SERVING LEARNING DISABLED STUDENTS IN HAWAIʻI 'S COMMUNITY COLLEGES — STAKEHOLDERS’ PERSPECTIVES

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF HAWAIʻI AT MĀNOA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

IN

PROFESSIONAL EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

AUGUST 2014

By

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

At first I was hesitant to apply for the doctoral. It was Robert Witt, who changed my mind. He told me, “Suzy, you need to do this!” As many people know, when Robert advises you to do something, you do it without hesitation. I am proud to have been a member of the first Ed.D. cohort at the University of Hawai‘i, and I want to thank Robert for the nudge I needed to embark upon this journey. I admire Robert and look up to him more than he probably knows. He is truly the kind of educator I aspire to be.

For the past thirteen years, Assets School has fully supported my professional growth. I am truly grateful for everyone at Assets, and in particular, Paul Singer, Sandi Tadaki, Nikki Hamai-Sakai, Jason Wagner, Rona Uyehara, and Miles Yamamoto, who took on additional work so I could pursue this degree, and Nancy Adams for both her friendship and editing skills.

Although there were times when I questioned whether or not I should continue with the program, I was reminded by my cohort that we are all in it together, and to them, I am grateful. Additionally, I want to acknowledge Hunter McEwan who constantly inspires me to pursue my greatest ambitions.

Finally, I would not be who I am without a loving and supportive family. I want to thank my mom Barb, my sister Kelli, and brother Randy for always believing in me. Most importantly, to the love of my life, Mike Travis, our two daughters Emily and Mairi, and my amazing in-laws, Barb and Terry Travis. Thank you for allowing me to miss Saturday swim meets, stay up late working, and all of the other sacrifices you made along the way to help me reach this goal. Emily and Mairi, I hope I have inspired you to fully pursue your dreams regardless of how long or difficult the journey may be. I know you can do anything that you are willing to work for.
ABSTRACT

According to the International Dyslexia Association, dyslexia and other literacy challenges affect 15-20% of the general population. Many of these individuals are not diagnosed and face ongoing challenges in school without an understanding of why; others are formally diagnosed as children and receive services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), or private services, during their K-12 school years. However, once a student turns 18 and graduates from a K-12 setting, IDEA no longer applies. Although the Americans with Disability Act (ADA) ensures services for individuals with disabilities, the differences between the laws are significant and have an impact on transition to post-secondary education. Across the state of Hawai‘i, thousands of learning disabled (LD) students enroll in community colleges, and effective support is essential to the success of LD college students.

The purpose of this research was to gain an understanding of how stakeholders perceive the effectiveness of Hawai‘i’s community college system in serving its learning disabled students. Using the multiple case study methodology, eleven interviews were conducted representing four subgroups and two community college campuses. The four subgroups interviewed were: disability office counselors, instructors, LD students, and high school college guidance counselors.

While the results of the research identified strengths in how the campuses serve their LD students, such as several dedicated and passionate educators who are doing their best with the resources they have to meet the needs of these unique learners, there were also some significant gaps in services and inconsistencies between the two campuses. In particular, LD students who lack executive function skills, self-awareness and acceptance, and the ability to advocate effectively for what they need, fall through the cracks of the system. Additionally, the issues surrounding the gaps in services are complex. Concerns surfaced in all of the following areas: implementation of
ADA laws and policies; the responsibilities of disability office counselors, instructors, and LD students; and a negative stigma about learning disabilities that impacted all of the stakeholders.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“I got all C’s and D’s in school and I am mildly dyslexic. But I am very persistent and ambitious. When I applied to college, the admissions office said I wasn’t what they wanted. So I sat outside his office 12 hours a day until the admissions officer said he would let me in if I attended summer school. The tuition was $12,000, so I took out my wallet and gave him $12,000 in cash. I was already making good money in nightclubs. I think that having dyslexia is a competitive advantage. Dyslexic people are good at setting everything aside to pursue one goal. Ambition beats genius 99 percent of the time.” –Jay Leno

A recent alumnus of Assets School shared with me an email she received from a professor at a local college on Oahu. The student used a scribe to send the professor an email with her ADA contract and request to receive the titles of her textbooks prior to the start of the summer term, so she could get them in alternative format and begin reading early for the class. In the email, the student explained that she is severely dyslexic and dysgraphic. The instructor responded by sending an email to the disability office that said,

“I received the e-mail from (the student) and judging from her writing ability and the articulation in the content of her mail, I don't believe she needs any special provision for ADA compliance unless she has a grave difficulty in hearing and understanding lectures that I give to the class in giving directions and information. I have no interest or access on providing her a personal assistant to help with note taking. Basically, she must be able to understand what I talk to the class. As for the quiz I give to students, she will be given my office desk to complete the quiz provided in hard copy instead of the normal oral form of giving question to the class. If this condition is not sufficient to accommodate her needs, my course is
not recommended for her to take because the needs to satisfy her ADA accommodations will severely disrupt my operation of the class for everyone.”

This student is one of the brightest and hardest working students I have ever met. However, this professor closed the door on her before she even met her. She intimidated the student, and made it much more difficult for her to approach her face-to-face. The instructor made gross assumptions about the student’s abilities and dug in her heals when broached with the possibility of being required to support the student’s learning. She also clearly has no idea what it means to be dyslexic or dysgraphic. Had she any knowledge about LD, she would not propose that she take an exam with a hard-copy, print version in place of an oral exam, which would actually be a better option. Many LD students face this kind of ignorance at some point in their college education, and without strong advocacy skills and confidence, these kinds of obstacles can make college impossible for LD students to navigate.

**Background**

Underserved dyslexic students has become a particularly concerning issue in Hawai‘i. In the spring of 2013, legislation was passed that required Hawai‘i’s school systems to properly train teachers and use methods in the classroom that are most effective for dyslexic learners. The Hawai‘i Branch of the International Dyslexia Association (HIDA) published the following statement in April of 2013 “Senate Concurrent Resolution No. 120, SD2 was adopted unanimously by the Hawai‘i legislator! In SCR 120, the Legislature asks the Department of Education, together with the University of Hawai‘i, and Hawai‘i Teacher Standards Board, to evaluate recommendations in the Working Group's Comprehensive Plan for Teaching Reading in
Hawai‘i Schools - in particular with respect to dyslexia awareness, professional development for teachers to support students with dyslexia and other literacy challenges, and licensed literacy specialists - and, the DOE to submit a report to the 2014 Legislature on the status of its efforts to provide these support services” (para. 1). The implications for not properly addressing the unique learning needs of these students put intelligent and capable children at risk for school failure and difficulties throughout life. For example, in the Spring 2013 issue of “Teaching Tolerance”, the headline article is titled “The School to Prison Pipeline.” According to Elias (2013) “students from groups – racial minorities and children with disabilities – are disproportionately represented in the school-to-prison pipeline. One report found that while 8.6 percent of public school children have been identified as having disabilities that affect their ability to learn, these students make up 32 percent of youth in juvenile detention centers” (p. 40). The Learning Disabilities Association (2004) says that, “Although the Department of Justice, Bureau of Statistics has not been tracking disabilities among our nation’s prison populations, educated estimates range from 40% to 65% or even higher for inmates and parolees who have learning disabilities” (para. 5). Legislation such as the one mentioned above, are aiming to address these larger social issues through literacy education.

In general, college graduation rates are low across the nation, and Hawai‘i is not an exception. A community college instructor, who was interviewed as part of this research project described a dim situation. In one semester, there are 50-60 sections of English 100 with over 20 students in each class (over 1000 students taking the course each semester). According to interviews with various English 100 instructors, only about half of the students pass their courses. English 100 is a required course for all degree
programs other than auto mechanics. Additionally, there are large numbers of students who are required to take remedial courses, such as English 22 before they can enroll in the Basic English 100 course. The University of Hawai‘i Community Colleges 2013 Annual Reflection Narrative, 2013, reports similar trends. Finally, it is not uncommon for a two-year degree to take a student four to six years to complete.

Hawai‘i’s learning-disabled (LD) youth have an interesting dilemma. Despite being intelligent and capable, these students tend to have limited options post high school. Without proper guidance, it can be difficult for LD students to find college programs with the support services they need to be successful. Additionally, many of these students underperform on language-based college entrance exams and, consequently, do not qualify for admission to local universities such as the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. In general LD students are often delayed in maturity, and may not be emotionally ready for such a large transition where they are living a minimum of five or more hours via airplane from home. Therefore, their most viable option for post-secondary education locally is to enroll in the community college system.

**Assets High School Context**

Assets School is the only school in Hawai‘i that specializes in serving students with language-based learning disabilities. Additionally, every year about 50% of Assets High School graduates enroll in one of the local community colleges. I have been a part of Assets School for the past thirteen years. My first eight years were as a classroom teacher in the high school, and I have served as the high school principal for the past five years. The majority of my training in learning differences has been at Assets. Since those of us from the Assets community have a unique and informed perspective on LD students in Hawai‘i entering the community college system, four of the subjects
interviewed for this research study are connected to Assets School. Therefore, even though Assets is a private K-12 school, there is a connection between its high school program and this study.

Assets School is unique for many reasons, but mostly for its population of students. According to the mission of the school, Assets students are identified as dyslexic, gifted, or both dyslexic and gifted learners. Although the term dyslexia has shifted in the past decades, Assets School uses the term broadly in its mission to describe students with language-based learning disabilities. Therefore, there are students at Assets with a wide variety of labels that fall under the umbrella of a language-based disability such as: specific learning disability, reading and math disorders, disorder of written expression, mixed expressive and receptive disorder, etc. Not all students at Assets have a diagnosis. Those who do not are admitted under the mission as gifted or high potential, yet underachieving in school. Additionally, Assets students frequently have a comorbid diagnosis such as ADHD, anxiety and depression. Occasionally, students who do not fit the description in the school’s mission perfectly are admitted as well because the school believes that the student’s specific needs are similar to the majority of our student population and can be served accordingly. For example, Assets serves a handful of students who are on the Asperger’s spectrum or only have ADHD as a primary diagnosis. Assets School does not provide a therapeutic or intensive 1:1 environment. The diverse population of students requires an individualized, non-traditional approach to teaching and learning. For example, Assets High School has a mentorship program like no other in the state and few in the nation. Each year, students in grades 10-12 are placed in an apprenticeship within the local community. Students leave campus once a week where
they gain actual work experience, connect the skills needed for employment and school, explore career fields, and work closely with an outside mentor. There is a wide range of positions for students in fields that include: retail, business, food, medicine, education, non-profit organizations, art, political, science, etc. In the 2013-14 school year, over 90 students were placed individually in mentorship sites across the island of Oahu. Although Assets Schools’ sole priority is not college placement, it feels obligated to prepare students for a successful transition to college should that be the direction they choose. Currently, over 90% of Assets graduates pursue a form of post-secondary education. Even so, many of the students continue to struggle in an academic setting, including Hawai‘i’s community colleges. Unlike LD students from public or other private schools in Hawai‘i, Assets’ graduates have completed a high school program, based on current LD research, targeted to develop the skills LD students need to be successful in a college environment. However, the ongoing struggle of these students post high school, along with other LD college students who likely have gaps in the skills needed for transition creates a question about the effectiveness of the services provided for learning disabled students. As an analogy, imagine if a person in need of a wheelchair had to access ramps that were too narrow, too steep, damaged, or difficult to locate. Even if there were a ramp, it would limit that person’s access to the building. What is the condition of the current educational “ramp” for learning disabled students and their access to this learning?

**Research Objectives**

Through case studies, the purpose of this study was to gain a greater understanding of how various stakeholders’ perceive the effectiveness of support services
at community college campuses in Hawai‘i. I hoped to identify both similarities and differences in perspectives to further understand how these programs can best support all of their LD students.

**Research Questions**

The overarching research question was, “How do various stakeholders perceive the effectiveness of Hawai‘i’s community college system in serving its learning-disabled students?” Additionally, the following more specific questions were also addressed:

1. What services are available to LD students? Are they perceived as adequate? And are they being accessed?
2. What strategies do instructors use to meet the learning needs of these students? And have the instructors been trained to teach students with learning disabilities?
3. What other contributing factors interfere or promote success for LD community college students?
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

“If you judge a fish by how well it can climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing it is stupid.” – Albert Einstein

With the help of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1974, colleges and universities are seeing an increase in the enrollment of students with LD. “The proportion of first-time, full-time students with disabilities attending colleges and universities tripled between 1978 and 1994 from 2.6% to 9.2% (Henderson, 1999; Leahman, Davies, & Laurin, 2000; National Council on Disability, 2000; Vogel, Leyser, Wyland, & Brulle, 1999). By 1998, the full range of students with disabilities (i.e., part-time students and students enrolled in graduate programs) had risen to 10.5% of the postsecondary student population (Gajar, 1998). And in their report, the National Council on Disability (2000) reveals that as many as 17% of all students attending higher education programs in the United States are now identified as having a disability, and learning disabilities are by far the most common type of disability reported by college students. However, even with these laws in place, LD students remain at a higher risk of school failure than their non-disabled peers. It is a complex issue that has many factors. For example, the laws are significantly different than the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) that provide services for LD K-12 students. Secondly, LD students often have gaps in academic, social, and personal skills needed to be successful post high school. Third, even if support services are available and accessible for LD college students, instructors and their classroom environments are not always responsive to individual learning needs. Cuseo (2008) reports that most college settings continue to be lecture based, content driven, and teacher
directed. According to Eckes and Ochoa (2005), “post-secondary instructors are unlikely to have the knowledge or skills to make educational accommodations for students with disabilities in their courses” (p. 10). Even if post-secondary instructors are adequately equipped with the necessary teaching skills, there may be resistance to accommodate students for the fear of watering down the curriculum or giving some students an unfair advantage (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005).

This literature review explores these propositions further by: defining the term learning disability and the common strengths and challenges of those identified as LD; describing the individual skills needed for an LD student to successfully transition to college from a K-12 educational setting; explaining the policy and laws that impact LD college students; discussing the pros and cons for LD students in community college programs; and examining the existing model programs across the nation designed specifically to serve the LD population in a college setting.

**What is a learning disability?**

There are a wide variety of learning disabilities. Silver (2001) breaks learning disabilities into the following categories: input disabilities (visual perceptual, auditory perceptual, and other senses); integration disabilities (sequencing and abstraction); output disabilities (language and motor). The National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) (n.d.) states that, “learning disabilities affect the brain's ability to receive, process, store, respond to and communicate information. LD’s are actually a group of disorders, not a single disorder. Learning disabilities are not the same as intellectual disabilities (formerly known as mental retardation), sensory impairments (vision or hearing) or autism spectrum disorders. People with LD are of average or above-average intelligence.
but still struggle to acquire skills that impact their performance in school, at home, in the community and in the workplace” (p. 1). In general, a student with a learning disability has average to above average intelligence, however, his/her brain processes information in an atypical manner, which impacts learning.

Dyslexia is the most common type of learning disability. “Approximately 80 percent of students with learning disabilities have been described as reading disabled” (LD Online, 2010, para. 1). Many people mistakenly identify dyslexia as a disorder in which people see or write letters backward. The International Dyslexia Association (2008a) stated, “Dyslexia is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede the growth of vocabulary and background knowledge” (para. 1).

In 2013 there was a heated debate about the term dyslexia and a proposal to have it removed from the DSM-5 as a label altogether. Ultimately, changes were made to the DSM-5, and dyslexia remained only in the descriptive text. In Hawai‘i, dyslexia is not recognized by the public school system and diagnosticians in special education do not use the term when assessing Hawai‘i public school students. This is a controversial and separate issue in the LD community; however, it is important to note that many other labels are now currently used in place of dyslexia, with the most common being “Specific Learning Disorder.” Additionally, the terms dyscalculia (math disorder) and dysgraphia
(disorder of written expression) are also being used less; however, all of these disorders are considered language-based disabilities.

For the purpose of this research study, the term learning disability was used to reference students who have average to above-average intelligence, but also have a diagnosed learning disability that interferes with the students ability in one or more of the following areas: reading, writing, spelling, listening, processing speed and/or memory. This includes all varieties of language-based disability labels.

It should also be noted, however, that many students diagnosed with a learning disability also have comorbid diagnoses such as: attention deficient hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety, and/or other social and/or emotional difficulties. Whether by causality or correlation, which is an ongoing debate in current research, the large number of individuals with co-existing diagnosis is important to remember when discussing the unique learning needs of LD students. The largest comorbid relationship with a learning disability is ADHD. The International Dyslexia Association (2008b) estimates that 30% of individuals with dyslexia also have ADHD. ADHD is considered a neurobehavioral disorder that is characterized by inattention, distractibility, and impulsivity (IDA, 2008b). ADHD varies in severity and can have a significant impact on learning. Brain research shows that individuals with ADHD have delayed development of their frontal lobe, which is the part of the brain responsible for executive function: time management, organization, decision making and problem solving. Individuals with ADHD, especially children, find it difficult to sustain tasks that require focused mental energy, such as reading and writing. Therefore, it is not uncommon to find children with ADHD who also are developmentally behind in their literacy skills, despite having average or above
average ability to read and write (Children and Adults with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder [CHADD], n.d.). Comorbid conditions frequently compound learning challenges for LD students.

Learning disabilities vary in degree of severity and are impacted by comorbid conditions; therefore, symptoms between individuals can look quite different. For example, one LD individual may have difficulty with decoding letters and sounds, yet, have high comprehension abilities. On the other hand, another LD individual may be able to read smoothly and fluently, but struggles to connect the words together to make meaning. It is important not to make assumptions about what someone with LD can or cannot do. On the other hand, there does tend to be general characteristics of the language-based learning disabilities that can guide one’s understanding of how dyslexia impacts learning.

