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### Exploring Students with Disabilities Experiences in the Classroom at a Midwestern Community College

Alyssa Klenotich

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**Exploring Students with Disabilities Experiences in The Classroom at A Midwestern  
Community College**

by

Alyssa Klenotich

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

St. Cloud State University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Master of Science

in College Counseling and Student Development

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Thesis Committee:

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## **Abstract**

This exploratory study featured interviews with students' with disabilities at a Midwestern Community College. The interviews were created with the guiding research question: What are students' with disabilities experiences with faculty at Midwestern Community College? Five participants were identified using convenient sampling. Interviews were held via zoom using semi-structured questions that aimed to gain an understanding of students' experiences with faculty with an emphasis on Universal Design. Participants' unique narratives provided a wealth of information about their individual experiences, which were transcribed and analyzed using inductive coding and analysis. The findings from this study emphasize the importance of communication, technology, flexibility, structure with an overarching meta-theme of COVID-19, which amplified the other findings, have had on students' with disabilities experience with faculty. Students indicated both items the students themselves can practice, along with faculty, in order to cultivate a more inclusive education setting for students with disabilities in higher education. Findings have been presented to the Midwestern Community College Disability Support office and will inform ongoing efforts for equitable education.

## Acknowledgments

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The population of students with disabilities in higher education has been increasing (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011; Mull et al., 2001; National Center for Education Statistics, 2021; Scott et al., 2003). Students with disabilities face challenges that are associated with ableism and needs to be addressed at a structural level to address the systematic oppression people with disabilities face (Ostiguy-Finneran et al., 2018). Individuals develop disabilities at various periods in their life, resulting in one of their major life activities being “substantially limited” (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990). These limitations are a direct cause of the environment being created for the dominant narrative, able-bodied and able-minded people, resulting in an interaction between the individual and environment. Creating environments that mitigate these barriers is vital for full inclusive participation in society, including higher education. Although these environmental interactions exist, physical or mental disabilities in no way diminishes a person’s right to fully participate in all aspects of society, including higher education, yet many have had diminishing experiences due to discrimination (Americans with Disability Act, 1990).

Postsecondary education has evolved to provide various accommodations for students that allows the environmental interaction to be minimized (i.e., note takers, extended testing time, read speakers etc.). The primary staff providing these services are housed in Disability Service (DS) offices in postsecondary education (University of Washington, 2021a). Although these offices provide support for students with disabilities, the students are interacting with faculty at a higher frequency. The faculty supporting students with disabilities are responsible for managing accommodations (i.e., sending testing materials to appropriate locations, having closed captioning etc.), and impact campus climate for students with disabilities (Milem & Berger,

1997; Fichten et al., 2014). Faculty report not having enough time or resources to effectively support students with disabilities (Raue & Lewis, 2011).

### **Defining Disability and Relevant Terms for This Study**

Language is powerful. Language related to disability, people and environments reflect on political, moral, and social values (Evans et al., 2017). Throughout this document there are terms that I will use repetitively. I am going to define some of the language here, so the reader has a better understanding of the text.

- *Disability*: Disability refers to a person's activity restriction due to their environmental interactions (Evans et al., 2017). Disability can be presented in a variety of ways, including psychological (i.e., depression, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety), physical (i.e., mobility disability, hard of hearing, blind), cognitive (i.e., attention deficit disorder (ADD) attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorder), and many others. Disability is fluid, as the individual's activity restrictions present differently in different environments (Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006).
- *Accommodation(s)*. Accommodation(s) refers to the way the environment is adjusted for the person to receive an equitable experience (University of Washington, 2021a). In postsecondary that can present itself in a variety of ways including extended testing time, audio recording, preferred seating, etc. The accommodation(s) provided are individualized and depends on the individual needs.
- *Person-centered*. According to Minnesota's Department of Human Services Person-centered refers to a specific approach when supporting people. The approach situates the person in the center and is treated as a person above anything else. The focus is on the person's strengths, abilities, and circumstances rather than their condition. A person-

centered approach honors the individual as an expert on themselves and allows for autonomy (Miller, 2021).

- *Marginalized groups.* Groups that experience exclusion and discrimination due to unequal power within political, social, economic, and cultural dimensions of society (National Collaboration Center for Determinants of Health., 2021).
- *Disability-first language.* Disability-first language situates the disability before the person (i.e., disabled student) with the recognition that the environment is what is disabling. Some argue that this should be used over person-first language due to person-first language creating a distance between disability and an individual, therefore not honoring the disability as an identity (AHEAD, 2021; Evans et al., p. 6, 2017).
- *Person-first language.* Person-first language refers to situating the person before the describer (i.e., student with a disability). This allows the person to be viewed as a human first rather than a describer or diagnosis. This creates a separation between the person and stigma that has been socialized with describers (AHEAD, 2021). This language is also preferred by some individuals (Evens et al. 2017).

### **Problem Statement**

The population of students with disabilities has been on the uprise (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011; Mull et al., 2001; National Center for Education Statistics, 2021; Scott et al., 2003). To effectively support the growing population of students with disabilities in higher education more research is necessary (Shallish, 2017). Those employed in postsecondary education settings make an impact on campus climates for students with disabilities (Milem & Berger, 1997; Love et al., 2015). To effectively support students with disabilities, faculty and administrators must possess some degree of disability-related knowledge and nondiscriminatory disability-

related attitudes towards this student population (Shallish, 2017). A lack of training programs and disability awareness results in faculty members being unaware of acceptable accommodations (Burgstahler, et al., 1999; Ouellet, 2004). Several studies indicate that faculty receive minimal to no training on how to accommodate students' disabilities (Asuncion et al., 2010; Gladhard., 2010). These factors impact students' interactions with faculty and their overall success in the postsecondary environment (Fichten et al., 2014, Love et al., 2015).

A willingness to work with students and an understanding of their needs is necessary for faculty to work effectively with students with disabilities in the classroom. Without having tools, such as workshops, or readily available online resources that focus on items necessary to effectively work with students with disabilities, available to understand how to effectively use accommodations, postsecondary institutions are setting faculty and students up for failure. To create tools, it is vital to understand students' with disabilities experiences in the classroom. With this information, tools can be focused on the areas needed for the specific institution. All students with disabilities, who initiate and follow through with receiving accommodation(s), have the support of the disability or accessibility offices on campuses; however, students interact with their faculty more frequently (University of Washington, 2021b). This study explored students' with disabilities experiences in the classroom at Midwestern Community College.

### ***Prevalence of Disabilities in the United States***

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), one in four American adults have some form of physical or mental disability (2020). Of those, 13.7% have a mobility disability (defined as serious difficulty walking or climbing stairs), 10.8% have a cognition disability that makes it difficult to concentrate, remember, or make decisions, 5.9% are Deaf or have hearing loss, and 4.6% are blind or have difficulty seeing even when wearing

glasses (2021). In 2019-2020 the National Center for Education Statistics collected data from students age 3-21 years old and found that the most common disabilities were specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, other health impairment, and autism spectrum disorder (ASD). This is helpful context for postsecondary institutions to understand the students with disabilities that maybe more prevalent on college campuses. However, it is equally (if not more important) that faculty and staff keep in mind that students with disabilities show up in diverse ways. For example, specific learning disability is an umbrella term that indicates an individual has barriers to understand or use language (spoken or written), and therefore manifests in difficulty listening, thinking, speaking, reading, writing, spelling, or doing math (Raue & Lewis, 2011). The term is broad; therefore, it is important to listen to the individual's needs rather than have a one size fits all for specific diagnoses (University of Washington, 2021a). There has been a shift in disability distribution, with growing numbers of students with non-visible disabilities attending postsecondary education (Raue & Lewis, 2011). Visible disabilities are often noticed easier and or more quickly, which means faculty may have a more challenging time identifying students with a non-visible disability. This can result in students with non-visible disabilities needing to self-advocate at a higher rate than their peers. Additionally, non-visible disabilities face barriers due to being systematically constructed as faking their disability (Dolmage, 2017). A phrase many disability studies instructors have heard is “But there are no disabled students in my class,” this statement is a defense or opinion for not creating an inclusive classroom, rather than a fact (Dolmage, 2017, pp. 42).

In the last 50 years, students with disabilities have had an increase in access to higher education due to the disability right movement, policy changes in K-12 education, and other legal changes (Madaus, 2011). The completion gap between students with and without

disabilities in high school has been closing, however this is not congruent with the graduation rates in postsecondary education (Whelley et al., 2002). As such, higher education institutions continue to seek effective ways to support diverse student populations, comply with legislation, and advance the occupational and social participation of students with disabilities (Schreuer & Sachs, 2014). With the diversity among students in postsecondary education increasing, disability service (DS) offices have been overburdened with supporting these students; this includes monitoring the implementation of accommodations in the classroom, advocacy, and working with faculty when they are not providing the appropriate services (Reardon et al., 2021).

### ***Barriers for Students with Disabilities***

Students with disabilities face unique barriers to equitable education. DS offices are in place on campuses to support these students, help remove barriers to their education, and follow through with legal responsibilities. These barriers are different for each student, as each student is their own unique person with different skills, background, and knowledge. There are various challenges that students with disabilities face, including physical, sensory, learning, attention, and communication (Burgstahler, 2020).

Physical challenges could include accessing a building that only has one elevator, if this one elevator broke down a person who is unable to use the stairs would not be able to access the building. An example of a communication challenge is audio content in videos that are not captioned, which may be inaccessible to students with brain injuries or whom are hard of hearing. An example of visual differences is web content that requires users to distinguish colors that may be inaccessible to those who are colorblind. For those with learning challenges, using one mode of delivery of course content can be inaccessible to those that learn in different ways.

Similarly, one mode of delivery can be difficult for students with attention challenges to be or remain engaged (Burgstahler, 2020).

Although DS offices are in place, the student receiving the accommodation(s) has the responsibility of managing their accommodation(s), disclosing their disability, and advocating for themselves on top of the academic course work and everyday stressors (Getzel, 2008). In the United States, studies have shown that approximately two thirds of students with disabilities do not receive accommodations due to the college not knowing about the disabilities (Dolmage, 2017). Students with disabilities have reported that they believe they work harder than other students, as they manage both their academics and disability (Seale et. al., 2015). Although balancing these responsibilities is challenging, students with disabilities have higher persistence rates in postsecondary education when receiving accommodation (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011).

### ***Institutional Context***

There are different admittance requirements for the various types of institutions in higher education. For example, Ivy League colleges have different standards than a state university. Community college's requirements include completing high school or obtaining a GED (General Educational Development). This means that some people who may not meet the requirements of other institutions are able to attend community colleges. This allows both for opportunity and unique challenges for diverse institutions to meet the needs of their respective student populations. Additionally, it has been noted that community colleges are considered more "friendly" to the student population who identify as having a disability and therefore may create an additional reason for a student with a disability to attend a community college (Fichten et al., 2014).

This study was conducted at a multi-location large suburban Midwestern Community College that has an enrollment of approximately 8,900 students (Community College Review, 2021). According to the ADA coordinator of Disability Services (DS) (personal communication, October 2021), faculty at Midwestern Community College are encouraged to use universal design in their classroom but are provided little direction or training on how to do so. Additionally, there is no formal training for faculty regarding students with disabilities. This combined lack of knowledge and resources can make it very challenging for faculty to meet the needs of these students.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore students' with disabilities experiences in the classroom at Midwestern Community College with the intent of sharing study findings to inform and advance ongoing efforts to create a more equitable campus.

### ***Research Question***

What are students' with disabilities experiences with faculty at Midwestern Community College?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study will inform recommendations for services and training for the Midwestern Community College faculty. In addition, this study could be adapted by other universities to better understand their students with disabilities classroom experiences.



## Chapter II: Review of Relevant Literature

### Understanding Disability in the United States of America

People with disabilities are placed within larger societal contexts and systems of oppression and privilege. In order to place students with disabilities, it is important to understand the context, which the participants are in. The following will illuminate on a historical overview of people with disabilities within the United States, the social justice lens, Universal Design (UD), Need for equitable education and community colleges.

