



Considering Disability in Campus Housing: A Grounded Theory Exploration of Resident Directors' Understandings of Disability

Author



CHRISTOPHER TOUTAIN

Martha A. Darling Dean of Students
Reed College
toutainc@reed.edu

THE RESIDENTIAL EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

in higher education play a pivotal role in their overall campus education. However, little is known about the ways that staff who manage and support these residential environments understand and work with issues and concepts of disability. Utilizing constructivist grounded theory, this study examines how resident directors think about and work with disability within their positions in residential management. The study also explores how resident directors think about and understand disability as a component of diversity, the steps that they take in working with students with disabilities, and the support they provide their student staff in fostering residential communities inclusive of students with disabilities. The findings suggest that resident directors' work related to disabilities and disability identity is marked by tensions between individual understandings of disability and institutional systems and job expectations. Suggestions are provided for ways to better support resident directors as they navigate a conflict between personal beliefs and positional responsibilities.

.....

The number of students with disabilities who are enrolled in postsecondary education in the United States has risen over the past several decades (Newman et al., 2010; Snyder et al., 2019; Snyder & Dillow, 2010). While enrollment has increased, an achievement gap between college and university students with disabilities and those without appears to persist. Research has suggested that the awareness and responsiveness of residence life staff has significant implications for the campus experiences of students with disabilities (Wilke et al., 2019), but studies on the perspectives and understandings of staff remain quite limited (Vacarro & Kimball, 2019). The present qualitative study sought to investigate how residence life professional staff understand disability.

The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory study was to explore how resident directors (RDs) understand disability by asking the following question: In what ways do RDs from small private liberal arts colleges and universities think about and work with issues and concepts of disability in the context of campus housing? Answering this question can clarify which areas of future research on student affairs' support of students with disabilities are most important or need the most attention.

IMPORTANCE OF THE EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN CAMPUS HOUSING

The campus housing experience appears in the literature as something that may contribute to the persistence of students with disabilities (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011), while simultaneously presenting its own barriers and challenges (Camarena & Sarigiani, 2009). One theme that emerged across several studies on students with

disabilities in campus housing was that their experiences are not universal (Gelbar et al., 2015; Madriaga, 2010; Stumbo et al., 2010; Wilke et al., 2019). Studies of the campus experiences of students with autism spectrum disorders (Gelbar et al., 2015; Madriaga, 2010) revealed that the same aspect of the housing experience was supportive for some, while difficult for others. A recent study on the perspectives of college students with disabilities (Wilke et al., 2019) corroborated the notion that these experiences are highly individualized, arguing that student recommendations for increased flexibility were related to institutional policies that lack the individualization to allow students to be treated as the experts on their own lived experiences. The fact that students with disabilities recognized the benefits and challenges of campus housing reinforces the reality that these students do not all have the same experience in higher education.

Disability accommodations are crucial to the residential experience, as noted in multiple studies (Kurth & Mellard, 2006; Vaccaro & Kimball, 2019; Wilke et al., 2019). Kurth and Mellard (2006) revealed that students identified the lack of accessible housing as a factor impacting their ability to participate fully in campus activities, thus limiting their participation and academic engagement. The physical accessibility of campus housing also appeared as an important issue in interviews conducted by Wilke and colleagues (2019), who noted that only eight of 24 participants reported utilizing accommodations; the others felt that they lacked knowledge about accommodations, felt that accommodations were not available, and were concerned about the social impact of accommodations.

A focus on disability accommodations also appeared in research on staff perspectives of disability. Vaccaro and Kimball (2019) revealed that staff articulated tensions related to the provision of accommodations and noted that participants reported conflicting challenges in working with students with disabilities: being simultaneously required to account for both the needs of individual students and the needs of the larger community with respect to students' desire for accommodations such as emotional support animals and single rooms, as well as their ability to navigate interpersonal conflicts. When considered alongside the study by Wilke and colleagues (2019), it appears that both students and staff struggle with the complexity of residential accommodations and the social implications for the decisions they must make with respect to providing them.

DISABILITY STUDIES FRAMEWORK

The present study utilized disability studies research to interpret the findings and connect them to tangible implications for housing professionals in higher education. This research has established the historical dominance of the medical model of disability in higher education (e.g., Lewis, 2017), the intersection of disability with other forms of marginalization (e.g., Annamma et al., 2018; Harbour et al., 2017; Hernández-Saca et al., 2018; Pearson & Samura, 2017), and histories of stigma, oppression, and campus

... students identified the lack of accessible housing as a factor impacting their ability to participate fully in campus activities, thus limiting their participation and academic engagement.

access (e.g., Barragan & Nusbaum, 2017; Wood, 2017). Disability studies scholarship was utilized in considering how the findings of this study might be understood within a broader context of relevant research and, accordingly, contribute to the ongoing engagement and development of housing professionals, in the support of their residents.

