

## **Voluntary Withdrawal of College Juniors and Seniors with Non-apparent Disabilities: Family, Peers, and Institutional Factors**

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### **Abstract**

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Framed within Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective, this article reports on a study that explored mezzo factors that Juniors and Seniors with nonapparent disabilities associated with their college withdrawal. The five former students in this exploratory qualitative research reported family's expectations and the institution's requirements and expectations as the major factors they associate with their college withdrawal. Conclusions and suggestions are made about the role families and universities can play in fostering a learning environment in which college students with nonapparent disabilities can be successful.

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**Keywords:** Disabilities, voluntary withdrawal, ecological perspective, college, higher education, upper division

### **1. Introduction**

The number of students with disabilities (SWDs) pursuing higher education degrees increased by more than 20% between 2003 and 2009 (National Council on Disability, 2011; Newman, Wagner, Cameto, Knokey, & Shaver, 2010). However, college completion rates among SWDs are disproportionately lower than the completion rates for students without disabilities (Jones, 2002). Retention rates of postsecondary SWDs can only be improved if colleges and universities determine what factors contribute to SWDs' inability to complete their college education and then develop appropriate policies and services to address these factors.

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Students withdraw from undergraduate studies for a variety of reasons. Student withdrawal from college is a serious matter and colleges and universities spend precious resources on retention of students. Concerns include loss of tuition, impact on college ranking, and concerns about student well-being. To more fully understand the factors that contribute to retention and withdrawal of college SWDs, researchers must consider: (a) whether the student has an apparent or nonapparent disability, (b) whether the withdrawal is voluntary or involuntary, and (c) the time at which the student's withdrawal occurs. This article discusses the interpersonal and institutional factors students with nonapparent disabilities report as contributing to their voluntary withdrawal from college during their junior and senior years. The data in this article was derived from a larger study that identified factors SWDs reported as contributing to their college withdrawal (Thompson-Ebanks, 2014).

## 2. Literature Review

The researcher conducted an electronic search and review of relevant database using key words and phrases such as *students with disabilities*, *disabilities*, *retention*, *dropout*, *withdrawal*, *attrition*, *college*, *postsecondary education*, *post-secondary education*, *higher education*, and *persistence*. The database search was restricted to the period January 2000 to January 2013. All citations were screened for three criteria: addressed upper division attrition, included retention and/or persistence of students with disabilities, and/or distinguished between voluntary withdrawal or involuntary withdrawal (academic dismissal). Literature reviews and conceptual papers were excluded. Of the 134 articles found, six research articles met the criteria for inclusion in this literature review. Of these six, all explored the retention of SWDs (Duquette, 2000; Huger, 2009; Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011, 2012; Megivern, Pellerito, & Mowbray, 2003; Wessel, Jones, Markle, & Westfall, 2009); one (Duquette, 2000) specified between voluntary or involuntary withdrawal; two (Huger, 2009; Megivern et al., 2003) were conducted with students with nonapparent disabilities; and three (Huger, 2009; Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2012; Wessel et al., 2009) specified whether or not withdrawal occurred during lower or upper division enrollment. Dowrick, Anderson, Heyer, and Acosta (2005) concluded, as do I, that "there is little research that gives voice to the experiences and perceptions of upper division students with disabilities" who voluntarily leave college before completing their degrees (p. 41).

### 2.1 Apparent versus Nonapparent Disabilities

Individuals may be referred to as having apparent disabilities, nonapparent disabilities, or both apparent and nonapparent disabilities (Parry, 2009).

Apparent disabilities are readily noticeable due to an individual's use of a physical accommodation such as a wheel chair, service dog, or hearing or sight aides. Apparent disabilities might also include individual behaviors such as an awkward gait, certain gestures, slowed speech, or other physical characteristics.

Disabilities that are less obvious are referred to as nonapparent or invisible disabilities. For example, it might not be readily apparent that a person has a learning disability, an emotional or mental illness, a traumatic brain injury, impaired activity level, or any of a variety of mental and psychological disorders. It is difficult at times to clearly distinguish between an apparent and nonapparent disability (Parry, 2009). For example, acognitive impairment may become evident only after an individual speaks.

