education (Gardner, Chapman, Donaldson, & Jacobson, 1998). The key role family members play in the lives of many SWDs in higher education is underscored in disabilities studies as students often rely on family members for needed services and support that may not be forthcoming elsewhere (Stodden & Conway, nd). Parents/caregivers or family members are often highlighted as a critical part of the support network SWDs need to succeed in

higher education. Getzel and Thomas (2008) confirmed the important role parents played in the lives of SWDs, “by encouraging, supporting, and understanding them and the issues they face in college” (p. 81). While emphasizing the important and supportive role played by parents in the lives of SWDs, Dorwick, Anderson, Heyer and Acosta (2005) noted that some family members can be over protective and discourage prospective SWDs from pursuing higher education.

### **Social Support**

Social support can provide an important safety net against life’s stressors. Social support can be garnered from family, friends, instructors, therapists, and other caring and helpful individuals who can serve as sources of validation, empathy, problem-solvers, and models of how best to maximize success in higher education (Welkowitz & Baker, 2005). Sources of social support for SWDs mentioned in the literature other than family and that which is formally offered via the university include support informally given by friends, fellow students, and external community support services (Borland & James, 1999). Peers can offer guidance and other SWDs can serve as a strong support network by sourcing and sharing information about available services, advocacy and supports (Dorwick et al., 2005). Despite references to external support systems, the literature is disproportionately focused on academic accommodations as a primary source of support and there is a dearth in the literature pertaining to support SWDs obtained from sources external to those offered through the university and its affiliates. All agents of support that SWDs utilize should be assessed rather than focusing primarily on academic accommodations.

## **Barriers to Student Success**

Barriers to college success for SWDs include lack of knowledge and misunderstandings of the needs of SWDs by faculty and administrative staff, attitudinal barriers, lack of relevant advising, and feelings of isolation. These barriers are discussed below.

According to Greenbaum et al. (1995), the most common institutional barrier cited by SWDs is a lack of knowledge, understanding, and cooperation from faculty and administrators regarding their issues and concerns. Further studies illuminated the concern that SWDs reported general dissatisfaction with the level of knowledge and understanding among faculty and administration toward them (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Wilson et al., 2000). Some studies reported that universities have done an acceptable job preparing their buildings and facilities for their disabled students, but are not preparing their teachers for these students (Sheppard-Jones, 2002). Another study suggested that faculty members' disability awareness varied greatly, ranging from the claim that accommodations were merely "common sense," to admitting that they were "woefully ignorant" (Beilke & Yssel, 1999, p. 366). Findings from Barnard-Brak et al. (2010) partially support the lack of understanding that faculty hold about SWDs. The authors found that students' experiences with the process of acquiring accommodations were reportedly mixed depending upon the individual faculty member. Of note, from the perspective of the students, faculty members as a whole did not appear to understand the nature of their disabilities. Rao (2004) asserts that there is a need for faculty and staff to "be better informed about disabilities and students with disabilities" (p. 197). If not, the integration of SWDs into the college environment may be hindered by stereotypical

beliefs and discriminatory practices on the part of professors and fellow students (Rao, 2004).

SWDs in higher education are significantly impacted by attitudinal barriers (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Rao, 2004). Lewis (1998) and Rao (2002) found no statistically significant relationship between faculty willingness to provide accommodations and their attitudes towards SWDs. However, Rao 2004 contends that the attitudes of faculty and administrators could play an important role in the success or failure of SWDs. Attitudes of faculty may impact success regardless of accommodations. Accommodations are legally required yet faculty may still create a chilly or unwelcoming classroom environment. Accommodations may include: personal assistance with note taking, research, reading, writing, and communication; books on tape; the use of computer and communication technology; and extended time on exams (Enright et al., 1996).

The type of disability may also influence faculty attitude toward SWDs. This view is supported by McGee's (1989) quantitative study examining the beliefs and attitudes of 500 faculty and administrators towards SWDs at University of Virginia. McGee found that impairments such as moderate hearing and vision were considered least debilitating while quadriplegia and schizophrenia were considered most debilitating (McGee, 1989). The study further revealed that perceptions of SWD varied by faculty's academic department affiliation (McGee, 1989). For instance, faculty from "soft" applied sciences tended to have a more positive attitude towards SWDS than faculty from "hard" sciences. However, Williamson's (2000) survey of 106 faculty members at a southeastern university reported that even within the applied sciences, the attitudes of faculty towards

SWDs varied. Results from Williamson's study suggested that faculty in the College of Arts and Sciences and the School of Business had more positive attitudes toward SWDs than faculty from the School of Education.

The lack of quality and content of career guidance that SWDs receive from faculty advisors and or administrators can also create barriers. Borland and James (1999) shed light on this problem in an examination of SWDS experiences at a British university. The authors reported that although the majority of the university's departments used academic grounds to screen students with disabilities for acceptance in their programs, a minority of departments only admitted students if they were convinced of the students' ability to cope with their disabilities irrespective of their level of academic achievement. Not using academic grounds as a screening tool is cause for concern, as this subjective means of admission is discriminatory. The New England ADA Center (2010) released four video interviews conducted with college students with disabilities in which students shared strategies to successfully stay in college, graduate, and get jobs ([http://www.adaptiveenvironments.org/neada/site/student\\_videos](http://www.adaptiveenvironments.org/neada/site/student_videos)). In these videos, students revealed their struggles navigating the college environment. Danielle's story is among these. She was born missing a limb at the elbow and had always wanted to be a nurse. While in college, Danielle was told by the Dean of Nursing she could not be a nurse. The concerns about Danielle's ability to be a nurse were dispelled after she experienced much anxiety, advocacy from one of the department's faculty members and demonstration of her capability to be an excellent nurse. Danielle later received an award as a registered nurse, based on patients' evaluation of her performance that validated her competence as a nurse.

Other factors affecting SWDs decisions to withdraw include medication concerns and side effects (Weiner & Weiner, 1997); academic stressors such as difficulty concentrating, missing class, and incomplete assignments (Weiner & Weiner, 1997); not receiving the proper services or lack of social support to complete their college education (Brackette, 2007) limited communications; receiving low grades (Lehr et al., 2004); and coming from a low socio-economic status (Lehr, Johnson, Bremer, Cosio, & Thompson, 2004). According to the U.S Department of Education (2002), the capability to fund higher education is a crucial factor in the pursuance and persistence of a college education as 63% of SWDs are dependent on financial aids and loans.

### **Retention and Persistence Issues**

Contrary to widely accepted academic beliefs, 85% of students who leave universities nationwide do so for reasons other than academic difficulties. This information disconfirms the myth that the majority of students who do not complete their college education do so because of academic failings (Tinto, 1993). Further evidence that suggests only a small percentage of students leave college because of academic failings, is the finding that only 6% of the more than 3,000 drop-outs who earned 98 or more credit hours between 1990 and 2002 at the University of New Mexico, left because of poor academic performance (Stuart, 2008). Factors associated with dropout vary depending on the year of enrollment as factors affecting first year students are speculated to be different than factors impacting other levels of enrollment (Mohr, Eiche & Sedlacek, 1998; Neumann & Finaly-Neumann, 1989). Further, a number of studies focus on student characteristics as determinants of success without consideration of institutional characteristics, thus reinforcing the concept that the student is largely, if not solely,

responsible for staying at or leaving an institution. Studies examining the impact of the college environment on student attrition patterns were not conducted until the late 1970s (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979).

There remains an ongoing need to explore the services and supports that can assist all students (Wagner, Cameto, & Newman, 2003), however, exploring the effectiveness of these services for SWDs is especially critical given their added risks of not completing college (Wagner et al., 2003; NCES, 2009). A range of programs and services are beginning to surface at institutions to assist students with disabilities. Some are privately owned. For example, the College Living Experience is a for-profit company that offers extensive support for individuals with learning disabilities, Asperger's syndrome, and emotional or behavioral disorders (Lipka, 2006). Other approaches include offering support and services from disability offices on campuses or as separate programs in conjunction with these offices (Harding, Blaine, Whelley, & Chang, 2006). As higher education seeks to respond to the ever changing needs of varied student populations, a better understanding of retention issues is timely.

The following topics help to address general higher education retention issues and how related factors are brought to bear on the retention of students with disabilities: (a) definitional considerations, (b) theoretical bases of retention and persistence studies, (c) undergraduate retention, and (d) retention and persistence of students with disabilities.

### **Definitional Considerations**

Several key terms need clarification and discussion. These include the following: persistence and retention, attrition, dropout, and stop-out. A review of the literature indicates that some researchers use the words *persistence* and *retention* interchangeably.

However, the National Center for Educational Statistics (2009) differentiates the terms by using retention as an institutional measure and persistence as a student measure.

Retention refers to “the ability of an institution to retain a student from admission to the university through graduation” while persistence refers to a student’s ability to continue in higher education towards the completion of a degree (Berger & Lyon, 2005, p. 7).

Another term commonly used in retention literature is *attrition*, which refers to the reduction in the number of students resulting from low retention. The tendency to oversimplify the retention dialogue to a dichotomy of retention on one hand and non-completion on the other is problematic as it ignores the complexities involved. Rather, retention should be viewed as a complex multi-dimensional construct with a number of variables to consider. Some of the significant variables are students who temporarily withdraw but later return to college (*stop-outs*); low graduation rates, despite possible high persistence rates for a number of students throughout varied academic years (graduation rates); high transfer rates; high attrition rates (which may also include some transfers); and specific groups or sub-groups retention issues.

Dropout is yet another term often found in retention studies that can have varied interpretations, often dependent on the stakeholder. For example, a student who stops attending one university and transfers to another institution to complete their degree is not considered a student drop-out, but rather an institutional drop out (Tinto, 1993). Often the term drop-out is misconstrued to refer to students who discontinue enrollment at an institution before completing the requirements for earning a degree. Yet, this terminology merely represents an oversimplification of the construct. More often than not for institutional and sometimes research purposes, transfers, withdrawals/non-completers,



number expected to continue year on year, and *stop-outs* (students stop attending a university for at least one semester, then re-enroll) are “lumped” into the category of drop-outs. The definition can vary depending on ease of access to data and the focus of the researcher. For example, LGU operationalizes drop-out out as students failing to return the following term or year. A student who does not appear as enrolled at the point of census the following term is identified as dropout (Personal communication, Paul Thayer, April, 25, 2011).

Bean (see his chapter in Braxton, 2000) asserts that a student cannot be classified as a drop-out, unless one knows the original intent of the student upon entering college. This means, if a student's intention on entering college was to garner the knowledge and skills offered in such a program with no intention to continue to graduation, he/she should not be considered a *drop out* once the intended goal was accomplished. Bean's (1982) conceptualization of *dropout* suggests that institutions should recognize that (a) not all enrollees have the goal of graduation, and (b) some students will not continue for a variety of reasons including change of circumstances, other opportunities, or dissatisfaction with the institution. No consensus exists as to when a student's discontinuance of college enrollment can be considered *dropping out*.

Researchers continue to debate the validity and reliability of statistics on retention and *dropout* rates. Researchers argue that retention data are often fragmented, misleading, or at best do not compare like with like (Wang, Foucar-Szocki, Griffin, O'Connor & Sceiford, 2003).

## **Theoretical Bases of Retention and Persistence Studies**

The retention literature uses the terms theories and models interchangeably and the same principle will be applied for the purposes of this study. Several theories have been advanced to explain student persistence in higher education (Bean, 1982; Bean & Eaton, 2000; Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1975, 1993), however the most prominent theory that underpins retention and persistence studies is Tinto's (1975, 1982) sociological social integration model, followed by Bean's (1982) Psychological Model of Student Departure. Other frameworks include economic models of persistence (St. John, Cabrera, Nora, & Asker, 2000); Anderson's (1982) Force Field Analysis of Student Persistence and Astin's (1993) Input-Environment-Outcome Model (I-E-O-Model). Yet, little focus has been given to formulating theoretical frameworks that seek to explain retention and persistence as they relate to SWDs.

As colleges and universities grapple with policies and practices to promote student retention, many atheoretical studies have also been conducted (Jorgenson, et al., 2005). Primarily, institutions focus on attrition and graduation rates, the academic performance of varied groups of students, and factors that may influence successful academic outcomes (Jorgenson, et al. 2005). Yet, little attention is given to tracking SWD. Subsequently, a number of universities and colleges are unaware of the retention rate of its SWDs population.

Tinto's social integration theoretical model is anchored in the work of Spady (1970) who framed his theory of retention on Durkheim's suicide theory (1952). Like Durkheim, Spady suggested that suicide is more likely if individuals are not adequately integrated into society, and further theorized that social integration of students increases

institutional commitment leading to persistence (Spady, 1970). Building on Spady's theory, Tinto (1975) expanded the process of social integration into the academic and social systems of higher education. According to Tinto (1975), "It is the interplay between the individual's commitment to the goal of college completion and his commitment to the institution that determines whether or not the individual decides to drop out" (p. 96). Tinto's model purports that persistence in college is a function of social and academic integration, and within these two aspects other characteristics should be taken into consideration. Some characteristics identified include family background (family expectations, socio-economic status), pre college experiences (high school rank and high school GPA), goal commitment (student's goal to complete college), and institutional commitment (student's commitment to an institution). A balance between academic and social integration often leads to persistence (Tinto, 1975, 1982).

Tinto (1988) expanded his persistence model to include a three stage process: separation, transition, and incorporation. This process, adapted from Van Gennep's social anthropology theory, adds a time dimension in the form of describing the longitudinal stages of the integration process. During the separation phase, students part "from past habits and patterns of affiliation" and their persistence in college is dependent on whether they become "leavers from their former communities" (Tinto, 1988, p. 443). In the second phase, transition students have to cope with the discomfort of leaving what is familiar before they are fully integrated into the new environment. This period can be challenging for some students. In the third stage, incorporation, the students establish competency as a member of the educational institution. The extent to which the student becomes academically and socially integrated in the institution determines the student's

decision to persist or not. Studies on minority student retention argue that an expectation that students will abandon their familiar comfort zone and associations for college purposes is unrealistic (Braxton, 2000). Since then Tinto (2006-2007) has debunked his earlier work on a three staged students departure model and has supported other retention scholars in acknowledging that to increase the likelihood for some students to persist in college, they need to remaining connected to their past communities, church, family or tribe is crucial.

A major critique of Tinto's original model is that the role of external off-campus factors in shaping perceptions, commitments, and preferences was not taken into account (Bean, 1985). The model failed to address, in detail, external factors such as family obligations, finances, external peer support, cultural, and other social forces (Tinto, 1982). Also, the model did not consider time as a variable, but rather focused primarily on factors associated with students' first year retention predominantly in residential universities. Tinto later conceded that external factors and events might in fact influence students to reassess their educational goals and commitment to the institution (Tinto, 2006-2007). Coping behavior was also added to Tinto's original model to further explain the retention process (Eaton & Bean, 1995). Students' ability to adapt to campus environments is reflective of their ability to cope, which is directly related to coping skills they developed from previous experiences.

Building on Tinto's theory, Bean's (1982) psychological model of student departure stresses that a student's belief system, which subsequently shape their attitudes, is one of the main predictors of college persistence. The model also recognizes that student persistence is associated with factors external to the institution including family

approval, encouragement of friends, finances, and a student's perceptions about opportunities to transfer to other institutions (Bean, 1982; Eaton & Bean, 1995; Bean & Eaton, 2000). Bean and Eaton's (2000) revised model asserts that sociological factors of academic and social integration are secondary to the process of persistence; most important are the psychological processes that emerge in the interaction between students' personal characteristics and the institutional environment. These interactions influence students' self-efficacy, stress levels, and locus of control. Favorable psychological processes lead to social and academic integration, which ultimately leads to persistence.

Anderson's (1982) Force Field Analysis of College Student Persistence illustrates the dynamic processes resulting from the interplay of student characteristics and attributes and the environmental forces. The force field analysis complements the multidimensional ecological perspective underpinning this study as it validates the student and all environmental forces impacting and being impacted by the student. Another model mentioned in the retention literature is Astin's (1993) input-environment-outcome model (I-E-O- Model). According to Astin, input refers to characteristics of the student at the time of entry to college, and environment refers to the institutional policies, practices, faculty, and staff and the overall educational experiences. Astin's model highlights that to promote persistence the forces impacting the student in a positive way be of greater magnitude than forces impacting the student negatively. Such forces include a combination of the student's internal forces and external/environmental forces, which can be negative and/or positive at each system level. Examples of internal forces may be

self-doubt or self-confidence and examples of external forces may be discrimination and financial support.

A commonality among most retention theories is the critical importance of students involvement, most popularly referred to as engagement (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2006-2007; Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005). Astin (1984) defines involvement as “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (p. 297). Research on this matter is emerging, resulting in an increased emphasis on intentional student engagement activities beyond the first year of college, specifically the sophomore (second) year (National Resource Center, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

The preceding discussion on theories explicates the complex multifaceted nature of student retention and persistence and highlights the fact that academia has still not been able to harness research efforts to enhance retention efforts and ultimately increase graduation rates. The exploration of theories also brings to the fore the need for theory development relevant to SWDs.

### **Undergraduate Retention: General Student Population**

There are a number of reasons why students in general fail to complete studies in post secondary education. Factors frequently cited in the literature are the lack of social support and inadequate student involvement/engagement (Belch, 2004-2005; Tinto, 1975, 2006-2007). Tinto’s model purports that persistence in college is a function of social and academic supports for students. High levels of support and integration are more likely to prevent students from discontinuing enrollment in colleges. Other factors associated with retention for college students include: social and academic backgrounds of students

(Duquette, 2000; Tinto, 2006-2007 & Wegner, 2008), environmental factors such as finances or family responsibilities that can pull students' attention away from their studies (Eaton & Bean, 1995), and faculty/student interaction (Greenbaum, Graham & Scales, 1995; Getzel & Brown, 2000; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002).

Historically, data have indicated that the largest numbers of students leave college during the first year or before entry into the second year (Iffert, 1956; McNeely, 1937; Tinto, 1993). As a result, research and retention programs focus on successful completion of the first year of college and subsequent return the second year. Seminal researchers, Pantages and Creedon (1978) focused on the first year by stating, "Measures designed to reduce attrition should focus primarily ... on freshmen, since these are the students most likely to withdraw" (p. 94).

Examination of national data from 1999 however revealed that 44% of all withdrawals occurred after the second year (Bowen et al., 2009). The authors further caution that "persistence cannot be viewed as simply a function of students completing their first two years" (p. 35). The same year, The Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange (1999) reported that approximately 20% of freshmen in four-year public institutions did not return for their sophomore year, 11% did not return after their sophomore year, and approximately 9% did not return for the junior and senior years (Stuart, 2008). Both studies suggest that retention is an issue throughout the college experience.

Bowen et al. (2009) state that, "In spite of all of the programs and services to help retain students, according to the U.S. Department of Education, Center for Educational Statistics, 50% of those who enter higher education actually earn a bachelor's degree" (p.

32). Despite recognition of the value of retention efforts during the first year, aggregated retention rates in the subsequent years suggest the need to bolster retention programs for college completion throughout college enrollment (Stuart, 2008). Administrators at University of New Mexico recognized the need to address retention of their upper division students after an internal student survey indicated that over a ten year period (from Fall 1980 to Fall 1990) an average of nearly 350 students per year who had earned 98 or more semester hours of credit and were enrolled as degree-seeking undergraduates left the university without completing a degree. Of the number of students who withdrew during that decade, 94% had successfully maintained a 2.0 GPA or higher grade point average on 98 or more semester hours of earned credit. University of New Mexico established a Graduation Project to get students to return and complete their degree. According to Stuart 2008, since 1997, the Graduation Project has successfully brought more than 1,600 students back to the university who earned their degrees. Stuart suggests four reasons retention efforts should focus on upper division students (juniors and seniors):

1. The students had already been successful in completing three-fourths of the coursework required for a degree (they had demonstrated persistence).
2. They had a track record and 94% had proven they possessed the academic ability to be successful (the other 6% being those who dropped out for academic reasons).
3. Higher graduation rate could increase the university's national rankings.
4. The university had invested substantially more institutional resources in getting these students through to upper division before they dropped-out.



Along with Stuart's (2008) study, two earlier studies focused on retention of juniors and seniors. In the first of these studies, Neumann and Finaly-Neumann (1989) attempted to predict retention and attrition of college juniors and seniors through Quality of Learning (QLE) indicators. The authors hypothesized that the factors affecting junior and senior attrition are different from those affecting freshmen and sophomores. While social and academic integration models and "external-environmental" models may be useful for explaining freshman and sophomore attrition, Neumann and Finaly-Neumann (1989) propose it is "quality of learning" or "learning conditions" that influence upper division student withdrawal (p. 133). They found three indicators that were the most important predictors of retention. Those predictors were student- faculty contact; student involvement in and content of an academic program, which included the quality of teaching and academic advising; and the value of the coursework. The authors concluded that "lack of integration" and "external factors" may predict attrition among first and second year students, but were not adequate for explaining attrition in the latter years.

The second study conducted by Mohr et al. (1998) built on Neumann and Finaly-Neumann's (1989) work, specifically addressing attrition of students who had achieved senior status. The results of this study supported the findings of Neumann and Finaly-Neumann in that the quality of the academic experience, while defined slightly differently in the two studies, was a strong predictor of upper division/senior student retention. Notably, none of these studies focused on any specific population. Thus, assumptions regarding attrition patterns of SWDs across different academic levels would be baseless.

## **Retention of Students with Disabilities**

Retention studies on higher education in the U.S have reported conflicting results regarding retention rates of SWDs when compared to students without disabilities. For example, according to NCES (1997), students /youth with disabilities ages 16 through 24 years old were more likely to drop out of high school and/or college than students without disabilities (14.6% versus 11.8%). There is also notable variation in dropout rates when each disability condition is considered. For example, in 1995, students within the stated age group with mental or emotional disabilities were more likely to dropout, 56.1% of SWDs who dropped out of high school/college reported mental illness, 31.1% reported mental retardation, and 23.6% reported emotional disturbance. The National Longitudinal Transition Study (2003) indicates that people with disabilities participate in postsecondary education in smaller numbers and frequently do not complete their degrees. On the other hand, Wessel et al. (2009) found that the retention and graduation rates of SWDs at a four year granting university were similar to students without disabilities considering the timeframe of six years to attaining an undergraduate degree. This longitudinal study tracked 11,317 students, inclusive of 172 SWDs, over an eight period from matriculation (1994 through 1996) to graduation to ascertain if SWDs were retained at different rates than students without disabilities. The major difference noted by the authors was in year four and five when less SWDs graduated than students without disabilities. The researchers reported that SWDs (typically students with non-visible disabilities) carried the lowest credit load possible to maintain full-time status, which prolonged the time to graduate a semester or two. Further, those students with severe

disabilities carried even smaller course loads hence requiring a few more semesters to graduate.

The above mentioned study confirms the findings of some scholars and challenges others. For example, it confirms Vogel and Adelman's (1992) findings that SWDs took a lighter course load, resulting in a longer time to graduation, yet the graduation rates for students with learning disabilities and those without disabilities were not significantly different. Similarly, a Canadian study (Jorgenson, Ferraro, Fichten, & Havel, 2009) found that although a higher proportion of SWDs entered the college with high school grade averages 75% lower than their nondisabled peers, SWDs experienced lower dropout rates between the first and third semesters than students without disabilities. They dropped out at substantially higher rates in later semesters however, resulting in equivalent dropout rates by the end of the tenth semester. In an earlier study over a 12-year period Jorgenson, et al. (2005) compared college records of 653 SWDs and 41, 357 students without disabilities to determine their academic outcomes. They reported that by the end of the tenth semester students with and without disabilities graduate at the same rate, even though SWDs took lighter course loads and took approximately one semester longer to graduate (Jorgensen et al., 2005). Wessel et al. (2009), however, challenges the findings of NCES and other researchers such as deFur et al. (1996), which assert that having a disability increases the likelihood of dropping out of college, hence decreasing the likelihood of earning a degree. These findings however should be considered within the limitations of the study, such as small sample sizes, scope of study, reliability, and validity.

As Borland and James (1999) note, SWDs may face additional challenges related to managing their disabilities in an academic environment. While adapting to the new demands of the academic terrain, “lectures may be unattended, assessment deadlines missed or, at the very least, requests made for extensions or ‘special’ circumstances to be taken into account” (p. 98). Some new dynamics and demands that institutions of higher education offer include increased work load, increases in academic competition, greater expectation for students’ independent success, decreased student-teacher contact, and changes in support networks (Stodden & Conway, nd). Without effective strategies to mitigate these often new challenges, such situations may put the students in danger of failing academically.