#### *Brief Historical Overview of Persons with Disabilities*

Persons with disabilities have historically faced unequal treatment from society. Much of this perception, that was documented, began with the lens of religion, where disability occurred as a result of sin (Ostiguy-Finneran et al., 2018). These viewpoints, and others, have led to horrific treatment of the population; including the isolation of people with physical differences to the extent that others did not have to view their form, sterilization, imprisonment, experimented upon, and putting those with severe disabilities in “freak shows” for entertainment (Dolmage, 2017; Meyers et al., 2013; Ostiguy-Finneran et al., 2018). ). War was a major catalyst for change in the treatment provided to the community with disabilities. World War I left many veterans disabled and therefore the government and society had to adjust to the growing population of individuals with disabilities (Evans et al. 2017). Society focused on using rehabilitation for the population deemed “crippled.” Those that lead the rehabilitation movement saw those with physical disabilities as a burden, as they relied on support for various things, therefore the goal was to make the “cripples” employable (Evans et al., 2017). Some vocational centers advocated for people with disabilities to be viewed for their abilities rather than their disabilities (Evans et al., 2017)

After World War II, those with physical disabilities fought for the right to attend college. Ed Roberts, a quadriplegic polio survivor sued the University of California-Berkley and was the first student with “significant impairments” to enter higher education (Evans et al., 2017). In 1944 the GI bill was passed, providing veterans with educational funding. Many veterans used this opportunity and attended postsecondary education (Evans et al., 2017). This caused an increase in the college population that identified as having a disability. As a result, higher education institutions needed to respond to the needs of their students. The highest percentage of disability was associated with amputees which resulted in an emphasis of change for physical disabilities rather than other types of disabilities (Evans et al., 2017). With a higher population of students with disabilities there was an increase in self-advocacy skills to combat the lack of support for students with disabilities (Madaus, 2011).

As advocacy continued, other disabilities were included in self-advocacy efforts. In 1973 section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act was put into place; this was important as it “is an antidiscrimination provision in a broader federal law providing rehabilitation services to people with disabilities. [This section] protects individuals from disability discrimination in programs and activities that receive federal financial assistance, including elementary and secondary schools, as well as many colleges and universities” (Dragoo & Cole, 2019, pp. 1). Advocacy continued, in 1990 the ADA (Americans with Disability Act) was passed. A highly symbolic protest occurred that called for the ADA to be passed. The protest included a number of physically disabled individuals crawling up the steep steps of the capital (Dolmage, 2017). The definition of disability was specifically constructed for broad coverage (Dragoo & Cole., 2019). The ADA is considered a civil right, therefore focuses on the unique needs and rights of individuals with disabilities to promote equity. The ADA was created with the intention to be

applied on an individualized, fact-specific, and case-by-case basis (Dragoo & Cole., 2019). Therefore, the ADA aligns with person-centered practices. Although laws cannot change the implicit and explicit bias we have about marginalized groups, these laws established the importance of ensuring students with disabilities receive equitable education. Unsurprisingly, there was a public backlash from the ADA. This caused the ADA to be seen as a compliance-centered law rather than a civil rights issue (Dolmage, 2017).

Socialization is unique to the individual and is impacted by school, family, religion, work, peers, and media. The laws passed to support individuals with disabilities reflects the United States socialization on a structural level. U.S. citizens have been socialized to consider disability as an “abnormal” biomedical concern, therefore reflecting the biomedical model (Siebers, 2011). The biomedical model categorizes disability as a defect of the individual. The model indicates that we need to “fix” the defect of the individual. Emerging studies view disability differently, as a product of social injustice. The individual is limited due to the environment created without considering the individuals with disabilities needs; therefore, this view of disability is focused on creating a socially just world (Siebers, 2011). This is still an emerging framework, and therefore requires further support to overwrite the biomedical model narrative and continue the United States of America’s path to a socially just climate for this marginalized group. In higher education, faculty recognizes diversity of the environment they teach. However, they must also recognize their positionality within their own personal pedagogical agendas, institutions, and departments that avoid and oppress students with disabilities (Dolmage, 2017).

### ***Social Justice Lens***

Social Justice is a broad lens that stems from the civil rights movement, concepts of social justice, oppression, and women's rights movement (Evans et al., 2017). The focus of the model is based around "transforming systems of social behavior, discriminatory institutional structure and cultural practices" (Adams, et al., 2007). This model has a preference of using the term ableism, which is "defined as the oppression of people with disabilities" (Griffin et al., 2007, pp. 335).

According to Hardiman et al. (2007), oppression can occur at an individual level, at an institutional setting and at a cultural level. For example, beauty standards or independence can create oppression at a cultural level; policies, laws, housing, and health care can create oppression at an institutional level; attitudes, and disability related knowledge can create oppression at an individual level. All of these examples can contribute to how people with disabilities are treated and the barriers that occur in their everyday lives, which is unique for each individual. This oppression can be intentional or unintentional (Evans et al., 2017).

### ***Universal Design***

Universal Design (UD) is the idea of making environments accessible to all people, regardless of ability (Evans et al., 2017; University of Washington, 2021b). This framework is often used as the backbone of faculty professional development training opportunities. UD encourages faculty to use inclusive practices into their courses, which can present in a variety of ways including using closed captions on all videos, choices in assignments (i.e., essay or class presentation), providing accessible documents or external resources (i.e., websites), and using a variety of teaching styles (Lombardi, 2010; University of Washington, 2021a). UD has little

empirical evidence to support its effectiveness, however, it is aligned with the social justice lens by changing the institutional structure of higher education's practices.

UD is not as specific as accommodation, however with UD there is potential to decrease the need for accommodation(s) and the need for students to disclose their disability; when faculty utilize UD practices, accommodation(s) would already be in place (i.e., closed captioning). Therefore, UD is helpful for the overburdened disability support offices who are monitoring the implementation of accommodations in the classroom, providing advocacy, and working with faculty when they are not providing the appropriate services (Reardon et al., 2021).

UD has three main guidelines that address the three brain networks that influence learning (CAST, 2021). The three brain networks include: the *recognition networks*, this is how people organize and process information; *strategic networks*, this is where individuals organize and plan tasks; and *affective network*, which motivates and challenges learning (CAST, 2021). The three guidelines include: *multiple means of engagement*, this provides learners with sustaining effort and persistence along with self-regulations; *multiple means of representation* provides learners to process information in a variety of ways; and *multiple means of action and expression*, allows learners to demonstrate their learning in a variety of ways (CAST, 2021). These are the core for faculty to consider while creating coursework, and course structure (Lombardi, 2010). Theoretically, this would create a more accessible learning environment for all students. However, there is not a standardized way to assess UD practices, despite it being endorsed by federal legislation in the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 (Edyburn, 2010). UD creates a more diverse learning environment for all; however, UD would not be able to completely replace accommodation(s) due to the complex nature of environmental barriers (i.e. need for interpreter).

### *Person-Centered Practices*

Person Centered approaches started over 20 years ago to support the understanding of individuals who have developmental disabilities (Rasheed et al., 2006). According to the Minnesota Department of Human Services (2021), Person Centered practices are flexible and adaptable for the person being served. This encourages people to have autonomy over their choices while being provided with necessary information. Person Centered Practices have been shown to increase people's quality of life (Minnesota Department of Human Services., 2021). Person-centered practices place the person being served first; however, it is more of a way of working with an individual rather than a formal process as individuals will differ (Miller et al., 2017). Person Centered approaches focus on strengths rather than deficits. Person-centered approaches have various interchangeable language (i.e. student centered), however they all meet five basic criteria: (1) encourage support while maintaining dignity and respect, (2) foster connectiveness, (3) picture expectations, (4) solve problems, and (5) celebrate progress and recognition of strengths and abilities (Miller et al., 2017; Rasheed et al., 2006).

With person-centered approaches allowing for autonomy, this may be challenging for students who have not had a lot of autonomy in their life. However, using a person-centered approach fosters independence and decision-making skill of the individuals (Miller et al., 2017). Person-centered approaches have been shown overall to support people's attainment of personal outcomes (Miller et al., 2017). The shift from limitations of the individual to seeing limitations as many variables in the environment that affect community access has been shown to be empowering to individuals and has caused changes in systems (Rasheed et al., 2006).

### *Persons with Disability Need for Equitable Education*

Students with disabilities are a unique marginalized group that has been growing among postsecondary education institutions (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011; Mull et al., 2001; National Center for Education Statistics, 2021; Scott et al., 2003). Presenting new challenges for postsecondary institutions to meet students where they are at and provide support to ensure an equitable education. Services for individuals with disabilities in postsecondary education primarily focus on accommodation. Accommodation(s) are a way to adjust the environment so that the student has an equitable education that they can learn in without altering the foundation of the course (University of Washington, 2021a).

Marginalized groups in the United States have a history of being in lower social classes and therefor experience oppression due to their positionality (i.e., ability to pursue a postsecondary degree, financial instability, and subjective perception of social status) (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2021). According to the CDC (2020), only 19% of people with disabilities are currently employed. College education is associated with an increase of stable employment and earnings; therefore, it is important for marginalized groups who are entering into the workforce to combat the history of lower social status and economic capital. People with disabilities have reported an increase in earnings and employability therefore experiencing a higher quality of life by receiving a postsecondary degree (National Council on Disability, 2003). Although advancements have been made in providing access for students with disabilities, they also face many barriers, including everyday stressors students face, and managing their accommodation(s) (Getzel, 2008; Seale et. al., 2015).

### ***Community Colleges***

Access and success of community college has been shown to be an important step for students with disabilities (Quick et al., 2003). Community colleges have fewer requirements in admittance compared to four-year universities and other institution types. Once advancements were made for students with disabilities to receive a more equitable education, a high percentage of students attended community colleges (Lewis & Farris, 1999). In 1997-1998 fifty-five percent of students with disabilities attended community colleges (Lewis & Farris, 1999). Community College's responded by creating programs and resources to support students with disabilities advance in their academics and gain opportunities for employment (Trach & Harney, 1998; Norton & Field, 1998; Gugerty & Knutsen, 2000).

### **Literature About College Students with Disabilities**

In order to understand the need for this study, it is necessary to recognize the literature and research that has already been published about students with disabilities in higher education. The following section highlights the benefits of diversity in higher education, effectiveness of accommodations for students with disabilities in higher education, and the impact of faculty on college students with disabilities,

#### ***Benefits of Diversity in Higher Education***

Anicha et al. (2017) report that various research shows that supporting a diverse community in higher education has a positive impact on a intra- and inter-personal level. When scholars discuss diversity, they often exclude people with disabilities; which is a direct reflection of inequality and oppression (Davis, 2015). Shallish (2017) states that an overall lack of understanding of persons with disabilities has led to persistent and structural exclusion of disability in diversity efforts. Faculty, and partitioners still largely identify disability as an



individual biomedical concern; therefore, disability remains separate from diversity (Burgstahler, 2020). Programs that have been created to advance diversity efforts have not yet created tangible means for addressing ableism (Dolmage, 2017). People with disabilities experience oppression due to disabling environments, therefore efforts should be made at a social justice level, including disability in diversity efforts (Shallis, 2017).

Studies have shown that interacting with a diverse population increases self-confidence, enhances cognitive development, and increases empathy (Antonio et al., 2004; Williams et al., 2005). Students who interact with more diverse peers experience a greater cultural awareness, and willingness to understand others' perspectives (Milem, 2003; Shalish, 2017). Peer interactions also contributed to a higher satisfaction with students' college experience and an increase in analytical and writing skills (Astin, 1993).

### ***Effectiveness of Accommodations***

Accommodation(s) does not guarantee student success. The accommodation(s) support the student in removing the environmental interaction barrier(s) to their education that do not exist for the population the environment was created for. As a result, the student is still responsible for the effort they put into their coursework and the outcome of the course to the same extent as their peers who do not use accommodation(s). There are legal differences regarding the protection for this marginalized group from when the individual is in K-12 versus in postsecondary education (Madaus, 2011). In education settings prior to college, there is a lot more involvement from teachers, guardians, and case managers. The individual's team all support and advocate for the individual's needs. Whereas, in postsecondary education, students with disabilities must seek out support from their disability support office (Dragoo & Cole, 2019; University of Washington, 2021).

It is the student's responsibility to request accommodation(s), provide information indicating their need for accommodation(s), and advocate for themselves (i.e., reminding faculty to send exams to the testing center) (Dragoo & Cole, 2019; University of Washington, 2021a). Due to the extra responsibility of managing accommodation(s), these students experience additional barriers compared to their peers, whom the environment was created for, to receive a equitable education (Getzel, 2008; Seale et. al., 2015). This can be especially difficult for students who are emerging into their independence and self-advocacy. Without prior advocacy skills this can be intimidating, as there are power dynamics to navigate through with less support than their previous educational setting.

Students who seek out accommodation(s) have reported that effectiveness of accommodation, availability of accommodation, increased independence and ease of use are statistically crucial factors when selecting accommodation(s) (Kurth & Mellard, 2006). If faculty are unwilling to accommodate a student they would inhibit ease of use, availability, and effectiveness of approved accommodation. Hudson (2013) reports that students who identify as having a disability at the postsecondary levels are at a higher risk of dropping out (as cited in Kim & Aquino, 2017). With 25% of U.S. citizens identified as being disabled, it is incredibly important for postsecondary education to focus on this group's success to advance society (CDC, 2020).