METHODS

The goal of this study was to contribute to the literature on students with disabilities in campus housing by exploring resident directors' understandings of disability in their work. In order to focus on these understandings, resident directors were invited to speak about experiences or understandings of disability based on their own definitions of the term. The focus of this exploration was on both the depth and individualized nature of the RD experiences. For this reason, constructivist grounded theory was selected (Charmaz, 2014).

The purpose of grounded theory is to inductively generate knowledge up from the data at hand (Mills et al., 2014), and it is particularly appropriate when little is known about the topic of study, when explanatory theory is the desired aim of the research, or when there is a process likely to be explained by the research (Birks & Mills, 2012). The absence of literature on RD understandings of disability, the identification of the importance of residential processes for students with disabilities (Wilke et al., 2019), and a desire to contribute insight into how RDs think about disability and how they work with students with disabilities all supported grounded theory as a strong fit for this study. Further, constructivist grounded theory operates from the standpoint "that both data and analyses are social constructions that reflect the conditions of their production" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 240).

The assumptions of constructivist grounded theory are consistent with my own research positionality, as well as with disability studies scholarship on the socially constructed view of disability (Hadley & Archer, 2017; Harbour et al., 2017; Shallish, 2017). I approached the study with an understanding that my presence in the research had an influence on the creation of meaning throughout the analytical process. With a background in student affairs generally, and in campus housing specifically, I have regularly worked with both RDs and students with disabilities. It was necessary to attend to this background as I interpreted the data—to be mindful of the ways that my own prior experiences were impacting my analysis and co-construction of meaning. I also approached this study as someone who does not presently identify as disabled. Part of my attempt to ask questions about how systems operate arose from a desire to create knowledge alongside individuals with disabilities in ways that impact the systems from which ableist structures arose.

Data Collection and Participants

Participants were recruited from small and medium private colleges and universities on the West Coast that have liberal arts traditions and house at least 25 percent of enrolled undergraduates in campus housing. A total of 32 RDs, from 17 different higher education institutions, participated in individual semi-structured (Marshall & Rossman, 2016) interviews. A table of pseudonyms and demographic information for the RDs is included in Appendix A (*see pages 69-70*). The interviews averaged 84 minutes and ranged from 50 to 98 minutes. After the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, transcripts were then coded iteratively, as described by Charmaz (2014). Initial line-by-line coding was followed by rounds of focused and theoretical coding. Memos were utilized to generate categories, and theoretical sampling was employed to test for saturation of concepts and to assist in the development of themes.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

As suggested by Mills and colleagues (2014), memoing was conducted throughout the data collection and analysis and assisted in documenting the fit and rigor of the analytical process. Additionally, thematic and theoretical memos (Marshall & Rossman, 2016) lent credibility by encouraging constant reflexivity and analytical testing of the ideas that emerged. Triangulation (Marshall & Rossman, 2016) was also conducted throughout the later portions of the analysis by reviewing the available literature as ideas were generated. Themes were also triangulated through conversations with RDs and other campus housing professionals to assess whether the analysis was coherent based on their experiences in the field.

FINDINGS

The study revealed an emergent theory of active tension marking the ways that RDs think about, and work with, concepts and issues related to disability. These tensions existed particularly at points of conflict between individual RDs and the RD role and responsibilities. Through the analysis, the theory of active tensions between individuals and systems emerged in five distinct themes: (1) resident directors' development of their understandings of disability, (2) reactive approaches to disability, (3) the incongruity of requirements related to students' needs and accommodations, (4) questions of accommodations, and (5) siloed disability expertise.

Developing an Understanding of the Breadth and Individualization of Disability

The resident directors described their understanding of disability as having expanded over time and explained that their work with individual students helped them develop a broader understanding of what might constitute disability and the ways in which it might appear. Though they described their past educations as limited in the extent to which they engaged with topics of disability, they credited a variety of experiences within their RD positions as having contributed to more developed understandings of disability.

The RDs frequently described conflicts between their personal experiences and societal norms regarding disability and noted that, in order to expand their understanding, they had to avoid making disability-related assumptions that relied on narrow, normalizing definitions or stereotypes. Isa described avoiding assumptions about the way that certain disabilities may or may not appear.

I really have to keep myself in check when I come in contact with a student who discloses, "I have bipolar disorder." Or, "I have borderline personality disorder." Or, "I struggle with a major depressive disorder." Or anything like that. I have to keep myself in check that I'm not making assumptions as to what that means and how it manifests for a particular person.

Many of the RDs expressed a similar commitment to avoid assumptions about a specific student's experiences or needs with respect to disability. Adrian emphasized the importance of not predetermining appropriate supports based on an individual student's disability.

It's an important thing, working with students who need accommodations for their disabilities, that just because we have a certain answer doesn't mean that that's the prescription. Each student needs to be able to live out their own story. And no two students have the same story. So, explaining, "Alright, here's our options, what looks good to you? What fits correctly?"

Similarly, Gwen recognized the importance of not dismissing a particular student request based on her own assumptions of what she might have found helpful herself.

