THE EXPERIENCES AND SENSE-MAKING OF STUDENTS WITH NON-VISIBLE DISABILITIES ON THEIR TRANSITION TO COLLEGE AND UTILIZATION OF ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATIONS: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The transition to college can be a difficult time for recent high school graduates. There are additional challenges for students with disabilities related to obtaining the academic accommodations to which they are legally entitled. The purpose of this study was to investigate how first-year college students with non-visible disabilities experience the transition to college, particularly in terms of requesting and utilizing academic accommodations. Five current traditional-age college students participated in this study. The researcher utilized an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach to examine their experiences. The participants initially desired independence as a hallmark of leaving high school. This included a reluctance to utilize accommodations related to their disabilities. The participants perceived that their high schools did not provide them with information about the transition to college. While most of the participants would have preferred to conceal the fact that they had a disability, they understood the need to self-disclose this information to their university’s disability services office in order to receive accommodations. Additionally, the participants’ interactions with professors influenced their experiences with receiving accommodations. The findings are relevant for secondary and postsecondary professionals who provide transition and accommodation services to students with disabilities, as they are in a position to help remove barriers to accommodation use. Additional research is needed to explore the perspectives of students with disabilities who may experience the college transition differently based upon their own characteristics or the characteristics of their institutions.

Keywords: students with disabilities, college student development, disability stigma, non-visible disabilities, college transition
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Chapter One: The Research Problem

The transition from high school to college can be a challenging experience for any student, but first-year students with disabilities encounter stressors beyond those students who do not have disabilities. Students with documented disabilities are afforded reasonable accommodations to ensure equal access to educational opportunities (Madaus & Shaw, 2004). In order to receive these accommodations, they are required to disclose the fact that they have a disability. Then, the students must communicate with faculty and staff in order to receive academic accommodations, as afforded to them under Subpart E of Section 504 of the Education and Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (Section 504) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

While postsecondary institutions are required to make these accommodations available to students, they are not required to proactively seek out students with disabilities and offer accommodations. Rather, college students are responsible for requesting accommodations each time they would like to utilize them, and they must follow their institutions’ procedures for doing so.

Statement of the Problem

Driven by federal laws governing the provision of accommodations to students with disabilities, there is a responsibility shift that requires college students to self-advocate in requesting and utilizing academic accommodations beyond what was required of them at the secondary level. However, students are not necessarily prepared, equipped, nor informed, to effectively manage the need to self-advocate once they reach postsecondary institutions. Students with non-visible disabilities may also encounter additional attitudinal barriers in their quest to receive accommodations (Adams & Proctor, 2010). These added responsibilities and
barriers might result in a difficult transition from high school to college for students with disabilities, adversely affecting retention, social and emotional adjustments, and academic success.

According to the 1978 Cooperative Institutional Research Program Freshman Survey, less than 3% of college students self-identified as having disabilities, while in 2008 The National Center for Education Statistics reported that the figure rose to 11% (Madaus, 2011). However, students with disabilities also experience a higher attrition rate than their peers without disabilities (Bolt, Decker, Lloyd, & Morlock, 2011). As the number of students with disabilities on campus increases, it is important to explore more deeply these students’ experiences, identify the challenges associated with transition, and then study those challenges and identify how to help students overcome them and persist to graduation. Student attrition may be due, in part, to barriers encountered by students as they transition to college and attempt to learn how to advocate for themselves and make use of the academic accommodations to which they are legally entitled.

Understanding the wide range of incidents in which students with disabilities face barriers in their transition to college helps to inform the support an institution can put in place. During this researcher’s practice as a university disability services provider, students have noted that communication with faculty and staff can be a barrier to students’ utilization of accommodations. Many professors are unfamiliar with the legal implications of Section 504, which adds to the difficulty students may experience in discussing accommodations with them (Bolt et al., 2011). This study was intended to explore and address this problem for students with disabilities, toward a more just education system for everyone.
Students transitioning to their first year of college experience many challenges, including those associated with “classes, professors, academic responsibilities, grades, extracurricular activities, studying, and relationships with family and peers” (Clark, 2005, p. 301). According to ACT (2012), across all postsecondary institution types, approximately 34% of students do not return to their institutions after the first year. Students with disabilities experience the same challenges as their first-year peers who do not have disabilities. However, they also have the challenge of securing whatever accommodations are necessary to allow them full and equal access to their institutions’ courses, activities, and services (Madaus & Shaw, 2004). Because colleges rarely operate in a manner that automatically provides equal access to all students, those with disabilities must advocate for themselves in obtaining this access from their institutions (Lombardi & Murray, 2011). This presents an additional layer of difficulty for first-year students with disabilities, many of whom are just beginning to learn how to interact effectively with faculty and staff (Marshak, Van Wieran, Raeke Ferrell, Swiss, & Dugan, 2010; Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009).

The number of enrolled college students who report having a disability is increasing (Adams & Proctor, 2010). Findings from the 2006 Longitudinal Transition Study showed that, from 1987 to 2003, the percentage of those with disabilities who attended college rose from 17% to 32% (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Levine, & Garza, 2006). Wagner, Newman, Carmeto, Levine, and Marder (2007) reported that, by 2005, 44% of students with disabilities were enrolling in a postsecondary education institution. Recent legislation has focused on preparing youth with disabilities for enrollment in postsecondary education institutions, with the
assumption that college attendance will improve employment prospects (Wilson, Hoffman, & McLaughlin, 2009).

Students who share personal characteristics with populations that do not have long histories of success in higher education may be considered at risk for failure in college (Schreiner, Noel, Anderson, & Cantwell, 2011). As the overall population of students with disabilities increases, institutions must be prepared to assist them through the transition from high school to college. Students with disabilities experience a higher attrition rate than their peers without disabilities (Bolt et al., 2011), likely because of the presence of impairments that limit their life activities and affect persistence to graduation (Adams & Proctor, 2010). In their longitudinal study, Berkner, Curraro-Alamin, McCormick, and Bobbit (1996) found that students with disabilities experienced a graduation rate 10% lower than their peers who do not have disabilities. This is alarming, because students with disabilities who do not achieve higher educational goals have dimmer employment prospects and are more likely to live at poverty level (Barnard-Brak, Davis, Tate, & Sulak, 2009).

While socioeconomic status is important to the individual, society as a whole is also affected when segments of the population are not able to independently sustain themselves. According to Murray, Goldstein, Nourse, and Edgar (as cited in Barnard-Brak et al., 2009), 56% of students with learning disabilities had not graduated from a postsecondary institution within ten years of high school, as compared to just 32% of those without disabilities. Once students with disabilities are in college, they experience lower graduation rates than those who do not have disabilities. The positive news is that many students with disabilities increase their chances for meaningful employment with the attainment of a college degree (Stodden, Conway,
Madaus (2006) found that college graduates who have learning disabilities have the same employment rates and average earnings as the general population in the United States. While socioeconomic status and educational attainment are worthy goals for the sake of the individual, society as a whole benefits when those with disabilities are able to independently sustain themselves.

Because college students with disabilities are required to take the lead in requesting accommodations, in contrast to what was required of them in high school, more study is needed to determine how to manage this adjustment at the postsecondary level. This change provides an additional stressor unique to students with disabilities and, thus, falls outside the scope of heavily-studied first-year student support initiatives. The intention of this researcher was to learn more about specific factors that contribute to a difficult transition for students with disabilities, as mediated by the legal requirements of students at the secondary and postsecondary levels and the self-advocacy that is needed in college.

In addition to the typical feelings of stress related to the transition to college, students with disabilities must cope with the added responsibilities associated with obtaining the academic accommodations to which they are legally entitled. Barnard-Brak et al. (2009) described the “transfer of responsibility” (p.190) that takes place when, in college, students are quite suddenly responsible for requesting accommodations related to their disabilities. A high school student is not required to take part in the process of receiving services related to disability (Gil, 2007). However, should a college student wish to receive academic accommodations to gain equal access to their educational program, they are required to self-identify to the university disability services office as having a documented disability that restricts one or more major life
activities (Gil, 2007). This may be challenging for students who are not used to discussing their disabilities or advocating for themselves.

This study adds to the existing literature a deeper understanding of the perceptions held by students with disabilities about their rights and responsibilities in regard to accommodations in college. Also, the literature on the first-year experience may be enhanced with knowledge about the transition to college for students with disabilities. As a scholar-practitioner, it is this researcher’s hope that this work will result in improved communication between postsecondary institutions, students, and parents. Further, the results of this study may inform transition-related practices at both the secondary and postsecondary levels, through a greater awareness of students’ expectations and experiences both prior to and during college. The study data could also result in improved faculty and staff training at the secondary and postsecondary levels. Finally, orientation and outreach programs for students with disabilities could be developed to more strategically address their unique transition needs at the postsecondary level.

By utilizing qualitative methods in this study, this researcher gained more insight into the social, academic, and emotional adjustment of students with disabilities who had transitioned to college. The findings may benefit postsecondary disability services professionals to more effectively support their students and to proactively address potential transition concerns. Further, professionals at both the secondary and postsecondary levels may utilize this study to collaborate and develop programs that will better prepare students for the transition to college and for the challenges associated with requesting and utilizing accommodations at the postsecondary level.
Research Central Question and Subquestions

The purpose of this research study was to explore the unique perspectives of college students with disabilities regarding their rights, responsibilities, and potential challenges in relation to the utilization of academic accommodations as afforded to them by federal law. The research questions that guided this inquiry were the following:

**Primary Research Question**

How do first-year college students with non-visible disabilities experience the transition to college, particularly in terms of requesting and utilizing academic accommodations?

**Subquestions**

What are the perceptions of students with disabilities regarding how they were educated and informed about academic accommodations prior to entering college?

How do students with disabilities make sense of the need to register with their college’s disability services office in order to receive accommodations and services?

How do students with non-visible disabilities experience communicating with university faculty and staff in order to utilize their accommodations?

The primary research question allowed for exploration of the lived experiences of college students who have non-visible disabilities, specifically in terms of how they made sense of their transition to college as students who were entitled to academic accommodations. The research participants had all utilized accommodations at the secondary level, and their experiences utilizing accommodations from the secondary level to the postsecondary level were explored.

The first subquestion allowed the researcher to take a deeper look at the information and training the participants had received at the secondary level about utilizing accommodations at
the postsecondary level. Further, this question guided an inquiry into how students made sense of the information they had received. The second subquestion related specifically to how college students with disabilities made sense of the requirement that they self-disclose as having a disability to their university in order to receive accommodations. Themes related to stigma and the non-visible nature of the participants’ disabilities were explored. The final subquestion allowed the researcher to examine the lived experiences of the participants in terms of their interactions with both faculty and staff members at their university as they sought to utilize academic accommodations. Themes related to stigma and self-disclosure of disability were explored. The review of the literature showed that the transition to college and the utilization of accommodations can be a challenging process for students with disabilities. Collectively, these research questions and subquestions guided the researcher in her exploration of the sense-making of the participants who have experienced this transition phenomenon.

**Summary and Organization of the Study**

This thesis is organized according to the steps taken to explore the topic of college transition for students with disabilities and their use of academic accommodations. Chapter one concludes with a discussion of Goffman’s theory of social stigma as the theoretical framework guiding this inquiry. Chapter two contains a review of the literature related to the research topic, including the current state of the research and deficiencies in the literature. Chapter three includes a description of the research methodology used to approach the problem, as well as information about the participants, data collection and analysis methods, and measures to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. An explanation of the steps taken to ensure the protection of the participants is also included in chapter three. Chapter four includes a detailed analysis of the
data obtained through personal interviews with the participants, and chapter five contains a discussion of the findings as situated within the extant literature and Goffman’s conceptualization of social stigma. Chapter five concludes with recommendations for practice that are based upon the research findings, as well as implications for future research on the topic.

**Goffman’s Theory of Social Stigma**

This researcher posited that college students with disabilities perceive the existence of a social stigma regarding disabilities and that this perception could influence the lived experiences of college students with disabilities. Goffman’s (1963) theory of stigma as a social construct was chosen as the theoretical framework for this study. It provided insight into the individual experiences of those perceived to hold a stigma, as well as their sense-making of interactions with others as they sought to utilize the academic accommodations to which they were legally entitled. Goffman’s social stigma theory helped to spotlight some of the potential perspectives and reactions experienced by those who are stigmatized in society. Thus, the unit of analysis was at the micro level: the individual student.

In his conceptualization of social stigma, Erving Goffman (1963) explained that there are attributes that might make an individual different from what is considered normal by the majority in society. Stigma occurs wherever there is a negative societal stereotype about such an attribute. Further, the individual who possesses a stigmatizing attribute holds the same view of normal as society, which is the origin of feeling stigmatized (Carnevale, 2007). Goffman stressed that it is the social perception of these attributes that is truly stigmatizing, rather than the attribute itself. He stated that societies have shared norms, and the ability or inability to conform to those norms has a psychological impact on an individual. While some sociologists
have criticized Goffman’s micro-level view on social stigma (Scheff, 2003), his work provided an astute lens through which to view the influence of stigma on an individual within a highly social context.

Goffman (1963) described a two-role model of the normal and the stigmatized, and stated that all people play both of these roles at one time or another in life. Neither the normal nor the stigmatized referred to people, but rather to a perspective or social construct that is part of Western society. Susman (1994) found this distinction to be among the most significant contributions of Goffman’s work in understanding the experiences of people with disabilities, because the greatest challenges they encounter are not the functional limitations related to disability, but rather societal responses to disability. In his study of the social experiences of families with children who required the use of mechanical ventilators in order to breathe, Carnevale (2007) found that the difficulties described by families were not all related to the functional limits imposed by their children’s medical issues. Rather, the reactions they encountered from people around them caused some of their greatest problems.

Link and Phelan (2001) said that one criticism of the study of stigma is that researchers have failed to include the individual voices and lived experiences of those who are considered to be stigmatized. Further, Frank (1988) argued that Goffman (1963) presented people with disabilities as passive and lacking control over their own lives. Fine and Asch (1988) agreed, stating that Goffman’s work assigned helpless qualities to those with stigmatizing attributes. The current study aimed to deeply explore the sense-making of college students with disabilities, and the researcher hopes this was an empowering experience for individuals who have chosen to actively self-advocate to receive accommodations. Goffman’s conceptualization of social stigma
provided a theoretical construct for understanding how students with disabilities might make sense of their role in receiving academic accommodations, as well as any perceived barriers they might encounter within a social context.

One challenge with utilizing Goffman’s (1963) conceptualization on social stigma was the dated quality of some of the defining terms he employed. Goffman wrote using the vernacular of the time in which his work was completed, and according to the standards and definitions of that period. For example, he frequently used the word *cripple* to describe a person with a physical disability and *Negro* to describe a person of color, neither of which are accepted terms in modern Western society. Further, Goffman’s use of *normal* and *wise* for certain groups who are not stigmatized, gave the impression that those with stigmatizing attributes may be *abnormal* or *unwise* (Flowerdew, 2008). Goffman also tended to group most non-apparent stigmatizing attributes together, as they were viewed equally in society, including mental illness, homosexuality, and criminal activity. Murphy, Scheer, Murphy, and Mack (1988) criticized Goffman for grouping *voluntary* and *involuntary* positions together as examples of deviance, thus paying no attention to the matter of choice in individual behaviors. Kusow’s (2004) work demonstrated that shifting social attitudes and demographics may impact how stigma occurs in society, highlighting that cultures have changed since Goffman’s 1963 work. Social views on many categories and labels have changed significantly since 1963, and this was taken into account when reading Goffman’s work.

Another noticeable gap in Goffman’s (1963) conceptualization of stigma is that he made no mention of constructs such as learning disabilities or Attention Deficit Disorder in his various examples of disability and stigma. This is worth mentioning, because these are currently among
the most common non-apparent disabilities in college students, and some of the participants in this study have these very diagnoses. The identification of various conditions has clearly changed in the past 50 years, and these diagnoses, as we understand them now, were not in existence in 1963. However, while some terminology has changed, Goffman’s theory on social stigma still provides a sound lens through which to view the lived experiences of college students with disabilities in the 21st century.

**The Discredited and the Discreditable**

The experiences of those who have stigmatizing attributes vary across their life spans in terms of how they will make sense of the stigma. For children, the school setting provides a social context in which individuals may first perceive that they are different from what is considered normal. The presence of a stigma related to these differences may be perceived by children as they grow and move through adolescence. Goffman (1963) pointed out that adolescents may wish to separate themselves from those who share the same stigmatizing attributes as they and, rather, gravitate toward those they believe society perceives as normal. Students are situated within this developmental phase as they transition from high school to college and may reject disability-related accommodations as a result. College students with disabilities must make sense of what the stigma means to them in a new setting, and they must then determine if they wish to disclose their disabilities to institution officials and faculty members in order to receive accommodations.

Perceived social stigma may influence how students with disabilities communicate with institutional staff and faculty in order to receive academic accommodations. Goffman’s (1963) conceptualization of social stigma provided a lens for considering the sense-making of individual
students as mediated by the social context in which they operated. He wrote of the *discredible* and the *discredited* as having different experiences regarding social stigma. The *discredible* do not believe that those around them are aware of their stigmatizing attribute, so they are primarily concerned with the control of information so as to continue the perception of being a *normal*. However, the stigmatizing attributes of the *discredited* are known to those around them. Thus, they are primarily concerned with the management of information as they seek to operate within their social contexts. This study focused only on students with non-visible disabilities who had chosen to self-disclose to their institution as having a disability, partly because they all had the shared experience of being both *discredible* and *discredited* at one time or another. Goffman explicitly stated that visibility is a critical factor in the construct of social stigma. Students with non-visible disabilities have the option of trying to *pass* as not having a disability at all, yet the participants in this study had chosen not to do that.