The type of accommodation(s) that are approved for each student is unique and individually based on their needs, not a diagnosis. Students with disabilities have a wide variety of experiences within their diagnosis, which is why a person-centered approach to approving accommodation(s) is important in understanding what is reasonable for the student (University of Washington, 2021b). According to Kurth and Mellard (2006), college student with disabilities

self-reported that note takers, extended testing time, adaptive technology, public transportation and moving to various locations in the classroom was an effective accommodation(s) for the student's specific barriers 80% of the time in their postsecondary courses. The 80% effectiveness might be explained by a variety of factors including educational context, willingness of faculty or faculty knowledge of implementation of the accommodation.

### ***Impact of Faculty on College Students with Disabilities***

There is a common misconception that individuals with disabilities receiving accommodation(s) leads to an unfair advantage (Williams & Ceci, 1999). This can cause tension among faculty members and their students with disabilities and/or Disability Support offices. Accommodation(s) are in place to provide equitable access to education by removing environmental interactional barriers. With negative attitudes or tension between faculty and students, the student can be less willing to disclose, self-advocate, and use their accommodation(s). Faculty-student relationships are important for a variety of reasons. Milem and Berger (1997) found that social inclusion, including personal relationships with at least one faculty member is associated with persistence among students with learning disabilities. Fichten et al. (2014) found that a student's intention to graduate was predicted by positive attitudes of professors. Unsurprisingly, students with disabilities identify that faculty members are one of the main barriers to their academic success (Love et al., 2015). Students make a point that in some cases, faculty members are unwilling to make necessary approved adjustments. This could be due to a lack of training faculty receives to respond to accommodation(s) appropriately (Martins et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2018).

### **Literature About Faculty Working with Students with Disabilities**

A focus of this study is about faculty, in order to grasp why this focus was chosen it is important to understand some of the existing published work about faculty with students with disabilities. This section will cover faculty perception on students with disabilities, and training and barriers for faculty supporting students with disabilities.

### ***Faculty Perception on Students with Disability***

Students with disabilities voice their need to be like “everyone else” and reduce attention on their disability (Yssel et al., 2016). According to Yssel et al. (2016) some faculty gave so much attention to their students with disabilities that it made them uncomfortable and negatively impacted their feeling of independence. Kimball et al. (2017) suggest that disability training and awareness should be present in professional development. As faculty are already trained to navigate conversations about sensitive issues, they need to provide the same level of support for students with disabilities. Institutions need to move past an emphasis on enforcing law and expand to include persons with disabilities into their inclusion and engagement planning (Kimball et al., 2017).

Graham-Smith and Lafayette (2004) incorporated the work of Chickering (1969), who stresses that importance of a sense of belonging to the success of students (as cited in Evans et al., 2017). Faculty willingness to create a positive campus climate for students with disabilities contributes to a higher persistent rate by creating a sense of belonging (Milem & Berger, 1997; Fichten et al. 2014). When faculty are unwilling to accommodate students, it results in a negative campus climate for those with disabilities (DaDeppo, 2009; Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011; Murray et al., 2008; Yuen & Shaughnessy, 2001). Campus climate and how faculty treat students plays a key role in student success and adjustment to postsecondary education (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011; Murray et al., 2014). Madaus (2011) found that the main difference between

positive and negative experiences of students with disabilities in college courses was dependent on how faculty treated them. When faculty do not value inclusivity, they are unlikely to adjust their teaching styles to meet the needs of their students (Moriarty, 2007). Faculty who were consistent in their expectations, available for their students and provided a universal design frame of instructions, validated individuality of students, and promoted the connection of knowledge to prior content contributed to a positive experience for students (Lombardi, 2010). Murray et al. (2010) discovered that any training, either minimal or intensive, improved attitudes of faculty towards students with disabilities.

Faculty attitudes can impact the effectiveness of the accommodation(s) students with disabilities receive, and as a result impact the students' performance and success in higher education (Hong & Himmel, 2009). In the Hong and Himmel (2009) study it was shown that lack of knowledge about legislation did not impact the willingness of faculty to work with students with disability, however the amount of overall disability knowledge was found to be a significant predictor of faculty's willingness to accommodate. Faculty also stated that they would not lower their expectations of coursework due to a disability (Hong and Himmel, 2009). Although disability offices do not alter the integrity of courses, there is a common misconception that accommodation(s) provide an unfair advantage and therefore some faculty might see providing accommodations as a way of "lowering the expectations of their coursework" (Williams & Ceci, 1999, p. B4). Understandably, with these negative attitudes the student with disabilities could be uncomfortable and hesitant to request assistance or advocate for themselves.

Vogel et al. (1999) found that faculty had differences in willingness among the type of accommodation that was approved for the student. Faculty were the most willing to allow the student to tape record lectures. Most were willing to allow extended examination times but were

not willing to alter the format of examinations or provide supplemental materials (i.e., outlines or alternative formats for assignments). Stein (2014) explored students' stories with the interactions of their professors. Many students with disabilities stated that they had difficulty receiving testing accommodation due to the extra steps that were required of the professor. Students voiced that they “believed the professor thought they just wanted “an excuse” or did not want to provide the accommodation” (Stein, 2014, pp. 58).

Students with disabilities reported that many factors influenced their decision to ask for assistance with accommodation in a course, many stated that a key factor was the professor based on their behavior and interactions. The interactions and behaviors were both personal and observant. Sometimes the students' fear of how the professor would react discouraged them from seeking assistance, even from courses that the students know they will need accommodation(s) in order to be successful (Stein, 2014). Kurth and Mellard (2006) conducted a focus group and discovered that students also had a fear of being labeled and discriminated against. The fear of being labeled is partially created internally by the student, and lack of knowledge among faculty was also a factor.

The way the professor interacts with students and others could be influenced by the type of training and knowledge they have of the student population. According to Stein (2014), students noted the faculty they perceived to have negative impact on their achievement (a) did not give the students accommodation(s), even when presented documentation and, (b) lacked knowledge about disability and disability services. Not all these students disclosed the specific nature of their disability. Those who did, reported that professors did not have adequate knowledge about disability, especially for those with psychological disabilities (Stein, 2014). The students suggested that faculty should receive professional development, specifically

regarding disabilities, in order to work effectively with the student population (Stein, 2014).

There are various research findings that show faculty that participate in some type of institutional training or workshop have a greater awareness of students with disabilities and accommodations (Lombardi & Murray, 2011; Lombardi et al., 2011; Murray et al., 2009).

### ***Training and Barriers for Faculty Supporting Students with Disabilities***

Research has been conducted on faculty perception, and how their perception impacts students with disabilities success (Hong & Himmel, 2009; Milem & Berger, 1997; Vogel et al., 1999). However, an area to further explore is what faculty need in order to be successful working with students with disabilities. Instead, the focus has been on what students can do and what faculty should do without any tangible training, tools, or education. This is an extremely broad topic, which includes knowledge of the laws of disabled students, how to implement accommodations and practices that are inclusive to a variety of learning styles. Cole and Cawthon's (2015) study concluded with four recommendations to faculty: increase disability and accommodation knowledge, develop accommodation plans with students, use a variety of teaching styles, and be open and willing to accommodate. Lombardi and Lalor (2017) suggest that efforts for students with disabilities must be coordinated by faculty and administrators to create a change; specifically, these efforts must include training around the awareness of disability and inclusive instructional practices.

All learners fall on a range of needs for their learning; therefore, instruction presented by faculty needs to be reconstructed on a continuum (Orr & Hammig, 2009). Gladhard (2010) found that less than half of faculty provided large print handouts, captioned or scripted audio, and advanced organizers. Without these faculty members using a universal design, students with disabilities who need these accommodation(s) would need to be responsible in requesting the

accommodation(s) from the disability or accessibility office and faculty member. Cole and Cawthon's (2015) reported that students with learning disabilities approached faculty members for accommodations and reported that faculty members did not know what to do with the request.

Other research indicates faculty overall have a positive attitude towards students with disabilities, including a willingness to provide accommodation(s), however, feel underprepared to provide the necessary supports (Murray et al., 2008; Vogel et al., 2008). Vogel et al., (2008) assessed their campus climate, as it relates to disability services, which indicated faculty having limited knowledge of disability and disability laws. They also concluded that faculty teaching for a greater amount of time showed statistically significant higher knowledge of disability related items. The data suggests that there is a need for practical knowledge about accommodation and policies (Vogel et al., 2008).

Further research shows positive impact of faculty training regarding students with disabilities. Findings indicate that faculty who participate in institutional training or workshop had greater awareness of students with disabilities (Lombardi & Murray, 2011; Lombardi et al., 2011; Murray et al., 2009). Although these findings show a positive outcome, 70% of responders reported that the largest barrier was lack of time and resources (Raue & Lewis, 2011). Various universities have produced materials to provide vital information about students with disabilities to faculty (e.g., University of Washington, 2003; Utah State University, 2003). However, with limited time for faculty to review the material it is difficult to determine what, and how much information should be included, and how it is best presented to faculty.



### **Chapter III: Methodology**

This qualitative study was created with five participant interviews. The interviews were constructed with semi-structured questions that were informed by general social justice values, Universal Design, and Crip Theory. My positionality, background, and worldview inform how the interviews were carried out and analyzed, thus further explanation about these items is explained in this chapter.

#### **Theoretical Framework**

The framework for this study is based on the broad lens of social justice, Universal Design, and Crip Theory. The Social Justice Model focuses on systems of power and oppression. The focus is to transform the systems of power and oppression for the better of the marginalized group (Adams et al., 2007). For the disabled community, the social justice lens examines ablism as a form of oppression (Griffin et al., 2007). Ablism is shown in all three dimensions of oppression (context, application, and consciousness) either at an individual, institutional, or cultural level (Evans et al., 2017). As I collected and analyzed data, I considered these different dimensions of oppression, especially as they relate to students with disabilities. The goal is to gain an understanding of students' experiences in order to promote a more equitable experience in higher education, therefore addressing ablism at the institutional level.

Crip Theory is a branch of Critical Race Theory and has a focus on the community with disabilities. Crip Theory is based around the concept of challenging what is “normal” (Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006; Sandahl, 2003). This theory emphasizes that able-bodied and able-minded individuals created our environment and perpetuated notions of normality. If someone does not fit into the dominant construct of what is “normal,” they are considered less than (Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006). Crip Theory challenges these messages by defining disability as contextual

(McRuer, 2006). Limitations of an individual occur due to their environmental interactions, therefore making disability fluid as individuals interact with a variety of environments (Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006). Keeping Crip Theory in mind, clarifying questions used in the interviews focused on environmental factors. This is important due to the contextual nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and the abrupt changes in environments for all students. Additionally, environments differ per classroom, therefore understanding environments that work best for individuals will support ongoing efforts for equitable classroom experience. Using a Crip Theory lens supports approaches to move towards the necessary person-centered practice and away from compliance-centered practice (Abes & Darkow, 2020).

This study, particularly the interview protocol used, was influenced by Universal Design (UD). Universal Design is a broad concept that the learning environment should be accessible to those of all abilities. At a postsecondary institution this would include physical designs of the environment, incorporating a variety of teaching styles, etc. UD is implemented in the educational experience by creating an environment that is mindful of the diverse population and accessibility needs (Evans et al., 2017; University of Washington 2021a). UD focuses on design flaw, rather than a flaw from the individual (Burgstahler, 2020). Focusing on cultivating a more universally designed higher education experience would change the accommodation approach to a proactive design, minimizing the need for accommodations (Burgstahler, 2020). Interview questions created for this study inquired about how UD was being, or not being, implemented within the classroom.

### **Researcher Positionality**

Positionality is a vital component to consider in research. This introduces an array of strategic, ethical, and personal issues in the research process. Explaining positionality explicitly

can support the reader in discovering biases in how the study was designed, carried out, and interpreted based on the values and personal background of the researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

I identify as a cisgender White female in my mid 20's who has multiple disabilities. Although I identify as having multiple disabilities, these disabilities are non-visible. My disabilities also did not create a barrier to my education due to my interaction with the environment; therefore, I do not have a personal background working with disability offices as a student. However, I have professional experience working within a higher education Disability Service office. During the first half of this project, I was an intern, working approximately eight hours a week within the DS office at Midwestern Community College. During the second half of this study, I continued that internship and worked as an Access Consultant at a different university within their Disability Service Office. Additionally, I have previous work experience at a Day Training and Habilitation (DT&H) site working with adults with disabilities. The majority of the people I worked with required support at a level that would obstruct the integrity of academic courses, which would not be accepted at a postsecondary institution. Therefore, my direct experience and subsequent knowledge of working with people with disabilities is different from what may arise with students with disabilities at a postsecondary institution.

