

# WORDING MATTERS: PRELIMINARY RESULTS IN IDENTIFYING STUDENTS WITH A DISABILITY IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

The prevalence of students with disabilities (SWD) in postsecondary education has increased exponentially over the last 30 years and it is likely that even more students with disabilities exist that have not disclosed their disability to the university. There are many reasons why students choose not to disclose, but when they don't, the university cannot accommodate their academic needs. This can result in poor academic achievement and even failure to obtain a degree. As a college degree becomes more vital to job attainment, identifying students with disabilities and getting them the proper support becomes more crucial. This study aimed to take a closer look at the prevalence of disability on a college campus, evaluate how the diction we use to discuss disability impacts the level of disability disclosure, and report on the differential outcomes of the wording.

## INTRODUCTION

The diversity of the student population, including minorities, students over the age of 25 and students with disabilities in postsecondary education, has grown substantially over the last two decades (Roberts et al, 2011). In 1978, studies showed that full-time students with disabilities at the postsecondary education level was only 2.6%. In 2011, this number was up to 11.3% and other studies suggest that as much as 50% of students with disabilities do not disclose their disabilities to their universities or professors (Smith, Hirschman, Rust, 2010). This which would indicate that the percentage of the student population that may needs different from that of mainstream students could be as high as 18-20% (Roberts, 2011).

Many students choose not to disclose their disabilities which impacts their ability to get access to the resources that they need to succeed in postsecondary education. There are many reasons that a student may choose not to disclose their disability to the university (Goode, 2006). Some simply don't know how to do so or don't fully understand how doing so may benefit them in their educational pursuit. Others are acutely

aware that officially disclosing their disability often makes them extra visible to their classmates, friends, and teachers. This calls attention to their disability and can make the student feel like an outsider in their classroom and opens the door for discrimination, both unintentional and intentional. Many students also struggle with their own identity as a SWD and do not see agreement in the way the university classifies SWD and how they see themselves. Lastly, some students who want to disclose never officially do because of the amount of paperwork required to do so. Declaring a disability with the university in order to gain access to services is an extensive process that requires detailed planning and organization, executive functions that many 18 years old struggle, regardless of disability status.

The A3 model, developed by Schwanke, Smith, and Edyburn (2001), is an important theoretical model which examines the relationship that exists between individual accommodation and universal design. The A3 model, formally the AAA model, is composed of 3 stages (advocacy, accommodation, and accessibility) which depict how disability needs are met over time.

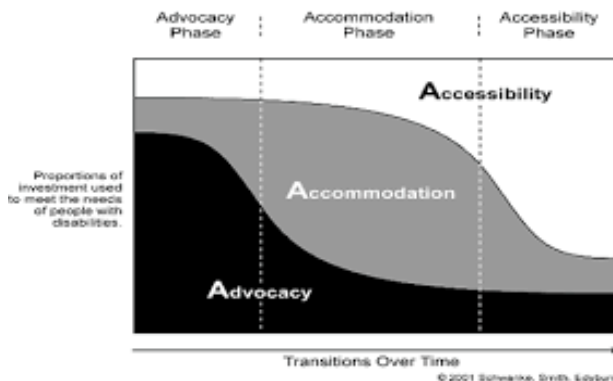


Figure 1: The A3 Model

Postsecondary education is largely functioning in the Accommodation phase of this model. Students with disabilities must individually contact the university and provide documentation to prove their disability in order to qualify for academic accommodations (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005). As previously stated, many students do

not disclose their disabilities to the university, resulting in a lack of accommodation and academic supports in higher education.

### Hypotheses

1. The prevalence of disability in postsecondary education is much higher than currently anticipated.
2. Using words like impairment or diagnosis instead of disability will allow more students to affiliate and disclose their disability.

## METHODS

### Survey Design

This study was administered through use of an anonymous survey. The survey contains 16 questions which establish basic demographics such as time in postsecondary education and field of study. The survey then asks the student whether or not they have a disability in 4 different ways. When asking SWDs to disclose their disabilities, universities commonly ask “Do you have a disability; yes or no?”. For this survey, we start with that question and then included questions that focused more on medical diagnoses and perceived functional impairments to see if there was a difference in how students answered questions that were worded differently, but still trying to get at the same basic information. The survey ended with questions which assess the students’ knowledge and usage of the student accessibility center on campus. One question also checks to make sure that the student has not taken the survey as part of another course in order to avoid duplicate responses.