Goffman’s (1963) notion of being *discredited* illuminated what college students with non-visible disabilities might experience as they seek to utilize academic accommodations. These students cannot receive the accommodations to which they are legally entitled unless they choose to become *discredited*, because federal laws allow institutions to require disclosure and documentation of disability to their disability services personnel in order to begin the process of receiving accommodations. This requirement to provide documentation of a disability could serve to stigmatize an individual, legitimize the need for accommodations, or both. Students are additionally required to disclose the fact that they have a disability to the professors teaching their courses. They have to do this repeatedly if they wish to continue utilizing accommodations, so that each professor they encounter becomes informed. This study sought to explore how
students experience that discrediting and whether or not the experience changes over time. Did the idea of being discredited all over again in college influence the students’ choices about using accommodations?

Link and Phelan’s (2001) conceptualization of the stigma process both supported and expanded upon Goffman’s (1963) work. Much like Goffman’s notion that stigma exists where an attribute and a stereotype meet, Link and Phelan stated that the presence of a labeled difference linked to a stereotype is essential to the definition of stigma. College students with disabilities may perceive that their labeled differences are connected to stereotyping attitudes at their institutions. These labeling practices may serve to create a perceived separation between us (professors, disability services staff, and peers) and them (students with disabilities) (Link & Phelan).

Link and Phelan’s (2001) work significantly expanded upon Goffman’s (1963) conceptualization of stigma by explicitly stating the importance of social status loss and discrimination. They indicated that the threat of negative consequences must be present in order for the traditional meaning of stigma to be fulfilled. This also supports Link and Phelan’s notion that power must be present in order to stigmatize, because status loss and discrimination can only be wrought by entities with some semblance of power over those with potentially stigmatizing attributes. While Goffman did not explicitly include a discussion of power in terms of normals (Gouldner, 1970), he did discuss several ways for those with stigmatizing attributes to utilize their own power to neutralize the effects of stigma. Either way, power is needed to influence how and where stigmatization occurs in society, and college students experience a power differential in their relationships with college faculty and staff.
Stigma and Personal Identity

Goffman (1963) stated that moving into a new community means the development of a new personal identity. Students manage this identity in some way, including during the transition to college. Goffman described a “shameful gap” (p. 127) between one’s virtual social identity and actual social identity that becomes apparent during social situations. Virtual social identity refers to what is expected, or considered normal, for a social context, while actual social identity refers to the characteristics an individual is perceived to possess in a particular social context. Goffman also discussed the fact that a stigmatizing attribute may be viewed differently across various social contexts depending upon the perceived connection between the attribute and the setting. Particularly in an academic setting, where intelligence and mental acuity are highly valued and expected, the need for accommodations for a student with a non-visible disability may be seen as especially undesirable.

Brown (1988) described the importance of context in terms of Goffman’s (1963) conceptualization of stigma by explaining that those who feel they are in the minority within their social context may be “forced to see themselves” (p. 163) through the eyes of the majority. Murphy et al. (1988) argued that liminality was a more sound theoretical lens than Goffman’s choice of deviance in understanding the experiences of people with disabilities, stating that liminality more aptly describes the marginal yet shifting position of people with disabilities as society addresses issues of accommodation and access. Conversely, deviance suggests a static position in society that is based on the medical view of disability as a flaw in the individual. Based on his study of families who have children with significant physical disabilities, which utilized Goffman’s conceptualization of stigma as a theoretical framework, Carnevale (2007)
argued that researchers should view disability as a social issue, rather than an individual medical problem, in order to illuminate the social processes that serve to discredit individuals. Regardless of verbiage, these researchers do not argue the veracity of Goffman’s overall claims about social stigma.

Goffman’s (1963) theory provided insight into students’ sense-making of their transition to college as mediated by what they experienced at the secondary level. Goffman explained that intimates can form a “protective circle” (pg. 97) around those who are stigmatized, shielding them from full awareness of their status and stigma. This may be particularly true for parents of students with disabilities who have had to advocate for their children and were often closely involved with the accommodations process when their students were at the secondary level. Carnevale (2007) supported this notion, stating that family members play a key role in, and carry a heavy responsibility for, mediating their children’s personal identity between the safe home environment and social environments that may stigmatize. The current study explored what roles parents have played, as well as how they have influenced the students’ use of accommodations in college.

Goffman’s (1963) theory of stigma also provided a clear lens for considering the differences between secondary and postsecondary education in terms of academic accommodations. He stated that it is often possible for a stigmatized individual to be excused from typical performance standards in a social context. Such an approach is legally permitted, through accommodations, at the secondary level. However, federal laws governing higher education do not require the changing of performance standards for individuals with disabilities for any reason.
Kusow (2004) argued that Goffman’s (1963) conceptualization of stigma did not take into account that people traditionally seen as stigmatized may not tacitly agree with the societal views on their stigmatizing attribute. This may be particularly true where cultural differences between the normals and the stigmatized are present. Goffman’s conceptualization was largely based on Western cultural norms. It is worthwhile to note the potential impact on stigma when interaction occurs among multiple cultures. While his examples may not have fully explored the complexities of Western society in the 21st century, Goffman explained in his work that social context mediates how stigma occurs.

**Stigma and Social Interactions**

Goffman (1963) further described that there may be concerns from the normal about associating with those who have stigmatizing attributes, because one would not want to be seen as possessing a stigma themselves. The current study sought to explore students’ sense-making of their social interactions in college as they related to academic endeavors. Are there social interaction problems when disclosing a disability to others? Brown’s (1988) work suggested that, even within the larger context of their college, students with disabilities may have differing views of their own identity depending upon whom they interact with. Thus, an individual’s experience of requesting and utilizing academic accommodations may be different between college courses as influenced by his or her perception of whether or not he or she is viewed as a stigmatized individual within each of those social contexts.

Goffman (1963) also shared the notion of stigma symbols, which are those things that may make a stigmatizing attribute apparent to others. For example, the use of adaptive technology in the classroom may be perceived as a stigma symbol, if all students are not using
that technology. These symbols may change across contexts within the college setting and according to each student’s accommodation needs. Goffman indicated that there may be a desire by the stigmatized individual to reject the use of these stigma symbols. This study sought to understand students’ perceptions of their own stigma symbols, as well as their acceptance and rejection of such symbols.

Federal law requires that students with disabilities have support available to them on the campus of every higher education institution that receives federal funding. Goffman's (1963) conceptualization of social stigma provided a framework for considering the role of a university’s disability services office. He explained that those who have stigmatizing attributes may have support or advocacy agencies representing them, which is exactly the intended role of disability services personnel. Goffman’s conceptualization further framed the role that disability services offices play as the wise, or those who do not possess stigmatizing attributes yet find themselves privy to, and sympathetic with, those who do. Prior, Wood, Lewis, and Pill (2003) conducted a study of attitudes on the disclosure of mental illness. They posited that Goffman’s conceptualization of stigma did not recognize that factors other than perceived stigma may impede disclosure of illness and the seeking of treatment. Echoing Prior et al.’s notion that the lay public does not necessarily recognize the presence of mental illness, nor the need for treatment, disability services offices play the role of the wise and encounter students with disabilities who may not seek accommodations because they do not see the need for them. Prior et al.’s work highlighted the fact that stigma may not be the pivotal factor in whether or not students with disabilities utilize accommodations, nor may they perceive stigma as the cause for any challenges or barriers they have encountered.
Goffman (1963) explained that the obtrusiveness of the stigmatizing attribute influences how the stigmatized person is perceived. The current study sought to understand how students with disabilities make sense of this obtrusiveness, or if they are even aware of it. College professors are ultimately responsible for ensuring that all students have equal access to their academic courses, but how much does stigma interfere with the flow of interaction in a social context? Goffman’s theory of social stigma provided additional context for understanding interactions between faculty and students with disabilities as the latter seek academic accommodations. In academia, accommodations may require more work on the part of faculty members, in addition to the need for pedagogical changes in order to provide equal access.

Goffman’s 1963 work provided a detailed conceptualization that appeared to assume that stigma exists in society. Manzo (2004) argued that this phenomenon is common in the study of sociology, stating that the existence of social stigma was merely an assumption that had not been substantiated through study. He further stated that, while stigma is an acceptable working concept, the actual experiences of individuals with perceived stigmatizing attributes must be studied before the notion of stigma drives policy and practice. The findings of the current study may add to the research a more thorough understanding of the concept of stigma as individuals’ lived experiences are considered.

Goffman’s (1963) conceptualization of stigma as a social process is succinctly described by Carnevale (2007) as the presence of two key phenomena: 1) the fact that certain individuals conform to societal norms, and 2) individuals with stigmatizing attributes must manage their position in society. Students with disabilities may perceive themselves as possessing a stigmatizing attribute, and they are required to navigate social relationships in college as they
seek to utilize academic accommodations. Further, researchers have posited that one must have power over another in order to stigmatize (Manzo, 2004; Link & Phelan, 2001). Without power, stigma has no meaning. This power dynamic is readily evident in academia, as college students must seek accommodations from faculty who have express power over them via their classroom experiences and course grades. Goffman provided a sound framework for exploring students’ lived experiences in a highly social context.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

There is ample evidence that students struggle to adjust as they transition to college. Most students leave their institutions during and immediately after their first year (DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004). Therefore, it is important to examine the period of transition to college in order to better know how to support students during this challenging time. Students with disabilities experience an additional transition phenomenon that is unique to them, and thus falls outside the scope of traditional first-year student support initiatives. Driven by federal laws governing the provision of accommodations to students with disabilities, there is a responsibility shift that requires college students to take the lead in requesting and utilizing accommodations that afford them equal access to their educational programs. Through an understanding of students’ perspectives on the challenges that come with the transition to college, postsecondary educational institutions can better support students with disabilities, increase use of academic accommodations, and improve the experience.

This study sought to explore the unique perspectives of college students with disabilities to add insight to the literature about students’ perceptions of their rights, responsibilities, and potential challenges in relation to the utilization of academic accommodations as afforded to
them by federal law. This review focuses on the available literature regarding several factors related to this problem of practice including legal considerations, common barriers to students’ seeking accommodations, and transition planning for practitioners.

Legal Considerations

A significant challenge for students with disabilities transitioning to college is that the laws governing the provision of accommodations and support services are different in college than they are in high school. The primary law governing services in secondary education is the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA), which states that all students, regardless of disability, must be provided with a free and appropriate public education through the provision of accommodations that are determined by a team of professionals at each school (Bolt, et al., 2011; Madaus & Shaw, 2004; Stodden, et al., 2003). Typically included in this team of professionals are a student’s special education classroom teachers and a transition specialist (Li, Bassett, & Hutchison, 2009). Additionally, school districts are responsible for referring students for evaluation and testing if a disability is suspected, and the districts must incur the cost (Bolt et al., 2011; Madaus & Shaw, 2004).

IDEA, which mandates services for children ages 3 to 21, has no authority in postsecondary education. Rather, once a student is in college, the provision of accommodations is governed by Section 504, Subpart E of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (Section 504) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (Bolt et al., 2011; Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009). Section 504 requires that postsecondary institutions make academic adjustments to ensure students’ equal access to programs (Gil, 2007). These adjustments, often referred to as accommodations, may include auxiliary aids or modifications to course policies and procedures.
As Madaus and Shaw (2004) explained, IDEA is legislation that entitles one to an education, while Section 504 and the ADA are “civil rights” (p. 13) laws that guarantee equal access to education through the prohibition of discrimination. Once students with disabilities graduate from high school, they are not guaranteed admission into college and, if admitted, they must maintain the academic and behavioral standards required of all students at their postsecondary institution (Shaw, 2009).

College students with disabilities have a greater share of the burden of responsibility for accessing accommodations than they did in high school (Garrison-Wade, 2012). Barnard-Brak et al., (2009) described the “transfer of responsibility” (p.190) that takes place when, in college, students are quite suddenly responsible for requesting accommodations related to their disabilities. Unlike IDEA, which mandates that a team of professionals be solely responsible for determining and providing services to students with disabilities, Section 504 requires college students to take the lead in securing academic accommodations (Stodden et al., 2003). As Garrison-Wade & Lehmann (2009) said, students must transition from being “recipients” of services in high school, to becoming “proactive self-advocates” (p. 420) who ask for what they need and follow the necessary procedures to arrange the details. McCarthy (2007) stated that a high school student is largely the “receiver, not the author of her accommodations” (p. 11).

In order to receive accommodations, little is required of a high school student who has a disability (Gil, 2007). However, college students who wish to receive academic accommodations to gain equal access to their educational programs are required to self-identify to their universities’ disability services personnel as having a documented disability that restricts one or more major life activities (DaDeppo, 2009; Gil, 2007). Failure to adequately self-
advocate can result in a very difficult transition for students with disabilities (Hadley, 2006). Under Section 504, a college student is responsible for securing and providing appropriate documentation of disability, even if it means paying for a physician’s visit or for psychoeducational testing (Shaw, 2009).

In accordance with Section 504, the first step a student with a disability must take in order to receive academic accommodations is to provide documentation of disability to their institution’s disability services personnel (Adams & Proctor, 2010). If students do not self-disclose as having a disability and request accommodations, then a postsecondary institution is under no legal obligation to provide accommodations. This in itself can be a barrier for students, because that level of responsibility and self-advocacy was not required of them in high school.

In their study of accommodation use by postsecondary students with mental illnesses, Salzer, Wick, and Rogers (2008) found that 58% of students did not utilize accommodations, because they were not aware that they were available to them in college. Further, obtaining documentation verifying their disabilities can pose a challenge for new college students. Under IDEA, regular testing and reevaluations of disability are not required (Madaus & Shaw, 2004). Rather, the law permits an IEP team to decide if updated documentation of a disability is needed.

The traditional model used to diagnose learning disabilities (Bolt et al., 2011; Madaus & Shaw, 2004), which requires a significant discrepancy between one’s achievement and one’s intelligence scores on psychoeducational tests, is no longer the standard at the secondary level.

While the discrepancy model and need for current documentation are still widely accepted standards of practice in disability services at the postsecondary level, there are signs that this is changing. According to the Association on Higher Education and Disability’s
(AHEAD) most recent guidance on documentation practices, “Requiring extensive medical and scientific evidence perpetuates a deviance model of disability, undervalues the individual’s history and experience with disability and is inappropriate and burdensome under the revised statute and regulations” (2012). Thus, AHEAD advocates for postsecondary disability services providers to consider students’ narratives about their history of accommodations and how their disability has impacted them, in addition to reviewing older documentation to determine accommodations for students who do not have more recent medical or psychological documentation. However, until practices change to reflect these recommendations, students entering college without current and appropriate documentation of their disability may be unable to utilize accommodations.

For many non-visible disabilities, the documentation requirements at the postsecondary level include complete psychoeducational testing. Also, many disability services providers state that testing cannot be more than three years old, since cognitive functioning can change as one nears adulthood (Madaus & Shaw, 2004). Under IDEA, if a parent would like his or her child tested for a disability, the school district must typically incur the cost of providing the tests. However, at the postsecondary level, the cost of testing falls upon the student. Madaus and Shaw (2004) expressed concerns that this could be cost-prohibitive for entering college students who do not have current documentation of their disability, thereby “disenfranchising” (p. 82) students from low-income families from receiving academic accommodations.

Once students do secure the required documentation of a disability, it must be provided to the college disability services personnel. Each student must then request and attend an individual meeting with disability services to determine the accommodations that will be
provided. The types of accommodations available to students in high school can be vastly different than what a postsecondary institution is required to provide (Bolt et al., 2011). For example, a high school student diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder may be provided, at the school district’s expense, an aid to teach him or her social skills. However, once that student reaches college, a personal aid is not generally considered to be a reasonable accommodation under Section 504 and ADA. This change creates a challenge for parents and students who are unaware that they are now responsible for identifying and paying for this type of support (Morrison, Sansosti, & Hadley, 2009). As with documentation requirements, this scenario calls into question whether or not the expense of providing one’s own support systems and strategies is disenfranchising for low-income college students.

Course content modifications are another potential adjustment provided in secondary schools for which there is typically not a corresponding accommodation offered at the postsecondary level (Shaw, 2009). Classroom accommodations at the college level must be reasonable in that they cannot alter the essential requirements of the course (Kiuhara & Huefner, 2008). Course modification in high school may include reducing the number of items on a homework assignment or the removal of certain assignments or assessments from the requirements for a student with a disability. In college, students are provided accommodations to ensure they have equal access to the course materials and knowledge, but they must be able to do, and demonstrate knowledge of, the entire curriculum that is required of all students (Shaw, 2009). According to Stodden et al., (2003), colleges provide accommodations largely “based upon a minimalist interpretation of the concept of reasonableness” (p. 31). This is in sharp contrast to the promise of the free and appropriate education guaranteed under IDEA, and thus
the disparity between the types of accommodations that are provided at each level of schooling (Bolt et al., 2011; Madaus & Shaw, 2004; Stodd et al., 2003).

It is important for disability service providers to understand the reasons why a college student with a disability may not seek assistance and utilize accommodations (Adams & Proctor, 2010). Due to the nature of IDEA, Section 504, and the ADA, students with disabilities must advocate for themselves on a much greater level in college than in high school. Their lack of awareness about this change, coupled with underdeveloped self-advocacy skills, contributes to the challenges that come with this change.

**Common Barriers Including Self-Perceptions and Interpersonal Interactions**

For the current study, this researcher used Fitzgerald and Paterson’s (1995) definition of *hidden disabilities* to describe those of a non-visible nature. Fitzgerald and Paterson described these disabilities as “not easily seen, measured, or objectified” (p. 15). Students with non-visible disabilities experience unique challenges when considering whether or not to request accommodations. They may have concerns that those around them, including professors and their peers, will not believe they really have a disability and that they need accommodations (Adams & Proctor, 2010; Marshak, et al., 2010). According to Lundberg (2003), students who are considered at high risk for academic and social difficulties do not often proactively seek help from, or interact with, faculty. Further, a review of the literature conducted by Enright, Conyers, and Szymanski (1996) suggested that “two factors [were] most critical to the integration of students with disabilities: (a) the ease of social interactions with peers and (b) the receptiveness of faculty members to accommodate their needs” (p. 106).