### **Persistence of Students with Disabilities**

A review of the pertinent literature highlights a number of factors associated with persistence of SWDs. The following discussion will highlight some of these factors cited in the literature.

In one study using Tinto’s model, Duquette (2000) examined the perceived experiences of 36 SWDs at a large Ontario university. Findings of this study indicated that background characteristics and academic integration were more important variables related to persistence than social integration. Elements such as goal-commitment, support of family and friends, and understanding professors were also found to be related to persistence among these SWDs (Brackette, 2007). Duquette’s findings concerning goal-commitment support Belch’s (2004-2005) assertion that SWDs who have a sense of purpose, reflected in their ability to set and develop goals were more likely to persist despite challenges.

Personal characteristics and attributes also seem to be positively associated with SWDs persistence and success. Wegner (2008) found that personal attributes such as motivation, maturity, and student outlook on higher education were associated with persistence. Additional personal characteristics related to persistence are the ease with which students adjusted to the social and academic life of the campus; how they utilized support from faculty and tutors; and the nature of their study skills such as study and time management, advocacy, decision making, and problem solving. Another factor impacting the success of SWDs in higher education is their perception of belonging. Several studies found that SWDs are significantly lonelier than non-disabled students (Dilger, 2000; Gambril et al., 1986). For example, Dilger (2000) revealed that 75% of the 161 college SWDs surveyed rated high for loneliness. In support of Tinto and Bean's theories, campus involvement, a sense of belonging, and purpose were recognized as critical factors that contribute to persistence (Belch, 2004-2005; Enright et al., 1996; Wegner, 2008).

The degree to which faculty and college staff provide/facilitate accommodations (Enright et al., 1996) is cited as a necessary factor to support students' persistence. Also students' ability to understand how to negotiate and use accommodations is purportedly a critical skill necessary for persistence among SWDs (Getzel, 2008; Wegner, 2008). Additional characteristics linked to self-determination include acceptance of a disability and how it affects learning, understanding which support services are needed and knowing how to express the need for such services, and having the determination to overcome obstacles that may be presented (Getzel, 2008). Barnard-Brak et al., (2010) examined the accommodation-seeking strategies upper division academically successful

college SWDs utilized (juniors and beyond) by exploring the extent to which students were comfortable discussing their disability with others (faculty, staff, and people in general). The authors recognized three behavioral strategies associated with the academic success of SWDs in college: scripting the disclosure of their disability and request for accommodations, negotiating accommodations rather than reporting ADA non-compliance, and downplaying their own disability status.

Baggot (2005) utilized the data provided in the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS: 96/01 – restricted level) to investigate the association between coping strategies and persistence for second year students with learning disabilities. BPS is a database that includes longitudinal studies of different cohorts of students who are enrolled in postsecondary education for the first time. The study collects data on student persistence in, and completion of, postsecondary education programs, their transition to employment, demographic characteristics, and changes over time in their goals, marital status, income, and debt, among other indicators (NCES, 2010). Coping strategies were operationalized in the Baggot (2005) study as enrollment in first-year remedial work and credit load during the first year. Enrollment in a remedial course was found to be strongly correlated to persistence to the second year of college, while credit load was not found to be considerably related to persistence.

Another study that examined a collective population of SWDs was conducted by Mamiseishvili and Koch (2011). The authors also used data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study survey (BPS: 04/06) to identify factors that influenced SWDs persistence from first-to-second-year. Mamiseishvili and Koch (2011) noted that academic, social integration and disability-related accommodations were

significantly associated with first-to-second-year persistence of SWDs, but were not significant when controlling for demographic, entry, and in-college factors. Social integration was noted as having a stronger positive influence on persistence than academic integration. Also, the authors further suggest that campus involvement and academic accommodations were of secondary importance in comparison to factors such as GPA and students' degree aspirations.

Paul (1999) conducted one-on-one qualitative interviews to explore the university life experiences of six SWDs who used wheelchairs. The meta theme connecting the university experiences of the six students was that the college "experience is a wholesome process" that may contribute to or hinder persistence and was more encompassing than just academics. Other important themes that emerged shed light on factors conducive to a satisfactory university life as well as barriers to campus engagement. These themes included (a) the meaning of college to the students; (b) making informed choices with emphasis on choosing the right college; (c) personal support network (family members, friends, the institution's disability service, and external agencies); (d) student beliefs about the institution's responsibility to provide a conducive environment in assisting them towards academic success; (e) university community comprised of fellow students, faculty, and non-teaching staff; and (f) self-promotion: defined as how the students felt about their personal obligations to build awareness and decrease visibility of SWDs within the university community. The study's review on student/faculty interaction was considered as both favorable and unfavorable. Students recalled that "even encounters with lift operators and security personnel ...

awareness level was considered to be higher than that of faculty and fellow students” (Paul, 1999, p. 101).

Corcoran’s (2010) qualitative research illuminates factors that are supportive of an integrative Tinto and Bean model. The study was comprised of multiple case studies of five students who were each interviewed four times. Each interview focused on different aspects of the students’ experience, namely their experiences of transitioning into college (interview one), the academic environment (interview two), the support services (interview three), and their definitions of success (interview four). Corcoran focused on factors that contributed to semester-by-semester success of community college SWDs during their first year. His findings suggest a seven stage process associated with student persistence. These stages include: pre-college experiences that influence academic involvement, initial encounters that created first impressions, transition shock, support-seeking and strategic adjustment, prioritizing and balancing of college and non-college commitments, recognizing success, and a sense of belonging to the college community.

In summary, the primary factors associated with SWDs persistence in higher education that emerged from the literature can be categorized under six broad headings: (a) personal characteristics, attributes, and experiences; (b) demographic factors; (c) support from family members, friends and peers; (d) institutional dynamics, characteristics, climate, and resources; (e) community factors; and (f) societal and cultural factors.



## Summary

Acknowledging the challenges associated with college life and the diverse needs of SWDs, it is not surprising that SWDs leave college before graduating at higher rates than students without disabilities. Adjusting to a college environment presents challenges for all students; however, for SWDs, the responsibility of managing their accommodations along with academic coursework presents challenges that are unique to these students (Getzel, 2008).

Research suggests that there are a number of reasons SWDs may not complete college degrees. The reasons vary from lack of social integration, dissatisfaction with course/faculty/institution, personal reasons such as medication problems, academic stressors, financial problems, and limited institutional supports. On the other hand the literature also highlights factors associated with college persistence and the success of SWDs. These factors can be categorized across four system levels. First, the individual level factors include GPA, pre-college experiences, self-motivation, possessing self-determination skills, understanding how to seek and use accommodation, goal commitment, well-adjusted to and sense of belonging to college life, ability to utilize support, quality of their decision-making, and study skills.

The other three system levels associated with college persistence and success have the potential of being a social support network for SDWs. The second system level pertains to parents, family members, friends and peers. Factors associated with this level of support include problem-solving, role model, encouragement, guidance, listening, validation, affirmation, provision of resources. The third system level is that of the educational institution. Factors linked to the institutional system includes: positive

accepting campus climate, counseling, tutoring, understanding and knowledgeable faculty and staff, availability and provision of disability services, and resources. The fourth system level relates to community resources. Factors connected to the community include employment opportunities; health specialists; affiliated disability services; and other community agencies, groups, and allies. Another system level that is often not focused on in the literature but has the potential to provide support to SWDs is the society at large. The society can offer support through legislation, economic, social and political mandates, media influences, and national agencies.

Many of the studies examined utilized surveys methods, students' records, and data gleaned through interviewing SWDs during their tenure on college campuses; a few interviewed students who dropped out (Megivern, Pellerito, & Mowbray, 2003). The review indicates a dearth in information gathered from SWDs who chose to discontinue their enrollment from universities and the need for continuing dialogue and data collection from this population.

It is also interesting to note that little is known about the timing of SWDs withdrawal and reasons associated with withdrawal after the first two years. Furthermore, the voices of academically successful SWDs who did not complete a college degree are not adequately represented in the literature. In addition, retention studies with SWDs who dropped out of college did not distinguish those who left voluntary or were academically dismissed. This study is designed to hear from undergraduate SWDs who voluntarily withdrew from their baccalaureate education after earning 60 or more college credits. This information can inform institutions' policies and programs to ultimately be more effective in retaining SWDs. Furthermore, involving SWDs in research that affects them

increases the relevance of research findings, making the results more meaningful to the target population.

Identifying factors at each system level that may impact retention of SWDs in college may inform future policies and practices related the SWDs, families, social supports, and institutional factors The influence of community/environmental and cultural/societal factors are beyond the scope of this study.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

This chapter addresses the philosophical framework undergirding the study and the data collection method utilized. An overview of the research site will also be provided. It elucidates the steps involved in the research process, how participants are identified and selected and rigors followed to ensure trustworthiness and credibility. The steps in the data analysis process will also be presented.

### **Philosophical Framework: Social Constructivism**

The social constructivism paradigm illuminates the phenomenon under exploration. Social constructivism is anchored in the ontological assumption that multiple realities exist and that these realities can vary based on the creator's lived experiences. Its epistemological tenet deems knowledge as subjective, contextual, local, pluralistic, and generated through people's experiences (Schwandt, 2007). As Crotty (1998) points out, social constructivism is not just about the human construction of meaning as independent of phenomena in the world. Instead, it is about human interaction with the world and how humans then make sense of their interactions, which constitute the essence of constructivism.

Social constructivism also validates the reality that exists within the conversation between the participant and the researcher. Researchers, and those being researched, or the phenomenon studied, engage in dynamic interaction that also creates the meaning of experiences. Therefore, the constructivist researcher becomes a "co-creator of knowledge, of understanding and interpretation of the meaning of the lived experience/s"

(Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p.196). Knowledge in this tradition is recognized as human construction and never value free (Bettis & Gregson, 2001; Crotty, 1998).

The constructivism paradigm recognizes the value of multiple truths shaped by individuals' lived experiences and the meanings they attach to them. In this tradition, research infidelity would occur if the researcher were to arrive at a cause and effect conclusion, as human interactions and experiences are often interrelated and complex (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

This research on SWDs seeks to gain an understanding of the factors associated with SWDs leaving college prematurely and identifying factors that may have prevented them from doing so. The social constructivism paradigm provides SWDs the opportunity to have their views heard in a recognized environment. Despite the number of studies addressing retention issues pertaining to SWDs, few studies privilege these students' experiences and perspectives on the factors they associate with non-completion of their college degrees. Therefore the factors SWDs considered before they decided not to complete their undergraduate degree will be explored.

### **Methods**

This is an exploratory qualitative study. In exploratory research, a social phenomenon is investigated with minimal priori expectations in order to develop an understanding of the phenomenon under exploration (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To conduct this exploration, qualitative methods of data collection, primarily semi-structured interviews, were employed. Qualitative methods allowed the researcher to remain true to the tenets of constructivism by allowing the participants to tell their stories, thereby constructing knowledge within the context under exploration. Qualitative

methods offer a lens to explore substantive areas about which little is known, to acquire novel understanding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Further, this method “gives voice to people who have been historically silenced or marginalized” (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005, p. 199). Also, the depth and breadth of context and contradiction that can be unearthed in a qualitative study cannot possibly be captured by quantitative methods.

Lehmann et al. (2000) emphasize the significance of listening carefully to students’ perspectives to identify and eliminate barriers to success, to identify personal and academic needs, and to provide support and a vision for their future. Interviews allow participants to be expressive and can be used to explore thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and other aspects of their experiences. As Mishler (1986) noted, “One of the primary ways ... human beings make sense of their experience is by casting it in a narrative form” (p. 67-68). The interview, therefore, becomes a tool for the production of rich narratives.

### **Research Site: Land Grant University (LGU)**

The research site is a land-grant university (LGU) in a mid-western U.S state. Like other institutions of higher education, the total number of SWDs at LGU is unknown. The data collected and reported on SWDs represent only those students who self-identify their disability, be it permanent or temporary, either to the university or RDS. The number of students registered through RDS with documented disabilities (undergraduate and graduate) at LGU has steadily increased from 133 students (0.7%) in 1985 to a modest 1,012 students (4%) in 2009 (LGU, Resources for Disabled Students Office, unpublished document, 2010). Although these numbers reflect an upward trend in

the number of SWDs as a proportion of the total student population, the actual number of SWD, in contrast to other post secondary institutions, is substantially lower. Nationwide, it is estimated that 11% of U.S. students identify as having disabilities.

Unreliable data may be due to several factors including that students may not disclose their disability identity or that some students may be unaware of their disability, as in the case of students with learning and cognitive disabilities (NCES, 2002). It may also be that some institutions are more selective than others and may inadvertently deselect some SWD in the recruitment process (P. Thayer, personal communication, November 23, 2010). In the spring of 2009, LGU launched an initiative to identify and help students who left the university (having fulfilled most of the matriculation requirements for an undergraduate degree) to return and complete their education. Students selected to participate in this initiative needed to have been in good academic standing and to have left the university with only 20% or fewer credits remaining to graduate. It is not known if any of these students are diagnosed with any disabilities.

The Resources for Disabled Students (RDS) Office is CSU's signature office committed to supporting the institution as a non-discriminatory environment that adheres to the mandates of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and its amendments. Resources for Disabled Students Office serve all students who disclose their disability status with their office personnel and are eligible to receive accommodation. Faculty and staff with disabilities may also work with RDS. Support services offered through RDS fall into the following three categories: accommodations, awareness, and advocacy. Another program available to SWDs at CSU is the Academic Advancement Center (AAC) which offers mentoring opportunities

during the first year of enrollment, along with tutoring sessions and the offering of learning and study strategies. An additional program, the Assistive Technology Resource Center (ATRC) also provides five main services to CSU's disability population and support staff, which includes: disability assessments, accommodations, training, equipment loans, and resources. SWDs may obtain services and supports when needed.

### **Participants' Identification**

The Resources for Disabled Students Office (RDS) at LGU provided a list of students registered with the office; this list was used as the primary means to identify students for this study who had documented disabilities and had disclosed their disability status. The target population was SWDs (having completed 60 credits or more) who voluntarily left the university without completing their undergraduate degree. Permission was sought from the director of RDS to contact SWDs (via email and or by any other preferred means) who have not enrolled for the last two years (See Appendix A for letter to director of RDS). Prior to this research, RDS had not kept track of the number of SWDs registered with their office that remain enrolled until graduation. Rose Kreston, the director for RDS, committed to put together a list of students' identification numbers and sent this list to the office for Students Affairs. Staff at the Office of Student Affairs used LGU's enrollment system to identify students who left before graduation. Dr. Paul Thayer, LGU's Associate Vice President for Student Affairs and special advisor to the Provost for Retention, committed to and conducted this enrollment audit. Results from the enrollment audit were sent directly to the director of RDS who contacted the SWDs who had left the university prior to graduating. A detailed description of the procedures



followed during the enrollment audit process to develop the list of SWDs who left LGU before completing graduation requirements can be seen in Appendix B

Of paramount consideration is that students' personal information relayed to an institution is private and the institution is not at liberty to share any of that information with a third party, unless granted permission by the enrollee to do so. Otherwise, unsolicited disclosure is considered an ethical breach that can have legal and academic implications for the institution and researcher. Therefore I could only contact this population if they gave permission to the director or other service providers to have me get in touch with them, or if they contacted me directly (See Appendix C for recruitment transmittal message to prospective participants).

### **Participant Selection**

All students who indicated their willingness to participate in the study were contacted. Prior research indicates that it is difficult to locate students who leave college prematurely. The study focused on recruiting 5-8 participants from a pool of 80 former students. The director for RDS distributed the contact script to all eligible former students based on the results of the RDS enrollment audit. Of a total of 80 eligible participants, 42 students were initially enrolled as new first year students and 38 were noted as transfer students. Sixty-one students who had their email addresses listed were sent the research contact script. Of this number, 32 were enrolled as new first year students, while the other 28 were transfer students. The enrollment audit helped narrow the population to reflect only students who met the selection criteria; namely, SWDs who voluntarily left the university without completing their undergraduate degree having completed 60 credits or

more. Also, transfer students should have completed at least one semester at LGU to be included in the study.

Ten students contacted the researcher via phone call and/or email to express their desire to participate in the study. Of an initial response from 10 former students, five followed through to the interview. Once contact was made with the participant, they were sent an Informed Consent Form to become familiar with the terms and conditions of the study (See Appendix D). However, I also took a copy on the day of the interview to read and discuss with participants to ensure they understood the terms and conditions of the research. The participants who requested telephone interviews, mainly because they lived out the state, were emailed the consent form that they printed, authorized and returned to me via postal mail. Once I received the consent form, the participant was contacted to arrange a convenient time to engage in an interview. On the day of the telephone interview we discussed the contents of the Informed Consent before proceeding.

The Informed Consent Form delineated the contract terms and agreement with the participant. It stated the research topic, its purposes and procedures, and the need for the participant's signature indicating voluntary involvement. It also explained the option to withdraw from the process at anytime. Specifically, the consent form provided participants the opportunity to arrange a date, time, and location where the interview could be conducted in private (anywhere seemingly safe and conducive), and requesting permission from participants to have interviews audio-taped. Confidentiality was protected by masking information that could expose a participant's identity with the use of pseudonyms that participants chose themselves.

## **Data Collection**

Prior to official data collection, I conducted a pilot phase with selected SWDs to determine the feasibility of my research design. The pilot phase consisted of three participants who were purposefully selected to closely represent the population with whom the study was conducted. The pilot phase included two current SWDs and one SWD who had recently graduated. An interview schedule was employed for this phase. The interview schedule used in the study includes minimum modifications as gleaned from the pilot study.

The interview schedule had a number of open ended questions to encourage participants to discuss their experiences as students at LGU. The primary focus was on factors that might have influenced their decision to withdraw from their baccalaureate education after successfully completing 60 or more college credits. The initial phase of the interview began with collecting some general demographics: gender, age, major, and type of disability. A copy of the interview protocol with the interview schedule is attached (Appendix E).

Participants were sent a copy of the interview schedule either electronically or by mail as per their preference at least one week before the scheduled interview. Providing the questions in advance of the interview allowed participants to become familiar with the questions and provided time for interviewees to reflect on their responses before the interview.

Interviews were conducted between August 2011 and December 2011. Two participants opted for face-to-face interviews, one chose interviewing via Skype, and the remaining two opted for telephone interviews. All participants granted permission to have

their interviews audio-recorded. Audio-recordings provided the researcher an opportunity to revisit an interview and review it in its totality, then transcribe and check for accuracy by re-playing and comparing transcripts with recordings.

There could be variations in the quality of the interviews because of different modalities used to conduct interviews. One of the participants who opted for telephone interview was more concise than the others, but I do not know if it was more succinct because of the impersonal nature of the telephone interviewing or other unknown variable/s as the other telephone interviewee was more open and elaborative. Body language and nonverbal cues cannot be conveyed using telephone interviews (Hay-Gibson, 2009) which make building rapport with interviewees challenging (Carter, 2011). The interviews conducted via face-to-face and Skype videos were equally expressive as one of the telephone interviews, with the recognition that through Skype video only some upper body language is visible (Carter, 2011). Given the detailed descriptions each participant provided of their educational experiences at LGU it is difficult to assess to what degree the modality of data collection may have impacted the information they relayed.

A semi-structured focused interview technique (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) was utilized to systematically obtain first-hand data about participants' experiences as SWDs in higher education, with particular emphasis on factors that may have influenced their decision to withdraw from college and what might have encouraged and or facilitated completion. This process was designed to diffuse anxiety related to feeling of unpreparedness. While pertinent literature informed the development of questions on the interview schedule (NCES, 2009; Tinto, 1993), most of the questions were developed by

the researcher based on their relevance to the topic under exploration. These interviews produced rich qualitative narratives that were subjective in nature (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) and privileged the voices of a population not often heard from.

### **Determining the Quality of the Research**

Qualitative researchers employ a variety of techniques to increase the trustworthiness of the research they conduct (Carlson, 2010). Trustworthiness addresses the rigor involved in a study to indicate that everything possible was done to ensure that data was appropriately and ethically collected, analyzed, and reported. Other common terms used interchangeably with trustworthiness include authenticity, goodness, plausibility, and credibility (Creswell, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The trustworthiness and authenticity of findings in qualitative research may be likened to the concepts of reliability and validity in quantitative research (Golafshani, 2003). To this end, Golafshani asserts, “Although reliability and validity are treated separately in quantitative studies, these terms are not viewed separately in qualitative research” (p. 600), instead both are considered to encompass research fidelity. In the qualitative paradigm, other techniques used to measure quality of the research are neutrality and confirmability. Unlike quantitative research, which is heavily dependent on the quality of the instrument constructed, credibility in qualitative research is based on the extent to which the researcher can convince the reader that the research is believable. Strategies employed to increase the trustworthiness and authenticity of this research included audit trails (Merriam, 1998), member checking, reflexivity, and thick, rich description (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 1998).

## **Audit Trail**

An audit trail entails careful documentation of all components of a study and helps convince the research community of the rigor involved in the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I documented detailed records of the methods and decisions made before and during the research that could help an external auditor retrace the research steps. Keeping a journal, field notes, interview notes, time-line, correspondence with persons involved in the process, and audio-tapes (for three years) are all measures of creating an audit trail (Carlson, 2010). The analysis included quotations of participants to illustrate and substantiate the presented findings. The use of quotes not only provided the participants a voice in the research, but also offers readers the possibility to make some validity checks of interpretations made against the data (Creswell, 2009). Tapes are electronically stored on a password-protected drive to which only the researcher and principal investigators have access. These tapes will be destroyed in three years after the completion of this dissertation.

## **Member Checking**

Member checking provides participants the chance to verify the accuracy of the entire transcript or aspects of the transcript specific to the research focus (Merriam, 1998). It is a “way of finding out whether the data analysis is congruent with the participants’ experiences” (Curtin & Fossey, 2007, p. 92). Creswell (2009) emphasizes that member checking is best done with polished interpreted pieces such as themes and patterns emerging from the data rather than the actual transcripts. While acknowledging that there are instances when full transcripts are required, Carlson (2010) attests to the value of partial transcripts, “so that participants can focus on their main contributions and

not be distracted or embarrassed in seeing places where they were off topic” (p. 1111). In this study, participants were sent copies of partial transcripts (aspects specific to the focus of the study) for verification of facts.

### **Thick and Rich Description**

Creswell and Miller (2000) postulate that the significance of providing thick, rich description in qualitative research is to pull the reader more closely into the story, to increase consistency, and to elicit feelings for and a sense of connection with the participants in the study. One measure of the quality of qualitative research is the extent to which corroboration or substantiation of findings is possible (Carlson, 2010). Corroboration is only possible in the interpretive paradigm with the provision of rich in-depth understanding of commonalities and differences that may exist among situations. When a researcher provides detailed description or several perspectives about a phenomenon, “the results become more realistic and richer...and add to the validity of the findings” (Creswell, 2009, p. 192). The thick detailed description presented in this study is augmented with participant quotations to further enhance the authenticity of the study.

### **Qualitative Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis**

Thematic analysis was used. The thematic approach is useful for “theorizing across a number of cases, finding common thematic elements across research participants and the events they report” (Riesman, 2004, p.706). To illuminate themes, both the data-driven (inductive) analysis and theory-driven (deductive) analysis were used, with a greater degree of dependency on inductive analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). Preference was given to the inductive data-driven modality to illuminate factors from the raw information

that SWDs associate with leaving college pre-maturely (Boyatzis, 1998). The data driven modality is the best approach to unravel patterns and meaning in exploratory designs and entails searching for patterns embedded in the "facts" or data being examined. Following the inductive theme analysis, the theory-driven analysis was also used to apply the ecological framework to the constructed inductive themes.

The data analysis process was comprised of three primary phases. Phase one focused on inductive data analysis. Phase two focused on deductive data analysis where the underpinning theoretical framework was applied to the inductive themes. Phase three concentrated on developing cases vignettes, which illustrated the interaction of factors within each participant's life.

### **Phase 1**

Phase 1 utilized the inductive data analysis approach. This comprehensive data driven analysis phase involved a series of steps. Step one involved transcriptions and partializing transcripts to focus on information salient to the study. Step two focused on open coding to determine supporting and constraining factors. Step three concentrated on contrastive analysis and identification of themes. Step four involved revision and application of key themes across cases.

