
THE TRANSITION FROM K-12 TO HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE IMPACT ON DISABILITY AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Ana B. Palma Gutiérrez

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Acknowledgements	3
Chapter 1: Introduction	4
Chapter 2: Literary Review	7
Background on Disability Law and Policies in the United States	7
Washington State Law	9
Understanding Disability in K-12	11
Differences in Accommodations in K-12 and Higher Education	13
Barriers in the Transition from K-12 to Higher Education	15
Chapter 3: Methodology	17
Chapter 4: Results	19
Terrible Transition	19
Building Connection	20
Mentorship for Students	21
Lack of Information, Documentation, and Proper Diagnosis	23
Lack of Self-Advocacy Skills	26
Disability Justice	27
Running Start Students in Comparison to Students Leaving K-12	29
COVID-19 and Disability	30
Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations	31
Appendix	35
Bibliography	38

Abstract

This study addresses the barriers students with disabilities face when transitioning from K-12 to higher education in Washington State. Students receiving accommodations from the three campuses at the University of Washington were recruited to participate in this research study. However, only students from the Seattle and Bothell campuses participated in the research. Further, students were asked to share their experiences in getting accommodations in higher education and provide their recommendations on the transition process. Lastly, a total of seven staff members at Disability Resources for Students (DRS) office were interviewed for this capstone, all holding unique roles and coming from the three campuses at the University of Washington. Staff members were asked to share their observations working with students and to identify the main barriers students face when leaving K-12 and starting college. The main themes found in the study were: 1) Students referred to the transition process from K-12 to higher education as “Terrible Transition”, 2) Students and DRS staff found it important to create spaces where students can connect with each other and support each other, and 3) Students and staff found it important to implement mentorship programs for students to make the transition process smoother. After conducting this research, it is recommended that future research be done to learn more about the transition Running Start students have in comparison to students leaving K-12 who did not participate in this program. Additional research is also encouraged to compare the transition from undergraduate school to graduate school and post-college work. Lastly, states across the country should consider establishing associations like Washington’s Council of Presidents so that communication between colleges and universities is prioritized at the national level, and students with disabilities can be better represented in the leadership and decision-making process of higher education’s monetary and policy making processes.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank those who contributed to the completion of my Graduate degree. First and foremost, I want to thank the four individuals who with their hard work and sacrifices gave my parents, their children, the life that was able to bring me here today. I also want to thank my parents for their hard work and sacrifices, for leaving everything and everyone they knew behind in México to give me a better life. My academic accomplishments would have not been possible without the hard work and sacrifices of these six individuals, and I am forever indebted with them. My academic journey has not been easy, as a first-generation student, I had to learn to maneuver college on my own since I first received my acceptance letters to university upon high school graduation. I am the first person in my family to earn a bachelor's and master's degree in the United States, an accomplishment that I will always be proud of, as I grew up in a patriarchal culture that insisted girls and women did not need an education. I must also recognize those who have mentored me throughout my academic journey, starting with my first Political Science professor, Dr. Timothy Jones, who took me under his wing and made it possible for me to not just get a bachelor's degree but also travel and see the world for academic purposes, an experience I will always be indebted with him for. I also want to thank my colleague and mentor, Sara Gardner, Director of the Neurodiversity Navigators program at Bellevue College in Washington State, who took me under her wing when I began working in the disability field and supported me in the completion of this master's degree. Lastly, I want to thank my Capstone Advisor, Dr. Keith Nitta, for all his support during the completion of my degree, the pandemic presented an incredible number of challenges that no one expected, but it was thanks to his mentorship and guidance that I was able to make it through.

This is for my parents, my sisters, and the women in my family who came before me, stood by me, and that came after me ¡Si se pudo!

“A lot of people experience a lack of resources or accessibility. I think there needs to be changes within the K-12 system and a college institution. Sometimes children go to school for love and understanding due to their situations, this is something needed for disability justice. I feel like this would be exhibiting cultural competence as we all come from different backgrounds.

Growing up with immigrant parents, they didn't know how to handle or even knew I had a disability, they just thought I was a troublemaker. The teachers didn't spot me out, they just told me to try harder. The journey of figuring this stuff out is hard which motivated me to become someone that my inner child needed when I was younger. Overall, I hope changes are made for disability justice.” - UWS Student

Chapter 1: Introduction

This study will address the transition from K-12 to higher education and the impact it has on students with disabilities and their accommodations. It is important to note that while a brief overview of federal disability laws will be given in this study, analysis presented will primarily focus on existing legislature in Washington State. Further, data analysis will be presented in this study from questionnaires and interviews conducted to current students receiving accommodations from the University of Washington Seattle and Bothell campuses. Lastly, to provide another layer of analysis, the study will also include data from interviews conducted to the staff working at the Disability Resources for Students (DRS) offices at the University of Washington, Tri Campus.

This study was inspired by my personal experience working as an Access Specialist for students receiving accommodations in higher education. In the time span of five years, I have worked in both the community college and university level, an experience that allowed me to see a pattern of challenges and barriers faced by students when graduating high school and transitioning into their college career. I also had the opportunity to work with Running Start students, who were either full time students at the community college and having their credits count towards high school graduation, or who were parttime students at both the college and the high school.

By working with Running Start students, I was able to see that those who graduated from high school and transitioned directly into the community college struggled more than the Running Start students who left my caseload and transferred to a four-year-institution. I noticed a difference between both populations of students, although they were in the same age group. One group benefited from the mentorship of the DRC office, while the other came from high school with little to no knowledge of what their disability was or what accommodations were.

Having identified an issue that I believed needed to be addressed, I began looking for opportunities that would allow me to improve the experience of students, and hopefully decrease the barriers they faced in the transition process. I partnered with other programs at my institution that focused on supporting students in completing high school. By working with these departments, and with the students in my caseload, I realized that the main barriers a student faced when transitioning to college or completing their high school degree were; 1) not knowing how to advocate for themselves, 2) not understanding their own disability or knowing how it affected their learning, 3) not knowing what accommodations truly benefited their learning, 4) not knowing how to express their needs, 5) not knowing how to look for mentorship or support, and 6) usually finding support when it was too late. Nearing the end of my third year as an Access Specialist, I decided to earn a degree in Policy Studies to hopefully address the issue at a larger scale, and that is how this capstone project came to be.

Recognizing that the disability community is underrepresented, I saw the value in surveying and interviewing students to give them a platform where they could use their voices and shine light into their experiences. I also saw the value in interviewing my colleagues in the disability field; their work and great knowledge have benefited thousands of students at the University for many years. After conducting my research and interviews, I was able to find the

following: 1) Students referred to the transition process from K-12 to higher education as “Terrible Transition”, 2) Students and DRS staff found it important to create spaces where students can connect with each other and support each other, 3) Students and staff found it important to implement mentorship programs for students to make the transition process smoother, 4), There is a lack of information, documentation, and proper diagnosis, 5) There is a lack of self-advocacy skills needed to ensure the attainment of accommodations and necessary services in college, 6) Students found that Disability Justice is important, 7) Students in Running Start programs have a smoother transition to higher education than students who enter college immediately after high school, and 8) COVID-19 further exacerbated disability and impacted learning.

