2017

Engaging Disability: Trajectories of Involvement for College Students with Disabilities

Ezekiel Kimball
*University of Massachusetts Amherst, ekimball@educ.umass.edu*

Rachel Friedensen
*Iowa State University, rachelef@iastate.edu*

Elton Silva

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cfssr_publishedwork](https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cfssr_publishedwork)

Part of the [Higher Education Commons](https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cfssr_publishedwork)

**Recommended Citation**

Kimball, Ezekiel; Friedensen, Rachel; and Silva, Elton, "Engaging Disability: Trajectories of Involvement for College Students with Disabilities" (2017). *Disability as diversity in higher education: Policies and practices to enhance student success*. 7.

Retrieved from [https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cfssr_publishedwork/7](https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cfssr_publishedwork/7)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for Student Success Research at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Published Work by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.
Engaging Disability: Trajectories of Involvement for College Students with Disabilities

Ezekiel Kimball (University of Massachusetts Amherst)

Rachel E. Friedensen (University of Massachusetts Amherst)

Elton Silva (Independent Scholar)

Abstract

This study draws on the narrative accounts of eight students with disabilities at a small liberal arts college in order to understand the connections between disability and student engagement. We found that disability plays a mediating role in the classroom; there are variations in access to institutional support; supportive peer networks are important’ and disability identity has a variable salience for these students. We also found that engagement for students with disabilities is multi-dimensional and multi-faceted. We include recommendations for supporting engagement for students with disabilities as well as suggestions for future research.

Citation:

**Introduction**

Though often lumped together for convenience or added statistical power (Kimball, Wells, Ostiguy, Manly, & Lauterbach, 2016; Vaccaro, Kimball, Wells, & Ostiguy, 2015), college students with disabilities are a remarkably diverse population (Eagan et al., 2014; NCES, 2014). The idea of disability encompasses a tremendous range of variation in the ways that people might interact with the world, ranging from visual and hearing impairments to cognitive processing issues to mobility restrictions to psychological conditions. Additionally, individuals assigned the same diagnosis by medical professionals might vary markedly in the extent to which they consider their disability a salient part of their sense of self as well as in the way their disability presents itself in a given context (Banerjee, Madaus, & Gelbar, 2014; Dunn & Burcaw, 2013; Lightner, Kipps-Vaughan, Schulte, & Trice, 2012; Riddell & Weedon, 2014). The diversity of disability becomes even more apparent when one begins to consider disability to be just one of many social identities that a person might hold (Jones, 1996; Jones, 2009; Jones & Abes, 2013).

When viewed from that perspective, it becomes clear that the lives of students with disabilities warrant an intracategorical approach to intersectional research (McCall, 2005), wherein careful consideration of the impact of not just disability but other social identities might yield more information about both shared and divergent experiences among people with disabilities. An intracategorical approach to the study of disability will provide new information about the actual experiences of students with disabilities. This information is critical in addressing an ongoing and significant gap in the equity of higher education outcomes for persons with disabilities. While the rate of college participation among students with disabilities is increasing (NCES,
2014), students with disabilities still do not graduate from college at the same rates as their peers (DaDeppo, 2009). A better understanding of who students with disabilities are and what sort of experiences they have will provide those working on college campuses with necessary information to construct evidence-based practices.

In this chapter, we undertake an intracategorical analysis through the lens of student engagement theory (Kuh, 2007; McCormick, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2013). Drawing on the narrative accounts of eight college students with learning disabilities drawn from one small liberal arts college in the northeast (pseudonym: Meadow College), our analysis helps to explicate connections between disability, other social identities, and engagement, a literature-base and framework widely used by scholars and practitioners alike. This analysis provides information about an understudied population (Peña, 2014) by focusing on engagement experiences, which have been shown elsewhere to be strongly associated with retention (e.g., Kuh et al., 2005; McCormick et al., 2013; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2013). Most importantly, however, this frame of analysis treats students with disabilities in a fundamentally respectful way. Regarding them as more than simply their disability, our chapter focuses on the narratives that feature stories in which disability plays a key but not always determinative role in the college engagement experiences.

