Universal Design: A Student Affairs Perspective

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This research is a product of the graduate program in College Student Affairs at Eastern Illinois University. Find out more about the program.

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Abstract

College is one of the most exciting times in an individual’s life and could also be one of the most challenging. Students are coming in to college needing amenities and different accommodations for a variety of different reasons; very commonly, learning and physical disabilities. Utilizing qualitative methodology, this study aimed to explore five different student affairs areas on campus to see if they provide a universally designed environment for college students with both learning and physical disabilities. Each professional shared their knowledge of universal design, universal strategies that they currently use, areas professionals believe are the most accommodating on campus as well as what is needed to make campus more universally designed.

Results showed that there was a lack of knowledge regarding universal design and often participants described concepts from the Americans with Disability Act (ADA). It was evident that more education, training, and development is needed in each respective department in order to implement the concept of universal design. Each participant did however discuss how they all believe the institution is an “institution of access”. They all believed that any student that identified with any population has the potential to be a successful student at the institution regardless because of the overall supportive, welcoming, and inclusive environment.

Keywords: universal design, disability, college students, accommodations, learning disability, physical disability, Americans with Disabilities Act, institution of access
Dedication

This study is dedicated to individuals who work in student affairs as well as college students with disabilities. Never let any obstacles get in your way, don’t be afraid of failure, and always follow your dreams.

I would also like to dedicate this thesis to my Grandpa Frank. Thank you for being one of my biggest lifetime cheerleaders and always providing me with endless laughs, encouragement, and love. I hope I made you proud – this one is for you!
Acknowledgement

I would first like to acknowledge my thesis advisor and committee Dr. Dianne Timm, Cindy Boyer, and Jody Stone. Thank you so much for your continuous feedback, inspiring motivation, and for sharing my passion for this topic. I am very appreciative for all of the time and effort you put into this study in helping make it the best it could be.

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Universal Design: A Student Affairs Perspective

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Introduction

Although enrollment is decreasing at four-year universities, the number of students with disclosed disabilities is remaining consistent (Hadjikakou, Polycarpou, and Hadjila, 2010). In the 2008-09 academic year, it was reported that 707,000 students with disabilities were enrolled at postsecondary institutions (Raue & Lewis, 2011). Both learning and physical disabilities are common among the majority of students that fall into the category of college students with disabilities (Cory, 2011). This specific group of students is integrated within the rest of the student population but require individualistic accommodations. Students with disabilities call for assistance not only in the classroom, but also when choosing which residence hall to live in, going through orientation, getting involved with extracurricular activities and even when attending athletic events on campus (Uretsky & Andrews, 2013). It is crucial that the administration and faculty within these universities are knowledgeable about universal design (UD) and prepared for all types of students who are adapting to college life.

The idea of UD in higher education focuses on creating environments that are accommodating to everyone instead of having a variety of different amenities for specific types of individuals (Lombardi, Murray, & Gerdes, 2011). For example, implementing slopes within campus crosswalks, otherwise known as ‘curb cuts’, is more convenient for everyone using the sidewalk (Lombardi et al., 2011). Lombardi et al. (2011) also indicated that by implementing UD, college campuses would be more accessible to all types of students, including those with learning and physical disabilities, both within the classroom as well as other places in the campus environment. In order for UD to be appropriately adopted within a university, proper ADA standards must be followed for
implementing the completely accessible design. There is a lack of attention in this area when it comes to old campuses that are resistant to updating because of historical reasons. Achieving a universally designed campus requires the university to adhere to the 2010 ADA Standards for Accessible Design that includes construction and alteration of both old and new campuses.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate different departments within student affairs at one university to see if they have the proper accommodations for college students with both learning and physical disabilities. In order for optimal student success among these individuals, it is essential that the university implement the idea of UD for ultimate accessibility across campus, not just in the classroom. Findings from this study can be useful for four-year institutions interested in implementing the new idea of UD and increasing accessibility on their campus for students with disabilities.

**Research Questions**

This proposed study was seeking to answer the following questions:

1. What knowledge do professionals working in student affairs have regarding the concept of UD?
2. What strategies have professionals working in student affairs made to adopt this area universally usable by all students?
3. What area of the college do student affairs professionals identify as being highly adaptable for all student populations or most conscious of creating universally designed environments?
4. What further accommodations do student affairs professionals feel are needed in order to make departments more universally designed?

**Significance of the Study**

Lombardi et al. (2011) found that in the recent years of public secondary education enrollment, students with documented disabilities of varying types have become a lot more prominent. It is often true that administrators and faculty do not know how to properly accommodate these students (Lombardi et al. 2011). Because there has been an increased enrollment of students with disabilities, the graduation rate for students is lower than students without disabilities (Herbert et al., 2014). Thus, this study will be a good resource for colleges and universities to learn more about the possibilities and success for these students with disabilities by providing them with the best resources possible. Additionally, the results from this research will provide institutions with information that will help create more universal environments for success.

**Limitations**

A number of factors could have limited the outcome or progress of this study. First, the target population was not a random sample of all four-year institutions. Thus, the results from this proposed study are only from the staff point-of-view in regards to what kinds of accommodations are offered at the one institution.

Because of time constraints, it would have been unrealistic to examine every department of the university that caters to students. Therefore, I focused in on some of the main departments that were be most frequently utilized by new students, ones in which they are likely to work with the population being studied. Such departments
include: Housing & Dining, New Student Programs, Student Life, Athletics and Disability Services.

Another factor that had to be taken into consideration was that the participants may not have been honest in their responses as to what accommodations they offer for this specific population of college students. The participants in this study could have responded in the way they think the researcher anticipated. To avoid this from happening, the participants were asked to talk about their already implemented accommodations prior to the explanation of the concept of universal design.

Definitions of Terms

In this study, the focus was on how UD affects college students with disabilities. The American Disability Act defines the term disability as, “a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activity” (retrieved from https://adata.org/faq/what-definition-disability-under-ada). This study will specifically focus on both learning and physical disabilities. According to McCleary-Jones (2014), a learning disability is a “neurological disorder that affects the brain’s ability to receive, process, store and respond to information, and note that LDs can affect a person’s ability in the areas of listening, speaking, reading, writing, or mathematics” (p. 44). The Physical Disability Council of NSW (2009) describes a physical disability as “pertaining to total or partial loss of a person’s bodily functions (e.g. walking, gross motor skills, bladder control etc.) and total or partial loss of a part of the body (e.g. a person with an amputation)” (retrieved from http://www.pdcensw.org.au).

UD, as stated by Watson, Bartlett, Sacks & Davidson (2013), says:
The overall goal for universal design is to create seamless access for most people with the specific intent of providing access to at least 95% of the population. Each of the principles contributes to basic design and functionality for a broad range of individuals (p. 160). The purpose of this fully accessible design is to be as inclusive as possible to a student population.

**Summary**

Chapter one entails the outline of the proposed study conducted the idea of UD. Chapter two will give an overview of literature regarding the history of disability law, current disability accommodations offered by universities, as well as a research overview of UD.
CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

In order to fully understand the integration of Universal Design (UD), it is important to know the history of students with disabilities within a college setting and what circumstances came about to bring forth the idea of a universally accessible campus. Chapter two reviews literature in this realm, consisting of the history of disability law and higher education, current disability implications offered by universities, as well as an overview of the concept of UD. These areas are relevant to the study because they illustrate a timeline of how accommodations for students with disabilities were in the past, how it is currently, and what researchers are hoping for in the future.

History of Disability Law and Higher Education

The main legal document that supports the issue of preventing discrimination against students with disabilities is the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. Students with disabilities that enter college are integrated within the rest of the student population but require individualistic accommodations. This act was developed to protect individuals in higher education institutions from being discriminated against because of a disability, as well as provide them reasonable accommodations (Kaplin & Lee, 2007). The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 prohibits any type of discrimination based on disability in regards to all areas of public life, including jobs, schools, transportation, and all public and private places that are open to the general public (“What is the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA),” n.d.).