I had a student who had a large snake as their ESA. And it blew the central office's mind. And I had an initial reaction of, "there's going to be a huge snake living across the hall from my cats? Will it eat my cats?" That was my first reaction, and then I was like, "you know, I know that student. If they need a snake, they need a snake." And she explained it to me one day: that it's like a living weighted blanket. The snake rests on her shoulders while she does homework. It is grounding, it is calming, and it lives for 20 to 40 years. So, she was like, "why get a cat that you're going to have to mourn in 10? I can have the snake that lives almost forever." So I think there's just a knee jerk of, "I can't have it or I don't need it. Ergo you don't either."

Many of the RDs also acknowledged that, due to their limited experiences with disability and the effects of operating within a normalizing society, it was difficult to avoid these assumptions. However, these assumptions were not only attributed to limited experience with disability. Juli, for example, acknowledged that though she knew she was not supposed to make assumptions about students' disabilities, her knowledge of autism made avoiding these assumptions difficult; but she also felt that, as a result, she was better able to support students with disabilities in her halls.

The RDs explained that their work allowed them to develop a greater sense of the breadth of disability, as well as an appreciation for the highly individualized ways it appeared. Together with the elements of personal experiences and attempts to avoid assumptions, they seem to have developed more complex understandings of disability

through the RD role. The resident directors worked with students in ways that led to both a broader understanding of what constitutes disability and specific appreciation for the unique ways that disability may appear or be experienced by individual students.

Addressing Disability Reactively

While the RDs expressed a desire to be more proactive in their support of students with disabilities, they overwhelmingly described their disability-related work as reactive; most of their work with students with disabilities involved responding to student concerns and referring students to their disability services (DS) office. Many expressed a desire for increased collaboration with this office, simultaneously indicating that opportunities for collaboration would need to be set by departmental leadership since RDs were limited in their abilities to create such opportunities themselves.

In contrast to a reactive approach to accommodations, the RDs discussed more proactive ways of thinking about disability when they considered it through the lens of inclusion. They spoke about inclusion particularly in terms of the supervisory support they provided to RAs regarding community programming. Kevin elaborated on how he calls upon his RAs to be mindful in their program planning.

For my traditional hall we do a Halloween themed carnival game type thing. But none of the carnival games are very easily accessible. So this year we made sure we had things like coloring and cookie decorating and other things that people could sit down and engage with that weren't so physical.

Other RDs shared similar examples of working with RAs to make sure that movie nights included captions, that guest speakers used microphones, and that events were held in accessible buildings. These types of proactive measures reflected a focus on inclusion, but many participants described their responses to individual student needs as often still reactive and considered through an accommodations-focused lens.

The limited resources and agency that the directors described help contextualize certain aspects of what appeared to be their reactive approaches to their work related to disability. They expressed desires to function proactively in what they provided students but were unable to do so when the things they were providing, such as a single room or one with a roll-in shower, were in short supply. Isa articulated this frustration.

While we're within ADA compliance—I would never say we're not ADA compliant—there's a difference between being compliant and being affirming. Does that make sense? And I kind of wish we could get to this place where we're not just in compliance, but where we're going above and beyond, and our buildings are all incredibly accessible. But, I'm not on our operations planning committees.

The resident directors worked with students in ways that led to both a broader understanding of what constitutes disability and specific appreciation for the unique ways that disability may appear or be experienced by individual students.

Isa's example highlights how RDs identified their entry-level position as a factor that limited their impact on institution-level decisions. Their perceived limited institutional authority served as an inhibiting factor, which led them to respond to disability in reactive ways, dictated by the existing resources at their disposal.

Understanding Incongruities Between Stated Needs and Documentation Requirements

Throughout the interviews, RDs discussed the role they often play as first points of contact for students with questions about disability-related housing accommodations. Tension appeared across RD discussions of these interactions. A particularly salient tension that they expressed was rooted in their concern regarding student access to accommodations.

Expressions of frustration emerged from RDs' inability to provide accommodations based on students' self-reported needs. These frustrations were not voiced by all of the RDs; for some, like Joshua and Perry, relying on the expertise of the DS office appeared to alleviate this concern. Many of the RDs, however, were concerned that systems for accommodations approval were further marginalizing due to the time, energy, and access to resources that they require. Darren described this frustration relative to the additional steps that he observed in the accommodations process.

The person who is experiencing the sense of disrespect for their identity or their needs has to be the one who's the loudest advocate for themselves. That's quite unfortunate. I wish that wasn't the case. I wish we could just accept students at their word.

Across this and similar responses, RDs articulated their attempts to focus less on formal disability diagnoses and more on what students said that they needed.