Students with nonapparent disabilities (SWNAD) face challenges similar to challenges faced by students with apparent disabilities, but their experiences may be unique due to the fact that their disabilities may go unnoticed and the severity of the limitations they face may not be recognized or understood by others (PingryONeil, Makward,& French, 2012; Wessel et al., 2009). However, unlike students with apparent disabilities, SWNAD must also make decisions and be strategic about when, how, and whether to share information about their disability with others.

## 2.2 Voluntary versus Involuntary Withdrawal of SWD

Most researchers do not distinguish between types of withdrawal—voluntary or involuntary. Students dismissed by a university are classified as “involuntary withdrawals” (Brunsden, Davies, Shevlin, & Bracken, 2000), while those who were not required by the university to leave the institution are classified as voluntary withdrawal. Retention studies with SWDs who withdrew from college rarely distinguish those who left voluntarily from those who were academically dismissed. Sometimes the line between voluntary withdrawal and involuntary withdrawal is unclear.

For instance, a student's academic performance may steadily decline to the point at which the institution places the student on academic probation or an academic advisor expresses concern about performance. During the semester under review, the student may doubt his/her ability to improve academically and voluntarily withdraw from the institution. The student's record indicates voluntary withdrawal, yet close scrutiny reveals that the student is on the verge of being academically dismissed.

### 2.3 Early versus Late Withdrawal from College

Most research pertaining to the retention of SWDs focuses on the withdrawal of students during their early years of enrollment in college—before achieving enough credit to attain “junior status” (Mamieseishvili&Kock, 2011). Data reveal that many students leave college after the second year (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Pascarella&Terenzini, 2005). Wessel et al. (2009) report that SWDs are more likely to withdraw during their fourth and fifth years of college than students without disabilities, which suggests that lower division retention issues may be different than upper division retention issues for SWDs.

This study reports the experiences and perspectives of five undergraduate SWNAD who voluntarily withdrew from their baccalaureate education after earning 60 or more college credits, which represents more than half of the academic requirements needed to obtain an undergraduate degree.

### 3. Theoretical Context for the Study

UrieBronfenbrenner's (1979, 1993) *Ecological Framework* provides the theoretical lens for this research. The *Ecological Framework* purports that individuals and their behavior cannot be understood in isolation of their interactions with and within other social and environmental systems, as they influence and are influenced by these systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1993).Bronfenbrenner's framework refers to five system levels: micro, mezzo, exo, macro, and chrono. This paper focuses on mezzo systems.

Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1993) conceptualized the mezzo system as the interactions an individual has with one or two micro systems.

In this research, mezzo level factors connote interactions that SWDs have with others in their immediate sphere of influence such as family members; friends and university peers; and institutional characteristics such as campus climate, faculty, student services, and administrative policies.

The focus of this discussion is on the mezzo system level factors that SWNAD self-reported as having contributed to college withdrawal as upper division students from an undergraduate program. Factors that participants found supportive during their enrollment period are also reported.

### 3.1 Factors Contributing to the College Withdrawal of SWNADs: Mezzo Focus

External factors that contribute to college withdrawal of SWDs are referred to as environmental factors (Astin, 1998), which may comprise both mezzo and macro factors. Environmental factors associated with SWD withdrawal may include: transactions with family members, friends, and peers; institutional dynamic characteristics, climate, and resources; community factors; and societal and cultural factors (National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities (NDPC-SD; 2008). Environmental factors may either inhibit a SWD's ability to succeed, or may serve as supportive forces for SWDs.

## 4. Method

This exploratory qualitative study was conducted with five former students with nonapparent disabilities (SWNADs) at a large westernland grant university in the United States (LGU). A transmittal message was created that the Director of the Resources for Disabled Student Office (RDS) distributed to SWDs who voluntarily left the institution prior to completing their undergraduate degree between the start of the 2009 fall semester and the end of the 2011 spring semester. Those years (fall 2009 to spring 2011) were selected because the participants left the institution within two years of data collection, thus increasing the likelihood that the academic experience would be relatively fresh in the participants' minds.