As stated by Kaplin and Lee (2007), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 coincides with the ADA because it explains how the employer is required to supply
sensible accommodations for these specific individuals. Carrying this over to higher education, a reasonable accommodation at a postsecondary institution may include extended time on tests, sign language interpreters, or having the option of ramps and elevators to those who need wheelchair assistance (Cory, 2011).

There are five titles in the ADA Act: Employment (Title I), State and Local Government (Title II), Public Accommodations (Title III), Telecommunications (Title IV), and Miscellaneous Provisions (Title V) (Kaplin & Lee, 2007). Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act focuses on preventing discrimination in areas run by state and local governments (“What is the Americans with Disabilities Act,” n.d.). Title II states,

No qualified individual with a disability shall, by reason of such disability, be excluded from participation in or be denied the benefits of the services, programs or activities of a public entity, or be subjected to discrimination by any such entity (Kaplin & Lee, 2007, p. 177).

Essentially, any government program, service or activity must be easily accessible for all individuals. There must be a way for everyone to communicate; this includes providing ways for hearing, visually and speech-impaired individuals to effectively communicate at a public entity, in this case of this study public institutions like colleges (“What is the Americans with Disabilities Act,” n.d.).

Title III prohibits disability discrimination in undergraduate and postgraduate private schools because they fall into the category of places of “public accommodation” (Denbo,
Title III specifically focuses on setting the physical standards for both private and public places to be fully accessible to their customers. For example, if a private school did not have a ramp or an elevator to get into their main building, their students with physical disabilities may not be able to have access to that building. Institutions must abide by the Title III standards to prevent any barriers and promote easy accessibility, which may require moving a class to an accessible building. If a public or private entity is violating the Title III public accommodation regulations, they must make the proper alterations and construction necessary. Student Affairs professionals are primarily accountable on Title II and Title III since it targets both public and private undergraduate, postgraduate and professional schools. Denbo (2003) explains that these Titles of the ADA state that these institutions have a responsibility to provide disabled students with proper accommodations as long as the student claiming the disability provides the prerequisites for the ADA claim.

In 2008, the American with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAA) was formulated with the intention of strengthening the wide-ranging implications among postsecondary institutions (Burke, Friedl, & Rigler, 2010). According to Burke et al. 2010, the definition for the term “qualified disability” was broadened to ensure that individuals with daily life activities such as reading and communicating are also able to receive disability accommodations. This change opened the door up for students with learning disabilities to receive the services they needed at postsecondary institutions. Burke et al. indicated that since the number of students in the college setting are disclosing their disabilities, the more awareness, growth and change will happen with the ADA to guarantee that our students are receiving reasonable accommodations as well as
increasing an overall university sensitivity to the various types of disabilities present on campus.

**History of Students with Disabilities in College**

With the development of ADA rules and regulations, campuses began to identify ways to create more inclusive environments. Professionals who assist and accommodate students in higher education with disabilities have an essential role in the student’s growth and development as an individual. Over the years, the disability services aspect has been through many changes and evolved into an essential part of any higher education institution (Mitstifer, 2012). Before the mid-20th century, students with disabilities who enrolled in college were primarily supported by rehabilitation services as well as their family members and professional faculty members of the university (Mitstifer, 2012). During that time, campuses were not at all collectively accessible for students with disabilities. For example, buildings on college campuses were not physically designed for students with physical disabilities and texts were not available in alternative formats such as braille if there was a student who was sight-impaired (Mitstifer, 2012).

Beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, institutions began addressing and implementing the needs of students with documented disabilities; this started with institutions providing sign language interpreters, allowing extra time when taking tests, and making sure instructional materials in class were accessible for all student populations (Mitstifer, 2012). The Association of Handicapped Student Service Personnel in Postsecondary Education (AHSSPPE) was formed to provide a place of knowledge and support for professionals working with students in these areas. This professional
organization is specifically intended for those individuals who work in a disability or
service office (Mitstifer, 2012). In 1992 the AHSSPPE transitioned into the Association
of Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) and the focus of this association is to offer
professional development ideas and information to professionals about networking and
technical assistance regarding students with disabilities (http://ahead.org/about).

According to Raue and Lewis (2011), institutions have made progress in regards
to their disability services. In a survey study performed by Raue and Lewis (2011) under
the US Department of Education gathered information from 4,200 two-year and four-year
institutions across the nation regarding the following: enrollment of students with
disclosed disabilities, what types of services and accommodations are offered for this
population of students, appropriate documentation guidelines, educational and
accessibility materials available as well as any Universal Design implementation. Among
institutions participating in the study, during the 2008-09 academic year, 93 percent
provided additional exam time as an accommodation for students with disabilities. It was
also indicated that 77 percent of institutions allowed classroom note takers, 72 percent
had faculty-provided written course notes or assignments, 71 percent provided a variety
of exam formats and 70 percent had adaptive equipment and technology (Raue and
Lewis, 2011). In order for students with disabilities to receive these accommodations, 92
percent of institutions require students to turn in a form of documentation indicating and
verifying their type of disability (Raue and Lewis, 2011).

There have been many other strides made to help the success of students with
specific disabilities during college. Project Success at University of Wisconsin Oshkosh
has shown to be very successful when helping students specifically with learning
disabilities (http://www.uwosh.edu/success/). Dr. Robert T. Nash founded Project Success and started serving six students in his program in 1979. Project Success rapidly grew from six students to 150 students in 1985; currently, Nash’s program caters to 320 students and holds a staff of 40 total tutors (http://www.uwosh.edu/success/). The overall goal of Project Success is to assist students with learning disabilities the necessary language skills to read, write, and spell to encourage them to become both academically and language independent; this is accomplished by teaching the students how to properly use the American English sound structure versus allowing them to listen to books on tape (http://www.uwosh.edu/success/). This technique allows the student to become academically independent within two to seven semesters of entering the program.

Specific institutions have also made an impact on the students with disability population by specifically focused on various disabilities to ensure student success. For example, Landmark College in Putney, Vermont has also been a leader in optimizing opportunities for creating a successful environment for students with learning disabilities, Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder, and Autism Spectrum Disorder since 1985 (http://www.landmark.edu/why-landmark). This institution focuses on producing a welcoming and supportive environment that also encourages individual development and interpersonal relationships for the individuals within this specific population. Specific quotes from students at Landmark indicated how impactful this college is on it’s students, “I learned how to learn at Landmark...people understood and suddenly I felt so much more confident, so much more accepted, so much happier” (http://www.landmark.edu/why-landmark).
Gallaudet University in Washington D.C. is another university that has made an impact on students with disabilities, specifically students that are deaf and hard-of-hearing. Gallaudet is the only university in the world with programs that focus directly on assisting students that are deaf and hard-of-hearing since 1864 (http://www.gallaudet.edu/about_gallaudet.html). Gallaudet’s specific mission statement is as follows:

Gallaudet University, federally chartered in 1864, is a bilingual, diverse, multicultural institution of higher education that ensures the intellectual and professional advancement of deaf and hard of hearing individuals through American Sign Language and English. Gallaudet maintains a proud tradition of research and scholarly activity and prepares its graduates for career opportunities in a highly competitive, technological, and rapidly changing world. (http://www.gallaudet.edu/about_gallaudet.html).

**Current Disability Accommodations**

Often times, the transition from high school to college can be very difficult for students with disclosed disabilities (Uretsky and Andrews, 2013). According to Uretsky and Andrews (2013), the challenging transition exists because these students are used to the large external support system in high school including teachers, parents, counselors, and specialists; whereas in college, these students carry more responsibility in advocating for themselves while living on campus. Therefore, the first step in the student receiving specific accommodations is to approach the campus’ Office of Disability Services with documentation of their disability as well as what type of impact they believe it will have on them while on campus (Cory, 2011). By meeting with the Office of Disability
Services, the student will be able to express their personal goals and concerns about their functional well being at the university. The Disability Services professional will work to develop a clear grasp of the student’s academic, social, medical and emotional needs (Uretsky and Andrews, 2013). Cory (2011) explains how the Disability Services staff member will focus the conversation on how to provide access to the best resources to the student within the classroom, extra-curricular and housing setting.