**Why does engagement matter for students with disabilities?**

Engagement is a conceptual construct that ties together a host of other theories and empirical findings about student success in higher education. Briefly, it holds that students who engage in a wide range of demonstrably beneficial academic and non-academic behaviors will experience success at higher rates than they might otherwise (Kuh et al., 2005; Kuh, 2007). For example,
researchers have consistently found positive effects such as increased learning and persistence among students who join learning communities, regularly receive and respond to instructor feedback, interact with a diverse peer group outside of the classroom, and participate in experiential learning opportunities (e.g., internships, study abroad, simulation-based labs) (Kuh, 2007; McCormick et al., 2013). However, engagement goes beyond mere involvement (Astin, 1993) and also examines the way that students think, feel, and process these beneficial experiences (McCormick et al., 2013), which may explain why not all students having the same experiences see the same results (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2013). For example, considerable variation in effect has been documented based on a student’s discipline, social identity (e.g., first generation status, race/ethnicity), and institutional type attended (e.g., research university, liberal arts college, community college).

These variations are particularly important to those doing person-centered research on students with disabilities (Malcolm-Piqueux, 2015). As noted above, while we know that students with disabilities struggle to persist at the same rates as peers without disabilities (DaDeppo, 2009), we actually know surprisingly little about what happens to them in college (Kimball et al., 2016). Much of the literature that we do have focuses on access to and the efficacy of accommodations (e.g., Barnard-Brak, Sulak, Tate, & Lechtenberger, 2010; Buchanan, Charles, Rigler, & Hart, 2010; Cawthon & Leppo, 2013; Grigal, Hart, & Weir, 2012; Stodden, Roberts, Picklesimer, Jackson, & Chang, 2006; Hewitt, 2011; Tagayuna, Stodden, Chang, Zeleznik, & Whelley, 2005). A more limited literature base examines their academic success (e.g., DaDeppo, 2009; Horn & Berktold, 1999; Megivern, Pellerito, & Mowbray, 2003; Murray, Goldstein, Nourse, & Edgar, 2000; Wessel, Jones, Markle, & Westfall, 2009). Overall, however, there is very little literature
that actually looks at what it feels like to be a college student with a disability and how that impacts retention (Kimball et al., 2016).

Thus far, only a handful of pieces have explicitly utilized engagement to frame research on students with disabilities. Both Nichols and Quaye (2009) and Brown and Broido (2015) used student engagement as an anchor point to guide the construction of synthetic literature reviews. In so doing, they demonstrated the extent to which literature on other topics (e.g., study skills, mentoring, climate) related to disability might also be seen as related to engagement. They also provided a series of in-depth recommendations for supporting the engagement of students with disabilities: notably, most of these recommendations are consistent with good practices for student engagement generally—that is, they need not be seen solely as a reflection of the disability of the students in question. That conclusion echoes the empirical findings of Hendrickson, Therrien, Weeden, Pascarella, and Hosp (2015), which showed that students with disabilities who participated in an inclusive, holistic post-secondary education program experienced college life in similar ways as students without disabilities, as measured by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Taken together, these three pieces not only show that engagement is a viable framework with which to study the experiences of students with disabilities, but using engagement as a framework shows that, with appropriate support in place, it is possible for students with disabilities to fully participate in today’s higher education environments.