### Recruitment

Participants recruited were all students at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM) during the Fall 2016 semester. Classes were selected for participation by using the course calendar for the fall 2016 semester at UWM. Courses that are taken predominantly by underclassmen were selected, in order to target that demographic. According to Thurlow, Sinclair, and Johnston, the dropout rate for students with disabilities is approximately twice that of general education students and these dropouts are more likely to happen in the first couple of years of schooling. Targeting the student population before substantial dropouts were likely was relevant for the study. Fifty course professors were contacted via email with a description of the study and 11 agreed to facilitate participation with their students. Research

participation was optional and anonymous. It was made clear to all students that a decision not to participate would in no way affect their grades or standing at the university.

Department	# of Students	Present	Declined	instruction method
Biosci	83	40	2	in person
English	38	38	0	in person
Econ	60	59	0	in person
Nursing	156	152	0	in person
Public Health	44	43	3	in person
English	14	14	0	in person
Kinesiology	55	53	0	in person
Business	200	150	1	In person
English	24	24	0	online
English	20	17	0	online
psych	280	180	100	online

Figure 2: Course Recruitment

### Participant Demographics

According to preliminary data, 614 students from 10 different courses have participated in this study. 71% of participants held either a freshman or sophomore status and 92% held a junior status or below. The field of study that the students identified as their own varied substantially and included all colleges at UWM except the College of Freshwater Sciences.

## RESULTS

Data analysis for this study is ongoing. To date, 614 surveys have been examined. Preliminary results of the Disability Prevalence Survey show significant discrepancies that exist in student disability identification, depending on the phrasing of the question. When asked, ‘do you have a disability?’ 5% of students identified as having a disability. However, when students were later asked if they had a medical diagnosis, 22% identified as having at least one medical diagnosis. Lastly, when asked if they felt like they had a functional impairment 19% identified a minimum of one category in which they felt as though they had an impairment. The figures below show the number of people who reported not having a disability when asked if they had a disability, if they had a medical diagnosis, or if they experienced impairments.

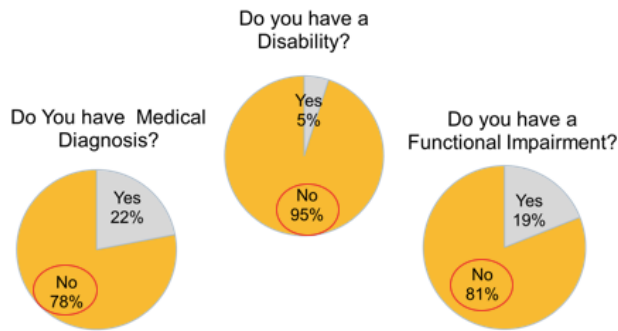


Figure 3: Preliminary Data from Disability Prevalence Survey

The graphs above show discrepancy of disability identification based on question phrasing. SWD appear to have largely underreported their disability when it was related to medical diagnoses or functional impairments usually associated with a disability.

When students were asked if they had disclosed their disability to the university, almost 77% said no. Reasons why they had not disclosed included: “didn’t know I could, did not know how, did not think it would help, did not want the university to know about my disability, and do not need/want accommodations.”

When the students were asked if they were aware of the services provided by the office of disability student services on campus, only 47% responded yes, and of those, only 6% had actually used those services before.

### DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

Ongoing data analysis prevent the discussion of any notable trends or findings, however, preliminary data suggests there may be many more people with disabilities on college campuses than universities are currently estimating. Data may also indicate that different outreach methodologies might be considered when trying to advertise the services of the disability student programs on college campuses since more than 50% of the polled students did not know what services they provided. Further analysis of this data should help illuminate the reasons behind the discrepancies and help us justify the need for universal design (UD) approaches in post-secondary education in order to assist in successful educational engagement by all students.

Rehabilitation engineering and assistive technology professionals are often the advocates and purveyors of universal design concepts, approaches and direct implementors of UD interventions need

evidence that supports the rationale for using UD. These preliminary data begin to reveal how dramatic the need might be for UD approaches. The difference between the numbers of students that identify as having a disability versus the number of students that might benefit from an intervention,

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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