The tensions that appeared to surround RD notions of student needs and documentation requirements were also framed by limited understanding of legal compliance and liability. Many RDs noted that they had only a cursory familiarity with the legal aspects of disabilities and that this lack of expertise led them to defer to others' instruction. As Carmen explained, "Because of the legal components, it's kind of like, well, we do what they say." These references to legal requirements often began with a focus on maintaining compliance or not running afoul of the law. The majority of RDs described their role as one in which they carried out the administrative decisions of others, even when they did not agree with those decisions. Megan discussed this tension, explaining, "I have to really balance that I am representing the institution, and I can't be like, 'well the institution was wrong.' That's never good. So that is very tricky." Megan's statement was representative of how many RDs felt: experiencing moments of disagreement with others at their institution but frequently finding themselves implementing decisions with which they may have disagreed, in part out of concerns for legal compliance.

Lastly, RDs described tension in supporting students through the disability accommodation process. Many of the resident directors acknowledged having limited positional agency with which to engage in advocating for students in these processes.

While the RDs expressed a desire to be more proactive in their support of students with disabilities, they overwhelmingly described their disability-related work as reactive. . . . [and] discussed more proactive ways of thinking about disability when they considered it through the lens of inclusion.

Carmen explained that, to her, advocating for students “doesn’t feel like real control or real change. At the end of the day, it’s just me being like, ‘please do the right thing.’” Advocacy-related tension also emerged regarding RD understanding of the processes for medical documentation and disability services accommodations. Bea shared concerns about socioeconomic barriers to documentation: “They need documentation, but is it really equitable for us to ask? Or for them to provide that if they don’t have the resources?” The RDs identified potential financial barriers that included students’ access to health insurance, the costs associated with taking time from a part-time job to attend off-campus medical appointments, and the ability to have or pay for transportation to those appointments.

Questioning Accommodations

In addition to concerns regarding the accommodations process, tensions also appeared when RDs questioned student requests for particular accommodations. The RDs focused these questions on matters of student growth and development and noted that interpersonal interactions, particularly those in moments of conflict, provide important opportunities for student development. They also expressed concern about requests from students for accommodations that would allow them to avoid these interactions and worried that these students would then miss out on the developmental opportunities that are an important part of the residential experience.

Several RDs spoke about departmental efforts to create contexts that encouraged student development. Perry identified this within his department.

It’s why we have a process of mediation for students. It’s why we require roommates for students. It makes so much more work for us, honestly. But that’s part of the struggle. We talk about challenge and support as those classic residence life things. We constantly try to balance the challenge and the support.

Joshua spoke directly to his belief that these moments of interpersonal conflict were important for all students, including those with disabilities, and expressed his belief that accommodations should not impede these educational moments.

That’s an important developmental process, in my personal opinion, to be able to confront issues and confront one another, and to manage and navigate that. I think that’s an important skill to learn. No matter what, even if you had a disability accommodation.

For the majority of the RDs, residence life offered important moments for the development of students’ social and conflict resolution skills, a perspective that at times appeared to run counter to student expectations of the residential experience.

Questions about the potential impact of accommodations on student development were exclusively related to non-physical disabilities. This is consistent with results from the literature across disability studies, which has established that there is a broad social awareness and acceptance of physical disabilities (e.g., Beilke & Yssel, 1999; Humphrey, 2000; Jensen et al., 2004; Samuels, 2013). Consistent with this research, RDs appeared to be more willing to question the impacts of accommodations specifically related to disabilities that were less easily visible.

Multiple RDs also expressed concerns about the potential for varied outcomes in students' ability to secure accommodations based on individual student access to resources. The RDs' concerns appeared to be rooted in beliefs that students who had abundant resources were often more easily able to obtain accommodations. Murphy explored this disparity.

If you have good social capital, you will navigate systems exceptionally well. And I think that is the case for disability stuff as well. If you have mom or dad who will call in and yell enough, or who will go get the documentation . . . you're going to have a much easier time than someone who does not have that.

Corey described similar frustrations.

I have heard from many students that their biggest barrier when it comes to accommodations is feeling like they can even access the ability to get the documents they require. Many of them come from low SES [socioeconomic status] families where they've had the documentation because it was provided through districts that have really great and robust systems. But then when they come to college, it's not good enough, and it's not relevant enough or new enough. . . . You're telling them they need to find an off-campus provider, and more often than not they don't have a car. . . . So I think a lot of our students just get really discouraged.

In these examples, the RDs problematized documentation requirements by raising questions about the impacts that they have on students, particularly those with limited resources.

Finally, the RDs appeared to have a heightened concern about the impact of documentation requirements, particularly when related to accommodations that were scarce. For example, none of the RDs were concerned about a student's ability to be approved for an emotional support animal based on whether other students had, or needed, the same accommodation. However, certain accommodations—particularly those that involved the physical characteristics of the residential buildings—were understood to be complicated by the availability of resources. When discussing this resource challenge, the RDs expressed optimism that over time their residential buildings would be renovated or rebuilt in ways that incorporated principles of universal

Expressions of frustration emerged from RDs' inability to provide accommodations based on students' self-reported needs.

design. In the meantime, they described the importance of taking it upon themselves to know the available spaces within their buildings, as well as the students who reside there, so that they could provide support and advocacy for students when individualized issues arose.

