AN APPROACH TO POSTSECONDARY WRITING PROGRAMS: EVALUATING PERCEPTIONS OF SELF-IDENTIFIED STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

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DEDICATION

For Catherine and Luke

“For what it’s worth:
It’s never too late to be whoever you want to be.
I hope you live a life you’re proud of,
and if you find that you’re not,
I hope you have the strength to start over.”

~ F. Scott Fitzgerald
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I began my doctorate degree with no expectations. Perhaps letting go of expectations allowed me to begin and end my journey successfully. Letting go of expectations enabled me to embrace changes, identify with topics, grow as an individual, and accept feedback. Letting go of expectations also allowed me to change my own perspective from simply wanting a doctoral degree to wanting to create and strengthen an academic path for others.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to identify perceptions of writing and motivation in seeking academic assistance from self-identified students with learning disabilities in a 4-year public postsecondary institution. Additionally, identification of strengths and weaknesses in writing was pursued as a means of assisting writing centers to create effective writing programs in postsecondary institutions for students who experience difficulty in writing. Self-identified students with disabilities were appropriate participants for this study because these particular students have an awareness of their disability, their academic needs, and their areas of strengths and weaknesses in various disciplines. Areas identified by the sample size may be applied to other students who experience difficulty in writing within the institution.

In order to recognize factors contributing to motivation and identification, a literature review was conducted to evaluate components of common practices in the postsecondary writing process. Components included (a) identifying disabilities, (b) defining self-identification, and (c) defining self-determination. Additionally, understanding the various academic support services available to students was acknowledged, particularly disabilities service centers and writing centers. To understand the academic process of postsecondary basic writers and the cause of the disconnect between secondary and postsecondary writing curriculums, a definition of underprepared students needed to be established. Similarly, descriptions of poor writing skills, secondary education writing scores, and common writing challenges were evaluated.

Qualitative research methods were used through semi-structured interviews to obtain information regarding participant experiences. Themes emerged from findings and included (a) goal orientation, (b) identification of postsecondary writing expectations, (c) self-awareness of strengths and weaknesses, and (d) motivational factors contributing to academic success.
Finally, although limitations were identified and suggestions were made for future research, results from participant responses proved consistent with research presented from past studies.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Weak writing skills are common occurrences among most students beginning during elementary years and carrying over well into postsecondary years. Despite the importance of writing, many students do not write well enough to meet the demands of school or even the workplace. College instructors estimated that 50% of high school graduates are not prepared for college-level writing demands (Graham & Perin, 2007); yet American businesses spend $3.1 billion annually for writing remediation (National Commission on Writing, 2004). Moreover, studies prove that weak writing skills are just as prominent among students with learning disabilities (SLD) as well as their non-disabled peers.

Methods of writing taught in secondary education differ from the style needed for success in postsecondary institutions. (Baker, Chard, Ketterlin-Geller, Apichatabutra, & Doabler, 2009) imply most writing lessons in elementary and secondary institutions are approached passively, where writing with reading is incorporated, and structure is not emphasized. Necessary techniques in writing which prepare students for success in postsecondary institutions and in the workforce should include (a) organizing writing tasks, (b) generating ideas about the writing topics, and (c) producing final written products that are coherent and organized. Research on effective writing instruction focuses on the quality of writing content rather than writing mechanics as seen in secondary classrooms (Baker, Gersten, & Graham, 2003). Additionally, Baker et al. (2009) identify (a) organizing information and ideas, (b) writing legibly, (c) implementing rhetorical structures, and (d) engaging an audience as necessary qualities students must possess to become effective academic writers.
Purpose

The purpose of this study is to understand perceptions of SLD when identifying strengths and weakness in writing, as well as to identify motivational factors, which allow SLD to seek non-mandated assistance in writing from an institution’s writing center. Identifying perceptions of strengths and weaknesses in writing which motivate students to use independently the college’s writing center will assist writing centers in (a) improving writing curriculums, (b) evaluating and focusing on individual gaps in writing, and (c) helping students navigate from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation in their writing. Self-identified SLD in postsecondary institutions possess qualities of self-determination. Self-determination allows students to identify strengths and weaknesses in writing, understand academic accommodations available in postsecondary institutions, and motivate students to independently pursue assistance.

Topic

Self-identified students with disabilities in postsecondary education are intrinsically and extrinsically motivated to seek non-mandated assistance from the institution's writing center. Identifying motivational factors towards using writing center services, along with isolating strengths and weaknesses from a population of students who have experience in pinpointing strengths and weaknesses in writing, will allow writing centers to serve better a larger population of underprepared students (Robinson, 2009) through discovery and remediation in writing.

Research Problem

This study explored experiences in academic writing from students with learning disabilities who self-identify with a 4-year public postsecondary institution’s Disability Service Center (DSC) and their perceptions of motivation for accessing academic support from the institution’s writing center.
Justification

Writing Centers

Many students struggle with writing in postsecondary institutions. As a result, assistance with writing eventually falls to an institutions writing center (Robinson, 2009). The purpose of an institution’s writing center is multifaceted and includes (a) helping students move beyond surface concerns and beyond satisfying the instructor’s demands and (b) teaching students to understand the content of the paper and their relationship to the content (Robinson, 2009). Ultimately, in order for tutors to teach writing to create successful academic documents, the staff at the writing center must work with the writer, not with the writing. Working with the writer involves moving from an extrinsic to an intrinsic process and teaching students how to go beyond only meeting requirements of an assignment. Focusing on this process will help students move towards independence as writers.

Historically, writing centers were founded specifically to provide support for students who were admitted to college under Open Admissions Programs in the 1960s (Grimm, 1996; Soliday, 2010). Writing centers have been used as agencies for remedial writers. As writing became more prominent in multiple postsecondary disciplines, writing centers evolved into hubs for remediation in writing, particularly at institutions where no remedial or developmental writing courses exist (Robinson, 2009). Currently, writing centers are used by students who (a) struggle with concepts in writing and are considered basic writers, (b) are mandated by an instructor to visit the center, or (c) are successful writers and want different perspectives or insight toward their writing. The writing center provides assistance from an employee of the institution who can give sympathy and one-on-one attention in an academic setting. The assistance equalizes opportunity and eliminates the stigma of labeling students (Mohr, 2009). Therefore, writing
centers are useful spaces for all students and provide a venue where students can ask for help with any area of the writing process. These qualities assist personnel at the writing center to shift student focus from extrinsic toward intrinsic goals.

**Academic Writing**

Academic writing is expected across the disciplines in most 2-year and 4-year postsecondary institutions. For many disabled and non-disabled students, writing in postsecondary institutions is a new and difficult subject that must be mastered. Additionally, the difference between what is taught in writing within secondary institutions and what is expected in writing within postsecondary institutions is vast (Baker et al., 2009). Ultimately, writing poses great problems particularly for students with learning disabilities in postsecondary institutions because they generally prove to have weak reading, writing, and math skills, lower GPAs and SAT scores in secondary education; and they shy away from extra academic demands, and possess lower retention and graduation rates than their peers (Mull, Sitlington, & Alper, 2001; Allsopp, Minskoff, & Bolt, 2005; Muller, 2006). The term “learning disabled” according to Milne and Stage (1996) describes:

> A heterogeneous group of individuals who are unable to learn specific academic skills often despite having normal or above normal intelligence... A heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities.” (p. 426)

Furthermore, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 defined learning disabilities to be “a handicapping condition that must be accommodated by federally funded institutions of higher education” (Milne & Stage, 1996, p. 426). Therefore, for the purpose of this study, students with learning disabilities are identified as self-identified students who possess characteristics of the aforementioned description provided by Milne and Stage (1996).
Students with learning disabilities are not the only population within postsecondary institutions experiencing writing difficulties. Basic writers have been identified in postsecondary institutions as a population of students who (a) possess a need for remedial assistance, (b) may be English language learners (ELLs) or linguistically diverse international students, (c) are simply underprepared (Robinson, 2009). Common areas of difficulty for basic writers can include language issues where writers write in a language that is English, but not the English of the academy (Robinson, 2009). Additionally, being a basic writer is about identity and feeling marginal in the academic culture where they struggle to adopt an academic English language.

Students with learning disabilities have been conditioned to identify areas of weakness and seek out necessary accommodations for most of their elementary and secondary educational experiences (Beale, 2005; Field, 1996; Milsom & Hartley, 2005). In high school, a district is required to conduct a student evaluation for SLD to receive special accommodations. At the postsecondary level, the burden of identification, evaluation, and documentation shifts to the student (Beale, 2005; Field, Sarver, & Shaw, 2003). Self-identification will allow a student to receive appropriate accommodations. If students choose to self-identify, they must independently document the existence of a disability (Beale, 2005), must provide documentation of that disability, and must request reasonable accommodations (Field et al., 2003). Moreover, in order to self-advocate, SLD must have knowledge of their disability and possess qualities of self-determination. Although access to accommodations is legally guaranteed, self-identification is a frustrating, embarrassing, unpleasant, and stigmatizing process for SLD (Field et al., 2003). Janiga and Costenbader (2002) identify that 50-75% of students who have a learning disability and have received services within K-12 do not possess adequate self-determination skills to self-
identify in postsecondary institutions, whether a result of the tedious process, or lack of knowledge about the process.

Self-identified SLD possess self-determination skills to independently access services from the DSC along with non-mandated academic assistance programs from service centers. Understanding strengths and weaknesses in a particular discipline such as writing, as well as identifying factors which motivate students to seek assistance, will help college writing centers create appropriate assistance accommodations for all students, including basic writers.

**Deficiencies in Evidence**

Research on college students with learning disabilities coupled with writing is limited. Although research is growing, much research in the area of postsecondary students with learning disabilities focuses on academic accommodations provided by the DSC, transitional and collaborative programming, and attitudes and perceptions of faculty and peers toward the disabled student. Few studies address self-identified learning disabled students and their perceptions towards writing or motivation in accessing academic assistance beyond DSC offerings. While research does address motivational factors of the basic college writer, research lacks in identifying extrinsic and intrinsic motivational factors pertaining to SLD when seeking academic assistance from a 4-year public college’s writing center.

Moreover, little research focuses on creating postsecondary writing curriculums based on perceptions of weak areas of the learning disabled college writer. Furthermore, few studies attempt to use identified perceptions towards writing as tools to create new writing curriculums. Although postsecondary writing centers exist to help students move from extrinsic to intrinsic factors, which include moving beyond surface concerns, beyond satisfying the instructor’s requirements, and toward understanding the content and the relationship to the content. Few
discussions exist regarding how basic writers use writing centers and how writing centers can best serve basic-writer communities (Robinson, 2009).

**Audience**

Research findings may be of interest to college administration, instructors, and postsecondary writing centers. Information sought through research identifying imperative components such as (a) perceptions of weak areas of writing, (b) perceptions of strengths in writing, and (c) motivational factors which push students to utilize academic services can be used to assist in the creation or assessment of college writing programs. Moreover, discovered information may be used on the secondary education level when creating writing curriculums or creating programs which assist in filling in the gaps in writing deficiencies and as tools for shifting the focus of external motivational factors to internal motivational factors. Postsecondary writing centers may find the discovery useful to understand difficulties in writing for students, and when creating writing programs, addressing orders of concerns for students. Finally, information uncovered will help faculty and staff identify basic writers and various levels of writers so those students can receive individualized assistance.

**Problem Statement**

Academic writing is expected across the disciplines in most postsecondary institutions. Writing difficulties will result in inadequate knowledge of subject content, which will hinder discipline learning in postsecondary institutions, and underachievement of basic skills, ultimately leading to high rates of postsecondary attrition rates (Rojewski, 1992). Underprepared students in postsecondary institutions have difficulty during their entire academic experience. Characteristics of underprepared students consist of (a) limited academic success in past experiences leading to remediation, (b) poor development of positive interactions with faculty,
Since many institutions may not offer remediation and since many students continue to need remediation well beyond basic course content within a writing course, remediation falls to the institution’s writing center. The writing center then provides the students with the academic support they need to move beyond developmental writing (Robinson, 2009). Students with disabilities, who obtained accommodations in their secondary education and who have self-identified in their postsecondary education, generally have an understanding of their disability, along with strengths and weaknesses in any particular subject area, and seek assistance in difficult subject areas (Beale, 2005; Field, 1996; Milsom & Hartley, 2005). Many students who have not been conditioned to identify academic weaknesses throughout academic experiences are not as acquainted with identifying strengths and weaknesses in a particular subject area, nor are they accustomed to seeking academic assistance (Brock, 2010). Therefore, understanding motivational factors along with common features of strengths and weaknesses from students who can identify and motivate themselves to succeed academically may benefit a larger student population. Ultimately, identification of student writing issues from the student’s perspective will allow writing centers to help students move beyond surface and low-order concerns and simply satisfying instructors’ requirements, and will help the student move from extrinsic to intrinsic characteristics in writing.

**Research Question**

What motivates self-identified students with learning disabilities to obtain academic support from writing centers in public 4-year postsecondary institutions?
Sub-Questions

- What do SLD identify as personal strengths and weaknesses in college writing?
- What elements of writing do SLD find to be the most important and the least important in college writing?
- What intrinsic or extrinsic factors motivate students to succeed in writing?

Theoretical Framework

Self-Determination Theory

Deci and Ryan’s (1985) self-determination theory looks at reasons why an individual chooses to undertake various tasks, and whether an individual undertakes a task for inherent satisfaction (intrinsic motivation) or to obtain an external award (extrinsic motivation) (Robinson, 2009). Self-determination theory (SDT) is a theoretical approach to human motivation and personality (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). In other words, SDT attempts to understand extrinsic and intrinsic behaviors of individuals and how the behaviors motivate success. When applied in education, Deci et al. (1991) address that (a) self-identifying, (b) understanding one’s own disability and weakness, and (c) independently pursuing assistance for academic success are manifestations of intrinsic motivation. Self-determination theory is effective in understanding factors as to why certain outcomes are desired. Self-determination is fully reached when individuals choose a behavior based on intrinsic factors (for the self), rather than extrinsic factors (to satisfy another).

Intrinsically motivated behaviors are engaged for the sake of the self, in that the student receives satisfaction or pleasure from his or her own performance (Deci et al., 1991). Internalization is the process through which people transform regulation of external incidents...
into an internal process (Deci et al. 1991). Therefore, intrinsically motivated students are concerned with self-satisfaction.

Extrinsically motivated behavior is instrumental by nature and satisfying a separate consequence other than the self (Deci et al., 1991). Deci and Ryan (1985) identified the four types of extrinsic motivational behaviors as (a) external, (b) introjected, (c) identified, and (d) integrated forms of regulation. Each behavior addresses different external elements, which contribute to extrinsic motivation.

Self-determination is a combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enables a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior (Deci et al., 1991). Similarly, Field et al. (2003) show, in order for a student to encounter self-determination, the student must understand his or her strengths and limitations and believe they are capable and effective. Therefore, successful self-determination is reached when an individual acts on the basis of his or her skills and attitudes, to take control of their lives and assume the role of a successful adult in society (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998).