What do students with disabilities say about engagement?
To begin deepening the understanding of disability and to explore its connection to engagement, we conducted an exploratory qualitative study involving eight students with learning disabilities enrolled at Meadow College, a small private liberal arts college located in New England. Participants were recruited using a snowball sample technique beginning with students known to one or more of the researchers. Each participant was also asked to refer additional potential participants. At the time that we conducted the study, the approximate undergraduate enrollment at Meadow College was 2,500. Roughly seventy percent of the student body identified as White while the remaining students self-identified (in order of frequency) as Asian or Asian American, Black or African American, international students, and Latina/o. Nearly sixty percent of enrolled undergraduate student were female. Thirty percent of all undergraduate students received were Pell eligible and roughly equal numbers were first-generation college students. By limiting the context to a single institution and the range of diagnoses to cognitive disabilities we were better able to identify the differential impact of disability on engagement. All the names contained in Table 1 and the discussion of these findings below are pseudonyms.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Diagnosis</th>
<th>Major</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deion</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Dyslexia</td>
<td>Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Reading Comprehension</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Dyslexia</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>A.D.D./Asperger’s</td>
<td>Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ralph</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>A.D.D.</td>
<td>Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Processing</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Disability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Xavier</th>
<th>21</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Auditory</th>
<th>Business</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zoey</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>A.D.D./A.D.H.D.</td>
<td>Sociology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each co-author brought unique perspectives to this study. Ezekiel identifies as a person with a disability, having been diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder at an early age. He has also served as the coordinator of disability services for a small college. Elton was an undergraduate student at the time that data was collected and therefore was able to connect with participants on a level based on their shared undergraduate experiences. Rachel, one of Ezekiel’s graduate students, has been involved in a research group centered on studying disability in higher education and is interested in the leaky academic pipeline for people with disabilities. Ezekiel designed the study. Elton was primarily responsible for collecting data and he also assisted Ezekiel with data analysis. Rachel confirmed their findings and interpretations and assisted with the writing process for this chapter.

Our study employed narrative research techniques (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009) to explore the way in which our participants told stories about their college engagement. Utilizing semi-structured protocols, we relied on interviews averaging sixty minutes each to seek information from participants about the following topics: 1) the participant’s sense of self; 2) the extent to which disability factored into that sense of self; 3) a day in the life at Meadow College; 4) academic experiences; and 5) non-academic experiences. We also provided all participants with an opportunity to offer any information that they felt was important for us to understand their experiences. We recorded and transcribed all interviews. Once done, we utilized narrative
analysis techniques (Coulter & Smith, 2009; Holley, & Colyar, 2009) to examine both what participants said and how they said it. The findings include: 1) the role of disability in mediating classroom engagement; 2) variations in access to institutional support; 3) the importance of supportive peer networks; and 4) the variable salience of disability identity.

**The role of disability in mediating classroom engagement**

For all of the participants in our study, disability shaped their classroom experiences in profound ways—some positive and some negative. The most basic of these impacts—often described in neutral terms—is that disability has a real cost in terms of time and money that can make it more complicated to participate fully in curricular and co-curricular engagement opportunities. One participant, Erin, noted that her disability required her to attend off-campus physical therapy appointments twice each week. In addition to a full schedule of classes, schoolwork, club meetings, and other activities, Erin sometimes found herself making difficult decisions about what task to do at any given moment. Indeed, time management was a recurrent theme for participants in our study.

Others noted that their disability impacted their ability to engage in the classroom in less tangible ways. For example, Samantha revealed that: “When I’m in the classroom, I just get anxious, I have test anxiety anyway. When everyone starts finishing I get really anxious and I take longer. I do better when I’m by myself at my own table.” While that may seem like a small imposition—or for those who have been forced to take a test in a loud classroom, even a benefit—it also means that Samantha is not experiencing the classroom in the same ways as her peers and might be unable to participate as fully in group work. Likewise, Xavier described his struggle to engage with material when presented in certain formats:
I mean I do have some difficulties because my intro to politics teacher was: you read the material and you sit and listen to him lecture and then you take a test. The same thing the whole semester. It was annoying because I’m not very good with listening. It’s part of my disability. It takes me a while to process thing and sometimes the professor will be on one thing and I’m still processing the other thing and I sometimes fall behind.

Xavier, though he wished to be successful in the class, could not participate fully in the class due to the fact that he was constantly trying to replay the instructor’s words from a moment before. Such a disconnect makes real engagement difficult—if not impossible. Another participant, Ralph, related a similar issue and elaborated that he found remaining engaged more difficult when he was not really invested in the class:

Classes that are required you kind of just get through them rather than enjoy them. [ . . .]