In the second step towards receiving the requested accommodations, the Disability Services Professional will create an accommodation letter for the student to give to each of their instructors and supervisors in the designated departments on a case-by-case basis (Cory, 2011). These letters will contain a detailed description of the student’s specialized requests depending on which department they are geared toward. For example, specific accommodations for the university’s Housing Department may include putting a plastic chair in the shower, having wide corridors or living in a single room on a quiet lifestyle floor (Hadjikakou et al., 2010). Accommodation requests from academic departments may include extra time on tests, supplemental note takers or using manipulative objects to visualize concepts (Cory, 2011).

Cory (2011) also stresses the importance of having strong campus-wide communication and collaboration amongst faculty and staff to ensure a strong campus commitment when serving students with disabilities. While it is extremely important for the Office of Disability Services to be familiar about a plethora of disabilities, it is also significant for other departments on campus to be knowledgeable about creating an accessible
environment for all types of students, especially those with disclosed disabilities (Cory, 2011).

**Universal Design**

Lombardi et al. (2011) describes the concept of UD as providing an environment that is usable by as many people as possible so that particular accommodations are not needed. Recently, there have been multiple efforts to extend the idea of UD beyond physical features of the environment including: “Universal design for assessment, universal design for instruction, and universal design for learning to promote maximum usability and accessibility in planning, delivery and evaluation stages of instruction” (Lombardi et al., 2011, p. 251). By implementing these different branches of Universal Design, campuses will become more accessible in all possible ways.

UD on higher education campuses promises optimal accessibility to a diverse population of individuals with regard to race, class, gender, sexual orientation or ability (Cory, 2011). The idea of UD is not to eliminate the single types of accommodations that students request but to “change the way one thinks about them” (Cory, 2011, p. 33). One example given by Cory (2011) includes having a sign language interpreter in a classroom for a deaf student. Prior to UD, that interpreter was just there for the single deaf student. Looking at it from the UD perspective would mean providing the interpreter in the classroom to facilitate everyone’s communication: thus the interpreter is there for the professor as well as both the hearing and non-hearing students (Cory, 2011). Another example described by Cory (2011) includes giving the class a choice between creating a paper or a verbal presentation. In doing so, this will support all different kinds of
student’s learning styles as well as “encouraging creative and inclusive pedagogy while removing the stigma or accommodations as ‘special considerations’” (Cory, 2011, p. 33).

Another important aspect of incorporating UD in higher education institutions includes thinking of disabilities as part of campus diversity: “seeing disability as diversity is easier if disability is situated in a culture and context rather than a person who has a disability” (Cory, 2011, p. 33). UD has the potential to benefit all types of students by including “greater access to learning opportunities within postsecondary settings” (Lombardi et al., 2011, p. 251). In doing so the campus is taking a step in the direction of creating a more accessible and inclusive environment overall.

Theoretical Framework

The theory that helps us in this study is Arthur W. Chickering and Linda Reisser’s theory of identity development. Chickering and Reisser’s (2005) research provides an understanding of student development through the use of seven vectors: developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity. Chickering and Reisser used the term “vectors” in terms of development because they show a progression of growth; once the student moves through one vector, they move on to the next one, but may even be concurrently dealing with issues from two vectors at the same time (as cited in Evans et al., 1998). Although each individual progresses in development at their own pace, they all will head down these major routes as each of these vectors build off of one another and gradually increase in both complexity and stability (Chickering & Reisser, 2005). Concurrently, it is critical that student affairs professionals understand the various challenges that their students will
come across from a theoretical perspective so that they can provide support as well as encouragement to those individuals.

In the first vector, developing competence, an individual develops intellectual, physical and interpersonal competencies (Chickering & Reisser, 2005). The individual is able to use reasoning and critical thinking skills. When looking at vector one in regards to students in college with disabilities, this could mean the individual is able to willingly participate in extracurricular activities. They know how to access the people and resources necessary for getting involved in those opportunities. In this first vector, these students can show they developed competence by being able to physically take care of themselves (i.e. showering daily and taking medicine). Student affairs professionals may play a role in this vector as well; for example, being open, knowledgeable, and available for these students if and when they are looking for specific resources. Professionals may also perform general checks every so often to check on the students’ progress.

In vector two, managing emotions, an individual becomes competent in their ability to recognize and appropriately handle their emotions in situations (as cited in Evans et al., 1998). There may be many times throughout college that could be highly emotional. For example, if a student does not get the grade they were expecting on an exam or if the student does not feel that they are getting the proper accommodations in the classroom. For a student who has a documented disability this may be one of the most difficult vectors as they may become frustrated when they see their peers without disabilities seemingly breeze through the collegiate experience. Student affairs professionals play a critical role in vector two, as they may be one of the main people that these students are releasing emotions to. It is the student affairs professionals’
responsibility to steer the student in the right direction; reminding them when appropriate
times are to be upset and how to handle their emotions properly. They might even offer
stress relieving resources and suggestions such as going to the gym or spending some
time with friends. The goal of vector two, is for the individual to get a hold on their
emotions in these high stress situations and understand when and where it is appropriate
to release them.

Once the individual successfully masters vector one and vector two, they start
working towards vector three: moving through autonomy to interdependence. In this
vector, the individual begins to develop an independent outlook on life as well as
understand that relationships are based off of interdependence (Chickering & Reisser,
2005). For example, the student with a documented disability is able to make their own
accommodations when they need it as well as knowing when to study and ask for help
from the resources available. The student affairs professionals' role in this vector is to be
a support system as well as encourage the student to increase their independence and self-
direction.

In vector four, developing mature interpersonal relationships, the individual
begins to truly develop tolerance for others around them, appreciation for others and
relationships with others from different backgrounds from them (as cited in Evans et al.,
1998). This vector focuses on the individual's ability to accept their own as well as
others' differences. For example, in this vector the individual may show interest in
befriending someone of a different heritage or disability from themselves and genuinely
appreciate their differences. Vector four may also include sharing their disability with
someone in a respectful and trusting relationship. Student affairs professionals are very
often reminded of the importance of diversity and their role in vector four would be very important. For example, a resident director of a building may encourage their hall council to put on a program that is about diversity to stress the importance of accepting and embracing everyone’s differences. Student affairs professionals can also continually encourage their students to attend various diversity events on campus as well as attend these events with them to give them an extra sense of comfort.

Vector five, establishing identity, an individual begins to accept and take pride in their self-concept as well as develop a sense of personal stability (Chickering & Reisser, 2005). Looking back on their foundation of the first four vectors, the individual is able to create a healthy self-image. An individual with a disability may struggle with this before mastering the first four vectors because coming into college with a disability may hinder their self-confidence and willingness to get involved. Student affairs professionals can be very important and influential on their students during vector five. For example, if a professional sees that their student is struggling with a sense of self-confidence or feel dissatisfied with themselves, it is the professionals’ job to provide the proper resources to help their students in the best possible way; such as referring them to the counseling center. It is also important for the student affairs professional to provide both a strong support system and a listening ear for their student during this tough time. By the time they hit vector five, they will hopefully take pride in themselves and think of their disability as a stepping stone that makes them stronger as both a student and an individual.

In vector six, developing purpose, the individual develops a positive view on their professional life, takes pride in their own interests and is fully able to establish positive
relationships with others (Chickering & Reisser, 2005). Throughout this vector, the student is able to articulate their strengths and weaknesses in relation to their disability and can identify strategies for overcoming their challenges in accomplishing their goals. Student affairs professionals may play an important role in this vector as a guide and resource to the student as they figure out what next step they want to take after college.