My work at the DT&H site formed a significant amount of my philosophies about working with people. These philosophies include that when working with people, we should use a person-centered approach, including the acknowledgment that all aspects of a person's life influence other aspects of a person's life (a holistic point of view). Additionally, I believe that the individual knows themselves best and can make decisions for themselves, when provided with the necessary information. Learning occurs from failure and natural consequences, which often

arises from the dissonance of when an individual must balance their wants and their needs. For example, a student may want to watch Netflix and they may need to study for an exam. The student will need to consider their options and navigate potential natural consequences of their decision. Finally, I view behavior as a form of communication. For example, a student might continually fail courses, regardless of having supportive staff and faculty around them, and being capable of achieving their degree. This behavior could indicate there are other priorities in the person's life that need attention, the student does not want to be in school or something else. All these communications are neutral and should use a person-centered approach to understand communication. Although these are neutral, these communications need to be considered especially while working through dissonance. The student in the previous example is not good nor bad, but just is.

### ***Transformative Worldview***

This research is situated in a transformative worldview. The transformative worldview holds an action agenda to analyze issues of power and oppression, inequality, alienation, suppression, and empowerment. In analyzing these issues, the researcher combats social oppression on an array of levels (Creswell & Creswell., 2018). Aligned with this worldview, I placed students with disabilities at the center of this study as they experience oppression. By gaining an understanding of these students' perceptions of faculty, I intend to make recommendations to inform and advance ongoing efforts to combat ablism at Midwestern Community College.

### **Methodology & Methods**

This qualitative study used a phenomenological research design. Phenomenological research design focuses on describing lived experiences rather than explaining them (Creswell &

Creswell, 2018; Lester, 1999). Phenomenological research emphasizes the importance of the participants' perspectives and interpretations while holding the paradigm of personal knowledge and subjectivity (Lester, 1999). This method aligns with my transformative worldview, placing a group that is marginalized at the center of the study to understand their experience and perceptions of oppression that has occurred in the classroom at Midwestern Community College.

Study participants varied in age, gender, major, disability, and racial identity. They presented their unique narratives of their time at Midwestern Community College, providing insights as to how they perceived their faculty members. Interviews were transcribed and inductively coded using the qualitative data analysis program, Dedoose. This analysis process allowed themes of lived experiences to emerge. These codes provide a wealth of knowledge about their personal experiences, including information on how to create a more inclusive learning environment.

### **Study Design**

This qualitative study was designed to be composed of one or two focus groups, each with a minimum of three participants (students with disabilities at Midwestern Community College). The focus group protocol was semi-structured and created with the intention to draw out students' experiences with faculty at Midwestern Community College. During the first focus group, two out of six participants attended the focus group, and one was feeling ill, leaving the group early. After this occurred, I sent out another call for participants. Due to scheduling, I shifted from a focus group format to individual interviews. This allowed for five participants, including the student who had fallen ill during the first focus group.

I asked participants to join via zoom for their interviews. This gave the participants the opportunity to be in a comfortable environment for themselves, have their camera turned off if

they wanted, and change their screen name if desired. It was emphasized that I valued the participants, and they were the focal point, therefore they could do anything they needed in order to take care of themselves (i.e., example go to the restroom, not answer questions, take a break, etc.).

### **Participants**

Participants were selected with a criterion sampling method. A criterion sampling method was determined due to the participant criteria of using accommodations for a minimum of one semester at Midwestern Community College, being currently enrolled at Midwestern Community College, and being at least 18 years old. The participant list was reviewed by the ADA director of Midwestern Community College based on experience with the individuals and their ability to provide information to the focus group.

Using the participant list provided to me by the ADA director at Midwestern Community College, I emailed and invited students to voluntarily participate in the study. An initial email invitation (Appendix A) was initially sent to students who met the criteria, followed with a second email invitation (Appendix B). Within the initial recruitment email (see Appendix A and B), I included a link to the study intake form (see Appendix C) and a brief demographics form (see Appendix D). Five days after the initial email, I sent a follow up email (see Appendix B). The Midwestern Community College Disability Support office provided thank you gifts to study participants, which included college swag and treats that were donated from functional areas across the university. Study participants chose their own pseudonyms as a measure of confidentiality.

**Table 1***Participants' Demographic Information*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Disability identification</b>	<b>Midwestern Community College is the first College attended</b>
<b>Stompy Ruffers</b>	35	Male	Caucasian	Person	No
<b>Rin</b>	32	female	white	Not sure	No
<b>Pidge</b>	31	Non-binary/third gender	Mixed race Japanese and White	Disabled person	Yes
<b>Delilah</b>	21	female	White	Fluidly depending on context	Yes
<b>Archibald Francis</b>	27	Male	White	Pretend it's not an issue	No

Five students volunteered to participate in this study. Of these five, two identified as female, two identified as male and one identified as non-binary. Ages ranged from 21-35 years old. Four participants identified as being White and one as Japanese and White, three had attended a college prior to Midwestern Community College, and all had different majors. Participants were asked to complete a question of how they identified their disability, this included a drop-down menu of “disabled person, person with a disability, non-disabled (able-bodied and able-minded) and other” where they could type their response. Three of the participants appeared to not know how to identify their disability. The participants responses to this question included: (1) Person, (2) pretend it is not an issue and (3) unsure how to identify. One participant identified as (4) a disabled person and the other (5) fluidly identified depending on the context and environment they are in.

## **Data Collection and Analysis Plan**

After interest was acquired, I sent participants an email that contained the Zoom login information for their focus group session (see Appendix F). I used a focus group protocol (Appendix E) created with cript theory and universal design in mind to guide my questions and interviewing. The questions were checked and edited by my thesis advisor, Dr. Ashlee and approved by St. Cloud State's Institutional Review Board (IRB). At the start of each interview, I restated the purpose of the study, reminded each participant that their participation was voluntary, provided a trigger warning of possible emotional responses to some questions, encouraged participants not to disclose faculty names, reminded participants that they could stop the interview at any time, and reminded them of my commitment to confidentiality. I took notes on paper during the individual interviews and wrote down time stamps that stood out to me as important to revisit. Interviews were audio and video recorded via Zoom. I also used Zoom's transcription feature to support the transcription process and ensure accuracy. After completing the interviews, I emailed participants resources that included information for counseling, the disability support office on campus, educational opportunities, and links for complaint forms (general and bias complaint form specific to Midwestern Community College).

Raw data was stored on a password protected computer and inside a password protected folder. Participants' names were replaced by their chosen pseudonym, selected in the intake form, during the transcription process. Once transcription was complete the video recordings were deleted. Interview transcripts were uploaded to Dedoose for coding using an inductive coding method. Using an inductive coding method, I built patterns, categories, and themes based off the responses from participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).



The validity of this study was determined by member checking. After I identified initial themes, I emailed participants a findings summary. Study participants were given the opportunity to review the themes and provide feedback to the principal researcher. Participants had ten days to provide feedback, the goal with the time frame was to allow sufficient time to fit into the students' schedules and not an excessive amount of time where the task may be forgotten. Two participants provided feedback that the codes reflected what the participant was saying.

## Chapter IV: Findings

The participants presented unique narratives of their own lived experiences at Midwestern Community College, with an emphasis of their time interacting with faculty. Like all college students, each experience was influenced by their own perspectives, positionalities, background, preferences, and needs. Throughout the data analysis process, I coded data for major patterns and themes that emerged from the students' narratives. I identified codes of: communication, structure, flexibility, and technology. These codes intersect and interact with each other in a variety of ways and support a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of these students at Midwestern Community College who have disabilities and accommodations. Regardless of accommodations, participants voiced that faculty members were a key factor in their academic success and persistence in college.

All participants felt that their accommodation needs were being met at Midwestern Community College. Some instructors made a significant impact by being attentive to students' needs and assisting them as needed. For example, Rin expressed

The first term I was at [Midwestern Community College] I wasn't [receiving] accommodations, because I didn't know that was a thing I could have. Before [receiving accommodations] my professors were willing to help and work with me [on] things that I needed, so it's always been a very positive experience.

Other participants felt that instructors were following the ADA, however, they did not experience their faculty going further. The following codes make further meaning of the above statement and illuminate their experiences with faculty at Midwestern Community College.

## **Communication**

Communication was emphasized on a variety of levels. To make meaning of communication, I have broken this theme down into three subcategories: from DS office, from student, and from faculty. All subcategories of communication were voiced as vital to participants' success and persistence in college, and impacted their perception of interactions with faculty members. With any of these pieces missing, the puzzle of the students' communicative needs would not be met.

### ***Communication from DS Office***

According to the study participants, the DS office is a key factor for students with disabilities. The office processes initial meetings to determine services that are appropriate for each individual, adjusts the student's accommodation plan as needed, advocates on behalf of students, and communicates with faculty members. All study participants stated that they had an overall positive experience receiving accommodation at Midwestern Community College, and there were two participants who indicated that they had complications due to their accommodation letters not being sent. Although these complications occurred, it was a product of the student's communication, not the DS office and therefore will be explained further in the subcategory of communication from student.

As students continue through their time in college new barriers may occur. For example, an event could exacerbate a mental illness symptom, medication changes that create new side effects etc. As these adjustments happen, the DS office is responsible for updating accommodation plans as needed. I would argue that this is both part of the flexibility and communication subcode of communication from student, however it is indicated that the DS office plays a large role in this. Pidge emphasized that the office providing that flexibility was

important. They stated “the accommodations that I do have fit me really well. I know that if I went and said, ‘can we add this to my letter’ I would be told yes, as long as it was reasonable.” They also mentioned that if friends were thinking of going to college, and needed accommodation, they would recommend attending Midwestern Community College to that friend. They stated, “if you do not know how to advocate for yourself, you’ll learn because they’ll tell you what you should do.” Looking at this comment through a social justice lens, Pidge is expressing how the office is supporting social justice efforts by providing support to students around advocacy.

### ***Communication from Student***

Without needs being expressed by the students themselves, it is difficult for the faculty or the DS office to know how to support the student. Students' communication is another necessary piece to the puzzle of communication within higher education. All participants voiced that this is necessary in order to effectively be supported in the higher education setting. Rin stated that her age is a key factor in her ability to advocate for herself, she shared, “I can kind of see [faculty] more as like a peer as I can talk to them on an equal level, and I still respect them as far as a professor.” She continues to express that when she was younger, she was not communicating with her faculty members, and that lead to an unsuccessful and frustrating time in college and with her faculty. Part of this, Rin explained that when she was younger, she worried more about being judged, and feared being perceived as stupid, which has subsided as she has matured.

At Midwestern Community College, there is a need for students to communicate Faculty changes to their schedule. The students are given a specific period of when this is necessary, which occurs at the beginning of the year to ensure letters are sent to faculty. This is a specific need of the community college due to their current systems being used and processing of

accommodation letters to faculty. As stated in the subcode of communication from students, there were two students who indicated that they had difficulties receiving accommodations.

Pidge explains,

I had an instructor that I had to fight [with] for my accommodations. That incident was less than ideal. I kept asking for my accommodation and it ended up that they never received my letter, so I was fighting without really knowing it.

Pidge further explained that their assigned faculty was adjusted, after letters were sent out, and they had forgotten the process of notifying the DS office so they could send the letter to the new faculty member. Delilah stated that she also had an incident where her letter was not sent to her instructor under the same circumstances. Through the lens of Crip Theory and UD, I interpreted this as an environmental barrier to students with disabilities. This additional communication step appears to be easily forgotten and therefore not user friendly to individuals who face change in faculty. This is not necessarily a flaw with the student or DS office, but more so a interaction due to the technology and software being used by Midwestern Community College.

### ***Communication from Faculty***

Communication from the faculty members is the third piece to the communication puzzle. This communication happens on two levels, including in the classroom, and one-on-one. Participants emphasized the importance of the faculty showing extra support (i.e., initiating support when the student is struggling) and the faculty using an empathetic approach to all interactions (i.e., acknowledging current events and how they are potentially affecting students). The first level of communication from the faculty members occurs within the classroom, this includes their syllabus, how they present their material, and clarity within their instructions. On the secondary level, I considered communication to be one-on-one. This includes the students'

gaining clarity and supporting the accommodation needs. Many of these items also co-exist within the following code, structure.

The first level of communication contains the core of the course, including syllabi, how content is taught, and the classroom experience. Delilah stated that “when [faculty] are doing introductions on the first day, they will bring up disability services, so people are aware of it ... it makes me pretty comfortable needing accommodations.” Looking at this comment through a social justice lens, Delilah sheds light on the importance of faculty introducing the services, therefore normalizing the need for accommodations and possibly making students feel more comfortable asking for services.

Several participants indicated that having multiple perspectives within the learning content supported their learning. Archibald Francis had an experience where a course did not have a textbook, therefore the only point of view was from his faculty member. He reflected, “I think it’s a disadvantage because sometimes one person’s point of view can cause tunnel vision. When I have a book, I can look at the book and get a better picture of what’s going on.” Stompy Ruffers stated that using faculty to talk in depth is helpful for his learning, he indicated that these in-depth conversations leave room multiple perspectives of knowledge. This was indicated as valuable to his learning as well. He commented,

I wish [faculty at Midwestern Community College] were more open to discuss things in depth with a bit more critical thinking, but you don’t always find that. Some faculty are open to that. Some of them, in my opinion, are box checkers and they’ve box checked through life. Which, I guess is a successful strategy because they have made it where they have, but they themselves focus on memorization and pre-approved application of knowledge ... if you want to really dive into things and cross analyze and think about it.