The organization, LD Online, provides a checklist of common signs of learning disabilities based on the age of the child, which is shown below in Figure 1. Most people will exhibit some of the characteristics from time-to-time, however, if an individual exhibits several of the characteristics over a longer period of time, then the person should consider having a psychoeducational assessment that is administered and interpreted by a professional.
It is easy to see why there are many negative misperceptions about individuals with learning disabilities. However, it is important to remember that a learning disability does not mean a lack of intelligence. In fact, it is often the exact opposite as many LD individuals are also considered “twice exceptional”, which means they cognitively test in the gifted/superior ranges of intelligence while possesses a learning disability. There are many LD individuals who are gifted scientists, mathematicians, innovators and entrepreneurs, and even authors, which some find a bit ironic given the impact an LD has on reading and writing. The list of famous dyslexics is quite long, including some who are considered among the most successful and intelligent in history such as: Albert Einstein, Thomas Edison, Winston Churchill, General George Patton, Agatha Christie, and Henry Ford. Some of today’s richest and most successful dyslexics include: Charles Schwab, Daymond John, Barbara Corcoran, Whoopi Goldberg, Tom Cruise, Jay Leno, Muhammad Ali, Richard Branson, Paul Orfalea, John Chambers, and hundreds more.
There have also been a number of books and articles that refer to dyslexia as a “gift.”

Brain research shows that individuals with a language-based learning disability process information atypically. This means they see the world through a different lens, and therefore, have a unique perspective. Dyslexic people are often described as highly creative, intuitive, and excel at three-dimensional problem solving and hands-on learning. They may have a keen ability to “think outside the box.” Unfortunately, there are too many individuals with learning disabilities who never have the opportunity to realize their full potential. Many are never diagnosed; some are mislabeled early on as discipline problems, cognitively deficient, lazy, etc. Too few receive early intervention and proper support through their education, which is key to their success as adults. Finally, as mentioned earlier, too many end up incarcerated. The world is a complex place with many complex issues that society struggles with. Perhaps it is those with a gift for problem solving and the ability to see the world in a different way who are most likely to change the world. How many of these individuals are stuck in systems that break them down instead of build them up, or that confine them instead of allow them to think and process in the ways that are different? Would the world be a better place if all of these individuals are given the opportunity to leverage their gifts, opposed to being defined and restricted by the fact that their brain works differently (not less than) most other people?

As reported in the article, “What Special Education looks like now in Hawai’i’s Public Schools” by Hill (2013), there are currently 183,251 students in Hawai’i’s public-education system (including 9,593 students who attend the state’s 32 charter schools), 19,696 are in special education, almost 11 percent of the student population. Of these students 8,515 receive services for learning disabilities. These numbers do not include
the number of LD students attending Hawai‘i’s private schools, home schooled, or unidentified. There are also a number of students who struggle in school, however, their diagnostic data is does not clearly support an LD diagnosis, and therefore, do not qualify for services. All of these students are considered at risk for school failure and/or difficulties in the workplace and throughout life. However, research shows that with proper support and intervention, LD students can be highly successful, and education can prevent them from falling through the cracks of our society.

What skills are needed for successful transition to college for LD students?

Regardless of types of interventions LD students may or may not receive as K-12 students, LD students have gaps in skills that create challenges in college environments. These gaps are directly related to the gaps in their cognitive profiles. For example, typical learners consistently fall within the average range on cognitive and academic assessments. However, there are high peaks and low valleys in the psychoeducational profiles of LD students. For example, sometimes there are large gaps between receptive and expressive language skills, verbal and perceptual reasoning compared to processing speed and working memory. In reading, there may be gaps between phonological awareness, automaticity, and reading speed. Academic assessments are likely to underrepresent a student’s ability, or show scores that are inconsistent. It is the gaps that make learning in a typical environment more difficult for these students. “LD students heading into college start off at a disadvantage compared to their non-LD peers. Adolescents and adults with LD are more likely to demonstrate a) deficits in study skills such as test preparation, note-taking, and listening comprehension, b) problems with organizational skills, c) difficulties with social interaction, d) deficits in specific
academic areas, with reading and written composition being the most frequent, and e) low self-esteem” (Skinner & Lindstrom, 2003, p. 132).

The gaps in skills that often interfere with successful transition for LD students can be grouped into four common areas of challenge: self-awareness and advocacy skills, executive function skills, study skills (including reading and writing), and social skills.

First, LD college bound students tend to lack self-awareness and advocacy skills. “High school students with LD often begin their postsecondary education with little knowledge about their disability, how it affects their learning, and how to access support networks on campus” (Brinkerhoff, 1996, p. 121). Advocacy is a complex skill to develop because of a high number of sub-skills needed to effectively advocate. For example, he/she needs self-awareness, communication skills, problem-solving skills, confidence, and acceptance of his/her disability. Therefore, there is some overlap when discussing the skills and factors necessary for LD students to find success in college. However, across the board, the importance of strong advocacy skills comes through as a key component to the success of LD students in a college setting. “Those who coordinate services for students with LD at the postsecondary level are most concerned with the inadequacy of students’ self-advocacy skills” (Janger & Costenbader, 2002, p. 465). “Every IEP needs to include self-advocacy skills training. Students need to be able to discuss their disability and how it impacts his/her learning and life” (Zvi, 2008, p. 14).

The former “No Child Left Behind” legislation shifted education back into strongly standardized content driven curriculum in schools. However, research indicates that study skills, reading comprehension, proficient writing skills, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities are the key areas that schools should focus on when preparing
LD students for college. “Often what separates students with learning disabilities from their non-disabled peers is the lack of study skills: how to study, when to study, and what to study. Further, students with learning disabilities often have difficulty knowing how to read for information and how to comprehend what they have read” (Zvi, 2008, p. 10). “College students with learning disabilities frequently lack effective study habits and continue to exhibit deficits in basic skills” (Brinckerhoff, Shaw, & McGuire, 1992, p. 417). “One of the greatest gifts that a secondary curriculum can give to a college bound LD student is increased competency in organizational and study skills” (Skinner & Schenck, 1992, p. 369). Finally, Carlson (1985) stressed that the emphasis at the secondary level should shift from subject-matter tutoring to instruction in enabling skills that will serve to lessen the impact of a learning disability on future learning. Too much emphasis is put on memorization and content knowledge verses the skills needed to learn.

Executive function was a third area identified as impacting successful transition for LD students. Executive function includes organization and time management skills. It tends to be difficult for LD students to structure their time, plan a process for completing long-term assignments, and organize materials. LD students are often told they are lazy or just need to try harder. However, this is usually not an effective approach because it is not a lack of will that gets in the way for these students; it is their weak time and materials management that preclude LD students from experiencing success. “As teachers, therapists, tutors, and even parents, we expect students to be instinctively organized. We expect our students to know first that they have to plan, and finally how to plan. We expect them to anticipate, to think, and to problem solve. While average students have trouble dealing with time, students with dyslexia are at a distinct and even
greater disadvantage when dealing with outcomes contingent upon time management skills” (Jenks, 2003, p. 7).

Finally, social skills play a significant role in the success of LD students. Students with the ability to relate well to others, work in groups, and form relationships, are more likely to do well in college. “A close network of friends increases tremendously the probability of successfully completing the college curriculum” (Skinner & Schenck, 1992, p. 369). If students lack social skills, they are less likely to obtain the necessary peer support needed for success. It is a myth that learning disabilities only impact reading, writing, spelling or academic areas. A learning disability often has both personal and social implications as well. In addition to generally having delayed social and emotional maturity, an LD student with a slow processing speed or expressive vocabulary challenges, for example, may not able to keep up with discussions and dialogs in peer groups, and therefore, are left out of the conversation. This can be particularly difficult for teenage girls, where a quick social gab is typical of their social groups. Those with ADHD along with LD have added challenges such as impulsivity, which may make it difficult to refrain from blurting out remarks before thinking about how their words or behaviors might be perceived by others. These students may also have difficulty maintaining personal space and respect for others property, or missing social cues entirely, due to their attention issues. LD students also struggle socially when they lack self-confidence, or see themselves as stupid or inferior to their peers. This can lead to social anxiety and other mental health challenges. Furthermore, if they are in an environment that is not supportive and understanding of LD, they may become a target for bullying or become ostracized for being different. Helping LD students to develop
strong social skills is as important as learning how to manage their academic challenges.

**What are other factors effect transition to college for LD students?**

How are LD students successful in college with all of these gaps? Research shows that despite the above challenge areas, there are factors that assist LD students in finding success anyway. These factors differ from the areas of challenge identified above because they may not be something the student can control, learn, or improve. Research shows that motivation, perseverance, self-esteem and confidence, family support, and academic support help to fill the gaps in skills for LD students.

Motivation is probably an important part of success for any student, but more so for those with learning disabilities. LD students typically have to work twice as hard, and it takes twice as long to get through school as their non-disabled peers. Without a clear motivation and desire to get through school, LD students simply get burned out. “In a survey of 911 high school graduates with learning disabilities, Sitlington and Frank (1990) found that one year after graduation only 6.5% of the 50% who had enrolled in some type of postsecondary setting were still in school” (Vogel & Adelman, 1992, p. 430). Vogel and Adelman (1992) also indicated “poor motivation and negative attitudes, along with concomitant factors such as substance abuse, denial of one’s learning disability, and unrealistic expectations, appear to be most predictive of poor academic performance” (p. 439).

Perseverance was also identified as a factor for success in college for LD students. When a student has perseverance, he/she has “the ability to continue to pursue goals despite roadblocks” (Zvi, 2008, p. 22). It is inevitable that LD students are going to encounter obstacles in their learning, and as a result, they need to know how to make
confident decisions, choose alternate learning strategies, and recover from setbacks in order to effectively navigate the obstacles.

Confidence and self-esteem are factors referenced in several journal articles. In a study conducted by Dowdy, Carter, and Smith, non-learning disabled students had greater confidence in intelligence and good grades while the LD students surmised that LD meant dumb. Even those LD students who were college bound described themselves as dumb and slow (Dowdy, Carter, Smith, 1990). “After years of academic struggle in high school, these students may view themselves as lacking any learning strengths or abilities, which further lowers their self-concept” (Brinkerhoff, 1996, p. 120). Confidence and self-esteem seem to be the foundation from which a student builds motivation, perseverance, self-awareness, acceptance, and the skills necessary for advocacy. Parents, teachers, and peers can have a great impact on a student’s confidence and self-esteem. Unfortunately for many LD students, that impact is negative which in turn makes the road to academic success even more challenging. “Students with LD who have struggled through school also may not consider themselves smart enough for college. These attitudes must be addressed if students with LD are to reach their full educational potential” (Getzel & Gugerty, 1996, p. 371).

Finally, LD students need support, and it starts at home. “Studies have consistently found that parent involvement is a predictor of school success” (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005, p. 18). However, parents of LD students have to support their children in a way that does not limit a student’s ability to self-advocate. Students must practice advocating for themselves, especially in high school, because educational laws prevent parents from advocating on behalf of their child in college. “Students will benefit if secondary schools
and parents work to empower students to take on a leading role in advocating for themselves” (Madaus, 2005, p. 35). The best way parents can support their child is by accepting and understanding their child’s learning difference, give their students plenty of encouragement, positive feedback, and throughout k-12 schooling, provide routines and structure in the home. Parents harm their children by calling them lazy, telling them to just try harder, comparing them to non-disabled peers or siblings, or assuming that their child will outgrow or completely overcome their learning disability. One way a parent can support his/her LD child is to assist him/her in finding an appropriate college environment. Too often, parents want their child to attend a big name school that may not be an appropriate fit. “Families must sometimes confront feelings of disappointment if the student is not qualified to attend a school at the academic level they would prefer or at the level of the student’s peers” (Brinckerhoff, 1996, p. 130). Furthermore, cultural influences such as ethnicity and social-economic status impact the ideals and value that individual families and students place on education and their expectations for a student’s future (Persell, 2001).

Academic support is perhaps the key factor in LD students finding success in college. Too often, LD students think of college as a fresh start, and believe they can manage their learning disability on their own. However, “students who try to “go it on their own” and not seek assistance from disability services in their freshman year are frequently setting the stage for failure. Students are best served when they identify their specific learning disabilities as a freshman to the appropriate institutional office” (Skinner & Lindstrom, 2003, p. 135). A study by Vogel and Adelman, (1992) found that academic advising for students with LD was particularly helpful. These specialists
closely monitor academic performance and assist students in monitoring deadlines for taking a course. Sinner & Lindstrom, 2003, reported a similar finding, “It is important for learning disabled students to have an emotional support system—a home base, someone who can listen to the hurts and frustrations, and who can say, “I know you can get it together again, I have faith in you” (p. 135). Students will need a variety of accommodations depending on the individual’s strengths and challenges; however, every LD student benefits most from a connection with an adult in the community who can guide them through their transition (Brooks & Goldstein, 2001). Most likely this type of service can be found in the student disabilities office. However, sometimes a key support person comes from another place. In the case study reported by Eckes & Ochoa (2005), a student talked about how she maintained contact with her high school math teacher throughout college for continued academic support. Without some accommodations it is unlikely that a learning disabled student can find success in college. It would be comparable to a person with poor vision trying drive during a road trip without wearing any eyeglasses; they will probably crash. With educational laws that mandate services for disabilities, it is important that students understand how to get accommodations and what accommodations they need to advocate for. Students’ best bet is to form a relationship with someone in the disabilities office who can advise them throughout their college career.

How do K-12 special education laws compare to secondary post-secondary laws?

The recent alumnae of Assets High School, who was mentioned in the introduction, spoke with me further about her challenges in accessing accommodations at her college (not a community college program). She is a severely dyslexic and
dysgraphic student who has approved accommodations that include: extended time, alternative format of text, a note taker, and a reader for exams. In her 6th week of classes of the term, and after several meetings, she finally received four out of six textbooks in alternative format. Two books remained in print, and the disabilities office on campus told her that she would need to acquire those texts in alternative format on her own. Additionally, she had a professor who assured her she would receive her extended time accommodation on an online timed test; however, when she took the test, there was no additional time granted. Her psychology professor told her “the accommodations on your ADA contract are just optional, and I don’t have to provide you with all of them.” I assisted this student in drafting emails to her professors and meeting with the ADA office. It was simply shocking to witness the effort she has to put forth to access the rights given to her under federal laws. At times, she has difficulty expressing herself due to her LD. Although she has confidence, it wears thin when her instructors repeatedly challenge her requests, and she often feels like she is the only student in this college who has ever sought out accommodations.

While the situation above is extreme, most alumni from Assets who come back to share about their experiences have similar examples of a professor who refused to accommodate, difficulty in getting required reading in different formats, and having to frequently explain to others about what it means to have a learning disability.

LD students who transition to college are moving from a system, set forth under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 (IDEA), in which students are protected by parents and professionals, into a system that requires self-initiation. To be specific, once a student has graduated from high school, and is no longer under 18 years
of age, he/she is also no longer protected under IDEA. Consequently, it is important that LD students be knowledgeable of their rights under section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 prior to transitioning into a post-secondary educational setting (Skinner, 2003 Eckes & Ochoa, 2005 Brinkerhoff, 1996, Zvi, 2008). Table 1 below outlines the differences between the three laws that impact LD students as reported by Skinner and B. Lindstrom (2003) & Zvi (2008).

Table 1. Disability Laws

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| Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990                | ▪ Provides free and appropriate education tailored to students’ individual needs, affects students in preschool through grade 12 or until age 21 if the student has not graduated with a diploma.  
  ▪ Once a student graduates with a diploma, IDEA no longer applies. |
| Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 AND Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 | ▪ Ensures accessibility, nondiscrimination and protects those deemed otherwise qualified (student has met the admission standards of an institution)  
  ▪ Ensures equal access by identifying and providing accommodations to reduce the effects of the disability as much as possible. (Does not ensure meeting individual needs)  
  ▪ It is the student’s responsibility to self-identify/disclose their learning disability  
  ▪ Student must provide documentation supporting their need for accommodations  
  ▪ Student must request necessary accommodations  
  ▪ Student is responsible for being familiar with college requirements, making programming decisions, monitoring their own progress, meeting the same academic standards of all students, and requesting assistance when needed.  
  ▪ Parents, professionals from former educational settings, cannot advocate on behalf of the student |

The laws above clearly indicate a shift in responsibility from parents and professionals to the student once they graduate from high school. This makes sense in that students K-12, particularly at the younger ages, are ill equipped to make decisions
about their own needs as a learner. “Students with disabilities graduating from high school move from a protective environment in which school personnel are legally responsible for identifying and providing appropriate services under the IDEA, to an environment in which the students are expected to self-identify as a person with a disability and request specific accommodations under Section 504 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)” (Stodden & Conway, n.d., para. 2). A question that arises, however, is whether LD students transitioning from high school to college have the skills necessary to seek out and access services? As stated in the earlier section, it is common for LD students to lack skills in self-awareness and self-advocacy, executive function, study skills, and social skills. Now, think about the skills needed for a student to independently seek out accommodations and support. First, the student needs to know him/herself as a learner, the supports needed, and have the confidence and communication skills to advocate for those supports. On top of all the typical pieces of college life that a student needs to manage, an LD student needs to be able to organize and manage additional aspects of planning for college engagement that include: arranging meetings with the disability office and professors; keeping track of small details such as dates for early registration or alternative times for testing; coordinating with note takers, tutors, counselors; carefully plan out writing assignments in order to get support needed with the writing process, etc. LD students, who by nature tend to lack effective executive function skills, are being put in a position that requires a higher level of executive function skill than most typical learners possess. The Americans with Disabilities Act is all about “access”; however, is there truly “access” if most students who need services lack the skills necessary to independently go and get what they need? Conway and
Stodden (n.d.) stated, “it is their [students] responsibility to inform school officials of their disability, provide documentation of the disability, and propose viable options for meeting the unique accommodation needs specific to their disability” (para. 2). Additionally, “because of a lack of the opportunity to practice self-determination skills in high school, many students with disabilities are ill-equipped to request and negotiate accommodations at the postsecondary level.” (Stodden & Conway, n.d., para. 3)

According to Eckes & Ochoa (2005), “Under current transition plans, many student with disabilities leave high school without the self-advocacy skills they need to survive in college. Further, although some universities understand their legal obligations in serving post-secondary students with disabilities, the litigation suggests that more needs to be accomplished” (p. 6). Potential flaws in the laws and policies, of which the disability services are built upon, add a layer of complexity to the issue of disability offices being able to effectively serve their LD students.