I’d say a class like sociology, a class that I’m not actively engaged or interested it’s a lot harder to focus than it is a class like [cultural studies] where I’m so interested in the actual content of the class is. Classes like science, those are a little bit harder to pay attention. I’m not really interested in them.

While issues like uninspiring classes doubtless plague all college students, they posed a special challenge to the students in our study: since they all had learning disabilities, they required additional time to process some forms of information. When compounded with wandering attention, engagement was particularly unlikely to occur.

Importantly, however, our study also revealed one possible strategy for getting students with disabilities to engage: providing course content reflective of their experiences. Jack told us that he was taking a course on disability in society and that he found: “that class is fun because I’ve
grown up with a disability, so I can actually contribute a lot to the class and give a point of view that most of the kids don’t know because they don’t have a learning disability.” That sentiment echoes literature on campus climate that suggests that students who are able to see themselves reflected in the courses they take and in the instructors that teach them are more successful (Hurtado, Alvarez, Guillermo-Wann, Cuellar, & Arellano, 2012).

**Variations in access to institutional support**

Moving beyond the classroom to curricular support, participant responses highlighted the extent to which access to institutional support varied. Meadow College offered two levels of support for students with disabilities. One level of support was designed to meet the institution’s legal obligation and, as required, was available to eligible students free of charge (Kaplin & Lee, 2013). This level included classroom accommodations and access to the institution’s tutoring center. The second level of support included fee-based access to a structured disability support program that included formal instruction on academic skills, easier access to academic support professionals, and a variety of technological aids. Generally, students who participated in the structured disability support program found it beneficial. However, it was quite expensive (costing each student roughly $10,000 per year to participate beyond routine tuition and fees).

There was also considerable diversity within the way that students utilized services within a given level of support. For example, students described a wide-range of service utilization patterns in the structured disability support program. One student, Jack, noted that he required “all the support that I can get.” For him, that involved a one-on-one meeting with an academic support professional who provided assistance with academic work. Xavier also stated that he met
once each week with an academic support professional but found he needed the most support on time management issues. Among our participants, Deion reported the most frequent use of the structured disability support program the most—three times per week—but also noted that he had reduced his use of the program over time:

I’m no longer in [the structured disability support program] now, graduated in a way from [the structured disability support program]. When I was there, I would, for my freshmen year I would meet three times a week. Later on, it got less and less. Back in freshmen year we would go over everything in the week. I was in a management group and we would go over everything. I would usually fly through the stuff because I already knew what we needed to do. I know that time management is the key to college, that was pretty simple. Later on it became: “Can you just read over this paper?” “Can we go over these terms because I have a quiz the next day?” It was little things. It wasn’t like I needed her holding my hand and helping me in every way.

Deion’s narrative reveals that disability support services represented a catalyst for learning and development that needed to be moderated based on a student’s growth trajectory. That finding was echoed by the experience of other students who had been enrolled in the structured disability support program but found that they did not utilize all of the services at their disposal. For example, Samantha noted that she had left the program because, over time, she realized that she only required extended time on tests.

In short, students with disabilities utilized a wide array of tools and services offered by the institution as they engaged with their college experience. While some students just needed the classroom accommodations provided by the law, others needed more structured and involved
assistance. Often, students who utilized more structured services found that they relied less and less on those services and were able to excel on their own.

**The importance of supportive peer networks**

A supportive peer environment can facilitate the normalization of disability for students; the development of such an environment necessitates a supportive campus climate with special attention paid to student identities and their interplay with curricular and co-curricular processes (Hurtado et al., 2012; Kimball, George-Mwangi, Friedensen, Lauterbach, Ostiguy, Manly, & Wells, 2015). Consistent with this literature, students in the structured disability support program often reported strong connections with the faculty members who met with them one-on-one or taught the small classes in which they enrolled. While connections with these faculty members were significant ways in which participants engaged at Meadow College, they were far from the only people with whom students forged bonds. In fact, many participants revealed that they had chosen to attend that institution due to the supportive social network that they perceived to exist at the institution. Joe’s admissions experience is quite typical in this regard:

> I like [Meadow College]. I was looking for a college that has a nice community feel where people kind of get to know each other, really support one another and . . . for me, going into it was definitely the community. I really wanted that community feel and a place where I didn’t feel lost and over stimulated.