Not every person, which means not every instructor, is going to be comfortable with that, which I've never really appreciated. But it's a thing that happens from time to time.

To add further context, Stompy Ruffers explained that the dominant way of teaching, that he experienced, including slides and the faculty lecturing is not supportive of his learning styles. He remarked, "it is just the bullet pointed audio version of the book." Stompy further explained that in one course the faculty member added "extra things" to their lectures, which supported his connection to the content and encouraged further processing of the information due to the different approaches. I interpreted "extra things" as information that was outside of the textbook, and included a variety of formats (i.e., videos, learning activities, etc.). Stompy expressed frustration when lectures only contained content from the textbook, as he is proactive in his readings and therefore, he does not believe it adds to his learning. Rather, Stompy would prefer information outside of the text to connect to the content he already read. I analyzed Stompy's comment from a social justice and Universal Design (UD) lens. Stompy is stating that the dominate way of teaching is not conducive to his learning, which could be impacted by his disability. When instructors implement UD (i.e., multiple means of engagement and representation), therefore changing the environment, supported Stompy's processing of information and classroom success. This universally supports diverse learners and therefore can create a more equitable education.

Archibald Francis noted, when there are online courses, it is helpful to have recorded lectures to support his learning style, however it "depends on the instructor." Archibald further explains that his comment around "depends on the instructor" is related to their ability to lecture and how tech savvy they are. This comment, interpreted through the Crip Theory lens, suggests that altering the learning environment (e.g., adding videos) supported his learning needs and

reduced barriers to his education. Additionally, Archibald is expressing the desire for UD (i.e., multiple means of representation and multiple means of action & expression), which would further social justice for those with disabilities. Rin also expressed some concern about course formatting, specifically related to time. She stated,

I did go back and forth a little bit between the length of the lectures. My first few classes, when I was starting out, were evening classes and they were two hours long at a time... [Now, I am] a full-time traditional student so I'm taking classes during the day, and they only have a 50-minute window [for classes] and I'm [wondering] how much can we actually get through in those 50 minutes?

She further explains that, in her experience, within that 50-minute time frame for class the faculty tend to want to cover a considerable sum of content, and it is not conducive to the timeframe provided. She indicated that this was difficult, because the faculty tend to rush through content and subsequently have to review it within the next class and inhibit the time for that day's content. This was interpreted through the lens of UD, expressing the need of providing multiple means of action and expression.

All participants noted that the in-class component of communication made an impact on their interaction or perception of the faculty member. Some of these are preferences, for example Rin, after exploring the differences between a two-hour course and fifty-minute course, has the ability to register for courses that fit with her preferences. There are also takeaways from this first level of communication that could support a more inclusive learning environment, which will be discussed further in chapter five.

At the secondary level, the faculty members directly communicate with students. Participants voiced this to be a key component for gaining clarity of content and supporting



accommodation need; according to the participants, faculty at Midwestern Community College were effectively meeting that need. Archibald noted,

My current Professor for this semester is actually [pause] he is making sure every week that I have an exam, [and is] emailing me 'is this the time that we said?' You know, just making sure he's always following up, so they've all been very diligent and supportive on anything that I've ever needed from them.

Archibald typically needs this communication in relation to his accommodation of minimal distraction testing environment and additional testing time. He expressed,

Usually that is the only time that [extra communication efforts] really happens. You know, I'll take the test in the test center but then because of the extra time [accommodation] I might have another class or something [where] there's crossover. So, we can work out a new test time. I've never had a problem with that.

He also stated that "the instructors are good about emailing." Rin expressed similar satisfaction towards faculty emailing responses. She stated, "all of them are approachable. I've had to email, all of them individual things for whatever reason and they always get back very quickly or are willing to just be there to help." Delilah receives an accommodation of receiving the PowerPoints ahead of time, she emphasized that it was helpful for her learning, and she has never had trouble receiving the PowerPoints on time, which is vital to her experience in the course for understanding and note taking.

All participants expressed satisfaction with their faculty's willingness to communicate. They also indicated that when faculty members went the extra mile by being empathic towards the individual's situation, and providing extra support was a key factor towards this satisfaction.

Pidge expressed a key moment to her persistence in college. They had a faculty member that saw them struggling, and took additional time to talk to Pidge. In particular, they supported Pidge's discovery of the read speaker, they expressed satisfaction within this experience and showed the impact this additional effort had on Pidge. They stated, "Honestly without her I would not have continued schooling.... She helped me get accommodations and I need them in order to continue my education." This incident shows both additional supports, and the empathy that this faculty member had. The faculty member could have allowed Pidge to initiate that interaction, however this action showed empathy and compassion for the student's situation and resulted in extra support that they needed.

This empathy and compassion goes further than this one interaction. Participants expressed how important this was for them. Although not directly indicated, an approach that shows compassion and empathy could create an environment where self-advocacy is easier for students. Rin captures the importance of this, especially for students with disabilities due to the rejection they have faced throughout their lives. She notes,

Anyone who has accommodations [probably] has rejection sensitivity.... It doesn't even have to be a big comment that [faculty] make. But sometimes it is just the way they say something can make.... Makes me feel like 'oh, I'm not right here or I'm doing something wrong or I'm taking up their time or they are annoyed.' It is not necessarily that they feel that way or anything, [but] just the way they [speak] can trigger those sensitivities and if you've been dealing with rejection and fighting through things like that your whole life, especially in learning, it can be very detrimental even to like just the relationship that you have with your professors.

Rin proceeded to explain how the aftermath of this feeling prevents her from learning the rest of the course period and creates a hesitation to advocate for herself or ask follow up questions, especially in the one-on-one setting. She also expresses that people are humans, who make mistakes and is very aware that faculty are not excluded from that. I asked Rin if the faculty recognized what happened and had addressed the situation later would that approach be helpful? She said yes, and proceeded to tell me about an example from her time at Midwestern Community College in a lab course. She stated that an instructor had interrupted her, which caused her to shut down. Later, the faculty members followed up with her to apologize for interrupting and she had felt more comfortable about interacting with the faculty member. Archibald Francis shared a similar experience where he made a scheduling mistake due to attending two colleges simultaneously. He stated, "I feel bad because I think [course instructor] is actually frustrated with me..... I think it's not a good look, you know what I mean? It doesn't look like I'm invested." This feeling appeared to be amplified by the instructor not responding to his apology email for the scheduling mix up. Archibald Francis noted that he also can feel uncomfortable due to faculty's actions. He mentioned,

I might get stuck on something. Like [for example], we are going through a sequence or something. We are starting with A and then going to Z but I might be stuck on like B or something in between and I keep staring at it. And then, the rest of the class is moving on, and I might ask at the end of class what may seem like a stupid question. But I was so stuck on that one aspect and couldn't figure it out.

I asked what kind of support he would want during these occurrences, he replied,

Normally, it's more like knowing that I was paying attention. But like I just got stuck on a certain part of something. Because sometimes they look at me and they'll be like 'why

aren't you paying attention' and I'm like 'no, I was paying attention, but I didn't understand the first part' or something like that.

Archibald seems to be expressing the need for the instructor to step into his shoes, instead of assuming something negative, therefore expressing empathy. These examples the students shared are not necessarily large events or gestures that the faculty member did, they are small communicative means to indicate they care about the student.

### **Structure**

The structure of the course and content was emphasized by all participants as being a crucial factor to their experiences with faculty members. Specifically, the structure of clear expectations and deadlines so students do not fixate on incorrect information. Without deadlines for homework, including supplemental work and readings, students struggled to complete assignments and focus on content that would support their success in the course. I asked Archibald Francis about his experience with structure, as he indicated it was especially important to him, and he stated that "I think the problem is, maybe.... I don't know if anyone ever really discusses [self-structure]. But if there is no structure, I'll end up micro focusing on details that are not relevant." Archibald mentions micro-focusing throughout the interview, as it has been a major challenge for him throughout his time in higher education. Based on his narrative, micro-focusing is where he focuses on a singular topic or problem rather than the larger portion of content he is required to learn. When micro-focusing he is unable to spend time on other aspects that are important for the course, and sometimes those items he focuses on are not reflected within an exam or assessment of knowledge. Rin has a similar experience, where instead of micro focusing, she does not complete supplemental work without a due date. She notes,

Because there is no due date for it... So for me, like it's 'oh well if he not expecting it, I won't do it.' Then it's a hindrance on me, [because] I don't learn the material well because I do not do the [supplemental] homework. I recognize this is totally on me, but I think if [pause]. I always do better when things are like 'oh, you need to have this done by a certain due date,' so you know it is expected of you to actually get those done.

She later expressed that she would prefer to have accountability to complete the assignments, even if it is not attached to an abundance of points. Looking at this statement through my lens of Crip Theory, social justice and UD, I interpret this as an environmental barrier for the student. The student's condition comes with executive functioning limitations that are shown in her statement. If the environment was adjusted with deadlines, it would be more conducive for herself and could benefit the larger population of students.

The structure of the course content was also voiced as important to students' experience with faculty members. Stompy Ruffers had to withdraw from a course due to its structure. He stated,

I don't really like the way the class is formatted. Even though I like the professor, he is a great professor, but the class itself is a [pause] I don't know, there's just not [pause] so basically everything is on D2L [all of] the content and everything for the whole semester is right there.

This approach, of having an entire semester's worth of content available or visible on D2L, was overwhelming for the student due to his condition. Archibald also explains how a course he was not successful in was structured.

It was not even really a hard class, but like [the faculty] came late to class and then she wasn't really prepared and there wasn't like there was no structure. No syllabus, well

there was a syllabus, but it was just really short. There just wasn't a lot of structure, and then things just kind of fell apart for me.

This incident illustrates the importance of structure for Archibald. Structure might be important to more than just the population with disabilities, however you can see how impactful this was for a neurodiverse student like Archibald. Lack of structure had serious repercussions for this student. Additionally, in Archibald's statement you can hear how that first level of communication was so poor that it led to a lack of secondary communication to gain clarity and support from the faculty member. Looking at this through a UD, social justice and Crip theory lens, if this course was designed in a more structured environment for Archibald it would support his condition and success in the course.

### **Flexibility**

Flexibility within higher education instruction was emphasized by every participant as a key factor towards their experiences with faculty members. This included classroom experiences (i.e., delivery methods, study support, instructional practices). It should be noted that that there will never be a "one-size-fits all" due to faculty preferences, and weaknesses, student preferences and contextual nature of the material being presented. Students across the board appreciated the flexibility the instructors and course had for them.

Rin expressed her gratitude for flexibility within asynchronous courses. I asked Rin if her condition makes an impact on her learning and if the online environment supports that flexibility for her condition. She stated,

That is a definite factor for me, you know when the class.... you know like 11 O'clock every day I don't always feel like learning at that time so being able to like to choose

those times when I'm okay to focused, I can learn that information right now and doing that also helps being able to set up my own schedule, as far as when I work.

To add further context, this statement is an indication of a need, not a preference, as her condition impacts when it conducive for her to learn. Pidge also expressed the flexibility that online courses have for them, due to being immunocompromised during the COVID-19 pandemic. They stated that it is uncomfortable being in person, therefore the online options are better for them. Other participants preferred the flexibility of In-person courses, like Dehlila. She stated that she tends to learn better with physical paper copies, so when instructors have digital handouts, she “[has] a digital copy and the paper copy, even if the paper copy is what I end up liking more.” I interpreted this as an appreciation of the instructors being mindful of formatting (digital and physical) and providing both for the student. Being physically in class provided this opportunity for the student to have both formats.

Delilah experienced and appreciated flexibility with attendance as well. She stated that this was a bit trickier than her other accommodations, as there is more coordination and communication involved. Delilah elaborated, “trying to figure out or work around if I needed to be absent for an appointment or something like that... like figuring out if it's going to affect my grade and what I need to do [due to my disability related absence].” With these students’ understanding of how different formats of courses work with their flexibility needs, they appeared to be able to navigate their courses effectively to find courses that fit their needs. Where flexibility appears to be lacking is within the learning activities themselves.

Multiple participants stated that the bulk of their learning experience has consisted of instructors lecturing with a PowerPoint, reading chapters from an assigned textbook, and taking exams. Participants indicated that this is not conducive to the individual's learning style.

Participants voiced their appreciation for additional learning activities (i.e. discussions, games, and activities that are included in eBooks) This was difficult for some students, as they have different learning preferences when exams are the only indication of testing knowledge, it does not always adequately represent the students' knowledge. This is not unique to students with disabilities; however, it could be significantly more impactful due to neurological differences.