Students’ concerns about others’ perceptions of their non-visible disabilities can lead to
isolation, and the lack of social integration with faculty and peers can hinder their ability to persist in college (DaDeppo, 2009). For example, the accommodation of a reader for one’s exams may be an obvious need for a student with a visual impairment, but may be regarded as suspicious for a student with a processing learning disability. A student with a non-visible disability who is receiving additional time to complete an exam may also be regarded with suspicion by classmates who are not receiving accommodations. Because it is not immediately obvious why they need accommodations, students with non-visible disabilities often encounter the need to repeatedly explain themselves in this regard. This may partially explain Blake and Rust’s (2002) findings that students with non-visible disabilities report lower levels of social self-efficacy in relation to their peers with visible disabilities. When people with non-visible disabilities have concerns that others view their conditions as fraudulent, their self-concept is negatively impacted (Fitzgerald & Patterson, 1995). Morrison et al. (2009) indicated that college students learn to trust their own voice and intuition as being valid as they develop into adulthood. Until students reach that point, it may be very difficult for them to express themselves to those in positions of influence over them, including professors.

For those with non-visible disabilities, adaptation to college can be a prolonged process, because it is easier to avoid asking for assistance (Adams & Proctor, 2010). Additionally, disability services personnel have reported that it is more difficult to reach out to and support students with non-visible disabilities (Collins and Mowbray, 2005). This may be partially due to the fact that faculty are less likely to refer these students to disability services offices in order to receive accommodations, while students with an obvious physical impairment and accommodation need may be referred for assistance quite early in their college careers.
Students’ concerns that there is a stigma associated with having a disability compound the communication barrier with faculty regarding accommodations (Bolt, et al., 2011; Fier & Brzezinski, 2010), as well as students’ overall campus experiences (Salzer, 2012). Trammell (2009) defined the stigma of disability as “the social, academic, and psychological consequences of disclosing a disability” (p. 106). Hartley (2010) reported that the “pervasive social stigma” (p. 299) associated with disability contributes to the difficulty of requesting accommodations from professors. Faculty may doubt the need for accommodations, or even the purpose of Section 504 and ADA in providing equal access to higher education for students with disabilities. In fact, many students with disabilities will intentionally avoid the use of disability services in college in an attempt to distance themselves from the stigma they experienced in high school (Marshak, et al., 2010). Salzer et al. (2008) found that the majority of students with mental illness whom they surveyed were fearful of negative reactions and discrimination from classmates and faculty members as they sought to utilize accommodations. Students have reported a lack of awareness of available services, as well as feelings of embarrassment in relation to inquiring about services (Garrison-Wade, 2012).

Stigma associated with disability can be understood in terms of how one views society and disability. Danforth (2008) and Lekan (2009) described two dichotomous views of disability: the medical concept of disability and the social model of disability. Those who ascribe to the medical concept view disability as a deficit within the individual, which makes that person less than the majority of individuals in society. Conversely, the social model describes disability as being in existence only as a social construct that is a creation of our society. Shah (2010) explained that traits in our society create the definition of disability and apply it to certain
people. As Jane Mercer (as cited in Danforth, 2008) stated, “Persons have no names and belong to no class until we put them in one” (p. 57). The focus of the medical perspective is on how to change those who have disabilities, while the focus of the social model is on how to change society to meet the needs of everyone. One could argue that federal legislation such as ADA and Section 504 are predicated on this latter notion of disability, because accommodations and adjustments are intended to create equal access for all persons. This researcher espouses Lekan’s (2009) position that society has a responsibility to adapt the environment to meet everyone’s needs, rather than requiring individuals with disabilities to do all of the adapting. However, research has shown that much of society still ascribes to the medical perspective of disability (Jacobs & Lauber, 2011; Peters, Wolbers, & Dimling, 2008; Rieser, 2006), and thus stigma is assigned to individuals with disabilities as they seek accommodations.

For many students with disabilities, communication with professors appears to be a major barrier to the utilization of accommodations (Bento, 1996). That is not to say that professors are the direct cause of students not utilizing accommodations, but their role in the process must be examined. Many professors are unfamiliar with the legal implications of Section 504 and ADA, which adds to the difficulty students may experience in discussing accommodations with them (Bolt et al., 2011). In one qualitative study examining faculty decision-making about accommodations, Bento (1996) found the presence of an “informational barrier,” (p. 495) noting that the faculty she interviewed did not have a full understanding of disabilities, nor of the applicable laws. In their survey of university disability services offices, Collins and Mowbray (2005) found that these staff members reported that faculty lacked the understanding of how to work with students with psychological disabilities. Dowrick, Anderson, Heyer, and Acosta
(2005) found that faculty uncertainty about the appropriateness of accommodations was most prevalent regarding students with non-visible disabilities. Thus, students may experience negative faculty attitudes when there is a perception that accommodations are not legitimately needed (Bolt et al, 2011). Also, in contrast to high school, college students have less frequent personal interactions with college faculty (Adreon & Durocher, 2007). Thus, it may be more difficult for students to develop the level of comfort desired for communicating about disability and accommodations.

In addition to concerns about faculty, students with disabilities have also reported that negative interactions with insensitive college staff contributed to their overall unease when discussing their needs (Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009). Hong, Haefner, and Slekar (2011) found that staff and faculty were reluctant to view learners as consumers or customers. This may exacerbate negative attitudes about providing additional accommodations to students, which requires more time, service, and personal attention from college employees. The quality and efficiency of support offered through disability services offices is also important (Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009), as students reported that the amount of paperwork and complicated procedures required to secure accommodations was a barrier (Lindstrom, Downey-McCarthy, Kerewsky, & Flannery, 2009). However, as Hong et al. (2011) explained, Section 504 provides access to knowledge, and faculty, as the primary deliverers of knowledge, must be a central part of providing reasonable accommodations. Regardless of who is involved, as disability becomes less stigmatized in our society, communication will improve and accommodations will become more effective in serving the purpose of providing equal access to higher education (Trammell, 2009).
A student’s developmental readiness for college can be another barrier to the utilization of accommodations. Because students are required to initiate and take an active role in the accommodations process, they must develop their self-determination and self-advocacy skills. Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, and Wehmeyer (as cited in Adams & Proctor, 2010) described self-determination as the ability to “engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior” (p. 169). Further, self-advocacy skills include the ability to understand one’s strengths, one’s weaknesses, and one’s rights as a citizen, along with the ability to communicate effectively about such matters (Adams & Proctor). Typically, parents and teachers are no longer heavily monitoring students in college, so students must become more adept at self-regulation (Fier & Brzezinski, 2010; Gil, 2007).

Students with disabilities are more likely to report that they do not feel like they fit in with their peers in college (Adams & Proctor, 2010). This is significant, because as Astin’s (1985) and Tinto’s (2001) works explained, student involvement with, and integration into, the campus community increases a student’s chance of academic success. This integration and connection with others is further impeded for students with disabilities, because they often have less free time for socialization. This is due to the additional time it may take for tasks such as personal care, homework, or navigating around campus (Hadley, 2011). Further, the nature of some psychological disabilities inhibits a student’s ability to engage in empathetic, reciprocal communication with others and to develop more meaningful connections with them (Adreon & Durocher, 2007). Also, students with disabilities reported an overall lack of confidence in their academic and social abilities, which is based on prior negative experiences (Lindstrom, et al.,
2009). As Smith, English, and Vasek (2002) reported, lacking confidence or feeling incapable hinders the use of self-advocacy skills.

While the need for self-determination and self-advocacy skills at the postsecondary level is clear, the research showed that, in general, students have not been learning and practicing these skills at the secondary level. In particular, secondary educators may not include activities that will build the self-determination skills of students with disabilities during transition planning (Thoma & Getzel, 2005). As previously described, the nature of IDEA does not require high school students to become heavily involved in the process of determining accommodations, and students do not have to get involved in meaningful ways (Morningstar et al., 2010; DaDeppo, 2009). Madaus and Shaw (2004) questioned whether or not secondary education providers have a true understanding of what students need at the postsecondary level in terms of advocating for themselves and securing accommodations. Li et al. (2009) posited that special educators are not receiving adequate training in transition issues, which may be the result of a national focus on academic content area knowledge.

**Transition Planning for Practitioners**

The available research on the transition of students with disabilities includes recommended practices for disability services providers at the secondary and postsecondary levels. Researchers suggested that transition planning must take place as early as the middle school years, so that students with disabilities who are interested in attending college may be placed in a more rigorous course of academic study (Shaw, 2009; Wilson, et al., 2009; Gil, 2007; Schutz, 2002; Smith, et al., 2002). Further, it is suggested that secondary educators be trained with an awareness of what will be expected of students in college, as well as in methods for
teaching students the skills needed to be successful at the postsecondary level, which may be accomplished through in-service trainings and professional development opportunities (Adams & Proctor, 2010; Morrison et al., 2009), collaboration and communication with postsecondary disability services offices (Fier & Brzezinski, 2010; Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009), and through improved special education teacher preparation programs (Li et al., 2009). The research described several specific strategies for preparing students with disabilities for the transition to college, including the teaching of self-advocacy skills through role-playing (DaDeppo, 2009). This allows students to understand their disabilities and how they are affected, while providing meaningful practice (Adams & Proctor, 2010).

With better awareness, secondary educators can inform their students about some of the differences they can expect in college and how they may be impacted based on their disability (Fier & Brzezinski, 2010). Students may also benefit from opportunities to practice some of the skills that will help them as college students, including time management, study strategies, and organization skills (Fier & Brzezinski; Morningstar et al., 2010; Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009). In their study of academically successful college students with disabilities, Anctil, Ishikawa, and Scott (2008) suggested that conflict resolution training that is specific to the process of requesting accommodations would be useful at the secondary level. To further assist with the transition process, secondary educators can begin to have conversations with parents about how their roles will change at the postsecondary level (Fier & Brzezinski; Morningstar et al.; Shaw, 2009), so that they are better prepared to handle the transition and become partners in preparing their students for self-advocacy and ownership in the accommodations process. As
Smith et al. (2002) stated, parents must not “promote [an] image of powerlessness and dependence on others” (p. 503) within their student.

The literature also suggested practices that allow postsecondary disability service offices to support a more positive transition for students. College disability services staff must attempt to create a positive atmosphere that is warm, welcoming, and helpful. This allows students to attach a more positive association to the utilization of accommodations (Barnard-Brak et al., 2009). Students with disabilities also reported that networking and mentoring relationships were integral to their academic success in college (Garrison-Wade, 2012). This could entail relationships with peers, faculty, staff, or community members.

The literature advocated for the creation of professional development opportunities for faculty and staff, so that campus communities become more aware of disability issues and laws (Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009). Gil (2007) suggested getting faculty involved in training that teaches them how to make course content accessible to all students, as well as more about specific disabilities and how they affect students in the classroom. Lombardi and Murray (2011) found that faculty who had been provided training and education regarding accommodations were more likely to uphold the legal requirements of Section 504 and the ADA. Dowrick et al. (2005) also advocated for this approach, stating that faculty need to be better educated, but that they also need effective support to develop teaching strategies that make the material accessible to all students. Salzer (2012), however, reported that basic education and awareness for faculty and staff are not entirely effective at improving the lived experiences of students with disabilities, and that intentional and meaningful interaction among all parties is needed in order to genuinely decrease stigma. Finally, McCarthy (2007) suggested sharing statistics about the
populations of students with disabilities on their campuses, so all students can gain a sense of community and shared experience.

Summary of Literature Review

Through a review of the literature, this researcher gained a clearer understanding of the considerations associated with the transition to college for students with disabilities. Much of the change that students encounter is associated with the legal differences between services in high school and accommodations in college. There is a paucity of exploration in the literature into whether or not students and their families are fully aware of these differences as students seek to transition from one level to the next. For those who do gain information about accommodations and disability services, there is a lack of understanding about where and how they received it.

Several other gaps in the literature emerged as well. Research is needed to determine if students are developmentally ready to enter college and advocate for themselves on a level that is required by Section 504 and the ADA. While the literature has shown that students with disabilities perceive the presence of a social stigma related to disability, there has been little research into individual students’ perspectives and sense-making of this phenomenon. Also, professors and disability services personnel play a crucial role in these students’ experiences in college. Thus, further qualitative research into how students perceive their interactions with these people throughout the accommodations process is needed. Finally, much of the research has focused on students with specific types of disabilities or on all students with disabilities. Due to the unique nature of non-visible disabilities, in terms of stigma and potential responses to requests for accommodations, research is needed that captures the experiences of this population.
of college students. This will allow practitioners at both the secondary and postsecondary levels to develop strategies for informing, preparing, and supporting students with disabilities throughout the transition from high school to college. With improvement in this area, they have the potential to enhance developmental, academic, and career outcomes for students with disabilities, while upholding the spirit of equal access laws such as Section 504 and the ADA.

**Chapter Three: Research Design**

The purpose of this research study was to explore the unique perspectives of college students with disabilities regarding their rights, responsibilities, and potential challenges in relation to the utilization of academic accommodations as afforded to them by federal law. Through qualitative inquiry, the researcher aimed to closely examine the lived experiences of the participants.

**Methodology**

The current study was conducted from the constructivism-interpretivism paradigm (Ponterotto, 2005). This paradigm assumes that there are multiple subjective, but valid, realities constructed in the minds of the participants and researchers. In other words, reality is constructed by the research participant through his or her lived experience, and this reality is unique in perspective. This is a good fit with a phenomenological approach in the research design, because of the focus on, and appreciation for, the individual perspective on each unique experience. Researchers working within the constructivism-interpretivism paradigm interact with the community of participants through methods such as personal interviews and direct observation. This creates a dynamic relationship with personal interactions allowing for reciprocal sharing of information.
According to Creswell (2012), qualitative research is appropriate for addressing research questions requiring the exploration of a problem or issue. Using a qualitative approach for the study allowed the researcher to deeply explore the complexities of transition to college for students with non-visible disabilities, allowing some unexpected themes to emerge regarding these students’ experiences. The research questions in the proposed study guided the researcher in exploring the sense-making of the participants in relation to college transition and the use of accommodations. According to Alexander (2006), the purpose of qualitative research is to understand the meaning of human experiences, rather than attempting to define causal relationships. Thus, a qualitative approach allowed the researcher to appropriately address the research question and subquestions.

In this study, the participants had all experienced the shared phenomena of transitioning to college and attempting to utilize academic accommodations as students with disabilities. The researcher conducted this study utilizing an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, which “offers insight into a particular perspective on a phenomenon” (Handley & Hutchinson, 2013, p. 188). Smith (2011) described the three-pronged nature of the IPA approach to research. IPA is phenomenological in nature in that it intends to examine individuals’ experiences and their sense-making of those experiences. The IPA approach is also hermeneutical in that it allows for the interpretation of the participants’ reflections. Further, IPA is an ideographic undertaking, because it calls for a highly in-depth analysis of individual cases. The goal of this research was to better understand each student’s unique view of the transition from high school to college in terms of utilizing accommodations. IPA is intended to help a researcher explore “how people make sense of their major life experiences” (Smith, Larkin, &
Flowers, 2009, p. 1), so this approach was a solid fit for the proposed study of events included in the transition to college.

**Site and Participants**

The chosen research site was a selective public university located in the southeastern United States and with an approximate enrollment of over 20,000 students. The researcher purposively recruited a homogeneous group of five participants, based on the guidelines for conducting an IPA study provided by Smith et al. (2009), which indicate that the parameters of *homogeneous* may vary from study to study. With IPA, the goal is to develop a homogeneous group of participants “to whom the research question will be meaningful” (Smith, et al., 2009, p. 57). Rather than focusing on basic demographic characteristics, the researcher recruited participants who were most likely to have experienced the phenomenon in a similar way. The goal was that the student participants were homogeneous in that they had lived a common experience (Smith, et al., 2009).

In order to participate in this study, participants were required to meet the following criteria:

a) They must be registered with the university disability services office, having provided documentation of a disability in order to determine that they are eligible to receive academic accommodations.

b) They must have disabilities that are non-visible in nature.

c) They must have had IEPs or 504 Plans in high school, so that they had experienced academic accommodations procedures at both the secondary and postsecondary levels.

d) They must be traditional-age students (18-24 years old).

e) They must have completed at least one semester of college, so that they had experienced

the full transition to college, as well as having had sufficient opportunity to engage in the process of requesting or utilizing accommodations.

The researcher began the recruitment process by contacting the disability services office at the site institution. She requested the assistance of the university disability services office and confirmed that they were willing to take part in the research process. Documentation of approval of the study (Appendix A), as well as information about the purpose and design of the study, were provided to the disability services office. That office acted as gatekeeper in the study, as they recruited and helped provide access to potential participants (Creswell, 2012). Their participation and role as gatekeeper was particularly important, because information about students with disabilities is typically held in strict confidence (Morningstar, et al., 2010). Further, students must self-identify as having a disability to this office in order to be eligible to receive academic accommodations. Once the site institution was identified and confirmed, the disability services office communicated with their Institutional Review Board about the research design and protocol. Subsequently, the researcher was given approval from the Institutional Review Board to begin the research study.

Once permission had been granted by the site institution, the researcher provided the disability services office with all of the information and materials needed to recruit, and obtain informed consent from, the research participants. A list of the criteria required to be in the sample were shared and, using a script provided by the researcher (Appendix B), the disability services office emailed all students who qualified. As the potential participants expressed a desire to take part in the study, the disability services office asked them to sign a basic consent form (Appendix C) allowing for the release of their names and email addresses to the researcher.
The researcher wanted a minimum of four participants for the study, so she decided to schedule five in case anyone needed to withdraw or did not follow through with the interview. Once the disability services office provided the researcher with a list of the first five volunteer participants and their contact information, the researcher emailed each one requesting to speak by telephone to discuss the participant criteria and confirm their desire to participate. The researcher subsequently spoke to each of the five students by telephone to confirm that he or she met all five of the participant criteria. All were found to meet the criteria, and interviews were scheduled accordingly.