As the Results section will discuss, students across the University campuses expressed excitement in finally having the opportunity to use their voices and thanked me repeatedly for taking the time to do this project. My colleagues alike, thanked me for the work I put into the project, as this is an important issue that has not been fully addressed and requires a great deal of attention especially during the pandemic, when our already vulnerable youth is constantly being challenged with the barriers presented by COVID-19. Lastly, as with all underrepresented populations, the more voices that are heard the louder the message is heard. I am grateful for the opportunity that this capstone project gave me to present my research and findings in a professional manner, and I am also grateful for the students who participated in this study, and for my colleagues who took their time to not only participate in the interview process but also supported me in my studies. I truly hope this capstone is the beginning to a more accessible road for students with disabilities.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Background on Disability Law and Policies in the United States:

To understand the transition between education levels and any disparities of accessibility in the process, we need to understand the existing disability laws and how they affect accessibility in education. The United States has four primary laws focused on providing accessibility and equality to people with disabilities: the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the American with Disabilities Act (ADA,1990), the No Child Left Behind Act (2002), and the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (2004). Together, these laws provide a pillar of protection and accessibility to people with disabilities at the federal and state level.

The Section 504 under the Rehabilitation Act specifically focuses on providing protection to the rights of people with disabilities in programs and activities receiving federal funding such as public schools and higher education institutions. Further, Section 504 states that “no qualified individual with a disability in the United States shall be excluded from, denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination.”¹ Similarly, the ADA prohibits discrimination because of disability in employment, state, and local governments, and provides protection in public accommodations including transportation and telecommunication means.² The ADA was enacted by Congress after disability rights activists in the 1980s sought to enact broad-based legislation that would provide civil rights to people with disabilities that would be like the rights given to African Americans and women.³ The establishment of the ADA provided a step towards the right direction, however, there were still disproportionalities in accessibility in the education

¹ US Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division: Disability Rights Section.
<https://www.ada.gov/cguide.htm#anchor65610>

² US Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division: Disability Rights Section.
<https://www.ada.gov/cguide.htm#anchor62335>

³ Colker Ruth. *The Disability Pendulum: The First Decade of the Americans with Disabilities Act*. 2005.

system and students with disabilities continued to face hurdles in obtaining an education, particularly those who fell in different racial and ethnic groups.

The passing of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2002, worked in decreasing segregation and disproportionality in education, particularly in public education by creating a fair evaluation of learning for all students regardless of race, ethnicity, and disability.⁴ In the early stages of the NCLB, some scholars believed that the law represented a fundamental break from the past and inaugurated a new era of federal leadership in education.⁵ However, other scholars wondered why the NCLB was established, since just a few years earlier the Clinton administration had passed two groundbreaking policies; The Goals 2000: Educate America Act and The Improving America's School Act. These acts were recognized as the "first truly national education policy in U.S. history."⁶ It was then clear that disability had become a political agenda, as much as the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Movement.

President Clinton took the historic recognition of implementing the NCLB, as schools across the country began adopting 'inclusive' education reform and learning evaluations. With the groundwork established under the Clinton presidency, business entrepreneurs and civil rights entrepreneurs were in a strong position for more federal roles and leadership overseeing the education systems under President George W. Bush when he took office in 2001. As the momentum for more federal leadership grew, the need for accommodations in the classroom increased as well and by 2004, enough momentum and advocacy had been created to warrant the establishment of the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004.⁷

⁴ Rhodes et al. *An Education in Politics: The Origins and Evolution of No Child Left Behind*. 2012

⁵ Rhodes et al. *An Education in Politics: The Origins and Evolution of No Child Left Behind*. 2012

⁶ Rhodes et al. *An Education in Politics: The Origins and Evolution of No Child Left Behind*. 2012

⁷⁷ Rhodes et al. *An Education in Politics: The Origins and Evolution of No Child Left Behind*. 2012

Washington State Law

Washington State legislature passed House Bill (HB) 445 in 1973 which defined people with disabilities as a protected class under Washington's non-discrimination laws. However, the Governor vetoed HB 445 and it was not until 1979, with the passage of HB 480 that anti-discriminatory laws applied to people with disabilities in the State. Further, in 1994, HB 2327 was passed by the Washington State Legislature which ensured minimum level of service for students with disabilities.⁸ These services were defined under the Washington State Core Service Act as reasonable accommodations in higher education; "each student with one or more disabilities is entitled to receive a core service only if the service is reasonably needed to accommodate the student's disabilities."⁹ Additionally, the 1994 Act became the first legislative document in Washington State that listed out accommodations that are commonly used by college students today including; priority registration, accessible reading materials, provision of readers and notetakers, accessibility in the physical environment such as having access to an elevator and ramps, flexibility in assignment deadlines, and early access to course materials including the syllabus, study guides, and displayed materials.

Washington State also has three higher education disability service associations: the Council of Presidents, Interinstitutional Committee of Disability Service Officers (ICDSO), the State Board of Community and Technical Colleges, Disability Support Service Council (DSSC), and the Washington Association on Postsecondary Education and Disability (WAPED). These associations are composed of professionals working in providing services to students with disabilities in higher education. Professionals use these associations as a resource to learn from

⁸ A Report to the Legislature: Disability Services Transfer Work Group. 2016.

⁹ <https://lawfilesexternal.wa.gov/biennium/1993-94/Pdf/Bills/Session%20Laws/House/2327.SL.pdf?cite=1994%20c%20105%20C2%A7%203>

each other, see how each institution makes decisions around accommodations as to maintain equity in the state, and work collectively in providing resources to the staff and faculty accommodating students in higher education. WAPED, specifically has a membership composed of professionals from Washington and Idaho and serves as a professional development provider for its members.¹⁰

In addition to these associations, Washington also has the Council of Presidents (COP) which is an association composed of six public baccalaureate degree granting college and universities in the State. In 2016, the COP convened the Disability Services Transfer (DST) Work Group in accordance with Senate Bill 6466 that was unanimously passed by the House and the Senate in 2016. The DST Work Group addressed the transfer process of students with disabilities from one college institution to another by surveying students and obtaining feedback on their experience on this transition process.¹¹ Results from the survey showed an increase of students who identified with having non-physical disabilities, such as mental, emotional, and psychological disabilities, some also reported having more than one of these disabilities.

It is important to understand the history of these laws and policies, how they were implemented, and the movements behind the establishment of each one. It is also important to note the differences between accommodations in K-12 and higher education and determine whether the transition process from one grade to the other create further barriers for students and if this creates additional disability segregation in schooling that these laws were created to prevent.

¹⁰ A Report to the Legislature: Disability Services Transfer Work Group. 2016.

¹¹ A Report to the Legislature: Disability Services Transfer Work Group. 2016.

Understanding Disability in K-12

Understanding the history behind disability laws is as important as understanding disability and how it impacts a child's learning. First and foremost, not all disabilities are visible which makes it difficult for K-12 educators to detect disability needs early on in their students' learning experience. Nonvisible disabilities are known as *invisible* disabilities which include emotional and behavioral disorders (E/BD) such as anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, and eating disorders. All these disorders are just as easy to be "masked" by students, as it is for educators to miss them due to how difficult it is to detect early warning signs. While public schools are equipped with school counselors, Special Education teachers, nurses, and social workers, not all K-12 teachers are trained to identify early signs of disabilities or mental illnesses, which makes it so that students do not get the support they need until it is usually too late, or the student has developed inappropriate classroom behavior.

