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Have You Heard?: Increasing College Access and Success for Students with Disabilities

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LS 400: Capstone

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Abstract

The focus of this Capstone Project is on increasing college access and self-advocacy for students with disabilities in higher education and the resources available for them. This is important because students with disabilities deserve to attend college and obtain the support they need in order to be successful once in the institution and once they graduate. It is argued that there needs to be an increase in enrollment for students with disabilities in higher education. Considerations of the issue include the perspectives of a staff member from the community college who is in the disability resources department and a student with disabilities who graduated from a four-year university and used the system to her advantage. This group of participants knows the system and resources that help students with disabilities become successful. Three action options emerged from an analysis of the data and were explored as ways to address the issue presented.

Have You Heard?: Increasing College Access and Success for Students with Disabilities

Well, if you take a look at my family you most likely would think we are a normal family, and that none of us have a disability. Little do people know that my youngest sister has a disability and is in special needs classes. You would not be able to know that just by looking at her. In reality, though, she has a speech and language learning disability that sets her back. Some examples of her setbacks growing up were that she did not have much control of her motor skills. She also is not at the reading, writing, or speaking level that someone her age should be at. She is still in the process of developing them, or still has not gotten to that stage where she can move on to the next skill, but she has been doing good with the help of the resources offered to her. Learning about all the resources that are available to children with disabilities not only helped my sister tremendously but my mom as well. Growing up it was difficult for my mom to even think that there was a possibility that my youngest sister would be able to continue on, into higher education. My mom never heard people talking about the possibility of students who have disabilities attending colleges or universities. She just assumed that my sister would possibly get her high school diploma, but that her education would end there.

As the years went by, my mom along with other mothers whose children were in the same class as my sister had all continued questioning the possibility of their children going to a college or university after graduating high school. They had gathered together to ask the teacher of their children and question if there was even a slight possibility their children could attend a community college or 4-year university. Unfortunately, the teacher was honest with the parents and told them that it is very rare to hear of students with disabilities attending postsecondary education. These parents then lost the little hope that they had.

As someone who comes from a family that has a person with disabilities, I can say firsthand that there is not a lot of advocacy or information being given to families and students. Success within the institution, let alone after graduating is not something you hear about either. Some may say that there are plenty of resources out there: colleges and universities go to high schools to do outreach and there are websites with the information needed. Well, there may be all those things, but many families and students may not know about them. There needs to be a way to reach a larger audience, and let them know success if possible. There need to be people who will advocate for families and students when they can not advocate for themselves. I have been an advocate for my mom and youngest sister ever since I can remember. I felt like all the responsibility was on me to find out the help and resources available for my youngest sister. To see if there was even a possibility that my sister would have a chance at success once in the school, but also after graduating. There was a lot of pressure on me to be the designated person on figuring everything out on my own one way or another. Now it is time for me to help other families and students, and be their voice for them. I also hope that colleges, and communities become even better advocates for families and students with special needs.

Literature Synthesis & Integration: Students with disabilities in higher education

Students with disabilities need to know about all the college opportunities that are available so they can take advantage of them. Higher education benefits students in the long run because they end up having a degree which can lead them to find a good-paying job. It can also help students with their development of cognitive and communication skills. In the long run, it helps the students have the experience and skills needed to become successful. It is necessary,

however, for postsecondary institutions to improve and offer better help for their students with disabilities. This is important because postsecondary institutions are the people advocating for these students, as well as teaching them how to become self-advocates. They also need to inform and educate families and students about the resources and opportunities that are available for students to be successful at the institution, and once they graduate.

What is the problem?