Operating as Generalists Between Silos of Expertise

When discussing how they interacted with issues of disability, RDs identified themselves as generalists who lacked specific expertise in disability or disability services. They also described how they perceived disability support as operating separately from their residence life departments. Understanding the RD position as a generalist role appeared to have a relationship with how the RDs perceived their levels of disability-specific knowledge. They acknowledged having foundational understandings of disability and indicated that their referral of students to disability services was in part due to a specialized knowledge of disability, held by DS administrators, which they did not have as generalists. Carmen shared an example of how she has described this to students.

I'll say, "You can go to the accessibility office, and you can talk to them about that and get an accommodation." And then I usually say, "I don't know a lot, but they are the experts and they know. They can talk to you about your options that maybe will help you manage both your depression and the impact that your depression is having on your schoolwork."

The RDs appeared to understand their referrals to disability services as being consistent with their role as generalists. They acknowledged that they may be well positioned to triage student issues related to disability but that they do not have the specific expertise to make decisions related to the provision of accommodations.

The frustration that many of the RDs articulated regarding the limits of their general knowledge and authority also appeared connected to the separate, siloed nature of the campus housing and DS offices. Not all participants shared this frustration. Frankie, for example, articulated a stronger sense of collaboration with the DS office and an ability to follow up with them as needed in order to support students. Unlike the majority of the RDs, she explained that the DS office and her office were in the same suite, which naturally reduced the siloed nature of their operations.

The RDs also discussed their role as generalists with respect to their perceptions of the legal liability involved in matters of disability. These perceptions are useful in understanding the RDs' deferral of disability-related matters to others on campus. Gwen described this tendency as she talked about areas of her role over which she asserts little control.

I think that there is a legitimate legal standing [associated with disability]. It is sometimes state level, sometimes federal level. And I don't have an understanding of all of that intimately. So, I think it's less that I don't have autonomy and more just "there be dragons." I don't know how to navigate that part so I don't.

There were numerous instances when the RDs described disagreeing with certain disability-related decisions, though in most of these instances they reported following instructions or advocating for students, but only to certain degrees. While they may have found themselves in situations where they disagreed with the decisions of DS offices or departmental leadership, recognizing that their knowledge of the legal landscape of disability was limited allowed them to take a deferential stance and carry out the decisions made by others.

Navigating Active Tensions Between Individuals and Systems

Across all the themes in this study, the RDs discussed navigating a number of disability-related issues when tensions emerged as they found themselves in the middle of individuals and systems that had competing interests, definitions, or values regarding disability. The RDs connected students with disabilities to DS administrators, while they simultaneously managed their own desires to support students beyond the bounds of those very processes. They also navigated their own understandings of how best to think about or respond to disability, demonstrating multi-layered understandings of disability as both a legally protected category and an important facet of diversity and student identity.

The RDs frequently spoke about the importance of making hall events more accessible, noting that this was important because they were not always aware of who might attend a program or what specific supports might be needed. These community-focused descriptions involved proactive consideration of potential disability, but tensions were visible when this approach was contrasted with the RDs' discussions and understandings of disability accommodations. Many of the RDs noted an absence of training or knowledge in this area. They often found themselves in the middle of legalistic individualized accommodations processes, for which they had received little training and for which they were quick to cede responsibility. They appeared to be more prepared to understand disability as an element of diversity at a community level but were limited—by their training and the systems within which they operate—in applying those principles to their support of specific students with disabilities.

Tension also appeared to be driven by the nature of the RD role and responsibilities. As part of their jobs, the resident directors were tasked to approach disability in rigid, individualized, and legalistic ways while also being mindful of the principles of social justice. The RDs valued a social model approach to disability but perceived themselves as limited in the extent to which they could make decisions that would extend inclusion to all of their residents. They did not perceive that disability inclusion was a

As part of their jobs, the resident directors were tasked to approach disability in rigid, individualized, and legalistic ways while also being mindful of the principles of social justice. . . . They did not perceive that disability inclusion was a high institutional priority.

high institutional priority. All the while, they interacted with individual students with disabilities in ways that informed their broader understanding of disability identity. Tensions were created within the RDs, as they came away from individual interactions with insights they might apply across their communities but in ways that were limited by the medical model frameworks of the systems within which they function.

LIMITATIONS

Multiple limitations were identified in this study. The RD participants worked at private, primarily residential, small and medium-sized colleges and universities on the West Coast of the United States that were rooted in liberal arts traditions. While these institutional characteristics narrowed the scope of the study, they simultaneously minimized institutional diversity in certain ways and did not account for it in others. The study did not include any resident directors from an Historically Black College or University, nor did it account for institutional religious affiliation. DisCrit literature (e.g., Annamma et al., 2018) raises critical questions about RD understandings of disability within the institutional contexts of their employment. Likewise, several RDs spoke about their understanding of disability as impacted by working at institutions with strong religious affiliations. These examples highlight the limitations of the institutional criteria of the study. Additionally, RDs opted into the study, leaving the possibility that those who elected not to respond to the recruitment emails held different understandings of disability than what emerged from the participants. Lastly, recruitment and interviews occurred during the summer and fall of 2020—in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic and in the wake of national response to the murder of George Floyd. These factors may have provided the RDs a particular lens through which they considered aspects of mental health and disability and of disability as an element of diversity. It is likely that RD understandings of these issues might have emerged from the data differently had the interviews taken place under a different global context.