A semistructured focused interview technique (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) was utilized to obtain first-hand data about participants' experiences as SWNADs in higher education. Interviews were conducted between August 2011 and December 2011.

The intent of the study was to report the voices of students with a wide range of disabilities (SWDs) yet only five former students, all with nonapparent disabilities, responded; SWNADs represents only a subgroup of the disability population. The participants are identified by pseudonyms: Abby and Mali (two females) and Adrian, Beck, and Carter (three males). Beck was of nontraditional age (40 years old) while the others were within the traditional age range (enrolled in an undergraduate degree program between the ages of 18-21 years). All participants were White except Mali who identified as Asian-American. All five former students reported learning disabilities: four congenital and one acquired that was the result of a traumatic brain injury. Three participants reported having dual or multiple disability diagnoses; two students reported having a single disability diagnosis.

Two participants were interviewed face-to-face, two were interviewed over the phone, and one was interviewed via a voice over internet technology (VoIP-Skype).

Thematic data analysis was used to establish common thematic elements across the research participants' reports (Riesman, 2004). Emphasis was placed first on conducting inductive data-driven thematic analysis to illuminate factors from the raw information that SWNADs associated with leaving college pre-maturely (Boyatzis, 1998). Following the inductive theme analysis, theory-driven (deductive) analysis was also used to apply an ecological framework to the constructed inductive themes. This process involved identifying themes applicable to the micro, mezzo, and macro system levels. Mezzo factors contributing to the participants' college withdrawal are reported here.

## 5. Findings

This paper reports mezzo withdrawal factors that the participants associate with their decision to prematurely leave a LGU. Supportive factors mentioned by participants are also presented. Micro factors that SWDs associated with their college withdrawal are reported in (Thompson-Ebanks, 2014).

### 5.1 Mezzo Factors

Ecological factors relevant to the mezzo system level that served as both constraining and supportive forces primarily involve those related to the family, peers, and the university. Constraining or withdrawal factors external to the individuals played an integral role in the participants' decision to leave the university. The constraining factors were grouped into two overarching themes: family expectations and university expectations. Participants also reported factors that influenced them to maintain enrollment at the LGU; these are referred to as supportive factors. Supportive factors were identified by participants as involving family, peers, and the university. Though the mezzo constraining factors that influenced participants' withdrawal are presented in this study in isolation of each other and other system level factors for discussion purposes, these factors are better understood in relation to each other as they are complex and interconnected. It is important to note that many factors cited as constraints by some participants were deemed as supportive by other participants. A factor was considered to have a negative or positive impact based on the perception of the participant.

## 5.2 Family

The family system was considered a negative factor associated with participants' college withdrawal, a positive force supporting their college endeavors, or a combination of negative and positive forces. One student (Carter) reported the family system solely as a negative force, while three students (Abby, Adrian, and Beck) talked about their families as positive forces that supported their learning. Mali was the only student who considered her family system as both a negative and a positive force. She said her parents' expectations were a stressful factor and her sister was a supportive factor; the family system contributed both positive and negative forces to college enrollment.

Two participants (Carter and Mali) reported that their family's expectations of their academic success caused undue stress and considered them factors that contributed to their withdrawal. Carter is a 28-year old White male who 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 of leaving the LGU, he re-enrolled, declared a career major, and remained enrolled for five years. He persisted in the program over a 7-year period then withdrew again for almost one year having only a few incomplete assignments to graduate. He reported that he lost interest in his major. Mali is a 23 year old first generation, Asian-American female. She was enrolled for three years and left the institution during her fourth year. Up to the time of the interview, Mali was employed in the hospitality industry with the hope of returning to the university to complete her undergraduate degree. She was also enrolled in a community college. These two participants discussed feelings of inferiority when unable to meet their parents' expectations. Carter spoke about his parents' comparison of his academic progress to that of his younger brother who enrolled at the university two years after him and completed his degree. Carter minimized the effect of being compared to his brother but highlighted his brother's achievement several times during the interview. Mali underscored her inability to meet the high academic standards expected by her parents, which she said weighed heavily on her and negatively impacted her sense of self and ability to thrive.