Rin further explains how this approach does not adequately assess her knowledge,

I understand the concepts and if I wanted to have a conversation about it, I could... but then [faculty] want me to take a test to remember which equation to use, and [for] me to do my math right and everything like that, and I just it just all goes haywire.

Within Rin's statement you can hear anxiety around testing, which could be due to testing in general or the amount of information she must regurgitate for an exam. Either reasoning for this anxiety indicates that traditional assessment of knowledge is not conducive to assessing Rin's knowledge.

When looking at the appreciation and need for flexibility through a UD, Crip Theory and social justice lens, I can see a number of environmental and design needs and wants for these students. With various preferences for in-person or online classes, it is clear that using a UD and offering multiple formats of class is important for these individuals. Although I am considering them preferences, within the context of COVID-19 this is a need directly impacted by these individuals' disabilities.

## **Technology**

Technology was emphasized as a valuable component to students' learning and their experience with faculty at Midwestern Community College. Participants emphasized online textbooks, learning activities and the ability to receive quick feedback within online activities to



be important. These technological components supported the students' learning preferences and can be a tool for faculty members. Additionally, students noted that technology, particularly eBooks, added flexibility and structure to their courses and learning style. All participants mentioned that eBooks were helpful for their learning, particularly the features that can read text aloud to them and engage in learning activities that are embedded within the book. Rin described an eBook her course is using, as an online version of the assigned textbook. This provides Rin with a read speaker built into the eBook and practice activities throughout the text to support her learning. She notes that a helpful component is that she can go back into the program to review her answers and gain an understanding of what she got wrong with the feedback tools that the eBook provided. She enjoys being able to interact with the material. Rin was not alone with this preference.

Stompy Ruffers mentioned that his online book is helpful because there is “technology embedded in the digital book. So, it reads the text to you and using that [feature] was a bit beneficial.” Rin stated that she feels “we should be moving away from big textbooks. It is probably just better these days. Sure, even if you don’t have an accommodation or a diagnosis, or whatever, nobody wants to sit and read 20 pages [of a textbook].” Pidge also mentioned,

I like the E-texts that we get. A lot of times, you can have them read to you, which is.

[pause] It reads really slow and that's irritating because I read really fast, but it also helps it sink in a bit more ... then I can adjust the fonts to make it easier to read.

When we think of different learning needs, the read speakers provides a opportunity for the environment of a textbook to be changed and provide a secondary way of processing information (e.g. auditory while students read). This appears to be impactful for students, and looking at a broader range can support UD as it could be helpful for a variety of individuals (i.e., English

language learners, low energy due to life circumstances, auditory preference processors). Similar to many of the other codes, this could disproportionality impact those with disabilities due to the nature of disabilities. For example, someone with a psychological disability may more consistently benefit from eBooks due to lack of energy, someone who has a disability that impacts reading speed or comprehension could dramatically impact their time on texts etc.

Stompy Ruffers and Rin explained how technology adds both flexibility and structure to their learning. Stompy has extra time on tests and due to his online class, he stated “testing is really easy because your timer is on D2L and you just go.” With this feature embedded within D2L, he does not have to adjust his arrival or departure time from class which would have to be coordinated with this instructor and the testing center. Earlier, in the structure code, Rin mentioned the need of accountability for homework. She states that faculty’s reasoning for not having set due dates is “a big factor of why [faculty] can't grade assignments, is that it takes a long time.” She follows with saying “that's also kind of where the online tools [can be used].” She expresses how these online tools, like eBooks, have built in assignments. The content can be automatically graded, and the student can receive quick feedback. Rin believes utilizing these tools would support faculty’s time, and students learning.

It is important to note that technology is a main form of communication for the DS office, students, and faculty. Within the communication code, I have noted email as a main form of communication. Additionally, appointments with the DS office are made through a scheduling system, confidential information about the students' eligibility is stored within a database, accommodations letters are sent to faculty via email, and course content is provided through Desire to Learn (D2L). Therefore, technology is seen throughout the codes, even if not explicitly said by participants.

## Conclusion

The data was analyzed and coded as communication, structure, flexibility, and technology. These codes interact with one another and impact the students' experience with their faculty members. The students' both indicated practices they can do, and that faculty can do in order to support their experiences in higher education.

Some of the key findings overlap with best practice that faculty can engage in. Effective communication, having an empathic approach, being mindful of technology, structure and flexibility are practices that can support all students, regardless of their disability status. However, these practices disproportionately effect students with disabilities due to their conditions. For example, specific communication with those who use the testing center, flexible schedules for individuals who have conditions that effect their ability to learn at specific times, technology for those whose condition makes it difficult to read etc. Rather than dissecting these codes into best practice and disability specific, I frame them as creating a more universally designed course to support all students. Doing so, happens to minimize the barrier between disability and environmental interaction.

Students indicated that their communication is essential for their persistence and experiences with faculty members. Their faculty will not be able to read their mind and will continue to make human errors, as they are not exempt from doing so. To support these points, the students need to communicate when a need is not being met. For example, a faculty member may forget to send a student's exam to the testing center, and that student can remind the faculty as needed. Additionally, students voiced preferences for courses. As earlier stated, there will never be a one size fits all which is not a new concept, and when students know their preferences, they are able to make decisions that best align with their wants and needs. A student

can pick if they want a fully online course, a course with zoom lectures or in-person.

Additionally, they are able to look at resources, like [ratemyprofessor.com](http://ratemyprofessor.com), and align their learning preferences with the style of the faculty member. With online courses, the dynamics between students with their peers and faculty members change. This was primarily voiced within the participants' communication with both faculty and peers. Participants voiced that there is less communication, which results in them not asking for support (i.e., asking a peer or walking to the tutoring center). Students can learn to navigate this difference in communication in order to build better relationships with peers or faculty. For example, a student can view their classmates' emails on D2L, they could then invite other students to a Zoom study session. They also are able to schedule online tutoring sessions (tutors from Midwestern Community College may zoom the student) or use Midwestern Community College's online tutor platform. Students With students taking ownership of these items, they set themselves up to have a higher chance of having a positive experience with the course itself and faculty member.

The participants also indicated that there are tools and skills that faculty can use to cultivate a more inclusive environment for students with disabilities. Participants noted that the faculty's communication was vital to their success. When faculty use a more empathetic approach in their interaction with students it resulted in a more comfortable learning environment for the students with disabilities. Structure, primarily with clarity of assignments, expectations and course material was also important for the students' experiences. The structure is dramatically impacted by the communication of the faculty members; for example, their syllabi is the first form of communication and introduction to their structure, providing information about the class, DS office, resources, and policies. Although structure is important, flexibility was also equally emphasized as being important. In particular, using a variety of

assignments (i.e., exams, papers, dialogue, games etc.) and using multiple points of view aids the students' processing of content. Technology was voiced as a major tool that provided students with this flexibility. In particular, eBooks that contained tools such as additional learning activities and a read-speaker provided the students' more opportunity to connect with the content and explore different opportunities for learning the material preferred.

## Chapter V: Discussion and Implications

Disability identity is one of one of the largest marginalized identities in higher education, and the population continues to rise (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011; Mull et al., 2001; National Center for Education Statistics, 2021; Scott et al., 2003). Lack of training programs and disability awareness has resulted in negative interactions between students and faculty members. This study aimed to gain clarity on what students with disabilities experiences are with faculty at Midwestern Community College. In particular, this college has advocated to use Universal Design (UD), however there are no training programs or resources provided to faculty to support their understanding of how to implement UD within the classroom. UD supports all students, however, but has a greater impact for students with disabilities due to neurological differences and disability-based barriers. Chapter four details these findings, and chapter five will situate those findings into my research question to make further meaning.

These findings are situated through the lens of UD, social justice and Crip Theory. All of these interplay with each other. Crip Theory is situated around the idea that the environment was created by and for able-bodied and able-minded individuals. Universal design is often used in disability research due to this idea of environmental interactions; the goal is to create an environment that is usable for all. This would be ideally creating environments that are accessible for those with and without disabilities therefore eliminating that environmental interaction, or at the least minimizing it. Social justice is broadly about systems of power and oppression. Using the frame work of UD and Crip Theory can support those social justice efforts in order to give this marginalized group a more equitable education.

## **Key Findings**

The findings found in chapter four communication, structure, flexibility, and technology impacted students' experiences at Midwestern Community College and their experiences with faculty. Findings underscore what is important for both students and faculty for academic success, and where gaps are occurring at Midwestern Community College. These codes intersect to create each individual's unique puzzle to shed light as to what they themselves can do and faculty can do to cultivate a more inclusive learning environment.

Communication was the most referenced element to students' classroom experience. Participants emphasized that communication from their DS office, themselves, and from their faculty members were all important components to their success. The DS office's main form of communication was to send out accommodation letters, as long as those were sent the participants felt that their accommodations were met. Two of the five participants indicated that their faculty members did not receive their accommodation letters, due to procedural error on the students end, which caused tension among the students and faculty members.

When students were experiencing this tension, they were also participating in self-advocacy, another form of communication that was emphasized by the participants. The self-advocacy process typically begins with acquiring accommodations from the DS office and continues in students' relationships with faculty members and the office as needed. All participants mentioned that self-advocacy is necessary in order to be successful within the college setting, and there were times where the participants felt judged or self-conscious while communicating with their faculty members. From my interpretation there were a few factors that contributed to this feeling, both on the student's end and faculty's end. When we refer to chapter four, Rin mentioned a specific example of her maturity easing the power dynamics between

herself and faculty member. She found that as she matured, she was able to see faculty as more of an equal. This gave her the ability to ask questions comfortably with faculty members. Many other participants indicated this similar feeling of not wanting to be judged, and this seems to be a combination of those power dynamics and internalized ableism.

On the other end of that communication is the faculty member. Communication from the faculty members came on two levels: within the course and one on one. Communication begins on a broad course level, which includes the syllabus, and how content is being taught. Participants indicated that a traditional lecture and exam format of courses was not beneficial for their learning. When faculty engaged in learning strategies that strayed away from (e.g., eBook activities, games, discussions), it was supportive of students learning preferences. Additionally, participants indicated that they do poorly on exams, and therefore they do not always accurately assess the students' knowledge. Alternative methods to showing one's knowledge (i.e., presentations, dialogue, self-reflection activities, etc.) allowed for a more accurate assessment of students learning. Faculty mentioning disability services, verbally in class and in their syllabi, provided an open door for students to feel comfortable with the faculty member. This small action contributed to students' with disabilities feeling more at ease to initiate conversations to support their learning or accommodation needs. Participants stated that faculty members were reliable with their email communications, and that was supportive for the students' persistence in the class and created a positive experience for the students. Participants mentioned when faculty members showed empathy, primarily through their actions (i.e., initiating support when students are struggling, talking to students outside of class if they appear to be shut down, etc.) it positively impacts the students' experiences with faculty members.



Allowing flexibility in structure was also important for promoting positive interactions between faculty and students with disabilities. Participants expressed the need for structure around when coursework was due and having clear expectations for each component. Supplemental assignments and readings were identified as difficult for participants to complete due to the lack of a specific due date. Due dates were viewed as an accountability element for the participants. On the other hand, participants voiced their need for flexibility. The flexibility that was specifically through course format- which varied depending on the individual, and technology used in the class. For example, one participant expressed that online course were important for her condition, so she had the flexibility to learn at a time that allowed her to manage her condition. Similarly, another participant appreciated the flexibility of being online due to a disability specific concern and susceptibility to serious illness by possible exposure to COVID-19. Other participants expressed how faculty providing online textbooks, assessing knowledge on multiple levels (i.e., grades are composed of more than only exam points), and providing multiple points of view while teaching course content (i.e., information from textbooks, and other resources) provide adequate flexibility. These different methods were indicated as beneficial for the participants learning and experience with faculty.

Technology was a support for both flexibility and course structure. All participants voiced that eBook's and read speakers were beneficial for their learning. In particular, the online textbooks supported students further than reading the text, although still an important feature that was voiced by the students. eBooks provide activities within the text to engage the student and support their processing of information. Participants voiced these activities provided flexibility to process and learn the content, along with the structure of receiving quick feedback. With both

structure and flexibility in place for students, they appeared to benefit interaction with their faculty members.

COVID-19 is an overarching meta-theme that impacted the above findings. The worldwide pandemic rapidly changed students' lives, including their higher education experience. The pandemic created an urgent shift to online learning at many institutions, including Midwestern Community College. This rapid shift to online delivery posed new barriers for students. Participants shift to online courses also shifted their relationships between themselves, faculty, and peers. Students reported feeling the need to be independent rather than interdependent (i.e., using campus tutoring or asking their peers questions). Participants were not communicating with faculty or peers in the same way, which impacted how students processed and used self-advocacy to clarify course content. When faculty are able to implement some of these items that students voiced as being beneficial (i.e., eBooks, effective communication), they can support the student have a positive experience with the faculty.