To provide context, Table 1 is a listing of the participants’ pseudonyms, the type of non-visible disabilities they identified as having, and the accommodations they typically utilized. Participants were not asked what specific disabilities they identified as having, but all of them shared this information during the interviews. Since the exact nature of some of the disabilities could compromise the confidentiality of the participants, they are more broadly categorized in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant name</th>
<th>Disability type</th>
<th>Accommodations used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jeff</td>
<td>Attention Deficit Disorder Processing Delays</td>
<td>extended time for testing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>Health Impairment</td>
<td>absences without penalty, as reasonable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Attention Deficit Disorder, Learning Disability</td>
<td>extended time for testing, low-distraction testing environment, permission to record lectures, priority registration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Disability/Accommodation</td>
<td>Details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathan</td>
<td>Attention Deficit Disorder Learning Disability</td>
<td>housing assignment central to academic buildings, permission to leave class early or be late to class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>Learning Disabilities Attention Deficit Disorder</td>
<td>extended time for testing, low-distraction testing environment, priority seating in the classroom, permission to use laptop for note-taking in class</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All communication and interaction with participants was conducted in a manner that maintained strict confidentiality and protection of their privacy. The researcher used only the contact information provided by the participants. The privacy of the participants was also taken into account when scheduling the interview location, which was a conference room on campus. The participants were notified in advance about the location, and the researcher confirmed with each one that he or she was comfortable with the arrangements. Prior to each semi-structured interview, participants were reminded of the research protocol, what they were consenting to, and that they had a right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The full informed consent document can be found in appendix D.

The sampling strategy and criteria used for this study enabled the researcher to appropriately address her research questions. The relatively small sample size of five allowed the researcher to fully explore the rich nature of the data obtained in an IPA study. Further, the sample criteria allowed the researcher to isolate participants who had experienced the same phenomena with some similarity.
Positionality

According to Kincheloe & Steinberg (1998), positionality provides a context for understanding that one’s experiences and personal characteristics affect one’s construction of reality, or worldview. In addition to holding a master’s degree focusing on college student development and higher education administration, the researcher holds a secondary education teaching degree and taught at the middle school level for a brief period. The former, along with her years of experience working as a practitioner in college student services, has provided her with knowledge of the laws governing accommodations in higher education, as well as some of the challenges experienced by students transitioning to college. The latter provided the researcher an informed perspective on the laws governing the provision of accommodations to students with disabilities at the secondary level, as well as a working knowledge of how accommodations are administered. These experiences have influenced her beliefs about the role of higher education institutions, their employees, and their students, as well as her expectations for their involvement in the process of disability services and accommodations.

The researcher first became interested in the field of postsecondary disability services when she worked in a disability services office as a graduate assistant while earning her master’s degree. Aside from that, she has no specific experience in the field of special education, she has no disability, nor does she have a close family member with a disability that would have impacted her interest in the field. Based on Briscoe’s (2005) definition of those who are members of an oppressed group, people with disabilities can be considered as the other. Thus, the researcher will conduct this study as someone who does not hold membership with the other whose experiences are being explored.
The purpose of this research was to learn more about the lived experiences of the participants. Ultimately, the researcher’s ideological positionality was to study the experiences of students with disabilities in order to promote equity and end oppression. Before the interviews, the researcher expected that each participant would have a unique perspective that had been shaped by a variety of factors, one of which is disability. The researcher strove to ensure that all discourse occurred in a manner that did not subordinate the participants in relation to the researcher.

Some beliefs and biases that the researcher held about the transition of students with disabilities must be acknowledged. For example, the researcher believed that students with non-visible disabilities were only defined as being disabled because the existing educational structures and pedagogy did not best utilize their strengths or ways of thinking and doing. This is congruent with the social model of disability described by both Danforth (2008) and Lekan (2009). As such, when students were accepted into college, their institutions had a responsibility to provide them with support and accommodations. An additional viewpoint the researcher held is that, while it was ultimately a student’s responsibility to request and take advantage of these supports, both secondary and postsecondary institutions had a responsibility to prepare students to participate as self-advocates. During transition, students move from a system that provides a great deal of support into a system that encourages them to develop into adults who are able to self-advocate. Having stated the above biases and personal assumptions, the researcher was dedicated to conducting her research with an open mind about the direction in which it would take her and the possibilities it would present. Fennel and Arnot (2008) said that researchers must “unpick their own learnings” (p.233). This was accomplished through self-awareness,
questioning, and reflection that took place throughout the research process. These processes were also necessary when conducting an IPA study, due to the double-hermeneutical nature of the sense-making that is occurring in both the researcher and the participants (Smith et al., 2009).

Data Collection

For this study, data was collected through semi-structured, personal interviews with the participants. In a semi-structured interview, prepared questions are posed to the participants, but the researcher also has the option of adding additional questions for clarification, depth, and the exploration of themes (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Smith et al., 2009; Seidman, 2006). This interviewing technique was also a good philosophical fit for an IPA study, because the act of shaping the interview as it is happening is an example of the double hermeneutical nature of IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2008) wherein the researcher is engaged in sense-making even as he or she is studying the sense-making of the participants. The interview protocol utilized in this study can be found in appendix E. The participants’ responses during personal interviews were reflections of their own sense-making processes (Smith et al., 2009). The actual interviews ranged from 40 to 75 minutes. Additionally, all of the participants were provided with the interview transcripts within two weeks of their interviews, so that they had the opportunity to provide additional information or clarification. None of the participants added information after reviewing the transcripts of their interviews.

The researcher did not take notes while conducting the interviews, except to occasionally write an additional question she wanted to ask later in the interview. This was done in an effort to make the participants feel more like they were part of a conversation and an opportunity to share their story, rather than feeling like they were being examined or studied. The researcher
audio-recorded each interview using a digital, handheld device. She also recorded each interview with an application on her mobile phone, so that there would be a back-up record of the data. The participants were informed of the recording protocol in the consent documents provided to them at the beginning of the study, and they were reminded at the beginning of each interview that they were being recorded.

The data gathered in this study existed in both electronic and paper form. Audio data was downloaded onto a password-protected computer in the researcher’s home. A back-up file was created on a flash drive and then stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s home. All data in paper form, including minimal interview notes, were also locked in this cabinet for secure keeping. The data was only accessible to the researcher. Further, the data was de-identified in order to protect the confidentiality and privacy of the participants, and the identification key was stored separately from the interview data in a password-protected electronic folder. All electronic data was securely stored with password protection.

**Data Analysis**

Interview data was analyzed using an inductive and iterative process, as recommended by Smith et al., (2009), during which the researcher actively engaged with the data at multiple passes. Smith (2011) described the importance of this iterative and dynamic process by explaining that *gems* may be found in the data. These gems were small pieces of information that hinted at greater significance upon first reading, and further analysis of these gems ultimately provided great insight into participants’ sense-making. This process allowed the researcher to deeply analyze the thick, rich data shared by the participants.

A full analysis was conducted on each interview before beginning analysis on the next.
The researcher listened to the audio-recorded interviews, and read the interview transcriptions, multiple times. This allowed the researcher to deeply process, and begin to make sense of, the data. Throughout the listening and reading process, the researcher made note of some of her own initial impressions of the data in an attempt to bracket them off for later analysis. The next step of data analysis was the process of coding, or commenting on, the interview data. Codes, as utilized in qualitative data analysis, were defined by Miles and Huberman (1994) as “tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study” (p. 56). The purpose of assigning codes, or coding, is to help the researcher effectively analyze large amounts of raw, textual data, engaging in sense-making and discovering connections among the emergent themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The first cycle of coding was conducted using the in vivo method (Saldaña, 2013). This close analysis allowed the researcher to carefully and deliberately capture the true essence of the participant’s perspective, which was useful in this IPA study (Smith, et al., 2009), as that was the primary purpose. Additional coding cycles were conducted in order to capture a meaningful description of the participant’s experiences, relationships among the data, and emerging themes. Smith et al. (2009) described three types of comments, or codes, which may be useful in analyzing data in an IPA study. Descriptive comments focus on the explicit nature of what has been shared by the participants, linguistic comments explore potential meaning of the specific language used by the participants, and conceptual comments allow the researcher to consider potential meanings not explicitly stated by the participants. The researcher utilized these three types of codes as a method for interacting with and interpreting the data at multiple passes and on multiple levels of meaning.
Once the researcher coded each participant’s interview data, she further examined her notes in order to identify emerging themes within each data set. This stage of analysis allowed the researcher to identify the “psychological essence” (Smith, et al., 2009, p. 92) of the data. At this point, the researcher was engaging in an interpretative, double hermeneutic process. This required her to interpret each participant’s sense-making with the goal of understanding the participants’ experiences. Once a chronological list of themes had been developed, the researcher analyzed the data to search for connections among the themes. This analysis process was completed in full on each participant’s interview data. During the final stage of analysis, the researcher discerned patterns across the participants’ experiences and defined the superordinate themes that emerged.

**Limitations**

In their examination of the usefulness of IPA, Brocki and Wearden (2006) cautioned against failing to note the limitations of one’s chosen methodology. Since lived experience is highly contextualized, it may be difficult to evaluate the transferability of the findings of this study to students with different characteristics or who are attending other institutions (Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty, & Hendry, 2011). The relatively small number of participants included in the current study limits the findings from being broadly applicable to the general population. However, Starks and Trinidad (2007) argued that an appropriate sample size for a qualitative study is dependent upon the researcher’s purpose and goals. With respect for “the complexity of most human phenomena” (Smith et al., 2009), the sample size of five participants allowed the researcher to deeply explore how these students made sense of their unique experiences as college students with disabilities.
Validity and Credibility

In their text on formulating and conducting an IPA research study, Smith et al. (2009) offer up Yardley’s assessment guidelines for qualitative research as a method for ensuring quality. The proposed study was conducted utilizing these four broad principles. *Sensitivity to context* was ensured through the careful review of the data and close consideration of each participant’s individual lived experiences. Further, written descriptions of the data analysis included verbatim comments from the participants to support and clarify the researcher’s interpretations. *Commitment to rigour* was maintained throughout the research process. The researcher conducted thorough interviews, aiming to put each participant at ease. The researcher strove to establish a strong rapport and sense of trust with the participants through the interview process, as well as through incidental contacts needed for scheduling purposes. The iterative nature of the data analysis process also ensured the thoroughness of the study. *Transparency and coherence* were achieved through data analysis and the subsequent writing process. The researcher kept record of, and described, each step of the research process, including the multiple iterations of data analysis that occurred. Ultimately, the researcher aimed to develop a work that had *impact and importance* by providing an analysis of the participants’ experience that may prove useful to researchers and practitioners in the field of disability services.

The researcher performed member checks, allowing each participant an opportunity to review the interview data for accuracy (Russell, 2008). The data was offered to students in multiple formats, including email, to ensure that all materials were accessible and that the participants were comfortable with the process. The researcher also employed peer review during the study (Russell, 2008). The doctoral committee played this role, as well as several
peers with doctorates who were willing to assist and hold the researcher accountable. Also, the researcher strove to make her biases transparent to the reader, so there was no question about assumptions regarding the topic.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

The protection of human subjects participating in research studies is a critically important consideration for the researcher. This researcher conducted an IPA study, which involved the personal interviewing of college students with non-visible disabilities. Paramount to all other efforts and concerns, the researcher followed Northeastern University’s (2013) protocol for human subject research protection and their Institutional Review Board. Several appropriate steps were taken to ensure a legal and ethical study was conducted with respect to working with human subjects.

The researcher created a participant recruitment protocol for the gatekeeper institution (Creswell, 2012) to follow, allowing them to reach out to students without any appearance of coercion. The information they provided included the purpose of the study. The consent forms made it clear that there was minimal risk involved and that students were free to withdraw their participation at any point in the study without repercussion. The researcher also had a plan in place for connecting participants with their institution’s disability services and counseling services offices, in case issues emerged related to disability or interactions with others on campus. The researcher aimed to leave the participants knowing they were supported beyond the scope of the study.

The researcher intended for this study to have minimal risk for the participants. Personal interviews gave participants an opportunity to share their perspectives and their stories in a safe,
non-threatening environment. It was very important to consider the fact that the participant population may have had concerns about privacy when sharing their stories. The researcher shared clear information with her participants about what measures she was taking to protect their privacy. Further, pseudonyms were used to de-identify each participant and to keep the name of the gatekeeper institution private. All data, both paper and electronic, were kept locked and secured. The researcher made a specific effort to inform her participants that she would not be disclosing any identifiable information about them to their institution. Since the interview questions had the potential to elicit concerns, or criticism, about the participants’ institution, faculty, or disability services office, this protection was important.

**Conclusion**

Alexander (2006) argued that educational research endeavors naturally emerge from problems occurring in practice. Further, he indicated that in order to craft more quantifiable generalizations about the problem, once must first understand detailed examples of specific cases. This conceptualization supported the current researcher’s line of exploration and research design. Students with disabilities are entering college and choosing to utilize accommodations with greater frequency. If these students wish to receive academic accommodations at the postsecondary level, they must disclose their disabilities and advocate for themselves. The purpose of this research was to explore how these students made sense of the transition to college and their own need to self-advocate. This study was qualitative in nature and was conducted as an interpretative phenomenological analysis as described by Smith et al., (2009). A homogeneous group of participants was chosen at one institution, and data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Data was coded and analyzed for themes, with each participant’s
story being considered individually. As described by Smith et al. (2009), once each participant’s experiences were fully considered, the researcher engaged in the process of analyzing for convergence and divergence across participants.

The research design described here was congruent with the overall purpose of the study, as well as the research questions guiding the inquiry. The IPA framework, which included individual interviewing as a data collection technique, allowed the researcher to explore the richness present in each participant’s individual story. The goal was to gain a deep understanding of how these participants were making sense of the transition to college and the utilization of academic accommodations. The research design enabled the researcher to achieve this goal in a manner that protected and respected the participants as valuable human beings who had unique experiences to share.

**Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis**

The purpose of this study was to investigate how first-year college students with non-visible disabilities experience the transition to college, particularly in terms of requesting and utilizing academic accommodations. The analysis of the interview data yielded three superordinate themes and seven corresponding nested themes. The superordinate themes and their nested themes were: 1) developing identity (1.1 seeking independence, 1.2 transitioning between discrete environments, 1.3 valuing sameness); 2) desiring credibility (2.1 seeking understanding from others, 2.2 valuing respect and trust from others); and 3) controlling information (3.1 desiring concealment, 3.2 reluctantly embracing interdependence).

Superordinate themes and nested themes were identified as those recurring in at least three of the five participants’ interview data.
Developing Identity

Students who are transitioning to college often experience challenges with entering a new environment, developing relationships with others, and making decisions for themselves. The first superordinate theme that emerged in this study captured the participants’ developmental struggles as they made the transition from high school to college and from adolescence to adulthood. Identity in this case refers to how each of the participants viewed themselves in relation to the environments they inhabited at various stages of their lives, as well as how these perspectives have shaped their expectations for the available support systems within the various environments. The researcher found three specific areas of convergence among participants related to identity development. The participants’ desire to be independent of others played a significant role in how they made decisions regarding the use of accommodations as they entered college. Further, the participants viewed high school and college as two distinctly separate environments that had little to do with one another in terms of accommodations for students with disabilities. Finally, the participants had a desire to experience college in as much the same manner as possible as students without disabilities. Thus, the three nested themes discussed here are seeking independence, transitioning between discrete environments, and valuing sameness.

Seeking Independence

The participants viewed the transition from high school to college as a watershed moment in which their role and identity shifted from dependent child to independent adult. They articulated a strong desire to behave independently as they transitioned from high school to college. This presented a juxtaposition unique to college students with disabilities because, while the participants desired independence as new college students, they viewed the use of
academic accommodations as a form of dependence. When asked, prior to entering college, about her perception of accommodations in college, Hannah indicated, “I don’t need accommodations. At first, I was thinking I can deal with it on my own.” Similarly, Kim stated that she did not choose to use accommodations until her second semester of college, because “I was sure I could take care of it myself.” These participants expressed that they believed they could be successful in college without the use of the accommodations they had utilized in high school.

Sarah stated that she “came in with the mindset that I was a college student and I needed to learn how to be an independent college student.” She further indicated her belief upon entering college that she needed to “wean [herself] off of it,” as a child from her mother, referring to the use of accommodations. Even after deciding to utilize accommodations, Sarah was concerned that her professors would treat her differently and stated that she “didn’t need my hand held during class.” These comments indicated an aversion to being treated as a dependent child who needs individual guidance in order to be safe. Referring to getting accommodations as a first-year college student, Jeff stated that he was happy to be on his own and that, at that point, he “didn’t like any help.” Jeff indicated that he did not feel he needed academic accommodations upon entering college and shared the following about his initial contact with the disability services office:

Yeah, the first time my mom pretty much brought me in kicking and screaming, doing the whole, “You need it.” And I was like, “No, I don’t.” Still at that point, I very much like it here, because I’m on my own. I don’t like any help.
Jeff’s words illustrate a strong desire to do things for himself, as well as an argument with his parent when he isn’t getting to handle things his way. His description also elicits an image of a small child throwing a tantrum when being forced to do something he did not want to do, which is an apt depiction of one attempting to obtain independence from one’s parent.

Nathan’s sense-making about his independence during the transition to college diverges from some of the other participants’ perspectives. When asked how he viewed his responsibilities in getting accommodations in college as compared to high school, Nathan stated that college was a “whole lot different, since I’m over the age of eighteen and I need to start making sure I’m on top of things. My mom can’t intervene, because I’m an adult.” He was not necessarily seeking independence. Rather, he believed that he must behave independently due to his age. Across participants, the transition from high school to college was viewed as one’s transition from childhood to adulthood. Accommodations were part of the high school experience, which should be relegated to the past as a thing of childhood. The students felt they should leave behind accommodations as a relic of high school that was not to be carried with them to college.