The problem is that there are many students with disabilities in the education system who simply just go through the educational system and never think of the possibility of continuing their education past high school. Students with the following disabilities: Acquired Brain Injury, ADD/ADHD, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Deaf/Hard of Hearing, Intellectual Disability, Learning Disability, Mobility/Orthopedic Impairment, Psychological Disability, Visual Impairment, Other Disability only made up 19% of undergraduate and 12% of postbaccalaureate programs in the 2015-2016 academic year (NCES, 2019). There can be many reasons why students with disabilities either do not go into higher education or drop out of school. The reasons can be anywhere from difficulty with the transition from high school to college, to their parents not allowing them, and even just their not knowing how to be advocates for themselves (Bialka, 2018). There are a variety of challenges that students with disabilities encounter when they transition into a postsecondary school. The challenges can range from not feeling like they have someone who can help guide them to not wanting to bring their “disabilities” with them into a completely new environment (Bialka, 2018). Many institutions are unprepared to support the basic federal mandate of having equal access and accommodations (Hong, 2015; Johnson, 2006) meaning students with disabilities may not be as successful compared to students without disabilities, because of the lack of institutional accessibility for them.

Why is it an issue?

The lack of students with disabilities in higher education is an issue because there are fewer than 20% of students with disabilities enrolled full-time at a college or university throughout the year. For post-baccalaureate students, fewer than 15% of students with disabilities are enrolled in a college or university full time (NCES, 2019). This means that schools are doing something wrong when it comes to students with disabilities. This can range from not having the proper help needed for their students, to faculty and staff being unprepared to provide the proper accommodations or the proper help that they need to give their students. Sometimes institutions do not frequently go to high schools to educate the families and students (Scheef et al., 2021; Raue et al., 2011). The more frequently they go the more they can educate families and students about the help, and programs that they have to offer for students to be successful in the long run (Shaewitz, & Crandall, 2020).

The socio-cultural perspective is important when it comes to the education of students with disabilities. It relates to them, and those around them because there are factors that differentiate students with disabilities from the overall population of students. The factors are age, culture, disability, economics, gender, history, identity, and language (Gibson, 2012; Scheef et al., 2021). So to say that there are a lot of interacting factors that contribute to the education of students with disabilities is an understatement. Colleges and universities need to take into consideration all the different factors and find ways in which they can address the needs of all students who attend their school. This is especially true for those students who have disabilities because those students are more likely to be lost, and have no way of feeling like they belong at their school. Students with disabilities have a significantly lower sense of feeling like they belong and more encounters with discrimination (Soria, 2021; Barnes et al., 2021). All students

need to feel included to be able to succeed and students with disabilities tend to struggle with inclusion, which in turn makes it more difficult for them to achieve (Soria, 2021; Barnes et al., 2021). Many students either do not make regular use of the accommodations available or do not seek out help from the array of resources that they have available (Hong, 2015; Johnson, 2006). Only about 17% of college students with learning disabilities take advantage of all the learning assistance, and resources that are available to them at their schools (NCES, 2019). Furthermore, new students feel unfamiliar with the variety of resources that are offered by their school's disabilities services office, or they may feel embarrassed to reach out for assistance or accommodations (Marshak et al., 2010).

For students with disabilities to be successful in a college or university they need engagement, and self-confidence which they get from a sense of belonging. A factor and consistent theme that was discovered by researchers was that the administrators, staff, and faculty at these colleges and universities often overlooked disability as part of their diversity and campus climate efforts (Soria, 2021). That goes to say that schools do not consider disabilities as a part of their campus environment.

The stakeholders for this issue are a staff member from the community college who is in the Disability Resources Center. She is a counselor and coordinator. Along with a student who has learning disabilities, and who went to a community college. The power dynamic of these two groups is that the staff member of the Disability Resources Center has more of an influence on students with disabilities, compared to the student with learning disabilities who went to a community college. The only reason for that is that the staff member can spread awareness to a larger audience and has more access in terms of ways to spread the awareness. Groups are differently affected by the issue because you can either be the main stakeholder within the issue,

or you can be surrounding the stakeholder who is within the issue. Students with disabilities are the main group being affected by the issue because of the extent to which each student is integrated into the social and academic aspects of the college or university. From there that will dictate the extent to which the student is committed to obtaining their degree at the college or university (Hong, 2015). The institutions themselves become a stakeholder because they play a major role when it comes to educating families and students with disabilities. From there, families and students with disabilities learn about advocacy and become aware of the resources that are available to them.