For Joe, and others, peers were the most tangible part of the social network that supported his success at Meadow College.
Others expanded on this idea by noting that institutional practices—like housing all first-year students together—had contributed to the rapid development of friendships on campus. Importantly, these friendships included connections to people from a wide variety of academic and social backgrounds. Xavier noted:

I’ve met some of them through my management courses freshmen year. I’ve met them through intramurals. I’ve met my closest friends freshmen year in my dorm . . . We’ve been close ever since then. I’ve met people throughout the school just by doing different things or being in different classes.

While Xavier described the importance of his participation in intramurals, others sought different co-curricular engagement opportunities. Erin and Samantha both described involvement in student organizations as critical to their experience on campus and connected it to their social lives. For example, Erin stated that: “I’m involved in clubs. I hang out with people in my clubs. I don’t know, I talk to people in classes, other than that, I guess I just have a normal social life.”

Importantly, peer networks were connected to the way that our participants described their disability. One of the clubs with which Joe and several other participants volunteered fostered mentoring relationships between college students with learning disabilities and school-aged children with the same disabilities. As Joe described the experience:

Every semester we get a new group of students of 8-9 students with various learning challenges. We go and we have an art project. We don’t necessarily care what it looks like in the end. We want them to try and be creative and innovative. It is a mix of anywhere between 6th to 8th grade. As a mentor I am trying to get that student to see a quality they have that they never realized through this project we’re doing.
This experience was meaningful on several levels. For some students, it connected with future professional goals—such as Erin’s goal of becoming a teacher. For the middle school children involved, it helped them to confront and address the underlying societal stigma toward disability. That effect also carried over to the participants from Meadow College. As Erin noted, her time at Meadow College helped her to address her fears of being thought of as a person with disability: “Because not everyone had a learning disability, I didn’t want to be pointed out as someone who did. Now I know that I am not the only one with a learning disability and it’s ok to have one.” The combined experience of working with younger students with disabilities and interacting with peers with disabilities at Meadow College helped Erin to incorporate her disability into her broader understanding of self.

**The variable salience of disability identity**

Even though the participants in our study all had similar diagnoses and Meadow College strove to be inclusive toward those with disabilities, we found that participants reported a diverse range of opinions regarding the salience of that identity. One of the first things that we asked all students in each interview protocol was for them to introduce themselves to the interviewer. In advance of the interviews, all the participants knew the purpose of the study and the general sort of information we would be seeking. Most participants focused on their academic major and hometown. For example, Zoey stated that: “I’m a sociology major, I’m a sophomore. I’m Co-President of [Students Against Drunk Driving], I’m involved with [peer tutoring], Alternative Spring Break and a couple of other committees, but I won’t name them. I’m from [Virginia].” Similarly, Deion described himself as “a management major” and “big intramural guy.”
Most of these introductions were very brief and provided a bulleted list of key facts. We interpreted these lists as the information that the students perceived as the most salient given the context of the interaction. Therefore, these students judged that this information, such as major, origin, and campus activities, was the most significant to share at the beginning of the interviews. Interestingly, and despite their knowledge that we were interested in better understanding their experiences as students with disabilities, the nature of their disability was not often one of those pieces of information. In fact, only two participants included their disability as part of this introduction. Jack revealed: “Well, I’m 20 years old. I’m from [Delaware] and my learning disability is I am a severe dyslexic. I’ve been I was diagnosed with my dyslexia at the age of 5.” Likewise, Ralph described himself as “a 20 year old college student” and “junior” majoring in the social sciences. He only became loquacious when speaking about his disability: “I guess you could say when I was maybe 10 years old I was labeled at ADD and it kind of followed me all the way through high school. It was kind of an obstacle for me, but I seemed to manage to get this far I guess.” While most introductions were fairly insubstantial, disability was one of the few times that participants actually added dimensionality—that is, time of diagnosis and impact—to their accounts.