These “rigid” academic standards, she noted, were sometimes unfortunately associated with expectations traditionally associated with the Asian culture. Mali smiled when she 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.

Carter also reported that his parents deprived him of financial support if he did not obtain the grades they expected. For instance, he shared that as a potential incentive to keep him focused and committed to his educational goals, his parents offered to pay for his education if he could maintain a 3.0 grade point average. Despite his efforts, he was unable to maintain the expected grades resulting in lack of financial support from his parents. Carter reflected on the relationship between his parents’ expectations and their lack of financial support of his college education:

My grades were always below 3.0 averages. Don’t get me wrong, I still managed to get occasional A’s and a 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 and Mali in particular reported feeling compelled to seek employment during college to offset expenses. While Mali’s parents were financially unable to assist her, Carter’s parents denied him financial assistance because of lower than expected grades.

Conversely, four of the participants (Abby, Adrian, Beck, and Mali) stressed the integral supportive roles different family members played in their lives as students. Family support came in the form of moral support, financial support, love, guidance, and overall general support. Abby, for instance, credited support from her family as a vital factor that influenced her confidence and drive to succeed. She is a 23-year old White female who was enrolled at the university for almost three and a half years, then left prematurely to attend a smaller college in her home town that she thought would be more conducive to her personal goals and needs. Abby earned her undergraduates degree within three semester of attending the small college and later reenrolled in graduate school. 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 thought I was too sick to be on my own or seemed as if I were 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 older 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.

Abby mentioned that she suspected that 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 when, "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."

Adrian also talked about family support. He 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. He highlighted the support he received from his mother who was "always there for him," offering encouragement and advice. He reported that his mother also supported his academic work and usually edited his papers.

Beck too spoke about the psychological and personal support he received from his family, specifically his wife and sister. Beck is a 40-year old White male, considered a nontraditional aged student who developed a learning disability resulting from a traumatic brain injury. Of the five participants he was the only individual who pursued an online undergraduate degree with the university. After his brain surgery, he returned to live with his parents who helped him with his activities of daily living and offered advice and suggestions. They were thrilled that he was "retooling" when he enrolled at the university and got married shortly after. Beck remarked, "My sister 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."

While recognizing the helpful and responsive nature of her parents, Mali underscored that she would rather discuss her problems with her older sister than with her parents. She reiterated that the ideal standards held by her parents made it difficult at times to be open with them. She referred to her sister as very supportive and ensured Mali consulted her parents before making any important decisions. Her parents and sisters listened to her concerns, offered advice, called her frequently, and visited her on campus.

### 5.3 The University

Participants commented on the university's expectations of them as students and their ability or inability to meet those expectations. University expectations included financial aid requirements; provision of teaching/learning materials; class attendance requirements and discretionary class scheduling; instructors' knowledge and understanding of disability, nondiscriminatory environment and personal communication with students. Participants also identified varied levels of support from the university.

#### 5.3.1 Financial Aid Requirements

Three of the participants expressed that approval for financial aid required monitoring and a minimum grade point average (GPA) and course load. Participants indicated that these requirements contributed to their academic demise. As an example, Mali became ineligible for financial aid as her grades fell below the GPA requirement and reducing her course load was not an option.

I think I had to get at least 15 credits of A's and a couple B's, but when I wasn't awarded financial aid, I had to drop a couple classes and get a job. Now, I'm only taking seven credits because I couldn't afford to take 15. I'm not able to register for next semester because I still have to pay off my balance. I still cannot get financial aid because I am taking too few credits.

Not being awarded financial aid had a devastating effect on Mali and jeopardized her ability to remain enrolled in college. Her effort to explain that she only became aware of her disabilities after she enrolled in college, and that she was seeking disability services, did not result in the university overturning their decision to deny Mali financial aid. Mali's problems were further compounded when she discovered that taking a reduced course load also prevented her from receiving approval for financial aid.