What should be done?

There are a few things that could be done for there to be an increase in enrollment of students with disabilities, help them become successful once in the institution, as well as prepare them for success once they graduate. Institutions need to review and refine the elements of their campus access, including campus buildings and spaces. By providing training for their faculty and staff on making resources and accommodations available for students with disabilities who are enrolled or could potentially enroll in their institution. The campus requirements and procedures for attaining accommodations need to be something that they let families, and students know about. Institutions can increase the promotion of the resources and the services for students with disabilities in particular the counseling services, career development, and learning centers. Schools need to promote a positive climate on campus by including disability as an aspect of student diversity training. So staff, faculty, and other students can make the students with disabilities feel welcomed at the institution. It would be helpful for colleges or universities to have support groups that promote disability within their school community so students with disabilities feel more welcomed (Shaewitz & Crandall, 2020; Soria, 2021; Raue et al., 2011).

To start, a lot of schools say they offer student assistance for students with disabilities “to a major extent” (Scheef et al., 2021; Raue et al., 2011). This does not help when every type of student needs support to succeed in obtaining a degree, and those with disabilities have specific support needs that must be addressed for them to be successful. A college or university having a sophisticated office of accessibility with the resources needed for students with disabilities is one step they can take to increase the number of students with disabilities who attend the college or university. Developing a college or university-wide training program for the faculty and staff is another major thing that colleges or universities can do. To have the faculty and staff better prepared and educated in ways to help their students become successful (Shaewitz & Crandall, 2020).

Having the colleges or universities come to high schools to educate and bring awareness of opportunities to families who have students with disabilities is important. It will benefit students because when they attend the institution they will have access to accommodations, and they will even learn to become advocates for themselves (Shaewitz & Crandall, 2020). By making families and students aware that postsecondary institutions offer different resources for students with disabilities to become self-advocates and be successful while attending the institution, but also long after graduating. There is a possibility of an increase in the percentage of students with disabilities who enroll in postsecondary institutions. Institutions must give presentations or a rundown on where/how to get access to the resources available because a majority of the time families and students do not know how or where to get the access needed. Giving families and students the rundown of what questions to ask, how to become self-advocates, and what to look for when it comes to choosing the right institution for their students to attend is important. Letting families and students know that the school is there to help

them be successful not only when they are at the institution but even once the students have graduated is a crucial part of increasing enrollment of students with disabilities. Institutions want families and students to know that the help, resources, and advocacy they have when they attend the institution goes on with them even after they graduate. It is important because not every institution is the right school for every student. By choosing the right institution their students may have a better chance of success (HEATH Resource Center, n.d).

Conclusion

There are many successful ways in which postsecondary institutions can help families and students become informed. While learning that the help from the institution is going to benefit their students not only when they are attending the community college or 4-year university, but even after they graduate. The success, knowledge, and self-advocacy that they get from the institutions will follow them even long after they graduate. It is important that the enrollment of students with disabilities in postsecondary education increase because it can help, students with their personal development, cognitive development, and communication skills even after graduating. Students with disabilities have so many resources available to them and by taking advantage of them they can achieve their professional and personal goals and hopefully become a better version of themselves. Furthermore, they can influence other students who have a similar story to them, and motivate them to get into higher education.

Method

For this Capstone Project, I investigated how to help families who have students with learning disabilities become aware of opportunities to attend college and the resources available to them that may increase their success. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature, I used what I have learned to formulate an action that responds to the focus

issue in a way that inspires, informs, or involves a particular audience. This is important because all students, especially those with disabilities should have the amazing opportunity to further their education, maximize their learning potential, and be successful. Additionally, they should be able to use everything that they have learned from attending the institution, by applying it to the real world.