Studies in the early 1990s consistently found that youths with disabilities were less successful in key adult outcomes such as employment and income than their nondisabled peers (Field et al., 2003). Yet, research has demonstrated that individuals who are self-determined are more successful in achievement of their stated goals (Deci et al., 1991). Since most theories of motivation focus on goals or outcomes, and do not deal with the question of why certain outcomes are desired, Deci & Ryan (1985) identified that these theories of motivation failed to address the issue of stimulating behavior. As a result, self-determination theory addresses the motivational issue as well as the directional issue and focuses on three innate needs of the individual including (a) competence, (b) relatedness, and (c) autonomy (or self-determination).
Deci and Ryan (1985) also state that when SDT is applied to the realm of education, the concern is primarily with promoting (a) an interest in learning, (b) a valuing of education, and (c) a confidence in terms of capacities and attributes. Central outcomes of behaviors of self-determined individuals are manifestations of (a) being intrinsically motivated, and (b) internalizing values and regulatory processes. When a behavior is self-determined, the guiding process is choice. Therefore, SDT addresses motivated actions that are self-determined where SLD are engaged in individual choice, endorsed by a sense of self (Deci & Ryan, 1991). Finally, when confronted with academic challenges, students with disabilities must possess self-determination in order to (a) identify a challenge, (b) identify weakness, and (c) independently seek assistance.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Poor writing skills pose great problems for students with learning disabilities in postsecondary institutions because students with learning disabilities generally prove to have weak reading, writing, and/or math skills, lower GPAs, and they shy away from extra academic demands, and possess lower retention and graduation rates than their peers (Mull, Sitlington, & Alper, 2001). Writing difficulties result in inadequate knowledge of subject content and underachievement of basic skills, ultimately leading to high rates of attrition (Englert, Raphael, Fear, & Anderson, 1988). Although some accommodations are provided for self-identified SLD in postsecondary institutions, academic assistance in subject areas is not commonly offered. When students face extensive difficulties in writing, a subject required within most postsecondary disciplines, obtaining academic assistance is necessary for program completion.

When addressing writing difficulties, specifically in postsecondary institutions, basic writers share similar writing challenges as self-identified SLD in that both experience difficulty with grammar, organization, interpretation of the assignment question, answering the assignment question, and finding something to write about (Robinson, 2009; Hillocks, 1984). Additionally, students with learning disabilities have also been found to share similar academic goals with their non-disabled peers. For instance, SLD and their non-disabled peers are motivated to (a) obtain a college degree, (b) further education or training, (c) learn a particular skill, (d) go to college because everybody else goes, or (e) fulfill a desire for future meaningful employment (Milne & Stage, 1996).

To address issues regarding availability of academic support for students in writing, multiple areas must be explored including identification of disabilities, particularly within self-
identification and self-determination; academic support, within disability service centers and writing centers; process of defining underprepared students, specifically through poor writing skills, and identifying writing scores, discussing writing challenges by recognizing secondary writing practices, and postsecondary writing practices; the understanding of academic behaviors through perceptions towards faculty, and perceptions towards writing centers, identification of strengths and weaknesses; and future implications.

**Identifying Disabilities**

Students who access accommodations under the “reasonable accommodations” requirement stated by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) benefit from curricular modifications (e.g., exemption from foreign language requirements), testing accommodations, and assistive technologies (Sparks &Lovett, 2009). Therefore, determining a self-identifying student meets criteria for a learning disabled diagnosis (see Chapter 1, Justification of Research Problem for SLD definition) is important.

Debates over diagnosis occasionally become heated since at times, a learning disability diagnosis is actively sought by students who, even though they have average academic skills, want to bypass graduation requirements or obtain extra time on exams (Sparks & Lovett, 2009; Beale, 2005). A student’s learning disability may be based on cognitive, physical, or emotional needs and may include specific accommodations as identified in Cawthon and Cole’s (2010) Mentoring Model. The model provides information on the overall prevalence and source of accommodations students receive in high school and then in the postsecondary institution. Accommodations at any given institution, whether provided by the school, parents, or other sources, may include (a) assistive technology, (b) classroom assistants, (c) tutoring, (d) alternate
test formats, (e) extended test time, (f) separate test locations, (g) individual counseling or therapy, and (h) physical therapy or functional training.

**Self-Identification**

For students with learning disabilities to receive support services from a postsecondary institution, they must initiate the identification process and voluntarily self-identify and disclose to the institution’s Disability Service Center that he or she has a learning disability (Field et al., 2003). In high school, the school system is required to conduct a student evaluation in order for the student to receive special accommodations, yet at the postsecondary level, the burden of identification, evaluation, and documentation shifts to the student (Beale, 2005; Field et al., 2003). The student must independently document the existence of a disability and the need for academic adjustments (Beale, 2005), must provide documentation of that disability, and must have requested reasonable accommodations (Field et al., 2003). Self-identification will make SLD eligible to receive program modifications and other appropriate academic accommodations, which will enable them to participate in and benefit from all of the educational programs and activities at their respective postsecondary school (Beale, 2005).

Students who self-identify possess self-determination skills needed to succeed academically in postsecondary institutions (Field et al., 2003) and have learned how to be effective self-advocates (Beale, 2005). Since parents and guardians are no longer part of the process to access academic support in postsecondary institutions, the student’s ability to articulate academic needs to others (Beale, 2005) is crucial. Additionally, students who self-identify in the postsecondary institution have an understanding of their learning disability, are responsible advocates, and can identify academic strengths and weaknesses as well as their individual learning styles (Field et al., 2003; Beale, 2005).
**Self-Determination**

Historically, parents have been important and productive advocates for their children, but students have typically not been prepared for self-advocacy or self-determination upon entering postsecondary education (Field et al., 2003). Research suggests self-identification is problematic since 50 to 75% of SLD in postsecondary institutions do not self-identify with the DSC (Forrest, 2003). During elementary and secondary education, special education programs foster academic dependence, which may inhibit independent and self-advocacy skills necessary for academic success in postsecondary institutions (Johnson, Zascavage, & Gerber, 2008). Students with learning disabilities do not have the academic support network in postsecondary institutions as they did in high school and must be able to articulate academic needs to others (Beale, 2005). If the student lacks self-determination, initiating assistance could be problematic (Deci et al., 1991). Since students are eligible to obtain accommodations from the DSC only if they initiate and self-identify with the institution’s appropriate office, self-determination becomes crucial for success in that SLD have knowledge of (a) their disability, (b) postsecondary support services, and (c) the ability to self-advocate succeeding in postsecondary settings (Cawthon & Cole, 2010; Beale, 2005).

Several definitions of self-determination have been offered in connection with special education and disability literature (Field et al., 2003). However, for the purpose of this study, the accurately summarized definition by Field et al., 1998 will be used which states:

Self-determination is a combination of skills, knowledge and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior. An understanding of one’s strengths and limitations together with a belief in oneself as capable and effective are essential to self-determination. When acting on the basis of these skills and attitudes, individuals have greater ability to take control of their lives and assume the role of successful adults in our society. (p. 2)
When applied to education, self-determination is concerned with the promotion of an interest in learning, the value of education, and confidence in capacities and attributes in learning (Deci et al., 1991). Additionally, Deci and Ryan (1985) suggest to have success, individuals should at least identify with the reasons they are completing a task and must be encouraged during elementary and secondary school years. Moreover, Deci et al.’s (1991) research identifies that students who possess self-determination qualities have more successful outcomes including motivation for doing schoolwork and seeking assistance across postsecondary disciplines.

**Academic Support**

The American Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 mandate that services provided by postsecondary institutions have to provide self-identifying students with only an equal opportunity to learn (American Disabilities Act, 2010; Cawthon & Cole, 2010). Postsecondary institutions do not have to provide accommodations that would provide equal results with non-disabled peers (Cawthon & Cole, 2010; Brinckerhoff, Shaw, & McGuire, 1992). Universities must also provide an accommodation only if it does not alter or interfere with the program of study or does not produce financial or logistical hardship (Cawthon & Cole, 2010).

Academic support is critical at postsecondary levels for all students because of (a) decreased teacher-student contact, (b) increased academic competition, (c) an increased need for self-discipline, (d) changes in personal support networks, and (e) unrealistic expectations of demands of postsecondary education (Dalke & Schmitt, 1997; Rojewski, 1992). Many times, postsecondary transition programs for individuals with learning disabilities begin in high school (Rojewski, 1992), and they start with a presence at IEP transition meetings. Participation at these meetings provides students with critical knowledge preparing to self-advocate when entering college which will enhance self-determination (Cawthon & Cole, 2010).
Disability Service Centers

Most postsecondary support programs for SLD offered by an institution’s DSC focus on adapting to academic and social changes (Rojewski, 1992; Nelson & Lignugaris/Kraft, 1989). Moreover, support services available for students who self-identify with the DSC include taped textbooks, individual tutoring, recorded lectures, diagnostic testing, modified exam procedures, academic advisement, counseling, and progress monitoring (Rojewski, 1992; Nelson & Lignugaris/Kraft, 1989; Dalke & Schmitt, 1997). Additionally, as mentioned in Cawthon and Cole’s (2010) Mentoring Model, common support services offered by the DSC include (a) assistive technology, (b) classroom assistants, (c) tutoring, (d) alternative format testing, (e) extended time on tests, (f) separate setting for tests, (g) individual counseling or therapy, and (h) physical assistance. Janiga and Costenbader (2002) surveyed that 98% of all postsecondary institutions with at least one student self-identified with a disability provided a minimum of one support service.

Approximately, 98% of national public institutions reported they have enrolled students with a disability and most postsecondary educational institutions provide some level of service, support and accommodation (Johnson et al., 2002; National Council on Disabilities, 2012). Regarding the reported accommodations, rates varied as follows in conjunction with the 98% of institutions: 88% offered extended time, 69% provided note takers, 62% offered class registration assistance, 55% offered text on tape, 58% provided adaptive technology, and 45% offered sign language interpreters (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). Although support services are offered, many postsecondary institutions do not offer academic support through the DSC. In order for students to obtain content-based or academic assistance they must independently seek resources from tutoring service centers or directly from their instructors (Rath & Royer, 2002).
Even if students receive adequate accommodations in postsecondary institutions, they still may encounter obstacles in the course of their education (Cawthon & Cole, 2010). Kurth and Mellard (2006) hypothesized that many accommodations offered in postsecondary institutions are ineffective and inappropriate because they assign accommodations based on the student disability rather than understanding what the SLD will need in the classroom or particular subject. As a result, 86% of SLD encounter some type of academic barrier during his or her postsecondary education (Kurth & Mellard, 2006; Cawthon & Cole, 2010). Therefore, students must independently motivate and seek out academic assistance from writing centers or tutoring centers to access academic assistance.

**Postsecondary Writing Centers**

The purpose of a college’s writing center is multifaceted and depends on the individual seeking assistance. Generally, the philosophy of the writing center according to Robinson (2009) is to find a balance between effectively serving individual needs of students and faculty while maintaining an independent pedagogical mission. A large population of students who use an institution’s writing center are considered “basic writers” (Robinson, 2009, p. 70), international and English language learners (ELL), SLD, underprepared students, students needing remedial writing assistance. Basic writers in postsecondary education are students who (a) are considered underprepared for college either through a high school education in the U.S. that was not sufficient for college level writing or (b) received pre-college education in a different language (Robinson, 2009). Subsequently, writing centers have been the spaces where these students can improve basic writing skills, shape the voice they want to adopt in a paper, express reservations about assignments, express doubts and frustrations, receive one-on-one attention, equalize opportunity, and eliminate the stigma of labeling (Robinson, 2009; Mohr,
Moreover, Lu (1992) states that many of the basic writers seeking assistance are interested in becoming like their tutors, in that they “want to internalize the discourse of the academic culture, to no longer be the 'other’” (p. 893).

The choice to use an institution’s writing center stems from extrinsic or intrinsic motivation as seen in Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory. Most students visit the writing center because they want help in fulfilling a writing task for their own personal satisfaction or because they have been told to do so by their instructor. Additionally, basic writers commonly seek writing assistance for help such as organizing, interpreting assignments, and sentence-level work; all these issues satisfy an instructor (Mohr, 2007; Robinson, 2009), an extrinsic motivational experience. Consequently, a smaller population of students visit the writing center because they believe tutoring sessions could help them achieve self-expression of ideas (Lu, 1992), an intrinsic motivational experience. The shifting from extrinsic motivation towards intrinsic motivation, specifically for basic writers, occurs through a series of tutoring sessions initiated by the student. Jones (2009) shows that basic writers experience low intrinsic motivation while students who have stronger writing skills experience high intrinsic motivation.

Writing center tutors will attempt to serve basic writers better by assisting the student when navigating from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation (Robinson, 2009) as discussed in Deci and Ryan’s (1985) self-determination theory. Therefore, understanding motivation of basic writers’ usage of the writing center will provide valuable information to tutors in understanding how to assist in the shift from extrinsic towards intrinsic motivation in writing.

**Underprepared Students**

Underprepared students in postsecondary institutions have had educational experiences that did not prepare them for college. Barbatis (2010) identifies necessary precollege characteristics
which contribute to academic achievement in underprepared students, similar to Deci and Ryan’s (1985) self-determination theory. Characteristics of successful underprepared students in postsecondary institutions include (a) a sense of responsibility, (b) goal-orientation, (c) resourcefulness, (d) persistence and determination, and (e) cultural identification. Furthermore, Barbatis (2010) classifies academic integration as a means to success during postsecondary experiences for underprepared students. Academic integration includes (a) faculty relationships, (b) campus resources, (c) time management, and (d) self-reliance and independence.

Lack of alignment between secondary and postsecondary education writing curriculums is a common cause of underprepared students in writing. For example, secondary education writing curriculums generally consist of (a) analyzing material learned in the classroom, (b) writing personal narratives based on their own interpretations of life experiences (Graham & Harris, 1997), and (c) composing persuasive essays in which they take positions on topical, social, and political issues (Wong, Butler, Ficzere, & Kuperis, 1997). Most students are taught within the framework to write analytic essays, comparing and contrasting two or more concepts, objects, people, or events (Baker, Gersten, & Graham, 2003). Therefore, ineffective methods direct little attention to critical components of writing in postsecondary disciplines (Wong et al.) which include (a) organizing information and ideas, (b) writing legibly, (c) implementing rhetorical structures, and (d) engaging an audience (Baker et al., 2009).

