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MANUSCRIPT

Emotional Support Animals on Campus: A Narrative Inquiry

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Requests for emotional support animals (ESAs) on college and university campuses have been increasing over the years, as more and more students are presenting documentation to allow them to live with their ESA in a higher education setting that does not otherwise allow pets. Research to date has focused primarily on higher education narratives about ESAs (e.g., issues like avoiding risk), but little is known about the individuals who have ESAs. Using a qualitative three-dimensional narrative approach, this study sought to explore the meaning that ESAs have for these students and the impacts of the unique campus housing setting on ESA partnerships. We collected information from three participant narratives. Four themes related to ESAs in campus housing arose from the data: the desirability of on-campus housing, the importance of a sense of community on campus, requirements needed to prove legitimacy, and policy restrictions on ESAs. The narratives inform suggestions for higher education institution administrators to better support ESA partnerships individually, systemically, and within the on-campus community.

Therapeutic relationships with animals can be powerful agents in leveling the playing field for individuals with emotional needs that affect their quality of life and their academic success. Emotional support animals (ESAs) are recognized by the Fair Housing Act (Fair Housing Act, 1968) as animals who provide emotional support or comfort in order to ameliorate symptoms of an individual's disability. Documentation of the need for an emotional support animal includes a letter from a health professional who can confirm the presence of a diagnosis such as anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress, among others, and that living with the specified animal helps to alleviate the individual's symptoms.

Requests for ESAs on campus have increased considerably in the past decade (Kogan et al., 2016; Lanning et al., 2022; Taylor, 2016). In 2012, *Velzen v. Grand Valley State University* determined that residence halls fit under the definition of "dwelling," and therefore the Fair Housing Act applies to campus housing (Hutchens, 2014). Access can be limited or modified if an animal's presence fundamentally changes the function of a setting or facility or interferes with the welfare or safety of other individuals (Air Carrier Access Act, 2003; Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, 1990; Fair Housing Act, 1968). In a residence hall setting, living in close proximity to an ESA may create problems for other residents who have allergies or

specific phobias. Additionally, access boundaries are unclear in situations such as dining halls or building lounges, which are in a gray area between housing and public spaces. As a result, there is more flexibility for higher education institutions to develop policies and additional restrictions to protect other residents. Policies such as handler responsibility agreements, enforced animal behavior rules, and restrictions on types or ages of animals may be imposed while still following the Fair Housing Act guidelines (Salminen & Gregory, 2018). As yet, it is unclear what higher education institution policies may be helpful and what constitutes appropriate denial of accommodation, resulting in unclear ESA policies at many higher education institutions (Lanning et al., 2022).

The ESA policies that do exist on some campuses are often ambiguous and shifting as clarifications are continually being made after relevant court rulings (Masinter, 2015), and education, awareness, and support for ESA partnerships are generally lacking on many campuses (Kogan et al., 2016; Lanning et al., 2022). One driving force in developing ESA policies at higher education institutions is avoiding major incidents or complaints about ESAs while also seeking to avoid conflicting with federal law (Hutchens, 2014; Lanning et al., 2022). The extant literature on ESAs in campus settings has often centered on institutional perspectives, policy, and risk avoidance, but little is known about the experiences of students who have ESAs on campus. The current study aims to illuminate the impacts of policy on real people and to provide the rich context that matters on an individual and systemic level but is often overlooked. Specifically, the study explores the experience of students with ESAs living in on-campus housing.

METHODOLOGY

Narrative methodology stems from an assumption that a story provides a rich context for interpretation (Schram, 2006). The focus is on both the context—tensions, dichotomies, and turning points (Creswell & Poth, 2016)—and the content communicated through the structure of the story. A qualitative orientation has less interest in facts or in an objective reality and instead focuses on voice and contextually situated meanings that people create about their lived experiences (Schram, 2006).