Context

This research took place at a community college and four-year university in a coastal town on the central coast of California. These institutions are located by the beach which is only a few miles away. The community college has a beautiful big campus, with lots of trees and nature all around. It is also located in a town that is known for its tourism. For the 2020-2021 school year there were 7,920 undergraduate students enrolled, and they served 551 students with disabilities. That is down significantly from pre-covid times. They have a medium-size building with 10 smaller offices inside. Examples of the services they offer include: Academic Accommodations, Test Accommodations, Counseling, High Tech Center (HTC), Adapted Physical Education (ADPE), and Learning Skills Classes (LNSK).

The four-year university is also close to the beach. The campus is very big and continues to grow with new buildings each year. There are trees all around the campus with lots of wildlife as well. For the 2020-2021 school year there were 7504 undergraduate students enrolled, and they served about 1500 students with disabilities. The Student Disability Resources Center is located in a fair size building and has a good size room inside the building. Some of the services they offer include Alternative Testing Accommodations (Exams), Alternate Formats (e-text, mp3, books on tape, braille, etc.), Assistive Technology page, Classroom Furniture Alternatives, Course Substitutions, Deaf and Hard of Hearing, Disability Management Advising, Notetakers

(In-class peer notetakers), Orientation to campus for students with disabilities, Pregnancy/Childbirth, Priority Registration, and Special Admissions.

Participants and Participant Selection

I invited two people to participate in this research project. The first was a staff member from the community college who is in the Disability Resources Center. She is a counselor and coordinator. The second participant is a student with disabilities who attended the four-year university and used the system to her advantage. This group of prospective participants was invited to participate because they have insight into the topic itself. They know the system and all of the resources that are available to help students with disabilities become successful.

First Participant. A female, Coordinator/Counselor for the disabilities resources department at the community college. She has been at the institution, and in their disabilities resources department for about 15 years.

Second Participant. A female, who was a student who has disabilities and who recently graduated from the 4-year university with a Liberal Studies major, and physical education minor. She was diagnosed at the age of 4 with the following disabilities: delayed learning, speech, and language impairment, and hard of hearing.

Researcher. I have a younger sister who has special needs and learning disabilities, and my mom has never been educated on educational opportunities, including the possibility of going to college. I wanted to bring awareness to not only my family but to other families who also have students in similar situations, by educating them on the resources that are available and how to get access to them. I am different because I am not the one with disabilities. There were a lot of

thoughts and feelings moving forward with this project. I kept an open mind, to every point that I came across during the span of my project, and considered every point for the final project. I was mindful of the answers I got from both of the participants and used what they said to figure out potential actions.

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Disabilities Resource Coordinator/Counselor:

1. What can you tell me about students with disabilities attending community college and their experiences?
2. What are you concerned about when it comes to increasing the number of students with disabilities who attend community college?
 - a. Also, what concerns do you have about helping them to be successful once in the institution?
 - b. What about helping students be successful once they have graduated?
3. What are community colleges currently doing to motivate students with disabilities to attend community college and be successful?
 - a. Are there specific resources being provided to prospective families or students?
 - b. How effective do you think these efforts are?
4. What do you think community colleges should be doing to motivate students with disabilities to attend community college and be successful?
 - a. What are some ways of reaching families or students with information?
5. What do you think are the obstacles to bringing awareness to families and students with disabilities about opportunities to attend community college and how to be successful?

6. Is there anything else that you would like to say about bringing awareness to families and students with disabilities about opportunities to attend community college and how to be successful once there?