### 5.3.2 Provision of Teaching/Learning Materials

Participants expressed concern about instructors' lack of and/or inconsistent provision of teaching and learning materials. While some professors provided resources, not all professors provided teaching materials such as handouts or PowerPoint slides either in classes or online. Abby and Adrian said they found the lack of learning resources to be challenging. Likewise, even those who provided learning materials in various formats did so inconsistently. Abby recalled, "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 quite difficult for me."

Adrian and Mali recalled feeling stressed when instructors did not provide hard or electronic copies of the material they covered in class or did so in an untimely adhoc fashion. They said it was difficult to recall what they learned in class as the effort to simultaneously take comprehensive notes and grasp the subject was often overwhelming. Mali also pointed out that it seemed like the university [instructors] expected all students to learn in a similar way and that this expectation caused her additional stress. In Adrian's words, "With this visual perceptual disability that I have, I get really confused, if I were to copy from the board or PowerPoint slides, listen to the instructor and make meaning of the lesson all at the same time." Similarly, Mali highlighted the difficulty she experienced when copies of lectures were not provided, "I listen well in class, but if I try to take notes and listen at the same time, or try to copy notes from the board and listen at the same time... I get really confused...as everything seems quite muddled." Mali also referred to what she perceived as a "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, she felt it would have been helpful if professors specified salient aspects of a book so that 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.

### 5.3.3 Class Attendance Requirements and Flexible Class Scheduling

Abby has a psychiatric disability and raised concerns about instructors' holding all students to the same attendance expectations. Class attendance is challenging at times for some SWNADs due to side effects of medications; for example, side effects of some psychiatric medications include slowed response time and drowsiness.

Abby highlighted that medication compliance sometimes made her require more sleep, causing her at times to be late for classes. 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 their disability. The provision of discretionary class attendance was suggested by Abby. In elaborating, she said, 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 Abby also mentioned that courses that are offered on a flexible schedule work best for her.

Such flexibility allows her the freedom to choose to attend classes that are offered later in the day rather than being restricted to take compulsory courses that are only offered early in the mornings. She describes her challenge:

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 a.m. 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.

#### **5.3.4 Instructors' Knowledge and Understanding of Disability and Nondiscriminatory Environment**

Participants also noted that some instructors lacked knowledge and understanding of disabilities and the need to facilitate accommodations. Adrian explained the challenges he encountered in an attempt to receive accommodations. He thought his professors lacked knowledge about providing accommodations for SWNADs. One challenge he reported pertained to completing a speaking and auditory section of a test that the professor wanted to administer. Accompanying Adrian to RDS to administer the test did not seem feasible for the faculty member. In an attempt to facilitate Adrian's need for accommodation, the professor invited him to his office to complete the test during office hours. Adrian thought this would have been a great idea except that during office hours other students visited the office. Thus, the space was not free from distractions, which is what he needs 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 assess how I understood the language, but then trying to find what worked for me too created a kind of a tension.

Another challenge for Adrian 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 a quiet environment, 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 prompts and stuff she gave me different prompts so that there would be no problem of sharing. And yes I eventually took the test at RDS within their opening hours.

Adrian thought that in general most faculty members were helpful but lacked knowledge and understanding about the needs of SWDs. Abby expressed similar sentiments and highlighted the challenge she experienced stating "the director of the department, in fact, wasn't fine with me receiving accommodations and spoke to the other professors to give me a lower grade if I received accommodations." Abby described this lack of compliance with ADA, and attempts to influence other faculty to do likewise, as discrimination. Abby said this discrimination marginalized her and created a sense of nonbelonging at 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. My accommodations [approved by RDS] allowed me to turn in my paper later, for example, three 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 one's 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 persuade the other professors [that I did not need accommodations/ not to recognize my accommodations]. I believe the professor must have been relieved when I left. I too felt as if I shouldn't pursue any further studies.

### 5.3.5 Personal Communications with Students

One other factor that two of the participants reported as contributing to their withdrawal was the impersonal manner in which the university related to them. Mali for example, noted that the university could have communicated with her in a more personal manner. She mentioned receiving a number of "generic" letters, but that she was never personally approached by anyone.