A study conducted in 2004, showed that children and adolescents with E/BD present both behavioral and achievement problems that interfere with their learning.¹² In comparison to other disabilities, students with E/BD have a lower graduation rate from high school and are least likely to pursue postsecondary education.¹³ This is primarily due to the barriers students face, while coping and adapting to their disabilities at a young age, as they also try to develop as the rest of their peers in school.

In 2017, the National Center for Disabilities published a study titled *Social, Emotional and Behavioral Challenges*, in which they presented data that spoke to the barriers students in K-12 face due to E/BD.¹⁴ The primary barrier students with E/BD face is related to social

¹² Nelson et al. *Academic achievement of K-12 students with emotional and behavioral disorders*. 2004.

¹³ Nelson et al. *Academic achievement of K-12 students with emotional and behavioral disorders*. 2004.

¹⁴ Social, Emotional and Behavioral Challenges. <https://www.nclد.org/research/state-of-learning-disabilities/social-emotional-and-behavioral-challenges/>

interactions; how they are perceived by their peers and teachers, whether they feel like they fit in or not, developing a sense of belonging, and behaving “normally.” Once a student believes they don’t belong in the classroom, that they don’t learn as fast as their peers, that they are viewed and treated differently by their teachers, and that they are not accepted by their peers, their disabilities get exacerbated which often results in “poor behavior” in the classroom. This then leads to suspension or expulsion, reflecting negatively on the student’s performance, and ultimately affecting their school completion and graduation attainment.¹⁵

The US Department of Education and Office of Civil Rights, found that students with Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) are more than twice as likely to be suspended than students without disabilities.¹⁶ The loss of instructional time raises the risk of repeating a grade or dropping out of school; from 2011 to 2012, it was observed that 12% of students with IEPs received one or more out of school suspensions, in comparison to 5% of students without IEPs.¹⁷ Further, students of color are more likely to be identified as having a disability and face harsher discipline in schools than their white classmates. For example, data found by the Department of Education, shows that 1 out of 4 black males are suspended or expelled in comparison to 1 out of 10 white males in school.¹⁸ Therefore, in 2016, the US Department of Education proposed a new rule to improve equity under IDEA that would keep States accountable in reporting

¹⁵ Social, Emotional and Behavioral Challenges. <https://www.ncl.org/research/state-of-learning-disabilities/social-emotional-and-behavioral-challenges/>

¹⁶ US Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2013-2014 Civil Rights Data Collection: A First Look (2016) and Civil Rights Data Collection Data Snapshot: School Discipline (2014). <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/2013-14-first-look.pdf>

¹⁷ US Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2013-2014 Civil Rights Data Collection: A First Look (2016) and Civil Rights Data Collection Data Snapshot: School Discipline (2014). <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/2013-14-first-look.pdf>

¹⁸ US Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2013-2014 Civil Rights Data Collection: A First Look (2016) and Civil Rights Data Collection Data Snapshot: School Discipline (2014). <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/2013-14-first-look.pdf>

disproportionality in discipline based of race and ethnicity.¹⁹ This would help public schools identify places for improvement in equity issues and implicit biases towards students of color.

In 2019, scholars from ACLU published the study *Cops and No Counselors: How the Lack of School Mental Health Staff Is Harming Students*, in which they observed disabled students of color facing stricter reprimands than white disabled students in the K-12 system.²⁰ It is important to understand how intersectionality plays into a student's education experience, as disproportionality in support and attention impacts learning and overall schooling achievement. This also further exacerbates disability, especially those of anxiety, depression, and other E/BDs. By the time a student leaves the high school environment, whether they graduated or not, they have experienced significant trauma from the treatment they received in K-12 that the moment they receive freedom as an adult, they no longer want to have anything to do with a disability office and therefore, do not seek the support they need to excel in higher education or in the work force post high school.

Differences in Accommodations in K-12 and Higher Education

The main difference between K-12 and higher education is that post-secondary education is not covered under IDEA but under the ADA and Subpart E of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Further, while accommodations in K-12 can alter the classroom and learning outcomes, post-secondary programs or colleges are not required to lower academic standards to accommodate students with disabilities, and refrain from fundamentally altering the course outcomes. Realizing that accommodations do not work the same in college is the biggest challenge for students once they start their college career, especially when they realize that the

¹⁹ Department of Education. Assistance to States for the Education of Children With Disabilities; Preschool Grants for Children With Disabilities. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2016-03-02/pdf/2016-03938.pdf>

²⁰ https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/field_document/030419-acluschooldisciplinereport.pdf

power and decision making is now on them as opposed to their 504 Plan or IEP Plan committee members.

One of the most common accommodations offered in K-12 is the ability to change the class assignments for the student, often alternating the original assignment to a different version such as making a written essay into a verbal presentation. This is very unlikely to happen in the university setting since some course outcomes require the ability to write essays. Therefore, the university may accommodate the student by offering advance notice of deadlines, or by providing the extended deadlines accommodation but will not alternate the original assignment, as to give the student the same learning opportunities as the rest of their peers. Since the differences between accommodations is significant, the U.S. Department of Education published a series of letters for parents and graduating high schoolers to help assist in the transition process.

In 2011, The U.S Department of Education released a letter to high school students interested in university or college careers, encouraging them to know their rights under the Office of Civil Rights and reminding them that as adult students they will carry bigger responsibilities for their accommodations that they do not carry as students in K-12.²¹ Further, the Department notifies students that they are not required to inform their institutions about their accommodations, however, they will not receive any academic adjustments or accommodations without being formally registered in the institution's Disability Resource Center or Disability Resource Services office. The Department also notifies students those institutions require documentation of disability, and each institution differs in requirements, however documentation may include diagnostic paperwork from a physician, psychiatrist, or therapist. While 504 Plans

²¹ US Department of Education. *Students with Disabilities Preparing for Postsecondary Education: Know Your Rights and Responsibilities*. 2011. [Students with Disabilities Preparing for Postsecondary Education](#)

and IEP Plans may be submitted for review, they may not always qualify for accommodations due to the different set of laws that postsecondary education institutions follow. Something to note however, is that these diagnostic documents are not affordable and especially for students already focusing on paying tuition. The cost of documentation can be very taxing for students not just financially but health wise, often triggering their disabilities and mental health further. To better understand the experience students, face when leaving the K-12 system to higher education, students from the University of Washington across the three campuses of Seattle, Bothell, and Tacoma were recruited to share their stories for the purposes of this study. Please refer to the next section for findings.

Barriers in the Transition from K-12 to Higher Education

We end with the most relevant study on disability accommodations and K-12 to college transition. In 2021, Laura Clark, a scholar from California State University, Fresno, published the article *The Administrator/Educator Influence on the Transition of Students, with IDEA Services, from K-12 to Postsecondary/College During the COVID-19 Pandemic*. In addition to mentioning the barriers associated with the pandemic, Clark was able to confirm that the main barrier students face when leaving K-12 and transitioning to college is the lack of self-advocacy skills needed to request accommodations and express their needs in college. Clark also found that there is a struggle to differentiate the services offered under IDEA and those offered under the ADA, and that both parents and students have a hard time accepting the Family Educational and Privacy Act (FERPA) and Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) laws set in college that declare a child as a legal and autonomous adult, and therefore the parent cannot be involved in the accommodations process anymore. “What students and parents alike don’t understand is, as soon as the students transition to college, it becomes a legal issue for the

colleges to reveal any information to the parents without a student consent form.”²² Without the necessary self-advocacy skills or communication skills needed, a student cannot maneuver college on their own and will not know how to request a release of information form, let alone be able to find the disability resource office on their own.