Other laws have come into play as well. For example, reauthorizations of the Assistive Technology Act of 1988 have occurred in 1994, 1998, and 2004. The most recent revision of the act is called the Improving Access to Assistive Technology for Individuals with Disability Act of 2004. The law recognizes that technology plays an increasingly important role in the lives of all US citizens in the conduct of business, the functioning of government, communication, commerce, and education, and as a result, has a tremendous impact on individuals with disabilities (Assistive Technology Act of 2004). According to the law:

Substantial progress has been made in the development of assistive technology devices, including adaptations to existing devices that facilitate activities of daily
living that significantly benefit individuals with disabilities of all ages. These devices, including adaptations, increase involvement in, and reduce expenditures associated with, programs and activities that facilitate communication, ensure independent functioning, enable early childhood development, support educational achievement, provide and enhance employment options, and enable full participation in community living for individuals with disabilities. Access to such devices can also reduce expenditures associated with early childhood intervention, education, rehabilitation and training, health care, employment, residential living, independent living, recreation opportunities, and other aspects of daily living (Assistive Technology Act of 2004, p.118)

This law has many implications for post-secondary educational settings. First, the law recognized assistive technology tools as a means of accommodating students with disabilities. Sometimes this is beneficial to the institution because technology solutions may be less expensive. For example, having a computer read a test to a student as opposed to paying for a personal reader is often considered more cost effective.

However, assistive technology tools may also be a burden at times. First, disability offices must stay on top of the rapidly changing world of technology. There are thousands of applications available to students on a multitude of devices. It is unlikely that any one individual could be familiar with everything available. Yet, students with disabilities have a legal right to access technology tools that, according to the National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, make it possible for them to participate in education, employment, and daily activities on a level playing field with other members of their communities (National Dissemination Center for Children with
Disabilities, 2013). This abundance of tools makes the task of determining accommodations more complex for both LD students and those who provide support.

Computerized testing creates another interesting dilemma. First, does the computerized version help or further hinder learning disabled students? Hockley (1990) considers advances made in testing technology and the questions that arise in terms of equity. “It is not known if the ability to perform well on computerized standardized tests is impaired or enhanced for students with learning disabilities. Given the heterogeneous nature of the population, it is likely that some individuals with learning disabilities will benefit from computerized testing and others will not. Research to determine whether barriers are created by technology must be conducted in the near future to ensure that access is not decreased by the introduction of technology” (p. 30)

Access to learning is a third issue that surfaces as a complex challenge for colleges and universities. Under ADA, as explained earlier, these institutions are required to provide access. This could include writing labs and other supports as well. Many schools are ensuring access by providing writing labs and such to all students. “By accommodating students with learning disabilities in this way, existing services are not duplicated, and accommodations become an integral part of the academic support network available to all students” (Shaw et al., 1994, p. 141).

Unfortunately, simply having access to a tool does not truly ensure access unless the student knows how to utilize the tool, which highlights a 4th issue. “Often students with learning disabilities reach the postsecondary level without being exposed to assistive technology and its benefits. Additionally, some students with learning disabilities are not identified until they reach the postsecondary level. For these reasons, it is important that
postsecondary service providers be familiar with selection criteria and training guidelines concerning assistive technology” (Day & Edwards, 1996, p. 491). Questions arise in terms of the responsibilities of the disability offices and the learning disabled students. For example, is it the responsibility of the disability office to research and identify new technology tools? Is it also their responsibility to train themselves, instructors, and students in how to utilize the tools? Are disability offices permitted to limit the number of technology tools they approve as accommodations, or does this violate the Assistive Technology Act? At the same time, should students be limited in use of the many tools that are out there? Should they be required to access only a few permitted by the disability office when they may be well versed in another tool? Assistive technology is only a fraction of the complex issue of effectively serving learning-disabled students, yet is an important and evolving piece that continues to challenge policy makers and post-secondary school personnel.

**TRIO Federal Department of Education Student Support Services Program**

TRIO is a federal outreach program through the Department of Education designed to identify and provide services for individuals with disadvantaged backgrounds. TRIO dates back to a federal program called Upward Bound, which was launched after the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 to address poverty in the nation. A second outreach program, Talent Search emerged a year later as part of the Higher Education Act. The third series of the educational opportunities program launched in 1968, called SSS (Student Support Services). By the late 60s the term “TRIO” was used to describe these three federal programs (TRIO, 2011).
Over the past forty years, TRIO expanded and added more programs. Today, there are eight programs within TRIO that target services to low-income individuals, first generation college students, and individuals with disabilities to progress through middle to post-baccalaureate programs (TRIO, 2013). A variety of organizations are eligible to receive TRIO funds to financially support programs that include:

“Academic advice, personal counseling, and career workshops; information on postsecondary education opportunities and student financial assistance; help in completing applications for college admissions, testing, and financial aid; coordination with nearby postsecondary institutions; media activities designed to involve and acquaint the community with higher education opportunities; tutoring; mentoring; education or counseling services designed to improve the financial and economic literacy of students; and programs and activities previously mentioned that are specially designed for students who are limited English proficient, students from groups that are traditionally underrepresented in postsecondary education, students with disabilities, students who are homeless children and youths, students who are in foster care or are aging out of foster care system or other disconnected students” (TRIO, 2014a, para. 2).

While many kinds of organizations are eligible to apply for grant funds within the eight programs, it is the Student Support Services program within TRIO that provides funds for colleges to better serve their learning disabled students (TRIO, 2014b). All higher education institutions receiving TRIO funds for an SSS project must provide: academic tutoring in reading, writing math, science, and other subjects, advice in course
selection, assistance with financial aid applications and programs, education or counseling services aimed at improving financial and economic literacy, and assist students in further education. SSS projects may also provide, but are not required to, individual counseling, instruction to acquaint student with career options, exposure to cultural and academic programs not usually available, mentoring programs, securing temporary housing during breaks for students who are homeless youth or aging out of the foster care system (TRIO, 2014b).

Although the federal government recognizes a need for additional support beyond ADA law, disability offices are bound by ADA. Other resources, such as TRIO, that provide further support demonstrate success, however, overall these services remain limited and/or non-existent in may colleges and universities (TRIO, 2013).

**What are the pros and cons for an LD student attending community college versus a university?**

Unfortunately, sometimes there is a stigma that unfairly labels community college programs and students. These two-year institutions are often not regarded as highly as university programs, and the students who attend the schools are sometimes mislabeled as less intelligent or capable than four-year college students. However, community colleges are a critical part of post-secondary education in the nation. Unlike four-year universities, community colleges open their doors to anyone who has completed a high school diploma or equivalent. The diversity within the schools is unlike any other educational institution in the United States. In one classroom, students may easily range in age from 16 – 80, and consist of a wide variety of ethnic and social-economic backgrounds. On top of those differences, students may also be working full time, single
parents, physically, mentally, or learning disabled, recovering addict, previously incarcerated, etc. Community colleges give everyone the opportunity to improve their life through education. This is an incredible gift that is often underappreciated and recognized in society. Although student attrition rates are high, graduation rates are low, and it too often takes students five-six years to complete a two-year degree. The diverse populations of community college students make these attrition rates highly complex.

While college is not necessarily for everyone, research still shows that those with a college education are much more likely to secure employment and careers than those without. “Completion of any type of post-secondary education significantly improves the chance of an individual securing meaningful employment” (Zafft, Hart, & Zim-Brich, 2004, p. 45). Community college provides this opportunity to all learners. Some LD students do not qualify for admissions into four-year programs due to low grades and/or college entrance exam scores, so community college gives them an open door to pursue post-secondary education. There are other benefits, too, specifically to LD students attending community colleges. First, class sizes tend to be smaller in community college programs, whereas, entry-level courses at large universities sometimes seat 500+ students in one lecture hall. LD students are more likely to advocate, get the individual support they need as a learner, and make a connection with a supportive charismatic adult in a smaller learning environment. Second, community colleges are local, making it possible for LD students, just out of high school, to be able to live at home and attend school. Many LD students are delayed in emotional and social maturity, making it more challenging to be independent at 18 years of age. Parents can help to transition their child by continuing to provide a loving and supportive home environment. Next, the
primary responsibility for instructors at community colleges is to teach their courses, whereas, at universities, professors are often more focused on their own professional research and/or graduate level programs. It is common in universities for undergrad classes, particularly during the freshman year, to be taught by graduate students. Not only do these graduate students have little or no experience in teaching, but they too are often preoccupied with their own research and study. Students with learning disabilities benefit from teachers who know how to break down concepts, connect ideas, and engage their learners.

**What are the characteristics of existing LD post-secondary programs?**

According to Newman, Wagner, Cameto, and Knokey (2009) only 21% of LD students (as compared to 40% of the general population) enroll in a four-year college or university. While there are a growing number of programs and colleges reaching out to the LD population, colleges with robust services for LD students remain quite limited. The same report states that although “Nearly nine out of ten of the nation's two and four-year colleges enroll students with disabilities, however, of the 86% of those that enroll students with learning disabilities, only 24% say they can help disabled students to a major extent” (Newman, Wagner, Cameto & Knokey, 2009, p. 39). Currently in the United States, there are only two degree-granting colleges that exclusively serve LD students, Landmark College and Beacon College. There are other schools who reach out to LD community such as Marymount California University, and some Universities that have significant supplemental programs, such as the Strategic Alternative Learning Techniques (SALT) program at the university of Arizona. These schools and programs
provide an overview of the best support services currently available to LD college bound students.

**Landmark College**

Landmark College proudly identifies itself as the first college in the nation designed exclusively for students with learning disabilities. In 1971, Charles Drake and his wife Marjorie founded the (K-12) Landmark School in Putney, Vermont. Charles was identified as severely dyslexic himself, yet graduated from Harvard with his Ed.D. and where he also lectured and advocated on behalf of students with learning disabilities. As the Landmark School grew, it added college-preparatory components to its curriculum and Drake recognized a need for a college program designed for these students. Drake and the school’s trustees secured a site on a former college campus that had closed and opened Landmark College in September of 1985 with 77 students (Landmark Links, 2005).

According to Landmark College’s website, the College began as a two-year college program, and in 1986, was authorized to grant Associate degrees. In addition to their Associate degree programs, today students can earn their undergraduate Bachelor’s degree in Liberal Arts. Landmark College also offers a graduate certification program for educators. Landmark is recognized nationally as the premiere institute of education for learning disabled students, with a price tag to match. Annual tuition including room and board is about $60,000 per year.

What is it that Landmark College does for its students that is different than other colleges and worth the price of tuition? The primary differences are an individualized approach to teaching, a focus on skills and learning, and a supportive environment made
up of instructors who are specially trained in disabilities and understand LD students as learners. “Instead of constantly struggling not to fail, Landmark students discover the power of successful learning. Our highly personalized approach integrates cutting-edge learning strategies, skills and assistive technology into every aspect of a student’s daily experience. At Landmark, students discover the learning style that works best for them. They develop the skills needed to succeed in their academic pursuits. Our singular focus creates a welcoming and supportive college community where faculty and students alike understand the challenges of learning differently” (Landmark College, n.d., para. 2).

Study skills and learning strategies are integrated into every part of the degree programs offered. For example, students are taught how to take two-column notes, and then that strategy is reinforced in every class. Students use consistent organizational systems and are taught how to access and integrate assistive technology into their learning. With a 1-3 student/teacher ratio, students are placed into one of three programs upon admission: credit curriculum, partial credit curriculum, and language intensive curriculum (LIC). Those in LIC receive intensive remediation in reading and writing skills using multisensory, phonetic approaches such as Orton-Gillingham, that are proven successful for students with learning disabilities. In 1986, an article was published in the Chicago Tribune about the opening of Landmark College. Since the founding of the school, the mission has been clear; teach students to read, write, and learn.

The Landmark organization started the college because officials realized that many dyslexic students are able to get through high school but cannot handle the more complex material they encounter in college courses. In addition to its college-level courses, the Putney campus also offers a pre-college program to
prepare dyslexic students to take on other colleges. “It’s great to leave a place after four years and have a B.A.,” Baucom says. “But if you leave and your reading skills are still at the 3rd- or 4th- grade level and you can’t write a sentence that’s legible or comprehensible, you’re not going to have much success” (Meyer, 1986, para. 17).

The same year an article was published in the New York Times, “At Landmark College, all students have high school diplomas before they arrive, and many have spent a year or two in college elsewhere, often making fair grades. But most are told that before they can begin college-level work here they must spend a year, or maybe two or three, in the school's intensive precollege classes to master reading and writing” (Wald, 1986, para. 1).

Author and Educational Consultant, Steven Roy Goodman, published his interview with Landmark College President Dr. Peter Eden in the March of 2013 edition of “Higher Education.” During his interview Dr. Peter Eden shared about the unique aspects of Landmark:

- Many other institutions do not adequately accommodate students. Landmark takes a lot of transfer students from other universities and the students report that they just are not getting the accommodations they need.
- There is a great comfort on campus because everyone has a shared challenge; every student has some kind of learning challenge. No one is an outsider or feels like they need to conceal their LD.
- At Landmark, accommodations are integrated into all parts of the school. There is not one person, or one department a student has to go to get his/her
accommodations. Students do not have to explain themselves and their accommodations each semester to their professors and hope that the professor will be supportive.

- LD students by nature have challenges with executive function, which includes time management, organization and planning. Each student has a faculty advisor, who acts more like a personal coach. The advisors meet with their students several times a week and help to keep them on track.
- Landmark has a robust student affairs division. This is particularly important for students on the spectrum who have learning challenges that impact their social interaction.
- Classes are very small, about 5-1.
- 9 out 10 students who transfer to other universities after completing the Landmark two-year degree, move onto four-year programs, and graduate at higher rate than national average for any learner.
- Landmark incorporates Universal Design for Learning into its curriculum. It is highly unusual to find this approach to teaching at the college level.

Contrary to what some people think, Landmark College is a “regular college.” They have sports teams, alumni associations, dorms, financial aid, accredited degree programs, etc. However, Landmark is unique, and even other higher education programs, that provide excellent support services for LD students, cannot compare to the learning environment, the integrated approach, the trained faculty and staff and personalized education that Landmark offers. It is also interesting that students who begin their college education in this type of program are much more successful in completing four-
year and graduate degrees than the national average for all learners. It is a testament that there are more effective methods of teaching students than the existing lecture-based and content driven approaches of most higher education institutions. Perhaps national college graduation rates would increase if there were more colleges like Landmark for all students.

**Beacon College**

There is only one other college in the nation that serves LD students exclusively, Beacon College in Florida. The mission at Beacon College is to offer academic degree programs to students with learning disabilities. According to the Beacon website, Beacon strives to help their students understand their learning disability in ways they never have before, while showing students how to optimize their academic strengths and develop effective learning skills to help them achieve their goals. Beacon College serves students with: ADHD, auditory and visual processing differences, dyslexia, expressive/receptive language deficits, language-based learning disabilities, reading/writing disabilities, math disabilities (Beacon College, n.d.).

The concept of Beacon was put forth in 1989 by a group of parents who were concerned about college opportunities for the LD children. As a result, the initial group of trustees founded the college. Beacon was the first college in the nation to offer an accredited four-year degree program. They currently offer BA or AA in seven majors that include: business management, computer information systems-web & digital media or information systems, human services, interdisciplinary studies, psychology, and studio art (Beacon, n.d.-a). Key aspects of Beacon include:

- Small classes and personalized attention
• Developmental courses designed to prepare students for college level material
• Individualized academic mentoring with Learning Specialists
• Teaching that caters to student’s learning style
• Courses that promote critical thinking skills
• Advanced technology incorporated into coursework

Similar to Landmark, Beacon College has incredible success rates for its students. “The results of our singular dedication to the success of our students are tangible and consequential. The rates of student retention (84%) and graduation (77%) that arise from Beacon’s rigorous undergraduate curriculum are extraordinary when measured against comparable national averages, as are the employment rates of our students immediately upon their graduation (exceeding 70%). Each year, an additional 12% of Beacon’s graduates are accepted for advanced study at competitive graduate schools across the nation” (Hagerty, n.d., para. 3).