Finally, vector seven, developing integrity, the individual can fully explain and support their own values they believe in through three stages: humanizing values, personalizing values, and developing congruence (Chickering & Reisser, 2005). In this vector, the student will have the authenticity to present him or her in a professional way and not using their disability to their advantage. For example, when taking a test in the classroom, they might ask the professor if they can take the exam in a quiet room rather than requesting a different version of the test. Students in this vector may become advocates for others with disabilities in providing support and guidance through the first six vectors. They may also look for opportunities to educate peers, faculty, and staff in hopes of creating a more supportive and developmental environment for others who come with similar backgrounds and challenges. A student affairs professionals’ role in vector seven would be to play a strong mentor role for them. As their students are mastering vector seven, it is important for these professionals to be an advocate and support system for them; help them reflect, show them their growth, and support their plans and values they hold for the future.

The intent is that the results from this study will promote the awareness, development, and enhancement of different departments on campus to ensure optimal accessibility and opportunities for students with documented disabilities. By applying the
seven vectors from this theory to UD, student affairs professionals will understand how students with disabilities develop through the same stages as every other student on campus. Using this knowledge, the student affairs professionals will be able to enhance the knowledge and awareness of this topic to their staff and take the next steps that are needed to best assist their students with learning and physical disabilities.

Summary

In this chapter, the literature provided reviews a history of disability law and higher education, current disability accommodations, an overview of Universal Design as a whole as well as a theoretical framework that applies to the purpose of this study. Research shows that students with disabilities are protected from discrimination by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 as well as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Although individualized accommodations are needed for students with disclosed disabilities, Universal Design can provide a more inclusive way for these college students to function on campus both in and out of the classroom. As student affairs professionals, it is important to understand the legal aspect and historical foundation on how students with disabilities are accommodated as well as new and improved ideas that are currently being researched for the present and the future.
CHAPTER III

Methods

This chapter outlines the methodological framework that was used to conduct the proposed study on Universal Design (UD). The qualitative method was used to gain insight into the knowledge professionals working in student affairs have regarding creating spaces that accommodate all students. Different student affairs departments were examined through one-on-one interviews to get an illustration of what a day-in-the-life of a student with a disability would be like in each professional's specific area.

Design of the Study

The proposed study used a qualitative approach, consisting of five separate one-on-one interviews between the researcher and each interviewee. According to Merriam (1998), a qualitative design is used for the purpose of allowing each participant to explain and elaborate on his or her experiences of how each department currently accommodates their students. Interviews were chosen for the specific method of gathering data because they allowed for optimal responses through rich conversation in a natural environment from each participant (Merriam, 1998). Each interviewee was a student affairs staff member from a rural mid-sized institution who work directly with students who have learning and physical disabilities. Thus, individuals from each of the following departments were selected: Housing and Dining, New Student Programs, Student Life Office, Health Services, and Athletic Academic Services.

Participants

Six designated administrators from five different departments on campus were interviewed in this proposed study. Five participants were approached and personally
invited to participate in the study, and one participant brought in an Assistant Director from his area to assist in answering questions. At the time of interviews, each participant held a director-level position within their designated department, and the additional person serves as an Associate Director. These individuals were selected because they all have high undergraduate student interaction and all of their positions have a large impact on the effects of the student body on campus as well as in their department. These participants also have the opportunity to make changes and implement things into their program based on what they identify as needed.

**Chelsea.** Chelsea is the Director of the Student Life Office. She has worked as a full-time employee in this role at the institution for 30 years. Through her position as the head of the Student Life department, Chelsea oversees the staff as well as the coordination of the variety of different programs and events that happen in this area. Throughout her professional experience, she has gained a lot of hands-on experience in the field of Student Life as far as programming, planning events, and coordinating activities for a variety of student populations over a span of 30 years. Chelsea’s educational background includes a Bachelor’s Degree in Education and a Master’s Degree in College Student Personnel.

**Kylie.** Kylie is the Director of New Student Programs and the Military Student Assistance Center. She has worked as a full-time employee in this role at the institution for 14 years. Through her position, Kylie has the opportunity to have an impact on a variety of different student populations; whether it is at orientation for first-time freshman, on-campus transfer students, international undergraduates, or students who are returning to school from the military. She has gained a plethora of institutional
knowledge through her position and through serving on many committees pertaining to topics such as retention and admissions. Kylie’s educational background includes a Bachelor’s Degree in Exercise Science and a dual Master’s Degree in Curriculum and Instruction as well as Education Administration. Kylie says she uses her Master’s Degree on a daily basis both when interacting with her students but also when creating programs and development for orientation and incoming students.

**Lola:** Lola is the Director of Health Service as well as holds the responsibility of monitoring the Student Affairs budget and overseeing the Counseling Center, the Student Insurance Center, the Health Education Resource Center, and the LGBTQ+ Resource Center. She has been in the position of Director of Health Service at the institution for 20 years. Within her job responsibilities, Lola interacts with a variety of student populations that may come through Health Services for numerous types of reasons such as, turning in immunization forms, coming in because they are sick, or sometimes answering parent calls when they have questions about how their student in being treated within Health Services. Lola’s educational background includes a Bachelor’s Degree in Mathematics and a Master’s Degree in Guidance and Counseling with an emphasis in Higher Education Administration. She believes that the key to staying abreast of things and learning the position is keeping up with professional development.

**Claire:** Claire is the Director of Academic Services for Athletes. She has worked as a full-time employee in her current role at the institution for 16 years. Through her position as Director of Academic Services for Athletes, Claire works very closely with the student athletes on campus and makes sure they are always in compliance with NCAA standards through weekly advising appointments where she checks in on their
academic progress and personal wellness. Claire’s educational background includes a Master’s Degree in Higher Education. She has also served previously as an advisor for at-risk students during the summer as well as completed internships with the Department of Children and Family Services and has been an active volunteer with the Sexual Assault Counseling and Information Services (SACIS).

**Mario:** Mario is the Director of Housing and Dining. He has overall responsibility for everything that takes place in the department and is always taking steps to make sure the housing facilities are up to date with the current issues in higher education. He has worked as a full-time employee in this role at the institution for 14 years. Mario’s professional background includes both a Bachelor’s and Master’s Degree as well as 35 years of working in residential life.

**Kendall:** Kendall is the Associate Director of Housing and Dining. Her overall responsibilities include assignments, contracts, marketing, retention, two apartment complexes, and Greek Housing. Kendall’s background includes a Bachelor’s and Master’s Degree in Business Administration as well as graduate knowledge and 24 years of residential life experience.

Through their positions within the Housing and Dining department, Mario and Kendall serve a large variety of student populations; typically, full-time students that live on campus including freshman through graduate students as well as adults who are returning to college. Over the summer, they also serve prospective college students as they come through a camp or conference at the institution from May through August. More recently, Mario and Kendall indicated that they are also serving specific populations such as international students and students with Autism.
Site

The proposed study took place at a mid-sized (9,000 students) institution in the rural mid-west. The campus has a residential requirement for first year students and houses approximately 37% of the overall student body. The individual interviews were conducted in specified rooms in each designated department depending on the professional’s choice of location. The time of each interview was approximately 30-60 minutes.

Instrument

The proposed research study utilized an interview protocol (Appendix A) to gain insight into the topic. An interview protocol allows the researcher to be the primary instrument for the data collection, “the researcher is able to be responsive to the context, adapt techniques to the circumstances, can process data immediately, as well as summarize and provide clarification of responses if needed” (Merriam, 1998, p. 7). The same protocol was used with each of the five individuals with the intention of learning about what kinds of accommodations each department has in regards to assisting students with learning and physical disabilities. Each interview lasted between 30-60 minutes and consisted of open-ended questions. The researcher voice-recorded and transcribed each interview for validation. A second individual analyzed each transcription as well for accuracy purposes.

Data Collection

Interviews between the researcher and participant were conducted and voice-recorded in a structured environment. A consent form was presented at the time of each interview for the participants’ agreement in consent to participate in the research. The
interviews were then be transcribed, coded and analyzed to understand how different units are incorporating the concept of Universal Design. Through recording and transcribing each interview, the researcher was able to physically outline and refer back to each interview when making conclusions about the data.