I wasn't really ever approached from anyone, any of my professors. I felt like they send 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. It would show that the university actually cares about you other than just wanting their money for school.

Carter also thought that personalized communication from the institution may have supported his ability to persist. He recognized the efforts of the professors who notified him when he was failing and tried to offer advice, yet he emphasized that he probably would have done better academically if his professors had spoken to him earlier about his academic performance. He too believed that one-on-one communication might have increased his confidence and motivation to persist in the program. He said, "Professors tried to reach out to me at the end of the semester but it was too late, I could not redeem myself."

### 5.3.6 University/Institution Support

In addition to the withdrawal factors associated with the university, participants also mentioned a number of supports they received from the institution.

Sources of support from the LGU included services and programs offered by the University's Counseling Center, inclusive of a learning assistance program that offers disability testing services; workshops on learning strategies and free tutoring services; RDS services; and helpful professors. Mali emphasized:

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 ... It took me a while to find out that we had all these programs.

To support her point about disability services availability and usage, Mali noted that she was placed on an 8-week waiting list to be tested for ADHD, which she thinks is an indication that the program is highly utilized. She also highlighted that the counselors helped her develop coping techniques as she became aware of and confronted her personal challenges and health vulnerabilities. Abby, Carter, and Mali also accessed services from the learning assistance program where they received tutoring in the writing process.

Carter just graduated from high school when he first enrolled at the university. He repeatedly said that from the very beginning he received tremendous academic support and had 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, as well as 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!

Most participants highlighted the RDS office as one of the disability support services they utilized and felt supported by them. Abby spoke of her selective utilization of RDS and thought they were highly responsive and supportive of her needs. Adrian also expressed positive regard for RDS. He stated, "RDS was a huge support. I thought RDS did a really good job of supporting all of their students ... and it seemed like there was always space available to take tests when I needed them." Likewise, Beck acknowledged the support he received from RDS. They worked with him to complete the necessary documents to receive needed accommodations.

He was granted accommodations for separate testing and 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.

Participants reported their experiences with the majority of their professors as generally positive, especially those who were their advisors. Beck, the only student who pursued an online undergraduate degree, 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, praising 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. Carter also had positive regard for his professors and was sympathetic toward their workload. He thought faculty were 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.

He also recognized the efforts of the professors who notified him when he was failing and tried to offer advice. Abby and Mali also mentioned that they had a good relationship with their professors and generally found them quite helpful. They found the professors approachable and they 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. Both Abby and Mali commented that some of the professors made efforts to provide materials used in classes whether by posting them before classes or distributing them in the classes. This approach to distributing materials worked well for them as they were unable to copy diagrams and notes and listen to the professors at the same time.

#### 5.4 Peers and Friends

Support from friends was very important for three participants. Friends offered emotional support, companionship, advice, guidance, information sharing, resource mobilization, and other forms of social support.



Abby recognized the value of the support she sustained from a core group of friends. They provided her with the material covered in classes when she occasionally missed classes, usually on days when she was not doing well. They also offered other forms of social and emotional support.

They would listen to me rant several times a day when I wasn't feeling 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...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.

Carter also credited his strong network of friends and peers for their ability to understand him and some of the struggles he faced as a student. Carter said he skipped a number of classes and his friends would provide him with material he missed.

My peers were very helpful ... if one of us did miss a class we'd fill them in on what they missed or give them the notes or, or if I missed they'd do the same for me.

## **6. Discussion and Recommendations for Practice**

The participants reported three major mezzo factors: family, institution, and friends/peers that either served as a support or hindrance to their pursuit of a college degree. The participants identified both negative and positive forces at the mezzo level and discussed how these forces shaped their college experiences. Constraining mezzo factors described by participants included interactions with the family system and the university system. Supportive factors included family and university systems, and friends/peers.

### **6.1 Family**

The first theme of family was crucial in the lives of all the participants and served either as a constraint or as a source of support. Two of the participants expressed the intense anxiety they experienced in trying to meet their parents' academic expectations, which contributed to feelings of inadequacy and inferiority.

Ironically, for some SWNADs, high academic expectations of parents inadvertently contributed to levels of anxiety and stress associated with the participants' premature college withdrawal.