Beacon students are assigned to a life coach whom they meet with weekly for at least ten weeks. While life coaches are not counselors, diagnosticians, or tutors, they play a critical role in the success of the student by guiding the student throughout college with goal setting and implementing a plan to meet those goals. Beacon describes a life coach as a person who will ask students powerful questions, encourage students to clarify their specific goals, bring activities and opportunities for reflection and growth, and support you and your goals (Beacon, n.d.-b).

An article about Beacon College was published in USA Today in December of 2010. Similar to the interview with the President of Landmark, the article quotes James
Wendorf, the executive director of the National Center for Learning Disabilities, who shares about the Beacon experience and how an inclusive environment lends to the success of their students. “There are not many schools like Beacon. The discloser issue is undoubtedly far less (there). Where there are robust programs within colleges and universities, it increases the acceptance level of LDs. The widespread achievement gap for LD students is partially due to colleges’ lack of proper accommodations nationwide. The other half is students' reluctance to seek out such resources due to embarrassment or shame. What the data shows is that many students who get onto campus don't go to the disability office, they don't disclose, and they don't get the accommodations available to them. That has a really negative impact, and LD students have significantly lower rates with completing a four-year degree” (Atteberry, 2013, p. 2). A student in the article explains the importance of the sharing the learning environment with other LD students. “It's kind of a lonely feeling when you're not feeling like you're as smart as everyone, but at Beacon, everyone here has LDs, so it’s not a big deal. It’s OK to be here and it’s OK to have that weakness, because Beacon College recognizes the rest of your strengths” (Atteberry, 2013, p. 2).

Marymount California University

While Beacon and Landmark College serve exclusively LD students, there are a few other schools in the nation, such as Marymount California University (MCU) in Palos Verdes California, that are recognized for serving LD students well. Part of the mission at MCU is to “foster a student-centered approach to learning that promotes the development of the whole person” (Marymount, n.d.-a, para.1). Like other small liberal arts colleges, a student-centered approach sets Marymount apart from large traditional
universities. Most traditional universities are teacher centered and content driven. In undergraduate courses, class sizes reach as high as several hundred in a one-room lecture hall. Additionally, although some schools report a small ratio, it is not the same as an average class size. Graduate courses and upper level undergraduate courses may be small; however, 100 and 200 level courses may be significantly higher. The environment does not lend itself to students interacting with one another or even the professor interacting with all students. Instead, the professors give lectures about their content, and student success is heavily weighted on their performance on traditional mid-term and final exams. In traditional environments, students who need additional support or want to form a relationship with their professor must go out of his/her way to standout among the hundreds of other students.

Marymount sets itself apart from other small liberal arts colleges because they seek to admit students who struggled in high school or during their first year of college, and/or have other diverse learning needs. In addition to small classes of 18 students on average, which are taught by full-time professors, the professors are expected to get to know each of their students, which allows for a personalized, educational experience and creates a tight community on campus. Unlike many universities, the professor’s primary role is teaching and coaching students. It is not uncommon for professors at Marymount to have lunch with their students, reach out to students who have not been attending class, and go out of their way to ensure students are set up for success and have the support they need through college. In addition to office hours, professors also tutor in the learning center and coach/mentor students.
All students at MCU have access to the school’s Learning Center, not just students with a diagnosed learning disability. The Learning Center is both physically and philosophically the heart of the school. It is the bridge between the academic rigor of college and developing the skills students need to be successful in a college environment. At the Learning Center, students can access both peer and faculty tutors, learn specific study skills and strategies, receive peer mentoring, access disability services, and receive intensive supports if needed.

Tutoring at Marymount goes well beyond helping a student with his/her homework or cramming for an exam. This aspect of the program mirrors the Marymount mission of personalized education as well. “The faculty and peer tutors of the Learning Center evaluate the learning process of each student and prescribe methods to further develop individual skills needed to enhance academic performance” (Marymount, n.d.-f, para. 1). Tutoring may be individualized, in a small group, or tutors may help to formulate and facilitate study groups and course or topic review sessions. Diverse learners often benefit from repetition and one-on-one instruction. The faculty found a way through the learning center to provide that kind of support and learning environment for all students.

The Learning Center also assists students with study skills mastery and peer mentoring. “Often, time management is the first skill that needs to be developed to achieve academic success. Initial tutorial appointments help students establish a personalized time management plan, while subsequent sessions focus on improvement of study skills. Through a series of specially-developed handouts, lectures, and workshops, students can work with their tutors and on their own to sharpen study skills and have a
successful Marymount California University experience” (Marymount, n.d.-b, para. 1).

According to Marymount’s website, specific topics in study skills include: time management and organization, improving concentration, listening skills, discovering self-motivation, adjusting attitude, spelling and vocabulary, note taking, textbook marking, test taking skills, using study aids, memory improvement, and combating test anxiety. Additionally, Marymount identifies which study skills students need further growth in. “During the first few weeks of each term, all incoming students are asked by the Learning Center to participate in an on-line study skills assessment tool – the LASSI. This nationally-normed inventory provides each student with an individualized profile of his/her strengths and weaknesses over ten areas relevant to academic success, including: anxiety, attitude, concentration, information processing, motivation, self testing, selecting main idea, study aids, time management, and testing strategies” (Marymount, n.d.-b, para. 1). Following the survey, faculty members conduct follow-up presentations on how to interpret the survey results, and assist students in setting goals to improve 1-2 areas each semester. Students take a post LASSI at the end of the first semester to provide evidence of improvement and identify areas that need continued growth. “Students report that they find the LASSI very useful in recognizing the components of learning. Data reveals that, by changing behaviors in only a few of these areas, students realize increased success. In fact, over 90 percent of Marymount freshmen improve in at least two areas measured by the LASSI in their first semester” (Marymount, n.d.-b, para. 3).

The Peer Partner Program is another facet of the Learning Center. This program partners struggling students with peer mentors. Mentors are trained in study skills and are highly familiar with campus resources. Participation in the program is voluntary, and
students may sign up for a peer partner for one or more semesters. “The goal of the Peer Partner Program is to help students stay academically-focused and become confident, successful college students through targeted and consistent one-on-one peer mentoring” (Marymount, n.d.-b, para. 4).

The disability office is also encompassed within the learning center, and they assist students in receiving their ADA accommodations and accessing assistive technology. LD students at Marymount receive a disability handbook that outlines resources and tips for success. LD are asked to sign consent to release confidential information. The form states the laws that protect confidentiality for disabled students. Then, students agree to the following on the form: “The Coordinator of Disability Resources may discuss my learning needs (including strengths and weaknesses) with Marymount California University administrators, staff and faculty who request such information to aid in their instruction/programming and to understand accommodations requested” (Marymount, n.d.-c, p.7). An additional line permits the disability office to discuss student information with parents as well. This helps students to have a support team in place opposed to having to single handily manage their disability.

For students who need intensive support, there are fee-based programs: Mariner Academic Strategies & Techniques (MAST) Program, and the Mariner Academic Assistance Program (MAAP). The MAST program was originally designed for students with learning disabilities; however, the program is now an option for all students. The goal of the MAST program is to provide “intensive and individualized support for students who have experienced academic difficulties and who want to confront those challenges with new learning strategies” (Marymount, n.d.-d, para. 4). Students in this
program receive intensive one-on-one services, but the cost is significant. A full year of
the program currently cost an additional $8,000 each year on top of tuition, room, board,
student fees, etc.

MAAP is a similar fee-based program that provides additional intensive support
for students. Free tutoring is available to all students, however, their appointments are
limited to no more than two appointments a week for the same subject, and are scheduled
on a first come-first serve basis. These restrictions are necessary so that the resources are
readily available to all students. MAAP was designed to meet the needs of students who
want a regularly schedule appointments with a faculty tutor in math, English, and/or
reading. Students pay different fees depending on the level of support (appointments per
week). For two appointments per week, the fee is about $2,000 per semester. Students
can enroll in up to four appointments per week for about $3,700 per semester
(Marymount, n.d.-e).

Most universities limit these kinds of resources for only students who have
qualifying learning disabilities. The downside to that policy is that others including
students, professors, and often LD students themselves, view the resources as handouts,
crutches, and sometimes an unfair advantage. LD students typically do not want to
standout, or be recognized as needing something different than their peers. Marymount
has bypassed this stigma by individualizing education for all of their students,
recognizing that everyone has strengths and challenges, and everyone is a unique learner.
Those who work in education with the LD population often say that all students benefit
from the strategies, techniques, and environment that are necessary for LD learners.
Marymount embraces this perspective by creating a conducive and individualized educational program for all of their students.

**Strategic Alternative Learning Techniques (SALT) center at Univ. of Arizona**

The University of Arizona (UA) is a large state college with nearly 30,000 undergraduate students, 7,000 graduate students, and 1,400 pursuing professional and medical degrees. It is hard to imagine an LD student who needs a more personalized approach and accommodations thriving in this kind of learning environment. However, The University of Arizona is recognized as an excellent option for LD students. The secret to their success is the Strategic Alternative Learning Techniques (SALT) center.

According to the program’s website, The SALT center was founded in 1980 as a program within the student resource center at the University. During the first year, it served three students. During the 90s the program grew into a freestanding and fee-based division of the university campus. During its third decade, the program outgrew its original space, and the program moved to its current location. Today, the SALT center employs 30 full-time staff, about 100 tutors, and serves over 500 students. The program’s mission is to “inspire students with learning and attention challenges to succeed in higher education. Through the provision of comprehensive academic support services, the SALT center encourages student engagement, self-awareness, and growth” (Strategic Alternative Learning Techniques Center [SALT], n.d.-a, para. 1)

Students must apply and enroll in the SALT program concurrently with applying to the University of Arizona. Students must have a diagnosed learning disability and/or ADHD to be accepted into the program. In addition to the tuition and fees of the University of Arizona, students pay for one of three services provided: comprehension
services for lower and upper division students ($1,100 - $2,600 per semester), Pre-
College Summer Program ($3,200 per summer session), and Life and ADHD Coaching
($1,350 for three months) (SALT, n.d.-b). There are six categories of support that are
encompassed in SALT’s comprehensive services program: tutoring, support from a
strategic learning specialist, workshops, psychological services, assistive technology, and
life and AD/HD coaching.

For tutoring services, SALT students have access to regularly scheduled tutors for
most courses at UA. Tutors meet with students both individually and to facilitate group
study sessions. Students may also drop in for support with writing assignments or math
and science courses. While tutors are not faculty members like they are at Marymount,
they are trained and certified through the International Tutor Training Program
Certification program (SALT, n.d.-c).

Strategic Learning Specialists (SLS) have a different role for SALT students.
“SLS provide individualized assistance with educational planning, goal setting, time
management, organization, and learning strategies. SLS offer guidance with transition to
the collegiate environment, in addition to improving skills in communication, self-
advocacy, and learning” (SALT, n.d.-d, para. 1). SALT students meet with their SLS
weekly, which allows an opportunity for a strong and collaborative relationship to
develop. During the meetings, SLS will work with students on goal setting and personal
aspirations, learning strategies, arranging tutoring and recommending tutoring,
workshops, and assistive technology. While the SLS is the student’s primary contact at
SALT, the program and SLS does not replace the disability services at UA. For example,
an SLS does not advocate or talk with faculty/professors, arrange accommodations,
release information to parents, faculty, or others outside of SALT, etc. Students must still register with the disability services at UA to access accommodations through ADA (SALT, n.d.-d).

Most universities and colleges in the nation provide counseling services for students. However, the SALT program has their own counseling staff for SALT students. “The SALT Center's Psychological Services can help students address issues related to anxiety, depression, coping with stress, and managing life in college. In addition, these services can assist students with grief and loss, substance abuse, and sleep disorders” (SALT, n.d.-e, para. 1). When mental health issues are significant, the counselors will refer the student to outside resources and treatment.

Each semester SALT offers a series of workshops to further support students in developing the skills they need for success in college. “SALT Center workshops, facilitated by staff, offer students the opportunity to learn new skills and academic strategies, provide a better understanding of learning challenges, and explore ways to conform learning strategies according to students' individual learning styles” (SALT, n.d.-f, para. 1). According to the online schedule, the following hour long workshops are listed for January and February of 2014: Top Ten Tops for an Excellent College Experience, Reading Strategies, Time Management, Textbook Navigation, Exam Prep, Test Taking, Stress, Strengthening your Writing, Research 102, Evernote, and Finals Prep.

SALT students have access to their own computer resource lab, which is well equipped with the latest assistive technology. Workshops, as mentioned above, are offered each semester to train students how to use the various tools and implement the
assistive technology into learning. Those in the SALT program recognize the importance of technology and how these tools can provide students with access to learning.

“Assistive technology programs can enhance visual stimulation, aural stimulation, or both, to increase the effectiveness of study sessions. The software can be strategically used in different combinations depending upon the learning strengths and weaknesses of each student. When applied properly, these AT [assistive technology] programs can make a world of difference” (SALT, n.d.-g, para. 1).

SALT’s newest service is Life and AD/HD Coaching. Similar to the SLS, the coach meets with the student regularly, helps set goals, and makes referrals for workshops, tutoring, etc. However, the coaches provide more intensive services for students who struggle the most with attention and executive function challenges. Services are based on individual student needs, so coaching may look a little different student to student. Additionally, the life and AD/HD coaches work specifically on skills that are typically weak with students diagnosed with AD/HD such as: daily structure, focus, organization, planning, task initiation and completion (SALT, n.d.-h).

**Summary**

Nation-wide learning disabilities make up close to 80% of disabilities in school settings, and 10-20% of the entire student population (IDA, n.d.). Despite advances in educational research, and strong evidence that supports specific approaches to education for these learners, many educators are untrained in how to implement these strategies into their teaching. Additionally, resources to support LD learners in educational organizations are slim-to-none. Nationwide, these students remain at high risk for school failure and difficulty throughout life, even though they are equally if not more capable
intellectually than their peers. There also remains a significant misunderstanding, and even ignorance at times, among the general population about what LD is and what it is not.

Research, resources, and outreach groups are critical in helping to change the paradigm and assumptions about LD. LD students need support in navigating through a language-based educational system, and the more that is recognized and understood about how these students learn and process, the more likely that these students will be able to succeed and reach their potential as adults.

By the nature of being identified as LD, these students entering college, directly out of high school, are likely to have gaps in skills needed for successful transition. In addition to the academic challenges LD students face as a direct result of their LD, these students frequently lack self-awareness, advocacy skills, executive function skills, study skills, and even social skills. While these skills are important for all learners, they are critical for an LD student because these skills are needed to access and effectively utilize supports and accommodations. Ironically, the students who need these skills the most are the least likely to have strengths in those areas.

Despite gaps in academic, social, and personal skills, there are many LD students who find success in college. Research shows that other factors help LD students to manage and navigate their challenges. These factors differ from skills in that the factors may not be something the student can control, learn, or improve. The four factors identified are: motivation, perseverance, self-esteem and confidence, family and academic support. In other words, if an LD student truly wants to succeed in college, is able to bounce back from set-backs, has a strong sense of self, and reaches out to family,
friends, and the school for support and accommodations, then the gaps in skills are diminished.

Educational laws to protect LD students are essential, especially due to the lack of understanding, ignorance, and acceptance that these students encounter in society. Although ADA laws have existed for forty years, many students across the nation still have to demand and fight for equality and access. Additionally, even when a student is in a supportive environment, there are limitations of ADA due to its emphasis on access versus individual learning needs. Many supports that LD students need to successfully navigate a language-based educational environment simply do not fall under the umbrella of a “reasonable accommodation.” Students often need support in organizing time and materials. Some students need counseling to cope with the anxiety, depression, and emotional difficulty in feeling like they are fighting a battle on their own, or perhaps that all of the negative labels, “stupid, lazy, worthless, bad” are true. LD students often need content presented in different ways. These kinds of supports are rarely listed as accommodations under ADA. If students receive these supports, it is because the school or program has them in place simply because it is what students need to find success, similar to what K-12 students receive under the IDEA laws that protect children with disabilities. IDEA goes well beyond what students need for access and instead provides supports needed for the student to find success in that environment.

Post-secondary institutions vary greatly in how they interpret the laws and also in the additional supports they have in place for students. It is important for LD students to seek out environments that best fit their individual learning needs. For many LD students, their best option is to begin their post-secondary education at a community
college where they can receive more individualized attention due to small class sizes, receive instruction by professors versus graduate students, and live close to home in order to have continued parental support. LD students, particularly students with ADHD, tend to be immature and may benefit from a structured home environment during those first years out of high school.

However, even community colleges are not necessarily the best learning environment for LD students. Campuses vary greatly from one to another in terms of support for LD students. Many of these schools are understaffed, where one to three people in an office are responsible for providing disability services for an entire campus. Since community colleges are among the most diverse educational environments in the nation, the lack of resources can make it difficult for an LD student to access what he/she needs. Graduation rates are low among community colleges, and many who do graduate take four to six years to complete a “two-year” degree. While there are many complex issues surrounding those statistics, LD students are at risk for dropping out of college and/or taking a long time to progress through the system. LD students are sometimes required to take several remedial courses for no credit prior to enrolling in basic college level courses. While this may be appropriate for some LD students, the instructors for these courses (remedial and/or basic English and math) are usually not trained to teach with the strategies and methods that work best for students with language-based learning disabilities.