**Poor Writing Skills**

Many students enter postsecondary institutions academically underprepared with weak writing skills, along with difficulties learning new concepts in writing (Graham & Harris, 1997). Students with learning disabilities in postsecondary education experience some of the most serious deficits in written language, particularly in expository writing (Guiffrida & Douthit,
Deficits include the meta-cognitive knowledge related to the processes of planning, drafting, monitoring, and revising expository text and the ability to use text structures in written language to produce well-organized texts (Englert et al., 1988). Hillocks’s (1984) meta-cognitive analysis also identified that a central problem in the writing of SLD is a failure to plan and organize writing while paying little attention to the audience, organization of text, development of rhetorical goals, and constraints of the topic, all requirements in postsecondary academic writing across the disciplines (Graham & Harris, 1997). Based on the literature, common writing practices in secondary education are misaligned with postsecondary writing expectations.

**Writing Scores Identified**

In the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), writing assessment performance was categorized as Below Basic, Basic, Proficient, or Advanced. According to Robinson (2009), basic is defined by the Institute of Education Sciences as partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work at each grade. Regarding SLD in grades 8 and 12, 94% of students scored at Below Basic and Basic levels. Within the United States, when considering non-disabled students, Isaacson (1995) estimates that approximately 16% of 4th grade students, 16% of 8th grade students, and 22% of 12th grade students were unable to write at even the most basic level. Consequently, problems in writing surface early and tend to remain with students throughout their schooling experience (Isaacson, 1995). Similarly, 94% of students with learning disabilities in grades 8 and 12, scored at Below Basic and Basic levels. Both disabled and non-disabled students scoring at Basic and Below Basic levels are not meeting minimum standards for competent writing.
Writing Challenges

Academic writing is expected across the disciplines in most postsecondary institutions and a large number of American students, both with and without learning disabilities have very poor writing skills (Baker et al., 2003). Writing difficulties will result in inadequate knowledge of subject content, which will hinder discipline learning in postsecondary institutions, and underachievement of basic skills, ultimately leading to high rates of postsecondary attrition (Rojewski, 1992), adding to the already reported more than 40% of SLD. Writing for most students in postsecondary institutions is a new and difficult subject that must be mastered, and the difference between what is taught in writing within secondary institutions and what is expected in writing within postsecondary institutions is vast.

Secondary Writing Practices

Baker et al. (2009) imply most writing lessons in elementary and secondary institutions are approached passively where writing with reading is incorporated, and structure is not emphasized. Common writing practices in secondary education classrooms consider writing instruction somewhat passively by having students read extensively and encouraging them to apply to their own writing what they observed in the writing of others (Baker et al., 2003; Gersten & Baker, 2001). Research indicates the methods do not help students become better writers; instead, the research on effective writing instruction has focused on the quality of writing content rather than writing mechanics (Baker et al., 2003). Moreover, based on expectations of postsecondary writing curriculums, techniques in writing to prepare for academic success in postsecondary institutions and in the workforce should be to teach students how to (a) organize writing tasks, (b) generate ideas about the writing topics, and (c) produce final written products that are coherent and organized.
Postsecondary Writing

The research on effective writing instruction has focused on the quality of writing content rather than writing mechanics as seen in secondary classrooms (Baker et al., 2003). Baker et al. (2009) identify necessary qualities of successful academic writing to include (a) organizing information and ideas, (b) writing legibly, (c) implementing rhetorical structures, and (d) engaging an audience. These elements can present difficulty for typical writers, but students with learning disabilities are more poorly developed in writing and experience greater difficulty than their non-disabled peers particularly with organizational structures (Baker et al., 2009; Englert, et al., 1998). Therefore, regarding writing instruction, a common goal is to teach students with learning disabilities how to organize writing tasks, generate ideas about the writing topics, and produce final written products that are coherent and organized and that can be used across the disciplines. Gersten and Baker (2001) found that writing interventions in educational settings had a positive impact on students’ perceptions of their own ability to write effectively, leading to academic success.

Academic Behaviors of SLD

Self-identified students with learning disabilities possess specific characteristics which will help them navigate towards independently obtaining academic support services not regularly offered by the DSC. Students with disabilities have expressed concerns regarding learning within postsecondary institutions. Academic skills and performance, partnered with the ability to learn in new situations, are negatively affected by learning disabilities (Rojewski, 1992). Students with learning disabilities are characterized according to Rojewski (1992) as passive learners with problems which include (a) low academic performance, (b) poor organizational skills, (c) text anxiety, and (d) limited attention span. These types of academic problems can
result in inadequate knowledge of subject content and underachievement in basic skills (Rojewski, 1992; Nelson, R., & Lignaugaris/Kraft, B, 1989), and they may hinder success in subjects such as writing. If students understand potential postsecondary barriers at the high school level, an acknowledgement of self-awareness and self-advocacy skills needed in postsecondary institutions will be present (Kurth & Mellard, 2002). However, Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1997), found that self-determined SLD who self-identify with a college’s DSC were likely to have achieved more positive outcomes such as higher rates of retention and graduation, lower rates of attrition, higher rates of employment, and higher earnings than peers who are not as self-determined.

**Perceptions Toward Faculty**

Understanding students with disabilities’ perspectives of faculty attitudes is important to obtain since SLD, at times, need to approach instructors for academic assistance with content or clarity of written assignments. In an effort to study students with learning disabilities’ perspectives regarding accommodations, barriers, and obstacles in postsecondary relationships, Cawthon and Cole (2010) identified SLD and faculty relationships as a potential barrier to learning. This barrier can be detrimental to success according to Muller (2006) because SLD in postsecondary education are influenced by their perception of faculty support of their learning, and “the success of LD [learning disabled] students in postsecondary education is influenced by their perception of faculty support of their learning” (p. 26). Murray, Wren and Keys (2008) identify that a student with a disability may not approach faculty with questions regarding written assignments or clarity of content because they believe faculty may perceive the student’s disability as a negative attribute in the classroom. Additionally, students expressed they were embarrassed in front of teachers and peers when asking for assistance during class or
after class (Murray et al., 2008) and said they preferred to hand in an incorrect assignment, or avoid the situation and not hand in the assignment at all.

Based on qualitative test results, Cawthon and Cole (2010), along with Kurth and Mellard (2006), identify that SLD sometimes felt faculty either believed the student was incompetent and they had to help the student succeed or that the SLD should not be enrolled in their class. Results of interviews conducted by Kurth and Mellard (2006) indicate that SLD students lack the sense of belonging and feel discriminated against by their instructors. This perception may also hinder the student’s ability to approach an instructor for academic assistance. Muller (2006) also states through her quantitative studies that students sometimes felt stigmatized by teachers when self-identifying, so they felt more pressure, which led to anxiety, to stay on top of their course work. Additionally, some SLD felt academic information was difficult to access because their professors did not know how to accommodate them or because the services provided by the institution were inadequate (Cawthon & Cole, 2010; Kurth & Mellard, 2006).

**Perceptions Toward Writing Centers**

Since SLD do not have the support network of family and friends in postsecondary institutions as they did in secondary institutions, students must articulate their academic needs to others (Beale, 2005). Students perceive writing centers as a safe haven where they can discuss academic difficulties during one-on-one interactions. Robinson (2009) identifies that students can openly discuss reservations about their assignments, doubts and frustrations about what they are asked to do, and personal weaknesses in a non-judgmental and supportive environment. Moreover, Robinson (2009) states that students seek assistance from writing centers because they are getting one-on-one assistance from someone who is (a) still employed by the college and (b) part of the formal educational loop, mirroring the role of the instructor. Students,
therefore, perceive writing centers as useful spaces where they can seek assistance in non-judgmental settings, while simultaneously identifying with the self, finding something to write about, developing ideas, and connecting with the representation of themselves as writers with important ideas (Robinson, 2009).

**Summation**

Self-identified students with learning disabilities make up only a small percentage of college students who experience difficulty with writing tasks. However, self-identified students with learning disabilities in postsecondary settings are motivated to succeed academically, understand their disability, and will seek assistance when necessary. Furthermore, SLD can identify academic strengths and weaknesses and navigate towards appropriate assistance when needed. Basic writers and weak postsecondary writers share similar strengths and weaknesses, yet may not be as keen on identifying issues or obtaining non-mandated academic assistance. Identifying strengths and weaknesses to create guidelines within an institution’s writing center, along with understanding motivational aspects, will help writing centers provide and become more active in initiating services to a larger student population. Furthermore, identifying weaknesses and strengths of basic writers, which include SLD and larger populations, can be used to create a hierarchy of assessment and teaching techniques when working in one-on-one sessions with students. Guiding students through the systemic practice will allow students to identify weaknesses and strengths independently and eventually independently work through difficult areas, ultimately moving from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

In this particular study, qualitative research methods were deemed the best approach to identify and obtain information regarding participant experiences. Student responses to qualitative methods during an interview process helped researchers identify factors which motivate self-identified students with learning disabilities to seek academic assistance independently from the 4-year public institution’s writing center. Creswell (2013) provides vital characteristics of qualitative components which differ from quantitative studies, particularly during the data collection process. The use of qualitative studies during the data collection process allowed researchers to learn from the participants’ experiences. Moreover, it was expected that since the research reflected a constructivism-interpretivism paradigm, participants discovered new experiences about the self as initial research questions evolved into deeper discussions based on responses. Results of a constructivism-interpretivism paradigm allowed for self-discovery, particularly when researching subject perceptions.

The data analysis process in qualitative research was an effective method of discovery when determining the meaning of participant perceptions of motivation. Since participant responses did not use statistics, the information provided by participants was coded, grouped, and analyzed to describe the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, during the data analysis process, words and responses of participants were coded, categorized, and placed into themes.

Research Question

What motivates self-identified students with learning disabilities to obtain academic support from writing centers in public 4-year postsecondary institutions?
Sub-Questions

- What do SLD identify as personal strengths and weakness in college writing?
- Which elements of writing do SLD find to be the most important and the least important in college writing?
- What intrinsic or extrinsic factors motivate students to succeed in writing?

Paradigm

According to Ponterotto (2005), the constructivism-interpretivism paradigm approach “maintains that meaning is hidden and must be brought to the surface through deep reflection” (p. 129) and was appropriate when seeking multiple perceptions of motivation from various subjects. During the interview process, participants’ reflections were stimulated based on the research questions. Although the research questions were an effective starting point for the dialogue, the direction of the initial discussion evolved and changed at some points, due to the discovery of perception from the interviewee. Instances of such were seen when the participant did not realize obtaining assistance from the writing center stemmed from intrinsic or extrinsic motivational factors, and did not consciously address reasons as to why he or she independently sought assistance. The dialogues and findings revealed a deeper meaning of perceptions and motivation from each individual.

Moreover, since the constructivism-interpretivism paradigm allowed students to identify underlying perceptions, constructivism also justified that there were multiple and equally valid realities and perceptions about motivation (Schwandt, 1994). Under this particular paradigm, the interview process sought diverse perceptions of the nine subjects. Each individual’s answer was based on what the individual deemed a reality of the situation. Hansen (2004) states that reality is individually constructed in one’s own mind and becomes an individual’s perception.
Therefore, feedback from SLD based on a perception of motivation was supported by the constructivism-interpretivism paradigm since the paradigm encouraged discovery of the self as well as differencing perspectives of the sample.

**Research Design**

Data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, and recorded with a digital voice-recorder which was later transcribed and coded by the researcher. The nine interviews lasted anywhere between 25-40 minutes and took place on the 4-year public institution’s campus at a location chosen by the participant.

According to Creswell (2013), interviews play a central role in phenomenological studies to understand student experiences and perceptions. The objective of the interviews was to have the students describe the meaning of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013) along with their experiences and perceptions in obtaining academic assistance from the institution’s writing center. Interviews were important in this phenomenological study because through the interview, the participant described the meaning of the phenomenon for a small number of individuals who experienced that specific phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Furthermore, conducting interviews and obtaining first-hand information directly allowed the researcher to understand perceptions created from participant experiences. The open-ended interview questions allowed the researcher to discuss and touch upon various areas the participants believed were important (Appendix A). Although primary questions were discussed, participants, at times, elaborated on and introduced pertinent evidence about the subject.

The qualitative study focused on SLD personal experiences of obtaining academic assistance beyond the offerings of the DSC and harnessed a small sample size to establish common themes. Exploring student perceptions of obtaining academic assistance in writing from
the institution’s writing center through interviews provided first-hand experiences identified by the participants. Personal experiences, particularly narrative study reports, are the basis for phenomenological studies according to Creswell (2013). Phenomenological studies described individuals’ lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon. The phenomenological method was used, so SLD could clearly identify reasons and elements related to the research questions. Moreover, identification of experiences isolated extrinsic and intrinsic motivation.

Arceneaux (2006) used a qualitative research approach when examining how individuals with learning disabilities developed and maintained a sense of self. Conducting interviews allowed participants to discover how they construct meaning from their academic experiences through life stories and experiences. Similar to perceptions of motivation in SLD, through qualitative studies, participants in Arceneaux’s (2006) research discovered perceptions of self in troublesome academic situations and identified how they adjusted to new learning strategies. Furthermore, Wagner (2008) conducted qualitative research through interviews to identify factors that contributed to or distracted students with disabilities from succeeding academically in their first year of college. Each participant in Wagner’s study was interviewed to discover motivational factors, attitudes, and beliefs about his or her personal academic experiences.

**Research Tradition**

A phenomenological study was a proper approach when researching self-identified students with learning disabilities’ perceptions of motivation in obtaining academic assistance in writing from the institution’s writing center. The phenomenological study according to Creswell (2013) described the common meaning for participants of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon. Researchers focused on what all participants had in common as they experienced the common phenomenon. Moreover, Moustakas’s (1994) psychological approach focused less
on interpretation and more on description of the experiences of the participants. Moustakas also focused on Husserl’s concept of bracketing, where researchers set aside their perspectives and interpretations to take a fresh non-biased approach on the topic (Creswell, 2013). For a researcher to discover the true perceptions of participants created by their experiences, the researcher must also obtain more descriptions of the experiences with less interpretation of what experiences could mean.

Regarding perceptions of SLD access to independently obtaining assistance from the institution’s writing center, using a phenomenological study allowed participants to discuss perceptions caused by experiences of accessibility of academic accommodations beyond standard DSC offerings. According to Creswell (2013), the basic purpose of a phenomenological study is to reduce the individual’s experience with a phenomenon to a description of a universal essence of the shared phenomena. Through the interview process, experiences were identified by participants along with how the participants had subjective experiences of the phenomenon and objective experiences of something in common with other participants (p. 78).

When seeking perceptions from the SLD population in a 4-year public postsecondary institution, phenomenological methods were used as seen in Wizikowski (2013) and Arceneaux (2006). Wizikowski (2013) successfully used qualitative research methods to obtain information through surveys and interviews from SLD regarding their perceptions and experiences with academic support in private and public postsecondary institutions. Through the phenomenological study, students identified perceptions and expressed usefulness of academic services provided by the institution. Additionally, Arceneaux (2006) followed a phenomenological study by conducting interviews to identify perceptions of SLD writing strategies in postsecondary assignments as well as their motivation to complete assignments.
Similarly, SLD developed their interpretations of their ability (intrinsic) and their own perceptions of what is expected within each assignment (extrinsic). A phenomenological study was significant when identifying intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to visit the institution’s writing center since individual perceptions of a particular situation were sought.