Clark focused her study in California and interviewed over 40 professionals working in the disability field or in human resource offices that accommodated employees with disabilities, Clark also interviewed students in the K-12 system in California. In her findings, she was able to get identify the barriers presented when leaving high school, whether the student was transitioning straight to college or the workforce. In her findings, Clark argued that self-advocacy skills during the middle and high school years is essential for an effective postsecondary transition. Clark further studied the transitional plans set in place in California and encouraged the establishment of student led IEPs that are focused on self-determination, and composed of the support of teachers, counselors, administrators, parents, and students. Clark further argued that it is important to include the students in the decision process of their accommodations, as this helps them develop the skills necessary to communicate their needs after high school.

The transition from K-12 to higher education is an important topic that is not very much highlighted in scholarly work. Given the additional barriers the COVID-19 pandemic has brought upon our youth, it is imperative that we begin to prioritize our youth’s education and overall life quality. We must address the barriers and challenges presented to students with disabilities from a young age as to ensure a smooth transition to higher education and an overall equitable education experience.

²² Clark, *The Administrator/Educator Influence on the Transition of Students, with IDEA Services, from K-12 to Postsecondary/College During the COVID-19 Pandemic*. 2021

Chapter 3: Methodology

The University of Washington has three campuses, one in Seattle (UWS), one in Bothell (UWB), and one in Tacoma (UWT). Each campus has a Disability Resources for Students (DRS) office, dedicated in providing accommodations to students and building bridges between students, faculty, and university staff. Although located in three different campuses, the DRS Staff works collectively as one team and together serve over 3,000 students. The Seattle campus has the largest student caseload since it is the main university campus. However, the Bothell and Tacoma campuses have their own leadership teams and oversee different programs and meet different goals due to the type of degrees offered in both campuses. Lastly, the Seattle campus has a student run program focused on providing leadership and social experiences to students with disabilities, the ASUW Students with Disabilities Commission.

A total of seven DRS staff members were interviewed for this capstone, all holding unique roles and coming from the three campuses at the University of Washington. The seven staff members have a decade or more of experience working in the disability field, in higher education, the K-12 system, and in counseling services. The DRS staff members also have experience working outside of Washington State and were able to identify similar observations and barriers to the transition from K-12 to higher education in the multiple states they have worked in, however, this capstone is only highlighting the observations made in Washington State. The staff members were recruited via email and were interviewed via Zoom, they were asked a total of eight questions: 1) How long have you been working in this field? 2) What inspired you to work in this field? 3) What are the main barriers students face when starting college that you have observed? 4) Are these barriers related to accommodations or to differences in processes between K-12 and college? 5) Have students ever joined the DRS ‘too

late' or too close to graduation? 6) Have students ever shared that they did not know the DRS/DRC existed and therefore struggled for months or years before finding support? 7) What if anything do you think can be improved to make the transition from K-12 to higher education smoother? 8) Do you think change needs to happen in the K-12 system or college institutions need to take the forefront in DRS recruitment? Lastly, staff were encouraged to describe their ideal world and to name their top priority in solving the barriers students face when transitioning from K-12 to higher education.

Students receiving accommodations from the three campuses were recruited via email to participate in this research study. However, only students from the Seattle and Bothell campuses participated in the research. To provide accessibility to the process, students were given the opportunity to participate in a written questionnaire and interview process via Zoom. For the questionnaire, students were asked six questions total: 1) How did you hear about the DRS? 2) What was your experience like transitioning from K-12 to college? 3) If you did not know about the DRS/DRC when you started college, how did this affect your studies? 4) How did your performance in school change once you started receiving accommodations? 5) What if anything do you think can be improved to make the transition from K-12 to higher education smoother? and 6) Do you think change needs to happen in the K-12 system to help with the transition? Or do college institutions need to take the forefront in the DRS recruitment? Students returned their written responses via email. Students were then given the opportunity to participate in a Zoom interview to expand on their answers from the questionnaire. A total of (31) students participated in the study with (31) participating only in the questionnaire and (4) following up in interviews.

Chapter Four: Results

I found a total of seven common themes in the staff and student responses: 1) Students referred to the transition process from K-12 to higher education as “Terrible Transition”, 2) Students and DRS staff found it important to create spaces where students can connect with each other and support each other, 3) Students and staff found it important to implement mentorship programs for students to make the transition process smoother, 4), There is a lack of information, documentation, and proper diagnosis, 5) There is a lack of self-advocacy skills needed to ensure the attainment of accommodations and necessary services in college, 6) Students found that Disability Justice is important, 7) Students in Running Start programs have a smoother transition to higher education than students who enter college immediately after high school, and 8) COVID-19 further exacerbated disability and impacted learning.

Terrible Transition

When asked to share about their experience during the transition process, students shared a mutual agreement that starting off college without accommodations further exacerbated their disability and caused them to suffer academically, some were even put on academic probation or were forced to leave college for a few years before trying school again.

“[Transition from K-12 to higher education] It has been terrible, my first quarter of college was okay school wise, but my health was worsening, and I did not have my DRS application approved by then which caused my school success to decline slightly. With my condition, stress can make it worse and being in such stressful environment has brought up much stress/pain.” -UWS Student

Some students also responded that they did not want to be seen differently by their professors and peers, and consequently forced themselves through school until they were put on academic probation or decided to drop out of school.

“The transition from K-12 to college is almost like night and day, one goes from an environment with limited autonomy and authoritative figures to one that places all the

responsibility upon the individual while giving them unlimited access to total distraction.” -UWS Student.

When asked if students had ever shared that they dropped out of school because they did not know they could get accommodations, all seven DRS staff members said yes. This is an unfortunate common trend I have observed not just for the purposes of this study but in the past five years, there comes a point in which students feel too overwhelmed and do not know how to seek support from their faculty and rather quit than to keep up with the stress.

Building Connection

Staff Perspective

There was also a mutual agreement among the DRS staff on the importance of having more visible offices and spaces for students to engage in.

“DRS organizations, in the ideal world, need programming space and they need a visible space. They need spaces where students are going to hang out with other students. A safe place where they can sleep or relax in between classes, a space where they can get on a computer to do homework. Think about the spaces that multicultural centers get, we need that type of space. But also, I think one of the other things about the space, and this one is likely going to be more of a challenge all around, and that is being in more public areas. Not on the third floor tucked away, not in places where you will not see disability services, and I know that's a challenge for students who want to keep their confidentiality. But I think that's the only way that we as a community can get over the stigma around disability. In comparison to other student services, disability offices are tucked away and hidden, we need to have more of a conversation as colleagues in this field about the future of disability services and advocacy must be at the frontline of making DRS spaces more public and more visual environments, it cannot be in the basement it cannot be tucked away.”

The DRS staff also spoke on the importance of having more funding for DRS offices, especially offices that target large caseloads. Proper funding would allow for more Access Coordinators and Counselors who understand disability and the impact they have on a student mentally, physically, and academically.