An important tool of narrative inquiry is re-storying: analyzing a participant's narrative for the main elements of a story (e.g., characters, timeline) and then rewriting it in a chronological sequence that usually implies causality or other relationships among events and characters. The rewritten sequence and relationships among events and characters also provide some resolution to the story's main themes (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2000). The telling of the story can effectively emphasize the most essential aspects of participants' experience through juxtaposition, metaphor, or other literary devices that draw the readers' attention. The researcher plays a central role in drawing out a more three-dimensional account of the participant's actual lived experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004), and then participants

are encouraged to engage fully in a collaborative analysis by sharing their insights and reactions to the researcher's re-storied draft (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Narrative methodology and theory can open a dialogue with institutions, highlighting the power they have to control the narratives of students with ESAs in their jurisdictions and illuminating any experiences of oppression (Delgado, 1995). Those with ESAs are often treated by the public with suspicion, as if they have somehow committed fraud, especially as mental and emotional disabilities are often stigmatized and thus remain invisible (Foster, 2018; Stockman, 2019). The process of narrative inquiry provides those with disabilities an opportunity to use their voices to share the truth of their experience.

Participants

Eligible participants were of any gender, race, or ability level; were over the age of 18; resided in on-campus housing at a land-grant university in the Intermountain West for at least one semester; and had an emotional support animal (*not* a service animal, which is trained to perform specific tasks for an individual with a disability, e.g., guide dogs for the blind or alert dogs for the deaf). Since an initial study focused on the voices of those with ESAs in on-campus housing, the inclusion criteria were intentionally left broad, with no attempt to target any specific identity or situation.

Procedure

An on-campus official emailed a flyer to all residents of on-campus housing who were documented as having an ESA. The first three individuals who connected with the researcher and met the inclusion criteria were selected to participate in the study. Each of them then met with a researcher via Zoom for two recorded 45-minute interviews.

The first interview focused on understanding participants' experiences with their ESAs and what this relationship meant to them by exploring the following topics: (1) ESA characteristics, (2) environmental and internal context prior to obtaining their ESA and the impact of the disability on their life, (3) how the ESA was obtained and documented, (4) how their life changed since having the ESA, (5) moments that stood out as being particularly difficult or rewarding regarding their ESA, (6) what their ESA has meant to them over time, and (7) anything else that is important to understanding their story. Interviews included follow-up questions for clarification and greater detail. The researcher took notes during the interviews, including the participants' personal reactions and points of emphasis.

Between interviews, the initial one was transcribed and coded with the use of the software program MAXQDA for major indicators of time, setting, plot, and themes. Notes from the researcher's experience also served as data and were integrated with non-verbal social cues and emotional content from video recordings. The interviews were then re-storied by the researcher

using a three-dimensional narrative analysis approach with the integration of quotations and information that best represented each theme found in the analysis of the first interview. Participants chose pseudonyms, and the researcher broadened or obscured any major details that might identify them. Prior to the second interview, participants were asked to read and analyze the re-story, inspecting it for accuracy and suggesting alterations.

The second interview focused on triangulating the re-storied data with the aid of an artifact (such as an object, a piece of writing, or a sound), the participants' experience of the first interview, and collaborative discussion about the accuracy of the re-storied narrative. Participants were told that their artifact could be anything that best symbolized what having their ESA on campus housing meant to them. Together, the participant and researcher discussed the meaning of their chosen artifact and its fit with the emphasized themes in the re-story. Artifacts were not considered narrative data; they were a tool for checking the trustworthiness of the re-story.

After the second interview, participants were asked to review the revised re-story and provide any feedback until the story felt accurate and complete. Participants received a $25 gift card for their participation.

FINDINGS

Participants' re-stories are the primary data used to answer the research questions. We first share backgrounds on each participant's ESA and major themes of what the ESA means to them, individually. We then dive into common themes focusing on topics most applicable to the effect of the on-campus setting on ESA partnerships. For clarity, excerpts from the re-storied data are presented in italics throughout the rest of the document.