**Transitioning between Discrete Environments**

The participants appeared to make sense of high school and college as two very distinct, and often unconnected, environments. Several of the students found that they were ultimately unaware of how their disabilities would impact their ability to perform scholastically in a college setting. This resulted in an initial feeling that, in college, they would not need the accommodations that they had utilized in high school. Prior to entering college, Kim thought she
wouldn’t need extended time and low-distraction testing environment accommodations in college. She explained her mindset at that time by stating:

Now that I’m in college I won’t get distracted. I’ll be able to use the whole class period to take exams. That was not the case. If anything, it was worse because, rather than being in a classroom of 16 people like in high school, you’re in a classroom of 200, and all of those pencils scratching and everything is so rushed. I thought that I could manage, but I couldn’t.

Similarly, Hannah felt that she would not need an accommodation in college that would excuse her for absences related to her disability. It had been quite easy to manage her absences in high school, since she didn’t need accommodations very often. Her mindset shifted only after her mother gave her more information about the typical consequences for missing a college class and how that contrasted with what Hannah was used to experiencing when she had to be absent in high school. Hannah and the other participants in this study did not understand how their disabilities might impact their access to college, and this prevented them from being able to make fully informed decisions about whether or not they would utilize accommodations.

Sarah found that being able to manage her time and academic responsibilities was one of her greatest challenges upon entering college. She had a routine and a fairly set schedule in high school, and she expected it to be the same in college. Sarah stated, “I figured it would be the same sort of thing, but coming here, my schedule changed immensely. It was very difficult to figure out how to manage myself.” Perhaps exacerbating this transition difficulty, Sarah’s parents and high school academic coach influenced her view of available supports to students in college when they decided to end the coaching she had been receiving prior to her senior year of
high school. Quoting her parents in regard to academic coaching, Sarah stated, “You’re not going to have this ability in college, so you probably should get used to doing this by yourself.” This scenario demonstrated that Sarah’s family members and other support systems from high school influenced her knowledge of, and choices about, assistance available to her in college. Sarah’s family and high school academic coach had an opportunity to provide her with a transitional bridge from high school to college, by giving her guidance on how to receive assistance in college. However, the information they provided was inaccurate and left Sarah lacking awareness about the availability of academic coaching in college.

In terms of accommodations, several of the participants viewed the high school environment as having very little to do with the college environment. They felt largely uninformed about the availability of accommodations in college and how to go about receiving them. Further, the participants did not hold their high schools responsible for educating them about receiving accommodations in college. Kim indicated that, “I was the only student that really used the accommodations in high school and I don’t remember the faculty ever mentioning it. Our guidance counselor and admissions lady, they were super busy at the time.” When asked what she would have found helpful prior to entering college, Kim stated, “I don’t think there’s anything anyone from high school or anyone in my family could have done that would have made it easier. They were all very helpful.” Ultimately, Kim viewed college accommodations as a low priority for the staff at her high school, due to the lack of students who were perceived to need the information and to the overall workload of these staff members. Further, she did not perceive this as a deficiency or as a detriment to her.
Similarly, Jeff responded that his high school special education teacher was “great” but that she didn’t know much about “the next level.” He seemed to believe that it wouldn’t even be possible for the personnel at his high school to prepare him, because “not everyone goes to the same university” and that they aren’t familiar with all colleges accommodations processes. This comment demonstrates Jeff’s misunderstanding of the procedural differences among institutions. He does not appear to be fully aware that there are great similarities among institutions, largely due to the fact that they are all held to the same federal laws regarding accommodations.

The participants appeared to espouse the notion that the college disability services office was responsible for educating students about accommodations at the postsecondary level. This demonstrates the analogy of high school and college as two silos, near one another but wholly unconnected. High schools are responsible for matters of high school, and colleges are responsible for matters of college. In response to a question about whether or not anyone at their high schools provided them with information about college accommodations, three participants gave a very quick “no” and a short laugh. The very notion that high school personnel could have shared that information with them while they were still in high school was viewed as absurd. Another participant’s response to that question was to share her thoughts on how the college provided information to her once she was accepted into the institution. This indicated that the participant held the college responsible for communicating with their students about disability services and accommodations. Ultimately, the participants did not view their high schools as able, or responsible, for preparing students with disabilities to utilize accommodations in college.
Valuing Sameness

The participants’ responses revealed that they do not see themselves as being very different from their peers who do not have disabilities, nor do they want others to see them that way. Rather, they wanted to experience life in much the same way as their peers without disabilities. Nathan described his initial feelings when diagnosed with a disability as a child, stating, “It did not feel good. There was always that kind of stigma that stayed with me as being the disabled kid.” Being treated differently from others, whether with positive or negative intentions, was not considered desirable. When asked about his decision to register with the disability services office in order to receive accommodations, Nathan expressed the following:

I didn’t want to make it seem like I’m using anyone because of my disability. I don’t want to use it to my advantage in any way, I should probably say. Kinda prideful how I don’t really want to make it seem like I’m taking advantage of anyone for that.

The participants did not want to be given better treatment than anyone else, nor did they want to be perceived as taking unfair advantage of anyone by utilizing accommodations. Sarah expressed that she was anxious about providing accommodation letters to her professors at the beginning of the semester in which she decided to start using accommodations. These letters served as verification to the professors that a student was registered with the disability services office and described the specific accommodations the student was entitled to receive. When asked to explain what potential reactions from professors caused her apprehension about providing accommodation letters to them, Sarah stated the following:
I suppose just cater to me, which would’ve bothered me just in terms of I didn’t want to be catered to. I just wanted them to know this was something that I needed to give them and they needed to accommodate for. I didn’t need my hand held.

While concerns about having her “hand held” evoked her desire for adult independence, her desire to avoid being catered to also demonstrated that she did not want preferential treatment over the other students in class.

The participants also appreciated being able to complete their academic activities in as much the same manner as possible as students who did not have disabilities. When asked to describe his best experience interacting with professors in order to get accommodations in college, Jeff discussed the professors in his academic major who provided his exam accommodations rather than requiring him to take his exams in the college’s disability services office. His experiences with the disability services office had not been negative, but when his professors provide the accommodations, he experienced testing as being most similar to his peers who do not have disabilities:

It’s all in the same building, it’s all in the same time, nothing that really deviates your schedule from it, or changes what your normal routine would be. It treats you the same as what normal students would be, you’re still taking the exam with nothing but students in your major. You’re still taking it in the same building. One of the teachers does it, so you’re taking the same teacher. It’s just more like a normal testing environment versus in the disability services test center.

The importance of sameness is evident in this quote, as Jeff repeated the term *same* on five occasions while discussing different elements of his testing experience. The participant
desired to experience testing in as normal a manner as possible, and Jeff’s definition of normal was testing in the same manner as the students without disabilities. Kim explained that she preferred for professors to provide her testing accommodations themselves, because then she was close enough to the professor to ask a question if she had one. This demonstrated the value she placed on having access to the same support and assistance as the rest of her classmates during exams.

The desire for sameness manifested itself as an initial reluctance to utilize academic accommodations for Sarah. Explaining her choice not to use accommodations during first year in college, she stated “that was sort of what that year was, just ‘I’m going to be an average student.’ I go to my classes and I take my tests at the times that they tell me to go take my tests.” Sarah’s desire was to function as she perceived a typical college student would, avoiding accommodations that would require her to do things differently than her peers. It is very difficult to obtain accommodations without experiencing some sense of otherness, and the participants’ responses indicated that it desirable to achieve sameness as much as possible.

As students transition from childhood to adulthood and from high school to college, they develop a sense of who they are and what their places are within their environments. The participants sought to achieve independence as they moved from the familiar environment of high school and close proximity to family to the foreign environment of college and living on their own for the first time. The transition was made more challenging, in part, because several participants did not have a strong understanding prior to entering college of how their disabilities would impact them in that new setting. Further, they were not prepared with information about what their rights and responsibilities were going to be in college in terms of receiving
accommodations. Also, while they ultimately determined that they needed accommodations, and chose to self-identify to their institution as having disabilities, they still had a desire to experience college in much the same way as their peers who did not have disabilities. They desired equal access, but shunned the notion of having an unfair advantage through accommodations. The participants sought to be viewed as equal members of their university community, valued and respected by both professors and peers.

**Desiring Credibility**

College students with disabilities who utilize accommodations may have concerns about how this will reflect upon them as individuals. The second superordinate theme in this study captures the participants’ desire to be seen as credible individuals within the context of academia. They sought both cognitive and affective understanding of their disabilities, in which others would have knowledge about disabilities and accommodations and also present a caring attitude related to how the disabilities impacted the participants. The participants also valued respect and trust from others. This was particularly prevalent in regard to working with professors in order to receive accommodations. The participants wanted to be seen as capable in the academic setting, but also trusted that they truly needed their accommodations for legitimate reasons. The two nested themes that signify these specific areas of convergence across participants were *seeking understanding from others* and *valuing respect and trust from others*.

**Seeking Understanding from Others**

The participants expressed in different ways that it would be desirable for peers, professors and university staff to have a cognitive comprehension of issues related to their disabilities. Hannah’s own experiences have shaped her perceptions about how her peers who do
not have disabilities might view her. She shared, “I’m always curious how they look at it because, now that I have [a disability], I look at things differently. Having a disability helps me understand. I can now see from other people’s points of view.” She had a much greater awareness of the fact that there are many viewpoints different than one’s own. Further, she desired for those around her to have that same understanding of her unique viewpoint as a person with a disability.

In response to a question about his perception of stigmatizing attitudes from others, Nathan stated:

There have been several instances where kids, because I have a handicap decal for my disability, and I’ve had several students say, “Why do you have this?” It’s pretty difficult explaining to them that it’s non-visible and so they might not see it all the time. That’s the large part of why I want to raise awareness for disabilities. I just feel like there’s a lot of kids that just don’t understand.

This scenario demonstrated the negative feelings that occurred for Nathan when someone questioned his need for an accommodation, of which he attributed to a lack of understanding about the non-visible nature of certain disabilities. Nathan’s desire to raise awareness about disabilities stemmed from these negative experiences and showed that this lack of understanding mattered to him.

Some of the participants found their experiences with professors more difficult when the faculty were not entirely familiar with the procedures for providing accommodations. They did not perceive any judgment from the professors, but they were not comfortable being in the position of essentially training the faculty on what to do in order to accommodate them. Kim
described her experiences with faculty as generally positive, indicating that many professors had been working for the institution for a while and knew what to expect when she approached them about her accommodation needs. Interestingly, she said her best experience was with a professor who was not familiar with accommodations processes. The way the professor chose to react was what made the experience a positive one. After describing her interaction with this new professor, she stated:

I think the best experience that I’ve had was actually with that professor, because she was, after I explained it to her, she asked a few questions just to more so understand it. I think, through that, she really understood what I specifically needed and she was always very adamant about making sure she was doing everything right. I think that was really helpful.

While this professor did not start out with a full understanding of the accommodations procedures, the fact that she took the initiative to ask questions and ensure that everything was properly put into place gave Kim the sense that her disability and her needs were understood. Kim clearly appreciated that the professor sought to learn more and to assist her. The professor’s handling of the situation diminished the burden on the student to self-advocate, inform, and train the professor about accommodation processes.

When asked about any negative experiences she may have had with professors in order to receive her accommodations, Sarah shared:

None of them have been poor, I suppose. I only have one teacher from last year who was confused by the test proctoring center, because he’d never used it before, which surprised me. He had to sit down and ask me questions about what needed to be filled out on the
form and I was kind of like, “I’m not really sure.” I guess he normally provided a room in the building so that he could go and come in for questions if we had any. I requested to do it in the disability services testing center, and that’s where he was confused.

Sarah further explained that she preferred to take that particular exam in the disability services office because the room this professor normally provided had so many students in it that she was too easily distracted. This was related to her disability, so she advocated to be accommodated in the setting that was most helpful for her. Sarah’s story showed that she perceived it as somewhat negative when she had to explain accommodations procedures to her professors. Having to do this was a new experience for her, and it made her uncomfortable. All of the other professors with whom Sarah interacted were knowledgeable about accommodations procedures, and this made it easier for her to engage in the process.

When asked about any perceived barriers to students getting accommodations, Sarah shared concerns about drug abuse on campus and how it impacted others’ perceptions of her own use of medication.

I suppose it’s the effect of peers around you. College especially, like the whole… I think it’s Adderall I think is the medicine that college students use all the time to pull all-nighters. I think it’s things like that in terms of my roommate did that once, and it’s sort of my medication, which does the same thing as Adderall. I’m not taking it to pull an all-nighter. I’m taking it because I require it 12 hours every day in order to function at the same level as you do. It’s sort of like students are seeing you as taking it as just sort of like, I’m going to take this so I can study like crazy. Because that’s how it would affect them.
Sarah felt that other students did not understand that her medication is not an advantage but, rather, something that allows her to function on the same level as a student who does not have a disability. She perceived her use of medication as an accommodation that provided her with equal access, and a lack of understanding from others made this a more difficult and frustrating endeavor for her.

Kim experienced similar concerns about how others perceived her use of accommodations. The lack of understanding from others has resulted in peers assuming she had an unfair advantage. When asked whether or not she had experienced any type of stigmatizing attitudes from others about her disability, Kim stated:

Not particularly about the disabilities. I get extra time on exams and sometimes when people don’t know the situation … because I don’t introduce myself, “Hi, I’m Kim and I’m dyslexic or dysgraphic, whatever.” I think sometimes when people would get upset that I had extra time on exams or whatnot, that would be something. But nobody’s ever been like, “We aren’t going to like you or we’re going to judge you because you’re dyslexic.” As soon as they understand the situation, it makes more sense to them.

Here, Kim believed that the lack of understanding about why she was receiving exam accommodations was due to others’ perceptions that she was receiving an unfair advantage. She did not perceive stigmatizing attitudes about disability itself, but attributed stigma to a lack of understanding. It is clear that she desired for others to have an understanding and awareness about her disabilities when she described her experience of registering with the disability services office to receive accommodations. She stated, “They actually understood all of the things that come with my disabilities, so there was no initial shock or initial, ‘Oh, explain to me
what that is.’ The questions that I’m not a big fan of.” She valued the disability services office as being wise about her disabilities, because she did not enjoy having to educate others about why she needed accommodations.

Some of the participants shared positive experiences in which they appreciated professors’ willingness to do more than was minimally required in order to accommodate them. This helpfulness was perceived as nice and as an affective understanding of the students’ needs. Sarah described a situation in which one of her exams had to be rescheduled due to an inclement weather delay at the university. She indicated to the professor that she would just take the exam in class without accommodations in order to get it done, but he offered to procure a testing room for her and came in early to accommodate her. She stated the following:

His response was unexpected and helpful, because I had figured most teachers, if I gave them the, “Don’t even worry about it, I’ll just take the test when it is,” they would simply accept it, but it was nice that he still attempted to go and find me an empty room to take the test in.

When asked about whether or not she has had any exceptionally positive experiences with professors in order to receive accommodations, Hannah shared the following:

Yeah. I had a teacher for my Chemistry classes. She was always really sweet. She was like, “Anything that you need, we can do for you. I want to make sure everything is really clear.” She’d take the time to write a paragraph down [on the test scheduling form for the disability services office] if she needed to make sure that the rules were clear. She got it done. That was really great.
In both Sarah and Hannah’s stories, they valued their professors’ willingness to behave interdependently. All of the responsibility for getting accommodations was not placed on the students. Rather, these professors took an active role in order to ensure that the students were receiving what they needed.

Conversely, Kim described her worst experience with a professor as one in which the professor was not very helpful:

He was very set in his ways and just wasn’t the most welcoming about getting the letter [describing her accommodations]. He’s one of the professors that is very anti-laptops, very, “You have exactly five minutes to take this quiz,” etc. When I gave him the initial paper, he sighed and, not rolled his eyes, but looked away and kind of made a face. Whenever I remind him when it’s a quiz day or an exam day, he just gives me a blank stare and just like, “Okay.” Like I’m inconveniencing him. That’s been the worst.

Here, Kim did not perceive the presence of interdependence in which both she and the professor would give something as part of the relationship. Kim’s response about this professor also provided insight into how non-verbal behaviors by professors influence how students make sense of their interactions with those professors. The professor in this situation never told Kim that he did not like providing accommodations, he never refused to provide her accommodations, and he never made any negative comments about her disabilities. However, his facial expressions, coupled with his general classroom policies, were perceived as non-verbal evidence that he did not like providing accommodations because they were an inconvenience to him.

Similarly, Jeff shared an experience he had when interacting with a professor in order to receive exam accommodations. The nature of the course and exam required that the professor
directly provide the accommodations himself. Thus, sending the student to the disability services office for accommodations was not an option. Jeff stated,

I would say that there was one professor that was almost kind of upset that I had [exam accommodations]. I could definitely tell he wasn’t happy about it. He wasn’t like, “I’m just not going to do that.” He did it, but he wasn’t really happy.

When asked to explain what made him think the professor was not happy, Jeff stated, “Just mannerisms, just if they feel unhappy they get short with you. You know, just [makes a heavy sighing sound] blowing, that sort of attitude. I wasn’t happy either.”

Jeff also described his interaction with this professor as the worst he had experienced on campus.

I definitely remember the final exam, the paper version. He’d sit there and watch me to finish it. Because everybody else had already left the room, and this is before the testing center was built. The whole body language, just staring at me the whole extra 30 minutes, just checking his watch. It made me feel kind of judged. I was like, wow, I don’t like this either, but it is what it is.