Across the nation, some colleges and universities are recognizing the need for trained instructors and optimal learning environments for LD students. Beacon College and Landmark College are two schools that exclusively serve LD students. Both schools
embrace a personalized approach to education that is skills-based. When curriculums are skills based, literacy and study skills are integrated into all lessons and mastering these skills supersedes memorizing content and covering every chapter in a textbook. In content-based and standardized curriculums, the information and content is the focus of the course, and lessons are about covering information opposed to learning how to study and learn. Teachers are expected to cover all of the course content so that every student has covered the same information. Both Landmark College and Beacon College also have successful graduation rates and set a high standard as model programs. While Marymount California University is not exclusive to LD students, it shares the personalized philosophy of education and serves a high percentage of LD students. MCU has a wide range of supports and a state-of-the-art learning center that is available to all students. In addition to the physical resources, professors are trained in LD and they set students up for success. At MCU, teaching students how to learn is an integral part of the school’s culture. These private schools are quite expensive, and therefore, out of reach for many students. However, there are a growing number of both public and private universities that are reaching out to better serve their LD populations. The University of Arizona’s SALT program is a prime example. This fee-based, inclusive, program has a mission to, “inspire students with learning and attention challenges to succeed in higher education. Through the provision of comprehensive academic support services, the SALT center encourages student engagement, self-awareness, and growth.” UA has nearly 40,000 students on campus in undergraduate and graduate programs. Yet, within this big school environment, they have worked to create a safe and supportive subset of campus specifically for LD students.
Even on the federal level, the recognition that post-secondary schools need to relook at how they best serve their LD students has not gone unnoticed. TRIO programs have surfaced across the nation, including in Hawai‘i, with the intent of providing additional support for individual’s identified as at risk: disadvantaged/low income, first generation college students, and/or individuals with disabilities. Unfortunately, the number of LD students served by TRIO remains small in numbers, and like many public programs, vary greatly from one another in operations and effectiveness.

Overall, there are three issues that emerge from the current research that need to be considered when collecting and analyzing data in regards to the disability services for LD students at Hawai‘i’s community colleges. First, the LD students enrolling in these post-secondary programs typically have significant gaps in skill areas needed to find success in an academic environment (reading, writing, study skills, executive function, memory, processing speed). Additionally, there are other factors that could either hinder or help these students such as their level of motivation, perseverance, and support systems. It is possible that even when an institution has the most ideal supports in place for LD students, some may still fail merely due to their personal unpreparedness for the challenges that face them. Like typical learners, LD students can fail for reasons that have nothing to do with their learning disability. Finally, if an LD student rejects his or her diagnosis, and there is no self-awareness and/or acceptance, then there is little anyone can do to support that student in finding success, especially once the student is an adult and out of a K-12 environment. I have known LD students who entered the college environment convinced that they “had no difficulties with reading, attention, etc. and therefore, didn’t need any particular skill, strategy, or support.” For a student with this
mindset, there is little anyone can do to convince the student otherwise. Self-awareness and self-acceptance is a sort of journey that students have to process through at their own pace.

The second issue is the quality of the supports systems. I mentioned earlier how an alumna of Assets School shared her challenges in receiving her accommodations and feeling unsupported by both instructors and the disability service office at her university. Despite her challenges with reading and writing due to dyslexia and dysgraphia, this particular student has the skills needed to face those challenges head on. She is a self-confident and effective advocate who is also motivated and perseveres. She has excellent study skills, manages her time and materials well, and possesses a tremendous work ethic. With adequate accommodations to support her disabilities, such as: extended time, alternative format for required reading, and a reader for tests, there is nothing that should stand in the way of her academic success. However, her current struggles are a direct result of her support systems failing to meet her needs. When disability services do not comply with law, or professors refuse or make it difficult to provide a student with access to course materials, exams, lectures, etc., even the most prepared LD student will have a difficult time navigating a discriminating and discouraging environment. LD students have their best chance for success when they have knowledgeable advisors, counselors, etc. who assist them in advocating and navigating the system, when disability services make accessing accommodations seamless and as simple as possible, and when instructors are compassionate, non-judgmental, or better yet, have some training and/or experience in teaching LD students.
The last issue is the effectiveness of the laws and policies put in place. While laws and policies are necessary to protect disabled individuals from discrimination, they can also create gaps between what is provided and what is actually needed. ADA laws clearly state that institutions must provide access and reasonable accommodations. While all post-secondary institutions that received federal funds are required to follow the law, those laws remain subject to interpretation resulting in a wide range of implementation from program to program. The law does not say “easily” accessible, nor does it define “reasonable.” Therefore, a student may need a certain accommodation that the school will not provide. The school states that it is either an unreasonable request, or that although it benefits the student, the student is not being denied access without the accommodation. If school policies are strict, counselors and instructors may have their hands tied as far as what they are permitted to provide. For example, instructors are told what accommodations the disabilities office has approved, but they receive no information as to what the disability is. This is part of the law to protect students’ confidentiality; however, it limits the instructor on understanding that individual as a learner. If the student has extended time due to slow processing, the student’s needs are likely quite different than one who needs extended time due to an anxiety disorder. Without knowing, the instructor cannot adequately adjust his/her instruction to meet the needs of that learner, which is not the intent of the law anyway. Another example of a gap created by the law is the documentation that is required to access services. If a student is struggling, he/she cannot walk into the disability office (often ironically called student support services) and get any help. The student might actually have some kind of learning disability, but if he/she was not previously identified as such, there is little the
office can or will do to help. This obstacle prevents many students from getting the support they need. Students who come from privileged backgrounds are more likely to have been identified in a K-12 setting and therefore received proper diagnostic assessments and/or services. However, LD students from a disadvantaged background may lack not only the awareness that they may be LD, but also the paperwork needed to access accommodations. Unless the institution is willing to reach out in some way to help identify these students, they are unlikely to receive any additional services that they may need to access their education. Finally, part of ADA law is that the individual must independently advocate and seek out his/her own accommodations. Even for a student fresh out of high school, parents are not permitted to advocate on a student’s behalf as they are in the K-12 environment. Yet, LD students are the least likely to have the self-advocacy and communication skills to effectively do this, especially if they have to argue for their rights. All college students have to learn to “jump through the hoops” of the institution. This includes, learning how to register, get financial aid, purchase books, add/drop deadlines, and navigate campus. However, LD students have an additional set of hoops to get through. No matter how well prepared, LD students are at a significant disadvantage compared to their non-disabled peers in a typical college environment.
CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY

“Many times I can see a solution to something differently and quicker than other people. I see the end zone and say, this is where I want to go.” – Charles Schwab

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain a greater understanding of how various stakeholders’ perceive the effectiveness of support services for learning disabled students at various community college campuses in Hawai‘i. The methods used were designed to examine the perspectives between the various stakeholders and further understand how these programs can best support all of their LD students.

Qualitative Method

A multiple-case study approach was selected for the method of collecting and analyzing data. Although two cases were examined for this study, the general framework of case study still applied. Yin (2003) considers “single and multiple-case designs are variants within the same methodological framework–and no broad distinction is made between the so called classic (i.e., single) case study and multiple-case studies” (p. 46). Unlike other research methods, case study design is particularly well suited when looking at complex systems and issues. “Case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (Stake, 1995 p. xi). This study was highly complex due to a wide range of factors that impact disability services including the learners, the institutions, and the policies. For example, care needs to be taken when generalizing about all LD students. By the nature of a learning disability, these students are atypical, and their individual needs, skills, and readiness for college can vary greatly from one LD student to another. Secondly, each of the community colleges has their own personnel and approaches to providing services for
students. Additionally, instructors are individuals as well, and may not consistently apply services in the classroom according to what the disability offices put in place for students. Finally, although there is law and policy in place, it does not mean that all institutions are going to interpret the laws and policies in the same manner. It is not uncommon to find great discrepancies between post-secondary schools in how they comply with the ADA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974. Due to these complex factors, it is unlikely that there is a simple formula, or one-size-fits-all solution, to how to best support LD students in a community college setting. However, there are likely patterns to observe in collected data that can inform strategies, approaches, and decisions with the unique needs of these learners in mind. For this research, a multiple-case study approach provided a method of collecting the data and analyzing it for such patterns.

Another reason for designing this research using multiple-case study methods was to capture unique and individual experiences and perspectives of the same situation. Case study methodology allows the researcher to explore the stories of the participants, which often reveals the competing factors to surface in the process. Robert Stake captures this essence well in his introduction to Chapter one in his book, “The Art of Case Study Research.”

“For the most part, the cases of interest in education and social services are people and programs. Each one is similar to other persons and programs in many ways and unique in many ways. We are interested in them for both their uniqueness and commonality. We seek to understand them. We would like to hear their stories. We may have some reservations about some things the people tell us, just as they will question some of the things we will tell about them. But we enter the
scene with a sincere interest in learning how they function in their ordinary pursuits and milieus with a willingness to put aside many presumptions while we learn” (Stake, 1995, p.1).

**Role of the Researcher**

Throughout the research process, I needed to consider my role at Assets School. Although I conducted this research as a doctoral student at the University of Hawai‘i, I am also an administrator at Assets School. Over the past thirteen years that I have been at Assets School, I have researched both formally and informally the topic of transition for LD students. As a direct result of the research I conducted, aspects of the high school program changed in order to better prepare our students for transition post high school. This topic has been a long-standing area of interest and pursuit of my professional career. As I designed this research study, I had to consider how best to set aside the lens through which I know this topic, and look at it from another angle I had not yet considered. In the end, I believe the case study approach provided a framework for collecting and analyzing the data that gave me a new opportunity to check my own predictions and assumptions, a better understanding of the transition for LD students heading into Hawai‘i’s community colleges post high school, and limiting limit my personal bias as the researcher. By using a case study, I attempted to remove myself from any sort of evaluative position and shifted into a listening and analytical position, setting aside my own experiences, beliefs, and expectations, and doing my best to see the issue through the lenses of the participants versus my own lens. A case study approach seemed the most holistic and authentic way of achieving this goal.
Reducing personal bias was also taken into consideration when determining my instruments for collecting data. A semi-structured interview provided a platform for participants to share their own stories and the opportunity for me to ask clarifying and follow-up questions in order to gain richer data. I identified key stakeholders and collected their stories from individual interviews. From the data, I identified the aspects of the program that stakeholder’s viewed as strengths and challenges. I also looked for consistencies and inconsistencies, both as an entire group of participants, and again from within each of the subgroups of participants. The conclusions and/or recommendations came from the stories themselves. Along with these questions, it was my role as the researcher to collect and analyze the data in order to respond to the research questions, as well as maintain balance with my own background knowledge and experience. I tried to do this by referencing current research to support my personal knowledge of the topic, and I used qualitative methods described by Johnny Saldaña from his book, The Coding Manuel for Qualitative Research.

**Participants**

![Figure 2. Participants in Study](image)
Four subgroups of stakeholders were identified for this study: students, instructors, counselors at disabilities service offices, and high school college and career guidance counselors. Within each subgroup, participants were selected in order to collect data that informed practices on two separate campuses. Three current community college LD students were interviewed representing both campuses among them. All three students attended Assets High School and are identified as having a language-based learning disability. Two of the students graduated from Assets School and one graduated from a public high school. Two English instructors and two disability office counselors were selected, one from each of the community college campuses. In order to compare data more consistently, both instructors currently teach English 100, which is a course required by nearly all community college students. Finally, three high school counselors were interviewed, one from Assets School, one from a public high school and one from a prominent independent school.

In order to identify participants, I started with those whom I know personally. This included Assets alumni, two of the high school college guidance counselors, and a counselor from one of the disability offices. These individuals I solicited either directly or via email. I initially identified the participants I did not know prior to the research through the community college websites. I contacted the individuals via the email message that I drafted for the IRB process. I provided each potential participant with general information about the research and included the participation agreement.

**Data Collection Methods**

All of the data was collected in face-to-face interviews that took place in the fall of 2013 and winter of 2014. Each interview took between 35 and 45 minutes, and I
traveled to the participant. For example, the instructors were interviewed in their individual campus offices. I also took notes during each of the interviews and used recordings, so that the data could be transcribed for the data analysis coding process.

Prior to conducting the interview, participants reviewed and signed the participant agreement form, see Appendix B, and were briefed about the purpose of the study. All of the participants were given the opportunity to preview the interview questions prior to the meeting. The questions were emailed to those who chose this option. It was explained that the questions would be used to guide the discussion, and that not all of the questions would be asked, or there might be additional follow-up questions asked as well. Each subgroup had a similar, but separate set of questions to start with; see Appendix C for the interview questions. The questions were based on propositions that emerged from the literature review along with the research questions. All participants in each subgroup were asked the same initial questions; however, based on responses, some were asked follow-up questions or needed the interview question reworded in order to elicit a deeper or more personal response or clarify a response.

After each interview was completed, it was transcribed and coded. Interviews within each subgroup (students, instructors, high school counselors, and disability office counselors) were compared to one another in terms of the propositions that were identified in the literature review as key factors when considering the effectiveness of disability support services for LD community college students (responsibilities of the learners, laws and policies, responsibilities of the disability office counselors, and responsibilities of the instructors). The subgroups were also compared to one another for
similarities and differences, and the coding helped to identify new themes that emerged. These themes are discussed further in chapter four.

**Ethical and Political Concerns**

With each subgroup of participants, various ethical and political concerns surfaced that had to be considered throughout the research study. The first one was protecting the community colleges from being disparaged in the research process. At the start of each interview, I explained that my role as the researcher was not to evaluate the program, and I was not conducting this research with the purpose of undermining or undervaluing the hard work and good work that Hawai‘i’s community colleges do everyday for thousands of students. This statement was particularly helpful to set at ease the instructors and the counselors at the disability offices who did not already know me prior to the interview. I did not want the participants to feel defensive, or think that I was there to judge them or their work. All of my participants appeared comfortable, and seemed open and honest during the interview process. I asked questions that required thoughtful, yet critical, responses to the environments in which they work. In order to honor and protect confidentiality, I eliminated any identifying information in the reporting of data that would connect the research back to the participant. Additionally, any notes and recording were kept in a secure location during the research and destroyed at the conclusion of the research.

Students were also put in a vulnerable position during the interview process, and I again reassured these participants of my processes for maintaining confidentiality and my role as the researcher. Students from Assets School are accustomed to discussing their learning disabilities openly. This is an ongoing part of the program design in order to
build self-awareness, self-acceptance, and advocacy skills. However, I did not want to rely on this assumption. I was particularly sensitive to the emotion LD students often feel in relation to their challenges with learning. I adjusted the interview questions as needed, based on how open and comfortable the participants appeared during the process, in order to help them feel safe, validated, and aware that I was not going to judge or evaluate them as students. For example, I asked students to discuss their strengths and successes prior to asking them about their learning challenges or school failure. I was also careful not to make assumptions about their skills. Although it is easy to clump all LD students into one category, the same learning disability can present itself in many different ways among different students. For example, instead of asking a follow-up question like, “What do you find difficult about reading?” I would ask, “What in school do you find most difficult?” Even if a student is labeled dyslexic, I could not assume that the student feels he/she has difficulty with reading. Any follow-up questions I asked, I had to be careful not to base those questions on preconceived ideas. During the interview I only asked questions and refrained from making any comments or putting my own words into their mouths. I allowed the student to share his/her story and used the guiding questions to move us forward when needed.

**Limitations**

Originally, I had planned to conduct more interviews; however, I had difficulty in finding participants. I initially chose a third community college campus to include in the interviews in order to broaden the scope. I was able to interview an instructor from this campus, however, the disability office counselors did not respond to my multiple attempts to arrange for an interview. My second challenge came with identifying LD
students. I had hoped to interview community college LD students who had not previously attended Assets School. This would have provided data more representative of the LD population attending the community colleges. However, despite several attempts to call for participants, I was unable to make these connections. Instead, I needed to rely on former Assets students. One of the student subjects did graduate from a public school, which helped to diversify the student data.

As I mentioned in the role of the researcher, I have extensive knowledge and deep passion for LD students and in particular, their transition and success in college. Through careful implementation of both methodology data analysis techniques, I did my best to limit my own bias and also keep an open mind to new perspectives and understandings.

I conducted a total of ten interviews, each lasting about 45 minutes. While the number of interviews provided a solid range of perspectives, there were some limitations in conducting short interviews. In general, 45 minutes is not much time to establish rapport and trust with the participants, and therefore, participants could have felt inhibited from sharing information that might reflect poorly on themselves or the schools for which they are associated. The semi-structured interview approach helped the interviews to feel more conversational; however, most of the participants met me for the first time at the interview.

Lastly, during the literature review, I researched model programs for LD students. However, I obtained the information for those programs from print and online sources. It is likely that there are aspects of these programs when what is practiced does not always match what is stated; yet that was difficult to uncover. My knowledge of these
programs may have been stronger had I been able to make personal visits. This is important to keep in mind when considering recommendations or a plan of action.
CHAPTER IV

DATA ANALYSIS

“I was one of the ‘puzzle children’ myself — a dyslexic . . . And I still have a hard time reading today. Accept the fact that you have a problem. Refuse to feel sorry for yourself. You have a challenge; never quit!” — Nelson Rockefeller

I began the data analysis by comparing interviews within the subgroups: disability office counselors, instructors, students, and high school guidance counselors. An interview with a counselor from the TRIO program was added during the data collection process and is discussed at the end of this chapter. I developed propositions from the literature review, which informed the interview questions and organization of the data collected for each subgroup. All of the interviews were transcribed so they could be coded and analyzed.

Patterns and Codes from Interviews

Since the questions for the interviews were open-ended, I needed to determine a method to look at patterns within the responses collected. Saldaña (2009) describes several methods in his book, “The Coding Manuel for Qualitative Research.” I found two methods for coding that were both applicable to the data collected: initial coding and provisional coding.