Data Analysis

Each interview was fully transcribed and coded upon completion by the researcher and the thesis advisor. During the coding process, the researcher looked for linked responses and themes to assist in the analysis and comprehension of the data as it related to the identified purpose and research questions for this study (Saldana, 2013). The researcher used Microsoft Word and Microsoft Excel to reorganize the information found from the interviews to identify common ideas.

Treatment of Data

Upon completion of the interviews, the researcher removed all personal information and assigned each individual a specified pseudonym, which will ensure the participant's confidentiality (Saldana, 2013). The researcher also provided a consent form prior to the beginning of the study and kept all interview documents locked up in a secure location. With consent, the researcher voice-recorded the interviews to go back and review information for coding and transcript purposes. All transcriptions were printed out on hard copies to ensure that the confidential information does not get passed on to anyone other than the individuals on the research committee. None of the confidential information or research findings were shared with anyone other than the research committee. Data was stored in locked file cabinets and on password protected computers.
Information will be maintained for three years according to Institutional Research Board guidelines.

Summary

This qualitative study examined different department heads at a midsized public institution in the Midwestern United States regarding the concept of universal design. Through one-on-one interviews, student affairs professionals were interviewed to gain insight into how they accommodate for all student populations.
Chapter IV

Results

This chapter presents the findings from the interviews with six student affairs professionals and their knowledge, strategies, and recommendations regarding the concept of universal design with students who have learning and physical disabilities. Data was obtained by conducting interviews where participants described their knowledge of universal design, universal strategies that they currently use, areas they believe are the most accommodating on campus as well as what is needed to make campus more universally designed. Several themes for each research question were explored from the various experiences that each participant shared during their interview. The research questions that guided this study were (a) What knowledge do professionals working in student affairs have regarding the concept of universal design? (b) What strategies have professionals working in student affairs made to make this area more universally usable by all students? (c) What area of the college do student affairs professionals identify as being highly adaptable for all student populations or most conscious of creating universally design environments? (d) What further accommodations do student affairs professionals feel are needed in order to make departments more universally designed? This chapter will provide an overview of those themes in an effort to answer the research questions.

Knowledge of Universal Design

When analyzing the responses in regards to what knowledge the participants had about Universal Design, there were varying levels of knowledge related to the student affairs professional’s position. When asked if familiar with the term UD, Claire, from
Athletic Academic Services indicated that she was not familiar at all with the concept. Chelsea from the Student Life Office, stated, “I’ve heard the term but I’m not familiar with how that term is defined.” Chelsea also went on to say that she needs to be more knowledgeable about this topic because of the work that is done from her office.

Mario from the Housing and Dining Department stated that he was familiar with the concept of Universal Design. When describing his knowledge about UD, he used the phrase, “invisibility of adaptation” and stressed the importance of making sure the accommodations they do provide are not a “back-door entrance… we want them to be coming in the front door like everyone else.” Mario then went on to talk about how various residence halls are handicapped accessible with accommodations being made that include, ramps in to buildings, elevators, doorbells on rooms, flashing lights in other rooms, and so on.

Kylie, from New Student Programs, indicated that she was familiar with the concept of Universal Design. When asked to describe her previous knowledge of UD, Kylie said,

When I think about Universal Design… I think about it when we do trainings. When we are setting up an event to ensure that all individuals that are going to access that have the support, or we’re using the terminology, or we’re making the space as inclusive as possible in the best ways we can for success. I think some of the things inherent inside Universal Design are not necessarily setting up for someone who you know in the space might have some sort of diagnosable disability but also accessing all seven or eight of the learning styles. Are you being kinesthetic? Are you functioning all of those? When we think about on the
job, how are we activating that? There are some key spaces especially when you are looking at an all-day piece like orientation where it cannot be just “this” all day.

When asked if familiar with the term UD, Lola, from Health Services indicated that she did understand the concept of UD. She stated that she was familiar with the concept but would not have used that term to define the concept.

Commonly found amongst majority of the participants, was that they gained their information about UD from outside resources like conferences and reading. Lola stated, “I think the key to staying abreast of things and learning your job is your professional development.” Mario and Kendall also indicated that conferences have many programs on the topic of invisibility of adaptation. The participants rarely stated that they received information about UD through graduate education or personal experience. It was common among most participants that they gained this knowledge from simply doing their job, serving on committees, working with different departments on campus, as well as through personal responsibility and awareness.

**Strategies to universality**

When looking at what strategies professionals are using to make their area more universally usable by all students, the responses varied based on the specific student affairs area. Lola from Health Services indicated that she often works closely with students that have a variety of different concerns; i.e. physical ability, learning styles, and students on the autism spectrum. “We’ve had situations already where there have been some pretty serious issues that have evolved because of communication and understanding how patterns have changed for individuals.”
Mario and Kendall stated that they are always thinking about the needs of the students because they have to think about them before they show up to campus and adapt to what people bring them. Mario stated,

I think that our populations, that we primarily serve, are people that are not to that level of severe needs. I think the people who have mobility issues, visual issues, all those types of things – we’ve adapted to whatever people have brought us...we build rooms that have built in strobes and electronics for bed shakers...we’ve evolved continuously as we’ve updated our technology. I think that’s always on our radar to make sure we are taking care of whatever special needs are out there.

Kendall indicated that Housing works very closely with Facilities Planning and Management, Disability Services and the University Council to make sure areas are accommodating.

Mario and Kendall also described some specific adaptations and amenities that make their area accommodating to the students. Mario stated that they have had individuals who reside in the on-campus apartments have live-in assistants living with them. Kendall indicated that they have also had comfort animals live with students. She said they assign those students to a low-level housing assignment for easy-access to the outside. Mario also described how they have rooms with strobe lights and bed shakers as well as other bathroom accommodations as needed by the student.

You provide strobe lights in a room so that they can see when the alarm goes off. They are attached to something called a ‘bed shaker,’ that goes under their mattress so that if they are asleep at night, it will go ‘wake up.’ Sometimes if people are in a wheel-chair, they have to have light switches lowered, towel bars
lowered, they have to have a no-threshold shower...I think that the other things we do is turn a list in at the beginning of each semester so that people know on campus where people have special needs are. For example, when they are doing snow removal, they are going to do this building first because they know that there is a student who lives there who’s got to be able to get to this handicapped spot because that’s how they get out of the building.

Kendall talked about how they sometimes have students who obtain temporary disabilities; for example, someone breaks a leg and needs accommodations for a short period of time but eventually want to move back in with their original roommate. In this case, Housing will move the student for however long they need. Mario indicated, “it’s a lot of reacting to the circumstance of the day – issue de jour.” Mario and Kendall both described how the concept of UD is on their minds more than others because, “the students live with us, eat with us, and shower with us,” stated Mario.

Kylie, from New Student Programs, indicated that she doesn’t always think about if she’s specifically incorporating the concept of UD in programs within her department because she said “it’s just inherent, in how we’re operating, it’s just ingrained.” Chelsea, from the Student Life Office, said that she incorporates extra staffing to help students who indicate that they have hearing, sight, or need handicap accessibility for their larger events. She explained that her office probably does not do enough in accommodating students for their smaller events. Chelsea also said that they try to do the best they can by utilizing different resources on campus,

I have to be honest, we don’t really put as much thought into it during our preliminary stages but for some of our larger events when we are looking at
concert events, typically we will provide additional staffing to assist people that may have disabilities such as sight problems, hearing problems, and handicap wheelchair accessibility - when actually attending these events. We will try to make a concerted effort with the university’s help in identifying, what’s the best accessible route to get into the venue and what happens as far as seating? What’s the best location? Do we have locations identified in the venue that are targeted for wheelchair seating and accessibility? What happens if someone is buying a ticket that is not disabled and bringing someone who is disabled - how do we accommodate that?