**Step one.** The analysis began by transcribing all the interviews, "a first draft of the entire interview that gets the words and other striking features of the conversation on paper (e.g., crying, laughing, very long pauses)" (Riesman 2002, p. 249). Before the process of detailed analysis began, the two participants who selected the option to have their transcripts emailed to them were sent a copy of their partial transcripts containing only aspects of the interview salient to the study for member checking (Doyle, 2007). The



participants were free to enhance, elaborate and/or alter their transcript, which was done via telephone conversation with the researcher. This was done to make sure the transcripts were accurate representations of participants' stories. Member checking is an important aspect of qualitative inquiry used for increasing trustworthiness (Carlson, 2010).

**Step two.** Participants made negligible adjustments to their transcripts.

Transcripts were read and re-read on a number of occasions, so that respondent's narratives became clearer. As I worked my way through and across the data, I noted in margins the constructs that 'jumped out' in the process. In this data-driven approach, codes were constructed inductively from the raw material (Boyatzis, 1998) that closely reflected constructs from participants' point of views. Devising codes that remain close to the raw information increased the likelihood that others examining the data will perceive and encode the material similarly. This open coding process enhanced the reliability of the research.

Thorough review of the available data illuminated both easily evident information and aspects difficult to discern. Boyatzis (1998) asserts that this process offers the potential for "previously silenced voices or perspectives inherent in the information be brought forward and recognized" (p. 30). Constructs derived from the transcript were considered the initial units of analysis to be coded. These codes were then categorized into pieces of data from which specific concepts and patterns were deduced, making the data more manageable (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Summary sheets were created for each participant each time so as not to have multi-level analysis on the same summary sheet.

**Step three.** Contrastive analysis of each participant's summary sheet was conducted. This phase of code development involved the discovery and creation of preliminary themes emanating within and among the samples (Boyatzis, 1998). This contrast was done to extract observable differences between and among the samples. The process mimicked Mason's (1996) suggestion of creating sub-categories and then indexing information into the categories, revealing a data linking process of encoding the raw information. The preliminary themes were compared across samples and I made distinct effort not to begin the interpretation process. According to Boyatzis (1998), attempts to begin interpretation too soon "will result in premature intellectualization...and an early illusion of meaningful concept and code" (p. 47), which may be more characteristic of a theory driven approach rather than a data driven one. Further examination of the raw information was done to determine the presence or absence of each of the preliminary themes.

**Step four.** Further examination included differentiating constraining factors that participants associated with non-completion of college and factors they found supportive during their studies. At this phase, themes were revised as necessary and themes remaining were recognized as salient/key themes. Key themes were interpreted and applied across the samples. These themes became the central concepts and headings in the report. Excerpts, quotations, and phrases made by participants were used to illustrate and substantiate the findings. This method of presenting the summarized data allowed a gradual move from the context within which themes were generated and interpretations created. Themes that were uncommon among the participants' experiences are also noted. Communicating to the reader the extensiveness of the evidence was also critical to

the validity of the study. For example, it was important to indicate whether a theme was unique to just one of the participants, was common across an identifiable sub-group, or was found in most of the data (Merriam, 1998). This systematic and rigorous process of analysis leaves a trail that other researchers can follow to arrive at the same or similar themes, enhancing the study's reliability (Boyatzis, 1998).

## **Phase 2**

Phase 2 utilized the deductive data analysis approach in which I applied the ecological theoretical framework to each participant case summary. This ecological framework analysis was conducted across all cases by examining the salient themes/factors to identify what ecological system level were they applicable. For instance, were the factors that supported or constrained participants' experiences related to the individual (micro) system level such as self-adequacy or personal disability-related issues, were the factors relevant to the institution/university (meso) system level or were the factors relevant to the community and/or societal (macro) system level?

## **Phase 3**

Phase 3 focused on the construction of case vignettes. The creation of these individual stories best illustrated the interrelatedness of the factors each participant associated with their withdrawal from the university.

Discussion of summarized data related back to the main research questions identified in the introduction and compared with existing literature. Contextualization of the analysis was done to indicate the implications of the findings to the participants, prospective SWDs, and higher education retention programs.

This chapter identified social constructivism as the research paradigm that frames the study and discussed the procedures involved in the research process. Procedures presented related to participants identification and selection, data collection and analyses . Strategies for establishing rigors in the study are also addressed. The following chapter will focus on reporting the findings of the study.

## **CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS**

This chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of the participants' experiences as undergraduate students with disabilities at land grant university (LGU). To introduce the participants to the reader, a brief demographic summary of the participants is presented. This section is followed by presentation of the results of data analysis Phases One and Two where I first identified the factors that were central in the participants' college experience, then filtered them through the ecological framework lenses. This section, entitled the Ecological Framework Analysis, places emphasis on the constraining factors. The next section will put forward the results of Phase Three of the data analysis, which is a detailed analysis of how the key factors interacted and played out in each individual participant's experiences through Case Analyses/ Vignettes. The Vignettes will first highlight the constraining factors participants associated with their college withdrawal followed by factors they found supportive during their enrollment period.

### **Summary of Participants**

The intent of the study was to report the voices of students with disabilities (SWDs), yet only students with invisible disabilities (SWIDs), which represent only a sub-group of the disability population, responded. I interviewed five SWIDs who left the institution before completing their undergraduate degrees. Pseudonyms are used to identify participants. The sample is comprised of two females, Abby and Mali, and three males, Adrian, Beck, and Carter. One participant was of non-traditional age (40 yr old)

and the others were within the traditional age range (first enrolled in an undergraduate degree program between the ages of 18-21 years). There were four White students and one Asian- American student. All former students have learning disabilities: four congenital and one acquired that was the result of a traumatic brain injury. Three participants report having dual or multiple disability diagnoses and two students report having a single disability diagnosis. Two participants completed their undergraduate degree at other universities while the other three expressed their desire to complete their undergraduate degrees in the near future.

Table 1

*Summary of Sample Demographics*

<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Total Participants (N=5)</b>
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	2
Male	3
<b>Race</b>	
White	4
Asian American	1
<b>Disability Diagnosis/es</b>	
Single	2
Dual	1
Multiple	2
<b>Enrollment Category</b>	
Traditional (1 <sup>st</sup> enrolled under 25)	4
Non-Traditional (1 <sup>st</sup> enrolled over 25)	1
<b>Degree Completion at other Institution</b>	<b>2</b>

## **Results of Phases One and Two**

Following the iterative process of inductive open coding to identify constructs from the participants' experiences, contrastive analysis was conducted to illuminate patterns and themes within and across participants' experiences. There are a number of glaring similarities across the stories as well as a few notable differences. There were several explicit reasons that students attributed to their decision to withdraw. However, when I looked more deeply at their stories, there were also implicit factors reported to have played a role in their decision to leave the university. The analysis also revealed an array of factors that influenced students' decisions to maintain enrollment at LGU, which are referred to as supportive factors. However the ensuing section will focus primarily on constraining factors to remain consistent with the purpose of the study. After completing initial coding, I then re-examined the codes within the Ecological Framework, as I describe next.

### **The Ecological Framework Analysis**

The ecological framework was used to develop further understanding of participants' stories. I organize the inductively coded factors using the ecological framework and illustrate this in Tables 2 and 3. When applying the ecological framework, the systems levels that were most applicable to the participants' experiences were the micro, meso and macro levels. Of interest is that factors related to support were more spread across varied levels of the ecological systems than the constraining factors, which were concentrated in the micro and meso levels. Factors that influenced SWIDs to withdraw from the university are discussed throughout this section.

Factors at the individual level include personal characteristics related to individual disabilities, medical reasons, feelings of adequacy, sense of belonging, self-advocacy skills, disclosure of learning/other needs to faculty and staff, involvement in campus social life, and finances. Ecological factors external to the individual primarily entail expectations from these external systems and the students' expectations of them, whether at the family, university, community and or societal levels. Such expectations impacted the level of support students received and /or their level of interaction. Factors at the family level mainly include the family's expectations and ensuing degree of support contingent on students fulfilling those expectations. At the institutional level, SWDs reported factors that included the students' expectations of the university and the university's expectation of the students. The community factors include expectations from external agencies and organizations with which students are affiliated. Societal level factors include students' perception of tacit stereotypes and stigmas towards persons with disabilities that they believe become systemic underpinnings within the education system. Students internalize these stigmas which may negatively impact how they negotiate with the environment to accommodate their needs. I discuss these findings in full next.

### **Factors Identified as Leading to Withdrawal From College**

#### **Micro: Individual System Level Constraining Factors**

Factors at the micro level focused on factors that existed within the context of the individuals. Table 2 illustrates constraining factors relevant to the individual system level.



Table 2

*Factors Contributing to Participants' Withdrawal: Ecological Analysis (Micro Level)*

Individual Factors	Participants				
	Abby	Adrian	Beck	Carter	Mali
Personal Characteristics Related to Individual Disability	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Medical Reasons	✓			✓	✓
Feelings of Adequacy	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sense of Belonging	✓	✓			
Small College Desire	✓	✓			
Self-Advocacy Skills	✓	✓			✓
Disclosure of Learning/Other Needs to Faculty & Staff	✓	✓			✓
Involvement in Campus Social Life	✓	✓			
Finances	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Personal characteristics related to disabilities varied across participants, some of which required accommodations to obtain equal access to education. The ability to manage these characteristics presented a challenge for a number of participants. For example, Carter struggles with indecisive and impulsive decision making and the ability to remain focused. This challenge transcended his educational journey at the university and ultimately led to his departure.

Medical reasons played an important role in the lives of the students. The ability to maintain a personal health plan which sometimes involved medication compliance was integral to most participants' ability to cope which raised other issues for some students. Examples of additional concerns are the cost of medication, the ability to be in frequent contact with health care provider to adjust medication as needed and the ease to find the medication that was most compatible with the student.

The desire to feel adequate was a common theme among the participants' experiences. It took on different meanings for individuals and was triggered by a number

of factors unique to students' backgrounds and experiences. Primarily, a number of participants felt inadequate in an attempt to meet expectations of varied external influences. One instance was mentioned by Carter who stated that his parents promised to pay for his college education if he could consistently maintain an above 3.0 average. This perpetuated a cycle of self-blame and feelings of failure and inadequacy when he was unable to satisfy this expectations. Other instances of inadequacy will be illuminated in individual stories.

The desire to have a sense of belonging to the university was most important to two of the participants, Abby and Adrian. However this was not an issue for the other participants who had a keen sense of attachment to the institution. The students felt as if they did not belong due to a number of reasons. For instance, Adrian felt alienated because he enrolled at LGU with the intention to leave to a smaller college before completion, hence he did not get involved in the social activities on the campus. Further, he also felt that the institution did not make efforts to influence his social integration on the college campus as a transfer student.

The ability of students with disabilities to recognize their needs and advocate for themselves is very important in receiving adequate accommodation and support specific to unique needs. A number of the participants blamed themselves about their inability to manage the learning environment without seeking support from faculty and staff, while some felt embarrassed about their differences in learning which also prevented them from seeking help. Linked with the ability to advocate for oneself is the ability to accept ones disability and disclose learning needs to faculty and staff in order to develop a mutual understanding and ultimately co-create strategies to address SWDs need. Many students

chose not to talk with faculty or staff because of feelings of inferiority and embarrassment and the desire to be noted for their capabilities rather than their limitations. Abby for example chose not to utilize health care on the campus as she feared her peers and faculty would become aware of her psychiatric disability. This choice presented a challenge for her as her mental team was not in close proximity to help her manage and adjust her health plan in a responsive manner. This choice, she said, compromised her health status on occasions as she got sick at times and there was a delay in accessing care as her health practitioner was in another state.

Most of the participants except Carter were not socially involved in the life of the campus which may have contributed to two students' feelings of alienation. Interestingly, the other two students who were not socially involved still had an enduring sense of belonging to the university. Of note is the fact that most of the participants chose not to become involved in extra curricula activities as a means of trying to manage their general academic commitments with well-being obligations such as weekly meeting with counselors, tutors and keeping medical appointments. Some of the students were involved in social clubs and activities during their first year but decided against doing so in subsequent years as they found it difficult to balance with their personal needs.

Financial constraint was a challenge for all the participants, but was more pronounced for Mali who attributed her withdrawal to inability to pay tuition fees. All students required and accessed financial aid at the onset, but Mali was later denied financial aid when she was unsuccessful in meeting financial aid requirement during her third year. Adrian also shared that he transferred to different colleges in an attempt to obtain the best financial package possible.

## Meso and Macro Systems Level Constraining Factors

Constraining forces external to the individual played an integral role in the participants' withdrawal. Students' perception of the environmental expectations on them as students was a common theme across participants' experiences. Ecological constraining factors at the meso system level involved those related to the family, friends and the university, while macro factors examined those at the community and the societal levels. Table 3 illustrates constraining factors relevant to the meso level (family, friends, and university) and the macro level (community and society).

Table 3

*Factors Contributing to Participants' Withdrawal: Ecological Analysis (Meso and Macro Levels)*

	Participants				
	Abby	Adrian	Beck	Carter	Mali
<b>MESO LEVEL FACTORS</b>					
<b><i>Family &amp; Friends</i></b>					
Family's expectations/values (linked with potential financial support for SWIDs)			✓	✓	✓
<b><i>University/Institution</i></b>					
University's expectations— Regulations for financial aid (GPA & course load)			✓	✓	✓
Participants' expectations of the university:					
▪ Consistent provision of learning materials	✓	✓			✓
▪ Sequential lectures and labs		✓			✓
▪ Flexible class scheduling	✓	✓		✓	✓
▪ Discretionary class attendance	✓	✓		✓	✓
▪ Knowledgeable & understanding professors (regarding disability needs and facilitating accommodations)	✓	✓		✓	✓
▪ Non-discriminatory environment	✓				
Personal communication				✓	✓

	Participants				
	Abby	Adrian	Beck	Carter	Mali
<b>MACRO LEVEL FACTORS</b>					
<i>Community</i>					
Agency's expectation			✓	✓	✓
<i>Society</i>					
Perception of societal stigmas regarding persons with disabilities	✓	✓			✓

Factors will be personalized through the individual experiences later in this chapter, but were generally linked to the expectations and requirements of participants' families, the university, and a community rehabilitative agency. For example, Mali highlighted that her Asian American parents had idealist expectations and expected her to always attain excellent grades which were burdensome and contributed to her feelings of inadequacy when she was unable to meet those expectations. Also at the university level, students have to take a minimum number of courses and maintain a minimum grade point average (GPA) to maintain eligibility for financial aid. In Mali's case, she recognized that she had learning disabilities two and a half years after college enrollment and was unable to seek disability services in a timely manner which may have contributed to her attainment of lower grades than required and ultimately denial of financial aid. As noted in Table 3, participants also had unfulfilled expectations of the university, which will be addressed more fully in the accompanying case vignettes.

At the societal level a number of students argued about their perception about stigmas toward persons with disabilities. This perception factored in their level of self-confidence, inhibition to disclose their disabilities and advocate for their needs. Interestingly, Abby and Mali held opposing beliefs about stigma in relation to persons with learning disabilities. Abby felt that stigma attached to people with psychiatric

disabilities was greater than stigma attached to persons with learning disabilities while Mali felt that stigma related to individuals with learning disabilities was greater than that related to psychiatric disabilities. This belief led Abby to self-disclose her learning disability to the institution but withheld information about her psychiatric disability. On the other hand, Mali disclosed both disabilities but noted feelings of embarrassment having to do so.

Delineating the factors that the participants' contributed to their withdrawal as presented in the preceding paragraphs does not adequately represent the interconnectivity of the constraining factors pressing against each other. The factors were integrally connected and will be presented in individual stories to capture a more natural articulation of the symbiotic nature of the factors.

#### **Factors That Led to SWIDs' College Withdrawal— Represented Through Individual Vignettes**

An understanding of the critical interplay between and among the constraining common and factors is best represented through individual stories. A contextual combination of constraining factors that influenced participants' decisions to leave the university are addressed first at the beginning of each participant's story, followed by factors they explicitly stated contributed to them leaving the institution. Student's capacity to succeed appears to be highly dependent on support they obtained from support networks. Such systems that supported their effort to stay in college will be highlighted at the end of individual stories.

The interrelationship pattern among the factors as illustrated in Figure 2 were reported by four of the participants (Abby, Adrian, Carter and Mali) with emphasis on varied factors and will be presented through each of their stories. In honoring the voices

of all the participants, however, the fifth participant (Beck) whose experiences were conspicuously different will be presented at the end of the connected stories.

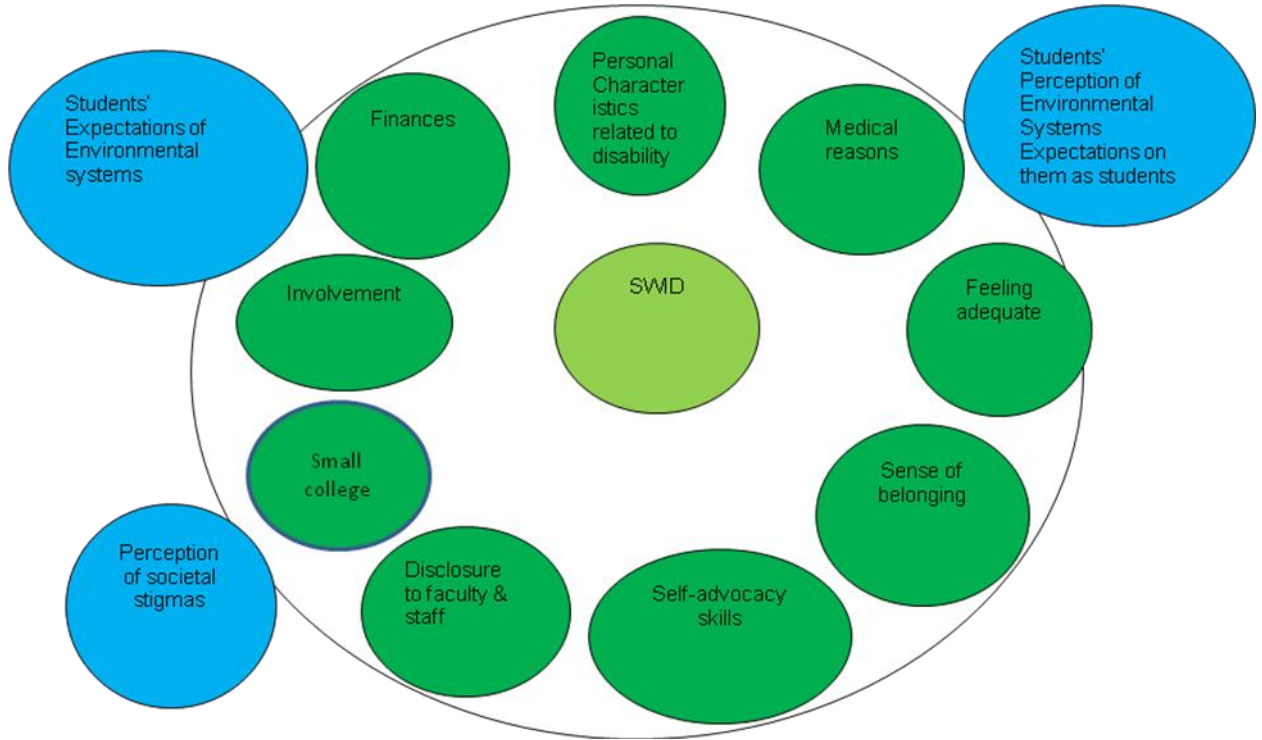


Figure 2. Factors Leading to SWIDs College Withdrawal: Ecological Model

### Abby's Experiences

Abby and I talked on the phone for close to one and half- hours. She is a 23-year old, White female, who was enrolled at the university for almost three and a half years. She decided to leave pre-maturely to attend a smaller college in her home town. She thought a smaller college would be more conducive to her personal goals and needs. Within three semesters of attending the smaller college, she completed her undergraduate degree. Abby is now employed full time and has applied to graduate school to begin studies in fall semester 2012.

Factors that were central to Abby's experience elucidated in her story include: feeling adequate, medical concerns, disclosure to faculty and staff, perception of societal stigma regarding individuals with disabilities, self-advocacy skills, involvement in campus life, and sense of belonging. Abby attributed three primary reasons that led to her withdrawal: the desire to attend a small college, the need for closer proximity to family and health care providers, and the desire to be at a college where she felt less marginalized than at LGU. The following discussion on Abby's experience highlights the factors that led to her withdrawal and illustrates how a number of the factors interconnect.

### **Feeling Adequate- "I Am More than My Disabilities"**

Abby spoke candidly about the nature of her disabilities and how they impact her ability in an academic environment. She noted that she has learned to adapt to her learning disability (Not Otherwise Specified-NOS) since age nine which was discovered when she was tested in elementary school. An Individual Educational Plan (IEP) was developed at that time that was used as an educational guide for her through high school. She explained that she reads and writes more slowly than her peers and as such her accommodations allows double the allotted time to complete tests, as well as a separate room for testing. Abby also noted that she requires help with writing.

Having lived through the stares, the whispers, and the questions from peers in previous schools as she was always pulled from classes to take quizzes and tests, on arrival at college Abby decided to disclose only her learning disability but not her other invisible disabilities: generalized anxiety disorder and bipolar disorder. She expressed the sadness she felt when she was ridiculed sometimes by her peers and being regarded as a



“special student.” In college she wanted to adopt a new persona. Abby’s desire to demonstrate that she could be successful and be recognized for her strengths rather than her limitations sometimes compromised her health.

But you know that made me work even harder. I would force myself to stay up several hours a night, sometimes all night working on papers and preparing for exams. And incidentally sometimes that made me feel so sick afterwards. Losing sleep for me can make me very agitated or confused. In class I sometimes struggled to remain energized and that can get a bit muddled with the meds I take.

This desire to be perceived as adequate as her peers also inhibited her from fully articulating her learning needs to her professors. She required flexibility with class attendance which is a discretion her professors could consider only if they were made aware of her learning needs.

Not only did she not informally disclose her full disability status to her professors but Abby also chose not to formally disclose her psychiatric disabilities to the institution’s Resources for Disabled Students (RDS) because she had a general distrust of the system. She feared being stigmatized and treated as inferior to her peers. Abby believed that there is a stigma attached to psychiatric disabilities and she feared being deemed inadequate. This desire to feel adequate is inherently intertwined with self-esteem issues and Abby’s distrust of the university system, which also prevented her from seeking health services on the campus.

I was afraid that I may be at the Health Network and my professor saw me or a classmate saw me and figured out that I had a psychiatric illness, just by the name of the doctor I was seeing. I don’t know that probably makes no sense, but I guess

I felt inferior just with having a learning disability that I feared if others knew about the psychiatric disability then they may just feel that I am worthless and incapable of earning a college degree.

When asked in retrospect how she viewed the decision she made then not to have utilized health services on campus she commented on having mixed emotions.

Although I lived in Fort Collins for close to 3½ years, my mental health practitioner is in my home town. I wanted to create a new persona at the university, so I disclosed my learning disorder but not my other [psychiatric] disabilities. I needed accommodations with my learning disability you know as in previous schools, but felt like I didn't need [accommodation] with the bipolar. Darn, was I wrong! It probably would have helped if I received some form of accommodation with my psychiatric disability. I really don't know what that could be. Maybe, hmmm, flexibility with class attendance, I don't know.

Anything that would probably prevent the stares when I showed up late for my early morning class sometimes. Ugh, that made me feel so guilty and worthless at times. ...any form of accommodation to let my professors know that I did not take my classes for granted. But then to some extent I am happy I did[not disclose] because if the professor whom I mentioned gave me a hard time knowing that I had a learning disability, can you imagine if he knew I had a psychiatric issue?

This general desire to be seen as adequate was a repeated theme throughout Abby's story and may have impacted her interaction with other environmental systems including how she accessed services to enhance her well-being. For example, she

reported that choosing not to utilize the health system on the campus or those in close environs negatively impacted her health.

### **Medical Reasons**

Abby stated that she required maintenance medication to optimize her ability to remain healthy and recognized the limitation of having a mental health provider far away from ones campus.

If I took my meds as prescribed for the most part I would be OK, but to be honest with you sometimes I ran out of meds as my doctor was miles away and he insisted on seeing me before he prescribed my meds. I felt extremely anxious sometimes and my energy level would ebb and flow. I mean I sometimes I struggle to remain focused. There were times when I had some awful side-effects that made me feel as if I was fading in and out while I was in class. I had these bursts of energy sometimes and fatigue would follow sometimes. Oh was I frustrated, you bet I was! Then sometimes I suffered from insomnia (I still do) and I'd be up all night.