“I just have a quick anecdote here, one of my veterans here came into my office and sat down for probably a good hour, you know talking about resources and he was like ‘well you know I really don't want these resources; I don't want to be disabled. You know, used to be this way’ and, of course, his experience in in the military has changed him. He said he was going to

go through the DRS process but wasn't really convinced himself with doing it, and then I didn't hear from him. I eventually heard from him a year later and his struggles for an entire year and he came back and sat in the exact same seats and said, 'I should have done it, I should have listened to you, I should have done it.' And again, I think this where that life coach, someone who understands disability services, understands the work we do, is what would help in this case. Maybe this is what you need to write, every DRS office needs a Disability Counselor like the one we have on our team." UW DRS Staff

Student Perspective

Students also shared wanting to be connected with other DRS students more, since it is not always easy to identify with having a disability but having events on campus for DRS students would help make connections and friends, especially as new freshmen.

"By making it be less stressful. This could be done by somehow convincing students that it is okay if you are not sure about what you want to do, I felt like I just had to choose one thing and go all in. Maybe require that students meet with advisors (my relationship with teachers and the school has made me feel noticed), it's scary to reach out on your own sometimes. Maybe make it easier for students to meet other students who also want to meet others, if it was not for the fact that I joined a frat I might not really have new friends." UWB Student

Having more staff would also allow DRS offices to have time to invest in building community with students and allow for the programming of events in which students can meet each other and have a social student life.

Mentorship for Students

Staff Perspective

Both DRS staff and students agreed that more mentorship is needed for students in higher education, not just around accommodations but how to manage college as a student with disabilities. One staff member described the services provided to students in higher education as "transactional services," a system focused solely on getting students through the door but not doing more to check in with them after accommodations have been given out.

"One of the things I think is important in this process, is providing support and mentorship that is beyond just the academic accommodations. Students need coaches, students need advisors, students need people who are going to help them through the transition I think it's hard for us to say we only do the academic accommodations because really if you look at it, and

you know this, most of DRS offices do what I call 'transactional services.' A student applies and provides documentation, we give them the accommodations and sometimes we don't see them again because they are self-sufficient, or we don't see them until they have failed or dropped out of school and came back." UW DRS Staff

The DRS staff also talked about the importance of being recognized as a professional office and not just as an office where faculty go when there is a problem with a student, or a place other departments route students to without really knowing if they have a disability or not. Being recognized as a professional working in higher education is important because students see how the staff who work to support them are seen by others, and if their specialists are also seen differently than the rest of the staff on campus, this also feeds into their experience and whether they engage with the DRS or not.

"I would love to see disability services recognized as an advising function. Our staff are also counseling service coordinators and yet I don't think there is a recognition that other advisors get, like those in Academic Advising and the Counseling Center. Advising and mentorship is a key part of this role, just like it is for all those other areas, and so I would love to just see that acknowledged and built out. I would love to see our staff have the same professional development support, like build out orientations, build out mentorship programs, peer to peer mentorship for students and staff. That would be so amazing and it's hard to imagine that would ever happen, but I think that would make all the difference in the world." UW DRS Staff

In addition to improving mentorship for students leaving high school and starting college, DRS Staff members also spoke about the importance of mentoring undergraduate students nearing graduation and deciding what to do post college graduation.

"A lot of students are under the misconception that once you graduate, and you are headed to professional school or a graduate program, you're no longer covered by disability services and that it is only for undergraduates. I have many students who are shocked to find out they can also get accommodations in Graduate School, and I'm surprised at how many are under the impression that the service stops. The college at the undergraduate needs to make sure that there is transitional work to Graduate School or work because many people also don't realize that they can get services in the work setting as well."-UW DRS Staff

Lack of Information, Documentation, and Proper Diagnosis

Lack of Information:

Staff Perspective

It was found that both students and DRS staff members agreed that the main challenge presented when leaving high school and transitioning to higher education is not having enough information on what to expect when starting college. Along with this comes the sudden expectation of independence and responsibility, students no longer have their high school counselors, IEP or 504 Plan committees, nor their parents guiding them, they are now responsible for finding their own support systems and disability resources.

The lack of information and mentorship causes a student to not know where to go or who to ask for help. This can be detrimental to a student's mental health and disability, in addition to forcing the student to start off their higher education without accommodations and setting them up for academic failure. When asked what the solution to this transition barrier would be, DRS staff members answered that educating the staff and teachers in K-12 about disability, accommodations, and transition plans would reduce the number of students who start college not knowing what to do or how their disability impacts their learning.

“I think number one, there needs to be more education with the educators in the K-12 system, about how accommodations work in the higher education field. Because while not every student who is in the special education field is going to go on to receive further education, they should be generally made aware of how to ask for those accommodations and where they should go to seek that because a lot of these students have never had to do that on their own.”-UW DRS Staff

Student Perspective

When asked to share about their experience during the transition process, students shared a mutual agreement that starting off college without accommodations further exacerbated their

disability and caused them to suffer academically, some were even put on academic probation or were forced to leave college for a few years before trying school again.

When asked why they did not seek out DRS services earlier, there was a mutual agreement that in addition to not knowing where to go initially, students did not want to have an “unfair advantage” to other students by receiving accommodations. This is a clear example of students not knowing the purpose of accommodations or how their disability benefits from them.

When asked what could be improved to make the transition from K-12 to higher education smoother, students answered that knowing more about what to expect from college prior to graduating high school would be useful, in addition to knowing they did not need to feel pressured or stressed in choosing their majors or what they wanted to study.

“By making it be less stressful. This could be done by somehow convincing students that it is okay if you are not sure about what you want to do, I felt like I just had to choose one thing and go all in. Maybe require that students meet with advisors (my relationship with teachers and the school has made me feel noticed), it's scary to reach out on your own sometimes. Maybe make it easier for students to meet other students who also want to meet others, if it was not for the fact that I joined a frat I might not really have new friends.” UWB Student

Lack of Documentation and Proper Diagnosis:

Staff Perspective:

Another big concern shared by both students and staff is the lack of proper documentation or diagnosis. Since students are not usually involved in the decision-making process of their accommodations, they are not aware of the details of their accommodations or know exactly what their disability is. This can be very costly in college, not just financially but also for their disability and mental health. Obtaining an official diagnosis is financially and time costly, therefore, DRS staff encourages K-12 administrations to start diagnosis early in a child’s life and keep the diagnosis consistent all the way through high school graduation.

“If a student was diagnosed with something as an elementary school student, and there might have been some significant changes in this condition, but no one kept track of it or did not diagnose the student again after leaving elementary school, it would be helpful if we had something that was a little bit more recent.” UW DRS Staff.

When students get diagnosed while in public school, the cost does not fall on them since the school districts take on the responsibility of ensuring the student is accommodated. The financial burden some students face in college by seeking documentation as adults, would be removed entirely if the proper diagnosis and guidance were given out in the K-12 system. Students also shared that they were diagnosed in elementary school but were never re-diagnosed again, so by the time they got to college, their 504 Plans or IEP Plans did not satisfy requirements for accommodations and were forced to pay high costs for a diagnosis they already had but needed the legitimate letter to speak for it.