**Participants**

The research aimed to explore why self-identified students with learning disabilities in a 4-year public institution independently obtained academic assistance in writing from the institution’s writing center.

**Research Population**

Characteristics of the participants included students who have (a) self-identified with the 4-year public institution’s Disability Service Center, (b) experienced academic writing in at least one college course, and (c) independently sought assistance from the institution’s writing center. The characteristics of the subjects were multifaceted. First, students needed to be self-identified with the DSC for self-determination purposes, so the responses would, in fact, come from students with learning disabilities. Next, self-identified SLD also have an awareness of academic strengths and weaknesses, can express strengths and weaknesses to faculty and staff, and have the ability to request information, and demonstrate awareness of services, needs, and appropriate accommodations (Field, 1996).

**Sampling Strategy**

Purposeful sampling was important in this qualitative study because individuals and sites purposely selected can inform an understanding of the research problem and common or central phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Criterion sampling was an appropriate fit for research on motivational factors within SLD to seek assistance from the institution’s writing center.
Additionally, the sampling would ensure participants met certain criteria, allowing for quality assurance (Creswell, 2013). Moreover, using precise criteria allowed for a more thorough research since participants had certain characteristics in common. The criteria for the nine participants included SLD who (a) self-identified with the 4-year public institution’s Disability Service Center, (b) experienced academic writing in at least one college course, and (c) independently sought assistance from the institution’s writing center. Participants had, but were not required to have, an understanding of academic writing expectations in postsecondary institutions along with personal knowledge of their writing strengths and weaknesses.

**Sample Size**

Participants from the 4-year public institution independently self-identified with the DSC as having a disability and acknowledged they needed assistance in the area of postsecondary academic writing. Approximately nine students were used for this study to obtain extensive data through interviews about perceptions of motivation when independently utilizing an institution’s writing center for academic assistance. Creswell (2013) recommends that studying a few sites or individuals allows researchers to collect extensive details about each site or individual studied. Since the intent is not to generalize but to explore experiences and perceptions, collecting greater details from fewer participants is ideal.

**Recruitment and Access**

Through collaboration with the 4-year public postsecondary institution’s writing center and the institution’s Disabilities Service Center, self-identified students with learning disabilities were recruited for the study. General interest flyers (Appendix B) were created by the institution’s writing center and placed in the common area at the DSC. Interested participants returned the bottom portion of the recruitment flyer which included potential participant’s name,
email, phone number, and a check box indicating whether or not he or she received services from the institution’s writing center. After interested students filled out the contact information on the flyer, the DSC director collected the information and passed the information along to the researcher in a sealed confidential folder.

Next, each interested participant, if qualified based on the flyer feedback, was contacted. If participants were not available, voicemails or emails were left, and the communication inquiry was recorded. Face-to-face or telephone discussions were held with participants who contacted the researcher regarding interest in the project. During the discussion, the researcher explained the purpose of the study and the qualifications sought from the participants, and asked whether or not the individual was interested in participating in the study. If participants agreed to participate in the research study, the first meeting was set up to discuss the project further. During the first meeting, the participants and the researcher reviewed and signed the participant consent form (Appendix C). Additionally, the participants and the researcher discussed an agreeable day and time for the interview at a preferred location for the participant. Note, since the researcher is an instructor at the institution where the research took place, students currently enrolled in classes taught by the researcher were not allowed to participate in the research. Although students must self-identify to instructors, some students who self-identify chose not to inform the instructor.

**Ethical Considerations**

Based on the Office of Extramural Research (2008), (a) respect for persons, (b) beneficence, and (c) justice are three principles essential to the ethical conduct of human research. The principles are the foundation of regulations and guidelines for the ethical conduct, supported by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).
Respect for Persons. Respect for participants was reached when participants were given adequate information about the study and entered into the study voluntarily with informed consent. To ensure that respect for SLD was reached, each participant was treated as autonomous agent (Office of Extramural Research, 2008) and was given in written form, information regarding (a) potential harms and benefits to the study and (b) risks or benefits related to the study. Since the population of the study is students with disabilities, diminished autonomy was considered as a potential factor. Misunderstanding of the study was a possibility; therefore, extra precautions were put into place to ensure potential participants fully comprehended the benefits and risks of the study. Precautions included support from DSC staff to be on hand if necessary to explain further, clarify, or discuss any issues with the study, and to support the student emotionally if the student experienced any anxiety agreeing to or participating in the study.

Beneficence. In order to guarantee beneficence occurred, the study was carefully planned to ensure no harm to participants with maximum benefits. Participants were interviewed in a non-threatening environment of the participants’ choice and advised that they were free to discontinue the interview at any time, before or during the actual interview. Additionally, participants were informed that information provided and collected would be used to create academic support programs through the writing center, particularly for students who experience difficulty in writing.

Justice. In accordance with justice, assurance that SLD would be treated fairly and equitably was in place. The research conducted sought to (a) enhance postsecondary learning at the institution’s writing center in a non-threatening setting and (b) identify how writing centers can best serve postsecondary students through means of discovery as well as remediation.
(Robinson, 2009). The research conducted with SLD pursued creation of improved writing programs for SLD as well as the general student population at the institution.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

The Office of Extramural Research (2008) states that protection of all human subjects is required and is identified as Subpart A, “The Common Rule.” Participants for this study qualified for the protection of human research because participants are (a) human subjects and (b) the data collected are through interactions with the participants. Although there was consideration that participants could qualify as a vulnerable population, the participants did not qualify for subparts B, C, and D, and additional safeguards were not needed to protect the rights of SLD. Prior to data collection, the research was brought to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at both the institution where the study was conducted and the researcher’s academic institution (see IRB Approval). Additionally, to protect the identity of participants, data collected during individual interviews were recorded and coded, and pseudo names were given to protect their identify. Furthermore, written consent was obtained from each individual regarding audio taping of interviews, and participants were assured that all data collected, including coded, recorded and written information were private and would be destroyed.

**Confidentiality**

 Protecting the privacy of the participants was mandatory in research of human subjects, unless the individuals provided consent of disclosure (Office of Extramural Research, 2008). Methods of ensuring confidentiality for this research included disposal of recorded and written records, limited access to data, and the storing of records in secured databases. Interviews with participants were audio recorded, coded onto worksheets, and stored on a password protected database. Additionally, any recorded information was locked and stored in cabinets, and coded
and written information and records were secured on a database. All written and recorded information was destroyed after database input.

**Informed Consent**

After gathering participants who agreed to the study, participants were required to sign an informed consent form stating that participants understood their enrollment was voluntary, and they could withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of benefits (Office of Extramural Research, 2008). Although consent was to be obtained at the beginning of the study by the researcher, discussions of consent were reviewed again on the day of the interview before the interview took place. Additional methods of consent to enhance comprehension, considering participants may have been a vulnerable population, included general discussions to interested and non-interested SLD during writing workshops, which allowed all students to share questions or concerns.

**IRB Approval**

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) facilitates and promotes the ethical conduct of research with human subjects. IRB approval was sought at two locations: Farmingdale State College (FSC), the 4-year public institution where the research participants were gathered, and Northeastern University, the institution where the research was presented.

IRB approval procedures at FSC were a multi-faceted process and included IRB Form 1: Application for approval for research involving human subjects, IRB Form 2: Protocol summary, IRB Form 4: Expedited review procedure, and IRB Form 8: Vulnerable populations.

**Data Collection**

Data were collected from individuals who experienced the phenomena of obtaining academic assistance in writing from the institution's writing center. Approximately eight pre-
written, primary questions relating to participants’ experiences of independently obtaining assistance in writing were asked (Appendix D). Moustakas (1994) suggests asking participants two broad questions: “What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon?” and “What contexts of situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon?” (Creswell, 2013, p. 81). These two questions will focus attention on gathering data that will lead to structured descriptions of experiences which, eventually provide researchers with an understanding of common experiences of participants within the sample.

Furthermore, the interview was conducted through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, and recorded with a digital voice-recorder which was later transcribed and coded by the researcher. Interviews lasted about 30-40 minutes and took place at a location on FSC’s campus chosen by the participant. According to Creswell (2013), interviews play a central role in phenomenological studies to understand student experiences and perceptions. For this phenomenological study, the process of collecting data was through in-depth interviews with nine students who have self-identified with the DSC. The objective was to have the students describe the meaning of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013) along with their experiences in obtaining academic assistance.

**Data Storage**

To maintain the integrity of the study and allow for confidentiality of participants, all recorded and written information was secured and protected. Additionally, all written and documented information including consent forms, transcriptions, and coding of the interviews was stored and then destroyed. The consent forms were kept in a folder labeled ‘confidential’ and locked in a cabinet in the researcher’s home. After the interviews were obtained and the research study was completed, the consent forms were shredded and discarded appropriately.
Similarly, transcribed interviews were kept on a password protected personal laptop as well as on an encrypted jump drive, which remained at the researcher’s home. Participants were identified with only pseudonyms, and after all material was coded, interview transcriptions were deleted. Documents including codes and themes were also stored on the researchers password protected personal computer as well as on an encrypted jump drive, which also remained at the researcher’s home.

**Data Analysis**

Qualitative researchers use inductive logic to code data, build patterns, categories, and themes from the “bottom up,” by organizing the data into increasingly more abstract units of information (Saldaña, 2009). As data were interpreted, themes emerged, thereby creating patterns, categories, and subcategories. Since coding is not a precise science but rather an interpretive act (Saldaña, 2009), the emergence of codes and themes was based on the interviewer’s perception.

Following Saldaña’s (2009) suggested procedure, the coding process consisted of working back and forth between developing themes and data until sets of themes were established. Based on experiences from a field study, most of the interviews were coded using “Initial Coding,” which were simply first impressions of the data (Saldaña, 2009), coding every single sentence. During analysis, unnecessary information was eliminated, a practice Wolcott (1994) identifies as “winnowing data” (p 184); not all information needs to be used, and some information may be discarded.

Creswell (2013) states researchers can develop a short list of 25-30 tentative codes. After the interviews took place, codes and themes emerged with the data. As analyzing progressed and
recurring codes appeared, “Simultaneous Coding” was used to apply the descriptive code on the right-hand side and another code within the single datum (Saldaña, 2009).

Based on the emerging themes, a master list of codes was created, which included approximately 25 potential codes. As each interview was analyzed, new codes created identifying factors of perceptions. Since Saldaña (2009) states coding is arranging information in a systemic order to make something part of a classification, a reference list of codes can be used so themes can initially be worded similarly without changing meaning. Codes were then categorized and numbered into a total of four themes. Following categorizing and numbering themes, each code was then placed under a specific theme. When necessary, wording with common meanings was changed because as Saldaña (2009) states, coding is not just labeling, but is linking. After the interviews were initially coded, a second round of coding was conducted. Saldaña (2009) states that researchers need to exercise flexibility and requires researchers to code twice sometimes. Codes were numerically labeled, and themes under each code were lettered. This process allowed for collaboration and pairing of themes for future identification and organization.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is imperative in qualitative research to ensure dependability and authenticity (Creswell, 2013, p. 246) of obtained information, as validation ensures credibility of research. A researcher attempting to find trustworthiness and validation of their study should utilize two strategies from the eight as suggested by Creswell and Miller (2000). Strategies of validation include (a) prolonged engagement, (b) triangulation, (c) peer review, (d) negative case analysis, (e) clarifying research bias, (f) member checking, (g) rich, thick description, and (h)
external audits. Two validation strategies used for ensuring the credibility of transcriptions of interviews conducted were triangulation and member checking.

**Triangulation**

According to Creswell (2013), triangulation is a method of ensuring validity of information obtained by using multiple sources, methods and theories to provide corroborating findings. To ensure triangulation, Yin’s (2009) guidelines of data collection were followed, which include audio taping and transcribing interviews, both structured and semi-structured. Each interview obtained from the nine participants conducted was audio recorded, transcribed, and coded to ensure triangulation.

**Member Checking**

Member checking involves collecting, analyzing, interpreting and concluding data, then passing the information back to the participants so the participants can judge the accuracy and the credibility of interpretation (Creswell, 2013). Before each interview took place, during the consent process, participants were notified about member checking for validity. After the interview was conducted and transcribed, the participant’s transcribed interview was emailed back to the participant so s/he could check for accuracy. Although considered, Creswell’s suggestion regarding using participants as a focus group to reflect on the accuracy of the account was not used. Furthermore, as Creswell suggests, participants received preliminary analysis of descriptions or themes, not the actual transcripts of raw data.

**Potential Threats**

Validation will assist in eliminating potential threats of collecting, analyzing, and reporting data (Creswell, 2013). A potential threat considered was within analyzing the data. Feeling empathy, sharing similar experiences or personally connecting with the self-identified
students with learning disabilities in postsecondary education could have resulted in reporting findings from the interviewer’s perspective. To address the potential issue, Creswell suggests reporting multiple perspectives and contrary findings along with assigning fictitious names and developing composite profiles. This process distanced the interviewer from the participants to avoid bias. Furthermore, member checking safeguarded analysis of data and reporting.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Before entering college, a student with disabilities has most likely worked with family and educators to establish academic plans and goals. Additionally, in order for the students to be academically successful during their postsecondary education, self-identified students with learning disabilities possess certain motivational characteristics since it is up to the student to access academic support when needed. Field (1996) identifies necessary motivational skill sets for successful postsecondary academic outcomes that include (a) an awareness of academic strengths and weaknesses, (b) the ability to express awareness to faculty and staff, (c) an awareness of services, needs, and accommodations, and (d) the ability to request information when appropriate.

Identification of Participants

Participants for the study were self-identified students with disabilities (see page 14 Self-Identification) and with varied academic backgrounds. Variations ranged from (a) length of time spent at the particular institution, (b) type of assistance sought, (c) average number of visits per semester, (d) discipline in which assistance was needed, and (e) whether visits were independently sought or mandated.

The nine participants fitting the sample size were composed of five male students and four female students. Furthermore, three students were freshman, three students were transfers from another postsecondary institution, and three students attended only that particular postsecondary institution. The length of time spent at the institution at the time of the interview varied from one semester to four and a half years. The type of assistance received varied between face-to-face individual tutoring sessions and workshops, which were given by writing center tutors at the
Disability Service Center. Five students received assistance through both face-to-face and workshop settings, three participants received only face-to-face assistance, and one student sought assistance only in a workshop setting. Additionally, eight out of the nine participants expressed that they independently visited the writing center multiple times within a semester (ranging from two to seven visits) for multiple disciples whereas only one student expressed that an instructor required the class to visit the writing center before handing in any research paper.