College Graduate:

1. How would you describe your college experiences?
2. How did being a student with a disability impact your experiences?
3. How did you come to find out about the help and resources the community college and university had to offer you?
4. What was it like on the community college campus for students with disabilities?
5. What was it like on the 4-year university campus for students with disabilities?
6. What did you find helpful at the community college in terms of resources?
7. What did you find helpful at the 4-year university in terms of resources?
8. What do you wish you had had access to at both the community college and university that was not offered to you if any at all?
9. Do you feel that the community college and 4-year university helped you become successful once you graduated?
10. Was there a difference between the community college and university with the support that was offered?
11. Would you recommend families and students to these schools?
12. Do you have any further comments or concerns?

Procedure

Participants were interviewed. All interviews were done individually. Since it was not

possible to interview participants in person, they were interviewed over Zoom. The interviews were audio-recorded (with participant consent), and video recorded (with participant consent). A semi-structured interview format was used for face-to-face interviews, to allow for follow-up questions to unclear, interesting, or unexpected responses. All interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the interviewee and took approximately 40 minutes to complete.

Data Analysis

Transcribed interviews were coded and analyzed for emergent themes.

Results

For this Capstone Project, two people were interviewed to see what they think could be done to increase advocacy for students with disabilities about higher education options and the resources available to them. This helps families and students with learning disabilities become aware of the opportunities and the resources available to them that will help increase their success. It is important because having brought awareness to families, their children may have the amazing opportunity to further their education in the future, maximize their learning potential, and be successful. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature three themes emerged (see Table 1). Evidence-based decision-making required evaluating each potential Action Option by the following criteria: time; reach; and effectiveness. Time is already an important factor that is working against staff members, along with parents in this attempt to spread awareness, as a result, it is important to consider how effective time is for the action options to work. Reach is also an important factor because it makes sure that students are not being overlooked. Lastly, effectiveness is a necessary factor because it examines the possibility and the extent of the success. Success can be seen from passing courses, and ultimately earning a degree that can be accomplished. Based on the evaluation of each Action Option an action will

be recommended and justified.

Table 1

Evaluation of Action Options

	Time Required	Reach	Effectiveness
Increase Awareness	High	Medium	Medium
Create a Sense of Belonging	Low	Medium	Medium
Learn Self-Advocacy	Medium	High	High

Increase Awareness

As a result of examining both the literature review and the interview data, an action option that emerged was to have more outreach brought into high schools and have more college representatives talk about the programs and services that are available for students with disabilities. Quite often post-secondary institutions do not frequently go to high schools to educate families and their students. You would think that there is already enough outreach being done, but the outreach being done is not reaching all audiences. As the first participant communicated through the interview she stated that there needs to be more outreach being brought into the high schools, and representatives to talk about the programs/services that are available to students (personal communication, March 15, 2022). For that, they need to target a specific audience which is families and students with disabilities by going to parent nights or setting a date and time aside. This will let college staff members lay out the information for

parents and students. As for reach, it may be a little challenging to find the right ways, to have the outreach brought to the proper audience. Concerning its effectiveness, it will benefit families, students, and postsecondary institutions greatly since there is a possibility of an increase in enrollment for students with disabilities in higher education. Making families aware of the many different resources for students with disabilities that higher education institutions have to offer will benefit students greatly (Shaewitz, & Crandall, 2020). The more frequently colleges do the outreach to high schools the more they can educate families on the help they have to offer, and the programs that they have for students with disabilities. One big reason that brought the point out of bringing awareness to families is that only about 17% of college students with learning disabilities take advantage of all the learning assistance resources that are available to them at their schools (NCES, 2019).

Time was an issue that was discussed throughout the interview with the first participant. Nevertheless, the first participant had discussed what she thought could be helpful and effective in terms of motivating students with disabilities to attend a community college or 4-year university and how to be successful while at the institution. This data is concurrent with the literature review on what is needed for students with disabilities to attend a community college or 4-year university, which is essentially bringing awareness of the opportunities available to families who have students with disabilities.