“We usually see it in two different ways; either student have had accommodations previously and they're used to not being in the driver's seat and it's kind of shocking to them to now be in control and they have to drive the process. They have to send their faculty notification letters every quarter because it's confidential and so, if they don't choose to use it, the faculty won't be notified that they're registered with us. And then for students who have never had accommodations before, I think, also because there are barriers to access to medical care in general in the country, this also impacts student's ability to obtain documentation. So, if students are experiencing impacts of a disability, but they've never been formally diagnosed, or they don't have access to that documentation, we try to work with students as much as we can. And that's really the big thing, especially the biggest one is learning disability, because that testing can be hard to get and very expensive.” UW DRS Staff

Student Perspective

“Initially I was confronted by stating my documentation was too old and I would need to fill out a 60+ page application for the possibility of the school psychologist would test me for a disability.” UWS Student

Students in college have a lot of responsibilities in general from making it to class, submitting assignments, and ensuring successful completion of their classes as to not harm their GPAs or lose their financial aid. Students with disabilities have these responsibilities along with

all the barriers and challenges that come with their disability/disabilities, needing to take time out of their already busy schedules to get assessments done for a diagnosis is an additional burden they need to bear just to have an even playing field in college. I was able to identify two types of student populations receiving accommodations; those who knew what they needed from the DRS and had their documentation in place, and those who did not know what they needed to request and lacked the proper documentation.

Lack of Self-Advocacy Skills

Student Perspective

Another challenge presented when transitioning from K-12 to higher education is the lack of self-advocacy skills needed to request accommodations and services. DRS Staff described the experience students have in K-12 as a lot of hand holding and little opportunity for self-growth, students interviewed also reported having very little say in their accommodations and learning in K-12.

“Learning self-advocacy skills throughout K-12 education would also be helpful for college. Having different events or even classes to focus on this would be very helpful for our mental health. I don’t know if this is something possible but having resources to prepare for independent living and managing new routines would be helpful.”-UWS Student

Staff Perspective

When asked about the observations they have made while working with in-coming students who recently graduated from high school, DRS staff members all agreed that in addition to students sharing they did not know where to go for support, they also noticed students lacked the necessary skills to communicate their needs, request accommodations, and self-advocate. DRS staff members also urged high school teachers and staff to implement coaching and mentorship for students in high school, starting in the 10th grade so they begin to be involved in

the decision-making process and know what to ask for and how to advocate for themselves once they start college.

“Anyone that has a 504 or IEP plan, for the most part, when they're in the high school setting, they have, as I say, sort of this robust amount of support that they get from their teachers and their parents. There's counselors, there's professionals, there's advisors, there's all of these different resources that are available for them to hopefully allow them to get the support, to get the accommodations, and to be successful in the classroom setting. But I think, in our experience, my experience working with some students and they're not all the same, and again I think there's different shades there, but at least for some of the students that we've worked with who have had 504 plans or IEP plans, have had major transition issues when it came to the university because they were so reliant on their parents. So, when they got here, they get that 'oh yeah you know you're an adult, you got to spread your wings, you got to do it for yourself,' but some of these students don't know how to be an adult because they've been so well catered to and they have never been in this position where they're going to have to be self-advocates. I think that's the biggest barrier, self-advocacy.” - UW DRS Staff.

DRS staff also spoke to the urgency of coaching students for post-high school in general, not all students decide to go to college but should be aware of their rights in the “real world” and what it entails to ask for accommodations in the work force or in any affiliations they get involved with.

“Maybe around the end of a sophomore year, I would gather the students and their parents and let them know what they're getting in high school and how in college things are different. Let them know that you can still get very similar things, but explain the differences, and I would bullet point that for them. The other thing that I would do is I would let them know they can always gather a directory of disability offices in different colleges and universities in the area. Give them a list of all the names and the contact information for the DRS offices so they know who to contact. Have the students recognize that they are graduating from high school next year, what do they need to know and what do they need to do.” -UW DRS Staff.

Disability Justice

Student Perspective

There was a common concern among all seven staff members pertaining to disability and intersectionality. Students also spoke about the importance of intersectionality and the role it plays in their lives and education. It is important to recognize that students with disabilities may hold more than one identity which further exacerbates disability and mental health. For example,

a student may have a mental health illness such as PTSD or anxiety after serving in the military, in addition to being a student of color prone to racism and discrimination. There are also students who identify as immigrants or as undocumented immigrants, who come from cultures where disability and mental health are seen negatively and as a result do not have the support needed to navigate their disability.

“A lot of people experience a lack of resources or accessibility. I think there needs to be changes within the K-12 system and a college institution. Sometimes children go to school for love and understanding due to their situations, this is something needed for disability justice. I feel like this would be exhibiting cultural competence as we all come from different backgrounds. Growing up with immigrant parents, they didn’t know how to handle or even knew I had a disability, they just thought I was a troublemaker. The teachers didn’t spot me out, they just told me to try harder. The journey of figuring this stuff out is hard which motivated me to become someone that my inner child needed when I was younger. Overall, I hope changes are made for disability justice.” - UWS Student

Staff Perspective

DRS Staff members also recognized the importance of having diverse disability offices for students to find coordinators and mentors they can relate with. More importantly, these offices need to have staff members who identify with a disability or at least have a strong understanding of disability and can serve as allies for students.

“I mean, as you know, we get that all the time in terms of students of color. Particularly when it comes to mental health, you know they’re like ‘well I don’t want my parents to know I’m having difficulty getting a diagnosis because I’m under my parents’ medical insurance.’ You know all these different challenges that you know students of color face when it comes to disability service. Oh, and then if you’re an international student, that is another set of barriers.” UW DRS Staff.

Student Perspective

One of the unfortunate realities that students of color and low-income students face in high school is not having the emotional support necessary to handle their disabilities from either their families or their school staff. There is an additional burden that comes with being the child of an immigrant, not all countries are accepting or understanding of mental health, and often

categorize illnesses as “temporary tantrums” or “problematic behavior outside of the norm” which leads to undiagnosed children which is detrimental to a child’s health. This immigrant child then grows up in a country where mental health is accepted, studied, medicated, and treated and while they know they can reach out for support, they don’t because their culture does not accept their disability. Then they get to college, where they are independent adults with all the freedom they never had, and yet they don’t have the means to pay the official diagnosis needed for their accommodations.

“If I were in high school again, I think that having a mental health advocate or psychologist at the school instead of just a regular counselor would help tremendously. I couldn’t bring any of the issues I was having because I heard rumors that they follow up with your parent and I wasn’t comfortable. I didn’t like the idea that they weren’t accommodating to students who were low-income and couldn’t do well in school because there weren’t that many resources for first-gen students about mental health.” - UWS Student

Staff Perspective

DRS Staff are too familiar with student cases like this, and they understand the importance of collaborating with other departments on campus to ensure students are connected with the resources they need.

“There is another important student population we need to acknowledge and support, and that is students that have been the subject of continuous racism and students who are low income. Student who haven’t had the resources that many of our other students have, there are schools with these students that don’t even have Special Es services for them because they are in low-income neighborhoods. And then, think about the expensive evaluation they need to get so that they can get into our office, I mean it’s just one thing after the next there’s so many barriers.” -UW DRS Staff

Running Start Students in Comparison to Students Leaving K-12

Among the students who participated in the questionnaire, some identified as being Running Start students prior to starting at the university. I was able to confirm that students who had prior experience working with disability offices in community colleges as Running Start

students, had a smoother transition to a four-year institution than students who started their university careers directly out of high school.