**Theme 1: Goal Oriented**

Students who self-identify with the 4-year public postsecondary institution have been prepared for self-advocacy upon entering the institution, which leads toward self-determination. Deci and Ryan’s (1985) self-determination theory explores the reasoning as to why an individual chooses to undertake various tasks, such as initiating academic assistance in writing from an institutions writing center, as well as whether an individual undertakes a task for inherent satisfaction (intrinsic motivation) or for external rewards (extrinsic motivation).

Deci and Ryan (1985) suggest that in order to succeed, individuals should at least identify with the reasons they are completing a task or identify an existing goal. Similarly, Field et al., (2003) identify self-determination as “a combination of skills, knowledge and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior” (p. 339), and when applied to this study, self-determination will result in participants independently seeking assistance from the institution’s writing center.

Participants were asked to discuss perceptions of hopeful outcomes after visiting the institution’s writing center. The emergence of the first theme identified by all participants was an awareness of specific goal or outcome associated with their visit. Participants identified
intrinsic and extrinsic goals within responses, as seen in Deci and Ryan’s (1985) self-determination theory and identified (a) academic goals, (b) future goals, and (c) personal goals.

**Academic Goals**

Students expressed hopeful outcomes after visiting the institution’s writing center to achieve academic goals. These outcomes were commonly shared among eight out of the nine participants. Academic goals, based on participants’ responses reflected both intrinsic and extrinsic factors and were categorized as (a) attaining a better grade, (b) understanding the writing process, and (c) comprehending assignments.

**Attaining Better Grades.** Participants who sought academic goals for self-success purposes expressed the desire to obtain better grades as an outcome of their writing center visit. Some participants clearly expressed their desire for a better grade by acknowledging the need for assistance from an experienced tutor to check their work. Marc was clear about hopeful outcomes when stating, “Well, first of all, I hope to get better grades! That’s something I want... good grades. Yea, just to get a good grade on it really.” Similarly, Frank shared a similar goal regarding outcomes and stated, “I was hoping to get a decent grade,” just as Luke and Michael respectively stated, “A good grade on papers or DBQ’s, [Document Based Questions] like in History,” and “Oh, well you know, obviously, um, a good grade on my paper. That would be nice. I would definitely feel good about a good grade.” The desire to succeed as a priority regarding outcomes after seeking non-mandated academic assistance is a common occurrence. Additionally, Cathy expressed the outcome after a writing center visit would be “that I’d get a passing grade,” and shares the goal with Ellen, who stated “I hoped to get a better grade than what I could have received,” and Pete who also stated his goal was, “to get a satisfying grade.”
Understanding the Writing Process. Another common component regarding academic goals in writing entails the student’s desire to understand the writing process. Marc clearly stated one hopeful academic outcome consisted of “trying to get a good start on writing an essay,” yet more specifically, “where to start or come up with an idea on how to start it.” The success of writing begins at the beginning of the process. Hillocks (1984) identified that effective and successful writing includes planning and brainstorming ideas, which help students organize information prior to writing. Organization of thoughts and ideas is a hopeful outcome for some participants when addressing academic goals. The need and desire to organize thoughts and ideas were expressed through Michael when he stated, “one accomplishment I’d like to see is after I go to the writing center is to organize my thoughts better, go at a nice steady pace, not stopping in one place and going back.”

Interpreting Assignments. Acknowledgment of extrinsic motivational factors as mentioned in Deci and Ryan (1985) was also expressed during the interviews when participants stated they were concerned with satisfying the instructors’ requests and wanted to interpret the assignment correctly. Michael stated, “I wanted to go to make sure I got the instructions 100% as well as what is outlined correct,” and similarly, Ellen expressed “I just want to make sure I’m doing the assignment correctly, and hope to fulfill the um, professor’s expectations in completing the paper.” Ellen also stated, “I want to make sure I’m answering the questions right.”

Future Goals

Subjects expressed not only immediate goals, but long term, future goals in writing, pertaining to their entire academic career as well as to their future careers. Elizabeth, who visits the writing center about twice a semester, and who is a junior at the institution is concerned about performance in the future and expressed, “I just want to be a better writer in school and in
my career.” Vicki, a sophomore at the institution, visits the writing center an average of eight times a semester and aims to “learn techniques, and uh, just to become a better writer from my experience.” Similarly, Frank, a first semester freshman, who recently experienced academic writing within the postsecondary institution, is also concerned with long term academic goals. Frank considers long term academic planning and states that hopeful outcomes of academic assistance from the writing center provide “a better understanding of how to do this for future essays or assignments. I want to be able to apply things I learn over the next few years.”

**Personal Goals**

Perceptions of personal goals are identified as factors that reflect the individual’s self-worth or self-esteem. Personal goals may also be closely identified with intrinsic motivational factors since the goals reflect internal success as seen in Deci and Ryan’s (1984) Self-determination theory. When seeking non-mandated academic assistance from the institution’s writing center, Marc wanted “to learn something new, to look at the mistakes I made and see what you guys [the writing center] pick up on. Also, I just want to you know, like learn how to write better, and just be a better writer.”

**Theme 2: Identification of Postsecondary Writing Expectations**

According to Baker et al. (2009), necessary skills for successful and effective postsecondary writing include (a) organizing information and ideas, (b) writing legibly, (c) implementing rhetorical structures, and (d) engaging an audience. Although Baker et al. (2009) imply many writing lessons in secondary institutions do not prepare most students for postsecondary academic writing, SLD are still able to identify expectations in postsecondary academic writing.
Differences in Secondary and Postsecondary Writing

First, participants were able to identify differences in writing expectations in high school and college. Identification of differences presents an awareness of expectations, which in turn allows students to self-evaluate their own weakness and strengths based on instructors’ expectations. Frank noticed differences in expectations in college as “in college, you just need to understand what the question is, before just going on and then just writing things.” Similarly, Elizabeth stated, “you really have to make sure you follow the directions and give them what they want. In high school, you can get off topic more. They don’t care as much.” Additionally, differences were also identified as “At this school [college], I’m finding it’s more, they don’t really care about page numbers, and they care about the content. In high school, it was more about making sure you got to the page number.” Participants also voiced difference as “Here, professors are a lot more uh, politically correct. You can’t just write about your opinion and say things. You always have to back it up.”

Important Aspects in Writing

Students with disabilities historically have been taught to identify areas of weakness in academics (Field, 1996). As a result, students are able independently to access academic assistance in college because they have learned how to recognize difficulties since obtaining assistance was a common practice during secondary education. Important aspects of writing are identified as foundations of writing which students believe are a priority based on instructors’ perceptions and elements which participants agreed are the parts of academic writing upon which they spend the most amount of time. The research shows that students identify the most important and least important aspects of writing from an institutional perspective, not based on their own strengths and weaknesses in writing. When asked to identify their perception of the
most important aspects of academic writing, participants’ responses reflected Deci and Ryan’s (1985) elements of extrinsic motivation and included (a) following requirements of assignment, (b) clarity of discussion, (c) quality of content, and (d) organization of material.

Requirements of Assignment. Although some participants identified multiple elements of writing as important, most participants initially identified satisfying the readers’ needs by following the requirements of the assignment as the most important aspect of writing. Elizabeth identified that writing to provide the reader with the information he or she is looking for is a priority, not only in school, but also in the workforce by stating, “I usually think the most important focus is correctly writing out the assignments, and [writing] should focus more on getting the point across so that the reader can understand what I’m saying.” Elizabeth, a non-traditional returning student who has experience in a professional work environment, connected the academic writing experience with the experience encountered in the workforce and stated, “There was always someone reading my work, team members, non-team member, and bosses. They would read our papers, so if something didn’t make sense, they would question it and then you would get in trouble if something didn’t flow correctly.” Elizabeth continued discussing, “It’s the same thing here at school. It has to make sense, and follow the requirements and rules.” and summed up the experiential connection by stating, “Understanding the assignment and making sure it’s clear to the reader has to be done before any other part of the process can make sense.” Although Vicki did not connect academic and workforce writing, she perceived the most important aspect of writing as “making sure it’s like, it makes sense to the reader.”

According to Marc, following requirements of the assignment to satisfy the teacher is the most important aspect of academic writing and stated, “It’s more of just you know, follow the rules type thing. You have to give them what they want. That’s the point of the assignment
right?” Marc clarified, “I just focus on what needs to be said and not anything else.” Justifying the importance of following directions, Luke and Pete agreed that following the requirements of the assignment is the most important part of writing and attempts to “answer the question and not wander,” as well as “focus on trying to answer the question right away” respectively.

**Clarity of Discussion.** Expressing and presenting evidence, along with justifying answers, are considered an important factors during the writing process according to the participants. Students are aware that in addition to following requirements of an assignment, they must express themselves clearly “and make sure that it flows consistently” according to Elizabeth. Additionally, while identifying academic writing as a bridge to industry writing, Elizabeth is aware of the connection and importance of clarity when she stated, “It’s just because when I used to audit before, and we had to write a lot of memos, like different sections, and let’s say I was working on the customer part, I had to write a memo and make sure that it flowed, and it was clear so the customer understood my point.” Furthermore, Elizabeth is aware of the importance of clarity of discussion when dealing with multiple audiences. Elizabeth states, “If I had someone above me reading my memo, I’d want to make sure everything flowed nicely, and they knew what I was talking about. I don’t want them coming to me with questions if I missed something or they didn’t understand what I meant.”

Clarity is considered a quality factor as many students are worried about fulfilling page requirements, Marc also understands the value of clarity by stating, “I don’t keep writing just to fit enough or you know, just to write a certain amount. I want to make sense, not just write a whole bunch of stuff that doesn’t make sense. What’s the point then?” When responding to the question regarding their perception of the most important facet of writing, Marc strongly stated, “I guess, you know, to make sure it makes sense.” Ellen illustrated clarity as one of the most
important elements of writing by stating “If you can’t get your words across, your reader will be like ‘What is he talking about?’ You have to get the right words to send the message.” Ellen continued to emphasize the importance of clarity through word choice and stated, “Even though there is more than one way to use words, like, there’s different ways to get it across and some ways are better than others. People understand things differently. Even words.”

**Quality of Content.** Many participants expressed the selection of content is an important quality and a priority when writing. When referring to content, students were aware that the type of content and the importance of material placed in the paper are essential. Luke realized that content does not refer to “just writing anything so you make the page number requirements. It really does matter what you put in the paper. It has to make sense and it has to do with your main ideas.” Luke also discussed the importance of quality of content by stating, “When you have a paper to write, and you have a question to write about, and you don’t have enough information to write about it, and you have one page, and you have to write six, you’re like ‘now what do I do? I need more and I can’t just fake this.’”

Similarly, Vicki acknowledges the quality of content and believes to succeed in academic writing, students should focus “mostly on the body paragraphs, that make it [essay]” along with selecting “the evidence, and using quotes to support ideas, not just stating your opinion.” Michael also shared the belief that the quality of content is one of the most important aspects of successful academic writing by indicating content should be, “Interesting. Drawing the reader in ya know? You gotta bait the hook and keep it interesting throughout. You don’t want to read something that’s boring. That takes a lot of practice because not only do you have to be interesting, but your information has to be right.” Cathy and Pete expressed the importance of
content respectively when they specified, “Getting the correct information, to support your ideas is the most important,” and “I would make sure I have the details to support what I’m saying.”

**Organizing Material.** As mentioned in Hillocks (1984), organization of material when writing is pivotal to success. Participants acknowledged the importance of organization of information and material as a priority to successfully write. Organization of material includes planning and brainstorming of ideas (Hillocks, 1984). Vicki acknowledged organization of content within assignments as a priority and believed without hesitation: “The most important [part of writing] is definitely organizing it. If ideas aren’t organized, the paper won’t make sense.” Likewise, Luke agreed and expressed, “I guess the most important part when I’m writing that I know I really need to pay attention to is mostly organization. I always think to myself, ‘Make sure it’s organized!’”

**Least Important Aspects in Writing**

Consequently, participants were asked to discuss perceptions of what they believed are the least important elements of writing in postsecondary academic writing. The least important aspects of writing are the elements which participants agreed are the parts of academic writing in which they spend the least amount of time. Although some participants identified multiple elements, three areas acknowledged by all participants included (a) grammar, (b) introductions and conclusions, and (c) incorporating personal opinions. Although two of the three identified are categorized as external (extrinsic) locus of control, incorporating personal opinions and emotion into writing is identified an internal (intrinsic) loci of control (Deci et al., 1991; Robinson, 2009).

**Grammar.** Almost half of the participants agreed grammar was one of the least important areas of focus when prioritizing elements of writing, Without hesitation, Elizabeth,
Vicki, Frank, and Luke quickly and confidently stated, “grammar” as the least important aspect in postsecondary academic writing. Participants did not elaborate on why they believed grammar was not as important as other aspects of academic writing, yet only recognized it was not as important. Although Elizabeth believed grammar was important, there was clarification that “It’s [grammar] the last thing that should be looked at. If you don’t have the right content, it won’t matter if grammar is correct.” Elizabeth then elaborated and emphasized, “It’s important, but it’s something that can be done later. There are other important things in writing which I have to do first, and then I go back and look at my grammar.” Frank agreed with his peers and stated, “I think maybe in high school grammar was important because writing was different, but in college, teachers expect and want different things. Grammar isn’t on the top of the list.”

**Introductions & Conclusions.** Participants expressed that the introduction and conclusion (either separately or combined) were two of the least important parts of academic writing. Michael strongly expressed why the introduction and conclusion were not as pressing when stating, “Um, the introduction and conclusion. I just, ya know, go along with it. I don’t think they’re as important to the teachers because it’s not really where you put the quotes and evidence. It’s just ya know, where you talk about what you should expect and then sum it up.” Ellen simply identified, “The important parts are not the introduction or the conclusion. I know you need to conclude your thoughts, but if you run out of things to say or if you feel that you answered the question, you should stop writing. The real answers are in the body with evidence and opinions.”

**Theme 3: Self-Awareness of Strengths & Weaknesses**

In addition to participants expressing their perceptions and identifying the most and the least important elements in postsecondary academic writing, participants identified their own
strengths and weaknesses during the writing process. Participants displayed a clear distinction and acknowledgement of differences between their own personal strengths and weaknesses compared to the most important and least important aspects of writing. In other words, students acknowledged that just because they found a specific area of writing as a personal weakness, they did not equate that as the least important element in writing. Additionally, participants selected multiple areas of weaknesses yet few strengths in writing.

**Identification of Strengths**

Field (1996) presents that students with disabilities are able to identify academic strengths since identification of disabilities and which areas they require assistance and can succeed have been instilled throughout secondary education. As a result, participants identified strengths as (a) creating content and (b) concluding material. Subsequently, students seemed to be more familiar with weaknesses rather than strengths. This could be due to the negative connotation and stigma of identifying disabilities and weaknesses (Beale, 2005); therefore, participants may be familiar identifying only areas they need help, rather than positive aspects of strength. Consequently, although all participants identified one or more areas of weakness, not all participants conveyed strengths, such as Vicki when she stated, “Um, I don’t know what my strong parts in writing are. I’m really not sure, but I can tell you where I have trouble.”