According to Saldaña (2009), “initial coding is breaking down qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examining them, and comparing them for similarities and differences” (p. 81). This method was relevant to this study because of my emphasis on capturing and comparing the various perspectives of stakeholders. I used initial coding within each subgroup, and across subgroups, to compare the data collected, focusing on similarities and differences.
Additionally, Saldaña’s description of provisional coding also matched case study methodology. Robert Yin (2003) described case study methodology as testing a theory with a clear set of propositions that are believed to be true. “To confirm, challenge, or extend the theory, a case may meet all of the conditions for testing the theory. The case can then be used to determine whether a theory’s propositions are correct or whether some alternative set of explanations might be more relevant” (p. 40). An important part of case study methodology is specifying a clear set of propositions that are believed to be true. For this study, propositions were established in response to the research questions and literature review, which then informed the interview questions and the organization of the data collected. For data analysis, provisional coding was used to establish a predetermined start list of codes prior to the fieldwork based on the propositions (Saldaña, 2009). “The provisional list is generated from such preparatory investigative matters as literature reviews related to the study, the study’s conceptual framework and research questions, previous research findings, etc.” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 120).

As mentioned earlier, TAMS Analyzer was used to digitally code the data. In TAMS, codes need to be in lower case, and since spaces are not allowed, underscores were used to separate multiple word codes. Predetermined codes were used for each of the subgroups consistently, while new codes were added as needed during the coding process. Figure 4 shows the codes chosen, and Figure 5 illustrates the predetermined and emerging themes in relation to each subgroup.
### Table 2. TAMS Analyzer Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-determined Code Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>responsibility_learners</td>
<td>Responsibilities of learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ada_law</td>
<td>Law and/or policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>responsibility_disability_office</td>
<td>Responsibilities of disability office counselors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>responsibility_instructors</td>
<td>Responsibilities of instructors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>New Code Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ld_culture_stigma</td>
<td>Stereotypes and assumptions of learning disabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>complexity_of_disabilities</td>
<td>Complexity of disabilities, range of disabilities, comorbidity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>limited_resources</td>
<td>Lack of resources including people and funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>recommendations</td>
<td>Recommendations for improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>college_career_goals</td>
<td>Plans and/or goals in terms of college and career for LD students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>college_experience</td>
<td>LD student experiences in college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>responsibility_hscounselor</td>
<td>Responsibilities of high school college and career guidance counselors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>college_readiness</td>
<td>College guidance curriculum used to achieve college readiness for students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>college_guidance_curriculum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 3. Predetermined Codes and Emerging Themes**
Data Collection and Subgroup Analysis

Disability Office Counselors – Background and Experience

Two counselors (Subjects 1 and 2) from two different campuses (A and B) participated in interviews. Both counselors hold Master’s degrees in counseling and are experienced in working in the field of disabilities. Subject 1 was hired as a counselor to start serving those with disabilities in the late 70s, shortly after the Americans with Disabilities Act became law. There was little research, policy, or practice in this field at the time. She spent a decade learning and conducting her own research and practice and decided to pursue her doctorate degree. Subject 1 shared a rich history of the evolution of disability services in the past 40 years. She has had a variety of roles and experiences in the field including practicing as a licensed psychologist who frequently wrote psychological reports. She currently works as the single counselor in the disability office for campus A, and only receives support from interns. She is responsible for managing all accommodations for all students with disabilities on campus A.

Subject 2 has an undergraduate degree in sociology and started out her career as a skills trainer for children with autism. During this time, she had the fortune of working with several renowned professionals, and as a result, received excellent training. Passionate about the field, Subject 2 pursued her master’s degree in counseling while working as an autism consultant. She also put her counseling skills to practice working with individuals in nursing homes. She started working on campus B in the TRIO program, where she provided counseling and support to TRIO students; however, since those positions are funded by grants, they were temporary. She later moved into the disability office as a counselor, which is her current role. Subject 2 works with one other
counselor in this office, and they split certain duties concerning accommodations. Subject 2 is completely responsible for all alternative format accommodations and access to text. She also manages disability notices to professors. In one semester, she will generate notices for 500-800 students, which involves coordinating with current student registrations and communicating about which students are receiving which accommodations.

Disability Office Counselors – Analysis of Pre-determined Codes

Responsibility of the Learner

It is clear from prior research that LD students typically have gaps in skills that often impact their success in college. For some LD students, they will struggle regardless of the support systems or laws in place. Both disability office counselors were asked several questions specific to this argument. Typically, how successful are LD students in the community college system? Do some LD students perform better than others? If so, why do you think that is? Do LD students generally access the support available to them? Why or Why not?

Both Subjects 1 and 2 noted a distinct difference between graduates from Assets High School and LD students from other K-12 environments. “Students who graduated at Assets tend to do the best! They have been probably forced, made, or coerced into discussing their disability. They are more matter-of-fact about it while other students have almost a shame about their disability and do not want to disclose it” (Subject 1). “Students from Assets are knowledgeable of laws and advocate for what they need” (Subject 2).
Both counselors reiterated what was noted in the literature review in terms of readiness and skills that students need for successful transition. Subject 1 shared that she believes a number of factors impact student success including: self-awareness, self-acceptance, motivation, maturity, and what she describes as a personal readiness. “There is a group of people who just should not come to college directly after high school, they should do something else for awhile, maybe work, volunteer work, but they really are not ready to work as hard as they are going to have to work on academic issues, they do not like school anyway, and they need to find out through real life experience, that if they want a better life, and they are bright enough to do it, then college is the main way they are going to be able to do it.” She shared stories about LD students finding self-acceptance on their time, for example, when they have children and want to be able to read to their child. “Everyone is an individual and I can’t give a formula, but I will say that maturity and readiness is a big issue. I don’t really know how to assess that, but instinctively, people need to know themselves. If they really don’t like school, they are not going to change over night. But a whole lot of people do eventually find what it is going to take within them to do what it takes to do well” (Subject 1).

Subject 2 discussed a lack of acceptance and advocacy as a hurdle as well for some students, but also shared that she thinks this may be a result of the K-12 system that the students transition from. “Students who come from a school where their LD is accepted, and they are getting what they need, which is highly unique, are more likely to be successful in college, opposed to students whose parents have been fighting their whole life with the Department of Education (DOE). Even with Individual Education Plans (IEP) the students do not always have proper assessments and sometimes no
diagnosis. How do you provide support when you do not even know where to start?

That is a huge problem.”

In terms of accommodations, both counselors identified extended time, note-taking, and alternative format of text as the most common among LD students. They also agreed that the responsibility is on the student to access and utilize each accommodation, and unfortunately, not all students have the skills to do so. For example, Subject 1 talked about how often those who get notes from a note-taker do not know what to do with the notes. Or, although there is Kurzweil and assistive technology readily available, it does not mean that students know how to integrate those tools into their learning. Subject 1 also reiterated that advocacy for support is important to success. “For a lot of people I recommend that they come talk to me monthly. Those who do, do better because they have to explain what they have or have not been doing and that keeps them accountable.”

Subject 2 discussed how a lack of self-awareness and acceptance interferes with students accessing what they need. “If a student has a certain LD, but only requests extended time for tests, I will try to discuss other accommodations, but sometimes they still do not want it. So I will explain every accommodation he/she is eligible for. Then, we have follow-up processes, so we can revisit the accommodations they are eligible for and using, but it is not mandatory. LD students often do not know what they need, or they do not think they need any accommodations.”

**ADA Law and Policies**

Between Campus A and Campus B, I noticed the greatest differences between the two offices in terms of how they work within the policies of the school and ADA law, and also in what ways the program supports LD students beyond what is required for
ADA law. While both clearly understand the ADA law, policy and practice varied greatly. Subject 1 demonstrated a deep compassion for any struggling student. Although formal paperwork is required for students receive accommodations through ADA, Subject 1 does not let that get in the way of helping any struggling student. She will not turn someone away who walks through her door. “One way I go beyond ADA is by giving access to some who are not formally diagnosed. For example, an [English language learner] ELL student, I am very careful though. I tell the instructors, you are not required to give these accommodations, however, this is what I have learned, and if you are willing to do it, I recommend it. I am careful not to represent them as having a learning disability. I have not had any trouble convincing instructors to accommodate a non-diagnosed student, but I am careful to how I write it.”

In contrast, Subject 2 clarified that the entire purpose of the disability office is to provide access to students with disabilities according to ADA, so there are no other formal support services. I asked Subject 2 specifically about how they help students who come in undiagnosed, struggling, or referred by an instructor. She said, “we will see the student, but we will not do an intake. We will inform them of ADA law and refer them to community resources to get the testing needed for services.” It was clear from the interview that the disability office on Campus B does not seek out struggling learners or provide support for students who do not walk in on their own accord, and/or who do not have the proper paperwork. I do not think Subject 2 is less compassionate, but instead interprets the ADA law differently, and more literally, than Subject 1.
Responsibility of the Disability Office

There seemed to be a core set of responsibilities that clearly fall onto the disability office counselors. Some of these include: determining, providing, and managing accommodations for those with diagnosed disabilities and communicating accommodations with faculty.

Similarly to the differences between Subject 1 and 2 in terms of support for undiagnosed students, their responses also contrasted in whether or not they are responsible for serving students referred to their office by instructors. Subject 2, clearly stated that this is not the role of counselors in her office. “Faculty feel that if they send a student to us, we are supposed to help them. It is part of our role to help faculty to understand ADA, and explain the difference between support service and ADA” (Subject 2). On the other hand, Subject 1 encourages instructors to identify and refer students who are struggling in their classes. “Sometimes when students have trouble with keeping up with their notes, keeping organized, or always forgetting things, it could mean that they have some kind of a hidden disability, and we want to give the students the opportunity to come and see me. Sometimes I have to rehearse it with the instructor. They should not tell someone they have a disability, but say sometimes when these things are present it could mean this. They may not have a disability and the struggle could be related to something else, but at least they had the opportunity to be referred, have someone check in with them who recognized that they were struggling” (Subject 1).

Subject 1 acknowledged that there are many more LD students on campus than come through her office. Although statistically LD learners make up 15-20% of all learners, according to Subject 1, the national average in colleges is about 7%, and on Campus A, it
is only at 6%. She goes out of her way, to reach all LD students, even those who may not
know it yet.

Responsibility of the Instructors

Similarly to responsibilities for disability office counselors, instructors seem to
have a core set of responsibilities in serving their LD students. These include: clearly
stating on course syllabi school policy for students with disabilities, honoring ADA law
and providing access and approved accommodations in the classroom, protecting student
confidentiality, and following up with the counselors when needed. The only difference
noted between Subject 1 and 2 were their expectations for faculty to refer struggling
students as discussed earlier.

Disability Office Counselors – Analysis of New Codes

LD Culture and Stigma

Subject 1 and 2 each discussed how the culture of shame about learning
disabilities interferes with success of students. Students are often apprehensive to
disclose their diagnosis because there is a history of exclusion for disabled students in
society. There are negative perceptions about special education and the SPED label.
“The thing about the term SPED is that it sounds like even our educators are trying to say
it as quickly as possible, get it over with, like a bad taste you are trying to get rid of in
your mouth” (Subject 1). When discussing students who graduate from the DOE and
transition to community college, Subject 2 said, “there is a stigma of the SPED (Special
Education) label, and students in general do not want that label to follow them to college.
Is the label even appropriate? Some students are labeled with a behavioral issue,
however, the behavior actually stems from a learning disability. Sometimes it is a pride
thing, and students insist on trying school without accommodations. I hear from students that they do not want people to treat them different, do not want people to know, instructors, or anyone.” Subject 1 discussed her desire to shift the stigma of disabilities in our society. “I wish I could go to every school on this island and say do not act ashamed of people who have some diagnosis or another, it is just part of the human condition that people have differences. Sometimes these differences are real enough to need some focused attention. If you do not involve the person themselves in the conversation, then they will think it is shameful, something to hide. Given that we have trillions of connections in our brain, the wonder is that there are not more people challenged to fit into the molds of our society. It is amazing it works as well as it does.”

In general there is a lack of public understanding when it comes to learning disabilities. People will fill in what they do not know with misinformation, judgments, and assumptions. Ironically, these stereotypes are so strong that Subject 2 revealed her own assumptions during the interview process when discussing access to accommodations. “I went out of my way to get her alternative text on the weekend because she was visually impaired, but I probably would not have done that for someone who is just LD.” Subject 2 inadvertently and unconsciously disqualified students with LD by assuming that they are more able to read text than someone with a visual impairment. However, the needs for a severely dyslexic individual, in terms of written text, are quite similar.

**Complexity of Disabilities**

In education, there is a tendency to want to generalize about those with learning disabilities; however, not only does LD vary in severity, but two students with the same diagnosis may have different needs, which makes adequately serving LD students a
complex challenge. Many LD learners have overlapping and added layers of other mental health conditions that complicate their learning challenges. Subject 1 talked about how there are a variety of disabilities such as LD, ADHD, autism, Asperger’s, anxiety, depression, substance abuse; however, she believes that these are not unrelated disorders, and though talked about separately, we are often talking about the same group of people. Unfortunately, educational evaluations do not include mental health evaluations, even though issues, such as anxiety and depression, are often present and compounding the learning issue. Additionally, when students are diagnosed, labels vary, are inconsistent, and sometimes inaccurate. The comorbidity of learning disabilities and other mental health diagnosis are part of the reason LD students are difficult to compare to one another. It also makes it unrealistic to treat LD in a purely prescriptive manner. There are general tools and strategies, but there is no single solution that will work for all LD learners. Instead education needs to be personalized.

Limited Resources

Both counselors agreed that professional development, or other support for instructors, such as methodology and strategies that are often effective for LD students, is an important task for the disability office but is an area that is neglected. Subject 1 talked about how her office conducts formal professional development only once a year. This spring, her topic is web-accessibility, which is a growing area of concern in colleges due to an increase of online courses. She also said that she talks to professors in general about what a student might need or general information about a type of disability that is not in association with a particular student. She said she has to be careful not to breach confidentiality, and therefore, cannot talk to an instructor about a particular student’s
disability unless the student says she can disclose that information. Overall, she discussed wanting to do more in terms of professional development and disability education, but limited resources make it difficult to put those ideas into practice.

Subject 2 focused more on the importance of educating instructors on ADA law and the procedures of the disability office. She sees providing an LD student with access to learning as a shared responsibility. At the end of the last term, she conducted an assessment to determine if the faculty knew what to do when they get notice of a student with accommodations. This assessment came back with mixed results. She talked about some frustration with only having about ten minutes during an orientation at the start of an academic year to meet with instructors about disability services. Although she puts out further information, she finds that many faculty do not read the information given to them. New faculty sometimes do not know the procedures while seasoned faculty are sometimes complacent, and it can be difficult to get them to switch to a new procedure. She sometimes offers workshops for instructors, but they are not well attended. She wonders if an online workshop approach might be more effective because people tend to seek out information only when they need it. Subject 2 also discussed hitting a wall with the policies around confidentiality. For example, she would like to offer group workshops for students on Kurzweil, but she feels this walks the line of violating confidentiality. She would need students to sign consent forms before attending the workshop because they would be around other disabled students, which exposes them as a student with a disability. While she believes there would be benefits to providing the workshop to multiple students at once, such as students getting to know one another and maybe forming study groups, she has not pursued this due to the confidentiality conflict.
Instead, she meets with students individually to train them on Kurzweil, which is a drain on resources and takes more time. She also shared about a general lack of resources to be able to do more. “When we call ourselves a program, I do not know if it is so much a program as it is a service. It could be a program, but there are only so many hours in a day. If we had more appropriate staffing, we could get to other things like awareness, but we do not do anything. We do not have time when it is disability awareness week to do something, even though we should.” In terms of professional development, Subject 2 also said, “As we are trying to be more progressive in that area, logistically we cannot. We are always in a “put out fire mode” instead of preventive mode, such as faculty education. Everything is urgent and cannot wait.”

Recommendations

Between Subjects 1 and 2, several recommendations were made to improve support for LD students. First, “red flag” all students who fail or drop a course, then collaborate as a team of educators on how to support that student. As part of this process, one of the counselors felt there is a need for defining a clear system for referring students. Training clearly needs more attention. In addition to providing more online and face-to-face workshops and information for faculty, it was suggested that they find ways to bring disabled students together to support one another. Finally, outreach is needed in order to educate SPED students in the public school and help them to shift the stigma and stereotypes around LD labels.

Instructors – Background and Experience

Subjects 3 and 4 are English instructors from campuses A and B respectively. Their prior background and experiences vary greatly. Subject 3 has been an instructor at
Campus A for the past seven years. She holds a B.A. in English, an M.A. in creative writing, and is completing her doctoral work in screenwriting. Subject 3 is an older woman with an eclectic background. She remembers struggling in high school and dropping out of her first semester of college, which ironically, was at Campus A. She traveled, married, and pursued a variety of careers ranging from banking, politics, and massage therapy. However, she always wanted to complete her degree, so over a ten year period, she pursued that dream. She feels her experiences as a non-traditional student make it easier for her to relate to her current students. “What I bring to the classroom is a wide variety of experiences as a student, being non-traditional, a working mom, a single mom, taking one class at a time to being a fulltime student.” Subject 3 teaches a wide range of English courses that include: English 18, English 22, English 100, English Composition, Business Writing, and Literature.