Ralph’s introduction also highlights the mechanism by which disability presented in diverse ways in our study: students varied in the salience that they assigned it in their lives. For Ralph, it had a very real impact, and it was something that happened to him (i.e., “it kind of followed me”). Other participants were more dismissive of the impact or confident in their ability to determine the course of their own lives. Samantha, for example, stated that she did not really
think of herself as a person with a disability: “. . . I don’t really like the phrase learning disability; I like learning difference because it’s not really a disability. Our brains are just different.” Meanwhile, others saw learning disabilities as an obstacle but not determinative part of their experience. When asked whether he sometimes thought of his learning disability as a positive thing, Xavier stated that: “I wouldn’t say it’s an advantage, but it’s just another attribute to who I am. Because, for me, I don’t really see it as an advantage or a disadvantage or something that slows me down. I just cope with it.” Both Zoey and Joe did see positive outcomes from their experiences as people with disabilities. Zoey noted that: “Having a disability isn’t necessarily bad, it can actually fuel people.” Meanwhile, Joe saw his worldview shaped by his disability in important ways. He stated that: “I believe that everybody has something good about them, everybody can contribute something no matter what flaws they may appear to have or what challenge they have.”

The particular focus on learning disability in our study also revealed an interesting potential insight into how experiences differ based on diagnosis. For example, Xavier stated that: “I feel like a learning disability is much harder to overcome than a disability itself because as of now, we have so much technology and medicine that will definitely help you, but from a learning disability standpoint, it’s very difficult to overcome it. It depends how you manage it as well.” In his narrative, Xavier highlights a theme raised by several participants: a learning disability cannot be easily treated so that a person will be able to meet a normative standard because it fundamentally alters the way that people process letters, numbers, words, equations, sentences, and ideas. While the impossibility of amelioration may also be true of other types of disability as well, the point that Xavier raises is an important one: it is somewhat difficult to speak of
disability as a discrete facet of self when it is integral to the very way that people experience the world. Notably, however, people with learning disabilities do typically have the ability to “hide” that part of themselves from the world. As Ralph stated: “A lot of times I feel like it’s easier to hide a learning disability. Someone can hide ADD or ADHD and just by looking at them you wouldn’t really know. Someone else with a physical disability would be a lot easier to identify that.” The ability to “pass” as a person without a disability makes it hard both for those with and those without disabilities to identify its actual impact on the way that people experience the world.

**Recommendations to Support Engagement Among Students with Disabilities**

The empirical findings offered above show that students with disabilities engage with the college experience in a variety of ways and are influenced by factors inside and out of the classroom. Furthermore, engagement and its mediating factors interact with these students’ intersectional identities, of which disability is only one facet. The many ways that students with disabilities engage with college means that there is a great need for intentional and proactive design. There are many vectors for engagement, including academic programs, intramural athletics, and social entities like clubs and student organizations, to name just a few. Fostering inclusive practice and support for students with disabilities means that inclusivity needs to be reflected in every possible engagement vector for all students. We focused on students with language-based learning disabilities; however, academic courses, programs, events, and physical space on a campus need to be accessible to people regardless of disability status or type.
We also suggest that disability awareness and training be incorporated into student affairs professional development. The field currently prepares student affairs professionals to become skilled at navigating conversations about sensitive issues such as gender identity, sexuality, and mental health. In the same way, student affairs professionals need to practice those same principles of destigmatization, honest communication, and support for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities should be able to disclose their disabilities in safe spaces and receive support from student affairs professionals, faculty, and other staff members.