“Well, I first participated in the Running Start program, so I began taking college courses in the last two years of high school, so my transition wasn’t quite as distinct as someone who went fully from k-12 to college. That being said, the transition itself was fairly straightforward for me. I appreciated the greater personal responsibility/independence you’re given in college, and not having to spend the entire day around people was a vast improvement to my quality of life (I have autism spectrum disorder but was undiagnosed until age 19 so went through the entire K-12 system not understanding why every day was so taxing).”-UWS Student

Running Start students showed a bigger advantage than students who transferred directly from high school to higher education, they were more confident in sharing their experiences and had a stronger understanding of their disability/disabilities and how they impacted their learning. This was the same in comparison to students who had a gap between high school and college, students who had participated in Running Start, expressed having gained more independence and confidence at a younger age. Lastly, since they had experience working with faculty and college staff in their last two years of high school, by the time they enrolled in university, they had already developed the skills necessary to express their needs to their professors and college mentors.

COVID-19 and Disability

Students and DRS staff recognized that the COVID-19 pandemic brought an array of unfortunate realities for many people, exacerbated existing mental health, and even created new mental health barriers but if there was one good thing that the pandemic did bring it was the opportunity to make Universal Design the new norm, and we all missed that opportunity. For decades, the disability field has heard “you cannot work remotely, we need employees who can show up on a daily basis,” students have been told “this class is only taught in person because of the nature of the subject, it cannot be taught online so I’m sorry you have an autoimmune disease

but if you cannot make it to the required classes, you cannot major in this field.” We have all proven that we can work remotely and that we can learn remotely, we had the perfect opportunity to implement solid foundations that would make classes more accessible for all students, and we missed that opportunity the moment the conversation of going back to campus learning came up.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

Results Summary

There were a total of eight themes found in this research: 1) Students referred to the transition process from K-12 to higher education as “Terrible Transition,” 2) Students and DRS staff found it important to create spaces where students can connect with each other and support each other, 3) Students and staff found it important to implement mentorship programs for students to make the transition process smoother, 4) There is a lack of information, documentation, and proper diagnosis, 5) There is a lack of self-advocacy skills needed to ensure the attainment of accommodations and necessary services in college, 6) Students found that Disability Justice is important, 7) Students in Running Start programs have a smoother transition to higher education than students who enter college immediately after high school, and 8) COVID-19 further exacerbated disability and impacted learning.

Study Limitations

This research was done in Washington State by conducting interviews to seven DRS staff members in the three University of Washington campuses, in addition to surveying 31 students in the Seattle and Bothell campuses, with four follow up student interviews. This study is not only limited to Washington State but also to one university in the state, additional research is encouraged to be conducted in other states to get a broader understanding of the barriers students

face when leaving high school and starting university with a disability. The DRS staff interviewed shared having worked in other states aside from Washington and spoke about similar barriers they observed in the transition process from K-12 to higher education in those states, it is worthwhile and imperative to continue this research at the national level to ensure students with disabilities have an equitable education experience in higher education.

The transition from K-12 to higher education is an important topic that is not very much highlighted in scholarly work. Given the additional barriers the COVID-19 pandemic has brought upon our youth, it is imperative that we begin to prioritize our youth's education and overall life quality. We must address the barriers and challenges presented to students with disabilities from a young age as to ensure a smooth transition to higher education and an overall equitable education experience. Clark attempted to address this issue in *The Administrator/Educator Influence on the Transition of Students, with IDEA Services, from K-12 to Postsecondary/College During the COVID-19 Pandemic*. More work similar to Clark's and this study needs to be done to ensure that students leaving high school and entering the "real world" are equipped with the resources and knowledge they need for either university or the workforce.

Future Research

Future research can also include a study on Running Start students and do a comparison study on how students with disabilities perform in Running Start in comparison to students who do not identify with a disability. A step further would be to do a comparison study on how students who identify with a disability in Running Start, experience the transfer from K-12 to higher education, in comparison to students who identify with a disability but are not in Running Start. Another topic that is also worth researching is the transfer from undergraduate to graduate

school and do a comparison study on how students receiving accommodations in undergraduate school experience the transfer to graduate school, in comparison to those who do not receive accommodations in undergraduate school. Lastly, a comparison study can be made on students leaving higher education and entering the workforce with accommodation needs, in comparison to students entering the workforce without accommodation needs.

Policy Recommendations

In addition to these study recommendations, it is also recommended that other states pass similar bills as Washington's Senate Bill 6466 and establish their own Disability Services Transfer (DST) Work Group to address the transfer process of students with disabilities from one college institution to another at a national level. Further, states should consider establishing associations like Washington's COP so that communication between colleges and universities is prioritized at the national level, and students with disabilities can be better represented in the leadership and decision-making process of higher education's monetary and policy making processes. Lastly, higher education institutions are encouraged to promote leadership opportunities for students with disabilities by establishing similar clubs and programs like the University of Washington's ASUW Students with Disabilities Commission, this will allow for students with disabilities to feel included in the university social experience.

Researcher's Analysis and Recommendations

After interviewing four students, seven staff members, and surveying 31 students, I was able to find that the two main barriers students face when transitioning from K-12 to higher education are the lack of information on what to expect in college and the lack of self-advocacy skills to express their needs. In addition to these barriers, I was also able to conclude that the responsibility of students' success in college falls on both higher education and the K-12 system. I had also hypothesized that Running Start students experienced a smoother transition to higher

education than students who started college directly from high school, this was supported by the students who participated in the surveys for this study. Therefore, a more thorough research study focused on Running Start and accommodations is strongly recommended to merge the gaps in learning and experiences for students. Lastly, as the students and my colleagues mentioned in their interviews, I believe that COVID-19 did present us with the unique opportunity to implement Universal Design, and we missed a huge opportunity to implement it both in high school and in higher education.

There is a lot of work left to do to prioritize the needs for students with disabilities. First, the priority should be in educating the K-12 staff and educators in identifying disability barriers in a child's early life and keep diagnosis consistent until high school graduation. Secondly, we need to improve the transition plans for students nearing high school graduation, these plans need to include the feedback of higher education professionals as well as tools for students who want to go straight into the workforce or other affiliations after high school. Third, higher education institutions need to prioritize the needs for their disability offices by providing the appropriate funding for staff and resources, as well as providing a visible and accessible space for the offices. Fourth, higher education also needs to prioritize the mentorship of students and faculty; training needs to be given to students to promote self-advocacy skills, and training needs to be given to faculty and staff to ensure that disability offices are seen in a professional manner and ensure that students' accommodations are met and understood. Lastly, both K-12 institutions and higher education need to prioritize the needs of students of color, low-income students, and other marginalized identities to ensure a fruitful and welcoming educational experience for students.

Appendix

DRS Staff's Ideal World:

DRS Staff were asked to define their ideal world and share what resources and accommodations would look like for them both in K-12 and higher education. All seven staff members unanimously agreed that both K-12 and higher education have a responsibility in ensuring students have a smooth transition into college, but that K-12 staff need to take the lead in the 10th to 12th grades of high school. DRS Staff also spoke on the importance of ending the stigma around disability, and that it takes a collective and community effort to do so.

Staff One

In this staff member's ideal world, the following are the main things we need to target:

1. Educating the staff and the educators in K-12.
2. Educating the Higher Education educators and making sure that they know what the DRS/DRC does, how to implement accommodations, and how to route students to our offices.
3. Finding an effective way for the DRS/DRC offices to onboard students.

Staff Two:

In this staff member's ideal world, the following are the main things we need to target:

1. Recognize that students in K-12 face trauma from the programs and resources that are meant to "help" them get through school.
2. Improve existing transition plans from K-12 to higher education.
3. Educate the staff and educators in K-12.