IMPLICATIONS

The RDs frequently held personal understandings of disability as an element of diversity and felt they were more inclusion-oriented than were the systems of disability in the institutions at which they worked. The theory of tension that emerged suggests that those who supervise RDs need to be aware of how issues of disability appear in their daily work and how RDs may understand individual student circumstances to be at odds with institutional or departmental procedures, protocols, or practices. RD training and supervision, student staff training, and residential programming are three areas where tangible implications based on these tensions may be identified and supported. Such an awareness would allow supervisors to provide intentional support and development opportunities to the RDs related to their understanding of disability and their positional responsibilities.

The RDs also perceived tension in what they perceived at times to be the competing interests of the institutions by whom they were employed and the students in their residential communities who they aimed to support.

Tension emerged in this study between, on the one hand, RDs understanding disability in individualized ways and engaging in it as a topic of diversity and, on the other hand, their experiences of departmental discussions and development opportunities in which disability was rarely centered. Based on the emergent theory of active tensions surrounding RD understandings of disability, RD supervisors should create opportunities for professional staff to discuss the experiences of students with disabilities in their residential environments. Bringing DS staff into department meetings or trainings to present case studies of interactive accommodation processes for residential students with disabilities would be one way to develop these conversations.

Similarly, time and professional development resources should be devoted to exploring disability as an aspect of diversity. There are multiple ways this might be undertaken, including engaging with faculty that residence life departments may already have on their campuses or utilizing relevant scholarship (e.g., Aquino, 2016; Pearson & Samura, 2017; Shallish, 2015) in departmental mission, vision, and planning sessions. RDs should also be supported by supervisors in deepening their familiarity with DisCrit (e.g., Annamma et al., 2018; Erevelles & Minear, 2013). Many of the RDs perceived tension at the limits of their abilities to advocate for students. Developing their understandings of disability as an element of diversity and as an identity that has intersectional implications will support their abilities in the cross-departmental support of students with disabilities.

RDs are also well positioned to employ both these suggestions within their residential programs or curricula. RDs who supervise living-learning communities should be encouraged to develop collaborative learning opportunities. In addition to devoting time to training resident assistants on disability services' policies and practices, RDs should also infuse RA training with an introduction to the social model of disability so that RDs can better promote universal design-based approaches to RA programs and community development opportunities. The more that RDs are in conversation with their RAs and their residents regarding the social model, the more likely they may be able to identify and articulate the tensions they experience between individuals and systems. Articulating these tensions may support broader departmental or cross-departmental adoption of universal approaches to residential policies, procedures, and educational opportunities.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There is limited research on how campus housing administrators think about and support students with disabilities. The present study has contributed to filling this gap by beginning to generate emergent themes in this area. Preliminarily, these themes are

marked by tensions that exist and must be navigated by campus housing administrators. Additional research is needed in order to add analytical depth to the experiences and understandings of campus housing administrators regarding issues of disability.

Additional research involving RDs at public institutions, large institutions, or professionally focused colleges and universities would aid in understanding whether relationships exist between institutional types and RD understandings and perspectives. Simultaneously, such relationships should also be explored through a narrowing of institutional criteria, which may bring greater nuance to understanding RD notions of disability.

CONCLUSION

Understanding how student affairs professionals engage with disability is vital to overall efforts to support students with disabilities in higher education. The present study sought to contribute to this research by exploring how RDs think about and work with issues and concepts of disability in their roles as campus housing administrators. The analysis resulted in the emergence of five themes, and RDs appeared to understand concepts of disability that were in dynamic tension with each other. The RDs also perceived tension in what they perceived at times to be the competing interests of the institutions by whom they were employed and the students in their residential communities who they aimed to support. Though these findings are limited to the specific RDs involved in the study, the tensions identified are valuable in supporting additional research in this area. A greater understanding of how disability is understood among RDs will allow campus housing departments to better equip the administrators responsible for providing service and support to students with disabilities in campus housing. ■