Finally, institutions as a whole need to consider disability access as a part of institutional engagement and include it in their diversity planning attempts. While disability access is often discussed as an important part of institutional diversity and inclusivity, it is rarely systematically addressed in institutional planning. Disability access needs to be incorporated into the fabric of an institution. In other words, institutions need to move beyond the letter of the law and fully engage students with disabilities at every level of institutional planning, engagement, and inclusion.

**Conclusion**

In many ways, the four themes we identified in our analysis—the role of disability in mediating classroom engagement, variations in access to institutional support, the importance of supportive peer networks, and the variable salience of disability identity—resemble the characteristics of college engagement identified by other scholars. Engagement as a conceptual construct contends that students may take part in a variety of beneficial academic and non-academic behaviors and the degree, type and nature, and affective experience of those behaviors has a variable impact on
academic success (Kuh, 2007; McCormick et al., 2013). Similarly, the students with disabilities in this study found that their engagement with the college experience was mediated by a variety of factors and in a variety of ways. For these students, engagement could take the form of classroom interactions, accommodations for disability, structured peer support groups, clubs and organizations (including intermural athletics), and interaction with peers, tutors, and faculty members. The way they experienced their disabilities inside and outside the classroom as well as the types of institutional and peer support they were able to access mediated these students’ engagement with the college environment. However, because disability identity is not monolithic and each student interfaced with the college environment in different ways, each student’s engagement had unique dimensions. This finding mirrors NSSE’s (2013) treatment of engagement as a multi-dimensional, thematic construct consisting of academic challenge, learning with peers, experiences with faculty, and interactions with campus environment.

Through the review of literature and discussion of empirical findings offered above, we have made the case that disability is a multi-faceted phenomenon that interfaces with engagement in diverse ways. Participants vary in the way that they describe their disabilities and the relationship those disabilities have to their sense of self. They utilize networks of supportive peers, but those networks do not always look the same—and might not exist in the same way at a different institution. Our participants also encountered a diverse array of support services and sought to make use of them in a manner that made sense to them. All of these elements contribute to the varied capacity of students with disabilities to engage in the classroom. In short, the engagement of students with disabilities is akin to a complex, perhaps unsolvable problem, but that does not mean that we are not obligated to try.
A key first step would be the construction of a relevant theoretical and empirical literature base. Students with disabilities are not presently included in much of the writing on engagement (or other major theories in higher education for that matter) nor are there many empirical pieces on their within-college experiences. Since good practice originates from good research (Kuh et al., 2005), a scholarly literature base that synthesizes disability and engagement is critical for moving forward. As this work is undertaken, care should be taken to distinguish between environments in which and populations for which particular strategies are effective.

Scholars and practitioners alike would do well to be mindful of the fact that “disability” can simultaneously refer to a medical diagnosis, protected legal category, and social identity. In and of itself, disability is an intersectional identity. Consequently, it is unlikely that there will ever be a unitary best practice for students with disabilities but rather practices that would work well contextually. This conclusion becomes even more apparent when disability is considered in tandem with other social identities. Based on literature that explores disability along with identities related to social class, race/ethnicity, and sexuality (e.g., Haeger, 2011; Henry, Fuerth, & Figliozzi, 2010; Kafer, 2013; Stapleton, 2015), we can reasonably conclude that a nuanced understanding of the relationship between disability and engagement must include other elements of a student’s background as well. That is, when thinking about the engagement of students with disabilities, we cannot look for a simple pattern shared by all students with disabilities. That conclusion echoes work done elsewhere that demonstrates that adding disability into the mix of theories of student development requires that these theories become more
complex to account for behaviors originated primarily from and not originating primarily from a student’s disability identity.

In the end, however, the main lesson offered by this chapter—and one that subsumes all the implications offered previously—is clear: we think about students with disabilities far too infrequently when thinking about engagement, and as a result, we do not fully appreciate the differing patterns of engagement that might exist on a given college campus. That needs to change, and it can change through an ongoing commitment from scholars and practitioners to hear the voices of students with disabilities.
References