Abby also spoke about how sad she felt having to watch her cohort graduate and a subsequent cohort taking courses with her, overlapping her and moving forward. It bruised her self-esteem and elevated her level of anxiety, which her feel ill at times. This came as a result of her needing to take fewer courses per semester to be successful. Yet it had a negative impact on her health and self-esteem to watch other students graduate before her, yet enrolled with her and even after.

## **Sense of Belonging**

Abby attributed a number of factors that contribute to her sense of non-belonging to the university. These factors include feeling discriminated by one “powerful” professor, a desire to attend a smaller college, and non-involvement in the social life of the campus.

Abby felt that her fear of being treated differently therefore rationalizing non-disclosure of her disabilities was reinforced by one professor’s behavior towards her. She said being discriminated against contributed to feeling marginalized and a sense of non-belonging to the university. In support of her stance, she said,

Most of the professors were great. I was very aware that some of the faculty were comfortable with us (others with disabilities) doing assessments differently because of our accommodation. Ironically the senior professor, the director of the department in fact wasn’t fine with me receiving the accommodations and spoke to the other professors to give me a lower grade if I received accommodations. My accommodations (approved by RDS) allowed me to turn in my paper later, for example, 3 days later. In one instance he gave me a lower grade than I earned because according to him I turned it in late. I had to seek RDS to mediate on my behalf, which they did. My grade was later reverted to the original grade. I felt like I was being attacked. Nobody knows how much harder than my peers I have to work to do well.

She further stated that one bad experience can taint ones perception of an institution. Abby spoke about the positive regard she had for her professors and summarized the negative experience she had with one professor by saying “I loved all the

other professors but that one made me want to drop out and I can understand why others would want to leave as well. I was a straight A student for the most part but it takes only one professor to make you feel bad...as if you don't belong. It was constant struggle between enjoying the program and 'fighting' for my rights with this professor and his attempt to convolute the other professors. I believe the professor must have been relieved when I left. I too felt as if I shouldn't pursue any further studies."

A sense of non-belonging seemed intricately related to her non-involvement in the social life of the college beyond the first year, which Abby discussed as an adaptive mechanism to better manage course obligations and disability support commitments. Abby initially felt connected and was involved in clubs and other activities during her first year but recognized that balancing her disability needs and academics were more demanding than expected, then removed herself from campus extra curricula activities. In addition to taking courses, she had to meet with a tutor from the learning assistance program, she had counseling/therapy sessions and had to check in with her primary mental health provider routinely. She felt managing these obligations were time consuming and did not allow her time to commit to anything else.

Her desire to be at a small college further perpetuated her sense of non-belonging.

Abby recalled, "I was frustrated that I often felt alone in a crowd and wanted to get away from the large campus. Although I felt that most of my professors were good natured, the large classes prevented them from getting to know us as individuals which made me uncomfortable to bond with many of them. Apart from my few friends I felt isolated and alone, although if you saw me you couldn't tell. I guess it is a pride thing!

### **Explicit reasons Abby attributed to her withdrawal**

The preceding paragraphs have illuminated a combination of constraining forces that collectively impacted Abby's decision to withdraw from the institution. However, there were really three interrelated factors she explicitly offered as the major reasons that led to her withdrawal: a desire to be at a smaller college, the need to be closer proximity to her support network and to be in a college environment where she did not feel marginalized.

Abby was quick to point out that she left the college primarily because she felt the need to be in a smaller college which would be more conducive to her learning needs and also to be closer to the support of her family, as well as, her mental health providers. She noted that as her stress level and anxiety level increased the need to remain compliant with a structured health plan also increased. She was often cautioned by her psychiatrist to consider selecting another mental health provider in the school area or better yet on campus. "Maybe I'm weird", she said, "but I just wasn't interested in considering that. But you know that made me try even harder to follow my health plan. He was concerned about how I was coping on the medication he prescribed and felt I needed closer supervision to adjust my medication as necessary.

She was happy about her decision to return to her home town to complete her degree. She also stated that she could no longer stay at an institution where she felt marginalized by one of her professors. As she puts it, "Having my parents, sister and my medical support team close by was sooo helpful, so much less stressful. I also didn't feel like I was being judged or marginalized by any of my professors. I was able to complete my degree within 3 semesters, summer included."

## **Supportive Factors**

Of importance many of the factors that are cited as constraints across participants may be deemed as supportive by any of the participants. Whether a factor is considered as having a negative or positive impact in the experiences of a student is dependent on the perception of the participant.

### **Feeling supported**

Like the other participants Abby's ability to persist at the university up to the time of her withdrawal was contingent on her capabilities and a number of supporting forces. She highlighted sources of support to include: her family; friends; institution (authorization to take fewer courses per semester, majority of professors, RDS and tutors); and community mental health support.

### **Family**

Abby credited support from her family as an integral factor which influenced her confidence and drive to succeed. She particularly highlighted the financial support, love, guidance, and overall general support from her parents and sister as most critical.

Regarding support from her parents, she commented:

I could not have succeeded without my parents. They would fly or drive to the [LGU] if they felt I was too sick to be on my own or seemed as if I was about to get sick. Over time they could also tell if I was having a relapse without much probing. I returned home to live with my parents, which was a more nurturing environment. My parents are extremely proud of me.

She also highlighted the almost maternal support she received from her sister who is her only sibling. She described the close bond she has with her sister and the value she places on their relationship.

She is my rock! My sister would ask about my medication, you know if I had enough, if I was taking them as I should. You know all that. Any relationships I had, how I was doing. But most importantly, she constantly told me how she and our parents loved me.

In addition, Abby mentioned that she felt her sister and best friends conspired at times to ensure she was doing well. Laughingly, she admitted not being able to figure out how her sister often called her at the most crucial times.

I believe my girlfriend and my sister had a conspiracy going on. Neither of them has admitted it, but almost every time I was feeling low, you know depressed, after my friend checked in with me to see how I was doing, shortly after my sister would call. And she was thorough, almost like my mother...sometimes I felt she wanted to control my life, but now looking back I think she wanted to save me from myself. I still get those low moods sometimes, but I am better able to recognize them and seek assistance or better yet my family is vigilant. I hate to say this but that's one of the reasons why I left my hometown to attend college a distance away. Hmm, in retrospect that may not have been too much of a good idea.

## **Friends**

Abby recognized the value of the support she sustained from a core group of friends. They provided her with material covered in classes when she occasional missed



classes, usually on days when she was not doing well. As well as they offered a general sense of support.

My girlfriends were very supportive. I mean they would listen to me rant several times a day when I wasn't doing well. It's weird. I don't know how to explain it but sometimes I became more talkative than usual. I guess they understood that I needed their love and support. There were times when I called them several times a day, but they were very sweet, reassuring and made me feel wanted. I often told them I was OK, but my two best friends were very discerning and apparently knew when I wasn't OK. I considered suicide on a number of occasions but my friends were always checking on me. I had two good friends who I told that I was depressed on occasions, but I never mentioned bipolar because I did not want them to feel I was crazy or needy. Sometimes I was depressed and I could not identify why. Often, I was just frustrated that it was taking me so long to finish school.

### **Institution**

Support obtained from the university was also underscored. Abby utilized RDS selectively and thought they were highly responsive and supportive of her presented needs. Abby also benefited from the writing center where she received tutorship in the writing process. She reiterated that she had a good relationship with most of her professors and thought this could have been better if the class sizes were smaller. Further she added that in creating an environment that caters to the learning needs of diverse students, some professors provided notes and other supportive materials they use during their teaching. On the other hand not all professors provided materials which Abby said

she found challenging. Also even those who provided learning materials did so inconsistently.

Some professors were really good at providing notes and any other materials they used in the classes. However, there were some professors who never or infrequently gave class materials. This made studying for me quite difficult. A number of times I overslept, I believe that's one of the side effects of my medications. So when I skip a morning class here and there, I wished my professors knew that it wasn't because I was being disrespectful or disinterested but I just couldn't get out of bed.

Another provision that she thought would be helpful is to offer flexible class scheduling. This she felt would give students the ability to choose to attend class at a time that is more conducive to their needs.

I usually come alive later in the mornings. Once I take my medication I am out and require several hours sleep to feel energized. Those 8:00 am classes are just horrible for me. You know I recognize that all colleges are almost scrounging for money but I wished they would consider flexible hours class scheduling. For example, offer the same course twice within the same day. Once in the morning and once in the afternoon, so that students can select a schedule that best fit their learning needs.

### **Community**

Abby highlighted other support she obtained from external community sources. She spoke specifically about her psychiatrist as well as her therapist who both practice in

her home town. When asked how she managed to keep regular appointments with her therapists, she said they were conducted via telephone.

I also had a counselor back in my community with whom I had a great relationship. She did telephone counseling with me at least once monthly. This was both helpful and stressful. The sessions helped me to remain compliant with my meds for the most part, but also helped me manage the numerous crazy feelings I struggles with sometimes. I could talk to her about anything! When I went home to visit my family I would also visit with her and my psychiatrist. Of course there were times when I didn't want to, but my parents insisted. I guess the fact that you are talking to me now means it worked well, right...ha, ha, ha.

The foregoing discussion gave voice to Abby's experience as a student. The discussion emphasized factors she considered as sources of stress, as well as highlighted those factors she noted supported her efforts towards the attainment of an undergraduate degree. The primary factors that led to Abby's withdrawal are: the desire to attend a small college, be closer to her support network inclusive of family and health care practitioners, and to be in a non-discriminatory learning environment.

### **Adrian's Experiences**

Adrian is a 25-year old white male who transferred to the university during his third year of university enrollment having completed the first two years of his undergraduate degree at separate small colleges. We talked for approximately 1 hour and fifteen minutes. After spending a year at a small college in a state where he grew up, he relocated to Colorado to attend a small college which offered what he thought was a better financial package. Due to financial needs he was in pursuit of better financial

package. However after enrollment, he realized that the financial package was untenable and would expire at the end of the year.

On discovering that he was unable to remain at that college he searched for a university that was accepting applications from transfer students and LGU was the only institution that had admittance of open application for transfer students. Shortly after enrollment at the university his worst fears were realized; a large campus environment and its dynamics were not conducive to his learning needs. Immediately following that insight he began discussion with the small college he was first enrolled to begin reenrollment procedures. Adrian completed only one semester at LGU where he took five courses.

### **Personal Characteristics Related to Individual Disability**

Adrian recognized that he had two learning disabilities, visual perceptual disability and dyslexia, when he was six years old and like Abby required an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) throughout elementary and high school. The main challenges he experienced which are associated with his disabilities include transferring information from the board to a notebook; trying to listen to an instructor talk and take notes at the same time, which he says is a confusing process; and copying accurately, which takes him much longer than his peers. He struggles to recognize, organize and interpret images that he just looked at. This challenge of transferring information also impedes the time within which he can complete an exam and requires extended testing time.

Adrian stressed a number of constraining factors that encapsulated his experiences at LGU. These factors include: feeling adequate, self-advocacy skills, disclosure of learning needs to faculty and staff, sense of belonging, involvement in campus life,

finances, and expectations of environmental systems (institution). Most importantly are the factors he underscored contributed to his withdrawal. These factors are, intent to leave before completion, and the desire to attend a small college. These factors are interwoven as the foregoing discussion will highlight. Factors that he found supportive during the one semester he was enrolled at LGU will be noted at the end of Adrian's experiences.

### **Feeling Adequate--Desire To Succeed**

Adrian is an intrinsically motivated student who strives not to allow his disabilities to limit his accomplishments. He enrolled at LGU to maintain continuous enrollment to ensure that his quest to attain an undergraduate degree would not be derailed or delayed. Like Abby, he too subsequently completed his undergraduate degree at a small college and has been enrolled in a graduate program since fall, 2011.

As he thought about his experiences at LGU, he recognized that he struggled with feelings of inadequacy, reflected in his inability to advocate for his learning needs. Like Abby, he too had self-esteem issues pertaining to his capabilities and limitations. Although he self-disclosed his disability status to the university, he felt inadequate to advocate on his own behalf what his immediate learning needs were to his different professors. He felt he should be capable of managing his academic responsibilities. When queried if he would take the same approach now as he did then, in retrospect he said: "I probably would have been more vocal about my leaning needs if I were to do this again. I would advocate on my own behalf."

Interestingly as our conversation prolonged he further clarified his inhibition to advocate for a learning environment that best suited his learning abilities. He said, "I was

just passing through [the university]. I didn't want to inconvenience people because of my disability and seem too needy. I was totally embarrassed. I guess it was personal pride. I kept telling myself I should be able to this.”

It became apparent that Adrian's outlook about the university was closely interwoven with his anticipated intention on enrollment. A recurrent theme in his story was that his intent on enrollment at LGU was to remain in continuous college enrollment to satisfy readmission eligibility criteria at the college he originally began his undergraduate journey. His intention of utilizing LGU as a conduit to his educational goals contributed to his sense of non-belonging to the institution.

### **Sense of Belonging**

It was obvious that Adrian was committed to education but not to LGU. This sense of non-commitment also fostered a sense of non-belonging to the university. Further along our conversation he made it evident that his early planned departure from LGU to some extent hindered his ability to feel connected to the university, but was also related to his desire to be at a small college. Being a transfer student he also felt the university did not capitalize on the opportunity to reach out to him and offer ways to socially integrate in the campus on arrival. Although admittedly, he said he is unsure that such efforts would have made a difference regarding his perception of the large campus. Adrian described, “Although I was only there for a semester at no point did administration try to reach out to me. Like, I said I just enrolled with the idea of leaving so I really never sought out a community that perhaps I could have found there. I immediately felt as if I didn't belong.”

Adrian realized that he potentially inhibited opportunities to get socially integrated in the campus community by not seeking ways to get involved. He also spoke of what he considered to be a missed opportunity by the institution to reach out to him as an example to accentuate his desire and preference for a small college. He compared a large college environment to that of a small college to highlight reasons for his preference.

A small school has a pervasive atmosphere of involvement and sense of belonging. You have that one on one interaction and you get the sense that people genuinely care about your well-being. I really wanted to be at a small school. So I was at LGU to keep up with credits, but really, the big school just doesn't work for me. I just wanted the break to be in continued enrollment so, yeah, I didn't really get involved in much outside of classes.

When queried about the sense of community and belonging that he spoke with such passion and importance, Adrian highlighted further characteristics of a small college that he found appealing.

As I mentioned, I went back to the small college and I'm still here [pursuing a graduate degree]. I have really benefitted from the sense of community, that sense of belonging and support in small class sizes that I've gotten here. .. I didn't get that sense of community at LGU. All in all I just didn't feel as if I belonged there. I am happy I came back here. I felt like I was more a part of the community here like I knew people's faces. I knew my professors outside of class as well as inside the class. I felt like the classrooms were just the right size and you really were treated kind of like almost an equal to your professor instead of just, you

know, one of 500 students in a lecture hall. And I just feel like in a way a small college shall make your experience the best that it can be. Like you don't necessarily have to seek it out, but they try to make that happen for you.

He did credit the effort of one professor who made an effort to create a sense of community in his course. Adrian commented on the community building activities they did, including taking some of the activities outside of the classroom. "In that class I felt like a sense of community, but I didn't really get that in any of the other classes I was in", he shared.

Another factor that he attributed to his sense of non-belonging was his living accommodations on the campus. He lamented that being a third year student placed on a dorm that housed primarily first year students was a "disaster". The noise level on the hall was consistently elevated and he had to search for quiet places on campus to study. He mentioned that they had meetings on the floor to discuss the noise level which was abated immediately after, but returned shortly to what he considered an unbearable level. Luckily, he said his roommate was another transfer student of which he was appreciative. He spoke highly of the bonding experience he had with that roommate as they both had attending another college in common, as well as, being new transfer students at LGU. He summarized that experience as one of the low points of his college experiences.

I think we both had a little bit of trouble living on a floor that was primarily 1<sup>st</sup> year students you know, who are still like trying to figure out what they want out of college. ... it was kind of hard for us junior status at that point, like we didn't really feel like we could relate to other people in the dorm that much. I don't



know at the time if placing me with another transfer was deliberate, but that helped a bit.

### **Student Expectations of Environmental System**

Adrian called attention to aspects of the teaching and learning environment that he found stressful and said he expected an educational setting that catered to diverse needs. Two features he noted were inconsistent provision of learning materials by some faculty and lack of understanding among some faculty members regarding the need to facilitate accommodations as required.

Like Abby, Adrian also praised professors who provided hard copies of their teaching material, but complained about the inconsistency of such provision. He noted the difficulty he had when he tried to copy from the board or PowerPoint slides, listen and make meaning of the lesson all at the same time. Further he said at the end of such a class it was difficult to recall what he learned as the effort to multi-task with taking comprehensive notes and grasp the subject was often overwhelming.

Adrian also explained the challenges he encountered in an attempt to receive accommodations and felt he had these experiences because his professors lacked knowledge about the necessity of such provisions for SWDs. One challenge he reported pertained to completing a speaking and auditory section of a test that the professor wanted to administer. Accompany Adrian to RDS to administer the test did not seem feasible for the faculty member. In an attempt to facilitate Adrian's accommodation the professor invited him to his office to complete the test during office hours. This Adrian said would have been a great idea except that during office hours a number of students

visited the office. This prevented the space from being distraction free which was what he needed to be successful.

We kind of reached a compromise of having me come into his office in the morning and take the test. But he had office hours going on and there were other people in the office . . . so it wasn't necessarily quite distraction free environment. So, you know, trying to work with his requirement of being able to administer the test himself, being able to be assess how I understood the language, but then trying to find what worked for me too created a kind of a tension.

The second challenge was a class that had tests scheduled for evenings when RDS was closed. This presented a challenge in finding another suitable location where the test could be administered in an environment that were conducive to his needs yet met the standards as outlined by the university.

And so it just took a lot of coordination to get her to give me the test that worked with RDS hours. She didn't want me taking the test before people and telling them answers or, taking it after other people had done it and students giving me answers. So I think what she ultimately did is that for like essay props and stuff she gave me different props so that there would be no problem of sharing. And yes I eventually took the test at RDS within their opening hours.

Adrian felt that in general most faculty members were helpful but lacked knowledge and understanding about the needs of SWDs. He stated that a small college was better able to coordinate and attend to the individual needs of students.

### **Explicit Reasons Adrian Attributed to His Withdrawal**

So far the discussion has focused on the collective reasons Adrian mentioned contributed to his decision to leave the university before completing his undergraduate degree. Of interest though were those primary factors that he attributed to his withdrawal. Adrian emphasized two main factors: intention to withdraw before completion and the desire to study at a small college.

When asked to comment on the factors that he attributed to his withdrawal, he said “I don’t know how to explain that, it’s just not the college I wanted to be at.” In addition he remarked that he came with the intention to leave, so LGU was just a conduit to re-enrollment at the small college he previously attended and completed his first year courses. “My learning needs are best satisfied in small classes. LGU would have had to make structural changes for me to even consider it again”, he stressed. Therefore, Adrian summarized two main reasons that influenced his decision to leave. One, he enrolled at the university with the intention to leave before completion of his undergraduate degree. Two, he was intent on attending a smaller college. Both factors are integrally related.

### **Feeling Supported**

Adrian recognized that he received support from a number of sources while being a student at the university. He noted that each source offered varied level of support and identified the following as sources of support: His mother, the institution (RDS, Professors and the Career Center).

When questioned on sources of support, he first mentioned that his mother was always there for him, offering encouragement and advice. She also supported his academic work and usually editing his papers.

He also noted that he was aware of his needs and sought avenues at the university to attend to them. Firstly at the institutional level, he had positive regards for RDS which he said was responsive to his needs.

RDS was a huge support. I thought RDS did a really good job of supporting all of their students. They explained the forms that you needed to fill out really well and, you know, I think a couple of times I forgot to put a signature on one of them or something and they sent me a follow up e-mail right away asking if I could come back and complete that section. And it seemed like there was always space available to take tests when I needed them. Yeah, I, I had a really good experience.

Secondly, he stated that most of the professors were willing to facilitate his accommodations. He was allowed extended time on tests, as well as, being in a distraction reduced environment. Adrian also spoke about the benefit of utilizing office hours as it helped him build a rapport with professors with whom he would feel more comfortable to discuss teaching styles that were more conducive to his learning abilities. He emphasized, "Faculty did a really good job at facilitating students. For the most part the professors were most receptive except the two encounters in separate classes I mentioned earlier. "

He also noted that small discussion like classes were more conducive to his learning needs and was often discombobulated in large lecture hall class settings. Those lecture hall style classroom environment, "becomes a lot like copying information off the power point which isn't a strong point of mine", he said. He remarked that the few

classes he enjoyed at the university, “were more like discussion based and I felt like I got to know my professors better “.

Lastly, Adrian mentioned the Career Center as another department where he solicited their support. He stated that they were helpful in assisting him to explore careers he was not even aware of and each may be compatible with his abilities or not. He was also pleased with the assistance he obtained in how to create a resume.

The foregoing discussion sheds light on the undergraduate experiences of Adrian. It illustrates the unique interrelatedness of both his positive and negative experiences at LGU. The constraining forces were obviously greater than the supportive forces and led to his withdrawal. The core withdrawal factors in Adrian’s experience were: his planned intent to leave before completion and his intent to complete his undergraduate degree at a small college.

### **Carter’s Experiences**

Carter is a 28-year old white male with whom I spent over one and a half-hours face-to-face talking about his experiences as an undergraduate student. I thanked him for showing up on time to meet with me and he replied, saying he hated to let people down. During his tenure at LGU, Carter withdrew from the institution on two different occasions. In the first instance he decided to pursue other career interests after the first two years of enrollment. After six months, he recognized that the second career pursuit could not be his lifetime career path and re-enrolled at the university the following academic year. On his return he declared his major and remained enrolled for five years. He is close to completing the requirements for his undergraduate degree having approximately three courses assignments incomplete. He has withdrawn from the

university as he has reportedly lost interest in his major and failed to follow through with some course requirements. Carter also spoke about the importance of earning a college degree and his desire to be successful, but he lacks self-determination skills necessary to complete his degree. He has persisted in the program over a seven year period with only a few incomplete assignments to graduate.

A number of constraining factors were highlighted in Carter's college experience. The factors that he focused on were: personal characteristics related to individual disability, feeling adequate, medical reasons, perceptions of the environmental expectations on him as a student, and sense of belonging. Of critical importance also were the three primary factors he contributed to his withdrawal: indecisive and impulsive decision making, loss of interest in major, and lack of career guidance. Discussion about supportive factors will be addressed at the end of Carter's experiences.

### **Personal Characteristics Related to Individual Disability**

At age nine it was discovered that Carter had a learning disability—attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). He noted his primary academic challenges as his inability to remain focused on any activity and his impulsive and indecisive approach when making decisions. He reported that he got bored easily and had to be in a learning environment that was stimulating or else he would lose interest quickly. He spoke of feeling lost in a large class environment where he felt professors were not aware of who was in attendance.

### **“I Constantly Compete with My Disability”**

For as long as he can remember Carter said it has been difficult for him to compete with his own disability and its accompanying symptoms. He does not want to

feel like a failure because he has ADHD and as such has persisted for seven years in an effort to graduate with an undergraduate degree. Carter stressed that some days he felt he developed strategies to cope with ADHD related challenges just to realize that he had not found the answer to his problems. He had difficulty with planning and prioritizing, difficulty to in completing given tasks, difficulty in decision-making and difficulty in managing his responsibilities. He related that he was once taken to an assessment center where his brain waves were assessed. The assessment revealed that his brain waves were charged for the first few minutes of an activity and then lost energy and the inability to stay engaged. He concluded that he learned differently, “My brain waves, use a lot of energy real fast. Primarily for test purposes, for the first half of test I’d have enough energy to get by, yet I would fade for the last half. I compensated by eating a high protein bar which provided me with source of energy to be able to complete the test.”

Carter attributed much of the problem he encountered in school with symptoms related to his disability. He insisted that he constantly struggled with being focused and remaining on task through completion.

It affects me a lot in school because it’s one of those things if I get bored my mind begins to wander...school has always been hassle sometimes cause if it doesn’t keep me enthralled or, you know, I just, I lose focus. When the professor or other teacher doesn’t keep me actively engaged I just tune out. I have found myself in the past not going to class because it’s boring. You know I’d rather stay at home and play video games. So, yeah, you know, I’ve done that a lot and it’s, you know, it has definitely affected my grades. Although I have had instances where I don’t go to class, but I can still pass the tests. But, I mean, what is a professor

going to do, when you have, you know, 300 kids in the class? It wasn't just the large class, you know. I mean, in any class I just get bored, you know. It gets monotonous.