Subject 4 is new to the field of higher education; however, she came into the field with ten years of experience as a public high school English teacher in Hawai‘i. She holds a B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. in English. She has only been in her current instructor position for one year on campus B. She currently teaches multiple sections of English 22 and English 100.

**Instructors – Analysis of Pre-determined Codes**

**Responsibility of the Learner**

On the surface level, Subjects 3 and 4 shared similar perspectives in terms of what LD students need to do to be successful. Both discussed the importance of motivation and a willingness to work hard. Each talked about how students are most successful when they take advantage of the resources available to them. Additionally, both
instructors highly value introspection and heavily integrate self-reflection into their English 100 courses. For example, Subject 3 shared that her students spend a lot of time writing about why they are there and what they plan to do with their life. “Are you in college because you have this career and field you are anxious to get to, or are you in college because your parents say you need to, or because society has this expectation?” Subject 4 requires her students to develop an action plan, which includes writing about their personal obstacles, the resources they need for success, their personal stakeholders, etc.

*ADA Law and Policies*

Subjects 3 and 4 both discussed the policy that information regarding access for disabled students must be included in each course syllabus. Additionally, each instructor is required to review the syllabus on the first day of the course. Both Subjects 3 and 4 said that they make a point to specifically discuss with their classes what students need to do to identify themselves to the disability office in order to access accommodations. Subject 4 also discussed being careful with student confidentiality when supporting accommodations. She gave an example of a student who required text to be printed in large font. During the peer-editing portion of the class, she had to ask the student how he wished to utilize that accommodation because telling another classmate that he/she must print the document in large font to give to the disabled classmate would breach confidentiality. Finally, both instructors talked about how it is helpful to have the disability identified; however, they only receive the list of accommodations on the disability notice, as this is all the counselors are able to tell the professors. Subject 4 talked about a student who disclosed that she had an anxiety disorder. Subject 4 said
knowing this made it easier for her to support that student and set her up for success. Based on what the student disclosed, Subject 4 was more cognizant not to put the student on the spot and potentially trigger an anxiety attack. If the student did not disclose, then the instructor would not have been able to make the necessary adjustments to the classroom environment.

**Responsibilities of the Disability Office**

Both Subjects 3 and 4 recognized that the primary responsibility of the Disability Office is to approve and manage student accommodations. For example, determining who receives accommodations, which accommodations are needed, arranging for notetakers, providing alternative format of texts, notifying instructors of students approved for accommodations, and assisting professors with any accommodations they are not able to take care of on their own. Both Subjects 3 and 4 talked about providing digital copies of handouts, printing in large font, and arranging testing with students as accommodations they do on their own.

Where Subjects 3 and 4 differed was in talking about their relationships with the Disability Office counselor(s). Subject 3, from campus A, spoke highly about the personnel in the office. She talked about how the interns will provide her with specific strategies for teaching students with ADHD and/or dyslexia. She felt that although there could be more professional development, the office is supportive of opportunities to attend workshops, puts out articles and information, and in general “constantly tries to find ways to strengthen services for students and supporting instructors.” On the other hand, Subject 4 shared that she does not receive much, if any support from the disability office. “I guess I feel like they do not help us that much.” In addition to receiving no
supporting material or articles, Subject 4 also felt like there was a lack of communication about students needing accommodations. She shared a story about a student who needed a particular type of furniture in the classroom. The student came to class, but she had no prior knowledge of his accommodation, and she did not know what to do when he arrived and the room was not properly equipped. In terms of students receiving services, however, Subject 4 spoke highly of the office. “If you get designated there (disability office), they keep good tabs on you. They sort of push their resources, they offer tutoring and have all these special resources.” Unfortunately, this is highly contradictory to what the disability office reported. According to the disability office counselor on the same campus, special tutoring is not a service they provide nor is individual coaching. It was clear from talking to the counselor that students who want access and accommodations need to come and get it. If they do not seek it out, the counselors are not hunting down those students to ask if they need more support. In terms of special resources, Subject 2 said, “We do not have anything formal/other support services.” If instructors, such as Subject 4, believe there are extensive resources available, that in actuality do not exist, this is a disservice to the students as they could get stuck in the middle because of an inconsistent message about what support is available and how to access it. Additionally, the attitudes and perceptions of instructors could be influenced if they believe LD students are receiving more support from the Disability Office than they actually are.

Responsibilities of the Instructors

Subjects 3 and 4 consistently identified key areas of responsibilities for instructors: provide accommodations according to the notices they receive, include disability information on syllabi, and maintain confidentiality. Their responses for how
each support struggling learners in their classroom was similar too. Both instructors talked about reaching out to students and making one-on-one meetings mandatory for all students as part of their grade.

Subject 3 talked about setting students up for success and shared that when she has struggling students, she would give them additional time on tests or other accommodations, even though they were not identified as LD. She said she would let the disability office know, and would then talk to those students about seeing a counselor in the disability office. This ability to accommodate and refer students who are not already identified differs significantly between Campus A and Campus B, which is discussed more in the findings.

Subject 4 reaches out to her struggling students by mandating that students access resources on campus that are available to any student. For example, sometimes she will not accept a draft of a paper unless the student has reviewed it with someone from the writing center. She also uses email to frequently communicate and encourage students. “If a student is not coming to class, I will email them and ask what is going on. When someone does not turn in an assignment, I send out a group email, blind carbon copy the recipients, and ask, where is your paper? I send a lot of reminders, and I feel like this is my way of trying to reach out.”

**Instructors – Analysis of New Codes**

**LD Culture and Stigma**

“There is no doubt that LD students often lack confidence and feel shameful about the labels they carry,” says Subject 3. Both instructors touched on this topic of a stigma around the word disability, and how the labels themselves are sometimes
obstacles for students. Subject 4 talked about how she and other instructors hate that the office is called “disability services” because right off the bat, students will not want to go. Subject 3 said struggling students give themselves negative labels, like dumb, and those labels get in the way of their success. In the English 18 or 22, she saw her students give up easily when they got stuck. “Students would say, ‘I should know this by now, and if I don’t, that means I’m stupid.’” She also wondered if LD students sometimes do not access the services or resources provided because of embarrassment, fear of others not understanding, or maybe even fear that they may be kicked out if they share their disability. She has tried to encourage students to access TRIO or the writing center, but says there are stigmas around those resources as well. In her class, she strives to build a culture of acceptance. One way she did this is through peer editing. “Initially it is very scary for them to pass out their paper to other students. But once they engage in a community of peers, they realize ‘I’m not the only one who has this problem with procrastination, feeling uncomfortable, or feeling scared,’ and they are no longer alone. This is a powerful awareness. They can carry that to other classes and maybe find other students to work with.” From a trained perspective on learning disabilities, however, I would never recommend in a classroom full of typical learners, to have LD students exchange their writing with typical learners, who will likely not understand how to give feedback to support their writing, and may also judge their ability based on the quality of the written work. This strategy further shows this instructor’s lack of awareness about how to effectively teach LD students, despite her compassion and enthusiasm for teaching.
Additionally, while Subjects 3 and 4 both expressed support and openness for LD students in their classes, their own negative labels and assumptions surfaced during the interviews. Subject 3 talked about her frustration in that everything a student needs to know is clearly spelled out in her course materials, and problems arise because students simply do not read what is in front of them. “I do not care what kind of disability you have, if you do not sit down and read it, that is the worst disability of all. If they would just read it and do the exercises, then they would find success, but there is this preconceived notion that I can’t.” These kinds of assumptions are dangerous in teaching, and this instructor fails to serve students when she assumes that all students can do something the same way. She is also assuming that her directions are clear, and if a student did not understand what to do, it is because he/she must not have read the material. For a student with a language-based disability, he/she may need information presented in multiple ways, multiple times, and his/her lack of comprehension has nothing to do with a lack of effort. In many cases, LD learners are working twice as hard as everyone else, and then feel shut down when instructors assume they are lazy and need to try harder. Subject 4 shared similar misperceptions about LD learners. “Sometimes I feel it is true, sometimes they are lazy and make excuses.” These comments do not negate that both Subjects 3 and 4 are compassionate and committed educators, but instead, is more of an indicator of a lack of training and understanding of learning disabilities. Mel Levine wrote a book entitled “The Myth of Laziness” where he challenged the assumptions that students who lack production must also lack effort, or that failure is a result of not trying hard enough. Those who have been specifically trained to teach LD students know fully that this could not be further from the truth.
Complexity of Disabilities

Neither instructor knew, in terms of percentages, the success rate of LD students in their courses. However, both Subjects 3 and 4 reported that the passing rate is only about 50-60% of all students in their entry level English classes, which mirrors what is average for the whole community college system in English 100 or lower. Subject 3 warned, however, that these numbers are deceiving and questioned how the system defines success. “A student who starts off not able to write a sentence, but ends writing a paragraph, may not pass the class but has made great progress. For that student and us, it is a huge success, but when looking at numbers, it is seen as a failure. I think we need to protect our students from that. Some students need a couple of semesters to get through it. Who says you have to do it in one semester? Everyone learns at a different rate.” Additionally, Subject 3 talked about the complexity of the issue. “There are so many reasons students drop or fail a course. For example, I had a student last semester whose father took ill and missed a lot of classes due to absences. We have students with domestic violence issues and living in very difficult situations. I had another student with the best intentions, but her sister was hooked on ice and she became responsible for her sister’s kids. We have a lot of working and single parents trying to survive. We have students who have come from the prison system trying to make a different life for themselves.” There is not a simple reason or solution to this issue of failure in the community college system. In fact, the factors mentioned by Subject 3 describe the highly diverse and complex student population in community college classrooms. Although most instructors are passionate educators, without proper training in LD, along with having to serve an exceptionally diverse student population in their classes, it must
be difficult for instructors to truly set LD students up for success. It seems like instructors lack the training to know how to effectively individualize and personalize learning and instruction, so it is up to the students to make the existing environment work for themselves. LD students are more likely to fail in a “sink or swim” environment, especially if they lack the skills necessary to access and advocate for the support they need to “swim.”

Recommendations

Both Subjects 3 and 4 felt they would benefit from additional professional development and training on teaching diverse learners. Subject 4 also would like to see the counselors on campus, of which she says there are many, check in more regularly with struggling students and implement a system for identifying these students. “I wish the counselors would do weekly checks. I often think of a student who stopped coming to my class about half way through. I would see him on campus and say something like ‘Are you coming back to class? You can still pass, come to class.’ Maybe they (counselors) are reaching out more than I know, but from what I hear from students, they are not.”

Students – Background and Experience

Three community college students from campuses A and B were interviewed. Subject 5 attended Assets School from 8th grade – 10th grade and graduated from a local public high school in 2012. He is currently a 19 year-old full time liberal arts major on Campus A. Subject 6 is 24 years old, graduated from Assets High School in 2007, and completed her certificate as a Veterinarian Technician in December of 2013 from campus A. Subject 7 is 20 years old, graduated from Assets High School in 2012, and attends
school full-time, on Campus B, majoring in liberal arts. All three students were born and raised in Hawai‘i, are diagnosed with a language-based learning disability, and access services with the colleges’ disability offices.

Subjects 5 and 6 had similar backgrounds in terms of their school experiences prior to attending Assets School. Subject 5 attended a private Catholic school for grades 2-7. He remembered struggling with school and being afraid to ask questions because of teachers ignoring or dismissing his prior attempts to seek out help. Overall, it was a poor experience. Subject 6 also described hating school. She attended a local private school for grades 2-4, and remembers “failing miserably.” She went through testing and was diagnosed with ADHD and Dyslexia. She tried medication to help with her ADHD; however, she went off of the medication after having adverse side effects. Subject 7 remembers, in general, liking his public elementary school and his teachers, where he attended for grade 1-3. However, he remembers struggling to learn like everyone else, especially in kindergarten where everyone learned to read except for him. His parents moved him to the public school after kindergarten to access more services. Although his reading, writing, and grammar failed to improve, he was not placed in special education or diagnosed because he was still “scoring above fair.” By the end of third grade, he had finally slipped far enough below grade level to qualify for services; however, the year was coming to a close. This was when he moved to Assets School.

All three students described similar highlights from their Assets School experiences. First, all agreed that the small class sizes and individualized attention was of great benefit. The teachers cared and were there to help students learn in whatever way worked for each individual. “If I had to come up to them (teachers) after class, or
before I went to the bus, they were always there. In a heartbeat, they would drop whatever they were doing to help, and it never felt like I was an imposition. Smaller class size, and knowing that I could ask for help was my stepping stone for success” (Subject 6). They all also talked about growing in self-confidence. Subject 7 said, “I grew and came out of my shell socially. Assets made me feel more confident in my own abilities to lead others. As a result, when I started at (Campus B), I was more aware of what was happening around me and could get myself involved.” Finally, all three talked about not only learning course content, but also learning about their individual learning needs. Subject 6 said, “Assets taught me the curriculum, but more importantly, they taught me how to learn.”

Students – Analysis of Pre-determined Codes

Responsibility of the Learner

All three subjects demonstrate a strong work ethic, motivation, and perseverance. They know they have to put forth more effort than a typical learner, and that they are responsible for getting the supports in place that they need to be successful. The three students shared varying levels of accommodations and strategies for success; however, self-advocacy was one all three had in common. “I have to make myself go up to professor on that first day. Some classes have been challenging, sometimes I do not understand the material, even when the profession re-explains it. I resolve that situation by making friends, at least 1-2 in each class, so I have a peer to turn to. This is hard with social anxiety. I’m getting better, but still hard at times” (Subject 7). Subject 5 discussed learning his lesson about advocacy after failing a class. “I failed English 100, partially because the teacher did not tell me I was failing. I passed the second time though. I
communicated more and went in for extra help on essays.” Subject 6 leveraged advocating with professors as her primary way of navigating her challenges. “I felt like I had a piece of gold in my pocket; if you go to the teacher they will help you, and no one else knew to do that. It was 3:00 and everyone would get up and leave. I would look at the professor and think, ‘Dibs on you, I have questions for you!’ I would sit down and talk to all of my professors. Literally, in the next weeks we would pass on campus and they would know me by name. If I hadn’t made that effort to make a personal connection, I would have been back in the same situation I was prior to attending Assets School.”

*ADA Law and Policies*

Each of the student subjects recognized that because they are identified as disabled, the law protects them by ensuring that they have access to course materials including texts, lectures, tests, etc. All three students registered with the disability office and have to renew their accommodations each semester by meeting with a counselor in the disability office. While the accommodations offered to each subject varied, they knew they were not required to use any or all of their accommodations. Without exception, each subject had one or more accommodations that they chose not to utilize. Finally, the students were well aware of policies surrounding confidentiality. They understood that it was their decision about whether or not to disclose their disability, and that this specific information is kept confidential. The three students had mixed responses in terms of whether or not they choose to disclose their disability, which is discussed further in the section on LD culture and stigma.
Responsibilities of the Disability Office

Each student subject talked positively about the services provided by the disability offices. Subject 5 talked about being offered several accommodations but turning them down because he did not find some of the accommodations beneficial. He feels that what he needs most to be successful in school is 1:1 meetings with professors and assistance with registering for classes and staying on track with his program. He feels comfortable and appreciates the support put forth by the office. Subject 6 similarly was offered a note-taker and extended time. However, Subject 6 finds that her retention is better when she takes her own notes and organizes the information visually and in her own words. Therefore, she did not find the note-taker helpful. She finds being able to check in with the counselor and get assistance with registration and progress with the program is most helpful. Subject 7, who attends school on Campus B, accesses a wide variety of accommodations. The Disability Office provides him with digital copies of his texts, access to Kurzweil, a recording device for courses, a note-taker, extended time, and a reader for exams. Although there is some legwork, Subject 7 feels his accommodations are easy and accessible. “Each semester I go into disability center, get my books in alternative format. Then they contact author and get the digital text and/or audio version. The counselors arrange note-takers for my classes. Each semester, I pick up a recorder for lectures. Every semester, I have to fill out forms for the things I need, but it’s pretty easy.” In general, all three subjects said they get what they need in terms of accommodations.
Responsibilities of the Instructors

In general, all three subjects spoke highly of their instructors. They felt they were approachable, willing to help and answer questions during 1:1 sessions, and followed through with honoring accommodation notices. Subject 6 noted that professors are excited to help when they realize she wants to learn and understand. She commented that many college students just go through the motions and lack an enthusiasm for school. On the other hand, all three subjects also gave examples of instructors who, although well intended, just do not understand how they learn. Subject 7 said, “Some classes have been challenging. Sometimes I don’t understand the material, even when the professor re-explains it.” Subject 6 also talked about the challenges of being a diverse learner in a traditional school environment. “I had some difficulty with getting the teachers to understand how my brain works. It was the same mindset as my school before Assets. The teachers have so many students to worry about, and they do not always understand why you do not get it like everyone else.” Subject 6 found, however, that by establishing a relationship with her instructors, they could see she was putting forth a great amount of effort, which eliminated assumptions about not trying hard enough. Along the same lines, Subject 5, said, “he was just the wrong professor, and I couldn’t understand the way he was explaining the material.” One distinct difference, however, with Subject 5 is that he made his comment with a sense of negativity toward himself, like it was his fault because something was wrong with him. The tone and attitude were noticeably different than Subjects 6 and 7 who presented themselves as much more self confident and accepting of their LD.
Students – Analysis of New Codes

LD Culture and Stigma

Subject 6, “When I was in 4th grade, before coming to Assets, I was sitting in class about seven rows back, students to right and left of me. The teacher would hand out these packets of papers, and they would make their way down the rows. Then everyone would just start reading and working on the packet. I would look at the packet and think, ‘I don’t know what you want me to do with this? I can read the instructions, but I don’t understand.’ I would put my hand up and ask the teacher, ‘Do you mind reading this to me?’ She said, ‘Just read the instructions and it will click.’ She always said that, ‘It will click.’ It was so frustrating. I wanted to scream, ‘It’s not clicking! You don’t understand, I can read this until I’m blue in the face, but it’s not clicking!’ My first day at Assets School, I was angry and feeling ashamed of who I was. I remember it so clearly. I was sitting in class and the same scenario happened. The papers got handed out, and I was looking at my paper thinking, “Great, here we go again.” Then, the teacher came next to me; she squatted down and looked at me eye-to-eye and said, ‘Do you have any questions? Do you want me to read this to you? ‘Yes! That would be really helpful.’ I exclaimed. She read through it, then she said, ‘Do you understand what it is asking you to do? I reiterated the directions in my own words. She said ‘Yes! Get started and I will come check back in on you.’ My mind was blown! She cared about my paper and she cared about me. The fact that she came over to me, and noticed I was lost, reframed the notion of the role
of a teacher for me. That moment changed my life. I realized I was not a freak or a weirdo.”