Create a Sense of Belonging

For students with disabilities to have a sense of belonging at the community college or 4-year university that they attend an action needs to happen. Subsequently, after examining both the literature review and the interview data, it is apparent that schools need to promote a positive climate on their campus. They can do that by providing student and staff diversity training that

includes disabilities. The institutions can have disability support groups that promote within their school community so students with disabilities feel more welcomed. Both the community colleges and 4-year universities need to address the needs of all the students who attend their schools, especially those students who have disabilities because they are more likely to feel lost, and not feel like they belong at their school. Simultaneously for reach, it is not too challenging when it comes to finding the proper ways to reach the students themselves. Regarding effectiveness, it will benefit both the students and the postsecondary institutions tremendously, which may increase the enrollment rate for students with disabilities in higher education.

Time is not an issue that would have a negative effect on this action option. As discussed throughout the interview with the first participant a priority for staff members is to for them have the time to help the students that they serve. After all, it is their job to help guide students through the time that they spend at the institution. This data coincides with the literature review on what is needed for students with disabilities to feel like they belong at a community college or 4-year university. As the first participant communicated through the interview she stated that campus climate has a substantial effect on students with disabilities who have a lower sense of feeling like they belong on campus and have far more encounters with discrimination (personal communication, March 15, 2022). All students need to feel included to be able to succeed and students with disabilities tend to struggle with inclusion, which in turn makes it more difficult for them to achieve that success (Soria, 2021; Barnes et al., 2021). The second participant that I interviewed stated that throughout her time at both the community college and 4-year university there were a lot of times when she did not feel like she belonged solely due to her having a disability (college graduate, April 14, 2022). This way staff, faculty, and other students on campus can make the students with disabilities feel welcomed at the institution.

Learn Self-Advocacy

Another major theme that emerged during the research process was helping students be successful once in the community college or 4-year university, and even after they have graduated. The accommodations are good and they are needed, but it is really about teaching students how to transition into the community college or 4-year university system which is new to them. It is also important to teach them how to advocate for themselves because that will be a lifelong skill that they need. Thus, a third action option emerges. This is teaching students with disabilities how to become advocates for themselves because it is a key component in learning self-advocacy once in the community college or 4-year university, and even after graduating. Finding real opportunities and ways for students to learn self-advocacy is the action option. Schools need to begin by trying to make connections with the local businesses to see what opportunities students could have within the community. This could range from doing community service to getting a job with the local business thus potentially creating an opportunity to come back to that same local business after graduating and work for them. Through learning and collaborating with the community, students gain self-advocacy knowledge, and real-world experience and most will have a smoother transition out of school ready to be successful. As for reach, since the schools already know the students that they serve, it makes reaching the specific audience which is students with disabilities easier. Getting that information out to them is quicker too. It also would not be too difficult to get in contact with the local businesses themselves. In terms of effectiveness, it will benefit the community, students, and the community college and 4-year universities immensely. Hopefully, there will be an increase in the attendance rate for students with disabilities.

Time is not an issue that would have a negative effect on this action option. In analyzing the interview with the first participant she stated that for more college-bound, degree-seeking, or certificate-seeking students. The most important thing is to teach them about self-advocacy (personal communication, March 15, 2022). Students with disabilities have so many resources available to them and by taking advantage of them they can achieve their professional and personal goals and hopefully become a better version of themselves. Having the faculty and staff better prepared and educated in ways to help their students become successful (Shaewitz, & Crandall, 2020), will benefit students because when they go and attend the institution they will have access to many different accommodations, and they will even learn to become advocates for themselves. The second participant stated that she is very concerned about students with disabilities not learning self-advocacy. It is something they need to know because it will benefit them a lot (college graduate, April 14, 2022).

Conclusion

After analyzing the literature and data, we now know that there are many successful ways in which community colleges and 4-year universities can inform and support families and students with disabilities. The goal is to make them aware of all the endless possibilities of success at the institution and after graduating. It is important to note that the enrollment of students with disabilities in post-secondary education can increase if institutions just find the right way to have students with disabilities take advantage of the resources available, in order to be able and achieve their professional goals, personal goals, and hopefully become a better version of themselves. Additionally, institutions can have a major influence on students who have a similar story to them, and motivate them to get into higher education.