Responses from participants regarding their strategies to universality within their departments also varied based on the specific disability of the student. Lola, from the Health Services said that their department uses a variety of different resources depending on the disability but also make referrals for students that need services that are beyond their personal scope of practice. Lola also indicated that they have a lot of different ways to make accommodations for students that may have long or short-term disabilities, “like for our students in wheelchairs, if someone needs something long term, we contact people to help make those arrangements. It kind of depends on what they are looking for.”

Claire, from the Academic Center for Athletes, said that they often have students who, inherit a temporary disability and need to make proper accommodations as such. We will notify faculty to give them notice that they may be coming to class a few minutes late and asking for them to excuse that. Working with the training staff in trying to get them rides to class...get their class schedules, pick them up,
and drop them back off. We’ve had hip injuries, hip surgeries, leg injuries...I’ve had students break their hand or fingers where they couldn’t type or write so we’ve set it up where someone else takes their notes or the professor allows for another assignment or something so they don’t have to type.

Kylie, from New Student Programs, stated that she needs to think more about what they specifically do for students with learning disabilities since her department has such a short time with them. She did mention that her department has made accommodations for students that may have requested amenities for a visual impairment such as visual text if a student needs something in bigger text as well as provided an electronic copy in case the student can use technology. “I wish there was a way to pre-understand where students are coming from so we can do better”, Kylie stated.

Lola indicated that Health Services has specific equipment that they can utilize if students need additional services. She mentioned that if a student discloses a speech or hearing impediment as well as someone who might have a language barrier, they have professionals on campus who they can consult with and who may share their expertise, equipment, or services with them.

Claire stated that her department typically does not know about a student’s disability unless they disclose that information during a recruiting visit or the coach tells them. She said if it is a learning or physical disability, they often refer them to Disability Services so they can meet with the director in that department to get the proper accommodations. Claire stated, “we have the student initiate a conversation too, with the faculty member, with the letter [from Disability Services] and work out how they are going to do their assignments and tests.” Claire mentioned that she also meets more
frequently with students who are struggling and sometimes has other students take notes for individuals she knows could use the assistance. Claire said that at the beginning of the year at their academic and compliance meetings with all of the student athletes, they talk about how the students can get assistance if they need it.

Kylie explained how she will often utilize resources, such as Disability Services, during new student orientation, "we also provided an interpreter for the first three days of [orientation] for a student this year... we make these accommodations as quickly as we can for students." Kylie also talked about how mobility issues can be a big piece during orientation as well, so it is important to make sure that her staff is trained to understand all the spaces and most accessible routes for the students that need that extra accommodation.

Chelsea also talked about how she consults with different departments on campus as well as the professionals in Facilities as to what the most accessible areas are of a certain building and how they can best prepare themselves for any challenges that may come up during an event that the Student Life Office will be providing. Chelsea went on to explain, "There’s always room for us to improve and how we do that because in all honesty, we probably don’t look at it from the perspective in everything that we do." Lola talked about how imperative training is for her staff to be knowledgeable about a diverse group of individuals, "I try to provide the staff with opportunities to learn and grow a little bit more." She explained how her staff just finished a special online training on how to properly address different student populations on campus such as veterans, LGBTQ, and students with depression. Lola indicated that she also makes it her own personal
responsibility to be aware of what it might be like for a student needing accommodations to maneuver around campus:

Riding in golf carts at the beginning of the school year and looking for all of the curb cuts and putting that together... walking on campus and noticing that the sidewalk floods in certain areas and thinking about people in wheelchairs what they deal with. I think just part of that is experience, part of my own personal interest, professional development... you just start paying more attention to it as you become more knowledgeable about it.

**Highly adaptable areas on campus in terms of Universal Design**

Participants were asked about which areas on campus they found to be most accessible to students on campus. There were many common themes found among the participants in regards to being highly adaptable for a variety of different reasons; including student academic services, residence life, transition services, facilities as well as the campus being an “institution of access.”

**Student Academic Services.** Claire indicated that the Office of Disability Services makes the campus friendly to students with disabilities. She gave examples and mentioned how Disability Services is able to make building accommodations for students that may have a physical disability or even an extra resource in the classroom for a student that might possess a hearing impairment. Chelsea also indicated that she believes the Office of Disability Services is one of the more highly accommodating areas on campus because they deal directly with students who disclose their disabilities when they come to campus.
When advising student athletes, Claire stated that she believes the Student Success Center does a very good job accommodating students when they need the assistance. Claire also indicated that her own department, Athletics Academic Center, is highly adaptable as well, “I feel like we really try to over accommodate to help serve our students.”

Mario indicated that the faculty on campus a good job of adapting to the students in the classroom,

Sometimes a student may need extra time for a test... also they will proctor a test separately form the class because they need more time... I think our campus has a lot to be proud of in terms of the way in which we’ve helped our environment be sensitive and adapt with the needs of what those folks really need.

**Residence Life.** Mario stated that he believes his department, Housing and Dining, is one the more highly adaptable departments on campus, “we do an excellent job of serving their [students] needs... we respond to what their requests are.” Chelsea also identified that Housing and Dining is a very accommodating,

This is because of the volume of students and obviously there are various living arrangements and needs that they have to provide for students. I’m assuming that they would be better equipped and probably be more aware of students coming in with disability needs because of the accommodations they would need to make for them and their living environments... housing to me, would be a necessity right off the bat because the living environment is a very huge part of campus life and campus experience.
Speaking from her previous Housing experience earlier in her Student Affairs career, Lola from Health Services, said that she thinks that the residence life department on campus is very accommodating.

**Transition Services.** A common theme among participants when asked about adaptable departments on campus was a variety of transition services. When her student athletes are in need of assistance when it comes to their future career, Claire indicated that the Career Center is a great resource that she can refer them to.

Lola indicated that the New Student Programs office is very accommodating because of the nature of their office in recruiting and getting new students acclimated to campus. She also stated that the Admissions Office goes above and beyond to reach out to potential students, “I think our Admissions Office has become much more accommodating in comparison to previous offices and how they’ve reached out to students and tried to accommodate in the various different ways to learn about the university and approach.”

**Facilities.** Mario and Kendall indicated that the Facilities Department as a whole is a very accommodating area on campus because of the nature of their work. They work hard to ensure that any buildings accommodations they make have the concept of “invisibility of adaptation” and whatever the amenity may be, is not a “back-door entrance.” Mario stated that his department works closely with Facilities Planning and Management when looking at erasing barriers in the residence halls, “we’ve done things like implemented more of those towers for people to push to open doors on buildings, we’ve put in more ramps, we’ve done bathroom pods, we’ve done a lot of things.”
Mario also said that the center for academic technology on campus has done great work with educating faculty to provide adaptive learning opportunities for students who may require that special need, “there are thousands of classes and hundreds of faculty and there are a lot of variables.”

**Institution of access.** Many of the participants identified that the campus as a whole can be perceived as an institution of access. When dealing directly with recruitment and orientation, Kylie said,

I think about as students move through the admissions process, are we open to finding ways for students to access higher education? In that regard, I think this institution has a strong track record of being an institution of access and being able to admit students, bring them campus...we have a really great track record of being successful and helping students graduate.

Lola indicated that the institution is very student-focused and does whatever they need to do to help their students succeed,

We seem to be able to help our students in so many different ways; whatever they are having problems with, we seem to be able to provide some kind of service to help them. It is not that they are going to fall through the cracks. It is not like we are a huge university and that maybe they aren’t going to be able to even find the service because they wouldn’t know about it. I think we are just a little heavier on the services... we do have a good reputation for being very hands-on, very customer service oriented, very student-focused. I think that is because we do have so many people and so many ways of helping our students.
Lola went on to explain how important and easy it is to support and coordinate with other student affairs professionals on campus which therefore makes it much more accommodating to the students, “there isn’t a director in student affairs where I wouldn’t pick up the phone and say ‘I think I need [an accommodation] for a student.’”

Further accommodations towards Universal Design

After explaining what they believe the most accommodating areas are on campus, participants were then asked to talk about what more needs to be done to make their own department, as well as campus as a whole, more universally designed. In order to support this vision, participants discussed themes such as individual support, ongoing campus challenges, and the education of faculty and staff.