### **Feeling Adequate and Medical Reasons**

When asked if he had utilized any form of therapy and or medical intervention to cope, Carter acknowledged trying a few prescription drugs over the years but decided not to continue taking them for at least four reasons. First, he said the medication can be expensive and he often could not afford them. Secondly, he stated that he did not want to feel dependent on medications to cope with his disability. He was intent on proving to himself and others, particularly his parents that he could succeed on his own volition. Thirdly, he said some of the medications were helpful, while some had terrible side effects. For example, he stated, “, the last meds I took it kept me more focused, but the side effect made me extremely aggressive , I would snap for just about anything.” Fourthly, he jokingly remarked, “then again, meds. can't make you go to classes.” (Participant chuckled). Carter implied that to increase the likelihood of a behavioral change medications should be accompanied by another form of intervention.

### **Student Perceptions of the Environmental Expectations on Him as a Student**

An important experience that Carter identified was his inability to meet his parents' expectations which he said made him feel inferior sometimes. Gaining their financial support was contingent on him meeting their expectations which were linked to his academic performance. Further, he spoke about how they constantly compared his academic attainment to that of his brother.



As a potential incentive to keep him focused and committed to his educational goals Carter's parents offered to pay for his education if he could maintain a 3.0 grade point average. Despite his efforts he said he was unable to maintain the expected grade which resulted in lack of financial support from his parents.

I have always just managed to get by with my grades. I did the bare minimum to get by. My grades were always below 3.0 averages. Don't get me wrong, I still managed to get an occasional A's and few B's, but I have always been trailing a 3.0 average by a narrow margin. So I never really got any help from them [parents].

Carter tried to minimize the effect of his parents comparing his progress to that of his brother by shrugging it off. However, he mentioned the comparison his family made between himself and his brother a number of times during our conversation. His younger brother enrolled at the university after he did, has subsequently graduated and according to Carter has done very well academically. His brother has obtained middle income employment. His emphasis on highlighting his brother's achievement may indicate that he has some concerns.

### **Sense of Belonging—A Dual Factor**

Unlike Abby and Adrian, Carter on the other hand had a great sense of belonging to the university and was highly socially integrated. He said he was often overly stimulated by his high level of involvement in the social life of the campus. As a student with an innate need to be activity oriented, he was involved in several clubs and fraternities. Ironically, it seemed his zealous involvement may have compromised his

ability to attend to his academic obligations. He smiled and said, “Maybe I became too popular which although helpful, was also distracting.”

### **Explicit Reasons Carter Attributed to His Withdrawal**

The aforementioned discussion focused on a number of constraining factors Carter said influenced his decision to withdraw from LGU. The following discussion will present the three core factors he attributed to his withdrawal: indecisive and impulsive decision making, loss of interest in career major, and lack of career guidance. He pointed out that the factors he mentioned are all connected with the challenges he experiences with his disability.

The reasons Carter attributed to leaving the university pre-maturely are intertwined with his struggle to make decisions, in this instance career indecisiveness, his struggle to maintain focus and possibly lack of career guidance. When asked about factors he perceived that have contributed to his withdrawal from the university Carter explained that reasons for leaving the first time are somewhat different from leaving the second time. He was committed to education but lacked the determination and stick-to-itiveness to complete his degree. On the first occasion Carter said after being enrolled for two years he lost interest and withdrew from the university to pursue another area of interest. He reported, “I didn’t feel like this [new interest] was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life and decided to return to LGU.” He said he sometimes made impulsive decisions and this may be one of those hurried decisions.

Connected with his impulsive decision-making and indecisiveness is his inability to decide on a career path. Those challenges he related are interwoven with his decision to leave the university the second time. Carter explained that on his return to the

university the first time he had to declare a major. Having difficulty deciding what to select he went along with the choice made by his best friend.

I kind of got into this major for maybe the wrong reasons. My best friend growing up through high school and stuff, his dad's the vice president of one of the largest WWW (pseudonym) companies in the country. So he decided to choose Y major. I had just come back, chatted with him then decided I would select the same major. He ended up moving and then now he's not even working for like that company anymore. About a couple years ago I just realized that although I loved some aspect of it, I don't want to do that as a career either. So I kind of lost focus and that's really when my grades started to slip pretty badly. Now I realize that this was the wrong reason to choose a career. Now I feel stuck. I have lost interest in the major; I have lost interest in the classes.

Carter admitted that his loss of interest in his major is probably linked to the fact that he had not given the decision careful thought from the onset. When questioned if he had ever utilized the services of a career counselor to explore careers compatible to his goals and capabilities he said, "No...in retrospect I probably should have."

I was disappointed about the major I was in and lost interest. After completing the capstone that was done as a group project, I didn't complete the other assignments and basically just stayed home for the most part. My professor told me that the group [Capstone] received an A because of me. I am very good with math, numbers. But after that I just lost interest in the major and stopped attending most of my classes. I totally dislike my major but at this late stage it would be nonsensical to change. I just want to finish the degree.

He further added that as his studies progressed, jobs in the field were hard to obtain and they were often low paying jobs. He was disappointed that he made that career choice and was frustrated with himself for not being able to remain focused to the end. It was therefore ironic that he continued to say he had withdrawn to regain his focus when in fact that had been his crucial challenge over the years.

I've just stopped going to LGU to try to regain my focus. I am taking a break, trying to gather my thoughts, you know, trying to get everything back where it should be. Like my mindset. I need to do this right now. Re-energize now and try to figure out what I need to do. You know, it's kind of hard to stay in something and try to figure things out when you don't even know what you want.

### **Feeling Supported**

Carter outlined a number of sources he accessed for support as a student in his effort to be successful. He referred to his friends, institution (key academic program, professors, counselors and tutors, university counseling center, learning assistance program, and academic advancement center), and support from the community where he accessed off-campus employment and off- campus housing.

### **Friends**

He credited his friends for their ability to understand him and some of the struggles he faced as a student. Carter noted that he had a strong network of friends with whom he spent time together to discuss classes and other topics and just have fun. Carter said he skipped a number of classes and his friends would provide him with material he missed.

My friends would take notes for me...that I borrowed sometimes. I missed a number of classes but managed to do well enough to stay afloat. I was very popular, maybe too popular, I was a member of a fraternity, I was involved in sports, many people just know me. My peers would very helpful, if I missed out on anything. Yeah, you know, I've always had good resources, you know, like friends and stuff. If one of us did miss a class we'd tell them or give them the notes or, or if I missed they'd do the same for me. I didn't like the major so I turned up for quizzes and exams, but stayed home more than I probably should. My friends would take notes for me...that I borrowed sometimes. I missed a number of classes but managed to do well enough to stay afloat.

### **Institutional Support**

Carter had just graduated from high school when he first enrolled at the university. He repeatedly said that since his enrollment he received tremendous academic support and has no one to blame but himself for not completing his degree. On entry he was involved in the Key Academic Community which is a first-year residential learning community. This is a community building initiative to foster connections with other students, faculty and staff and involvement in campus activities. He said, "We had sophomore [second year student] mentors. It was a good experience, good place to start. But a bunch of my friends, we all moved out soon as we could. We kind of wanted more freedom, you know the opportunity to do adult stuff!"

## **Professors**

Carter has positive regards for his professors and was sympathetic toward their workload. He also felt faculty was often unable to extend themselves to offer much additional support to students due to the large classes they had.

I can't blame anyone [for degree incompleteness]. My professors were good. They had so many students in their classes anyway so I was just another number.

Although some of the professors in my department were very helpful when I went to see them." You know, it's not about the teachers, they try their hardest. It's not their fault, "it's more of sometimes my apathy of not wanting to go or not go [to classes], you know.

He also recognized the efforts of the professors who notified him when he was failing and tried to offer advice. Carter is convinced that he probably would have done better, if his professors had spoken to him earlier about his academic decline. He believed this level of one-on-one communication would have helped him to act more responsibly.

Professors tried to reach out to me at the end of the semester but it was too late, I could not redeem myself. If they had held me more accountable for classes I missed/ skipped, I probably would have done better. Actually I believe if my professors had put more fire on my tail to get to classes and finish up, I probably would have been done today. I was already on the brink of being academically dismissed and decided to withdraw before the university asked me to leave.

## **Counselors And Tutors**

Counselors at the counseling center were helpful and they networked with advisors in the learning assistance program, as well as tutors in the Academic

Advancement center to work with Carter. The counselor he said worked closely with him monitoring his academic progress which also involved monitoring his academic attendance. He coyly said, “My tutors tried to help keep me accountable by giving me a form to give to my professors to sign indicating my attendance.” “Pfff”, he uttered and shrugged his shoulder in a nonchalant attitude indicating his disregard. He continued, “In a class of 200 and more, how would they know about me. I thought walking around with the form was so ridiculous and just one more thing to do.”

He was quick to air his grouse for the tutoring services he received. He utilized free tutoring for only the classes for which tutoring was available. He bemoaned that the service did not have many tutors for courses specific to his major, as well as the rapid staff turnover among the tutors. Carter pointed out, “the staff turnover was annoying. But I understand as people have to move on to better things. I cannot blame anyone for where I am today.”

### **Off-Campus Employment**

Carter mentioned that he has been working in the community before and since enrolling at the university. He mentioned that he received negligible support from his parents and had to maintain financial support through college by working. Therefore to offset his financial responsibilities he remained employed, at least part time. This income was supplemented by student loans he received. Carter explained, “I have always tried to make some money. This time I am out of school working to try to pay off some of my student loans.” He has always managed to gain employment in environs close to the university.

Carter also discussed that he has been working part-time since age sixteen. I wondered about the possibility of work obligations detracting from his commitment to his studies. When asked if he thought working throughout his tenure at college impacted his ability to succeed, he replied, “Hmm, I don’t think so. I’d go to school in the morning or afternoon, and then go to work at night. I think the fun choices I made more impacted my grades than working. The busier I am the better I do, because like I said if I get bored I lose focus. I would be in a lot more debt if I didn’t work.”

In responding to my query about what he meant when he said his grades were more negatively impacted by the “fun choices” he made rather than the fact that he worked. Carter explained that he partied and played games more than he probably should which sometimes caused him to not to attend classes.

Well, I mostly worked in restaurants. I didn’t work in bar very much. So I would get done around 10:30 or 11:00 [pm]. I would usually leave at 11:00pm.

Sometimes, I would go party before I got home. I then tended to skip a number of my classes, especially the morning ones. I would sleep in late or stay home and play video games which were much more fun than attending classes.

### **Off-Campus Housing**

Carter also considered the freedom that came with living off-campus a supportive factor. He spoke about the convenience of living in close proximity to the campus and the affordability of off-campus housing. After residing on campus the first year, he has always lived off campus.

Living in the dorms is fine, but it gets old. You’ve got one room with another person and it’s kind of weird for that whole time. So I’ve always preferred, living



off campus. That is great. Yeah, that's one of the, one of those things you learn to appreciate especially after living in a dorm I guess. I don't know more freedom I guess, especially as you get older too. You want more independence, more space. You can do your own thing. Yeah, you don't . . . have to share a bathroom and a bedroom. You know, you have your own room.

Like the other participants, the factors Carter highlighted in his experience as an undergraduate student at LGU are integrally connected. It is also difficult to isolate any particular factor to summarize his overall experience. Collectively, important constraining factors that led to Carter's withdrawal include: personal characteristics related to individual disability, primarily indecisiveness and impulsive decision making, loss of interest in his college major and difficulty maintaining focus.

### **Mali's Experiences**

I met with Mali face-to-face and we talked for one and half-hours about her experiences on campus as SWIDs. Mali is a twenty-three year old first generation, Asian-American female of affable nature. She expressed how delighted she felt about sharing her university experiences in the hope that others will glean insight. Mali was enrolled for three years but left the institution during the fourth year. Up to the time of the interview, Mali was employed in the hospitably industry with the hope to return to the university to complete her undergraduate degree. She is currently enrolled in a community college.

Mali highlighted a number of constraints that contributed to her withdrawal from the university. These constraining factors include: personal characteristics related to individual disability, feeling adequate, perception of the environmental expectation on

her as a student, finances, and student expectations of environmental systems. Embedded in those broader factors are a number of sub-factors that are integrally related. These connected constraining factors will be illuminated at the beginning of Mali's experiences which will be followed by factors she found supportive.

### **Personal Characteristics Related to Individual Disability**

Like the other participants Mali also had a learning disability, Irlen's Syndrome, but only became aware of the disability a year and a half ago after completing two years at the university. Irlen's syndrome is a type of visual perceptual problem that affects how the nervous system encodes and decodes visual information. Mali explained that her impaired perception contributed to her slower reading rate, other problems with reading, and problems with concentration and attention. She expressed aspects of the struggles she experienced.

I felt like I just couldn't study, felt like I couldn't read as long as I should have been able to. I thought I was...not trying hard enough and questioned myself you know am I being lazy? How come I can't read and study as long as other kids did?

During her tenure at the university she was also made aware of having mood disorders, namely: generalized anxiety disorder and clinical depression. Mali added that she had an appointment to also be tested for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder as she thought her learning needs were not unearthed.

### **Feeling Adequate**

Mali highlighted that being a second generation minority student meant a lot to her which also contributed to her desire to be successful. She emphasized that her

ethnicity had significant meaning regarding how she deemed herself. Her family placed great emphasis on academic excellence and she felt compelled to meet this expectation.

That all contributed to how I wanted to see myself. I wanted to go to college and support myself and to, you know, be something more than just part of the workforce. I didn't take any semesters off [after high school graduation] or anything. I kind of heard stories about high school students taking a couple of years off and some of them never went back to school. So, you know, I kind of wanted just to get it started.

Mali explained that after the first few months at college she was constantly bombarded with feelings of inadequacy. She attributed a number of factors to her feelings of inferiority and worthlessness. First, she mentioned that since enrolling in college she has struggled to live up to her own academic expectations. Second, she spoke about her inability to attain the “understood” academic standards set by her parents. Third, she noted that the university has academic standards that she had struggled to fulfill, which also made her feel like an underachiever. Interestingly, she noted that her feelings of ineptitude were integrally interrelated with her lack of knowledge about her disabilities, primarily her learning disability.

### **Lack Of Disability Awareness—Meeting Personal Expectations**

She had been an Honor student at high school and expected that she would continue to excel while in college. She was “traumatized” when she was unable to attain the high standard in college as she did in high school. Mali commented on her preoccupation with feelings of inadequacy as she tried to figure out why she was unable to cope with her academic work. She belabored the point that particularly during her

second year at the university she became frustrated with her inability to cope academically despite her dedication and hard work. Her grades were beginning to decline from the A's she was accustomed to in high school.

Mali changed her major hoping to select courses that involved less memorization of facts and processes. Despite the change in major she remained frustrated as she continued to struggle to keep up with her academic requirements. Mali explained, "I was an achiever and now I feel like I'm kind of fooling myself and I am trying very hard, but it seems like I just can't concentrate long enough to actually accomplish what I want to accomplish." After years of questioning herself about what else she could do to improve learning, she searched the university's health network for possible resources. She discovered the Learning Assistance Program, attended an orientation and subsequent workshops that were offered. Much of what was focused on resonated with Mali's academic experience and she decided to seek and access disability assessment

After accessing the disability testing services on the campus she received her first disability diagnosis of Irlen's Syndrome. She summarized the experience by saying, "It took I think close to three years for me to realize ...there was something wrong and it wasn't just me. Mali noted the sense of relief she experienced to know that she genuinely had a learning disability and it was not that she "was not trying hard enough or was being lazy" as she had often questioned herself. Further, she mentioned that she was not aware that students could access disability testing services on the campus as she thought only a medical doctor could administer such tests. Since she was without medical insurance she did not consider getting tested a possibility.

However, one of her major regrets is that it took her a long time to discover she had a learning disability, which was compounded by the lack of knowledge pertaining to where to access disability services. Further she has still not discovered what all her learning needs are as she still feels, “all over the place” and has an appointment to test for attention deficit disorder. As she puts it “you’re investing in your education and if you don’t know all these things that might be affecting your learning you can’t really be successful.” She spoke candidly about her frustrations regarding having disabilities that may be unrecognized.

Mali expounded that the whole experience of not recognizing that she had learning disabilities may have impacted her academic performance. She commented on how her inability to excel academically contributed to feelings of low self-esteem.

It’s just difficult on your self-esteem. Having been able to achieve so much prior to college and then getting to college and not being able to achieve very much. It has really got me down. It hasn’t totally defeated me though. But, it’s affected my grades, it’s affected how I study, how I’ve been thinking and without doubt how I’ve been presenting myself, you know.

She also felt that her disabilities did not start presenting themselves until she encountered stressful situations. For example, a loved one had a medical crisis during her second year of enrollment at college. Mali was forbidden to discuss it with anyone so she cared for the individual along with confidantes and remained vigilant to the loved one’s recovery needs. “I wasn’t really thinking about me or my future during that time. I was really thinking about how I could have . . . helped this person,” she recalled. During that period she was made aware that she had generalized anxiety disorder and was clinically

depressed at one point. Mali also highlighted that her clinical depression was triggered by the immense sadness she experienced after the breakup of a romantic relationship ,as well as not knowing what to do to improve her academic performance. She remarked, “In high school, I got really good grades. [In college] I wasn’t doing as well as I did in high school, because you’re used to your like high achievements . . . and then you’re like “oh crap, I can’t do this . I should be able to do this.

### **Perception of the Environmental Expectations on Her as a Student**

She highlighted that expectations from external systems have negatively impacted her sense of self. Mali made such an assertion in reference to her perception of the expectations her family and the university had of her.

### **Feeling Adequate—Ability to Attain Parents Academic Standards**

Mali underscored the point that her inability to meet the high academic standards expected by her parents weighed heavily on her and have negatively impacted her sense of self. These standards she noted were sometimes unfortunately associated with cultural expectations of some minority population. Mali smiled and said:

I’m Asian and if you’ve heard those Asian stereotypes some of them are very true. If you got a B that means an F, you know. I remember I didn’t get to play basketball one year in high school because I got a B in language arts.

She reported feeling inadequate and not being able to live up to her parent’s pristine academic standards. Such feelings of inadequacy she said also contributed to her issues of low self-esteem.

### **Feeling Adequate--Ability to Meet University Academic Standards**

Discovering that she had disabilities further along in her studies rather than on entry also negatively impacted her ability to seek and obtain supportive services at the university. Mali was unable to seek accommodations that may have increased her chances to meet the university's academic standards. Not realizing that she had a learning disability, she also felt inadequate to discuss her learning worries with her professors. She felt she would be deemed as inferior to her peers. Mali said, "I was embarrassed, I didn't want to talk to my professors about this. I was constantly asking myself questions like "am I not trying hard enough or am I kind of fooling myself?" She has assumed that her disabilities have contributed to some of the low grades she has received resulting in being denied financial aid the year before her withdrawal. The issue of financial instability, including ineligibility for financial aid was a critical theme in Mali's experience. Students are required to take a minimum number of courses per semester and maintain a minimum average to be eligible for financial aid. Mali was denied financial aid as her grades fell and she was unable to meet the expected academic requirement. Her appeal to highlight that she became aware of her disabilities late and was seeking disability services was not adequate to overturn the decision to deny her financial aid.

### **Financial "Disability"**

Not being awarded financial aid had a devastating effect on Mali and drastically decreased her ability to remain enrolled. She does not have the financial stability to pay her way through college and was heavily dependent on that source of finance. She had always supplemented her financial aid with part-time employment on and off the campus

ranging between 15-20 hours weekly. This was important for her as she had minimal financial support from any other source except for financial aid.

Since being denied financial aid, she decreased the number of courses she took and increased her number of employment hours. This was a difficult decision to make yet as she was determined not to be “defeated”. Taking a lower course load further decreased her chances of meeting eligibility requirements to obtain financial aid. She also recognized that in addition to her learning difficulties, increased employment obligations would possibly detract her from the increased academic performance she was aiming towards. What she did not anticipate was the tenuous nature of her employment indicated by reduced employment hours soon after. This reality ultimately affected her ability to remain in school as she became indebted to the institution which made her ineligible for future enrollments until her outstanding fees are paid.

Mali expanded on how she felt and coined the term “financial disability” in reference to the financial difficulty she experienced. She explained:

I wasn't able to register for the following semester because I still had to pay off my balance. My parents are unable to help. My dad just recently lost his temp job and my mom who was unemployed for a few years just recently found a job. So now it's the financial disability and the learning disabilities that I've been worried about. I still can't re-enroll as I still have those outstanding fees. And, you know, I just know that it's stressing me out and why now I can't concentrate other than, you know, worrying about this stuff. I can't, I can't get anything done and I just, I feel like, like I'm so odd. It's life I guess. I mean, I know a lot of other people who are going through probably worse and you know we still have our house.



## **Student Expectations of Environmental Systems**

As a symbiotic relationship students have expectations from the systems around them and these environmental systems in return make demands on students. Mali expressed aspect of the teaching and learning environment at LGU that did not meet her expectations.

Mali suggested that instructors should be aware of major disability symptoms and when they identify students exhibiting such symptoms they should be capable to suggest different learning assistance programs and other disability resources. She noted that this can be a sensitive issue, but felt if handled competently could have prevented her from withdrawing from the university.

She also felt that the university could have communicated with her in a more personal manner. She mentioned receiving a number of “generic” letters, but was not approached by anyone.

I wasn't really ever approached from anyone, any of my professors. I felt like they kind of sent you almost the same letters as any other student who was having problems. I think people, you know, as a species kind of live on advice and praise and all that stuff. I think having something that was personalized and directed towards you instead of some generic paper would have definitely helped me. and, you know. It would show that the university actually cares about you other than just wanting their money for school.

In retrospect she felt that it should be required that students have their learning needs assessed once they enter college. This assessment she said should be followed by exposition to the various resources available that they would help them be successful.

She also cited three other areas of concern that the professors should be mindful of and seek to address. One concern she highlighted was a disparity in the timing of when topics were covered in laboratory (lab) and lectures. On a number of occasions topics covered in labs did not follow the lectures in a sequential pattern.

I just felt like what we were learning in lab was not related at all to what we were learning in the lectures. The lectures were often lagging a couple weeks behind or one was in front of the other. I think if the assistants and professors actually come together and planned everything out to, to make sure the lessons fell in the same week it would have helped me and maybe a few other people understand the concepts more.

The second concern referred to perceived lack of catering to diverse learning capabilities in the classroom. While she said she recognized that one cannot expect professors to try and accommodate all students it would have been helpful if professors specified salient aspects of a book, so that especially students with learning difficulties could maximize their time reading the essential components. Some text books have tangential material that can be detracting to students who struggle to learn, she insisted.

The third concern pertained to non-provision of learning materials to supplement class lectures in some classes. She noted that some professors did not provide hard or electronic copies of the material covered in class, while a few did so inconsistently. This she said left her solely dependent on her ability to listen and take notes which was not one of her areas of strengths.

### **Explicit Reasons Mali Attributed to Her Withdrawal**

The foregoing discourse concentrated on the collective constraining factors that led to Mali's experiences. However, she was eager to point out the two main factors she felt contributed to her withdrawal from the college. These factors are: finances and late awareness of disability.

When queried about the main reasons that contributed to her withdrawal from the institution she quickly said, "My financial disability and not being aware of my disabilities until it was too late." These two reasons are interconnected. She noted that although she discovered her learning disability further along her studies, if she had financial stability she would not have to leave when she was denied financial aid. She expressed that she has taken time off from the university to earn and save enough money to return and complete her degree. In the meantime, she is enrolled at a community college working toward completion of a certificate with the hope to obtain a better paying job.

### **Feeling Supported**

Mali's ability to remain in the university up to the time of her withdrawal was dependent on a number of supportive factors. She named the following sources as areas from which she gained support: family, friends, institution (university counseling services, learning assistance program, academic advancement program-tutoring services, medical patient assistance program, and RDS, professors and campus employment) and community employment.

**Family**

She identified her parents as helpful and responsive to her needs as best as they possibly could, however she noted that she would rather discuss problems she was experiencing with her older sister. Mali reiterated that the ideal standards held by her parents made it difficult at times to be open with them. She referred to her sisters as very supportive and ensured she consulted them before making any important decision. They listened to her concerns, offered advice, called her frequently and visited her on campus and importantly were confidential.