Chris and Gerald

Chris, a married, out-of-state undergraduate student, was diagnosed with Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in 2018. *He went to therapy for a year in his home state before coming to a different state to attend the university in 2019. . . . Right about the time that the COVID-19 pandemic gained ground in the United States, he felt an unanticipated wave of difficulties and residue from his childhood trauma. Being a poor student, he couldn't afford to go to therapy when he came to the university, and his anxiety and the effects of the pandemic were weighing on his mental health. Within the context of the pandemic, a recent move, and increasing anxieties related to his diagnosis, Chris and his wife were anticipating how lonely they were both going to be. Chris and his wife were living in on-campus housing when they decided to get a pet rabbit [for] his wife's birthday, "She just wanted something adorable in the house besides myself!" he joked. "So, we got a bunny."* He is a gray-brown Rex mixed breed named Gerald. After a resident assistant discovered the rabbit and told Chris that appropriate documentation would be needed for it to stay on campus, Chris started the paperwork immediately and Gerald was subsequently accepted as an ESA within about a week.

Permission for emotional expression. *Chris held [Gerald] up to the camera during the interview, with both hands tenderly supporting him. . . . An emotional connection was evident in the very way he moved: with gentleness and patience, taking care to move slowly and keep Gerald comfortable, sensitive to his needs and his experience as he was carried and held. It seemed to be a clear, visible contrast to how Chris described himself before Gerald entered his life. "One of the things I struggled with in my mental illness is . . . ignoring my emotion . . . I didn't realize how hard my heart was. I wasn't belligerent or anything, just unaccepting of emotion, and unaccepting of my feelings . . . I didn't want to acknowledge that I didn't feel."*

A drive to nurture and an affinity for new life is not often praised in men in Westernized Euro-American cultures but is more acceptable when an animal is involved. Chris reminisced about when Gerald was so small, maybe a third of the size he is now. He almost seemed embarrassed to share the feelings that came rushing in at the thought of such a tiny bunny he had held against his chest. "There's just this piece of your heart that if you're holding a tiny animal, especially like a rabbit for me . . . It just softens your heart . . ."

Honest feedback about lovability. *When Chris had first picked [Gerald] up and held him, the breeders were surprised "because apparently he was really a spaz when people were holding him. But with me, he immediately was just really, really calm." This first experience . . . had a profound effect on Chris. One of the deepest issues haunting him from his childhood trauma was that he was not lovable. And here a rabbit had chosen him to be comfortable with. This rabbit had chosen him . . . Through a relationship with Gerald, Chris experiences himself in a powerful, new, and therapeutic way . . . A rabbit is honest, incapable of an agenda, and defenseless and vulnerable. A rabbit has every reason to be choosy . . . And yet, just like that first day they met, Gerald continues to choose Chris every day. . . . As tears came to his eyes, Chris expressed the hope and invitation Gerald's love offered him. . . . Gerald, an animal that can't even speak his language, gave him permission. Chris reasons determinedly, "If this little creature can love me, then I can love myself."*

Ellie and Hermione

Ellie is a partnered international student coming to the university for graduate school. *As an international student, Ellie could foresee all the anxieties that come with traveling to and living in another country. She anticipated feeling quite isolated. On top of that, COVID-19 was in full swing in the United States and social distancing practices made creating a sense of community or even casual friendships incredibly challenging . . . They thought that a dog might be a particularly effective emotional and social support for the stressful and isolating time ahead.*

Ellie and her partner moved to on-campus housing and immediately began the ESA documentation process. After completing the required ESA documentation with the university, they adopted Hermione, a one-and-a-half-year-old brown herding breed, from a shelter. "Hermione ended up in the shelter because she had nipped a maintenance worker who had come into her

family's backyard, and they consequently weren't comfortable with keeping her". . . When they went to meet her, Ellie's partner knew for sure that she was the right dog for them, but Ellie was more skeptical because of the history she learned about. At the meeting, Hermione was stranger shy and took her time to get to know them, but then warmed up rather quickly.