Staff Three

In this staff member's ideal world, the following are the main things we need to target:

1. Create a DRS/DRC process that would allow for:
 - a. Mentorship around the college onboarding process.
 - b. Coaching that will promote self-advocacy for students with disability and other marginalized identities.
2. Create an educational program for faculty in which they learn:
 - a. What the DRS/DRC does.
 - b. The policies the department follows when granting accommodations.
 - c. How and when to route students to the DRS/DRC and understand that not all students need DRS accommodations but another resource on campus.
3. Create a visible and safe space for students on campus where they can be free to be themselves, not feel like they need to mask or hide their disabilities and find the support they need outside of the classroom.

Staff Four:

In this staff member's ideal world, the following are the main things we need to target:

1. Make the DRS a center that prioritizes mentorship and encouraging of student self-advocacy.
2. Prioritize students of color who identify with multiple identities including disability.
3. Create a program that will help students transfer from undergraduate to graduate school or to the real world.
4. Educate faculty.

Staff Five

In this staff member's ideal world, the following are the main things we need to target:

1. Educate faculty on how to be better supporters and mentors.
2. Gather students in the 10th grade of high school and teach them what the differences between K-12 are. Also, grab the parents and teach them this and how to support their kids in the transfer process while slowly transitioning them into independence and adulthood.
3. Provide high schools with a list of all the college's DRS/DRC office information so they can teach students how to seek support in higher education.
4. Revisit the requirements of attaining documentation/diagnostic documentation in higher education to relieve financial stress on students.
5. Evaluate students consistently in K-12. There are students who get diagnosed from Kindergarten-5th grade but are not re-evaluated in 6-8th grade and they are stuck with documentation from years ago to try to figure out what accommodations they need to have in 9-12th grade. Some students get to higher education with documentation from 4th grade that we can no longer accept due to how old it is and now they need to get expensive evaluations on top of tuition costs.
6. Create mentorship programs for students leaving undergrad and going to grad school or the real world.

Staff Six

In this staff member's ideal world, the following are the main things we need to target:

1. Educate K-12 staff and teachers on how to better support and counsel students. Educate students more about self-advocacy and how to communicate their needs once in college. Educate faculty on how to better support, mentor, and route students to the DRS.
2. Improve communication with high schools to ensure an effective transition to higher education.
3. Prioritize intersectionality and how it impacts a student's life, health, well-being, and education.
4. Provide mentorship for students once they are ready to graduate from undergrad and moving on to graduate school or the real world.
5. Prepare students more or have them more engaged in their 504 Plans and/or IEP Plans committees. Allow students to have a say in their education in K-12.

Staff Seven

In this staff member's ideal world, the following are the main things we need to target:

1. Higher Education needs to improve all of their services in general to focus in all aspects of student life, this includes prioritizing the DRS office and better funding it so students can have the mentorship and support they need to be their own self-advocates.
2. The DRS needs to build a peer-to-peer mentorship program so students can empower each other and learn from their shared experiences. Also, build mentorship programs for staff and faculty on campus so they get the support they need and can better serve students.
3. Strengthen partnerships with the local high schools and work closer with K-12 staff.
4. Have the DRS recognized as a legitimate professional office, and not just be seen as the place staff and faculty route students to when they think students need services; the DRS is only sought out when there is a problem to fix, very rarely is it sought out to be a learning opportunity for faculty to create classrooms with universal design in mind.

Student suggestions/recommendations

- Consider standardizing the application process for accommodations in the State and nationally, if possible, so that high school counselors have a platform to stand on when preparing students to transfer to higher education.
- Provide a freshman orientation over the summer with a short presentation from the DRS/DRC office to help students learn about resources and the difference between K-12 and higher education.
- Provide a DRS/DRC booth at freshman rush to help raise awareness of resources available to students.
- Have the DRS/DRC contact students who share they have a disability in their college application.
- Earlier detection of disability in K-12 is as crucial as providing the appropriate accommodations. Students did not know that they were under the wrong IEP Plan or 504 Plan until they started getting accommodations in college.
- DRS/DRC need to establish workshops, trainings, or mentorship programs to help with the transition process.
- Ensuring that all accommodations that require people to assist students meet the students' learning needs, and not just assign accommodations just to get the student through the door.
- High schools can prepare students by building skills in advance and prepping for college applications and explaining that resources exist in university. Universities should support students as soon as those students are accepted.
- From K-12 they should make teachers study different disabilities to be able to spot out students who may have learning disabilities because not all students have the accessibility. In K-12 it would be helpful to have coaches or academic advisors that students with disabilities can turn to and be able to work with to make sure they are succeeding in school. Starting from grade 11 (or earlier), it would help if they had a program to work on a transition plan, so students feel more prepared when entering college.

- High schools tend to have college fair events where they show various colleges that we can attend to. There should be a disability focused section, so it becomes more inclusive. It would also help them see what kind of accommodations each college must understand which ones are suitable for their needs.
- When switching to higher education, it would be nice to get the accommodation of seeing the syllabus a week before the quarter start so those with learning disabilities can plan ahead because on the first day of class, it's very overwhelming to focus on organizing your schedule while starting assignments/readings.
- Provide mental health counseling in high school will help students learn about self-advocacy, learn about their disability, how to manage flareups and medication, and better prepare them for the transition process to college and the mental health toll it takes to adapt to a new environment and set of expectations.
- K-12 systems need to implement more efforts in supporting students of color, first generation students, low-income students, and immigrant students all whose hardships further trigger students' mental health.
- Universities need to talk more in depth about the DRS/DRC and what is about. Professors in college also need to stop using ableist language in their syllabus and curriculum and not refer to the DRS as a center for "special needs" students because it is demoralizing and only feeds into the stigma of getting accommodations.

Bibliography

A Report to the Legislature: Disability Services Transfer Work Group. 2016.

<https://lawfilesext.leg.wa.gov/biennium/1993-94/Pdf/Bills/Session%20Laws/House/2327.SL.pdf?cite=1994%20c%20105%20C2%A7%203>

Clark, *The Administrator/Educator Influence on the Transition of Students, with IDEA Services, from K-12 to Postsecondary/College During the COVID-19 Pandemic*. 2021

Colker Ruth. *The Disability Pendulum: The First Decade of the Americans with Disabilities Act*. 2005.

Department of Education. Assistance to States for the Education of Children With Disabilities; Preschool Grants for Children With Disabilities. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2016-03-02/pdf/2016-03938.pdf>

https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/field_document/030419-acluschooldisciplinereport.pdf

Nelson et al. *Academic achievement of K-12 students with emotional and behavioral disorders*. 2004.

Rhodes et al. *An Education in Politics: The Origins and Evolution of No Child Left Behind*.

Social, Emotional and Behavioral Challenges. <https://www.nclld.org/research/state-of-learning-disabilities/social-emotional-and-behavioral-challenges/>

Social, Emotional and Behavioral Challenges. <https://www.ncl.org/research/state-of-learning-disabilities/social-emotional-and-behavioral-challenges/>

US Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2013-2014 Civil Rights Data Collection: A First Look (2016) and Civil Rights Data Collection Data Snapshot: School Discipline (2014). <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/2013-14-first-look.pdf>

US Department of Education. *Students with Disabilities Preparing for Postsecondary Education: Know Your Rights and Responsibilities*. 2011. [Students with Disabilities Preparing for Postsecondary Education](#)

US Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division: Disability Rights Section. <https://www.ada.gov/cguide.htm#anchor65610>