REFERENCES

- Annamma, S. A., Ferri, B. A., & Connor, D. J. (2018). Disability Critical Race Theory: Exploring the intersectional lineage, emergence, and potential futures of DisCrit in education. *Review of Research in Education*, 42, 46–71. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X18759041>
- Aquino, K. C. (2016). A new theoretical approach to postsecondary student disability: Disability-Diversity (Dis)Connect Model. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 29(4), 317–330. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1133815>
- Barragan, E., & Nusbaum, E. A. (2017). Perceptions of disability on a post-secondary campus: Implications for oppression and human love. In S. L. Kerschbaum, L. T. Eisenman, & J. M. Jones (Eds.), *Negotiating disability: Disclosure and higher education* (pp. 39–55). University of Michigan Press.
- Beilke, J. R., & Yssel, N. (1999). The chilly climate for students with disabilities in higher education. *College Student Journal*, 33(3), 364–367.
- Birks, M., & Mills, J. (2012). *Grounded theory: A practical guide*. Sage.
- Camarena, P. M., & Sarigiani, P. A. (2009). Postsecondary educational aspirations of high-functioning adolescents with autism spectrum disorders and their parents. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 24(2), 115–128. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088357609332675>
- Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Erevelles, N., & Minear, A. (2013). Unspeakable offenses: Untangling race and disability in discourses of intersectionality. In L. Davis (Ed.), *The disability studies reader* (4th ed., pp. 354–368). Routledge.
- Gelbar, N. W., Shefcyk, A., & Reichow, B. (2015). A comprehensive survey of current and former college students with autism spectrum disorders. *The Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine*, 88(1), 45–68. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25745374/>
- Hadley, W., & Archer, D. E. (2017). College students with learning disabilities: An at-risk population absent from the conversation of diversity. In E. Kim & K. C. Aquino (Eds.), *Disability as diversity in higher education: Policies and practices to enhance student success* (pp. 75–88). Routledge.
- Harbour, S. W., Boone, R., Heath, E. B., & Ledbetter, S. G. (2017). “Overcoming” in disability studies and African American culture. In S. L. Kerschbaum, L. T. Eisenman, & J. M. Jones (Eds.), *Negotiating disability: Disclosure and higher education* (pp. 149–169). University of Michigan Press.
- Hernández-Saca, D. I., Gutmann Kahn, L., & Cannon, M. A. (2018). Intersectionality disability research: How dis/ability research in education engages intersectionality to uncover the multidimensional construction of dis/abled experiences. *Review of Research in Education*, 42, 286–311. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X18762439>
- Humphrey, J. C. (2000). Researching disability politics, or, some problems with the social models in practice. *Disability & Society*, 15(1), 63–86. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687590025775>
- Jensen, J. M., McCrary, N., Krampe, K., & Cooper, J. (2004). Trying to do the right thing: Faculty attitudes toward accommodating students with learning disabilities. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 17(2), 81–90. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ876004>
- Kurth, N., & Mellard, D. (2006). Student perceptions of the accommodation process in postsecondary education. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 19(1), 71–84. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ844625.pdf>

- Lewis, B. (2017). Narrating and navigating mental difference and disability. In S. L. Kerschbaum, L. T. Eisenman, & J. M. Jones (Eds.), *Negotiating disability: Disclosure and higher education* (pp. 191–209). University of Michigan Press.
- Madriaga, M. (2010). "I avoid pubs and the student union like the plague": Students with Asperger syndrome and their negotiation of university spaces. *Children's Geographies*, 8(1), 39–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1473280903500166>
- Mamiseishvili, K., & Koch, L. C. (2011). First-to-second-year persistence of students with disabilities in postsecondary institutions in the United States. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*, 54(2), 93–105. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034355210382580>
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (2016) *Designing qualitative research* (6th ed.). Sage.
- Mills, J., Birks, M., & Hoare, K. (2014). Grounded theory. In J. Mills & M. Birks (Eds.), *Qualitative methodology: A practical guide* (pp. 107–121). Sage.
- Newman, L., Wagner, M., Cameto, R., Knokey, A. M., & Shaver, D. (2010). *Comparisons across time of the outcomes of youth with disabilities up to 4 years after high school* (A report of findings from the National Longitudinal Transition Study [NLTS] and the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 [NLTS-2; NCSER 2010-3008]). SRI International. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED512149.pdf>
- Pearson, H., & Samura, M. (2017). Using a spatial lens to examine disability as diversity on college campuses. In E. Kim & K. C. Aquino (Eds.), *Disability as diversity in higher education: Policies and practices to enhance student success* (pp. 89–103). Routledge.
- Samuels, E. (2013). My body, my closet: Invisible disability and the limits of coming out. In L. Davis (Ed.), *The disability studies reader* (4th ed., pp. 316–332). Routledge.
- Shallish, L. (2015). "Just how much diversity will the law permit?": The Americans with Disabilities Act, diversity, and disability in higher education. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 35(3). <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v35i3.4942>
- Shallish, L. (2017). A different diversity? Challenging the exclusion of disability studies from higher education research and practice. In E. Kim & K. C. Aquino (Eds.), *Disability as diversity in higher education: Policies and practices to enhance student success* (pp. 19–30). Routledge.
- Snyder, T. D., de Brey, C., & Dillow, S. A. (2019). *Digest of education statistics 2018*. National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2020/2020009.pdf>
- Snyder, T. D., & Dillow, S. A. (2010). *Digest of education statistics 2009*. National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2010/2010013.pdf>
- Stumbo, N. J., Hedrick, B. N., Weisman, C., & Martin, J. K. (2010). An exploration into the barriers and facilitators experienced by university graduates with disabilities requiring personal assistance services. *Journal of Science Education for Students with Disabilities*, 14(1), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.14448/jsesd.03.0001>
- Vaccaro, A., & Kimball, E. (2019). Navigating disability in campus housing: An ecological analysis of student affairs work. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 56(2), 168–180. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2018.1490307>
- Wilke, A. K., Evans, N. J., Varland, C. E., Brown, K. R., & Broido, E. M. (2019). Access and integration: Perspectives of disabled students living on campus. *The Journal of College and University Student Housing*, 46(1), 46–60. https://www.nxtbook.com/nxtbooks/acuho/journal_vol46no1/index.php#/p/45
- Wood, T. (2017). Rhetorical disclosures: The stakes of disability identity in higher education. In S. L. Kerschbaum, L. T. Eisenman, & J. M. Jones (Eds.), *Negotiating disability: Disclosure and higher education* (pp. 75–91). University of Michigan Press.