Sense of purpose: Giving a being a better life. *Hermione came with her name, and Ellie and her partner kept it, as they respected and honored Hermione's history and shy personality. . . . Part of what has brought the most joy and meaning in their relationship stems from Hermione's initially shy and hesitant nature . . . Ellie delights in providing Hermione with a home and experiences to encourage Hermione to grow more into herself and experience more of the joy in life, especially considering where she had come. . . . from. As if to demonstrate the better life she is living, in the background during the interview, Hermione flipped over onto her back, front paws in the air, back legs spread out across the length of the couch. . . . Yes, things are pretty good for her, now.*

Over much time, exposure, and confidence-building, Hermione has not gotten more comfortable with or interested in strangers . . . Ellie advocates for Hermione when strangers want to pet [her] . . . Hermione had already been rejected by one family because of the expectations that she should be okay with strangers approaching her. Some of the power in the relationship for Ellie seems to stem from the opportunity to provide free, chosen, and conscious acceptance for Hermione, which Hermione did not have before . . . Through wanting courage, joy, and connection for Hermione, Ellie found it for herself.

Rachel and Fish

Rachel, a graduate student, and her husband were living off campus with family when they adopted a mixed breed puppy, Fish. Rachel had previously been diagnosed with depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) due to trauma that occurred during a mission trip to a foreign country. She discovered how helpful Fish was for managing her PTSD and depression symptoms. *"Unbeknownst to me, these animals were really important for me."*

Rachel and her partner had been benefiting from the emotional support that Fish offered for about six months, when they decided to move out of their extended family's home to have their own space close to campus, in an apartment or other rental unit. *They had not entirely decided where they would live, but they used the university documentation [for an ESA] to prepare because it was the most comprehensive and straight-forward they had found and would be effective wherever they ended up. Ultimately, they decided to live on campus because it was so convenient, close to their classes and university resources without needing to commute, affordable, and easiest to set up with plenty of time in advance.*

Getting out of one's own head and into here and now. *Fish had just turned 3 years old, and her puppy energy was still very present. "We joke. We call her monster." She's not really a monster; she's very smart, obedient, and well-behaved, but "she could go, and go, and go, and just never give up until*

she gets really tired. And then she'll breathe, get some water, and then she can go again." She loves to be outside. . . . during the interview Fish nosed her way between Rachel and the screen, pushing with a paw, staring, and grunting to communicate that she'd rather be doing something a bit more exciting than sitting on the bed paying attention to a screen. Rachel laughed.

Especially in the morning, Rachel could feel particularly down and have a hard time getting out of bed. Fish made her get out of bed . . . Fish responded similarly when Rachel showed emotions like fear or sadness, prompting her to get up, get out, and play. During the winter when Rachel struggled with depression more, Fish "lives for snow," and doesn't want to be outside doing things any less . . . Her "neediness" and energy forced Rachel to experience the real, here-and-now, funny-squirrel-throwing-pine-cones-at-us world. "She helped me get outside of my own head, because I have to physically and emotionally engage with her in an outside setting . . . I have to be grounded in reality." [Fish's] boundless energy was contagious and it helped Rachel have the energy to do things.

Common Themes

Several additional meanings and themes were identified in the participants' narratives, which often focused on the advantages of being active, socially engaged, and a welcome member of the community. These themes are listed in no particular order and are not intended to demonstrate saturation, but instead to illustrate each theme in the words that portray a related lived experience.