Individual support. When helping new students get acquainted to campus at orientation, Kylie talks about how much she would love having one-on-one support for every incoming student, “what I would love is every time someone stepped in the [computer] lab, I would have a student who was helping two students. I can see where that would be a stressful moment on an already stressful day.”

Chelsea, from the Student Life Office, said her own area could be more accommodating for students with disabilities. She admitted that her department could have potentially neglected certain populations because their disabilities are invisible:

When they are not very visible, it is hard to identify when a student may or may not need help or assistance; especially for a department like mine. That is not typically something that students walk around and have on their forehead, ‘I have a learning disability.’ Sometimes I don’t know that students have a learning disability until they tell me.
She did talk about how her office has made accommodations when given information in advance.

When accommodating students with learning disabilities we are probably below average... if we have advanced notice, we try to make accommodations early enough but sometimes that does not always necessarily mean that we are always prepared to address that right off the bat... I think the challenge you have with learning disabilities is that they are not very visible.

Chelsea went on to explain that the accommodations she offers for students with hearing disabilities are also below average. Chelsea indicated that hearing accommodations are made once the office is made aware of them and only on an as-needed basis, “we could probably do a better job of being proactive as opposed to reactive to providing the needs of potential student or students that have some disability of some sort.” When addressing visual disabilities, Chelsea said there is more her office can do in terms of signage. On the other end of the spectrum, Chelsea does feel that her office provides adequate “above average” accommodations when accommodating students with physical disabilities.

**Campus challenges.** When working with student athletes, Claire often refers them to other departments and resources on campus for a variety of reasons. She indicated that the offices of Financial Aid and Student Accounts could be more accommodating towards the student body as a whole,

I think the Financial Aid department could be a little more accommodating with the demands of students that are on financial aid. I think they could keep their office hours open like one or two days a week a little longer to help serve students. Even have a weekend...online chat service where if students have a
question, they can get online and have a chat with someone, 24/7. Student Accounts needs to be a lot more accommodating...specifically more student-friendly.

Claire also talked about how ideally she would like to have a learning specialist to work specifically one-on-one with her at-risk student athletes and students with disabilities that may need a little extra support.

Lola, from Health Services, discussed how there are also many universally designed campus-wide projects funded with Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) money that are currently on hold because of budgetary issues within the state. These projects include but are not limited to making more buildings on campus more accessible for students with disabilities. Chelsea, from Student Life, also supported this point by saying, “some of our buildings are physically more challenging than others to access especially for someone with a disability.”

When getting New Student Orientation ready every year, Kylie is often in contact with many departments on campus, one of them being the Office of Disability Services. Kylie stated that Disability Services is “understaffed, underfunded, and unsupported...a good example of this is, I pay every time an interpreter comes – Disability Services does not pay, I pay”.

Lola made a point of saying that the institution does a good job providing accommodations but there is always room for improvement,

Things change. I cannot tell you how many times things have changed. I think that sometimes the biggest hurdle to jump is perception. If a student comes in here and perceives that we are not “open” to a student population. A student might
perceive that because of experiences that they have had before. We deal with some of those things going in the door. I think that we just do the best that we can.

**Educate faculty and staff.** Another area that participants noted as being less accommodating than others was the academic areas, more specifically, faculty on campus. Lola stated, “sometimes I think that our faculty... can depend on the faculty... can be very stringent and not real accommodating, maybe because of the nature of what they do.”

Kylie from New Student Programs said that sometimes faculty and staff are not knowledgeable about this topic so it is important to educate and train them. Kylie indicated that she stays knowledgeable and up to date on this topic through professional organizations and brings this information back to her own staff, “being able to ensure faculty and staff are as educated and knowledgeable about how to interact with those students as possible”.

When thinking about how the Student Life Office can increase their accessibility, Chelsea talks about how they should challenge themselves as a department in regards to the concept of universal design as far as services and programs go that they offer. Chelsea mentioned how insightful the conversation regarding universal design was and how she was going to take it back to her office to educate her staff,

We will probably have more dialogue and conversation because this has been very eye opening to think that I have not given it much thought. I do think that awareness and now having an opportunity to reflect on that, there is definitely room for improvement... something we need to make a priority to look at and see what we can do.
Chelsea went on to say that, she plans to connect with other departments on campus as well as learn more about disabilities and what challenges they commonly face on campus. Using that information, Chelsea said that can lead to, “creating an awareness to try and provide more support and services” to students with disabilities. “We need to recognize the fact that there are students with disabilities and with challenges that we want to have the full college experience,” Chelsea stated.

**Summary**

Themes found during individual one-on-one interviews concerning knowledge of universal design, universal strategies that they currently use, areas they believe are the most accommodating on campus as well as what is needed to make campus more universally designed were explored in Chapter IV. Different themes were explored under each research question. From the different research questions, the amount of knowledge and strategies varied depending on student affairs area. Common themes among participants regarding highly adaptable areas on campus included student academic services, residence life, transition services, and facilities. Further accommodations in regards to universal design included individual support, various campus challenges, and the education and awareness of universal design to faculty and staff. Chapter V will conclude by providing a summary of previous chapters, provide recommendations for student affairs professionals, and include suggestions for future researchers on the topic of universal design on a college campus.
Chapter V

Discussion

The current study sought to understand the knowledge among different departments within student affairs at one university to see if they have the proper accommodations for college students with any type of disabilities. Research consisted of interviews and data collection from six participants who are current student affairs professionals holding director-level positions within their designated department. The interviews focused on the professionals’ knowledge, strategies, and recommendations regarding the concept of universal design as well as areas they each believe are the most accommodating on campus and what further steps need to be taken to make campus more universally designed. Therefore, the following research questions were asked: (1) What knowledge do professionals working in student affairs have regarding the concept of UD?; (2) What strategies have professionals working in student affairs made to adopt this area universally usable by all students?; (3) What area of the college do student affairs professionals identify as being highly adaptable for all student populations or most conscious of creating universally designed environments?; (4) What further accommodations do student affairs professionals are needed in order to make departments more universally designed? In the following chapter, the results found for the current study are discussed as well as recommendations for student affairs professionals and for future research are provided.

Discussion

In Chapter IV, four research questions were identified and themes were explored through comparison of the five individual one-on-one interviews conducted. Several
themes for each research question were explored from the various experiences that each participant shared during their interview. Each professional shared their knowledge of universal design, universal strategies that they currently use, areas professionals believe are the most accommodating on campus as well as what is needed to make campus more universally designed. Discussion of the themes in comparison to the literature review, will be discussed.

**Universal Design vs. ADA.** Lombardi et al. (2011) describes the concept of UD as providing an environment that is usable by as many people as possible so that particular accommodations are not needed. UD on higher education campuses promises optimal accessibility to a diverse population of individuals with regard to race, class, gender, sexual orientation or ability (Cory, 2011). The idea of UD is not to eliminate the single types of accommodations that students request but to “change the way one thinks about them” (Cory, 2011, p. 33). Throughout the interviews, there was a general lack of knowledge regarding the concept of UD. Often times, it was evident that the participants either did not know what it was or thought they knew what was UD. However, when participants were asked to describe their knowledge of UD, they described the concepts of the Americans with Disability Act (ADA).

As stated by Kaplin and Lee (2007), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and ADA explain how the employer is required to supply sensible accommodations for these specific individuals and their individual needs, disability depending. Examples of ADA accommodations include assistance such as sign language interpreters or having the option of ramps and elevators to those who need wheelchair assistance (Cory, 2011). When interviewed, the student affairs professionals would talk about all of the specific
accommodations they would do for the students in their area rather than talk about how they have worked to make their areas universally usable by everyone. The concept of Universal Design is to eliminate all of the individual accommodations that are requested by students.