Some students expressed great satisfaction with their overall experience at Midwestern Community College, particularly with their faculty members. There are also some improvements that can be made so that students do not feel that faculty are just “checking a box” when it comes to supporting students with disabilities. Students expressed “box-checking” as ensuring that their rights were not violated, and not providing anything further. This “box checking” phenomena were mainly impacted by faculty members, which could be due to either a lack of understanding of disability, lack of communication, or lack of skills to create an inclusive learning environment by using structure and flexibility. In the discussion I will elaborate on practices, based off these codes, that can support a more inclusive learning environment for students with disabilities.

## Discussion

Within these past two years, regardless of ability, students have gone through many life events. A worldwide pandemic, and many other life-altering events have occurred. The pandemic has made dramatic changes to higher education. The participants mentioned COVID-19 at an extensive volume. COVID-19 couldn't be separated from the overall themes because it impacted the context of this study. One of the largest impacts to students during the pandemic was moving to primarily online environments. This was abrupt for many students and faculty alike. Students had to learn how to ask questions within the online delivery method, manage new classroom dynamics, handle technical issues (i.e., wi-fi lagging), engage with peers, and stay engaged in the content while in their home environment. With the participants expressing different learning preferences, this specific environment does not appear to be conducive for all disabilities. Rather, having options available for those with disabilities is vital to their experience with their faculty members and in college.

It is important to note that there will never be a 'one size fits all' in terms of what is best for individuals, which was shown by the different preferences of the participants and amplified by COVID-19 due to lack of choice. There will always be a component of the student choosing what is best for them (i.e., online courses or in-person courses), which may require some exploration by the student. This is key for students with disabilities, as they can find the environment that is best suited for their disability-related barriers that accommodations may not be able to support. I would highly recommend institutions implementing a way to facilitate this exploration with students prior to registering for courses. This will not fill all the gaps, however with a form of exploration the student can critically think of delivery methods that balance out what is important to and for the student. For example, it may be important to the student to have

flexibility and it may be important for the student to have interactions with peers. In this example, the student may find a balance with taking a synchronous course or registering only half of their courses in an online format. In doing so, inherently the student affairs professional who facilitates this exploration would also be critically thinking about Crip Theory, and how these environments were created for able-bodies and able-minded individuals, as the students with disabilities express their unique needs and concerns as they explore this with a professional staff. Therefore, not only would these conversations allow for the student to explore their needs, but it would also allow the advancement of social justice for students with disabilities due to an increase in knowledge and awareness around disability needs in higher education.

It is important to note that most of these individuals did not know how to identify with their disability (i.e., person with a disability or a disabled person). This is important for the results of the study, and for the implications for the DS office and higher education in the United States. I specify the United States due to terminology being defined by federal laws, which may or may not be applicable in other countries. In chapter one I defined disability and disability-related terminology; Within this, I defined both identity-first and person-first language for people with disabilities. There are arguments for either identity term being the more inclusive or socially just, therefore argued the ‘correct’ way society should identify an individual. Throughout this study, I chose to use person-first language. Although I believe embracing a disability identity identifying is an integral part of a person’s disability journey, which could be either person-first or disability-first, I also believe that using person-first language is a softer invitation to these terms. Using disability-first could have felt as though I labeled the participants, instead of allowing autonomy for that decision, which was not my intention. Additionally, I do not believe there is a ‘right way’ to use this language, as it should be the individual's choice how to identify. The lack

of knowledge among the participants of how-to identify I believe reflects how frequently and openly disability is discussed. The extent to which disability as an identity is talked about may impact people's understanding of ableism that occurs within their life and therefore their self-advocacy around the ableism. Additionally, the participants' age ranged from 21-35 years old, therefore having more time to explore their identity than a traditional student at age 18. This combined with disability laws changing from K-12 indicates a gap of knowledge as to what encompasses disability, according to the ADA. In order to cultivate more awareness around disability, ableism, and needs of the field here are a few recommendations based on this study that I have.

It was indicated that having DS information within the syllabi and mentioning the information within the first class was inviting for individuals to openly communicate with their faculty members. If the faculty are able to take this a step further, by defining disability and giving examples according to the Americans with Disability Act (1990), within their communication and in their syllabi, faculty could cultivate more awareness for students around what is included within these laws and terminology for both students who may use the services and for their peers to further social justice efforts. With open communication around disability terminology, it could also provide additional comfort for students to self-advocate by showing empathy and compassion around the topic from their faculty members. Additionally, by verbalizing this law it can build awareness among the faculty members around what conditions qualify for accommodations, according to the ADA (1990).

Based on the need for flexibility and structure, technology appeared to meet many of these needs for the students. I recommend faculty offer an option between online and physical textbooks. The reasoning behind offering an option is because some students may not prefer the

online textbook option, so this allows students preferences on textbook type to be in consideration. By allowing this option, the faculty member would be implementing the Universal Design guideline of multiple means of engaging (CAST, 2021). When we look back at universal design, this is an option that would fit a diverse body of students' learning needs, regardless of their ability. This has the potential to eliminate the need for some students to use accommodation, and disclose, (i.e., if the students only accommodation is alternative textbooks). This could be a small step that can be supportive of the DS office's responsibilities (Reardon et. Al., 2021). When presenting these options, it could be beneficial to explain the benefits of either choice. I would recommend emphasizing the learning activities to support diverse learners, and the quick feedback that the online textbook offers. Additionally, I would recommend faculty at Midwestern Community College to verbally express the ability to use tutor.com; this is a resource students may use at any time of the day to receive tutoring or support for questions. Spreading awareness of this resource could fill gaps for students when online textbooks are not available, specifically to receive quick feedback.

Communication was voiced as important for the students' experience with faculty members. In order to streamline communication, there are practices that student affairs professionals and faculty members can establish to support their work with students with disabilities. I recommend student affairs professionals can foster students' transition from K12 into higher education. In particular, communication skills by providing programming and support to incoming students to understand communication needs. In my experience, K-12 students did not utilize email in the same capacity that students in higher education do and was not expressed as important. Having programs, workshops, or support in place to transition students into this communication need is crucial for all students and could be highly impactful

for students with disabilities regarding the extra communication they may need to do in order to coordinate accommodation needs. Likewise, faculty members can execute practices to support the understanding of how important email communication is (I.e. an English course that all incoming freshmen are required to take could have an assignment to email their faculty member and later the class can discuss why that assignment was important).

I also recommend faculty members show compassion and empathy during their time teaching, I recognize this may look different for each individual as they have different comfort levels, personalities, and styles. The faculty member can decide how best to implement these qualities into their practice; this could be on a one-on-one level by emailing each individual whom they receive an accommodation letter from expressing that they have received their letter and they are available for support as needed or at the first level of communication within the course. On that first level of communication, within the larger class, the instructor can engage in mindfulness activities, model vulnerability, validate possible triggering current events, or make policy changes to include an empathic approach (i.e., each student may have X mental health days, is able to have one assignment grade dropped, etc.). The practices that are implemented by instructors that show empathy and compassion may depend on the context of the class in order to uphold the class's integrity. It is unsurprising that students felt judged or “stupid” when asking questions, as this is congruent with other focus group’s results such as Kurth and Mellard (2006). With implementing approach, the faculty member would also be following Chickering (1969) theory, that there is an importance of a sense of belonging in order to be successful as a student (Evans et. al., 2017). This may contribute to Milem and Berger (1997) finding that social inclusion, including personal relationships with at least one faculty member is associated with persistence among students with disabilities. Rather than the association, we can think of using

compassion and empathy as a way to build that personal relationship between faculty and students, and as a result build a sense of belonging for the student. If a faculty member chooses to show empathy and compassion on that first level, within the classroom, it may also contribute to students with disabilities voiced need to be like “everyone else” (Yssel et al., 2016).

COVID-19 was identified as a meta-theme, which exacerbated the above codes. The pandemic amplified the above codes with the shift of environment. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed higher education forever. In particular, the environment itself has changed abruptly for many students. During shifts to all remote classes' students had to adjust to the virtual class experience. This included a shift in communication with peers and faculty, and navigating different environments (i.e., focusing on a zoom lecture while at home). Additionally, faculty had to adjust to this new way of teaching, engagement, and organization if they were not familiar with online courses. This has both been challenging for students and faculty, however, can be analyzed to pave the way for what a new “normal” might look like, while keeping disability in the forefront of our mind.

Pidge expressed that the shifts to having in person classes this past semester have been difficult for them. They stated that having more online options would make them feel more comfortable due to their immunocompromised disability, as mask mandates alone do not make them feel comfortable. Additionally, they are hard of hearing and use closed captioning in their online spaces. This semester, due to in person classes, they are navigating not having that technology option. The in-person equivalent for this student's accommodation would be lip reading. This means that the instructor should intentionally show their mouth movements so Pidge can follow. With mask mandates in place, lip reading is challenging. There are specific masks with windows for lip reading, however they can be forgotten or not thought about to begin



with. Additionally, the faculty members move around the room, it is easy for their head to turn in a manner where Pidge, or other lip readers, would not be able to see therefore making content difficult to grasp and process.

With rapid changes to the environment, higher education also has changed. Rin expressed her uncertainty of where Midwestern Community College is at regarding course delivery, and the advantages that COVID had posed on delivery. Rin stated, “So, I am fully online right now; I don’t know if there’s any option to come into the classroom because of the pandemic, but I actually find that to be extremely helpful for me.” Although Rin expresses her preferences, she also demonstrates the rapid changes COVID-19 has created within Midwestern Community College. She is uncertain of classes available, which could be due to how this communicated or being drained of keeping up with changes that have occurred due to the pandemic. She later explains that when she is online, she must answer questions, instead of waiting for another student in class to answer. This supports her learning preferences and makes her more comfortable answering questions.

Participants raised some cons when it comes to the online environment, especially with relationship building and communication. Archibald Francis stated,

I feel like I haven't had any relationships with professors since it's been really online. But in person, I always feel like I had a good relationship with my professors, but I also would go ask questions in their office hours and stuff like that ... it’s harder to learn stuff online due to lack of feedback.

Similarly, Stompy Ruffers stated that he does not have a relationship with his instructors, “I do not interact with them at all because it’s totally distant.” Rin expressed similar negatives to the online environment, however with peers. She stated,

When you're not in a class setting with other people, so you can't look over to them and be like 'hey did you get this answer?' So that's one thing about being online that is a little more difficult.... I'm a loner so it is a little bit difficult that way to reach out.

Archibald Francis reiterated the impact of online courses in relationships with peers and resources. He stated, "in person is better [for him]" and one of the factors is because when he is in person, he is more likely to use resources, including the tutoring center and discussing questions with peers. Without using these resources Archibald "feels like it takes away [from his learning and experience], I feel like that's one of the hardest things is when you get stuck up on something. It's really hard to figure it out when you are online, I guess." He further explained that when breakout sessions occur within the virtual classroom, students are quiet and do not work together whereas in the classroom they would interact. Stompy Ruffers also expressed that due to the pandemic the students are missing in-person experiences that could transfer into the work environment.

Based on these individuals' narratives, there are many implications to education for students with disabilities. This is amplified in a variety of ways, depending on the student's condition and how it interplays with the environment. It is vital that as higher education transitions into a new "normal" they keep students with disabilities in mind. Doing so, at a UD level, would be including options for both online and in-person classes.

### **Implications**

This study sheds light on a variety of areas that require further research in order to gain a deeper understanding of students with disabilities and to establish best practices in order to provide a more inclusive environment for students with disabilities. In this next section I will make recommendations for further research at Midwestern Community College, and other

institutions in order to gain that deeper understanding to cultivate a more inclusive environment for students with disabilities.

There was no single phenomenon that was identified by the students experience at Midwestern Community College, rather, each experience was unique and impacted by a variety of factors that may include context of course, skills, preferences, and disability related barriers. In order to gain a deeper understanding, similar studies surrounded by specific disabilities should be further explored. I recommend instructions focus on disabilities that they identify as being disproportionality affected, or by population needs. Although no disability will be identity, some of the barriers will be more similar of those who have the same diagnosis. With this information, we can more specifically understand supports for those individuals and implement a more inclusive learning environment.