Rachel and Ellie highlighted how the needs, energy, and love of play that particularly accompany the canine species creates a reason and need for individuals to get out of the house, engage in regular exercise, be outdoors, and support a more here-and-now awareness. Ellie acknowledged that *one thing that didn't take very long to figure out was that Hermione was very energetic and liked to channel that energy . . . "We'll get on more trails we would have taken more time to get to because I'm not going to go walk myself as often as I'm going to walk a dog. There's just more things to do."*

The participants described how their ESAs had sparked new and stronger friendships, serving as a magnet for social interactions. *Conversations with neighbors that would have only been a "hello" and "goodbye" become longer conversations that start with talking about Hermione* (Ellie). *"It's been more fun for people to come over to our house because we'll have a couple over and he'll just be hopping around. And we'll be talking for 20–30 minutes about Gerald . . . that's helped us make some good friends."* (Chris). *Fish's social nature also ended up rubbing off on Rachel . . . She helped Rachel engage with people in a time when she was out of the habit of being social because of social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic. "She just loves people, and they love to see her because she's just so friendly-looking, and she is friendly"* (Rachel).

Aside from being a catalyst for social interactions and relationships, participants described how their ESA made them feel part of a group. As Ellie noted, *"As someone not from this area, as a citizen of another country, and someone very much atheist, you don't have those commonalities with people in this area . . . But you meet other people with dogs."*

Impact of the On-Campus Housing Context on the Meaning of ESAs

Most participants chose to live in on-campus housing because it was convenient, close, affordable, and provided a way to be set up with housing in advance. In addition, there was a protocol in place for handling ESA partnerships. Working with ESAs in the community does not always go smoothly. *As Rachel and her husband looked for housing, they ran into several difficulties with housing accepting the ESA documentation. "It's actually technically not legal for housing complexes to do this, but we were denied, 'absolutely no.'"* Once she chose to live in on-campus housing instead, Rachel expressed her appreciation to the university: *"Thank you for actually believing me and having something set up where I can document this. And then not punishing me financially for having it."*

Participants also highlighted the sense of community they felt in the higher education setting. ESAs played a unique role in a community where pets were usually not allowed and created a sense of community with other students who had ESAs. These communities were also sometimes virtual ones, as Ellie explained.*There is even a Facebook group for residents with ESAs to connect with each other for fun or support.* Rachel's pet played a major role in forging connections with her neighbors.*[Fish] played a role in bringing her a deeper sense of community in a way [Rachel] didn't have before living in on-campus housing. "All of our neighbors in our area just love her because she's just so sweet and she's funny . . . If anyone is on their back porch, Fish includes them in her play and now, it's like our neighbors are some of our best friends."*

Policies Related to Emotional Support Animals

All the participants felt that the need to somehow prove their ESA's legitimacy was frustrating, though certainly worth it. For Ellie, who came from another country, it had unique challenges. *She became animated and her voice increased in pitch as she described the frustration she experienced with this process . . . "It felt very weird to have a doctor breakdown of what's going on with you, and then . . . really weird and bizarre to be like 'here's the notes from my doctor.' It's just like, 'I don't know you . . .'" Overall, Ellie felt it was a very weird system and she didn't like it. "Aren't we all adults?" she asked, exasperated*. For Chris, the need to prove Gerald's legitimacy provoked feelings of anxiety and even induced traumatic responses and shame: *He began to have anxiety attacks and began to wonder if he was good enough, if he was wrong . . . Being confronted about needing ESA paperwork without sensitivity to his condition and threats of losing Gerald "just nailed every single fear that I had . . . and it just exacerbated them through the roof . . . It was*

terrible . . .” Chris felt that he was finally doing something to help himself in a powerful way, “and then everyone was just like, ‘you cannot help yourself’. . . . It felt like everything was falling in on me when I was trying to get [Gerald] approved.”