Again, a professor’s non-verbal reactions influenced one of the participant’s experiences. While Jeff perceived that the professor did not like being inconvenienced, he also felt judged as if the use of accommodations was a negative reflection on him. Further, Jeff’s comments indicating that he wasn’t happy either demonstrated a desire to be understood. Jeff was not using accommodations because he wished to inconvenience the professor. He would have liked the professor to understand that the accommodation was a necessity and that he was no happier about needing it than the professor was about being required to provide it.
Valuing Respect and Trust from Others

While the participants wanted others to have an understanding of their disabilities and need for accommodations, they also hoped for the absence of judgment related to their disabilities. They perceived this absence of judgment as respect and trust. Hannah described the impression she initially held about using accommodations in college, citing concerns that others might perceive her negatively and think, “Oh, someone needs accommodations. What’s wrong with them?” When asked about her feelings regarding what other students think of her, she expressed concern about being pitied and perceived as defective, which revealed a desire to be respected as someone whole and capable. She indicated, “I guess [I’m concerned] that they think something is wrong with me or that I can’t do things on my own and that I need help. ‘Oh, poor her. She has a disability.’”

In order to be permitted to utilize accommodations, students are required to provide their professors with accommodation letters at the beginning of each term. These letters verify for the professor that the student is registered with the disability services office, and they list which accommodations must be provided to that particular student. The participants noted that the need to personally hand these letters to the professors for the first time caused them some apprehension. Sarah stated that, “I felt really anxious giving them the letters the first time, just, I suppose, in terms of how they would react to it.” Sarah perceived that one particular professor was “questioning the realness” of her disability when she provided her accommodation letters. She explained, “It was sort of a how many of these accommodations do you actually need, do you really need the extra time?” She was not denied accommodations, but she felt the professor did not believe her need was legitimate. Sarah ultimately chose not to utilize accommodations in
that course, stating “I think that was one class I didn’t actually do the testing center for. I just sort of ignored it.” Ignoring the utilization of her accommodations suggests an avoidance of further interaction with this professor since, to actually schedule exam accommodations, students were required to have the professors fill out an additional form for the disability services office. It is possible that Sarah was made even more uncomfortable by the lack of trust she perceived from this professor, because this person held much of the power in their relationship. Students are required to interact with professors in order to schedule and receive accommodations, but that can clearly be a difficult endeavor when a professor, who is ultimately a student’s evaluator, expresses doubt about the integrity of that student’s accommodation needs.

The participants also experienced apprehension about what their professors thought of them as they chose to utilize accommodations. The non-visible nature of their disabilities played a particularly important role in their sense-making of the experience of interacting with professors in order to receive accommodations. Speaking about her disability and a previous negative experience she had with a professor, Kim stated, “If [my disability] were more visible, he might be less inclined to not believe me, I suppose. Somebody from the outside who doesn’t understand the situation might not necessarily believe that.” Her statement suggested that she had sensed a lack of trust about the legitimacy of her disability and the credibility of her need for accommodations. Similarly, Sarah stated that a professor would be more likely to believe that accommodations are needed for a student with a visible disability than for her.

The professor would have both visual and documented reasons as to why that person has a disability, where all I have is, “Here are some documents that say I have it. I’m not sure how to prove it, but that’s all I have.”
Sarah’s comments demonstrated that she had felt the need to justify the fact that she had a disability that legitimately required accommodations.

Nathan’s response indicated a divergent perspective about non-visible disabilities and how they impact others’ perceptions. Nathan has a physical disability that is non-visible in nature. He stated:

Since mine wasn’t really academic, I didn’t really think of it any differently because, to me, physical disability is a whole lot different than mental disability. I didn’t really perceive any judgment. For a mental disability, I kind of feel like faculty feel that there’s something wrong with you. Having to take more time with testing or something. I’m not saying I that I know what they think. I just think there might be a stigma that goes to it.

Nathan’s response indicated that students with physical disabilities were perceived as more credible within the academic environment than those with mental disabilities. He believed that professors viewed students with non-physical disabilities as more deficient than those with physical disabilities because of how their accommodation needs were situated within the academic context. Nathan sensed that mental capabilities were of paramount value in the academic setting and, thus, mental disabilities diminished one’s worth within that setting.

Several participants described their positive feelings about situations in which their professors trusted their need for accommodations. Hannah explained that she appreciated the role of the disability services office, because they helped legitimize her request for accommodations with her professors:

It’s really nice having this office here. It makes it hassle free. If I were to have to go to each professor and have to explain everything to them ... This kind of makes it … the
professor knows. “All right. They have something. Here’s the documentation, I don’t need to question it.” It’s really nice having that official label of the disability there.

The fact that Hannah values the disability services office for this reason illuminates her concern about being trusted by professors with her need for accommodations.

Interestingly, awareness of certain behaviors in others increased the participants’ concerns about being viewed as trustworthy in terms of their need for accommodations. Hannah indicated her belief that some students who have an accommodation like hers have abused the ability to be absent from class due to their disabilities:

There are some people who abuse the system though. Some of them kind of have it in a more negative light as far as people taking for granted the absences and for what purpose to miss class even if they could have gone to class. Some faculty have to take extra precautions as far as being stricter.

Hannah clearly felt she had been impacted by other students’ behaviors, from the accommodation being viewed negatively to encountering professors who had stricter rules in an effort to prevent abuse of the accommodation. Jeff indicated that he was not aware of anyone cheating when taking exams in the disability services office, but he appeared certain that professors had concerns about that occurring. He expressed a desire to avoid testing in the disability services office explaining, “You don’t have to worry about cheating. I’m sure it’s happened. I’ve never heard of anything, but I’m sure it has happened.” Jeff felt that other students’ cheating made it likely that his professors would have doubts about him if he chose to take exams in the disability services office.
One particular area of concern noted by two of the participants was related to reports of student abuse of medications typically prescribed to those with Attention Deficit Disorder. In response to a question about the non-visible nature of his disability, Jeff explained that there had been stories in the campus newspaper about students:

They are abusing ADD drugs, finding them and selling them and stuff like that. I’m sure that some professors look at [accommodations] the same way. “Oh right, you got ADD. That means you just find a psychiatrist and pay them off.” Like people in the handicap parking sites, handicap passes for students that get out and walk just fine, so I’m sure there’s maybe a little bit of that stigma to it. If they can’t see it, it might not be real.

Jeff’s response indicated that he had felt doubted, due to the convergence of two factors related to his particular diagnosis of ADD. He was concerned that publically known drug abuse issues reflected on him because his diagnosis was typically treated with the medications being improperly used by those who did not have ADD. Further, he clearly felt that the non-visible nature of his disability influenced whether or not professors believed he had a disability. The example he gave about the handicap parking spaces indicated that he felt stigmatized, doubted, and perhaps scorned about his non-visible need for accommodations.

All of the participants had decided, at some point, to register with the disability services office and to utilize the accommodations to which they were legally entitled. Along with that choice came the need to interact with faculty members about their status as people with disabilities. The participants desired to be believed as having legitimate disabilities and a legitimate need for accommodations, which they perceived to be a particular challenge due to the non-visible nature of their disabilities. While they had not experienced being denied their
accommodations, they had perceived some isolated incidents of negative judgment from professors, due to non-verbal cues and body language. They had the most optimal experiences with others when they were trusted and respected. Also, peer behaviors, such as abuse of accommodations or medications, concerned the participants because they felt that these behaviors increased others’ doubts about the credibility of their own disabilities and accommodation needs. Wherever a true lack of understanding about their disabilities and accommodation needs existed, the participants appreciated when others made an effort to learn and to engage in some of the tasks involved with the accommodations process along with them.

**Controlling Information**

All of the participants in this study have had to make decisions about controlling information regarding their disabilities. Utilizing accommodations had required them to share some information about why they needed, and were entitled to, accommodations. The third superordinate theme that emerged from this study captured the participants’ desire to manage exactly what information about their disabilities was shared and with whom. Several of the participants indicated that it was desirable to be able to conceal the fact that they had a disability, and they had attempted to do so. However, all of the participants had, at some point, chosen to share information about their disabilities with the purpose of seeking help and becoming more interdependent. The two nested themes that signified these specific areas of convergence across participants were desiring concealment and reluctantly embracing interdependence.

**Desiring Concealment**

Four of the five participants expressed that, at one point in time or another, they wanted to conceal the fact that they had been diagnosed with a disability. This was particularly of note,
because students cannot completely conceal this information if they wish to receive academic accommodations in college. When asked about potential barriers to students with disabilities receiving accommodations in college, Sarah recalled that the disability services office had an information table set up at the orientation session she attended the summer prior to her first year of college. She stated the following:

I think it’s also maybe hard for people to go up to the table at orientation, because it’s seen as a beacon, the [disability services office]. I don’t think kids are going to be like, “Yeah. Let me go over to the disability services table.”

Her description of the table as a beacon indicated that going up to the table would be something noticeable to those around her. Being noticed as someone with a disability was not something she desired at that time. Rather, she believed that most students would share her desire to conceal such information at orientation.

When asked about how they, as students with non-visible disabilities, felt their experiences in college might compare to someone who had a visible disability, all of the participants indicated that they felt more fortunate because they had the option of concealing their disability. Nathan stated the following:

I probably feel not as bad as they do because a lot of people can’t see my disability compared to those who have an obvious disability like a wheelchair or something. There are times when I can kind of hide my disability, where they can’t do that. I do think it’s tougher for them.

Kim specifically cited a desire to be able to conceal her disability from her peers, stating, “It can be easier from a social point of view. It’s easier for me not to let fellow students and
friends know that I have a non-visible disability. It’s obviously more difficult for someone who has a visible one.” At another point in the interview, Kim also shared that she was a relatively private person who did not like to share her problems with others. She told this story to explain why:

Many times I’ll tell people that I’m dyslexic or dysgraphic or have ADD and they’ll be like, “Oh, can you write me something backwards?” After writing them their name backwards 30 or 40 times, it just gets old after a while.

Kim had clearly been uncomfortable with being asked to display her disabilities, and she continued to value the ability to conceal at her discretion.

Jeff shared similar feelings about those with visible disabilities, stating, “I’d feel bad for them. Just cause, you know, mine’s concealed. I only let people know about it if I want to.”

Jeff explained that his concerns about concealing his disability changed over time as his environment changed. In high school he “really, really hated [using exam accommodations], just because in a 20 person class, everyone notices when you’re gone on test days consistently.” However, his concerns were alleviated in college, where it was easier to utilize accommodations relatively unnoticed. He stated, “The social stigma isn’t really relevant here in college. Classes are big and no one really knows. No one really cares if you’re here or there.” The desire to conceal still existed for Jeff, which is why he favored the anonymity of college classes. The participants’ desire to conceal suggests that they felt the presence of a stigmatizing attitude in society about disabilities. Without any negative societal feelings about disability, there would be no other conceivable reason to hide this information.
Reluctantly Embracing Interdependence

All of the participants reluctantly came to embrace interdependent relationships in order to utilize academic accommodations, rather than remaining completely independent. Some made this transition to interdependence very early in college, while others waited longer to make that choice. Two of the participants registered with the disability services office at the very beginning of college, because they felt that their parents were requiring them to do so. Hannah described her decision to register with the disability services office:

Actually, it was my mom. We were at orientation and she saw the [disability services] table, and she kind of dragged me over there. She was the one who kind of did the paperwork for that, and I didn’t really think I needed accommodations. When I kind of read over what they had, I was like yeah, those are good to have just in case.

Jeff shared a similar experience when he first registered with the disability services office, stating, “Yeah, the first time my mom pretty much brought me in kicking and screaming, doing the whole, ‘You need it.’ And I was like, ‘No, I don’t.’” Hannah’s use of the term dragged and Jeff’s use of the phrase kicking and screaming elicit the notion of a small child being forced to do something against his or her will. However, while Hannah quite quickly determined that she would utilize accommodations, Jeff indicated that, at that point, he “never intended to use it.” He ultimately chose to utilize accommodations just a few times during his first degree program. Later, he chose to fully utilize accommodations for most courses once he began his second bachelor’s degree program at his institution. These students sought independence and were both reluctant to register with the disability services office for assistance.
However, they both ultimately chose to embrace interdependence and accept the accommodations that were available to them.

All of the participants who chose to use accommodations cited specific reasons why they eventually made that choice. In all cases, it was an intentional choice made with academic motivations in mind. The participants felt that they had a greater chance of academic success if they chose to utilize accommodations. Hannah explained her motivation for getting accommodations:

It made sense to have the excused absences [accommodation] if I needed them, having to leave the classroom and things like that. College is a lot different than high school, class-wise. If you miss a big test it’s not like, “Oh, I can just make this up.” It’s, “No, you get a zero for that.” It was really important to get these accommodations.

Hannah specifically cited the role of the disability services office in her transition to college, stating that “it was easier knowing that I had something to fall back on if I was going to get sick. Then I always have the accommodation and this office, just in case something does happen.” She saw her accommodation as a safety net that was provided by the disability services office, in case the symptoms of her disability caused her to be absent from class. She embraced interdependence because she was willing to do her part to receive accommodations, and she was willing to accept help in the process.

At the time of the interview for this study, Jeff was working on his second degree at the institution. During his first degree program, he had chosen to utilize his accommodations for “only three or four classes. Biology and Psychology were very hard.” When Jeff returned for
his second degree after being out of college for over a year, he chose to fully utilize his accommodations:

I made sure to get them, because it was going to be nothing but math and science. I probably used it more in the past semester than I did in my first five years here. That’s just based off why I use them, just when you’re doing Psychology class and Biology, it’s you know or you don’t, versus in Physics or Math, you have to work through the problems and some processing delays or whatnot. With me having been gone from school for a year-and-a-half, getting back into the lifestyle and all that, I knew it would be pretty rough, so anything I could do to maybe make it a little bit easier, I was willing to do.

In making his decision to use accommodations, Jeff relied on his understanding of how his disability impacted him in certain types of courses. His response to a question about the experiences of those with non-visible disabilities provided insight into his motivation to more fully utilize accommodations. He stated, “For me it’s a want. I can graduate through [this institution]. My difference is probably a 2.7 GPA versus a 3.0, or a 3.5 versus a 3.8, versus someone like that it’s a yes or a no.” Jeff believed he could earn that particular college degree without the use of accommodations, but he made a deliberate choice to be accommodated so that he would earn better grades and the resulting higher grade point average.

Two of the participants attempted at least one semester of college without the use of accommodations, and were then motivated to begin utilizing them in order to raise their grades. Kim stated the following about using accommodations for exams:
I actually did not register until my second semester of freshman year. I was sure I could take care of it myself, but my grades did suffer from it. I really needed the extra time, the limited distractions, and so I went and registered second semester and my grades went right back up to the top. It’s really been a great tool for me.

Kim was reluctant to use accommodations until she was motivated by a specific need that mattered to her. In response to a question about what might have helped her transition more smoothly into college, Kim explained that if she knew someone with disabilities who was about to go to college, she would tell them to use accommodations from the very beginning. She recognized over time that the accommodations were a helpful tool available to students with disabilities.

Sarah explained that getting accommodations in college was largely student-initiated, which made it “decently easy to sort of just put it on the side and not really worry about it.” She chose to register with the disability services office when she started college, but she didn’t actually utilize accommodations until after she completed her first year. “I failed a class and got a D. I don’t think I got any Bs in my second semester, so I realized something needed to be looked at and reorganized, and surprisingly, after that I basically did a 180.” She explained that her choice not to use accommodations “ended up being a mistake, because I do require help at least with how I learn.” In addition to utilizing accommodations, Sarah also began to embrace interdependence in other ways:

I just sort of started to spend a lot of time in the [university’s learning center] in terms of they have a great sort of study area downstairs, and I started seeing they have academic coaches here, which was sort of the same thing as what I had in high school, which is sort
of to check in and look at my week coming up. It helped organize my thoughts and things that I need to do.

Here, Sarah realized that some of the same types of assistance she found useful in high school were also available to her in college. The fact that she was familiar with that type of support, coupled with her desire to earn better grades, was enough motivation for her to move from independence toward interdependence. Sarah’s response to a question about her perception of the role of the disability services office provided insight into how she made sense of the interdependent relationship she had with them.

Before I put much effort into it, they sort of seemed like they were just okay. “You’ve signed your forms, now you’re here, but there’s nothing more that we’re really going to take interest in, in terms of helping you. That’s on you.” Which I suppose I understand, because we’re adults so it’s the whole “be an adult and figure it out.” But when I did start to take more of an interest in disability services, I realized they were a lot more of, “Here’s this. This would probably be a good idea for you to look into if you want to.” I started looking at emails and so on and so forth. I feel a lot more relaxed when I walk in. They are perfectly happy to accommodate, and it feels more welcoming.

Sarah’s perception of the role of the disability services office shifted from strictly procedural to more relational, as she took more initiative in seeking assistance.

Regarding the fact that students must initiate requests for test accommodations with their professors, Sarah stated that it is “fair enough, because you have to show that you actually want to do it.” Sarah came to understand that receiving accommodations must be an interactive and interdependent process. She further underscored the value of help-seeking by explaining that, “I
felt a lot more in control, I suppose, is the best way to put it. I feel a lot more aware of what’s going on in terms of things I need to prepare for at the beginning of each semester.”

Students with non-visible disabilities have an opportunity to conceal the fact that they have disabilities, and the participants in this study clearly valued that. Their stories demonstrated the struggle that they went through to determine whether or not they should utilize accommodations. They had the option to conceal their status as people with disabilities, but they could not do so if they wished to utilize accommodations. The initial wish to be completely independent and to forgo assistance eventually shifted to a desire to behave interdependently and receive accommodations. This shift was highly driven by the participants’ academic concerns, and in each case the decision was intentionally and carefully made. The participants perceived the disability services office as helpful in its role of ensuring that students with disabilities were properly accommodated.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to investigate how first-year college students with non-visible disabilities experience the transition to college, particularly in terms of requesting and utilizing academic accommodations. A close analysis of the interview data yielded several insights into how the participants had experienced, and made sense of, their own transition journeys. The participants initially desired independence as a hallmark of leaving high school and entering college as an adult, and this included a reluctance to utilize accommodations related to their disabilities. However, these participants ultimately chose to use accommodations because they viewed them as necessary to help them achieve their academic goals.
The participants perceived that their high schools did not provide them with information about the transition to college and the use of accommodations. They did not receive general information about their rights and responsibilities in college, nor were they provided with individualized information to help them understand how their disabilities might affect them in college classes and what their accommodation needs might be. However, the participants did not perceive their high schools as responsible, nor equipped, for providing this information.