Recommendation. Out of the three action options given above, I recommend that schools need to find real opportunities and ways for students to learn self-advocacy. This can range from doing community service to getting a job with the local business, and being able to come back to that same local business after graduating and work for them. Through learning and collaborating with the community, students gain self-advocacy knowledge, and real-world experience and most will have a smoother transition out of school ready to be successful. Based on the literature and the data that was collected during the interviewing process, I am confident that this is the best solution for increasing college access and self-advocacy for students with disabilities in higher education and the resources available for them. This section will discuss the concessions, limitations, and possible negative outcomes that this action option may entail.

Concessions. While I choose to learn self-advocacy as the best action option moving forward, the other two action options have considerable strengths as well. For example, the first action option advocates bringing awareness through more outreach being brought into high schools and having more representatives to talk about the programs/services that are available for students. The literature points to the significance of making families aware of the resources for students with disabilities because of how beneficial it is for students (Shaewitz, & Crandall, 2020). Bringing more outreach into the high schools and more representatives to talk about the programs/services would help students feel empowered and encourage them into wanting to attend post-secondary education. After all, if the outreach is not being done then there will not be an increase in the number of students with disabilities who attend community college or a 4-year university. As for increasing the sense of belonging action option, there are also substantial strengths worth noting. Unlike the other two action options, this action option takes up less time. They would just need to make a training for students and staff members on the diversity of

disabilities. Undoubtedly, both of these action options have significant strengths to help students with disabilities.

Limitations. While choosing to learn self-advocacy as the best action option, there are still limitations that need to be recognized. For example, some students may not want to work with the local businesses and learn self-advocacy. So there is no guarantee that every student will want to participate in the action option plan, to even the local businesses themselves. Meaning that by teaching students self-advocacy with real-life opportunities, may not be the best way for students to learn.

Potential negative outcomes. There is a possibility that this action option will have negative outcomes to consider. For instance, the local businesses may feel pressured in offering their services to students with disabilities. The harsh reality is that not every local business will want to offer their services to students with disabilities. They may think that students with disabilities will not be the best option for their business to thrive. Or that their business could be successful after having students with disabilities working there.

Conclusion. Despite all of the limitations and potential negative outcomes, I still recommend learning self-advocacy as the best action option that will support students with disabilities while they are attending a community college or 4-year university, and even after graduating. This action option has the strongest reach of all the actions because if schools and local businesses partner up to give students with disabilities the opportunity to learn to self-advocate and learn so many more skills. Once students graduate, they will not only have a degree, but they will have the experience, and skills needed to be successful later in life. Reaching every student, especially those who have learning disabilities needs to be a priority. Due to the fact that students with disabilities can easily go unnoticed sometimes. Additionally, I

believe that if community colleges or 4-year universities want to increase the enrollment of students with disabilities, they need to make some changes. The action option rises above all the other ones as the best solution moving forward.

Action Documentation

Students with disabilities is not a topic that comes up in conversation very often, especially during conversations about higher education. Getting students into community college or a 4-year university goes far beyond just getting students in through the door, it is about giving them the support they need, making them feel welcomed and that they belong. It is also about guiding them through their time at the institution and helping them succeed. Three action options emerged after interviewing two people. The input of the two people I had interviewed corresponded with the I had researched I had done regarding students with disabilities in higher education, which then helped me with what my action options were going to be. The first action option that emerged was to have more outreach brought into high schools and have more college representatives talk about the programs/services that are available for students with disabilities. The second action option that emerged was that schools need to promote a positive climate on their campus. They can do that by including disabilities in student and staff diversity training. The final action option that emerged was to find real opportunities and ways for students to learn self-advocacy and success. The recommended action option is to learn self-advocacy and success. This action option was chosen based on the data that was collected from the two people interviewed, and the research literature on students with disabilities in higher education. Moving forward with this recommendation, a letter was written and sent addressed to the disabilities resources department. The letter explained that after carefully analyzing the literature and the interview responses, an action option had emerged that schools should begin making connections

with the local businesses, to see and explore the many different opportunities, and success that students could have within the community. Additionally, the letter explained what the issue was, the action option, and explained the importance of the action option. All in all, the letter was assertive at only suggesting the action option as a means of helping increase the enrollment of students with disabilities in higher education and their success. As of yet, there has been no response from the disabilities resources department.