Rachel felt she needed to prove the legitimacy of her ESA with people in her community as a response to suspected ESA fraud on campus. *With a sense of community has also come some challenges, not with having an ESA, but with how it is perceived in the community . . . She feels like she must guard against people thinking she is one of those people who took advantage of the system to get a pet. “I almost feel like I have to explain myself to people when they see Fish because, especially here in this apartment complex, it’s like, ‘You live in this place with an animal?’ ‘Yeah it’s because I have PTSD, because I was abused in multiple ways by different people throughout the course of five years. Will that shut you up? Will it make you believe me?’” She doesn’t mean to be harsh; she just feels a little exasperated. Answering questions with perhaps too much uncomfortable and personal information makes it clear to questioners that it felt disrespectful to question her in the first place . . . living on campus with an ESA can also mean feeling the need to be a little defensive. “It can be a little bit taxing emotionally.”*

According to one participant, the university policy on her campus specified an age requirement for canine ESAs, presumably to cut down on puppy-related problems like potty-training and chewing behaviors. The problem with this approach is that it makes ESAs potentially less available for some, since older adopted dogs generally have unknown histories and potential behavioral problems (e.g., aggression, destructive tendencies). *[Ellie] and her partner were looking at a few dogs, through classifieds and a shelter. However, by the time the process with the university was complete, those dogs were unavailable. . . . At the time of the second interview, the university had changed its age-requirement policy for ESAs . . . Though she wouldn’t trade Hermione for another dog, Ellie reflects that her own stressful ESA searching process might have gone differently if she hadn’t had to look for an older dog with more of an unknown history.*

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The common themes identified in the participant narratives reflect what extant literature identifies as roles that therapy animals and pets can play. The “being active” theme is reflected in the literature about the physical health benefits of dogs (Hall et al., 2017) and the motivation they provide for being physically active (Curl et al., 2017; Wohlfarth et al., 2013). Most of the common themes in the data related to the social advantages of having an emotional support animal, particularly dogs, who have been considered “social capital” (Bueker, 2013, p. 212)—the glue that can hold communities together. Animals create a sense of belonging and connection, spark conversations and interactions, and improve owners’ social skills (Chitic et al., 2012).

Policies Related to Emotional Support Animals

Participants perceived campus housing to be highly valued, but it is also a very complex setting that requires meeting the needs of many different residents simultaneously, as well as following legal regulations. Though ESA policies are essential to meeting the needs of multiple student groups, they can also be unintentionally biased; the content of specific policies and the way it is communicated and enforced can have a differential impact, privileging some over others (Lanning et al., 2022; Phillips, 2016). As higher education institutions try to meet the needs of multiple students, those of students in ESA partnerships may be viewed as more optional or less serious than other concerns and in fact may conflict with the needs of other residents who may be allergic to or afraid of certain animals. However, according to the Department of Justice, these are not valid reasons to deny or limit access for assistance animals (Phillips, 2016). Instead, institutions must attempt to accommodate students with and without ESAs and avoid privileging the needs of some students over others.

Policies may also privilege students like Rachel who are further along in their ESA process. More stringent policies may make it harder for individuals to provide the necessary documentation, and they may preclude animals that actually have the best fit for the individual circumstance. Finding the right animal for the ESA job that fits the needs of the person and the context of the situation is vital (MacNamara et al., 2015). In ESA policy development, restrictions on which animals can serve as ESAs should not be imposed under the presumption that a certain animal (or one of a certain age) will be destructive, disruptive, or "be too much" for a student to care for. It is essential for all stakeholders to remember that ESA status does not provide a free pass for destructive or dangerous behavior or inadequate care. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) guidelines state that an animal that causes excessive destruction of property, threat to others, or fundamentally changes the housing facility or purposes may be denied access if the problems "cannot be eliminated or reduced to an acceptable level through actions that the individual takes to maintain control of the animal" (2020, p. 13).

Given these findings, one key recommendation is that clear policies that are understandable and accessible to the public and relevant stakeholders are critical. Policy statements should be reviewed carefully and thoughtfully to avoid raising unnecessary barriers for individuals with disabilities. In reviewing institutional policies, consider if current policies have a stance of assuming fraud; restrictions regarding animal age, species, or breed; specifically targeted concerns (e.g., does not require live animals as food); a process for handling incidents and requests; and language that respects and appreciates the importance of the bonds between humans and animals.