**Friends**

Friends played an important role in Mali's life as a student and she acknowledged that she had a close group of friends. She felt they cared about her well-being and provided her with suggestions, advice and the opportunity to be validated during challenging times, particularly when she felt inferior. The value of having a strong friend's support network was critical to Mali.

Pamela was very helpful because she was always there to, I guess, just to listen to me rant about stuff . . . what I was going through. She would be able to empathize with what I was feeling in a safe environment, without feeling like I was being judged. She's a really good listener and she also knew when I needed help, when to offer good advice, you know.

**Institution**

Using her initiative and the innate desire to succeed despite the odds, Mali benefited from a number of sources at the university. She emphasized that, "LGU has lots of awesome disability resources. But you just need to access them. I wished advisors

would... point them out or make them known, sort of advertise them more.” Mali referred to what she described as numerous services offered via the University’s Counseling Center, inclusive of the Learning assistance program that offer disability testing services along with workshops on learning strategies and free tutoring services. Mali remarked, “It took me a while to find out that we had all these programs.” Admittedly, she underscored the point that a number of students obviously are aware of and are utilizing the programs as she was placed on an eight weeks waiting list to be tested for ADHD. She also noted that although the fees for testing for disabilities can be exorbitant in some institutions, LGU considered waiving fees for students without financial aid or other financial supports. Learning about her disabilities was helpful as she has begun to address them in varied ways.

She also recognized the support garnered from her counselors whom she said helped her develop coping techniques as she became aware of and confronted her personal challenges and health vulnerabilities. Mali also found tutoring at the Academic Advancement Center very helpful but noted that students should be aware that these sessions are most beneficial if students attend with questions pertaining to areas they have concerns.

Mali also highlighted the assistance she obtained through the prescription assistance program at the university’s health network. She explained that she took anti-anxiety and anti-depressant medications and would not be able to access these medications while in school without the program offsetting the cost of her medication. She qualified for the assistance through a means testing approach.

She also solicited the support of RDS after discovering that she had Irlen' Syndrome. She received accommodations of having extra time to take tests and doing so in a reduced distraction environment. They also offered her advice as well. One such advice was to audio record the classes. She tried this recoding method a few times and found it too time consuming in addition with her other commitments. According to her, "It felt like something I would not be able to do the whole year, you know. It felt like I attended the same class twice, it was more like a burden."

### **Sense of Belonging—Despite Non-Involvement**

After joining a club at the university during her first year, Mali decided not to become involved in any other social clubs in an effort to focus on her academic endeavors. She also stated that on enrollment at the university she had decided not to get involved much as she felt exhausted by the number of social commitments she had in high school and felt she needed time to focus on other things. Importantly, at the end of her first year in college she recognized that balancing her academic obligations was becoming more challenging and decided not to get involved in any other clubs during her tenure.

Ironically, unlike the other participants previously discussed despite Mali's non-involvement in clubs and other extra-curricular activities she had an endearing sense of belonging to the university. She highlighted that student's acceptance of diversity made the university appealing to her.

I have never felt judged by my beliefs and background. It's a very friendly campus, you know, all the kids there make you feel welcomed. I haven't seen any bullying because of your beliefs or your sexual orientation or your racial

background or anything like that. If it's there maybe I haven't seen it because of the group I hung around. People who are, I guess, enlightened and open minded.

I definitely love the school and I'm working my way back to LGU.

### **Professors**

Mali mentioned that she had a good relationship with her professors and generally found them quite helpful. They were approachable and consulted with them when questions about a class or lesson emerged. Mali noted that she found the professors with whom she interacted to be fair. She also felt that a number of her professors made effort to provide materials used in classes whether by posting them before classes or distributing them in the classes. This strategy she said worked well for her as she was unable to copy diagrams, notes and listen to the professors at the same time.

The primary constraining factors that were central in Mali's experience coupled with the number of support systems she utilized is another example of how disequilibrium at any level of the environmental systems may compromise educational attainment of a student. Her report indicates that despite the provision of support systems other critical forces/factors are prudent to promote persistence. In Mali's case, late awareness of her disability and financial limitation proved most impactful.

### **Beck's Experiences**

Beck is a 40-year old White male, considered non-traditional aged student who developed a learning disability resulting from a traumatic brain injury. We talked for one and a half hours via Skype about his experiences being an undergraduate student. Of the five participants he was the only individual who pursued an online undergraduate degree with the university. After acquiring cognitive impairments he found the flexibility of the

online program conducive to his learning needs. It offered him the freedom to move back to his parents' home for support during recovery, to be close to the community's rehabilitative center, as well as, pursue an undergraduate degree. His story does not have the same thematic patterns as the participants previously discussed but offers a lens into the life of an undergraduate student that cannot be discounted.

The constraining factors that emerged for Beck focused on two core issues external to the university. One of the factors related to his personal characteristics related to his disability and the second factor related to not being able to meet an environmental (agency) expectation of him. Important to the withdrawal discussion is that Beck's perceived inability to fulfill the agency's requirement is also interwoven with finances. Yet, when asked to relate the factor/s he attributed to his withdrawal he mentioned only one factor: the community agency's expectation of him as a student. He explained that an affiliated community agency imposed its expectation on him which contributed to his withdrawal from LGU. These interconnected factors will be discussed in Beck's story and along with factors he found supportive.

### **Personal Characteristics Related to Individual Disability**

Two years before enrollment Beck had a medical condition that required a brain surgery which resulted in some long term memory loss and significant short term memory loss. He related that the disability shortened his attention span and it took him multiple attempts to process information. Up to a year prior to his enrollment, he noted "Simple little things about memory, I would have to write down. For example, I just couldn't remember how to get to a location I was quite familiar with over the years." By the time he enrolled at LGU he had begun retrieving both some long term and short



memory capabilities. Yet, he stated that his attention span was short and it took him multiple attempts to understand new information. He subsequently devised strategies to adapt to his cognitive impairment and had successfully fulfilled partial requirements for the undergraduate degree up to the time of his withdrawal. Since his withdrawal Beck has relocated to another state, but is still exploring possibilities to complete his undergraduate degree at LGU.

### **Road to Recovery**

Beck' parents resided in Colorado so it was befitting for his family to identify a rehabilitative program in the state that could assist him through recovery and help him attain qualifications that would help him in the future. After exploring their options, a rehabilitative center in Colorado was identified and relocated to benefit from their services. Once he registered with the agency, he also qualified for welfare and educational benefits which offset his tuition fees at the university.

### **Ability to Adapt to Cognitive Impairment**

During our conversation he was pleased to talk about strategies he had developed to assist him to cope with his cognitive impairment. He has utilized an impressive system of linking his computer to other navigation devices inclusive of setting up his cellular phone to send text reminders of his daily priorities. He remarked that some of his accomplishments during his studies were being able to take a timed test and complete it in the allotted time as he continued to require fewer accommodations.

### **Online Degree—Best Fit**

Beck said he enjoyed his classes at the university. The convenience of studying online was one of the most attractive elements as at the time of enrollment he had

difficulties commuting on his own. In addition, the flexibility offered was compatible with his needs as he was able to pace himself as necessary. He also mentioned that initially he needed to improve his writing skills and enrolled in a writing course at a community college to address that. Accordingly, he noted that his grades improved.

### **Feeling Adequate—Lower Course Load**

Beck said initially he registered to take a full course load but had difficulty keeping up with courses requirements and sometimes got behind with the readings and assignments. During the first two semesters he retook a few courses. With suggestions from his primary counselor at the rehab center he decided to take a lower course load which felt more manageable. He was then able to obtain A's and B's and kept pace with his academic requirements which boosted his self- confidence. Beck realized that he performed at a more optimal level carrying a lower course load which contributed to his feelings of adequacy.

### **Expectation From an Environmental System—Community Agency**

Integral to Beck's premature departure from the university was his perceived inability to fulfill the expectations of the community agency with which he was dependent for rehabilitation and subsequently their financial assistance to pay his college fees. After experiencing failure at attempting a full course load when he initially enrolled, with the assistance of his first counselor at the agency, Beck decided to decrease his course load to three per semester and was successful in attaining good grades. Nonetheless, he explained that his first counselor at the agency left and he was assigned a second counselor who insisted that he took a full course load. He insisted that he had no

intention to increase his course load as he was at the point where he was attaining success with taking three courses per semester.

### **Explicit Reasons Beck Attributed for His Withdrawal**

When asked to talk about reasons that contributed to his withdrawal from the university he stated that the reason was not directly related to the university. He stated that the community agency he depended on for rehabilitative support insisted that he carry a full course load and caused him to “quit.” Beck reiterated that the new counselor at the agency insisted that he increased his course load at the university from three courses per semester (9 credits) to five courses per semester (15 credits) to maintain eligibility of services at the center. Beck mentioned that the imposition to increase the number of courses was overwhelming as he had done that before and was unsuccessful. He did not want to experience those feelings of inadequacy and frustration he felt when he undertook a full course load when he first enrolled. Beck said he made numerous attempts to negotiate with the counselor and the rehab center but to no avail.

It became obvious that the issues with the rehab center weren't going to allow me to continue to take classes at that time. I mean even RDS contacted them [rehab] to let them know that it was okay with LGU that I take the smaller class load to get my degree. There was no problem with the university at all, but the rehab would not allow it. The new counselor was stricter about the requirements about carrying a full class load. I don't fully understand the situation there... something regarding high client loads and low success rates. It seems they were trying to require people to take full course loads in order to continue receiving funds for their service, while they pay for our classes and so on. I guess it was a little bit of

a political issue within the Rehab center and what they're willing to do to keep clients on until they complete their degrees. Their requirements became a little bit too high for me so I got so frustrated and quit college.

It is obvious that the situation between Beck and the rehab center remains obscure. However the imposition to take a full course load triggered those early feelings of inadequacy when he first enrolled of which he was unwilling to experience again.

Although Beck emphasized the misunderstanding between himself and the rehab center as the primary reason for leaving the university prematurely, it became clear that there was a secondary implicating factor. The second factor is financial limitations. If he had the financial ability to pay for his education he would have completed the degree. During his enrollment, as he was also recuperating from his injury he was unable to be gainfully employed to offset any cost. At that time he was therefore dependent on the financial support and other forms of support from the rehab center. He was also keen on pointing out that the limitations that resulted from his memory loss were also impediments in his educational attainment.

Yet, he was adamant that he will complete his studies at the university in the near future. He describes the withdrawal process as "just a little bump in the road that is all".

### **Feeling Supported**

He acknowledged the number of sources which supported him as a student. Beck highlighted the following sources of support: family (parents, spouse, and sister), the institution (RDS, Advisor and Professors) and the community rehabilitative center.

## **Family**

Beck credited his family for offering him the greatest level of support he obtained in college. He specially mentioned his parents, spouse and sister. After surgery, he returned to live with his parents who helped him with his activities of daily living and offered advice and suggestions as they saw fit. They were thrilled that he was retooling when he enrolled at the university.

He also noted that during his recovery phase he got romantically involved with his long lost love. They got married and she too supported his educational endeavors. Beck also acknowledged support he ascertained from his sister. She was a school administrator who was knowledgeable about SWDs, the disability act, as well as how and where to access services that he required. As a result she was usually his first point of contact. He remarked, “She was really familiar with how to research a lot of institutions, how to get through the application process and how to talk to the school personnel and so on. So she was extremely helpful.” Altogether as a family unit they all pulled together to help him navigate systems if he experienced any difficulty and or to make the process easier.

## **Institution**

Beck noted that he was pleased with the level of support he obtained from the university, demonstrated by everyone with whom he interacted with. Firstly, he spoke about support he garnered from RDS. They worked with him to have all necessary document completed and submitted to receive needed accommodations. He was allowed accommodation for separate testing which could include: receiving different test questions of similar level of difficulty as he was allowed extended time to complete

exams. He said he was not totally aware of how RDS informed the instructors, but they were made aware of his disability and they too were very helpful and accommodating. Accommodation could vary a bit depending on the way the teacher organized a course and how assessment was designed. In referring to RDS he exclaimed, “Once it’s a disability issue if you end up with Rose [RDS director], you know it’s going to be taken care of.

### **Advisor and Professors**

Beck exclaimed that his department’s advisor was his first point of contact with the university and “she was awesome at her job!” He had similar sentiments for his professors whom he praised for their helpful nature. Whether by phone or email he said they kept the line of communication open and seemed as if they were interested in his success.

### **Sense of Belonging**

It was interesting to note that although Beck engaged with university primarily in the virtual environment he had a keen sense of belong to the university. He said the university made a concerted effort to create an engaging and accommodating atmosphere.

They’re (LGU) always accommodating. They’re always welcoming. They always seem to be willing to do anything it took to help me succeed. All I had to do was ask. If there was a way for them to figure out how to accommodate what I needed to do in order to take the course and complete the tests and whatever it took. Most of those personnel who worked in my program, the advisors, whomever, they were very knowledgeable and helpful. They would bend over backwards, whatever it took, within, you know, the policies of course ...

I asked him to elaborate on the importance of having a sense of belonging to the university. He remarked that it provided a sense of importance that each individual mattered to the university. Beck added that he got the impression that the college wanted to get SWDs involved as he was constantly sent invitations to clubs, sporting events and other social engagements. These invitations were sent via emails and/or postal mail. Unfortunately he said he was unable to honor most of those invitations as he lived a distance away.

### **Community Agency**

Beck's interactions with the rehabilitative organization are viewed at the community level. Beck noted that at the beginning of his relationship with the rehabilitative center, staff personnel were very helpful to assist him in his quest to obtain an undergraduate degree. The first counselor at the rehab he was assigned to work with tried to include him in decisions that would affect him. He described this counselor as a computer wizard who tried to learn about the university learning systems in order to help him gain mastery in navigating the online environment.

The rehab center was also instrumental in helping him discover and develop techniques to adapt to his cognitive impairment. During his time as a client with the rehab he regained much of his cognitive functioning and they also acted as brokers to other available resources. Beck stated how disappointed he was when his counselor was replaced by another counselor whom he felt lacked insight. Suddenly the level of support he received declined to the point that he thought they were no longer serving his needs but theirs instead.

Beck's experience underscores the impact of environmental systems on a student's ability to persist. It sheds light on the importance of having a level of congruence among forces interacting with individuals. Beck had a number of support systems, yet the pressure from the community agency was powerful enough to influence his withdrawal.

### **Conclusion**

The foregoing discussion presented the findings personalized through individual participant's stories. By examining the participants' experiences, a constellation of factors that are significantly related to their withdrawal from college resulted, along with systems that supported them during their studies. The inter-relatedness and dynamic nature of the factors told a compelling story of the contextual nature of the SWIDs' experiences. The stories illustrated varied negative and positive forces at different environmental system level and how these forces shaped the participants' college experiences. Ultimately, despite the array of support systems, influences from the negative factors superseded those supportive forces which contributed to the participants' withdrawal from college.



## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION**

This final chapter presents the summary of this research study and connects findings unearthed in Chapter 4 with pertinent literature. Implications of the research findings relevant to theory, practice, and policy will be put forward. Additionally, recommendations for future research and the significance of the study will also be presented.

The original intent of the study was to examine the experiences of a heterogeneous group of students with disabilities (SWDs); however, only students with invisible disabilities (SWIDs) agreed to participate, which represents only a sub-group of SWDs. Therefore, the purpose of this exploratory study was revised to examine the experiences of SWIDs in a mid-western land grant university (LGU) and shed light on specific reasons they attributed to their withdrawal after completing at least sixty college credits or more at the institution. Secondary purposes included identifying both the participants' sources of stress as well as their sources of support.

The students' experiences were anchored within an ecological perspective to elucidate the complexity of systems interacting and impacting the lives of students. The primary research questions were: "What are the experiences of SWIDs during their first 60 credit hours while enrolled as a baccalaureate degree student at the land grant university; and "What influences SWIDs to voluntarily withdraw from the university after completing 60 or more credit hours?"

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather information from participants. The data were open-coded and summary sheets were created for each participant that recorded essential constructs the students underscored. Thematic analysis and contrastive analysis were conducted with the students' experiences, which were filtered through the ecological perspective lens. Preliminary themes were examined within and across participants and were revised to form the salient themes presented in Chapter 4.

An important idea that this study brings to the fore is that withdrawal is not always a negative action for students. As the participants' experiences highlighted, withdrawal depends on the needs and goals of the students. In Adrian's instance, he enrolled at the LGU to maintain continuous enrollment, which would make him eligible to re-enroll at the small college where he had completed his first year in college. It was his intent to return and complete his undergraduate degree at that college; he had no intention to complete his undergraduate degree at the LGU. The experience of this participant reinforces Bean's (1982) assertion that a student should not be considered a drop out if his or her intended goal was accomplished before he/she departed the institution.

Students' early departure from an institution has negative implications for the institution. High attrition rate may cause an institution to lose its credibility ranking which may have further implication for obtaining potential funding. Financial resources utilized to provide programs and services to support a student who withdraws before completion may be deemed as lost investment by the college and funders. As revealed in this study, two of the participants left to attend another college where they felt their needs were better addressed; once at that college, they successfully completed their

undergraduate degree. Withdrawal was considered a negative outcome by the institution from which the student departed but in reality it reflected success for those particular students.

### **Summary of Findings**

Overall findings from this research are compatible with prior research done on college retention of SWDs (Brackette, 2007; Dorwick et al., 2005; Duquette, 2000; Getzel & Brown, 2000; Greenbaum, Graham, & Scales, 1995; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Rao, 2004; Sheppard & Jones, 2002; Wegner, 2008). The findings demonstrate the complex interplay of constraining and supporting factors/forces in the lives of SWIDs. The constellation of constraining factors include: personal characteristics related to individual disability, medical reasons, feelings of adequacy, sense of belonging, self-advocacy skills, disclosure to faculty and staff, involvement in campus, finances, students' expectations of environmental systems, and environmental systems' expectations of students.

The participants' capacity to complete their academic obligations was contingent on a number of interrelated supportive factors. Supporting factors were described as: family and friends (having a non-judgmental listener, provided advice, helped to monitor and maintain health plan compliance, friends who provided notes, etc., if student missed a class, helped search for suitable support resources); university (ability to take lower course load, some understanding and accommodating faculty, knowledgeable and helpful staff, tutoring, counseling-career and otherwise, prescription assistance, several disability services and club membership and employment opportunities); community (employment opportunities, off-campus living convenience and rehabilitative services and support).

Most participants except Adrian carried a lower course load and felt it was necessary to do so to cope and be more successful. Only Adrian took a full course load, but he attended the university for only one semester.

Importantly, not all students experienced every factor in the constellation but rather a cluster of interacting constraining factors. For instance, for one student, a combination of being required to take a required course load to keep financial aid and keep above a certain GPA along with a sense of not meeting parental and self-expectations contributed to an overriding and often-stated sense of inadequacy and/or not feeling successful as a student. For another student, a number of interconnected factors contributed to her feelings of marginalization, a sense of inadequacy or not feeling successful as a student which also triggered a sense of non-belonging to the university. These interrelated factors included: lack of support from a faculty member regarding unwillingness to facilitate accommodations coupled with attempts to influence other faculty to do likewise; reluctance to disclose her disabilities to faculty and staff along with side-effects of medication. One theme that was unique for one participant (Mali) was the lack of awareness she had of her learning disability, which inhibited her from seeking and accessing necessary services earlier.

The study findings also illustrated the importance of each factor and the impact that may be created if one factor is eliminated. For example, Beck reportedly had a positive academic experience with LGU and felt the college environment was highly flexible and supportive of his diverse learning needs. However, his unfavorable experience with the community agency with which he was affiliated was enough to trigger his withdrawal from the university because he felt he could not succeed as a

student under the required conditions. Beck's experience relates to a desire to succeed and creating conditions that support opportunities for success. Conversely, students' experiences also suggest the possible impact adding and or augmenting one factor may create.

The forthcoming section will provide a detailed discussion of how the individual stories intersect by common themes among them. Most importantly it will illuminate the meanings participants ascribed to these themes. Reasons they attribute to their withdrawal as a collective group will be underscored. Dissimilarities will also be highlighted. An important point to emphasize is the complexity within which the themes relate to each other. From an ecological perspective, one recognizes how a number of the factors impacted other factors, triggering an almost domino effect. It is difficult to extrapolate the impact of just one factor and one wonders if one of the constructs missing in the participant's life had been available, how that may have impacted the individual's proclivity to persist. For example, if Mali had known of her disability on enrollment at the university, like the others, how different would her story be? The reverse is also true if one of the supporting factors had actually been missing what may have been the outcome? Would the student have persisted to an upper level status or would s/he have withdrawn before?

It is important to note that all the participants expressed an innate desire to be successful individuals in society and felt that obtaining an undergraduate degree was one of the primary medium to attain such an endeavor. Abby and Adrian, despite withdrawing from the university, pursued their undergraduate degree elsewhere and are pursuing graduate degrees. They both emphasized that they will not allow their disability

to define them, hence their innate drive to be successful. Both Beck and Mali have been working towards mitigating the major challenge impeding their ability to complete their undergraduate degree, which is financial limitations. The impetus to succeed was even more pronounced for Mali, who stressed that being a minority student and the first in her family to pursue higher education created an additional motivational factor. Conversely, despite Carter's desire to complete his studies at the university, he lacks the self-determination skills required. The desire to succeed was one of the positive factors among the participants, yet had varied degree of significance and meaning based on individuals realities.

The emphasis of this research study is to explore factors SWIDs contribute to their voluntary withdrawal from LGU. Therefore, I focus primarily on these constraining factors that the participants associate with their pre-mature departure from the institution. As aforementioned, a number of themes repeated across participants' stories. One theme was unique for one participant (Mali) – the lack of awareness she had of her learning disability/ies, which inhibited her from seeking and accessing necessary services. The remaining themes were found across multiple participants' interviews. The following discussion will focus on each factor and illuminate the interconnectivity of meanings among the participants.

### **Personal Characteristics Related to Individual Disability**

Personal challenges related to their individual disability were noted by all participants, yet only Carter and Mali identified them as major constraining factors. Carter highlighted that his inability to make decisions and maintain focus on any given task were associated with his disability. Mali also emphasized that her inability to cope

with academic demands were apparently related to her disability/ies which was also connected with her delayed disability awareness. These factors are also intertwined with Mali's utilization of disability services after years of enrollment which are linked to her obtaining low grades and ultimately inability to maintain eligibility for financial aid. The other participants had formulated adaptation and accommodation strategies and did not regard their personal characteristics as limitations. For a number of the students, disability factors are closely linked to medical reasons. The ability to comply with a professional health care plan increased the potential of their continuance at the university.

### **Feeling Adequate**

Of importance, all participants struggled with feelings of inadequacy and attempted efforts to compensate for such feelings. They all ascribed different meanings to their desire not to be seen as inferior but to be accepted as adequate to their counterparts. Feelings of inadequacy inhibited a number of the participants from advocating for their needs. Abby and Adrian for example, both wanted to be accepted for their capabilities rather than their limitations, which resulted in them inadequately advocating for their needs. Abby chose only to disclose her learning disability to the institution, as she felt there is a stigma attached to psychiatric disabilities and assumed she may be viewed and treated differently by both students and faculty. This choice of hers limited the number of services she could have received. Yet, she reported that her rationale for not disclosing her psychiatric disability was underscored when she experienced instances of discrimination and feelings of marginalization from one professor who knew only of her learning disability. Abby assumed if the professor knew of her full disability status professor she could be subjected to further levels of marginalization. According to Abby,

she was deemed as an excellent student among her peers and most professors and did not want to be seen in any other light.

Abby also struggled with self-esteem issues and feelings of adequacy as she compared the time it took her to complete partial degree requirements with that of her cohort and a subsequent cohort to reinforce her feelings of inadequacy. She elaborated on how painful it was for her to watch students who enrolled at the university the same year she did graduated before her. Equally painful was watching even a subsequent cohort complete before she did. Carter on the other hand felt like he was in daily combat with his disability as he is yet to develop strategies to cope with struggles he encounter related to his disability. Furthermore, Carter and Mali endured feelings of ineptitude as their parents often compared their accomplishments to standards the families held in high esteem.