To whom it may concern,

I first want to thank you for taking the time out of your day to read this email. Which contains information about an action plan that needs to be done within the university itself, but more so within the [REDACTED]

With that being my semester-long capstone at California State University Monterey Bay has come to an end, but with a lot of new knowledge and insights on students with disabilities in higher education. I have done my research and interviewed people with knowledge of the topic itself. Regarding how we can increase college access and self-advocacy for students with disabilities in higher education and the resources available for them.

The recommended action option is for schools to begin making connections with the local businesses to see what opportunities students could have within the community. This is where the [REDACTED] comes in and works on making it come true. The [REDACTED] is the ones with all the knowledge, and resources to make the action option happen.

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Best Regards, Michelle Trujillo

Image 1. A screenshot of an email was sent to the disabilities resources department at the community college and the 4-year University. Which asks for the possibility of them taking action and doing what the action option suggested.

Critical Reflection

From the beginning of the semester, I did not have a single clue about what to expect in my LS 400: Senior Capstone course with my Capstone advisor Dr. Whang. Little did I know that

I would soon be delighted to learn that I had the freedom to choose a topic that was personally meaningful to me. For that reason, I decided to choose a topic surrounding the importance of having more attention brought to students with disabilities in higher education. What surprised me the most was the reluctance of one of the interviewees to tell me what really happens “behind the scenes” within their own Disabilities Resources Center. After finishing my interviews I realized that I did not get much information from one of the interviewees. So I went to my professor for help. Having spoken with my professor, I then came to the realization of where I went wrong. I realized that I needed to have two different sets of questions for each of my interviewees, which I only had one at the time. I then went back, and make some more questions that corresponded more to the interviewee. After the second time of doing the interview, I had much more information than I did the first time. This meant that the new questions worked so much better, and they were the solution to my problem. The challenges I have encountered throughout my research along with my action options made me feel that the level of difficulty I had thought at the beginning of the semester was definitely worthwhile in the final product. As a future educator, I am very grateful to have been given this opportunity to take on an issue that had a lot of meaning for me. Moving forward, I plan to collaborate with the Disabilities Resources Center and work with them to make the action option come true. Moving forward I became confident in myself as the professional that I am and what I can offer to others.

Synthesis and Integration

The time I have spent at California State University Monterey Bay (CSUMB) as an undergraduate student has challenged me at times, but ultimately at the end of the day, it has been so rewarding. The required coursework, for Liberal Studies (LS) MLOs, and this action research project have made a positive impacted and has equipped me with all the things that I

needed in my professional development. Starting off with MLO 1: Developing Educator, I feel confident in myself within my skills to think, write, and speak critically regarding the subject matter of my project and in the context of a California public educator. The project itself has given me the opportunities to connect and speak with other professionals in the field.

Additionally, in terms of MLO 5: Subject Matter Generalist, I have come to recognize my most recent experience in completing a coherent in-depth study that was successful within my action research project. Analyzing the literature did an extensive job of developing my understanding and inspiring me to do even further research within the field of education. Moving forward to the professional career I aspire to have, I believe that it is necessary I become familiar with the literature that goes hand in hand with my passions and makes me confident with my own abilities as a professional speaker, writer, and thinker. I would say that my greatest takeaway after completing this project is that I now have the power and knowledge to be able to inspire, inform, and educate others around me.

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