Identity development, with respect to disability, is important for the DS office at Midwestern Community College staff to understand. Further research on disability identity will cultivate a more positive exploration around this identity for individuals who use accommodations (i.e., programming). Likewise, other institutions can explore their campuses' student population understanding of disability identity. Since identity offices for disability are not present on most campuses, it is crucial for further exploration on how lack of disability identity knowledge in students impacts self-advocacy, retention, and graduation rates for students with disabilities. Recently, roughly a dozen universities have opened disability culture centers. These centers focus on the disability identity, rather than accommodation, which allows for a safe space to build community with others who also identify as having a disability (Elmore et al., 2018). Research on how these identity centers support students with disabilities is crucial to gauge likely future directions for universities students with disabilities services and the benefit

these centers have on disability identity development. Once of disability identity is understood, we can further explore terminology. It is a moot point to explore how this identity terminology affects students with disabilities if they have not claimed an identity.

In order to situate students' experiences with faculty members it would be beneficial to have further research on faculty end. Research on faculty attitudes, and perceptions of students with disabilities DS efforts can target their efforts to fill gaps in knowledge about disability. According to Hong and Himmel (2009), when there is an overall gap of knowledge around disability, there is a significantly lower chance that the faculty member will work with a student with disabilities. When it comes to diversity and inclusion, disability is often overlooked. Disability offices are often under-staffed and have specific stressors in order to meet compliance needs of the Americans with Disability Act for both the student, and institution. Decentralizing inclusion efforts with students with disabilities would allow DS offices to serve as a piece of the pie, rather than being the whole pie themselves. This would allow for wider spread efforts, reaching a larger population.

With much of this study, course engagement was highly emphasized by participants (i.e., activities, delivery method). It is necessary to understand what engagement is effective for students. Further research surrounding this topic, specifically for students with disabilities, can provide further direction for faculty members who are executing these engagements and possibly for those who support students with course registration. In particular, with the rapid changes COVID-19 has posed on students these past few years it is important to understand effectiveness of engagement techniques within the online environment. By doing so, faculty can gain knowledge on best practices and implement them as necessary.

## **Limitations of This Study**

This study does not provide a comprehensive list of all students with disabilities experiences at Midwestern Community College, due to this limited sample size and time constraints, not all departments that students interact with were supported. The participant sample itself did not contain traditional college age students. This itself could be considered a positive, however it also means that traditional age students are not represented in the study. Additionally, some steps within this study are flawed and could have impacted data.

The title of my study itself may be limited, as some students who use accommodations do not identify as having a disability. This could have caused some individuals to not participate in the study or feel offput by the call for participants. Additionally, some of the language within my questions and my subjectivity is a limitation. For example, some students may not understand what it means for course content to be presented in a flexible way that supports a variety of leaning styles. The execution of my data collection plan is also a potential limitation. My initial idea for this study was to use focus groups as my data collection method rather than individual interviews. The intent was so that participants could bounce ideas off each other. However, the low participant turnout for the first focus group necessitated that I pivot to individual interviews. Since I spoke with participants individually, they each received different clarifying questions and follow up questions, which may have impacted the direction and emphasis of their remarks.

## **Conclusion**

This qualitative study contained five participants who indicated diversity within their gender, race, age, and major. Due to the nature of this study, the data cannot be generalized to the total population of students with disabilities. The participants indicated that their accommodations were met by the institution, as long as their accommodation letter was sent to

their faculty member. The participants shed light on their individual experiences at the community college, which were made meaning into different codes. These codes included communication, flexibility, structure, and technology with a meta-theme of COVID-19 which amplified the other codes. The codes contain different components that students, faculty and staff can engage in further efforts to a more inclusive education experience for students with disabilities.

Further research of DS offices can support these findings to make further meaning, which can be generalized to the total population of students with disabilities. In particular, research about disability identity, faculty perception and engagement effectiveness is recommended. With this further research, efforts towards a more equitable education for all will dramatically improve inclusions for students with disabilities.

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## Appendix A: First Recruitment Email to Students with Disabilities

Hello and happy spring 2022 semester!

I am a master's student of College Counseling and Student Development (CCSD) at St. Cloud State University and Intern of the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD). As part of my graduation requirement, I am conducting a qualitative study exploring students' with disabilities experience at the [Midwestern] community college in the classroom. The end goal is to gain a greater understanding of these experiences so we can support faculty to work effectively and confidently with students with disabilities.

To do so, I am conducting 60-90 minute long zoom focus group sessions for students with disabilities. There will be two session opportunities that you may volunteer to take part in. This will allow you to be in community with other students with disabilities and voice your experiences. This experience will be audio and video recorded and coded as a form of data. However, your name **will not** be linked to ensure confidentiality. Participants will select a pseudonym of their choosing to be used in data analysis and reporting findings.

Participant Eligibility:

*Research participants must meet all the following criteria*

1. Currently enrolled at [Midwestern] Community College (full or part-time)
2. 18 years of age or older
3. Are currently using accommodations through the [DS] office
4. Have attended a minimum of one full semester at the [Midwestern] Community College using accommodations.

In order to effectively gain an understanding of students with disabilities experience in the classroom at Midwestern Community College, your input is extraordinarily valuable. Here (hyperlinked) you can volunteer to be a part of this study. This link includes demographic questions, a consent form and a space for you to fill out your availability. As a token of appreciation, the [DS] Office is supplying a thank you gift, including college SWAG and treats, for your time and support.

If you have any questions, please contact Alyssa ([alyssa.klenotich@anokaramsey.edu](mailto:alyssa.klenotich@anokaramsey.edu))

In solidarity,

Alyssa

## Appendix B: Second Email sent to Students with Disabilities

### Replied to initial email: To be sent if there are less than four participants in each focus group

Hello and happy (insert day of the week)!

This email is a reminder that you have an opportunity to volunteer in a study. I am conducting a qualitative study exploring students with disabilities' experience at the [Midwestern] community college in the classroom and your perspective is extraordinarily important. The end goal is to gain a greater understanding of these experiences so we can support faculty to work effectively and confidently with students with disabilities.

At the bottom of this email, you will find more information about the study. To volunteer in a 60–90-minute focus group please click here (hyperlinked) to complete the intake form. As a token of appreciation, the [DS] Office is supplying a thank you gift for your time and support. A follow up email with zoom information will be sent to you after your interest is recorded.

Participant Eligibility:

*Research participants must meet all the following criteria*

5. Currently enrolled at [Midwestern] Community College (full or part-time)
6. 18 years of age or older
7. Are currently using accommodations through the [DS] office
8. Have attended a minimum of one full semester at the [Midwestern] Community College using accommodations.

I am a master's student of College Counseling and Student Development (CCSD) at St. Cloud State University and Intern of the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD). As part of my graduation requirement, I am conducting a qualitative study exploring students with disabilities experience at the [Midwestern] community college in the classroom. The end goal is to gain a greater understanding of these experiences so we can support faculty to work effectively and confidently with students with disabilities.

If you have any questions, please contact Alyssa ([alyssa.klenotich@anokaramsey.edu](mailto:alyssa.klenotich@anokaramsey.edu))

In solidarity,

Alyssa

## Appendix C: Intake Form

### Letter of Consent to Student Participants

Housed in Qualtrics

**Project title:** Exploring Students' with Disabilities Classroom Experience at a Midwestern Community College

**Primary Investigator:** Alyssa Klenotich

St. Cloud State University

[alyssa.klenotich@anokaramsey.edu](mailto:alyssa.klenotich@anokaramsey.edu)

You have been invited to participate in a research study by Alyssa Klenotich, a College Counseling and Student Development (CCSD) graduate student at St. Cloud State University as part of her graduation requirements. This is conducted under the supervision of Dr. Aerial Ashlee, a CCSD faculty member, and Molly Tast, the Assistant Director of Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD).

**Purpose of the Study:** I am conducting this study to gain an understanding of students' with disabilities experience in the classroom (i.e., Faculty relationships, instruction etc.). The findings from this study will contribute to the [DS] offices ongoing efforts to promote equitable education.

**Procedures to be followed:** If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to answer a series of questions in a focus group. This focus group will consist of myself and other students at the [Midwestern] Community College whom use accommodation(s). The focus group will last between 60-90 minutes and will be audio and video recorded on Zoom. The video recording will only be used to inform transcription. Transcription will be stored in a secure location. Transcription will not include your name; your chosen pseudonym will be used. By signing this consent form, you are granting me permissions necessary to use the transcription as data for this study.

**Statement of Confidentiality:** To maintain confidentiality, your real name will never be used in reporting the data and analysis. You will be de-identified by having a pseudonym of your choice. Any information that is collected in this study that can be identified with you will remain confidential and only be disclosed with your permission. Audio recording, video recording, and Transcriptions will be stored in a password protected computer and stored in a password protected file. All files associated with this study will be destroyed at the time of Alyssa's graduation in May 2022.

**Voluntary Participation:** Participation in this study is voluntary. If you do not want to participate at any time, you are welcome to notify me. There will be no penalty for choosing to not participate.

**Questions:** If you have any questions about this study at any point, please reach out to Alyssa via email ([alyssa.klenotich@anokaramsey.edu](mailto:alyssa.klenotich@anokaramsey.edu)). You may also contact Dr. Ashlee ([aeriel.ashlee@stcloudstate.edu](mailto:aeriel.ashlee@stcloudstate.edu)) who is my thesis advisor.

You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to take part in this study. You may withdraw at any time from this study, and you must sign and submit this consent form to participate in *Exploring Students with Disabilities Classroom Experiences at a Midwestern Community College*.

In solidarity,

Alyssa

Participant signature:

Date:

**Appendix D: Intake Form****Demographic and background questions: Housed in Qualtrics with consent form****Name:****Primary email:****Select all focus group times you are available to attend:**

Options will be added upon IRB approval

**Participant Pseudonym** (Please pick a fake name, this will be used as your identity in the research process to ensure confidentiality):

In order to participate you must meet the following criteria: *be 18 years of age or older, currently enrolled at [Midwestern] Community College, currently using accommodations through the [DS] office and have been using accommodations through the [Midwestern] Community College for a minimum of one semester.*

**Do you meet all of the above criteria?** Yes or no**Current major:****Gender:**

Male,

Female,

Non-binary

Other (space to type gender identity)

**Age:**

**Race:**

**Is this the first college you have attended?** Yes or No

IF NO: how many colleges have you attended before [Midwestern] Community College?

**How many semesters have you completed at [Midwestern] Community College:**

**Did you use accommodations in high school?** Yes or No

**How do you identify:**

Person with a disability

Disabled person

Non-disabled

Other (space to type response)

**Anything else you want the primary investigator to know about you:**



## Appendix E: Interview Protocol

### 1. Introduction:

- Welcome students as they arrive into the zoom room
- Thank everyone for coming
- Explain who I am and the purpose of the study
- Explain that participation is voluntary, and participants can decline to answer questions or withdraw from the study at anytime.
- Remind participants that their pseudonym will be used to ensure confidentiality and any faculty names mentioned will not be included in the thesis.
- Explain that the focus group will last approximately 60-90 min
- Ask if the participants have any questions
- Provide a trigger warning that some of these questions may cause discomfort. For example, if you have had a particular negative experience with faculty or accommodations. Participants are welcome to turn their camera off and take care of needs.
- The primary investigator will be sending our recommended resources after the focus group and will stay after in case anyone would like to process anything in a private conversation.

### 2. Interview questions:

- Please share an example of a Midwestern Community College faculty who has been particularly helpful in supporting you and providing you accommodations?
- Please share an example of a Midwestern Community College faculty who has not been not helpful in providing accommodations or supporting you?
- Please talk about how you think faculty at Midwestern Community College view students who use accommodations?
- Please share how information is presented to you in your classes at Midwestern Community College?
- Please share an example of a time course content was created in a flexible way to support your learning style (i.e. Etextbook was available with the option of read speaker, PowerPoint and lecture provided or being able to pick your assignment)

### 3. Closing:

- Invite questions from participants
- Explain the next steps in the study.
- Primary investigator will be coding the two focus groups
- Initial analysis of the transcript will be sent to participants to ask for their input, feedback and reactions.
- Any quotes that may be used will be sent to participants to be given the opportunity to review. You may make changes or withdraw from participation.
- Acknowledge that these experiences may have evoked emotional responses.
- Provide campus resources (i.e. counseling, OSD contact info etc.) and contact information for any follow up questions via email
- Invite students who would like to debrief 1:1 to stay in the zoom room for longer if needed or contact me

Thank participants for their time.

## Appendix F: Calendar Invite to Participants

- Calendar invite title: Exploring students with disabilities experiences in the classroom  
[Date of event, reflective of the volunteer's choice]
- [Time of event; reflective of the volunteer's choice]
- [Zoom login information]
- Email reminder sent to students:
  - 24 hours prior to the event: Thank you for volunteering in this study. Within the calendar invite you will see the Zoom login information, please use the information provided to access the Zoom room for our conversation. If you have any questions, please reply to this email. I look forward to hearing from you tomorrow.
  - One hour prior to the event: Thank you for volunteering in this study. Within the calendar invite you will see the Zoom login information, please use the information provided to access the Zoom room for our conversation. If you have any questions, please reply to this email. I look forward to hearing from you soon.