### **Sense of Belonging**

Interestingly, a sense of belonging had different meanings to the participants. For example, Abby and Adrian spoke about not having a sense of belonging to the institution which was considered a constraining factor for them. Ironically both Beck and Mali had a keen sense of belonging to the institution despite their limited to non-involvement in social activities. They noted this as a supportive factor. Remarkably, Carter had a strong sense of belonging to the university but could not decide whether that was a supportive factor or a stressor he was always actively involved in a number of social engagements, but now contemplates if these engagements distracted him from his academic accomplishments.



Like Abby, Adrian's sense of non-belonging resulted from his desire to attend a smaller college which he felt would be more conducive to his learning needs. Most importantly, he enrolled with the intention to leave shortly thereafter, which hindered him from having the interest to get to know the university and get involved. Also he criticized the University for not making any effort to reach out to him as a transfer student. This obvious lack of integration further reinforced his feelings of non-belonging. Abby, on the other hand believed that her experience of discrimination by one professor in her department, who tried to penalize her for 'late submission of papers' and appeared to Abby to attempt to collude with other faculty to do likewise, made her feel sufficiently marginalized to make her feel alienated from the university.

### **Self-Advocacy**

Mali and Adrian felt embarrassed to discuss their learning difficulties with professors. Both Adrian and Mali lacked the confidence to accept their disabilities and articulate their learning needs. Although Mali came to the recognition of her disability late, she was often frustrated that she was not performing well academically, but feared talking with professors about inability to cope. Instead, they inadvertently badgered themselves pertaining to what their capabilities should have been which further reinforced their feelings of inadequacy and resulting low self-esteem. They reported that they need to sharpen their self-advocacy skills which will enable them to assertively request accommodations as needed. This factor is intractably connected to students' fear and or embarrassment to disclose their needs to faculty and staff.

## **Finances**

Although all the participants had financial constraints, they did not share the same level of financial constraints or in fact were impacted differently. Of the five participants, while only Beck did not access financial aids via the university, he was dependent on the rehabilitative center to offset his educational costs. This implicitly led to his withdrawal from the university as on severing ties with the rehab center he lost their financial support as well. He had to remain a client at the rehab to continue receiving financial benefits. Beck however did not highlight this financial issue as a factor for leaving the university pre-maturely but rather focused on the rehabs imposition on him to take a full course load per semester.

Mali on the other hand was the only participant who emphasized her financial limitations as one of the primary reasons that impeded her from completing her studies. She also mentioned that her financial woes were also related to financial problems in her family who were unable to assist her financially. Albeit Adrian did not state his financial status as a constraining factor, he noted that he enrolled at different universities in pursuance of better financial packages that sometimes were not as tenable as they initially seemed. This is indicative that he too had financial concerns, but like Abby, Carter and Beck did not deem to that factor as a crucial obstacle.

## **External Forces**

The participants' ability to persist was also linked to pressure from systems in the environment which often made them feel inept. They often felt that they were being compared to others and/or had to prove that they were as capable as their peers without disabilities. For instance, Carter noted that his parents always compared his progress to

that of a younger sibling and offered what they felt would have been an incentive for him—the expectation to maintain a 3.0 grade point average. Although he received , an “occasional A and a few B’s he remarked that he had never been able to maintain an overall 3.0 grade point average. Likewise, Mali discussed that she had struggled to meet her parents’ idealist academic expectations and have felt inadequate when she was unable to meet their expectations. She also felt inadequate trying to meet the university’s requirement to maintain eligibility of financial aid. Financial aid considerations she felt were also compromised as she was not aware of her disabilities until two and a half years after enrolling in college, thus was not eligible for accommodations until after such discovery and supporting documentations. Beck also underscored the point out that he felt incapable of meeting the Rehab’s insistence that he should take a full course load. He therefore withdrew as he wanted to continue doing well and felt he was unable to do so with an increased course load. Another implicating factor is the fact that Beck became romantically involved and relocated just around the same time when he was frustrated with the Rehab’s increased course load imposition.

### **Summary of Explicit Factors Participants Attributed to their Withdrawal**

Two participants, Carter and Mali noted factors relating to their disability as factors that contributed to their withdrawal. Carter highlighted his inability to focus and make decisions, while Mali vented her frustrations about recognizing that she had a learning disability “too late.” Carter’s second reason he attributed to his withdrawal is the intense dislike and/or loss of interest he has developed for his major, having not given careful thought when he initially chose his major. This reason is apparently intertwined with his struggle to make decisions. Mali’s second reason for leaving the university is

having financial woes. Her second reason could also be seen as connected to that of her first, late awareness of her disabilities, which inhibited her from seeking services early and which may or not have impacted her ability to qualify for financial aid.

Interestingly, despite the number of constraining factors they mentioned, the other participants except Beck all mentioned personal factors that contributed to their withdrawal. Adrian explained that his anticipated intention to leave was probably the most crucial factor. Yet, intertwined with his intention to leave is the second reason he provided for leaving which is his desire to be at a small college. This was obvious as he withdrew to attend a small college where he has completed his undergraduate degree. Abby's reasons for withdrawal included the need to be closer to her support network: including mental health provider and family, as well as to be in an environment where she felt supported by all her professors. Beck was the only participant who mentioned a factor associated with a community resource. He noted that he withdrew because the Rehab imposed course load restrictions that he felt incapable of adhering to which resulted in his decision to discontinue receiving services from them and ensuing withdrawal from the university.

This section focused on the factors the participants stated influenced their withdrawal from LGU. The uniqueness of the factors illustrates features of the needs and experience of this diverse population. The resulting dynamic nature and interdependency among the factors highlight the potential complexity involved in tailoring educational and support services to meet the multiple needs of the SWDs population. The next section will seek to make connections of the findings with prior research and put forward suggestions of how the findings may be used to shape SWDs services.

## **Implications of the Research Findings**

I am in no way trying to claim a full understanding of each individual.

Implications of the study are based on the students' self-reported college experiences, recognizing that there is so much more to these participant's lives than what we discussed during the interviews. In light of the findings that have been summarized in Chapter 4 and what the literature suggests, this section will propose implications of the research applicable to the following areas: theory, practice, and policy.

### **Theory**

Like Anderson's (1982) force field analysis of College Student Persistence, this study highlights the dynamic interplay of the SWIDs personal characteristics related to their disability and factors related to systems external to the individual in determining the students' withdrawal decisions. Environmental forces can either serve as push factors (away from the university) or pull factors (toward remaining in college). Findings from this study of SWIDs suggest that in addition to personal characteristics, a number of factors external to the individual, whether they are on-campus or off-campus, may be perceived as either a negative or positive force impacting a student's decision to withdraw or not. For instance, a student with sufficient financial resources would consider finances as a supportive factor, while a student with financial problems would consider finances a constraint. Likewise, a SWID who perceived her/himself as adequate would consider the factor adequacy as a positive influence, while the student who lacked adequacy would consider that factor as a negative force. This implies that certain factors could either be a positive or negative force in SWIDs' educational experience. The ecological perspective suggests

the need to reduce the constraining factors and increase/or boost the supporting factors to likely increase retention among SWIDs (Nutter & Ringgenberg, 1993).

This intersectionality and interaction of students' perceptions of environmental system demands and their actual experiences played a crucial role in the students' departure from the college. For instance, Abby felt that students with psychiatric disabilities were deemed inferior to other SWIDs and the larger student population in general. She chose not to disclose that aspect of her disability identity to either faculty or staff for fear of being stigmatized, deemed inferior, or treated differently. Mali also felt that SWIDs were stigmatized, hence she was embarrassed to disclose her learning needs to faculty. Likewise, Adrian chose not to talk with some faculty about his learning needs as he, too, felt embarrassed, which is indicative of deep seated beliefs about SWIDs, whether real or perceived. These choices may have impacted the services and/or support they could have potentially received. On the other hand, choosing not to self-disclose may have merit as Abby assumed that she experienced discrimination by a faculty because of disclosing her learning disability status, but also felt that she could have encountered an even greater degree of marginalization had her psychiatric disability been known. There is no evidence to substantiate Abby's assumption, but her perceptions about the experience are critical to her withdrawal decision.

Current findings support Bean's psychological (1982) model, which emphasizes students' perception about a broad array of external systems that might impact their decision to stay or withdraw from college. These findings also reinforce Tinto's (2006-2007) revised retention model, which recognizes that students' interaction with these external forces may cause them to reassess their commitment to an institution. Bean

(1985) and Tinto (2006-2007) refer to external factors as off-campus factors. However framed by the ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1993), this current study considers the individual as one system (micro system) and factors external to the individual as operating at different systems levels (meso and macro systems). Therefore for the purposes of this study, external environmental systems include friends, family, the university (institution), and society.

A number of the withdrawal factors unearthed in this study have previously been cited in retention studies on SWDs. Factors cited in the literature that were confirmed in this study include: personal characteristics, involvement, sense of belonging, feelings of adequacy, advocacy skills, medical reasons, finances, need for strong support network, lack of knowledge and cooperation from faculty regarding SWDs needs and concerns, disclosure to faculty and staff, and negative attitudes toward SWDs that may create discriminatory practices within institutions (Brackette, 2007; Dorwick et al., 2005; Duquette, 2000; Getzel & Brown, 2000; Greenbaum, Graham, & Scales, 1995; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Rao, 2004; Sheppard & Jones, 2002; Wegner, 2008). However, a number of studies report factors associated with SWDs attrition, but the contextualization of these factors is often not provided. It may be that this study provides a more personal way of looking at the literature as not many studies provide rich contextual experiences as reported by SWIDs. Most importantly, this study offers new insights into the symbiotic relationship of environmental factors, which are apparently inter-dependent on each other.

Withdrawal factors that were reported by these participants, but featured less in pertinent literature included: the desire to attend a small college, desire/need to be closer

to health teams and support networks, students' intent to leave before completion, late disability awareness, students' perception of environmental expectations on them as students, and students' expectations of environmental systems.

The desire to attend a small college was an essential theme in the experiences of two participants. Their preference for a small college was triggered by both similar yet different reasons. In one instance, the participant was previously enrolled at the small college he was desirous to return and felt it offered a more conducive learning environment, which included small classes that suited his academic needs. His reason for withdrawal is deeply intertwined with his original intent when he enrolled at LGU to leave and complete his undergraduate degree at that small college. Although, he also noted that as a transfer student LGU made no effort to create a sense of belonging to the institution. The other participant also felt a small college, with small classes would best suit her learning needs and said she often felt overwhelmed in the large college setting of LGU. She also had feelings of non-belonging to the university which she noted were associated with discrimination and marginalization by a faculty member. However, integrally connected with her yearning for a small college was the fact that it was located in her home town where she could be close to her support network, inclusive of her family and health team. The small sample size and interrelatedness of the factors does not allow for a theory about small colleges and their ability to serve SWIDs.

Another unique phenomenon is the interrelated dynamic nature of all the factors with emphasis on the students' personal characteristics related to their individual disability, the students' expectations of environmental systems and their perception of these environmental systems expectations of them as students. For example, for one



participant who took almost two and a half years as a college student to recognize that she had a learning disability, expected that faculty members would be more knowledgeable about disability to recognize that she had difficulty learning and suggest disability resources she could explore. Compounding these factors was her parents' expectations of her to maintain academic excellence and those of the university to maintain particular grades and course load to be eligible for financial aid.

The findings of this study also concur with former retention studies of SWDs on the association of factors such as students' personal characteristics, goal commitment, and possession of strong decision-making and problem-solving skills, which are reflected in the ability to set goals and develop plans to achieve them and persistence (Brackette, 2007; Dorwick et al., 2005; Duquette, 2000; Wesel et al., 2009; Wegner, 2008). All the participants had personal strengths and weaknesses that they had to manage. However, Carter pointed out that he continued to struggle with his disability-related characteristics, which presented a challenge for him to set attainable educational goals and create a plan and commit to executing the plan. This experience also highlights the personal challenges that SWIDs have to manage on a daily basis in addition to managing their educational obligations.

Academic and social integration, which foster a sense of belonging, have been reported in former research as important determinants of persistence for students without disabilities (Tinto, 1987, 2006, 2007) and those with disabilities (Duquette, 2000; Getzel, 2008; Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2010; Wessel et al., 2009). Academic integration was also important to this group of SWIDs. However, in light of prevailing theories on SWDs regarding the association of campus involvement, social integration, and sense of

belonging (Belch, 2004, 2005; Getzel, 2008; Wegner, 2008; Wessel et al., 2009), it was interesting to note that two of participants had a keen sense of belonging despite their non-involvement in the social life of the campus. On the other hand, two other participants were not involved and felt alienated from the university. It appears that a number of factors may be perceived as positive or negative forces in the lives of SWIDs, but are dependent on the perceived benefit the student derives from them. This finding suggests that for SWIDs a sense of belonging can be fostered by factors other than campus involvement. For example, Beck, who was a student in the on-line learning environment, found it difficult to engage socially because of distance limitations, while Mali, who chose after her first year not to continue being involved in extra curricula activities in an effort to focus more on academic obligations, reported having a keen sense of belonging to the college. Factors they associate with sense of belonging are feelings of acceptance by peers and faculty and a positive college climate where they felt students and faculty were non-discriminatory not just towards SWDs but also toward diversity among the general student population. Research on the importance of involvement and engagement beyond the first years of college is emerging to evaluate its contribution to retention (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

The small sample size of this research and lack of having a comparable group do not allow for a conclusion to be made about factors that impact withdrawal within the first two years and those that may impact withdrawal in later years of college. However, this study supports the findings of previous studies (Neumann & Newmann, 1989; Mohr, Eiche, & Sedlacek, 1998) that students' perception of the overall quality of the academic experience may be critical in upper-level college students' withdrawal decision. Some of

the participants in this study expressed disappointment with difficulty accessing their academic accommodations, inconsistent provision of course material, reduced interaction and availability of faculty due to large classes, class size in general, invisibility of some disability support services, and an instance of discrimination.

Findings indicate that LGU has a range of programs and services to assist students with disabilities that most of the students found helpful. However, one participant, who found many of the disability services helpful, lamented on the length of time it took her to search the campus website to locate some of the services available to students with learning disabilities. She attributed the “hidden” nature of the webpage to the scant regard paid to the needs of persons with disabilities in society.

The website was not prominent on the health network’s webpage. If these programs were seen as more significant they wouldn’t be so small. I had to actually search through the whole entire health network to find a link about learning disabilities or the Learning Assistance Program.

Feelings of inadequacy were also a central theme reported by all the participants and underscore the work of previous studies that students with learning disabilities frequently exhibit feelings of low-self-esteem and self-concept, which can result in underachievement (Stage & Milne, 1996; Dipeolu, Reardon, Sampson, & Burkhead, 2002). In this study, SWDs’ withdrawal was associated with anticipated feelings of inadequacy if they were to remain enrolled or feelings of inadequacy reflected in feelings of embarrassment to seek help from faculty and staff, reticence to request classroom accommodations, and feelings of inferiority in their inability, whether perceived or real, to meet external systems expectations and demands. Like all students, SWIDs formulate

perceptions of themselves and their environs based on their interactions with environmental systems (Dipeolu et al., 2002). “The outcome of long-term exposure to prejudicial attitudes often results in negative self-appraisal” (Dipeolu, et. Al., 2002, p. 415). Some of the participants spoke of experiences of being labeled as ‘student with special needs’ in educational settings prior to college and the negative association they have made with those experiences and the negative schema they have formulated. Three of the participants had utilized special education services prior to entering college. Yet, one student who was diagnosed with disabilities after college enrollment also shares similar negative assumptions about herself. Another student, who acquired a learning disability as an adult but also prior to college enrollment, did not share some of the negative perceptions the other students associate with having a disability. A noteworthy point is that the feelings of inadequacy permeated other facets of the students’ life and inhibited some students from asserting themselves and advocating for their educational needs.

Feelings of inadequacy were connected to students’ perceptions that systemic stigma toward persons with disabilities exist in society, which they felt infiltrated higher education and other social structures. Another important finding is what could be considered internalized stigma as a number of the participants were embarrassed and or reluctant to disclose their disability and or seek accommodation due to the perceived negative attitude associated with persons with disabilities in general. Such beliefs were internalized and inhibited three of the participants from advocating for their learning needs, but importantly, also decreased their self-efficacy. Mali in particular was adamant that society perpetuates the non-acceptance and limited tolerance particularly for students

with learning disabilities. This was contradictory to Abby's belief that society was highly intolerant of persons with mental health disabilities rather than learning disabilities and as such chose only to disclose her learning disability to the university.

The literature also indicates that SWDs' proclivity to persist is related to their ability to utilize support from faculty, staff, and other support networks (Dorwick et al., 2005; Wegner, 2008) and possession of self-determination skills, which includes strong self-advocacy skills (Barnard- Brak et al., 2010; Dorwick et al., 2005; Getzel, 2008; Wegner, 2008; Wesel, et al., 2009). Students' limitations in these factors were underscored in this study and contributed to their withdrawal. Some of the participants chose to optimally utilize disability services and support, while others opted to be selective in how they sought campus services and support. Abby, for example, chose not to use the campus health services and opted to retain the services of her hometown mental health team, which was several miles away in another state. This choice she noted, compromised her health on occasions as she had to wait to have her health plan revised to match her immediate and ongoing health needs. Had she utilized the campus health services, or even services in close environs to campus, she possibly would have maintained better health as there would be less of a delay to access care. However, she was not limited in her capacity or self-advocacy; she strove for what she felt was better at the time, a health care team she trusted and felt supported her. Her choice to move closer to this team was in the end, seemed a wise decision. For those students who used campus supports, such as talked with faculty, counselors, and tutors and accessed other health services, their educational aspirations were stymied by other negative impacting forces. Despite the utilization of support from varied sources, other bombarding forces such as

financial difficulties and limited advocacy, decision-making and problem-solving skills, were overpowering to contribute to their withdrawal from the college.

The findings suggest that if constraining forces can be minimized and supportive forces increased and/or enhanced, the likelihood of students withdrawing may be reduced (e.g., Nutter & Ringgenberg, 1993). The ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1993) provided a comprehensive examination of withdrawal factors associated with SWIDs as it stresses the importance of considering the mutual relationship of the student (individual) system and all other external systems (i.e., family, friends, tutors, faculty, disability service staff, community agencies, societal/cultural forces). The ecological perspective illuminates the delicate nature of the interdependency of all these environmental systems, which can cause a withdrawal domino effect for a student if one system or a sub-system is perceived by the student as compromising. One questions that these findings raise is, “is it the disability that increases the likelihood of SWDs pre-maturely departure from college (source), or is it an interplay of sometimes competing environmental forces impacting the individual?”

As this study highlights, a number of withdrawal factors are socially created by environmental systems with which students mutually interact. For example family’s expectations of students’ capabilities and/or rehabilitative expectations of student’s capabilities, financial aid requirements, faculty expectations, and or lack of knowledge and willingness to facilitate accommodations are all socially created. For the majority of these SWIDs, withdrawal was associated with a combination of several factors. Of crucial importance was their perception of how compatible to their needs was the impacting/interacting environmental systems.

Beck, Carter, and Mali's ability to receive financial assistance was contingent on meeting the expectations of different systems. They all felt pressured from these external entities, which potentially detracted from their ability to maximize their potential to access an undergraduate education. In Beck's context, he was denied the opportunity to have his voice heard in a decision that ultimately contributed to his withdrawal from college. The second counselor at the rehab institution insisted that he increase his credit hours without taking into consideration Beck's perception of his capabilities to undertake an increased academic responsibility. Beck was deprived of his right to make a decision about his education. Rather than supporting his recovery efforts and academic accomplishments, his right to self-determination was violated. Frustrated he quit obtaining services at the rehab and hence lost his educational benefits.

Carter's experience, yet different from Beck's, shared the common element of external pressure. In this instance the stressor came from his parents who insisted that they would pay for his college education if he maintained a certain level grade point average. Despite their good intention, the stated expectation was burdensome to Carter, who apparently spent time indulging in self-blame and feelings of inadequacy, further depriving him of his right to education.

The university also has its standards and expectations, which Mali had difficulty meeting. In her third year she was denied access to financial aid as her grades did not meet the established standards; a student has to take a minimum number of courses and earn particular grades to access financial aid. Mali struggled for two and a half years in college before she was diagnosed or identified her disability, therefore her previous grades probably reflected that. Could her denial of financial aid be considered a breach of

her right to access? To what extent could the paper trail that ensued as she sought and accessed disability services be considered in an appeal process? These findings indicate a complex interplay of supportive and constraining factors at the micro, meso and macro systems. For the majority of these SWIDs, withdrawal was associated with a combination of several factors. Of crucial importance was their perception of how compatible to their needs was the impacting/interacting environmental systems and the extent to which these systems supported them as SWIDs.

### **Practice**

The major findings of this research have practice implications pertaining to SWIDs, families, institutions, community resources, and the general society.

**Students with Individual Disabilities (SWIDs).** In light of the findings that a number of students felt inadequate and lacked adequate self-advocacy skills, which had implications about how they sought and utilized needed support, like other researchers (Dorwick et al, 2005; Wegner, 2008), I am advocating that SWIDs gain mastery in self-advocacy skills. This charge has implications for disability support systems to help SWIDs build self-advocacy skills. Acquiring such skills should help them become more confident learners. Students with disabilities should be made to understand that like their non-disabled counterparts they too have a legal right to higher education. SWIDs should be empowered to request academic accommodations and support as needed as this is one of the ways to ensure that they acquire the same opportunities as non-disabled students.

**Families.** Families can help their SWIDs develop self-advocacy and other self-determination skills, which would be reflected in their willingness to and level of ease in discussing their disability with faculty and staff and advocate for their personal needs



(Barnard- Brak et al., 2010; Getzel, 2008; Wegner 2008). These skills can be harnessed as soon as a family is made aware of a disability diagnosis. Families may or not be aware of the challenges their loved ones can encounter in the educational setting if SWIDs lack advocacy and self-determination skills. Health practitioners should continue to reinforce the need for these trainings once they make a disability diagnosis of a family member.

Additionally, families need to be more educated about disabilities and the family's role in creating a supportive environment of acceptance for the disability. Families can help their SWDs maximize their strengths in a non-judgmental environment. Families' role in helping SWIDs follow their care plan was also underscored in this study. Higher education can help support families of SWDs by involving them in seminars and workshops geared toward disability awareness and self-empowerment skills. Within this proposition of family involvement and support, is the contradiction of young adults in college and the need for their independence from family.

**Universities.** As highlighted by one participant in this study, watching her peers who enrolled with her graduate before her was frustrating and further added to her feelings of inadequacy. Often due to accommodations of taking a reduced course load, cohorts can graduate and leave other members of their cohort behind in college. One question that this raises for higher education is how to prepare students for non-traditional time-frame to obtain a degree?

Other questions that this study raises are "How to help SWIDs who are not aware of their disability?" and "How to help those students who acquire a disability during their tenure in college?" These are critical concerns. Lack of/late disability awareness was paramount in one participant's experience in this study and raises the concern about the

number of students enrolled in higher education who have disabilities but are undiagnosed. Mali endured a number of obstacles in an attempt identify why she faced so many challenges in the academic arena. University support services may also offer support groups to non-traditional SWD's who may not have parental and other significant others support, for example SWD's who aged out of foster care system;

As institutions grapple with budgetary restrictions, they must prioritize how to allocate their funds. Retaining a student is often less costly to an institution than having to replace a student it loses through attrition. Therefore, retaining more SWDs rather than having them withdraw might be advantageous to universities. Universities could accomplish this in a number of ways. For example, it is recommended that a series of self-advocacy and disability resources workshops be offered to students during orientation to a college. Colleges should provide information packets of common disabilities, their symptoms, and a comprehensive array of academic support services and opportunities available to SWDs on enrollment. Support groups could also donate grants and/or scholarships to pay for such trainings. Institutions should also consider orientation for transfer students to ensure equity in service provision.

The study brought to the fore that some SWDs struggle to comply with needed medication and attend classes early in the morning as they tend to require several hours of sleep. Based on the participants' suggestion, scheduling a course at different times during a day could be beneficial to students who experience difficulty in attending early morning classes. Flexible class scheduling should be considered, for example a course may be offered at 8:00 a.m. and again at 3:00 p.m. The utilization of online and hybrid

course models have also been providing additional educational options for SWDs pursuing higher education.

An institution also has an ethical responsibility to provide the same opportunities for SWDs. In an effort to remove educational barriers, faculty have a responsibility to cater to diverse learning needs in the classroom. Therefore, faculty are challenged to provide lessons via multiple modalities in attempt to remove educational barriers. This could create an environment of equal opportunity for diverse learning needs, even if students have not disclosed any specific needs. Faculty should always operate under the assumption that there are different learning needs in any classroom. Higher education has a legal and ethical obligation to create a learning environment that caters to diverse learning needs.