**Creating Content.** Many participants recognized creating content as a strength in writing. Commonly, Frank, Michael, and Pete found creating content a personal strength when writing about topics of interest or topics in which they have experience. Michael confidently addressed the ease of creating content and stated, “I’m good at like the creative stuff and keeping the reader interested.” Similarly, Frank shares the perspective and acknowledged a writing strength in creating content “by expressing, my creativity. If it is a subject of interest, I can write
a five page essay about it.” Moreover, students, as perceived by Pete, discover strength in creating content when writing about personal experiences. Pete believed, “If it’s something personal, if it’s talking about past experiences. I would always find that personal experiences seem to flow out more and can really write about that stuff.” Ellen found strength in creating content through a different lens in providing evidence and said, “I’m better at getting and writing about the research and going ‘okay, this is a research paper, these are good sources, and these are bad sources.’ That’s when it’s easy for me to write, when I have the evidence.”

**Conclusion.** Students are aware and confident about concluding their ideas and bringing closure to their writing. Since Ellen understands the meaning, the purpose, and the content within the conclusion, she believed their strength falls within the conclusion stating, “closing you’re just restating the intro, and the main ideas so...that’s easy.” Pete admits with practice and training comes confidence when writing that part of the essay and stated, “Well, now cause I’ve gone through the training and everything, I’m better at the conclusion. It’s just pulling everything together.”

**Identification of Weaknesses**

Key factors within academic success for students with learning disabilities are identifying their disability as well as identifying weak academic areas (Field, 1996). When asked to identify and discuss their perception on their weakest area(s) of writing, students identified weak areas quicker than they identified strong areas in writing. Identification allows students to seek assistance in specific and particular academic areas (Beale, 2005; Field 1996). Some participants expressed weaknesses during the entire writing process and stated “I’m not an essay person, I’m not a really good writer,” and “You know, my essays probably are not college material essays,” yet specific and common areas of weakness include (a) grammar, (b) organizing content, (c)
creating content, (d) getting started, and (e) understanding requirements. Moreover, participants identified more than one area of weakness.

**Grammar.** Grammar was commonly identified as a difficult area in writing amongst many participants. Hillocks (1984) identified that self-reported writing problems with SLD included problems with spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Similarly, Elizabeth explained, “I know like, I get confused on the grammar. That’s [grammar] something I do need to improve on, with the semi-colon and what to use.” Elizabeth also stated, “I’m a returning student, so I don’t really remember some of the rules from high school. I should maybe take a grammar course.” Marc also identified grammar as an area of difficulty and was able to identify specifically which part of grammar lends the most trouble stating, “I’m not a good punctuation person. I never know when to put in certain commas and periods. Spelling is a weakness, and I don’t like the grammar because I’m not good at it.” Problematic areas in writing foster an attitude of dislike towards that particular writing component.

Likewise, Ellen identified a weakness in grammar and links the weakness to her disability by stating, “Grammar is where I lack. I have dyslexia and I mix up letters a lot. And when I’m writing sometimes, people will be like ‘What is she writing about?’” Additionally, Ellen adds, “My spelling is incorrect a lot, like there, they’re and their, as well as what’s a noun and an adjective. I definitely need help in that area.” Finally, Frank stated without hesitation, “Grammar,” and identified the particular aspect of grammar by stating, “Unfortunately, I’m a bad speller.”

**Organizing Content.** Organizing content was expressed as a common area of difficulty for many of the participants. This area is generally a struggle for many SLD as identified by Hillocks (1984) that a central problem in the writing for SLD is failure to plan and organize
writing. Participants specifically recognized which areas of organization create difficulty. Vicki clearly identified that placing content within appropriate clusters or ideas throughout the paper proved difficult and stated, “Taking all of the information I get and figuring out where it goes and how it supports the paragraphs for my topic is hard for me.” Although Ellen identified organization as a personal weakness in writing, Ellen’s idea of organizational difficulty focused on alignment and keeping ideas together, and she stated, “I do a lot of spider webbing now, but it’s just I jump from one idea to another idea. The fact is I don’t format one idea.” Pete, who also identified organization as a weakness, recognizes difficulty with balancing and placing content appropriately and deliberated, “There are times where I would go a little too heavy on the introduction, meaning I would put things in the intro where I should really put it in the body. Planning has always been my weak spot, and if I get 10 more papers, you [writing center tutors] will probably be seeing me 10 more times.”

**Creating Content.** Many participants, including Marc, Luke, Ellen, and Pete, expressed difficulty in the area of creating content, particularly creating personal input and analyzing of ideas. Baker et al. (2003) identify creating content as a common difficulty for SLD since students on the secondary level have been taught to write analytic essays in which they compare and contrast two or more concepts, objects, people, or events. Therefore, creating content analysis using evidential support proves difficult in postsecondary institutions. Marc discussed, “I don’t know how people want you to write a five page paper when like you know, and I don’t even know if I have five pages worth of words. It’s hard for me to talk about something in detail after I say it on paper. I don’t really know how to explain a lot of it.” Luke concurs regarding the creation and elaboration of content to fulfill page requirements by stating, “To get through two or three pages is a lot for me.” Difficulty expressing opinions and putting ideas into their own
words proved difficult for Ellen and Pete as well. Ellen identified a struggle with creating content by saying, “The hardest part for me is getting my ideas down on paper.” Similarly, Pete shared the same challenge and stated, “If I’m familiar with the topic, I would automatically think of ideas and details, but when I would sit down at a computer, nothing is there. I can’t create the words. I can’t get it on paper.”

**Getting Started.** The initial step of getting started is a common area of weakness for many participants including Marc, Luke, Michael, and Pete. For some, the difficult starting point is writing ideas down on paper, and for others, beginning with the introduction and writing from that point proves to prevent the flow of ideas, which may affect creation of content. Marc stated, “I have a really hard time probably like getting started, and then, if I don’t know how to get started, I’ll probably just make up stuff.” Luke also identified getting started as a weakness by saying, “Starting is always the hardest part, I’ll sit there with a complete blank page for maybe two hours. I just don’t know what to do.”

Michael answered as the others did and stated, “Just starting the paper. That’s the biggest thing. The whole process, finding a place to sit down and just be motivated enough to just write it.” The participant also articulated frustration: “I always get nervous because I don’t want to pick the wrong topic. It’s so annoying.” Initially getting ideas on paper and beginning the writing process is also difficult for Pete. Pete clearly expressed beginning as a weak area by answering, “Getting it started, because the fact that I have to put the thoughts on paper, and the thoughts won’t come out.”

**Understanding Requirements.** As an extrinsic motivational factor, students believe understanding requirements and instructor assignments is a priority many find difficult. Participants found understanding requirements difficult for multiple reasons including lack of
clarity or simply just confirmation that the student was interpreting the request correctly. Luke and Ellen expressed understanding requirements through the perspective of the instructor as a difficult task. Luke illustrated lack of clarity within requirements is difficult by stating, “I had to do a paper for my business class. It’s actually a midterm. I had NO idea what I was doing. It’s sports marketing. It’s my major. I had NO idea what to do. I didn’t get what the teacher wanted and couldn’t understand. I had to go to the writing center so someone could talk to me about it.” Similarly, Ellen attributes difficulty and weakness in a specific area of writing to her disability by stating, “Due to my disability, I don’t always understand instructions. Maybe I don’t understand from the teacher’s perspective. I need someone to explain it to me in different terms.”

Theme 4: Motivational Factors Contributing to Academic Success

In order for disabled and non-disabled students to succeed in postsecondary education, there must be some desire or motivational factor to succeed. Self-identified students with disabilities who are motivated to succeed have been taught during most of their academic career to access accommodations after identifying weak areas within a particular subject area. Barbatis (2010) identifies that approximately one-third of all students entering college need remediation, and as many as 41% within community colleges are enrolled in developmental courses, particularly English and Math. Moreover, Barbatis (2010) identified motivational factors which contributed to high graduation rates for underprepared, ethnically diverse community college students included similar factors which align with the motivational factors for SLD in public 4-year institutions including (a) college support, and community influences, (b) precollege characteristics, (c) social involvements, and (d) academic integration.

When asked to identify motivational factors which influence their decision to seek non-mandated academic assistance from the institution’s writing center, students commonly
identified with Deci & Ryan’s (1985) intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors and influences as (a) acknowledgment of need, (b) academic success, (c) future preparedness, (d) ensuring correctness, (e) clarity of requirements, (f) personal relationships, and (g) self-esteem. Many participants identified more than one motivational factor when seeking assistance from the writing center.

**Acknowledgement of Need.** Students who independently sought assistance identified that it was necessary, and they acknowledged the need for assistance in the area of writing. The participants clearly identified their area of weakness and understood that to excel within that aspect of writing, they needed to seek assistance independently. Those who expressed motivation through self-acknowledgment of a need also provided the most explanations and details of how they recognize their needs.

More than half of the participants acknowledged a need for continued assistance in writing, acknowledging a weakness of their disability as an intrinsic motivational factor in seeking assistance. Ellen acknowledges the need for assistance due to her particular disability and stated, “Due to my disability, I need someone to look at it, at my paper.” Similarly, Frank identified a weakness and understood that in order to have successful writing results, it is necessary to continuously seek assistance stating, “I’ve always known I’ve had trouble with spelling, writing and English in general. I just have to keep practicing and keep getting help until it clicks.” Marc identified a personal weakness and addressed the need to use the writing center for assistance with that particular difficulty affirming, “I know, I guess, because I do need it. Like, cause, I’m always getting stuck and it’s just something, I acknowledge that I do need help.” Comfortable with the discussion, Marc continued by conferring, “The essays are like, a lot of them are something you can’t do on your own. Like you need some kind of assistance to help
how you get started, or some kind of you know, someone to help with an outline, just uh, you know, just to get it flowing.”

Similarly, Luke acknowledged the need for assistance by addressing “I guess I just go because I know I need to, and I know myself, and I know I’m not going to do it on my own,” just as Pete connects a weakness with a need for assistance stating, “If I’m not motivated, or just can’t get started. If the due date is creeping up on me, which I tend to put things off to the last minute, and if I should um, push myself more, if I want to get this over with.” Additionally, Pete was very aware of motivational factors connecting to a weakness and elaborated by stating, “just planning out a timeline, For example, if you were to tell me to write something about disabilities discrimination, which I already had wrote a paper about this semester and got an A- on it. But if I were told to write a paper about that, all these ideas will come popping up, but if I were to sit down at a computer, I would say, ‘So, how should I do this?’ and, then I would start procrastinating and I wouldn’t even think about the paper, I would just watch movies.”

Academic Success. Succeeding academically was a factor of motivation for eight out of nine participants. Students identified specific areas of academic success, which included a strong desire to do well, to learn new concepts, and to succeed during their postsecondary academic experience. Students also expressed the value and the importance of successfully growing and developing as students. Academic growth is emphasized as students expressed an interest to learn and understand new and existing concepts and to succeed during their college experience. The desire to learn and understand writing concepts was illustrated when Elizabeth stated, “I like going to workshops and just learning new things.” Furthermore, Vicki and Frank expressed motivation to access independently academic assistance in writing to “understand concepts of writing” and to “better myself in that subject” respectively.
Participating subjects expressed intrinsic motivational qualities through the desire to succeed academically as a whole within their coursework and throughout their educational experience. The desire to succeed academically is a key factor motivating students to use writing center services. Elizabeth expressed, “I want to succeed in my classes. I want to do well,” just as Vicki agreed and articulated, “I want to do well.” Similarly, Frank expressed the need to succeed by stating, “I would be afraid of failing. I would want to pass and do well, to get a good grade. I also don’t want to be left behind or slack.” Marc acknowledged seeking academic support at the writing center will assist with success and stated, “I guess the reason I’m back in school and learning is because I want the degree just have that piece of paper. Going to the writing center will help me if I need help getting that degree.” Similarly, Luke acknowledged the motivational factor for obtaining writing center services is simply, “for the grade. That’s the only reason. I want an A, and if that means getting extra help or an extra set of eyes to look at my work, I can do that.”

Although Michael and Ellen seek assistance regularly to succeed academically, they acknowledged multiple factors with the need to succeed. Michael, an athlete, identified the importance of being an athlete coupled with academic success and stated, “Sports. Being a college athlete, you don’t get to play if you don’t pass, so that makes me want to come back [to the writing center] so that I can get that grade that I want. I want to succeed in both areas. They kind of go together.” Ellen is motivated to succeed academically so others do not discriminate based on her disability. She identified motivational aspects, “It’s academically. But also as far as academic, I don’t want my disability to hold me back in anything. Yea, I may need more help but I don’t want someone to be like ‘She’s dyslexic, she’s autistic, and she can’t do it.’ I can. It may take a little longer, but I can.”
**Future Preparedness.** Students expressed the need to succeed academically to prepare for future experiences. Thus, being prepared for the future and planning ahead became motivational factors in seeking academic assistance in writing as mentioned by almost half of the participants. Vicki is concerned with short term and immediate future success goals and stated a concern is “to learn what mistakes I made in writing so I can fix them the next time I do it, and so I don’t make the same mistakes again” whereas Elizabeth, Frank and Marc are more concerned with long-term future goals. Through personal experiences as seen in theme 3, Elizabeth identifies motivation from knowing “It’s [writing] something that I am going to be using forever. I need to apply it [writing] to all of my classes and also to all of my jobs.” Similarly, Frank stated motivation to seek academic assistance is mainly “to go with life and succeed,” just as Marc is motivated “to at least get something, and so you know that would help me succeed in the future. I know I’m going to need to know how to write well.”

**Clarity of Requirements.** Many participants are extrinsically motivated to seek non-mandated assistance from the writing center to ensure and confirm clarity of requirements to satisfy the instructor. For instance, Elizabeth confirmed that she visited the writing center because “I felt that uh, [the assignment] wasn’t very clear, the picture to me, and I wanted to make sure I was giving the teacher what she wanted.” Vicki also discussed the need to satisfy assignment requirements and is motivated before the writing begins, stating, “I visit the writing center, so I know when I’m starting it, I’m doing it right.” Marc noted that when it comes to evaluating the requirements, a visit to the writing center will help “try to understand it [requirements] better,” and sometimes, the participant cannot understand from the instructor’s perspective and needs “just another view, instead of what the teacher is saying, because the teacher, he’ll just be like ‘I want this,’ and then I’m like ‘WHAT?’”
Luke concurred with the other participants when clearly stating he is extrinsically motivated and visits the writing center “for clarity of an assignment. I’ve been there a couple of times with just a question, and I’m like, I have no clue what I’m doing, no clue. Like I don’t even know how to describe this question.” The common occurrence regarding confirming requirements which may indirectly be related to lack of confidence is also shared between Ellen and Pete when they stated respectively, “I went before just to make sure I knew what I had to write about, and what exactly was my teacher trying to get from me,” and “to know if I’m doing what I’m supposed to be doing correctly.”