While most of the participants would have preferred to conceal the fact that they had disabilities, they understood the need to self-disclose this information to their university’s disability services office in order to receive accommodations. They all perceived the disability services office as helpful to them in their pursuit of accommodations. The participants still sought to experience college in as typical a manner as possible, which sometimes resulted in a preference to receive their accommodations directly from their professors.

The participants’ interactions with professors influenced their experiences with receiving accommodations. They identified as their best experiences those in which they felt their professors trusted and respected their need for accommodations. It was important to them that their professors believed that they had a legitimate disability and need for accommodations, which they perceived as a possible challenge due to the non-visible nature of their disabilities. None of the participants had been denied accommodations by their professors, but they did recount some negative feelings when they perceived judgment from professors in the form of non-verbal cues and body language. They also had concerns that abuse of accommodations by their peers could result in their own accommodation needs being doubted by professors. The participants valued the professors’ willingness to take time to understand their accommodation
needs and do more than was minimally required in order to ensure the participants were properly accommodated. Ultimately, the participants wanted to be valued as equals who were viewed as highly capable students within their college environment.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications for Practice

The purpose of this research study was to examine the unique experiences of college students with non-visible disabilities as they transitioned to college, particularly in terms of requesting and utilizing academic accommodations. The researcher employed the qualitative approach of interpretative phenomenological analysis, which enabled her to deeply explore the participants’ sense-making of the phenomena they had experienced. Given that the transition to college and accommodation use occur within highly social contexts, and that those with disabilities may perceive the presence of stigmatizing attitudes from others, Goffman’s conceptualization of social stigma provided a lens through which to examine the participants’ experiences. The three superordinate themes that emerged through a close analysis of the data were 1) developing identity, 2) desiring credibility, and 3) controlling information. This chapter begins with a discussion of the findings related to each superordinate theme and its position within current literature. The researcher then discusses the implications of these findings in the practical setting, with a focus on enhancing the college transition experience for students with disabilities. Suggestions for improving practice at both the secondary and postsecondary levels are included, as students are influenced at multiple points in the transition process. Finally, this chapter concludes with recommendations for future research on how college transition might be experienced by students with disabilities who have different characteristics than the participants in this study.
Developing identity

For the participants in this study, the phenomenon of transitioning to college occurred in the last phases of adolescence, but they were emerging into adulthood at the time of their interviews. They initially desired independence from accommodations as a hallmark of adulthood, yet several of them chose to register with the disability services office at the behest of their parents. This demonstrated the identity shift and dissonance that was occurring within the participants as they transitioned from high school to college, as well as highlighting the uniqueness of the transition to college for students with disabilities who must make the decision whether or not to utilize accommodations.

The transition to college and the dilemma about whether to utilize accommodations were influenced by the participants’ stage of life and identity development. In order to participate in this study, they had to have experienced at least one year of college and be between the ages of 18 and 24 years. In his work on identity development, Erik Erikson (1968) framed this stage of life as the leaving behind of adolescence and the beginning of adulthood. In particular, he described adolescence as a period during which people grapple with questions about their own identity and their role within society. They eventually move away from earlier familial attachments and attempt to define their sense of self.

According to Erikson (1968), one moves through various stages of identity development, and development itself occurs as one reaches psychological crises. Crises were described by Erikson as points at which one’s social environment changes and a dissonance between one’s internal being and one’s social environment exists. The transition to college can be viewed as a time of crisis for students as they move from one environment to another and are expected to
seek increasing independence from parents. As students experience this *crisis*, they are
developing a sense of who they are and what role they and others play within their social
environment.

Marcia’s (1966) work built upon Erikson’s original notion of developmental stages, and
he described four identity statuses to describe how those in late adolescence experience their
*crises* stages. The participants in the current study initially experienced the transition to college
situated in Marcia’s *moratorium (crisis/no commitment)* status. According to Marcia, those
experiencing the *moratorium (crisis/no commitment)* status are just beginning to genuinely
question those who have had authority over them, but they have not fully realized, nor achieved,
commitment to their own identities (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). Some of the
participants in the current study were in disagreement with their parents about their need for
accommodations, and they wished to distance themselves from accommodations as a relic of
adolescence. These traditional-age college students had resisted utilizing accommodations as
they were first transitioning to college, and this was perhaps reflective of the psychosocial
development typical of students of that age.

While traditional-age students who are transitioning to college are seeking independence,
they are also quite concerned with how others view them as they move from adolescence toward
adulthood (Evans, et al., 2010). This presents a unique challenge for students with disabilities
who, as a result of sharing traits with those of a historically oppressed group, might identify as
having an *otherness*. Specific to disability and accommodations, the participants in the current
study desired sameness in that they wanted to experience college in as much the same manner as
their peers without disabilities. They wanted to blend in by being treated the way they perceived
a typical student would be treated and by doing things in the same ways as everyone else. This desire for sameness was initially a barrier to accommodation use by the participants, and the extant literature has shown that avoidance of utilizing needed accommodations may prolong the adaptation to college for students with disabilities (Adams & Proctor, 2010). Several of the participants in the current study ultimately chose to use accommodations only because they had experienced academic difficulties in college and subsequently saw a need for accommodations in order to achieve their goals. The participants came to prioritize their academic goals above their desire for sameness.

While the participants’ desire for sameness could be partly attributed to their psychosocial development, the role of the stigma of disability was also important. In his work on social stigma, Goffman (1963) explained that the obtrusiveness of a stigmatizing attribute influences how the stigmatized person is perceived. Subsequent researchers have found that college students with disabilities might delay using accommodations due to concerns about stigma (Bolt, et al., 2011; Fier & Brzezinski, 2010; Marshak, et al., 2010). In the current study, the desire for sameness reflected the participants’ concerns about social stigma, which initially manifested as a reluctance to use accommodations at all. Due to the non-visible nature of their disabilities, the participants were discreditable in that they had the option of concealing their disabilities in order to control information about their status as people with a disability. Eventually, all of the participants made the decision to disclose their disabilities and use accommodations. However, a lack of obtrusiveness during the utilization of accommodations was desired, and the participants felt that they could achieve this through sameness.
The participants in the current study viewed high school and college as two discrete silos that were relatively unconnected to one another. Further, they initially viewed their own roles within the two environments as unconnected. While in high school, they received very little information about their rights and responsibilities in terms of receiving accommodations in college and, upon reflection, most did not view that as the responsibility of their high schools. In some cases, the students were told that they would not have assistance in college as they had in high school, and that they would need to be completely independent. This lack of awareness influenced how the participants experienced the transition to college in terms of their ability to self-advocate in order to receive accommodations.

According to Adams and Proctor (2010), self-advocacy skills include the ability to understand one’s strengths, one’s weaknesses, one’s rights as a citizen, along with the ability to communicate effectively about such matters. In concluding their study on the transition to college, Fier and Brzezinski (2010) espoused the notion that students must be prepared to advocate for themselves in college. The participants in the current study were not provided with information about how their specific disabilities might impact their academic performance in college, which in turn hindered their ability to make fully informed decisions about utilizing accommodations at the postsecondary level. This finding is similar to past research, which has indicated that students were not receiving this information in high school (Li et al., 2009; Thoma & Getzel, 2005). Further, if students view high school and college as two discrete and unconnected environments, they are not likely to communicate the expectation of this type of preparation in high school.
Literature has supported three major differences in the laws governing accommodations between high school and college, which could make the transition from one level to the next difficult for students with disabilities. These differences are 1) documentation requirements (Madaus & Shaw, 2004), 2) reasonableness of certain accommodations (Bolt et al., 2011), and 3) requirement for students to initiate and drive accommodations processes (Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009). The experiences of the participants in the current study diverged, in part, from the existing literature on these particular legal differences. For example, documentation requirements and reasonableness of accommodations were not direct barriers to the utilization of accommodations in the current study. None of the participants expressed that they had difficulty procuring the required documentation of their disabilities, nor any hesitancy at being required to provide such to their university’s disability services office. Further, the participants did not express any concerns about the types of accommodations they were receiving in college, including concerns about not being able to get an accommodation that they had received in high school. Overall, they reported that their university’s disability services office was very helpful to them as they took additional steps to receive accommodations. This supports the existing literature, which reported that the quality of the interactions between students and their disability services offices can impact students’ choices about use of accommodations (Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009; Lindstrom, et al., 2009). Once the participants in the current study determined that they wanted to receive accommodations, they did not perceive the process of becoming eligible as being overly cumbersome or difficult.

The fact that students were primarily responsible for requesting accommodations in college, and for following any related procedures, appeared to have been a barrier to
accommodation utilization in college for the participants in this study. However, the impact was relatively minor. The participants did not fail to use accommodations upon entry to college as a result of being unaware that they had to request to do so, nor did they express concerns that they were required to initiate and drive the process. Rather, some of the participants expressed an understanding that the responsibility should be theirs as adult college students. Conversely, the need for the participants to drive the process made it easier for them to avoid accommodation use, as several of them initially hoped to do. However, that need was not necessarily the root cause for the choice not to use accommodations. In terms of differences between the secondary and postsecondary levels, a lack of awareness about how their disabilities might impact their success in a college setting was the real barrier to the utilization of accommodations by the participants in this study. Previous research has found that being able to self-advocate for one’s needs is crucial in receiving accommodations in college (Hadley, 2006), and it is difficult to achieve this without a strong understanding of why one needs to advocate and for what one needs to advocate.

As adolescents who were moving into adulthood, the participants in this study experienced identity development in their transition to college and ultimately their decision to utilize academic accommodations. They were largely reluctant to use accommodations as they entered college, because they wanted to be independent adults, and they did not want to be perceived as different from their peers. Upon transition from high school to college, the participants viewed accommodations as a relic of high school and as a form of dependence. They initially avoided accommodation use in an effort to be independent adults who were viewed the same as their peers without disabilities. Most of the participants desired this
sameness and, as students with non-visible disabilities, they perceived that they could more effectively conceal their disabilities if they did not use accommodations.

While in high school, the participants in this study received very little information to prepare them for utilizing accommodations in college. They did not receive information about their rights and responsibilities under Section 504 and the ADA in higher education. The participants were also not prepared with information about how their disabilities might impact their ability to perform in a college academic setting, nor how to advocate for their needs. However, they did not hold their high schools and families responsible for providing this information. Rather, the participants viewed high school and college as two discrete, unconnected environments, and they did not expect one to influence the other. The participants’ psychosocial development, coupled with the perception of disability-related stigma, influenced how they viewed themselves as they transitioned from high school to college. They desired independence and sameness and, as they experienced the transition to college, they were not prepared for how accommodations might assist them in that new setting.

**Desiring credibility**

Research has shown that relationships with peers and faculty receptiveness to provide accommodations both heavily influenced students’ ability to integrate into college (Enright et al., 1996). The participants in the current study sought to be perceived by their peers and their professors as capable individuals who had credibility as college students and people with legitimate disabilities and accommodation needs. They found it helpful when others had a cognitive understanding of their disability and accommodation needs, and they further appreciated when others sought to deepen their own understanding. Several of the participants
actually noted some discomfort when they experienced a need to educate others about their disabilities or accommodations. This occurred with both peers and faculty members. While the participants often felt no judgment from others, they did perceive a lack of understanding and knowledge about what they were experiencing as people with disabilities.

The participants sought cognitive understanding in several different ways. They expressed a desire for others to understand what it was like to have a disability, which would lessen misconceptions about their experiences and their needs. The participants thought that this was particularly important, because their disabilities were of a non-visible nature and perhaps not easily understood. When others did not have a strong understanding of the participants’ experiences, they felt the need to educate them. It was most uncomfortable when this had to occur with professors during the process of arranging academic accommodations. This supports researchers’ findings that some professors lack knowledge about disabilities and are unaware of the legal implications inherent in the provision of accommodations, making the utilization of accommodations more difficult for students (Bolt et al., 2011; Bento, 1996). The findings of the current study add to the literature a deeper understanding of how students experience accommodation use when encountering faculty who do not possess adequate knowledge about disabilities and accommodations.

Goffman (1963) described the *wise* in terms of social stigma and those who possess stigmatizing attributes. He explained that there are those who do not possess a certain stigmatizing attribute yet have an understanding of those who do. Several of the participants in this study perceived their university’s disability services office as one such *wise* entity. They perceived the disability services office as a place they could go to provide documentation of their
disability one time, so that they did not have to repeatedly explain their needs to every individual professor. Further, the participants appreciated that registering with the disability services office was relatively easy, because they already had a strong general understanding of all types of disabilities and what related accommodations might be needed.

The participants in the current study sought more than just a cognitive understanding of their disabilities. They also desired an affective understanding, manifested as trust in them and respect for them from others. This finding emerged most readily as the participants shared their perspectives on interacting with professors in order to receive accommodations. The participants in this study all had non-visible disabilities, and they cited concerns about being trusted because of this lack of visibility. This finding supports Dowrick et al.’s (2005) notion that faculty’s doubt about students’ need for accommodations was most prevalent when the students’ disabilities were not readily apparent. Whether or not doubt is actually present, both the current findings and previous research support the notion that students with non-visible disabilities have concerns about being believed in terms of their disabilities and accommodation needs (Adams & Proctor, 2010; Marshak et al., 2010). The participants appreciated when professors took an active role in the accommodations process in order to ensure that the students had everything they needed. These findings support existing research showing that faculty influence the college experiences of students with disabilities who are attempting to utilize accommodations.

Building upon Goffman’s (1963) work on social stigma, researchers have noted that a power differential must be present in order for one to be able to stigmatize another (Manzo, 2004; Link & Phelan, 2001). The power differential inherent in the relationship between students and faculty, coupled with student concerns about stigma, may result in a barrier to
accommodation use if students fear that their professors do not trust the legitimacy of their
disability and accommodation needs. Interestingly, some of the participants expressed concerns
about being stigmatized by their peers who held misconceptions about people with disabilities.
This may appear to be in contrast to previous researchers’ notions that a power differential must
be present in order for stigmatization to occur. However, power does not necessarily need to be
formal in nature. Researchers have already noted that people in late adolescence are quite
concerned with what others think of them (Evans et al., 2010). Perhaps the participants’
concerns about how others see them allowed their peers to have influence, or power, over how
they felt.

Goffman’s (1963) description of the wise not only referred to those who were
knowledgeable about one’s stigmatizing attribute, but also to those who were sympathetic to
one’s situation. Here again, the university’s disability services office filled the role of the wise
for the participants in this study. Providing documentation to that one entity was perceived as an
opportunity to legitimize their need for accommodations with every individual professor in one
simple step. As the generator of accommodation forms, the disability service office was
perceived as having credibility with professors, which, in turn, made credible the participants’
need for accommodations.

The participants’ perceptions about specific interactions with faculty illuminated some
concerns about the process of utilizing accommodations. The findings of this study support
Goffman’s (1963) notion about the importance of context in considering the presence of social
stigma. He posited that an attribute may be stigmatizing in one environment, but not another.
Several of the participants in the current study had disabilities that were cognitive in nature, and
these participants had concerns about being viewed as inferior in an academic setting. They perceived a connection between their type of disability and how it might be viewed by professors who valued students’ ability to think critically and solve problems. The participants’ perceptions reflect a concern that their professors espouse the medical concept of disability, as described by Danforth (2008) and Lekan (2009). The medical concept frames disability as a deficit within the individual. If the participants believed that their professors simply saw disability as a social construct, then perhaps they would not have had concerns about encountering stigmatizing attitudes.

None of the participants in this study had been flatly denied an accommodation by anyone at their institution. However, several participants shared stories about interactions with faculty that they perceived as negative. The participants’ responses demonstrated the influence that professors’ non-verbal communication had on them as they sought accommodations. According to Dynel (2011), people are always communicating, intentionally or not, and non-verbal signals are a key part of communication. Several of the participants in this study perceived a lack of trust or respect related to their disabilities or accommodations as a result of non-verbal communication from professors. This perception resulted in one participant choosing not to utilize accommodations in a particular course. The participants’ concerns about being stigmatized by professors support Hartley’s (2010) assertion that perceived stigma and faculty doubt about the legitimacy of the need for accommodations can make using accommodations more difficult for students. Overall, much of what the participants shared about their experiences were stories about interactions they had had with professors, which is congruent with Hong et
al.’s (2011) assertion that faculty are at the center of the accommodations experience for students with disabilities.

**Controlling information**

In his work on social stigma, Goffman (1963) described the notion of the *discreditable* and the ability to control information about one’s stigmatizing attribute. He explained that those with stigmatizing attributes that are not immediately discernable to others have the opportunity to control information about that attribute. The participants in this study all had disabilities that were not readily apparent to others. As such, they had to make a choice about sharing information about their disabilities with others. The participants’ decisions about controlling information manifested in two key ways. First, most of the participants appreciated the fact that they had the option of concealing their disabilities, and they had desired to do so at one point or another. Second, they all reluctantly came to disclose their disabilities and embrace interdependence in order to utilize accommodations and reach their academic goals.

Goffman’s (1963) framework on social stigma keenly highlights the importance of disclosure in the experiences of students with disabilities. In congruence with the laws governing accommodations in college, the participants had to disclose their disabilities if they wanted to utilize the accommodations to which they were entitled (Barnard-Brak, et al., 2009; DaDeppo, 2009; Gil, 2007). The need to disclose one’s disability is a barrier to using accommodations in college because students may have concerns about stigmatizing attitudes from their professors and their peers. The participants were leaving behind the high school environment, where they were not necessarily required to participate in the accommodations process, nor given an express choice about whether or not they wanted accommodations.
(Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009; McCarthy, 2007; Stodden et al., 2003). They clearly appreciated the fact that they had the option of concealing their disabilities in the college environment, so it was a challenging decision to take the step of self-disclosure. While the participants initially avoided using accommodations, in part because they wanted to be independent, they also believed that stigma existed and they wanted to avoid being stigmatized.