Enforcement of Policy

The communication and enforcement of ESA policies can also be inequitable and discriminatory, as they were in the traumatic interaction that triggered Chris's disability-related symptoms. The HUD (2020) guidelines assert that ESA accommodation requests can be made *after* bringing the animal into the housing and should encourage an "interactive process" that is approached "in good faith" (p. 14). Educating residents and enforcing policies in a compassionate and openminded way can support individuals with disabilities in a process that can be intimidating, frustrating, and distressing.

Rachel's concern about fraud and its impacts on so-called legitimate ESA partnerships is important to consider. Unquestionably, some students may use ESA documentation in ways that are intentionally dishonest. However, it is difficult to make that determination from the outside without contextual information. It is worth considering how much of the suspected fraud on campuses stems from the often invisible nature of and stigma surrounding mental health diagnoses or the confusion about ESA roles and purposes.

Chris had heard stories of ESA documentation being denied and rejected "forcefully." Policies that assume fraud until proven "legitimate" or project the image of being "choosy" about their acceptance have trickle down effects for residents, including judgement, fear of judgement, and defensiveness. How policies are expressed and enforced can be a potent source of prejudice and invalidation, while a positive stance can promote an accepting attitude toward individuals with invisible disabilities.

Educating, training, and supporting policy enforcers such as resident assistants and hall managers about compassionate, collaborative ways to enforce policies could make a positive difference in on-campus ESA partnerships and the social climate in which they exist. Education is critical at all levels and for all stakeholder groups, from administrators to housing officials to local health care professionals. There is still tremendous confusion about the role of service animals, therapy animals, and emotional support animals. Several organizations provide free and low-cost webinars on the topic of assistance animals to the public: the American Psychological Association's guide to human-animal interactions, the Human-Animal Bond Research Institute (HABRI), and the International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organizations (IAHAIO). Some of the most valuable information may come from the perspectives of those with less power but rich lived experience with the topic.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The present study does not encompass all the meanings attached to ESAs partnerships on higher education campuses nor was this the study's goal. Instead, the hope was to give a voice to three individuals who could speak freely about their experiences and the impact of the on-campus context on their ESA relationship. Unique individual stories have the advantage of

highlighting the situations and identities of those who are often left out of the conversations and face barriers within systems of power that have a particularly negative impact on students with mental health challenges. In interpreting the findings, it is important to remember that stories are contextual in terms of the setting, the particular disability, the personalities of those involved, the animals who serve as ESAs, and the temporal context (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic). Future studies may ask more specific questions to capture the lived experiences of individuals in specific situations of interest or with different identities. As this body of literature grows, we can move toward a better understanding of how best to support both ESA partnerships and the higher education communities in which they reside.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. It is difficult to avoid incidents involving emotional support animals (ESAs) on campus while at the same time following federal law. How can an institution avoid incidents and complaints while still meeting students' accessibility needs?

2. Some students with ESAs felt anxious that their request to keep an animal on campus would be denied. Can the integrity of the accommodations process be maintained while also taking the emotional well-being of the students into account?

3. The age requirement for canine ESAs could be a significant barrier, as an older pet may have an unknown history or behavioral issues. Is it reasonable to ask students to specifically avoid younger animals?

4. ESA documentation often requires students to have a recommendation or other documentation from a mental health professional. How can institutions support students who do not have the resources to connect with a mental health professional?

5. Some participants felt they had to defend themselves against people who assumed they were just taking advantage of the ESA process in order to bring their pet to campus. How might clear, accessible policies work to address this perception? What types of community education can ensure that students with ESAs don't feel that they have to disclose personal information to others who might question the legitimacy of their need?

6. One reason for having an ESA on campus, as opposed to choosing off-campus housing, is the relative ease of ESA approval from campus officials as opposed to the often unclear policies of privately owned rental properties. How might an institution take this into account, particularly in cases of those who are not students of a traditional age or are students with families?

Discussion questions were developed by Ana Bourque, residential life assistant for faculty programs at New York University in New York City.