**Ensuring Correctness.** Participants also displayed extrinsic motivational factors as mentioned by Deci and Ryan (1985), which include the need to provide correct content within writing assignments as well as the need to follow requirements for the instructor. Elizabeth reflects, “My freshman year in college, I was taking English 102 [Literature]. I had this professor, she was very specific in what she wanted. I felt I needed to go seek help at the Center so that I could understand what it is that she wanted to be written in the paper and just to get the help that I needed.” Frank is also extrinsically motivated to ensure correctness and is concerned with “just [going over] and check to make sure everything was good. Just to make sure everything I hand in is right.” Similarly, Marc is concerned with the quality of the paper and expressed “I think it was just a rough draft, and it seemed like it needed a lot of work. I thought it was right, but I wanted to make sure someone else thought it was right too.” The motivational component of Luke is “to check work, to make sure your writing is correct,” and he remembered, “I went to the writing center, and I thought I did a good job and they were like, wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong. So now, even though I think I’m right, I know I could be wrong. Definitely need someone to check over until I get to the point where we both agree I’m right.”
**Personal Relationships.** The need to succeed concerning personal relationships is an extrinsic motivational factor that affects more than half of the participants. Cathy identified, “[her] parents,” as a motivational factor, just as Ellen identified “[her] family” as a motivational factor, when deciding to visit the writing center. Frank agreed that personal relationships was a motivational factor yet elaborated when stating, “The fear of going home to my parents with an F. I don’t want to fail, especially in front of my parents.” Moreover, some participants felt they need to prove their academic success to others, just as Luke mentioned, “I come from a very smart family. A very, very, very smart family, so, there’s some competitive pressure to do well, especially for my parents.” Michael shared the same concern and stated, “For the most part, one is my dad, because he’s kind of smart, I want to show him that 95. I want to prove to him that I can do it too.”

**Self-Esteem.** Intrinsic motivation as mentioned in Deci and Ryan (1985) was evident when participants discussed self-esteem as a motivational factor to access writing center services. Students expressed they sought services to improve and value the “self” as identified in Hoffman and Field’s (1995) Model for Self-Determination. When students reach a level of intrinsic motivation and seek success to enhance the purpose of self, they learn to accept and value the self, admire strengths, and take care of the self (Hoffman & Field, 1995). Vicki identified motivational factors contributing to seeking academic assistance for “myself,” and Frank elaborated by stating, “It was more of a self-influence for myself that wanted me to improve.” Improving the self, can also be seen when Michael stated “I just feel like sometimes when I get a paper back, and am just like God, I could have done better on that, ya know?” Michael continued and emphasized “That makes me so angry like, I don’t want to be that dumb
person and I want people to take me seriously. I want to do well. I know I can do well, and getting good grades feels so good!”

**Availability of Services.** One component of academic success for SLD is knowledge of appropriate accommodations both through a DSC and through the postsecondary institution (Beale, 2005; Field, 1996; Milsom & Hartley, 2005). Therefore, students who are aware of available services, will seek assistance when needed because according to participants, the service is available. Some students expressed since they are aware of the benefit of free services, they will take advantage of the service offered. Elizabeth stated, “I like to take advantage of things that are out there, that are especially free for students. I know about the service, so I figured, you know, I’m aware for a reason. You’re paying for it, you should just take advantage.” Additionally, Michael agreed and stated, “Why not take the resources when they’re given to you right? It’s free help. It’s only going to help me in the long run.”
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSIONS

Findings resulting from responses of participants are consistent with research presented from past studies. Self-identified students with learning disabilities can clearly create and identify goals, which include academic, future and personal successes. Establishing goals for successful outcomes is a quality taught to most SLD during secondary educational experiences. Additionally, identification of expectations in postsecondary writing is consistent with the research findings which identify acknowledgement of educational expectations along with acknowledgement of strengths and weaknesses (Field, 1996), all qualities for academic success amongst SLD. Finally, recognizing motivational factors which drive students to succeed academically also stem from identification of a disability and understanding of how to navigate around barriers toward academic success (Beale, 2005).

Theme 1: Goal oriented

Milne and Stage (1996) identify that self-identified students with disabilities have been found to share academic goals as their nondisabled peers, which include obtaining further education or training, learning a particular skill, attending college because everybody else goes, attending because a family member wants them to go, earning a degree, or fulfilling a desire for future meaningful employment. Similarly, participants identified goals of outcomes after seeking assistance at the institutions writing center concentrated around academic values. Goals included (a) academic success, (b) future success, and (c) personal satisfaction.

Deci et al. (1991) identify self-determination in education promotes an interest in learning for the students, a value of education, and a confidence in their own capacities. The outcome is educational success. Yet, according to Hoffman and Field’s (1995) Model for Self-
determination, various components of identification must be achieved. The ability to plan and set academic goals will increase the likelihood of achieving and succeeding at the stated goals (Hoffman & Field, 1996). Students with learning disabilities are encouraged and taught to create goals as part of academic planning in secondary education and during transitioning programs. Participants within this study clearly identified the importance of goals, intrinsically (personal satisfaction), and extrinsically (components of academic and future success). Goal setting and identification of motivational factors of the goals corroborate with Deci and Ryan (1985) and Hoffman and Field’s (1995) theories of academic success through self-determination.

Furthermore, within Hoffman and Field’s (1996) Model for Self-determination, planning includes (a) setting goals, (b) planning actions to meet goals, and (c) anticipating results. Participants set various types of goals, particularly academic and personal, as well as a plan to reach the goals, which exemplifies self-determination skills. Planning and actions to meet the academic goals were demonstrated during discussions of understanding specifically reasons why students visited the writing center, which included (a) understanding the writing process, and (b) clarifying interpretation of assignments. These extrinsic factors are part of the academic planning process when attaining academic goals. Additionally, participants identified immediate and long-term future goals as well as steps towards planning and actions to achieve the goals. Participants expressed the desire to succeed in their future academic experience as well as to succeed in their careers with writing as an important factor. The subjects were also aware that multiple visits to the writing center were part of the long-term plan to succeed with future writing assignments and in the workforce.

Identified and expressed goals, including academic, future, and personal, were mostly intrinsically motivated. Succeeding in the writing process was necessary for some participants to
attain success and learn techniques, and they expressed that they wanted to learn to become a better writer for their own personal meaning. Factors of academic goals are illustrated in Table 1.1, factors of future success are illustrated in Table 1.2, and factors of personal goals are illustrated in Table 1.3.

**Table 1.1: Self-Determination of Academic Goals**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal Goals of Academic Success</th>
<th>Level of Self-Determination</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attaining a better grade</td>
<td>Intrinsic Motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding the writing process</td>
<td>Intrinsic Motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpreting the assignment</td>
<td>Extrinsic Motivation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1.2: Self-Determination of Future Goals**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal Goals of Future Success</th>
<th>Level of Self-Determination</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Become a better writer in school</td>
<td>Intrinsic Motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Become a better writer for future work</td>
<td>Intrinsic Motivation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1.3: Self-Determination of Personal Goals**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal Goals of Personal Success</th>
<th>Level of Self-Determination</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lean new concepts</td>
<td>Intrinsic Motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Become a better writer</td>
<td>Intrinsic Motivation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme 2: Identification of Postsecondary Writing Expectations**

Theme 2 clearly answered the research sub-question: What elements of writing do SLD find to be the most important and the least important in college writing? Participants identified
two components within postsecondary writing expectations, which included the most important aspects of writing and the least important aspects of writing. Students identified the most important aspects of writing common to extrinsic factors, which included (a) following requirements of the assignment, (b) clarity of discussion, (c) quality of content, and (d) organization of material. Motivational factors of seeking non-mandated academic assistance were typically intrinsically motivated while some perceptions of the most important writing factors were extrinsically motivated.

Deci et al. (1991) identify four types of extrinsic factors of motivation: (a) external, (b) interjected, (c) identified, and (d) integrated forms of regulation as well as one type of intrinsic factor of motivation: (a) internalization. Internalization is a “proactive process thought which people transform regulation by external contingencies into regulation by internal process” (Deci et al, 1991, p. 328). External motivation represents the lowest self-determined form of extrinsic motivation and refers to behaviors for which the locus of control (LOC) is external to the person. Each perception of the most important aspect of writing reflects extrinsic motivation, particularly external motivation as seen in Table 2.1.

**Table 2.1: Identification of Important Aspects of Writing**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most Important Aspect of Writing</th>
<th>Locus of Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Requirements of Assignment Met</td>
<td>External</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarity of Discussion</td>
<td>External</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Content</td>
<td>External</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization of Material</td>
<td>External</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Within a similar instance, participants were asked to identify the least important aspects of writing, which reflected both internal locus of control (Robinson, 2009) as well as external locus of control. Participants identified the least important aspects of writing as (a) grammar, (b) introductions and conclusion, and (c) incorporating personal opinions. If participants identified personal opinion, or the “self” in their writing as an important aspect, the students would reach the maximum level of self-determination. Still, satisfying the instructor is a priority for many students as illustrated in Table 2.2.

**Table 2.2: Identification of Least Important Aspects of Writing**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Least Important Aspect of Writing</th>
<th>Locus of Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grammar</td>
<td>External</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introductions &amp; Conclusions (content)</td>
<td>Internal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Opinion</td>
<td>Internal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme 3: Self-Awareness of Strengths and Weaknesses**

Theme 3 addressed the research sub-question: What do SLD identify as personal strengths and weakness in college writing? Identification of self-awareness of personal strengths and weaknesses in writing is closely related to “Know Yourself” identified in Field and Hoffman’s (1994) Model for Self-determination. Factors of successful self-determination under “Know Yourself” include students knowing their personal strengths, weaknesses, needs, and preferences, as well as deciding what is important to the self (Hoffman & Field, 1995) in academics. A valuable approach to more fully identifying instructional practices that have the power to transform students’ writing skills is to conduct a systemic review of writing intervention research. Learning about strengths and weaknesses is one method.
Participants clearly identified their own strengths and weaknesses in writing, which differed from their perception of the most and least important aspects of writing. In order for individuals to accept themselves, along with weak behaviors, they must know their strengths, weaknesses, needs, and preferences. Within education, this knowledge will help students determine, based on available options, the direction in which they peruse educational development (Hoffman & Field, 1995), and an ability to navigate toward accessing support services. Identification of strengths and weaknesses in writing also corroborates with much of the research which identifies where both disabled and nondisabled students exemplify challenges in writing.

**Weakness in Writing**

Participants’ specific common areas of weakness include (a) grammar, (b) organizing content, (c) creating content, (d) getting started, and (e) understanding requirements. Hughes and Smith (1990) identify grammar including misspellings, punctuation, and clarity errors, as the most commonly shared difficulty amongst SLD. Misspellings included distorted spellings, letter reversals, and dropping off final letters in words. Punctuation errors included irrational or random capitalization, misuse of apostrophes and indiscriminate use of periods, colons, and other marks. Sentence clarity was affected by the dropping of words and occasional word reversal. All identified factors of weakness are also shared by the basic writer, particularly international students and ELL (Robinson, 2009). Furthermore, similar difficulties are identified through writing assessment tests given to various student populations in secondary education (Graham & Perin, 2007). Baker et al., (2003) identify that a large number of both disabled and non-disabled students have very poor writing skills as seen on the National Assessment of Educational
Progress (NAEP), where students in grades 4, 8, and 12 wrote below basic levels, scoring 72%, 69%, and 77% respectively.

For SLD, failure to plan and organize their writing is a central problem according to Hillocks (1994). Furthermore, according to Englert et al. (1998), students who experience more serious deficits in writing experience difficulty in expository writing related to the process including (a) planning, (b) drafting, (c) monitoring, (d) revising, and (e) organizing. Participants acknowledged their weaknesses relating to Englert et al.’s (1991) findings as seen in Table 3.1.

**Table 3.1: Comparison of Weaknesses**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Identification</th>
<th>Research Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organizing Content</td>
<td>Organizing Content (Englert et al., 1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating Content</td>
<td>Drafting (Englert et al., 1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting Started</td>
<td>Planning (Englert et al., 1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding Requirements</td>
<td>Planning / Monitoring (Englert et al., 1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar</td>
<td>Grammar (Graham &amp; Perin, 2007)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Strengths in Writing**

Writing interventions had a positive impact on students’ perceptions of their own ability to write effectively (Gersten & Baker, 2001). In order for students with learning disabilities to become independently successful academically, students are encouraged to have knowledge of their disability, along with knowledge of academic weaknesses associated with that disability (Beale, 2005). Although Field (1996) identifies that knowledge of strengths and weaknesses is imperative to reach the highest level of self-determination, often times, SLD are encouraged to ensure knowledge of weaknesses. Therefore, participants reflected the lack of confidence and
knowledge of strengths. Although some did identify strengths, participants were provided more information and content reflecting weaknesses.

Identified strengths included (a) creating content and (b) writing the conclusion. Neither strength reflected factors of successful writing in general, yet the factors were in line with strategies taught within secondary education courses, not necessarily the requirements of postsecondary education courses. In secondary education, students are usually taught structures for writing fictional narratives (Baker et al., 2003) and, how to write personal narratives based on their own interpretations of life experiences (Graham & Harris, 1989), and analytical essays where they compare and contrast two or more objects or people. Comparatively, strengths identified by participants are direct outcomes based on techniques taught in secondary curriculums as seen in Table 3.2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Identification</th>
<th>Secondary Curriculum Techniques</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creating Content</td>
<td>Fictional, Personal Narratives (Graham &amp; Harris, 1989; Baker et al., 2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing Conclusions</td>
<td>Summarizing Content</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3.2: Comparison of Strengths**

**Theme 4: Identification of Intrinsic & Extrinsic Motivational Factors**

Theme 4 addressed the primary research question: What motivates self-identified students with learning disabilities’ to obtain academic support from writing centers in public 4-year postsecondary institutions along with the sub-question, What intrinsic or extrinsic factors motivate students to succeed in writing?
First, when referring to the primary research question regarding motivation, participants identified conscious choices pertaining to the factors which motivate them to seek assistance in writing from the chosen institution’s writing center. Successful academic outcomes for SLD have been linked to qualities of self-determination in postsecondary institutions, which include (a) awareness of academic and social strengths and weaknesses (Field, 1996) as seen with identification of participants, (b) the ability to express an awareness to faculty and staff (Field, 1996) as seen with SLD who independently self-identify, and (c) the ability to request information, assistance, and accommodations when appropriate (Field, 1996) as seen when seeking non-mandated academic assistance from the institution’s writing center. When SLD possess qualities of self-determination, students become effective independent advocates with the ability to articulate needs, assess situations, make academic choices, anticipate consequences, and learn from mistakes (Beale, 2005; Hoffman & Field, 1995). Deci and Ryan (1985) explain that the self-determination theory in education is concerned with promoting an interest in learning, valuing education, and recognizing individual capacities. Additionally, self-determination theory, unlike most other theories, makes a distinction which falls within a class of behaviors that are intentional and motivated (Deci et al., 1991). Therefore, the behavior and motivation of self-determination are conscious choices.