For example, Mali spoke of her parents' constant demand on her to produce stellar grades, which contributed to feelings of frustration and negative self-worth as she struggled to counter symptoms associated with her disability. She stated that her personal abilities and or disability were not considered and associated her parents' pressure for excellent grades with her Asian family's traditional cultural expectations. Based on these findings, future research investigating factors associated with college withdrawal of SWDs should include an exploration of cultural factors as they influence family dynamics. From a practice standpoint, educators, advisors, and disability support service professionals should consider cultural issues as they engage SWDs.

In one situation, financial assistance from parents was tied to grades. According to Carter he did not receive financial support from his parents because he was unable to maintain a B average. Although the literature indicates that a culture of high expectations can increase confidence and academic performance (Brophy, 2010), academic expectations may need to be tailored to an individual student's needs and abilities. In addition to educating parents about the nature of a disability, family members may benefit from a discussion about reasonable academic expectations for their SWD.

## 6.2 University

The second important factor participants associated with their college withdrawal was related to aspects of the university and its operations. Participants also identified university factors that supported retention. However for these students, constraints outweighed the positive factors. Participants specifically identified rigid financial aid requirements; lack of /or inconsistent provision of class material by instructors (notes, handouts, PowerPoints); inflexible class attendance requirement; course scheduling problems; a discriminatory campus climate; and poor university communication with students as factors contributing to college withdrawal.

For example, a student must be enrolled in a minimum number of courses and meet grade requirements to access financial aid; special considerations for students with a disability are not made (FinAid Page LLC, 2013).

Many SWDs are more likely to enjoy academic success by enrolling in fewer credit hours; others may be required to take courses that require skills and abilities that are especially challenging due to their learning disability (i.e. math, languages, writing). Flexible financial aid policies should be considered for SWDs, thereby addressing this particular stress.

Participants complained about the inconsistent manner in which some faculty members provided handouts and copies of other learning materials without due considerations of differential learning styles and capabilities. Tomlinson (1999) argues that rather than providing uniform classroom instructions, it is necessary for instructors to consistently provide learning instructions in different formats to support their lectures. The Americans with Disability Act (ADA) in 1990 mandates that the built environment be accessible to all people. Perhaps academic instruction should use a “universal access” model. If multiple modes of learning are accommodated, instructors need not even have to know which students have a non-apparent disability. It is this author’s opinion that higher education has an ethical obligation to create a learning environment that provides opportunities for diverse learning needs.

Abby suggested that universities adopt a discretionary class attendance policy, whereby professors would take the unique circumstances of SWDs into account when recording student attendance. The literature indicates that symptoms associated with some medical conditions and side effects of some medications can negatively impact a student’s ability to perform (Duquette, 2000). She proposed that faculty be less punitive with some students regarding class absenteeism or lateness as it could be associated with their disability. Although some professors may provide informal accommodations and take a student’s circumstance into consideration, informal accommodations cannot be expected. At the postsecondary level, students must provide documentation that establishes the existence of a disability and the need for accommodations. Further, the student must also take responsibility for assisting the institution in identifying appropriate accommodations. Therefore the university has an obligation to provide reasonable accommodations to SWDs, but equally the students have the responsibility to disclose their disabilities and request services.

Abby chose not to disclose her psychiatric disability in fear of being stigmatized.

There is evidence that the stigma of mental illness may result in discriminatory behavior by educators (Demery, Thirlaway, & Mercer, 2012; Padron, 2006,) and employers (Brohan & Thornicroft, 2010). Universal access to learning may not only facilitate improved learning by SWDs, but also students without disabilities. One may raise concern about lowering academic standards by loosening or eliminating requirements for classroom attendance and extending time to complete assignments. This should be a topic of future research.