APPENDIX A

Participant Demographic Information

Name	Age	Gender identity	Race/ ethnicity	Ability/ disability	Years experience	Graduate school
Aaron	31	Male	White	Able	3	Masters-Higher Ed. Admin.
Adrian	25	Non binary	Asian	Physically able, diagnosed anxiety	2	Masters-Higher Ed. Admin.
Angela	25	Female	Multi-ethnic	Able bodied	2	Masters-College Counseling
Bea	25	Woman	Asian American	Type 1 diabetes	1	Masters-Higher Ed. Admin.
Brooke	27	Female	White, Caucasian	Able bodied	2	Masters-Higher Ed. Admin.
Carmen	27	Woman	Biracial	Able	4	Masters-Higher Ed. Admin.
Cathryn	27	Female	White	No disabilities	1	Masters-Higher Ed. Admin.
Corey	26	Male	White	Able bodied	5	MBA
Damien	28	Cisgender male	African American	Able bodied	1	Masters-Higher Ed. Admin.
Darren	30	Cisgender male	White, Caucasian	Able bodied	4	Masters-Higher Ed. Admin.
Elizabeth	29	Female	White	I have a disability	2	Masters-Higher Ed. Admin.
Emily	30	Woman	White, Caucasian	Able	2	Masters-Higher Ed. Admin.
Frankie	27	Woman	White, Caucasian	Able	2	Masters
Gwen	27	Cis woman	White, Caucasian	Able	2	Masters-Higher Ed. Admin.
Isa	32	Female	White, Caucasian	I have a disability	3	Masters-College Counseling
Jessica	31	Female	Hispanic	Able	2	Masters

Appendix A continues on page 70

APPENDIX A (continued from page 69)**Participant Demographic Information**

Name	Age	Gender identity	Race/ethnicity	Ability/disability	Years experience	Graduate school
Joshua	29	Male	White	No disabilities	7	Doctorate-Higher Ed. Leadership
Juli	26	Female	Latina	Temporarily able bodied	1	Masters-Higher Ed. Admin.
Kevin	29	Male	Biracial	Able	4	Masters-Higher Ed. Admin.
Lynn	24	Female	White, Caucasian	No disabilities	1	None
Mac	28	Male	White, Caucasian	Presently able	2	Masters-Higher Ed. Admin.
Maeve	27	Female	White	Able	6	Masters-Mental Health, Wellness
Megan	30	Woman	White	I have a disability	7	Masters-Higher Ed. Admin.
Murphy	27	Trans male	White	I have a disability	5	Masters-Higher Ed. Admin.
Noelle	25	Cis woman	White	I have a disability	1	Masters-Higher Ed. Admin.
Parker	27	Male	Asian American	Able bodied	6	Masters-Higher Ed. Admin.
Perry	24	Male	White, Hispanic	Able	3	Masters-Theol.
Robin	40	Male	White	Able	6	Masters
Rose	23	Female	White	No disabilities	1	None
Scotty	27	Male	Latino & Middle Eastern	Able bodied	4	Masters
Theo	26	Male	Latinx	Able bodied	2	Masters-Higher Ed. Admin.
Vanessa	24	Woman	Asian Pacific Islander	Able	2	Masters

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. This article highlighted how resident directors think about and work with disability. Based on what you have read, what is your understanding of the disability services offered at your institution?
2. How may gender, age, race, and other identities intersect with disability? Do students need different accommodations even though they have the same disability?
3. What challenges do students with disabilities face in getting accommodations on your campus besides providing proper documentation? How can your department support students in overcoming those challenges?
4. How is the existence of disability accommodations communicated on your campus? Consider the wide spectrum of disabilities and disorders and then the spectrums within those disabilities and disorders.
5. Who is responsible for communicating information about the available accommodations and assessing students' needs? What is your role in this process?
6. What narrative is shared with prospective residential students about accessibility on the campus so that they can make appropriate choices about where they want to live?

Discussion questions prepared by Abel Ramirez, College of Lake County, and Cornelia Forrester Slate, Olive-Harvey College, City Colleges of Chicago