Next, relating to the sub-question of identification and organization of extrinsic and intrinsic factors, participants identified multiple motivational factors which drive them to seek non-mandated academic assistance, stemming from academic and personal success (extrinsic and intrinsic motivation). Aligned with Deci and Ryan’s (1985) theories of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, participants identified motivating factors within extrinsic and intrinsic categories as (a) acknowledgment of need, (b) academic success, (c) future preparedness, (d) ensuring
correctness, (e) clarity of requirements, (f) personal relationships, and (g) self-esteem. According to Deci and Ryan (1985), the optimum level of self-determination is reached when the student’s behaviors are completely intrinsically motivated, and student is engaged for his or her own sake. When students are intrinsically motivated, they engage in activities that interest them and no other people (extrinsic). For example, if students visited the writing center because they wanted to make sure the teacher would like their assignment, that reflects extrinsic motivation. Thus, if the students visited the writing center because the students received pleasure and satisfaction in doing so, the students were intrinsically motivated.

Students did identify multiple motivational factors, both which reflected extrinsic as well as intrinsic factors. Intrinsic behavior was reflected within this study though motivational factors identified as (a) acknowledgment of need, (b) academic success, (c) future preparedness, and (d) self-esteem. Participants expressed the desire to want to visit the writing center because they understood (a) their disability causes academic difficulty and (b) they have a personal desire to succeed academically. Moreover, the desire to be prepared for the future for their own perception of self, as well as developing their self-esteem, also reflects intrinsic motivational factors, the ultimate goal of self-determination.

Extrinsic factors, which were also present, were less prominent. Students recognized the need to satisfy an external regulation (Deci et al., 1991) where the locus of initiation was external to the student. For example, students emphasized they independently visited the writing center to ensure correctness, to make sure they provided the instructor with the right information, and to gain clarity of requirements. In turn, the need to satisfy an external regulation illustrates extrinsic motivational behavior. Additionally, personal relationships and the need to satisfy
others fall within extrinsic factors since the individual is attempting to succeed for others. Table 4.1 illustrates identified motivational factors with the level of self-determination.

### Table 4.1: Identified Extrinsic and Intrinsic Motivational Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identified Motivational Factor</th>
<th>Level of Self-Determination</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgement of Need</td>
<td>Intrinsic factor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Success</td>
<td>Intrinsic factor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Preparedness</td>
<td>Intrinsic factor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Esteem</td>
<td>Intrinsic factor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensuring Correctness</td>
<td>Extrinsic factor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarity of Requirements</td>
<td>Extrinsic factor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Relationships</td>
<td>Extrinsic factor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students with learning disabilities have been found to have essentially the same motivational factors for obtaining a college degree as their non-disabled peers do. Qualities of motivation shared between the two groups include (a) obtaining further education, (b) learning a particular skill, (c) staying current with other student behaviors (d) abiding by family member requests to attend college, (e) fulfilling a desire for future meaningful employment, (f) earning a degree (Milne, 1989; Milne & Stage, 1996). Therefore, identification of motivational factors when accessing non-mandated academic assistance can be used within writing centers when attempting to increase levels of intrinsic motivation in all students.

### Limitations

A limitation was present through the sample of participants because the sample does not clearly depict the full population or diversity of basic writers. Since the sample size only
represented basic writers who were self-identified as SLD, results of the study may not be a true representation of basic writers without a learning disability. Therefore, motivational factors along with identification of areas of strengths, weaknesses, and importance may differ.

Students with disabilities who seek academic assistance from an institution’s writing center usually understand the process in seeking assistance and are familiar with their disability and academic weaknesses. This study does not address whether basic writers beyond SLD will independently seek academic assistance or can identify academic strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, since approximately 50-75% of SLD who self-identified within secondary institutions do not self-identify in postsecondary institutions (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002), a large population of basic writers who do not possess self-determination skills may possess different motivational factors than the motivational factors identified in the study.

Research questions also presented limitations within the study. Participants were not asked to elaborate or describe their perception of academic growth after multiple visits to the writing center. Identification of perceptions of academic growth may have identified a clearer depiction of extrinsic to intrinsic learning.

**Future Implications**

Although high attrition and low retention rates are concerns in postsecondary institutions, long-term future issues remain. Writing effectively is a lifelong requirement and has been deemed essential for success in the workplace (Baker et al., 2003). Furthermore, Baker et al., (2009) state that the majority of public and private employers believe that writing proficiency is critical in the workplace and directly influences their hiring and promotion decisions. Since writing has become a workplace demand that expands throughout all living-wage jobs, emphasis should be placed on writing across the disciplines in postsecondary institutions. Baker et al.
(2009) also reports a lack of fundamental writing skills among new employers and that approximately 30% of employees require on-the-job training in basic writing skills. The financial responsibility for private companies is approximately $3.1 billion annually and about $221 million annually for state governments (Graham & Perin, 2007).

Pertaining to the college writing center, future outcomes for the student, after several tutoring sessions, include expanding focus from seeking assistance only with extrinsic motivational factors and evolving toward intrinsic factors. Motivating basic writers to access academic accommodations where self-identification is not mandatory will provide students with greater academic success rates, higher rates of retention, and lower rates of attrition. Students may use writing centers as both sites of discovery as well as sites of remediation.

**Future Research**

Despite the importance of writing, too many students do not learn to write well early enough to meet the demands of secondary education, postsecondary education, or the workplace (Graham & Perin, 2007) requirements, which ultimately places students who do not learn to write well at a great disadvantage. Weaker writers are less likely to use writing to support and extend learning in content classrooms (Graham & Perin, 2007), their grades are likely to suffer, and their chances of graduating are reduced (Graham, 2006). Therefore, a strong need exists for research focusing on instructional strategies (on a secondary and postsecondary level) to assist basic writers write more effectively. Comparing writing curriculums, with perceptions of weak and strong writing skills, will assist writing centers as well as administrators in creating content programs. Moreover, identification of motivational factors will assist writing center staff toward moving weak writers from extrinsically motivated perceptions to intrinsically-motivated perceptions, the highest level of self-determination.
Future research should include participants who possess a wider variety of basic writers along with writers who have evolved as basic writers. Perhaps, a longitudinal study which includes students with a greater variety of writing capabilities after multiple visits to the institution’s writing center may produce clearer results. A comparison of perceptions and attitudes toward writing by obtaining perceptions of basic writers (including SLD, ELL, and international students) and advanced writers can also provide more accurate perceptions needed to recreate curriculums and programs in writing within postsecondary institutions.

Self-identified students with disabilities have the knowledge to identify academic weaknesses and strengths with an ability to independently access academic support programs in writing. Additionally, self-identified SLD clearly identify motivational factors, which enable them to access academic support. Therefore, based on the research, SLD clear identification of perceptions can be a useful tool to create academic support programs for weak and basic writers within writing centers as well as within academic writing curriculum programs.
References


American Disabilities Act, 2010


Cawthon, S.W., Cole, E.V. (2010). Postsecondary students who have a learning disability: Student perspectives on accommodations access and obstacles. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability, 23*(2), 112 – 128.


Interview Questions – Appendix A

Introductory Protocol

You have been selected to speak with us today because you have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share about your experiences seeking assistance from the institution’s Writing Center. Our research project focuses on the experience of students who have self-identified with the Disability Service Center and independently seek assistance at the College’s Writing Center. Through this study, we hope to gain more insight into what motivates students to seek academic assistance. We hope this process will allow us to identify ways in which we can better support SLD during their academic experience.

Since your responses are important and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I would like to audio tape our conversation today. Do I have your permission to record this interview? I will also be taking written notes during the interview. I can assure you that all responses will be confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting from the transcripts. I will be the only one privy to the tapes which will be destroyed after they are transcribed.

To meet our human subjects’ requirements at the university, you must sign a form which states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm. Do you have any questions about the interview process or this form?

We have planned this interview to last about 30-40 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning. Do you have any questions at this time?

A. Interviewee Background

How long have you been a student at this institution?

Have you self-identified with the DSC each year you have been at the College?

Part II: Objectives (20-30 minutes): Obtain the participant’s insights, in his/her own words, into the learning experiences that have facilitated or hindered a sense of self-efficacy or self-confidence in specific areas related to conducting research or becoming a researcher.

Prefatory Statement: I would like to hear about your academic experience in your own words. To do this, I am going to ask you some questions about the key experiences or transitions that you encountered during your educational experiences and your perspective at various times. Your responses may include both academic and non-academic elements as appropriate.
We are interested in learning intrinsic motivation and factors which drive you to access academic assistance from the Writing Center. In this context, intrinsic motivation concerns the reasons why an individual chooses to engage in a particular behavior (Ryan & Deci, 1985). The questions that follow reference many of those components and ask you to discuss the ways in which your experiences in academic writing motivated you to seek academic assistance from the Writing Center.

Q1) How often do you use the Writing Center in a semester?

Q2) What are some reasons you seek assistance from the Writing Center?
   - Can you identify an experience which motivated you to seek assistance?
   - Were your visits suggested by an instructor or did you independently seek assistance?

Q3) What are your desired outcomes after a visit to the Writing Center?

Q4) What is the most important component(s) to work on at the Writing Center?
   - What areas of writing are the most difficult for you?

Q5) Do you think you were prepared in secondary education for postsecondary writing?

Q6) Reflecting on your time at this institution, describe an experience in which you realized you needed to seek academic assistance from the Writing Center.
   - If applicable, after your first visit to the Writing Center, did you want to visit the Writing Center again?
   - Have you visited the Writing Center for assistance more than once for the same assignment?

Q7) What personal experiences outside of college (work events, family relationships, and friendships) have influenced your ability to independently seek academic assistance?

Q8) After visiting the writing center, was your perception about your writing skills changed?
Appendix B – Recruitment Flyer

**Students Needed!**

Have you written papers for any of your college courses?

Have you received assistance from the Writing Center?

Are you willing to share your writing experiences?

📝 📝 📝 📝 📝

If you answered yes to these questions, you may be qualified to participate in a research study through the Writing Center!

If you are interested in sharing your perception of what motivates you to use writing center services, please fill out the information below and you will be contacted by Christine Sacco, Writing Center Director.

Information obtained will be used in a research thesis at Northeastern University.

 требуется заполнить

Name: __________________________
Email: __________________________
Phone: __________________________

Year at FSC: ______________________

Have you used services from the Writing Center? □ Yes □ No
Are you over 18 years of age? □ Yes □ No

If you qualify for the study, someone from the writing center will contact you. Thank you for your participation!
Appendix C – Participant Consent Form

Name of Investigator(s): Christine Sacco

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
We are asking you to be in this study because you have self-identified with the Disability Service Center (DSC) at Farmingdale State College and have previously sought assistance with the College’s writing center.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this research is to identify factors which motivate students with learning disabilities (SLD) to seek assistance in writing.

What will I be asked to do?
We will ask you to answer a series of questions pertaining to why you seek assistance in writing from the College’s writing center.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
The interviews will take place at the DSC conference room and will take about 20-30 minutes.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There is no foreseeable risk or discomfort. You are not obligated to answer any questions and may stop participation at any time.

Will I benefit by being in this research?
There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, the information learned from this study may help create specialized writing assistance programs for SLD.

Who will see the information about me?
Your identity as a participant in this study will not be known. That means no one, not even the researchers, will know that the answers you give are from you. Each participant will be given a pseudonym (fake name) during the coding process.

The interview will be audio recorded, coded onto worksheets, and stored on a database. Therefore, recorded information will be locked and stored in cabinets, and coded information will be secured on a database. All written information will be appropriately destroyed after database input.
Can I stop my participation in this study?
Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you
do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may
quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights,
benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as a student.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Christine Sacco, the person
mainly responsible for the research at saccosc@farmingdale.edu or 631-420-2082.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Dawn Grzan, IRB
Administrator at 631-420-2687 or grzand@farmingdale.edu. You may call anonymously.

Will I be paid for my participation?
You will be given a $20 gift certificate to Barnes & Noble as soon as you complete the study.

Will it cost me anything to participate?
There is no cost to participants.

Is there anything else I need to know?
This research is paid for by FSC Students First Title III Grant.

I agree to take part in this research.

________________________________________________________________________
Signature of person [parent] agreeing to take part                     Date

________________________________________________________________________
Printed name of person above

________________________________________________________________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the
participant above and obtained consent                     Date

________________________________________________________________________
Printed name of person above
Appendix D – IRB Protocol

Form 1. The application for approval for research involving human subjects was a general application outlying research data. Information provided to the IRB included six sections. Section I: General Protocol Information, which identified the title of study, investigator information, and identification of research category. Section II: Subject/Data Research, which clarifies type of study, subject information, and vulnerable populations. Section III: Informed Consent, which identifies type of consent to be obtained. Section IV: Privacy/Confidentiality seeking information regarding means of data collection. Section V: Subjects Data/Biological Specimens, which identified how data collection would be obtained. Section VI: Certification of Principal Investigator. Section VII: Certification of Department Chair.

Form 2. Next, explanation of protocol was presented which required discussion of (a) purpose of the study, (b) research questions, (c) sampling plan, (d) recruitment, (e) research procedure, (f) data collection, and (g) presentation of findings.

Form 4. The study fit into a category of research that may be reviewed by the IRB through an expedited review protocol. To qualify for the expedited status, the research must involve no more than minimal risk and fall into a given category. The appropriate given categories to expedite the process were identified as (a) data collected from voice, video, digital or image recordings made for research purposes and (b) research on individual/group characteristics or behavior or research involving survey, interviews, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Form 8. FSC identified this study as a study which included vulnerable populations since the research involved students. In order to ensure vulnerable population were not negatively impacted, the study guaranteed (a) participants in research were not offered to
students as a way to fulfill course requirements, (b) no additional option for those who chose not to participate in the research, and (c) explanation of protections were in place to ensure students were not coerced into participating in research out of concern for their student status or grades.

IRB approval at Northeastern University was sought after IRB approval at FSC was confirmed. The process at Northeastern University included an assurance of a principal investigator along with an application for approval for use of human participants in research. Similar to FSC’s application, Northeastern University’s IRB required (a) investigator information, (b) protocol information, (c) identification of participants, (d) research goals including questions and sub-questions, (e) purpose of the research, (f) identification of project personnel, (g) identification of other organizations involved, (h) recruitment procedures, (i) consent process, (j) study procedures, (k) risks, (l) confidentiality, (m) HIPPA-protection, (n) benefits, and (o) health care provisions if necessary. Moreover, both FSC and Northeastern University required copies of all documentation including recruitment flyers and consent forms.