Chickering and Reisser (1993) used seven vectors to explain how students develop as they experience college. The vector moving from autonomy toward interdependence recognizes that students initially desire independence as they transition from adolescence to adulthood. However, they come to appreciate their own interconnectedness with those around them and begin to value an interdependence that allows them to assist others and to receive assistance from others. The participants in the current study experienced a developmental shift as they transitioned to college and then completed their first classes. Upon transition, they espoused the notion that they needed to be autonomous and independent adults, and accommodation use would be a dependent act. However, after they experienced college, they began to shift toward accepting assistance and accommodations.

Several of the participants initially felt forced by their parents to register with the university’s disability services office, so that they could utilize accommodations. However, they chose not to follow through and use accommodations initially because of concerns about stigma and a desire for autonomy. The participants were able to make this choice because using accommodations is highly student-driven in college. Then, as they progressed through their college classes, they determined that they needed to use accommodations in order to reach their academic goals. They began taking responsibility for their own goals, and to engage in self-
directed behaviors in order to achieve them. The participants became less concerned with how others would perceive them and with being completely independent, which Chickering and Reisser (1993) described as hallmarks of the vector, *moving from autonomy toward interdependence*. It is interesting to note that the participants with cognitive disabilities were more reluctant to utilize accommodations than were the participants with health impairments, which could be related to the context in which they were operating. Perhaps the participants with cognitive impairments had greater concerns about stigmatizing attitudes toward cognitive differences and how they may be perceived in an academic environment.

It is important to recognize that these participants did not become dependent beings once they started utilizing accommodations. Rather, they engaged in an interactive process with the disability services office and their professors. They wanted accommodations, but they embraced their role as initiators and drivers of the process. They accepted responsibility and the need to play an active role in receiving accommodations. Chickering and Reisser (1993) espoused the notion that college affects students’ development. The environment and events that students encounter influence how and when students will develop. Overall, the participants in the current study had positive impressions of their university’s disability services office and of most of their professors. These positive interactions made it more palatable for the participants to share information about themselves in an effort to receive accommodations. They also developed the traits of interdependence as they came to value their long-term academic goals over their ability to conceal their disabilities. Ultimately, the participants’ choices about controlling information changed as they experienced college.
Recommendations for Practice

Jenlink (2005) described the scholar-practitioner as transformative intellectual, explaining that someone in that role seeks to utilize theoretical findings to improve practice, always viewing current practices through new lenses. One of the goals that the researcher had for this study was to provide new insight into how students with disabilities experience academic accommodations, so that the findings could influence current practices in disability services. Several recommendations are included here, which encompass practices at both the secondary and postsecondary levels. Many stakeholders may benefit from the research findings, including students with disabilities, students’ families, secondary educators, postsecondary disability services providers, faculty members, and higher education administrators.

The participants perceived that they had received very little, if any, information while they were in high school about utilizing accommodations in college. They further reported that they largely avoided accommodation use as they transitioned to college because they wanted to behave as independent adults. Their reasons for avoidance call into question how effective it would be to provide such information in high school. The participants ultimately came to embrace interdependence, but only after encountering some difficulties achieving their goals in college. In order to increase the possibility that students with disabilities will choose to utilize the accommodations to which they are legally entitled, it is important for them to receive related information at multiple points in time. This will allow students to become informed as they develop throughout the process of transitioning to college. The experience of college changes students, and practitioners must be willing to reach out to them at more than one point throughout that development process.
Students with disabilities, and their families, would benefit from learning more about college accommodations while they are still in high school. Essential information would be 1) general differences between receiving accommodations in high school and in college, 2) typical requirements for registering with a college disability services office, and 3) information about each student’s disability and how that disability might impact performance in college classes. Secondary educators have an opportunity to provide this information as part of transition planning under the auspices of IDEA. Academic accommodations at the postsecondary level are intended to ensure access to higher education, so knowing how to obtain these accommodations is important for students who may transition to college. While students in high school may not yet be receptive to using accommodations in college, early information will, at least, give them awareness that assistance may be available to them.

There are also general skills and information that can be discussed with all high school students. A key area to address would be the concept of interdependence. While secondary educators and families may believe they are helping students by telling them that they must be highly independent in college, students may not understand that there is a great deal of assistance available to them at most higher education institutions. Teaching students that there is assistance available, and that interdependence is an essential component of adulthood, might encourage them to seek and utilize the accommodations and services available to them in college.

Collins and Mowbray (2005) discovered that university disability services personnel found it particularly challenging to reach out and offer support to students with non-visible disabilities. The participants in this study reported a desire to conceal their disabilities as much as possible, which made it more difficult for them to seek out their disability services office to
request accommodations. According to the participants, the office reached out to students via an email sent to all incoming first-year students and by having an information table at all orientation sessions. The participants were at least aware of the existence of the disability services office as they entered their university, which may have decreased the time between their entry to college and when they began using accommodations. By reaching out to all new students via email, the disability services office was able to make its existence and purpose known in a relatively unobtrusive manner. Students have reported in the research that they were completely unaware that accommodations were available in college (Garrison-Wade, 2012), so contacting all students prior to college, in some manner, would be a good standard practice for institutions.

The findings of the current study suggest that students may not be ready to utilize accommodations immediately upon entry into college. However, once students actually experience college classes, they have additional context for understanding their needs and making informed decisions about whether or not to use accommodations. Disability services offices must be prepared to disseminate information to students beyond orientation and students’ first semester. This would allow students access to information at whatever point they are developmentally ready to receive it and respond to it. Disability services office may accomplish this through email notifications, representation at campus events, collaboration with campus offices that assist academically distressed students, and by encouraging professors to mention disability services in class and in their syllabi. Disability services offices will continue to be challenged with how to become more visible to students who may desire to remain invisible themselves.
Interpersonal communication is clearly important to the experience of students with disabilities who are attempting to use accommodations. The participants in this study desired respect, caring, and trust. These are qualities that disability services personnel must display in order to make students feel welcome and comfortable. Choosing to utilize accommodations is likely a difficult and purposeful decision, which can be made more palatable for students by personnel who are helpful and caring. Additionally, faculty must be provided with information about different disabilities and how accommodations processes work at their institutions. This must occur with existing faculty, as well as with all newly-hired faculty. In addition to a cognitive understanding of these things, the goal should be to improve interpersonal interactions between faculty and students. Trainings should be developed and presented within the framework of the social model of disability (Lekan, 2009; Danforth, 2008) in order to create a culture that values equal access for all as a form of social justice. This researcher suggests that the disability services office alone cannot be responsible for advocating and providing training to faculty. Rather, support for these initiatives must come from senior leadership in academic affairs divisions in order to have the greatest influence.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

One of the limitations often cited in existing literature on college students with disabilities is that the perspectives of students who are choosing not to utilize accommodations are not represented. The current study adds to the literature the perspectives of students not utilizing accommodations, because several of the participants were in that situation at one point during their transition to college. Future research should further explore students’ experiences prior to utilizing accommodations, as well as their decisions to use accommodations. It would
also be valuable to identify students with disabilities who have chosen not to utilize accommodations at all, in order to better understand their perspectives and experiences. This may also provide insight into the effectiveness of accommodation use.

Additional research should be done to better understand the perspectives of the families of students with disabilities and the personnel from their high schools. A study that includes student participants and their family members and secondary educators would provide valuable insight about what students are experiencing prior to entering college. Also, the participants in the current study appeared to have some differences based on their specific types of disability. As such, the findings suggest that further research focusing on students with specific types of disabilities is warranted.

Replicating this study with different student populations and at varying types of institutions would also add to the literature. The psychosocial developmental stages of the participants in the current study were found to be a significant influence on their experiences with the transition to college and the utilization of accommodations. Thus, further research is needed on the experiences of older learners with disabilities and their decisions about using academic accommodations, as their psychosocial development is likely to be different.

Another population that may have different experiences is returning combat veterans. Veteran populations are increasing on college campuses, and a significant number of them may have non-visible disabilities, such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Barnard-Brak, Bagby, Jones, & Sulak, 2011). Further research can also be conducted to examine the transition and accommodation experiences of students of varying demographics, such as gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. It would be particularly interesting to examine how
documentation requirements are perceived by students who may experience different cultural views on mental health care or those who find evaluation or treatment to be cost-prohibitive. Additional research could also explore if students experience transition and accommodations differently at different types of institutions, such as public, private, large, small, community colleges or those with religious affiliations.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to investigate how first-year college students with non-visible disabilities experience the transition to college, particularly in terms of requesting and utilizing academic accommodations. The researcher found that students’ psychosocial development, and related desire for independence, influenced their decisions about using accommodations. Concerns about stigmatizing attitudes related to disability also influenced the choices the participants made about using accommodations. The perceived presence of stigma also mediated how students experienced interactions with professors and peers as they sought understanding, trust, and respect from those around them. Further, the participants’ attitudes about accommodation use shifted as they experienced college and began to make decisions with their academic goals in mind. In essence, their priorities shifted over time, which influenced their decisions about accommodations.

The researcher believes that the most significant contribution of her findings is that of giving voice to students with disabilities about their experiences with transitioning to college and receiving accommodations. Not everything that matters can be quantified, and this research adds to the literature a deeper understanding of how students with disabilities make sense of their experiences. Further, this study contributes to the current literature on college student
development by providing insight into the unique experiences of those with disabilities. It is clear that barriers to accommodation use still exist, but additional research and dedicated practitioners present an opportunity to improve the college experience for students with disabilities.
References


NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION

Date: January 8, 2014  IRB #: CPS14-01-01
Principal Investigator(s): Joseph McNabb
Lori Ann Smith
Department: Doctor of Education Program
College of Professional Studies
Address: 20 Belvidere
Northeastern University
Title of Project: The Experiences and Sense-making of Students with Non-Visible Disabilities on Their Transition to College and Utilization of Academic Accommodations: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Participating Sites: [Redacted]
DHHS Review Category: Expedited #6, #7
Informed Consents: One (1) signed consent form
Monitoring Interval: 12 months

APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: JANUARY 7, 2015

Investigator's Responsibilities:
1. The informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when recruiting participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any other university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Collin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Nan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection

Northeastern University FWA #4630
Appendix B – Recruitment email

Dear ************ students:

My name is Lori Smith, and I am a doctoral student with Northeastern University in Boston, MA. I also work as a disability counselor for a disability services office at a university in Florida. Your [disability services office] has graciously agreed to help me recruit several students to participate in a doctoral research study for my thesis, which is titled:

The experiences and sense-making of students with non-visible disabilities on their transition to college and utilization of academic accommodations: An interpretive phenomenological analysis

I am recruiting participants who meet the following criteria:
  a) are registered with [your institution’s] disability services office to receive accommodations
  b) have disabilities of a non-visible nature
  c) have completed at least one semester of college
  d) are traditional age (18-24)
  e) had IEPs or 504 plans in high school

Students who agree to participate will be asked to do the following:
  a) Talk with me by telephone to confirm their interest in participating and to set up the in-person interviews
  b) Meet with me one-on-one at [your institution] to participate in a confidential 60-90 minute interview about their experiences as a college student with a non-visible disability
  c) Read an emailed copy of the interview transcription (a word-for-word account of what was said in the interview), and then let me know if they would like to add or clarify anything

Participation is voluntary, and students would be free to withdraw from the study at any time. Students who participate in the interviews will receive a $15 [campus bookstore] gift card.

If you meet all of the above criteria, and wish to participate in this research study, please stop by the [disability services office] in ************ to sign a consent form allowing [your institution] to provide me with your name, your contact information, and confirmation that you do meet the study criteria.

Thank you so much for your time!
Lori Smith
Appendix C – Basic consent form

CONSENT FORM

Consent to Disclose Information

To comply with the provisions of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974, an institution must obtain signed consent before it can release student information to a third party.

I, ________________________________________________, hereby request and authorize the [disability services office] at [my institution] to release specific information pertaining to academic progress, academic records, psycho educational information, medical and/or health conditions to the following physicians/specialists/agencies/educational institutions:

Dr. Joseph McNabb; Lori A. Smith

Name of physician/specialist/agency/educational institution ________________________________________________________________

Address

_North Fort Myers_________________________ _FL________________ _______33917________________________
City State Zip Code

_239.***.****______ _smith.lor@husky.neu.edu_________________________
Telephone number Email address

The purpose or need to disclose this information is _doctoral research study________________________

The specific information to be released includes: _Student’s name, telephone number, email address, age, number of semesters student has attended [your institution], confirmation that student has a disability of a non-visible nature

I understand that as an adult student, I may revoke this consent, in writing, at any time to the parties listed above, except to the extent that any previous action has been undertaken, or information released. I understand that all information released is specifically indicated and will be released only to individuals named on this form. All other information remains confidential.

_________________________________________ ______________________________
[Disability Services Office] Staff Signature Date
Appendix D – Informed consent

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Graduate Programs - Higher Education Administration

Name of Investigator(s): Dr. Joseph McNabb, Lori A. Smith

Title of Project: The experiences and sense-making of students with non-visible disabilities on their transition to college and utilization of academic accommodations: An interpretive phenomenological analysis

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 are a college student who:
   f) is registered with your university’s disability services office to receive accommodations
   g) has a disability of a non-visible nature
   h) has completed at least one semester of college
   i) is of traditional age (18-24)
   j) had an IEP or 504 plan in high school

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this research is to explore the unique perspectives of college students with disabilities regarding their rights, responsibilities, and potential challenges with the utilization of academic accommodations. The intention of the researchers is to learn more about specific factors that influence the transition to college for students with disabilities.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to:
   d) Talk with the researcher by telephone to confirm your interest in participating and to set up the in-person interviews
   e) Meet with the researcher one-on-one to participate in a confidential interview about your experiences as a college student with a non-visible disability
   f) Read an emailed copy of the interview transcription (a word-for-word account of what was said in the interview), and then let me know if you would like to add or clarify anything
Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
The initial telephone call should take no more than 15 minutes. You will subsequently be interviewed at a time and place that is convenient for you. The interview will take about 60 to 90 minutes. Two to three weeks later, you will receive an emailed copy of the interview transcription (a word-for-word account of what was said in the interview), which I will ask you to read. You may then let me know if you would like to add or clarify anything.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There is no foreseeable risk or discomfort anticipated with your participation in this study.

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 future researchers and disability services professionals improve upon the experiences of college students with disabilities who wish to utilize academic accommodations.

Who will see the information about me?
Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way as taking part in this project. Pseudonyms will be used to keep your name and the name of your institution confidential. Only the researchers will have access to the data materials during the research study. An outside transcriptionist will be provided with the audio-recordings of the interviews, but no additional identifying information will be included. Transcriptions will be completed in accordance with the confidentiality standards of that industry. The data will only be used for the purposes of the current research study. All data, both paper and electronic, will be kept locked and secured in one of the researchers’ home office. Paper data and information, including interview notes and signed consent forms, will be stored in a locked filing cabinet along with the digital audio recorder containing the original interview recordings. Electronic data will be stored on a password protected computer that is only accessible to the researcher.

If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?
You may voluntarily withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?
There is minimal risk of harm for you in this study. During interviews, there is the possibility that you may experience psychological vulnerability as you address subjects or experiences of a sensitive or stigmatizing nature. However, these risks are minimal in nature and are unlikely to cause harm to you. However, should you share concerns during the interviews for which the researcher thinks you might need additional assistance, you will be referred to the appropriate campus support systems.

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 at your institution.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Lori Smith (239.***.**** or smith.lor@husky.neu.edu), the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Dr. Joseph McNabb (617.373.6602 or jmcnabb@neu.edu), the Principal Investigator.

Whom can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?
You will be given a $15 gift certificate to [the campus bookstore] as soon as you complete the one-on-one interview with the researcher.

Will it cost me anything to participate?
There is no anticipated cost to you to participate in this study.

Is there anything else I need to know?
n/a

I agree to take part in this research.

____________________________________________ __________________________
Signature of person 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 E – Interview protocol

Interview questions:

1. How and why did you decide to register with the disability services office in college?

2. How did you experience being diagnosed with a disability?
   prompt: When did this occur? How did it feel initially and then as time progressed?

3. What was your experience like with using academic accommodations in high school?
   prompt: What accommodations? How were they provided?

4. What role did you play in getting accommodations in high school?
   prompt: Attend IEP meetings, Communicate with teachers, etc.

5. Prior to entering college, what were you expecting in terms of accommodations?
   prompt: What did you think you needed to do? Who prepared you?

6. What was your experience like with registering with disability services at [your institution]?
   prompt: When did you do this? Who accompanied you? Did you have any concerns about self-identifying as having a disability?

7. What do you perceive to be the role of the disability services office at [your institution] in terms of you receiving accommodations?

8. What have been your experiences following the procedures to get your accommodations for each class?
   prompt: Working with [the disability services office]; scheduling exams, etc.

9. What have been your experiences in interacting with faculty to get your accommodations?
   prompt: Best experience? Worst experience?

10. How do you feel when you provide a faculty member with an accommodation letter? A test proctoring form?

11. How would you describe the change in your role change from high school to college in terms of receiving accommodations?

12. Do you believe there are any types of barriers to students’ receiving accommodations in high school? In college?

13. As someone diagnosed with a non-visible disability, how would you compare your experiences in requesting and using accommodations compared to someone with an obvious disability?

14. How did having a non-visible disability influence your transition to college academic and college life?

15. Reflecting back on your experiences, what could have helped you in your transition from high school to college, in terms of getting accommodations?
   prompt: High school teachers or counselors?, Disability services staff?, Faculty?