Lack of Knowledge. Mario and Kendall from Housing and Dining indicated that they were familiar with the concept of UD. When asked to describe their knowledge and current implementation of it within their professional area, they described how their residence hall buildings are in compliance with ADA rather than being universally designed as well as the specific amenities they provide. For example, Mario and Kendall talked about how they have provided live-in assistants and comfort animals for students that requested them. Mario also described how they have rooms with strobe lights and bed shakers as well as other bathroom accommodations as needed by the student. While these accommodations are very much necessary for students with disabilities, they are individualistic and do not fall under the UD umbrella. Things that may have shown evidence of a deeper understanding of UD would have included how they train their staff or the way they provide materials to prospective and current students.

Lola from Health Services provided some knowledge of the concept of UD as she explained the purpose for having “all-gender” restrooms. However, when asked how she accommodates for students with learning and physical disabilities, Lola talks about she will use specific resources for students who need those additional services such as a speech or hearing impediment or a student that might have a language barrier. Like Mario and Kendall, these resources are very helpful to students but they do not qualify as being universally accommodating. Much like Lola, Kylie from New Student Programs, also
understands the overall concept of UD but the way that her department accommodates for students with disabilities are on an individual case-by-case basis and, as she stated, “we are observant and we address as needed.”

Professionals also indicated little to no knowledge regarding UD. Chelsea, from Student Life and Claire, from Athletic Academic Services both said that although they may be familiar with the term they do not know how it is defined. They admitted to not implementing any aspect of UD in her department because it really has not been brought to their attention or required of them in their position. When staff are not supported to consider this concept there is no reason for them to learn more about it and cultivate a knowledge base.

Throughout conversations with participants, there were no strategies to the implementation of UD in any of the departments. It was common among all participants that they will continue to make individual accommodations within ADA standards when a student discloses a disability. This strategy goes against the definition of UD because the overall concept of a department being universally designed is being readily available for anything at anytime while eliminating individual accommodations; being proactive rather than reactive.

Training and development for staff is lacking because they either don’t know or know but have such a basic understanding. In order for the concept of UD to take off within these departments, the knowledge and awareness of UD among the institution needs to be increased. Once the staff within departments on campus are educated and trained, they will be able to create training plans and development for student staff to implement within their designated areas.
Each participant did however discuss how they all believe the institution is an “institution of access.” They all believed that any student that identified with any population has the potential to be a successful student at the institution because of the overall supportive, welcoming, and inclusive environment. This commonality among participants truly shows that the institution has the potential to be successful at implementing the concept of universal design once the overall knowledgebase is there to truly bring the universal designed aspects to life.

Implications for Student Affairs Professionals

With such a high number of students with disabilities enrolling in higher education today professionals working in student affairs need to have a clear understanding of ADA policies, but they also need to consider how they are creating universally adaptable environments (Raue & Lewis, 2011). Based on participant responses, as well as current literature, information pertinent to student affairs professionals arose. For all student affairs professionals in every department on campus, staying current in their field is vital to being a solid resource for the students they serve. Since there was a lack of clear understanding regarding UD found among participants in my study, it is important for university professionals to get educated on this platform. Since student affairs is an ever-growing field, it is important that professionals do what they can toward advancement within their designated area to help with the overall end goal of the whole campus being universally designed.

In addition to staying educated themselves, it is of upmost importance that professionals educate and train their staff appropriately with this information. It is critical that the entire staff, from top to bottom, has a strong foundation of knowledge regarding
UD and what it stands for as well as the pertinent differences between UD and ADA. Professionals need to be able to decipher the difference: are we ready for anyone or do we make arrangements when notified? Professionals in student affairs must view their specific departments just as much of a classroom as any professor on campus would. Students are learning just as much in a residence hall or on-campus event as they are in a psychology or history lecture.

There also needs to be more communication among different units at the institution. The term “universal design” can often be viewed as a concept that is only applicable in the classroom. UD is a growing concept that can be applied anywhere, both in and out of the classroom. Departments, within and outside of student affairs need to meet, share, and discuss the different ways that they are incorporating the concept of UD in their areas. The more collaborating and exchanging that takes place, the more we become a unified front as a whole and are so much closer to being a more universally designed campus. Conversations need to be about ways to train staff and faculty across the campus, ways that each area is accommodating students and identify new strategies for further providing services. One example is providing adaptable websites that can be enlarged, listened to, or translated to other languages.

Finally, as a professional in the field, it is important to continue maintaining strong professional development throughout one’s career. Whether that be actively participating in professional organizations, webinars, committees, or taking the lead on projects within their institution, it is important to be willing to adapt, innovate, and excel with the changes in the field. Their role in higher education is vital to further success of today’s college student and can help keep their department moving in the right direction.
Recommendations for Future Research

Future research is recommended on this topic based on the responses of the participants, current literature, and observations of the researcher. Those recommendations are as follows.

- Interview more student affairs areas and different professionals on campus, including faculty. It would be useful to get more perspectives on UD, such as, current knowledge, implications, and suggestions to enhance the campus as a whole. This could be beneficial to create a more holistic campus-wide view on UD.

- Conduct the study on a larger scale, such as, different types of institutions (small, private, large, liberal arts, for-profit, urban, etc.) to examine their knowledge and interpretation of UD.

- Replicate this study at other universities. Since UD is such a newly implemented concept, it would be valuable to see what other universities on the same scale are doing in comparison.

- Ask specific questions about the difference between ADA and UD. As seen throughout participant responses, there was a lot of overlap when they described their knowledge of UD and ADA. More often than not, participants were describing ADA implications when they were asked to describe UD. It would be beneficial to have questions within the Interview Protocol that truly probe the participants in seeing if they know the difference between the two concepts. This will help establish a foundation in implementing a campus-wide UD plan.
Interview or survey students about how they are being accommodated and areas of strength and weakness at the institution.

Conclusions

The current study was carried out, utilizing a qualitative approach, in order to better understand student affairs professionals and their knowledge, strategies, and recommendations regarding the concept of universal design. Chapter V contained a discussion of the results from the current study. This research found that most student affairs professionals had a lack of knowledge when it came to UD and often confused it with concepts of ADA. It was also found that the few professionals' who said that they were already implementing universally designed accommodations within their designated departments rather were accommodating on an individual as-needed basis, which does not support UD and is solely in compliance with ADA standards. It is critical that institutions start adapting the concept of universal design to become more proactive rather than reactive.
References


Hadjikakou, K., Polycarpou, V., & Hadjila, A. (2010). The experiences of students with


Welcome to the UW Oshkosh Project Success Site — Project ... (n.d.). Retrieved March 27, 2015, from http://www.uwosh.edu/success/


APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol
Interview Questions

1. Do I have your permission to take a video/audio recording of this interview?

I: The following questions are simply to gather demographic information about all participants in my study. They will not be used to identify you.

1. To ensure this, please give me your first name and last initial.

2. What department on EIU’s campus do you work in?
   a. What do you do? Tell me about a typical day in your world (or week)?
      What area or areas are you responsible for? What is the purpose of your office?

3. What is your specific job title?
   a. How long have you been in this position?
      How long have you been at the institution? (What other roles have you held)
   b. What type of preparation have you had to do your job?
   c. Tell me about the student population your office serves? In what capacity?
   d. Are there any populations you think you should be serving that you currently aren’t? Why/why not?
   e. Are there student populations that are more challenging to serve than others?

4. Are you familiar with the term “Universal Design?” (If not, provide different definition)
   a. Where did you learn this information?
b. How do you stay current on this topic – do you stay current on this topic?

5. What sorts of accommodations do you provide students with different abilities?
   Physical, learning, hearing, sight, etc.?
   a. Do you believe your department accommodates for all students on campus (race, gender, disability, etc.)
   b. How would you rate your level of accommodations to the various abilities identified?
   c. What sorts of improvements would you like to make if you could to accommodate more students?

6. Overall do you think this campus is accessible to all current and perspective students? Why or why not?
   a. What areas do you see being most accommodating?
   b. What areas could be more accommodating?
   c. How do you see your area in comparison to others regarding Universal Design?

7. Are there plans to address Universal Design in the next couple of years?

8. Is there anything else you would like to share at this time regarding this topic?