Most of the participants thought that some faculty members lacked knowledge about disabilities and the challenges SDWs encounter. Further, they thought that some faculty lacked understanding about the importance of academic accommodations (Cook, Rumrill, & Tankersley, 2009) and were unwilling to facilitate accommodations as required. Similar attitudinal complaints against faculty have been reported in the literature (Wilson, Getzel, & Brown, 2000; Greenbaum, Graham, & Scales, 1995; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Rao, 2004; Sheppard-Jones, 2002). National research designed to investigate the extent to which instructors are aware of legal requirements regarding the provision of reasonable accommodations for SWDs are recommended. One possibility is to mandate on-line disabilities awareness training to all college instructors. Modeled on Sexual Harassment Training courses (Online Sexual Harassment Training, 2009), educators would be required to take a pretest and posttest of knowledge on rights and responsibilities of SWDs, instructors, and institutional policies, and services.

Trainees would receive certification, which should be renewed every 2 to 3 years. This periodic training would help faculty and staff to keep abreast of disability law, student concerns, advancement in disability research, and issues and implications pertinent to the relationship between faculty and SWDs. Despite the enactment of disability laws, in particular ADA and the amendments made to ADA in 2008, an instance of discrimination was still highlighted with a faculty member at the college by one of the participants. Although there was swift recourse through RDS, this experience discouraged continued enrollment, which potentially contributed to an overall chilly climate for the student and her withdrawal (Duquette, 2000). The suggested disability awareness training could also provide guidelines for institutions in the event an instructor inappropriately denies accommodations to SWDs and/or are guilty of discriminatory action.

It is recommended that college and university administrators conduct an audit of the institution's educational environment, policies, faculty and staff attitudes and behaviors, and student satisfaction with regard to disability issues. These data could be utilized to inform educational modifications that comply with disability laws and meet the educational needs of SWDs.

Participants reported that institutional communications were generic and impersonal. One participant thought that if his professors had communicated with him earlier and held him accountable he would have finished the program. A disabilities audit of the university may uncover this student concern and new procedures for communicating with SWDs could be implemented.

A personalized tracking system whereby students are flagged when their grades decline; students would be invited (or required) to attend a face-to-face meeting with an advisor to discuss strategies to maintain academic success.

One student highlighted the long time it took her to become aware of the number of resources that were available to SWDs on the campus, while others lacked knowledge of many of the services. The findings indicate that the university offers a wide array of disability services, yet if SWDs are not knowledgeable about these resources, certainly they cannot utilize and benefit from them. Faculty, advisors, and other support personnel need to be knowledgeable about campus disability services and those resources available in the community so that they can educate and direct SWDs to resources available to them.

## **7. Conclusion**

This study highlights that many withdrawal factors are socially created by environmental systems with which students interact. Anchored in the ecological framework, mezzo level factors in this study were conceptualized as factors external to the individual that were related to small groups and organizations with which the individuals interacted on a regular basis. Mezzo level negative factors that contributed to the participants' college withdrawal included family expectations and the university requirements and expectations. Constraining factors associated with the family included their idealistic expectations of their students and their demands on their students to fulfill those expectations.

Mezzo withdrawal factors related to the university included stringent financial aid requirements without considerations for disability status, inconsistent or lack of distribution of teaching instructions, instructors' inadequate understanding and knowledge about disabilities and their unwillingness to facilitate accommodations, discriminatory action from faculty, and a lack of personal communication with students from the university.

In this study supportive factors included family members, peers, and aspects of the institution. Family members offered moral and financial support, love, guidance, and overall general support. Support from friends/peers included emotional support, companionship, advice, guidance, informational sharing, resource mobilization, and other forms of social support.

Institutional support came in the form of helpful advisors and professors who always provided copies of their learning instructions in multiple formats, assistance from RDS and other disability services although many students were unaware of their existence, professors who tried to offer advice to students who were failing academically.

Withdrawal or supportive factors were categorized based on the students' perception of the role played by these individuals/systems in their lives and how compatible they were to their needs. This study illustrates that support from any source (family, university, and peers/friends) can be valuable, yet supportive factors must be strong enough to outweigh the negative forces for SWDs to persist through to graduation.

One cannot extrapolate these findings to lower division SDWs. However, the study provides a rich qualitative presentation of barriers SWNADs associated with their withdrawal and suggestions that college administrators and disability support services can implement to mitigate withdrawal factors.

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