The provision of discretionary class attendance was raised by Abby. She highlighted that medication compliance sometimes made her require more sleep, causing her to be late for classes sometimes. Also, she was ill on occasions and missed a few classes. She proposed that faculty be considerate and less punitive with some students regarding class absenteeism or lateness as it could be caused by health vulnerabilities. This proposition raises another concern about how would faculty know that SWDs need later classes if they choose not to self-disclose? Yet another concern would be how to maintain a classroom culture in which discretionary class attendance is not abused?

Another suggestion is for colleges to communicate with students in a more personal manner. Some participants felt that institutional communications felt generic and impersonal. One participant felt that if his professors had communicated with him earlier and held him accountable he would have finished the program. Previous studies

also shed light on college's limited communications with students (Follian- Grissel, 1988; Lehr, Johnson, Bremer, Cosio, & Thompson, 2004), which is associated with attrition.

**Community/Society/Culture.** It was apparent through the SWIDs' experiences that the role of their perception of societal stigma toward persons with disability was a central theme. This study is calling for continuous community dialogue regarding the social norms pertaining to disability. Dialogue pertaining to de-stigmatizing attitudes toward people with disabilities (Grame & Levertz, 2010) should be confronted in the public domain, media, agencies, communities, and education. Mali is advocating for the reframing of the term special education as she thinks it has a negative connotation that SWDs are fragile with "special needs"; that they are deemed as a bother to society in general. She posited:

I just wish our society was more accepting of people who need help with their learning. I feel like our society has viewed people with disabilities in a bad light. It's like if you need more help than normal people do ... it's just like we're such a fast paced world that the people who can't keep up usually just get behind and society really just kind of steps over that. I feel like society doesn't care as much and that's where I feel a lot of kids these days are just being taught like what they need to do to pass.

### **Policy**

Results of the present study yield a number of policy implications. Policy implications are particularly directed to higher education within which this study may have the greatest impact.

Most of the participants felt that some faculty lacked knowledge about disabilities and the challenges SDWs can encounter. Further, they felt that some faculty lacked understanding about the importance of academic accommodations and were unwilling to facilitate accommodations as required. An instance of discriminatory practice in an attempt by one faculty not to honor one student's accommodation was also reported. Similar attitudinal complaints against faculty have been made over several years (Getzel & Brown, 2000; Greenbaum, Graham, & Scales, 1995; Janiga & Costenbader, 2000; Rao, 2004; Sheppard-Jones, 2002), but apparently needs to be further addressed.

I am advocating for mandatory periodic disability awareness training for all college faculty, inclusive of adjunct faculty and staff. This training should be on disability issues pertinent to SWDs and higher education. This could be 30-40 minute online training/interactive web-based program designed for faculty and staff in higher education. Trainees would receive certification, which should be renewed every 2-3 years. This intervallic training would help faculty and staff to keep abreast of disability symptoms, concerns, advancement in disability research and issues and implications pertinent to higher educations and the law.

Despite the enactment of disability laws, in particular the Americans with Disability Act (ADA) in 1990 and the amendments made to ADA in 2008, an instance of discrimination was still highlighted with a faculty member at the college, which potentially contributed to an overall chilly climate for the student and her withdrawal. It is crucial to note however, that other implicating factors contributed to that participant's decision to withdraw from the college. The suggested disability awareness training may also frame the dialogue pertaining to clearer guidelines if institutions/faculty breach the

disabilities act. Institutions need to strive towards an inclusive educational environment with zero tolerance for students' human rights violations. Accommodations are legal requirements and students should not be made to feel guilty or inferior for requiring accommodations.

### **Limitations**

Despite the rich, detailed, contextual experiences provided by these SWIDs, only five former upper level students who voluntarily left the LGU University participated. One of the limitations of this study is the small sample size yet it allowed for the collection of more indepth data. Most of the students who contacted me expressing interest to participate in the research had re-located to other states. Some of these students who initially expressed interest to participate did not follow through to the interview as they felt the process of downloading, reading, printing, and returning the consent form to me via fax or postal mail was too cumbersome. This should be considered within the parameters that I could not make initial contact with participants as I was privy to neither their names nor contact information. I was dependent on the director of the Disabled Student Office to make the initial contact, which was first done via email and later followed up by postal mails. Also, a few students who initially made contact with me opted not to follow through with the research as they said they were still challenged by recurring ailments and were unable to participate.

Another limitation is that the study was specific to LGU former SWIDs, which reduces the transferability of the data to other SWIDs' realities. It is also possible that another group of former SWDs may have generated different findings, recognizing that SWDs are a heterogeneous population. This study is also limited in that it is based solely

on self-report. Therefore assumptions, suggestions, and recommendations are made based on these SWIDs' reported experiences.

Findings of this report are also limited to participants' recollection of a past experience, exposing responses to reflective recall errors. However, all participants stated that the strategy I employed to send them the interview schedule at least two weeks before the interview was helpful. It triggered their memories and helped them provide more informed and thoughtful responses. In the case of Beck who has had issues with long and short term memory related to his traumatic brain injury, he related that he was able to look at the interview schedule and write his responses. However, he admitted to recalling additional elements of his experiences based on probing questions I asked on the day of the interview.

### **Recommendation for Future Research**

In light of the findings and limitations noted, a number of recommendations are presented for future research. Seven main areas of research are postulated.

First, further research should focus on recruiting a larger sample of SWIDs across varied universities who voluntarily withdrew after completing more than 60 credits. This would provide broader contextual experiences of disabilities across this heterogeneous population. It would also be helpful to discern if withdrawal patterns and factors vary across distinct disability populations.

Second, research could also focus on comparison of withdrawal factors associated with SWIDs who completed 60 or more college credits to those factors associated with withdrawal among SWIDs who completed less college credits. This could lead to more

insights into the formulation of withdrawal theory/ies specific to SWDs' attrition to best serve this population.

Third, a longitudinal study to follow SWDs from first enrollment through to withdrawal, graduation and post graduation would be beneficial to determine educational outcomes for this population.

Fourth, in light of the limitation noted above pertaining to contacting former SWDs and requesting them to complete and return research consent forms, I am suggesting the following. It may be helpful to ask the gatekeeper (RDS Director in this instance) to mail the forms to possible participants with a return, stamped envelope, saving them from printing the form out. For participants who may find it difficult to get the consent form to the post office, one might consider sending them a UPS or FedEx envelope that includes a prepaid pick-up fee, so they would only need to make a call to have it picked up.

Fifth, another research consideration is for the Internal Review Board (IRB) to consider allowing for audiotaped verbal consent by research participants. This could be in the form of an audio taped dialogue between the researcher and possible participant reading the questions on the consent form and the participant affirming or disaffirming the questions.

Sixth, further research could also explore gender and ethnic differentials among SWIDS to illuminate similarities and differences or uniqueness to inform strategies to best serve diverse spectrum of learners.

Lastly, this study also evokes questions about the possible need for smaller classes for SWIDs. The quest to attend a small college was put forward by some



participants. Further research could explore whether small colleges or small classes are more suitable for SWIDs.

### **Significance**

This current research study on SWIDs provides a more personal and in-depth method to more fully examine some of the factors formally elucidated in the literature associated with withdrawal of SWIDs. It contextualizes factors already known to be associated with SWIDs' college withdrawal, personalizes students' experiences, and provide new insights into the complex, interrelated, and multi-dimensional nature of factors at the micro, meso, and macro levels. The most important finding is the vulnerability of students that can result from any of the factors at any level. Therefore each factor has the potential to support the student to remain in college, but can also predispose the student to negative forces that could lead to their withdrawal. For example, a family could be a source of support if so perceived by the student, but could also be a source of stress if the family makes what the student considers to be unreasonable demands on them. Two of the participants in this student spoke of what they perceived as their parents' constant comparison with others, which made them feel inferior, resulting in feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem.

These results are significant to all stakeholders (students, families, colleges, communities, tax-payers, and society). This study may even suggest factors SWIDs may consider in their search for a college that is most conducive to their educational needs, such as size of classes or proximity of health care provider. It also highlights challenges that they may encountered, but points out sources of support that may counteract such

challenges. Importantly, SWIDs can use these findings and better prepare for their higher education academic endeavor.

Findings of this current research study are significant to institutions of higher education in garnering a broader understanding regarding factors that may contribute to the withdrawal of upper-level SWIDs. It provides a detailed contextual body of knowledge that can inform the teaching and learning environment. For example, the students made suggestions about flexible class scheduling, consistent provision of class material, discretionary class attendance, sequential provision of material covered in lectures and labs, and greater understanding among faculty about disabilities, symptoms, and need for facilitating academic accommodations as required. The study can potentially inform higher education on reducing factors that are constraining to this population and increase supports. Universities have a legal and ethical obligation to provide the same opportunities to all students recognizing that to attain that goal, some students require accommodations.

The findings that resulted from this qualitative exploratory study also have the capacity to trigger dialogues among stakeholders (family, friends, universities, community resources, and the government) regarding the collective role they play in supporting SWIDs and these students' right to attain higher education. The students who participated in this study all had the potential to complete their undergraduate degree but despite utilizing a number of support systems were impacted by the weight of a number of constraining forces, which led to their withdrawal. Some of the negative forces were external to the university and over which it had no control. For instance, based on one of the participant's report, the disability agency in the community with which he was

affiliated failed to include his voice in a decision that ultimately affected his decision to withdraw from the university. This recognition supports the view that all stakeholders must get involved in reducing socially created barriers and empowering and supporting SWIDs to complete a college education.

The findings also suggest the need for continuous dialogue at the societal level regarding reframing disability and de-stigmatizing attitudes towards people with disabilities. Recognizing that many of the barriers that prevent SWDs from full societal inclusion are socially created, social norms that undergird social structures and institutions should be continuously examined.

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**APPENDIX A**

**LETTER TO DIRECTOR OF RESOURCES FOR DISABLED STUDENTS**

**[LGU LOGO/LETTERHEAD]**

Date

Director

Resources for Disabled Students

Land Grant University

Dear Ms. Kreston,

As a follow-up to our face to face and telephone conversation, I value your commitment to facilitate this research study at different stages of the process. Thanks for putting together the identification numbers of LGU's undergraduate students registered with RDS over the last two years as of Fall 2010 and collaborating with Paul Thayer, LGU's associate vice president for Student Affairs and special advisor to the Provost for Retention who has committed to cross-check to discern those students who have left the institution. Due to ethical considerations, I am not allowed access to students' names and contact information unless they grant me permission. Therefore, I am soliciting your



assistance in sending out the attached recruitment transmittal message to the students Paul Thayer identifies as having discontinued their enrollment at LGU.

I am targeting in particular undergraduate students with disabilities who successfully completed 60 or more credits of their academic requirement but discontinued enrollment. The research findings should make a meaningful contribution to the literature on disabilities in Higher Education. This study is to provide voice to undergraduate students with disabilities who did not complete their post secondary education and identify reasons they associate with their non-completion. The findings should also inform institutions in their quest to develop, implement and refine programs to address the special and diverse needs of this population.

I would be available to meet with you, clarify and or provide any information you may think is important. I can be contacted via email at [vtebanks@cahs.colostate.edu](mailto:vtebanks@cahs.colostate.edu) and by telephone at 970-491-7367.

Thanks for helping to facilitate this research endeavor.

Sincerely,

Valerie Thompson-Ebanks

Co-Advisor: Dr. Deborah Valentine

Co-Advisor: Dr. Louise Jennings

## APPENDIX B

### INITIAL STEPS TAKEN IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE FINAL MASTER LIST OF SWD WHO LEFT LGU BEFORE GRADUATION

SWDs registered Fall 2009-Spring 2010	SWDs registered Spring 2011	SWDs not registered Spring 2011	SWDs who graduated Spring 2011	SWDs who did not graduate Spring 2011	SWDs with confidentialit y holds	Working Master list	SWDs registered in 'non degree' programs	Final Master List
<b>1,543</b>	<b>1,088</b>	<b>455</b>	<b>244</b>	<b>211</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>208</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>203</b>

### Additional Steps to Create List of Potential Participants with Eligibility Criteria

	Final Master List	15 or more credits completed	60 credits or more	Potential number of participants
Registered as Transfer SWDs	53	38	Not calculated	38
Registered as First Year SWDs	150	42	42	42
<b>Total</b>	<b>203</b>			<b>80</b>

### Comprehensive Enrollment Audit Process of SWDs Registered with RDS during Fall, 2009 and Spring 2010

Original data: 3 files received from RDS:

- Fall 2009: undergraduate SWDs enrolled (914)
- Fall 2010: undergraduate SWDs enrolled (956)
- Spring 2010: undergraduate SWDs enrolled (1,216)

1. Put all students from three files into a single file [Copy of Aggregate = 3,085], then eliminated duplicates. [Distinct Records = 1,543]
2. Checked distinct records (N = 1,543) for SWDs registered for Spring 2011 semester.
3. Eliminated students not registered for Spring 2011. [Not registered Spring 2011; N = 455]
4. With assistance from Amy Robertson, determined graduation status and presence of confidentiality flags among the 455 SWDs.
5. Eliminated SWDs who graduated before Spring 2011; N = 244
6. SWS who did not graduate before Spring 2011; N = 211
7. Of these, two students have phone and/or address flags and one had an overall confidentiality hold; N = 3.

8. Associated names, addresses, emails, phone, ethnic, gender, confidentiality information.
9. Deleted the two students who have phone/address confidential holds and the one student showing confidentiality flag; N =3
10. Master List of SWDs not registered for Spring 2011; N = 208
11. Added withdrawal information. This table produces multiple entries for students who have withdrawn multiple times. Checked to ascertain whether any students not registered for Spring 2011 had been approved for retroactive withdrawal during Spring 2011. Found none.
12. Checked with the Office of Student Conduct to ascertain whether any students had been withdrawn for reasons of conduct. It was decided to exclude students who were dismissed or suspended, but include any who were in conduct probationary status. Found none.
13. Checked Operational Data Store (ODS) via the Center for Advising and Student Achievement (CASA) to assure that no students in the master list are deceased. Found none. .
14. Added information on Fall 2011 registration. Found 20 students with Fall 2011 registration, indicating their plans to re-enroll this fall.

Working Master List = 208 students, 20 of whom are registered for Fall 2011 classes.

15. Added cumulative credits earned.
16. With help from CASA, added student type. 'N' indicates student was admitted as a new student; 'T' indicates admission as transfer. Deleted 5 students who were "nondegree." [FINAL MASTER LIST; N = 203 students]
17. Created table for Transfer Students only; N = 53 students
18. Limited to transfer students with 15 credits or more. FINAL SWDs TRANSFER LIST; N = 38 students
19. Created table for students who entered LGU as New Freshmen only; N = 150 students
20. Limited to SWDs with 60 credits or more. FINAL LIST: SWDs originally entered LGU as First Year students; N = 42 students
21. Potential number of participants; Transfer SWDs with 15 credits or more + SWDs who originally entered LGU as First Year students:  $(38+42) = 80$

## APPENDIX C

### RECRUITMENT TRANSMITTAL MESSAGE TO BE DISTRIBUTED BY THE DIRECTOR OF THE RESOURCES FOR DISABLED STUDENTS

Dear Student,

This letter has been sent to you by Rose Kreston, the Director of RDS at LGU on my behalf. I am conducting a research to find out why students with disabilities voluntarily leave LGU after successfully completing 60 or more college credits. This research is a part of my doctoral work in the Interdisciplinary Studies at Colorado State University. I am interested in research that provides a platform to hear from persons whose voices are not often heard. The title of this dissertation is ‘Experiences of Students with Disabilities: Factors that Influence Non-Completion of their Baccalaureate Degree’.

I am inviting you and several other former LGU students to take part in this study. The information will be collected through face-to-face interviews during the months of July and August, 2011. Alternate interview options such as telephone and Skype will be offered for instances that makes it necessary such as disability, geographical distance, etc. All information shared will be kept confidential; only the researcher and committee members directly involved in the research will have access. Your identity will remain confidential by use of a fake name, or pseudonym, and by avoiding the reporting of information that could identify you.

The findings from this research will be used collectively to help prospective students with disabilities and universities get a better understanding on measures that work or do not work in the undergraduate environment. This may also inform universities of ways in which they may better serve students with disabilities in the future.

If you would like to participate in this study, please contact me using one of the mediums below: **Valerie Thompson-Ebanks, Colorado State University, School of Social Work, Education Building, and Room 123. Telephone: 970-491-7367, Fax: 970-491-7280, [ytebanks@cahs.colostate](mailto:ytebanks@cahs.colostate).**

Once you contact me, we will make arrangements regarding possible dates, times and location convenient to you to have the interview done. I will also send you a copy of the interview questions that we will talk about. On the day we meet I will have a consent form for you to sign indicating that you are voluntarily performing in this study. The consent form was approved by LGU Institutional Review Board for the protection of the human subjects in the research. For persons opting for alternative styles of interviews I will send you a consent form for you to sign and return before the interview can be conducted.

I greatly appreciate your support and thank you in advance for your willingness to participate.

Sincerely,

Valerie Thompson-Ebanks

Co-Advisor: Dr. Deborah Valentine

Co-Advisor: Dr. Louise Jennings

## APPENDIX D

### CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

#### LAND GRANT UNIVERSITY

**TITLE OF STUDY: Experiences of Students with Disabilities: Factors that Influence Non-Completion of their Baccalaureate Degree**

#### **PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS:**

**Dr. Deborah Valentine, Director and Professor,**

School of Social Work,  
Colorado State University,  
Fort Collins, Colorado 80523  
970-491-1893

[deborah.valentine@colostate.edu](mailto:deborah.valentine@colostate.edu)

**Dr. Louise Jennings, Associate Professor**

School of Education  
Colorado State University  
970.491.5425

[louise.jennings@colostate.edu](mailto:louise.jennings@colostate.edu)

**CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** Valerie Thompson-Ebanks, Colorado State University, School of Social Work, Education Building, Room 123. Doctoral Candidate in the Interdisciplinary Studies Program. Telephone: 970-491-7367, Fax: 970-491-7280, [vtebanks@cahs.colostate.edu](mailto:vtebanks@cahs.colostate.edu).

**WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH? :** You are invited to participate in this study as you were registered with the Resources for Disabled Students Office (RDS) at Land Grant University during the years 2008-2010 and have stopped attending before graduation. You qualify to participate in this study if you completed 60 or more college credits. If you were a transfer student, you need to have completed at least one semester at LGU.

**WHO IS DOING THE STUDY? The research will be conducted by me: Valerie Thompson-Ebanks, under the supervision of my co-advisors- Dr. Deborah Valentine and Dr. Louise Jennings.**

**WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?** I am conducting this research to find out why students with disabilities voluntarily left LGU after successfully completing 60 or more college credits. I will also be focusing on what could have prevented you from withdrawing from the university.

**WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?** The study includes taking part in an interview with me, the researcher. The interview should last approximately two hours. The interview will be conducted at a place convenient to both you and me.

**WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?** During the interview you will be asked to respond to some questions relating to your experience while being a student at LGU, particularly why you decided to leave after successfully completing 60 or more college credits. You will be sent a copy of the questions you will share information about before the day of the interview.

**ARE THERE REASONS WHY I SHOULD NOT TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?** All participants should have completed 60 or more college credits and willingly left the university. Any student that was asked by the University to leave cannot take part in this study. A transfer student should have completed at least one semester at LGU to take part in this study.

**WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?**

There are no anticipated risks associated with your participation in this study. It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researcher(s) have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential, but unknown, risks.

**ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

A potential benefit might be, you will get an opportunity to discuss your LGU academic experiences with a person experienced in interviewing and working with people with disabilities. The findings may also inform prospective students with disabilities and universities on measures that promote university completion for this population.

**DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?** The interview will be adjusted to accommodate your disability as needed. Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time without penalty.

**WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT I GIVE?** We will keep private all research records that identify you, to the extent allowed by law. We may publish the results of this study, however information shared will be kept confidential, only the researcher and committee members directly involved in the research will have access. Your identity will remain confidential by use of a fake name, or pseudonym, and by avoiding the reporting of information that could identify you. We will make every



effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is. For example, your name will be kept separate from your research records and these two things will be stored in different places under lock and key.

### **WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?**

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions about the study, you can contact the primary investigators, Dr. Deborah Valentine at Colorado State University at 970-491-1893 and/or Dr. Louise Jennings, Colorado State University at 970.491.5425 at If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact Janell Barker, Human Research Administrator at 970-491-1655. I will give you a copy of this consent form to take with you.

This consent form was approved by LGU Institutional Review Board for the protection of human subjects in research on (Approval Date).

**WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO KNOW?** I would like to audiotape our conversation so that I can listen more carefully, without having to take notes while I am talking to you which may be distracting.

Yes, I grant permission to have our interview audio taped. \_\_\_\_\_

No, I refuse to have our interview audio taped. \_\_\_\_\_

After writing out our conversation, I would like to send you a copy. I would be thankful if you could check to see that I have accurately noted what you said during the interview. Feel free to make changes and/or add details you think are important.

I agree that the summary of the interview should be sent to me by way of:

Email \_\_\_\_\_ :email address:

Postal mail \_\_\_\_\_ address:

I do not want to receive a summary of the interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Your signature acknowledges that you have read the information stated and willingly sign this consent form. Your signature also acknowledges that you have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document containing \_\_\_ pages.

---

Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study

Date

---

Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study

---

Name of person providing information to participant

---

Date

---

Signature of Research Staff

## **APPENDIX E**

### **INTERVIEW PROTOCOL AND GUIDE FOR STUDENTS PARTICIPATION**

Thank you for your time. The purpose of this conversation is to gather information and ideas about your academic experience at Land Grant University (LGU). Please reflect on your entire LGU experience from your decision to enroll to your decision-making process that led you to leave the University. I am particularly interested in learning more about why you decided to leave LGU after successfully completing 60 or more credits of your undergraduate academic requirement.

While we have some guiding questions to follow, I hope that as you think of ideas regarding your experience you will feel free to share them. Bear in mind there are no right or wrong answers. This conversation will be kept anonymous with your confidentiality protected. With your permission I would like to record our conversation so that I can listen more carefully, without having to take notes which may be distracting. You can request to turn off the recorder at any time.

You may also stop the interview at any time if you wish. After our conversation today and the interview is transcribed into a summary document, I will share it with you and ask that you tell me whether it accurately reflects what you said in the interview. I would also encourage you to add anything that may have come to mind after your interview or as you read the summary. Also, please feel free to delete anything you feel

does not accurately represent our conversation. Do you have any questions before we begin?

### **Interview Schedule**

1. Tell me about your decision to go to college. LGU?  
Probe:
  - a. Where did you first enroll?
  - b. How old were you when you started the program?
  - c. At what level did you enroll? Freshman, sophomore, junior, transfer etc.
  - d. What was your major?
  - e. How many credits have you completed?
  - f. Which is the last semester you attended LGU? (College?)
  - g. When you were first diagnosed with a disability?
2. Tell me about your academic experience at LGU.
3. Tell me about your day to day living experience while you were a student at LGU?  
Probe: Where did you live while you were student?
4. Help me understand how you made the decision to leave the University before completing the degree.
5. What would you say were the main reasons contributing to your decision to leave LGU?  
Probe: Were these personal reasons? Were these family reasons? Were the reasons related to LGU? Faculty, academic, student services, housing, parking etc. Please provide examples.
6. Are the reasons that led you to make the decision to leave the university still of concern today? Why? Why not?
7. At the time when you left could anything be done to enable you to continue?
  - a. Would these same things enable you to complete it now or in a few years?
8. What were your biggest sources of support while you were a student at LGU?  
Probe: Were the reasons related to your community, institution, family, friends/peers, personal; medical, financial etc.
9. What were your biggest sources of stress while you were a student at LGU?
  - a. Can you give me an example or two?
10. What services did you utilize at LGU?
  - a. In what ways were they helpful or not helpful?
11. Did you have equal rights to access on LGU campus?
12. Did you have a sense of belonging while being a student at LGU?
  - a. Probe: Explore why they felt they belonged or why not.

Is there anything you would like to add? (Something that you believe would be helpful for me to know about your experience at LGU)

Are there any questions you have for me?

Thank you for taking the time to share your university experience with me today. Please tell me which medium I should use to send you a copy of the summary of your interview?

\_\_\_\_\_email

\_\_\_\_\_mail

Thank you again for your time.