This is an important story for people who work with LD students. Although the teacher’s intentions were probably good, and may work for a typical learner, her methods were not only ineffective, but also harmful to Subject 6 as a child. Any teacher in any school can do what the teacher at Assets School did for Subject 6, but unfortunately, that is not the culture of our educational system. Too often, children are still categorized by their peers, parents, and teachers as smart or not smart, failing to acknowledge the complexity of intelligence and ability. I had the privilege of teaching Subject 6 as a high school student. I watched her slowly shed the damage of her early school years and rebuild her confidence to a place where her LD label did not define who she was.

I also taught Subject 5 in high school. He is someone who always appears happy no matter what. He is also quick to say that everything is “good.” Subject 5 was not able to graduate from Assets, although he wanted to stay until graduation. His family kept him at Assets as long as they could, but by the end of his sophomore year, they could no longer afford the tuition. When I asked Subject 5 about his last years of high school, he of course said, “It was good.” However, some of his other comments caught my attention. I asked him about services he received at the public school, and he told me that he did not have any because he did not want to be identified as special education. Even though he significantly struggled with his English courses, he “felt like I should just try to be normal.” I asked Subject 5 if he discloses his dyslexia to his professors. He said, “No, I worry about being judged and treated differently.” I asked him if he felt ashamed of his LD. He said, “No, not really. It’s just that most people don’t understand, and I don’t
want to have to try to explain it.” Overall, Subject 5 did not present himself as self-accepting and chooses to mask his disability by rejecting accommodations and disclosing his disability to his instructors.

*College and Career Goals*

All three students stated that they chose to attend community college primarily for financial reasons. Additionally, all three students applied and were accepted to other colleges both in Hawai‘i and on the mainland.

Another similarity that each of the three subjects had in common was their uncertainty about what to study in college and which career path to follow. Subject 7 talked about his plan out of high school staying the same, but the timeline changing as a result of his having difficulty settling on a major. Subject 6 took nearly six years to complete her two-year program. She planned all along to go slowly taking two to three classes at a time. She also struggled to find her path. She knew from her high school mentorship experience that her passion was with horses, but this still left her unclear about what to study in college. “I didn’t feel like school could really offer than what I wanted to do. A trade school sounded more interesting, but I didn’t even know what I wanted to do. Horses don’t care about your level of education; they will buck you off no matter what.” She finally settled on Veterinarian Technician, but the program fell short when her courses focused on cats, dogs, and birds, opposed to large animals. She would seek out additional resources, but still had to go through the stated curriculum. In the end, she feels the right opportunity presented itself, and she realized what she got most out of college was time to grow up and determine what not to do. “I struggled with not knowing how I fit into society’s mold, and if I don’t, then what? I ended up falling in
love with a farmer, and found that open spaces, huge machinery, long hours, are my soul. It is what I’ve been looking for. Finally, I know what I have to do, what I need to do, and what I want to do. College helped in showing me what wasn’t going to work and gave me time to grow up.” Subject 5, the youngest of the three subjects still plans to transfer to a university. His timeline has slowed down as well due to the number of courses he can afford financially to take each semester.

**College experience**

All three students have found success in college, despite sharing continued challenges directly related to their LD. Of the three students Subject 5 seemed to struggle the most academically as he failed both a math and English course. When asked about these experiences, he had a difficult time identifying his strengths or challenges. Overall, he seemed to lack self-awareness. Subject 6 also talked about struggling with two courses, a math course and a history course. He changed to no credit for both courses and retook the math course. Subject 6 talked about how his social anxiety disorder made transition from high school difficult at first. “It is my shyness in social situations, advocating, and taking that first step to talk to someone that is so difficult. I have to make myself go up to professor on that first day. I’m getting better, but this is still hard with my social anxiety.” Subject 7 did not fail any courses. She recognized that sustaining attention along with comprehension of auditory information is most challenging. She came into college with strong compensatory strategies in place. She “claims her front seat on the first day” and asserts herself with professors to develop personal relationships with each one. Additionally, both Subjects 6 and 7 talked about having highly supportive parents who have been by their side throughout college.
High School Guidance Counselors – Background and Experience

Three high school college guidance counselors were interviewed, one from a local public high school, one from a prominent private school, and one from Assets School. Interestingly, the counselor from Assets School, Subject 8, had the least amount of formal training in special education and counseling. She holds a B.S. in Biology and began her career in education as a high school science teacher. She also has a M.Ed. in Curriculum Studies. While teaching at Assets School, she became highly interested in college guidance counseling and eventually moved into that role full-time. All of her training in college guidance, along with special education, has been on the job at Assets School. Subject 10, from the pubic school, has a B.A. in Psychology and a Master’s Degree in counseling. He took courses specific in cognitive assessments and practiced as a diagnostician for children for ten years. As a result, he is highly familiar with the learning profiles of learning disabled students. Subject 9, from a private school, holds an undergraduate degree in Elementary Education with a Special Education endorsement. However, instead of going into teaching, he worked for 16 years in the admissions office at a mainland university. Prior to his current position, he was a grade level counselor at another prominent private school in Honolulu. He also holds a M.Ed. in Educational Leadership.

Subject 8 has been in her current role at Assets School for about six years. She works closely with LD students as they make up over 60% of all the students she works with each year. The other 40% of students are considered diverse learners as well, but are not categorized as LD. Subject 8 reports that at least 90% of graduates continue onto college post high school, with approximately 40% selecting a community college or trade
school program, and 50% attending a four-year college. On average, 10% or less pursue military, work, or gap year programs. As a result, she is highly experienced in guiding LD students through transition post high school. Subject 9 has been in his current position at a large private school in Hawai‘i for the past five years. Subject 9 reported that approximately 10% of the students he works with are identified as LD. This private school is considered selective and competitive for admissions. It is expected that 100% of students will continue onto a college program, and about 95% of their graduates enroll in four-year university programs, this includes their LD students. Subject 10 reports that approximately ¼ of his graduating seniors enroll in community college post high school. In terms of their LD students specifically, Subject 10 stated that most do not pursue college, and those that do almost always enroll in community college.

*High School Guidance Counselors – Analysis of Pre-determined Codes*

*Responsibility of the Learner*

All three counselors highlighted the importance of self-awareness, self-acceptance, and advocacy. Subject 10 said, “The key is confidence and ability to advocate.” Subject 9 feels that nearly all of their students who graduate from his school (95%) are prepared for four-year college programs post high school. When he was asked further about transition for LD students he said, “There is a certain level of the students knowing what they need. Hopefully, by senior year, they know what they need to be a successful student. I don’t feel like it’s been an issue for us.” Subject 8 emphasized advocacy. “Even though the services are available, students still have to fight for adequate access. They have to be a consistent advocate, as soon as someone says no to the student, they need to have the confidence and skill to educate others about how they
learn and seek out support. I think kids encounter a lot of professors in college who completely misunderstand their needs.

*ADA Law and Policies*

All of the high school counselors were well versed in ADA Law and highlighted that the greatest change for LD students, in terms of disability laws, is the shift to students being responsible for accessing services. Subject 8 and Subject 10 talked about this change being difficult for many LD students. “LD students are going from a supportive environment with lots of people who advocate for them, to a system where they have to do it on their own, and these are kids who often have organizational and advocacy issues. All of the sudden they are expected to be independent, ready or not” (Subject 10). Similarly, Subject 8 said, “I think there is sufficient support for LD students at the community colleges, but it takes a lot of planning ahead. Unfortunately, that is something a lot of LD kids are really bad at. So, it would be nice if the support came in a more proactive manner because the kids who need it most are often the least likely to reach out and grab it.”

*Responsibility of the Disability Offices*

While Subjects 9 and 10 expressed satisfaction with the community college disability offices, neither could elaborate with details about the effectiveness of services provided. Subject 8 seemed to have much more first hand experience with multiple community college campuses. She began by stating that the disability offices on various campuses have different policies. For example, the requirements for documentation vary campus-to-campus. She stated that both Campus A, and a third campus not included in this study, are flexible with documentation and willing to help struggling students the
best they can. On the other hand, “the counselors at Campus B tend to be more sticklers for the documentation.” Last year, Subject 8 invited the disability offices from two different campuses to come and present to her high school students. “In the presentations, Campus B counselors were trying to give a warning to the students that it is going to be different, and they should not expect the same supports they get in high school. That is a normal thing to say, and I get it. We know the laws and that laws change, but I do not know if that is helpful for kids. That message closes doors and intimidates the students. On the other hand, I found the counselors at another campus to be more welcoming by saying, come talk to us, we want to help you.”

When I asked Subject 8 about the effectiveness of services, she said it was inconsistent. She has had many reports from alumni who shared stories of counselors in the disability offices going above and beyond what was expected to support their learning needs. However, she also had situations where she was disappointed with the level of support, and it was clear that there was a discrepancy between what the student actually needed and the disability support office understanding that need. I asked her for an example and she shared the following story: “One was an alumnus who was not allowed to use calculator in his math class. He had documentation going back to 4th grade. Every report clearly identified that he needed a calculator based on his dyscalculia and the way his deficits in working memory impact his automaticity in arithmetic. I helped him craft a letter to advocate for the calculator. He had already failed math classes twice before, and it was his only credit remaining for graduation. Once he was granted the calculator, he found success on his exams and passed the course.”
High School College Guidance Counselors – Analysis of New Codes –

Responsibility of High School Guidance Counselors

All three counselors had consistent perspectives on their role as high school guidance counselors. General responsibilities include: helping kids research and apply for colleges, work with parents, help in applying for financial aid and scholarships, hosting visitors and college reps, meeting with every student at least once, administer and supervise college entrance exams.

Subject 9 and 10 had some difficulty answering questions specific to LD students. Subject 9 indicated that about 10% of their students are diagnosed LD. These students work with an academic dean to access accommodations for their classes. However, it was not clear if the dean also supports these students in college transition specific to disability services. Similarly, Subject 10 said that there is a Special Education Coordinator who works with students with IEPs, and anything beyond what a typical student needs in terms of transition falls onto the responsibility of these specialists.

Subject 8 emphasized a personalized approach to her work. In addition to individualizing for each student, she also spends a lot of time with parents. “I do a lot of talking with parent individually and in groups. I think I end up counseling them just as much as the students because they are really scared. I find that parents of LD students, who also have children who are typical learners, are anxious and not as confident in their LD child. This anxiety gets passed onto the student, and it doesn’t usually help. I have to do a lot to help parents to understand what “normal” looks like for an LD child because they don’t have a framework for that.”
I think everyone in society would agree that we want kids to graduate from high school prepared with the skills and knowledge they need to pursue a college education if they chose to do so. However, what those skills are, what knowledge is needed, and how to teach and assess skills and knowledge remains an area of great debate across the nation. Even among the three college guidance counselors interviewed, there were distinct differences in their perceptions of what “college prep” means.

Subject 9 talked about a culture at his private school where all students are expected to go onto a four-year college, not just by the school, but their families and peers as well. Students undergo an intense and traditionally rigorous academic program throughout high school. In terms of college guidance, its focus is on the college search and the application process, which is identical for all students, including those with learning disabilities.

Contrastingly, Subject 10 from the public high school shared great concern about whether or not students were prepared for college. According to Subject 10, 50% of their students who attend community college fail the Compass Placement Test and are required to take one or more remedial courses in English and/or math. Students in the DOE are required to have personal transition plan to graduate. The guidance curriculum is a part homeroom, and students participate in activities a couple of Fridays a month that covers writing resumes and personal statements, and taking career and interest surveys. All teachers in the school, including Subject 10, have a group of students for homeroom and are responsible for following the guidance curriculum. LD students also have an IEP, and Subject 10 indicated that the special education teachers provide these students with
additional support as part of their IEP. Subject 10 indicated that as a school, they try to encourage all students to pursue college, as opposed to the case of Subject 9 where that is the expectation for all students.

In addition to the typical traits of college guidance curriculum, Subject 8 shared how she has adjusted the curriculum at Assets School to meet the unique needs of her LD learners. First, since Assets School is small (120 total high school students in total and about 30 in each grade level), she is the only college guidance counselor and teacher for the required guidance course. Therefore, every student benefits from her expertise. Subject 8 talked about teaching the “language of colleges.” For example, she finds that students do not know what a credit hour means, what drop/add deadlines are, or what a counselor or advisor in college does. They do not know the steps to take to navigate registration, housing, financial aid, etc. Many are stuck before they even get started.

Another unique aspect of Subject 8’s approach to college guidance is her advocacy project. Students are required to contact the college over the phone and have a 1:1 conversation with someone about questions they generate. Students with a diagnosed disability are encouraged to make that call to the disability service office and talk to counselors about the supports they might qualify for in the college they are considering applying for. “I’ve had students take this project on the road when they visit colleges as well. Students are encouraged to go to the disability service office of every school they visit. There are more steps when you are applying to college and have a learning disability. Students need to research the college and the supports, so I help them through that process through the advocacy project.” Subject 8 also requires her LD students to research their diagnosis and understand their diagnostic data in relation to their strengths
and challenges. Students leave her class well equipped to educate others about how they learn and what they need.

Overall, in terms of how college guidance counselors support LD students in transition, the public school and private school did not indicate that the process is different or more complex for LD students. Additionally, students in either environment who may need more support with the process must access that through other people. However, Subject 8 felt strongly that the process is distinctly different for LD students and requires additional support for both the child and the family. While all three counselors talked about the importance of self-awareness, acceptance and advocacy, only Subject 8 specifically addressed those skill areas in her guidance curriculum.

**TRIO**

During the literature review, the federal TRIO program surfaced as a unique program that provides additional support for LD students beyond what disability offices can provide for students. According to the US Department of Education website, Campus B has been receiving TRIO funds for an SSS program for at least twelve years. Dating back to 1999, all recipients and the dollar amounts received are posted online (TRIO, 2012).

Currently there are only 206 students being served by TRIO at Campus B. TRIO provides services for LD students in addition to the Student Disabilities Office (TRIO, 2014b). The disability office at Campus B is responsible for services provided under the Americans with Disabilities Act. Services, such as tutoring, are not part of ADA, and therefore fall under TRIO. As in accordance with the federal law, this program serves not only LD students, but also those who are first generation college students or come
from a family with a low income. There are over 9,000 students who attend campus B. Based on statistics from the International Dyslexia Association (2008a), a conservative estimate is that at least 10% of these students have language-based learning disabilities, so there are 900-1000 students who likely qualify for services under federal law. Yet, TRIO is limited in the number of students it can serve. Additionally, the guidelines for TRIO funds states that, “two-thirds of the participants in any SSS project must be either disabled or potential first-generation college students from low-income families. One-third of the disabled participants must also be low-income students” (TRIO, 2009, para.2). While likely well intended, this stipulation further limits qualified students from receiving services through TRIO. Campus A follows a similar pattern. The TRIO program has shown success at Campus A and reports that they have served 684 students, with an average of 236 each year. 96% of these students are in good academic standing, 353 received their AA degrees and/or transferred to a four-year college program (TRIO, 2012).

As a result of learning this information, I decided to interview a counselor from the TRIO program on Campus B. I found both pros and cons to the program. First, students in the TRIO program are more successful in the community college than those of the general population. The counselor contributed this success to the safe and small community within TRIO. There are additional supports such as tutoring and counseling, and the program brings similar students together in a family like environment. These students feel cared for, and as a result, their education becomes more personalized. TRIO also does not carry with it the stigma of the disability office. While not all students in TRIO are LD, they are all identified as at risk. The greatest downside to TRIO is the
limit in the number of students they can serve. Overall, they are capped at about 210 students per year, and thus only a small percentage of those students can be LD. Lastly, most of the activities conducted by TRIO are geared toward students who come from low-income, indigenous, or foster care type home environments. While LD students certainly can benefit from a culture-based program, it does not specifically serve their unique needs. TRIO counselors are also not specially trained in learning disabilities, and neither are the tutors. This is problematic because someone, for example, who is trying to help a dyslexic student revise and edit a paper, may not know the best way to support that student. As a result, the students are also subject to more stereotypes and overall misunderstanding about their actual cognitive abilities, particularly when there are obvious misspellings, odd sentence structure, disorganization of content, etc. It is like seeing a general practitioner physician when what you really need is a specialist.
CHAPTER V

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS, AND ACTION

“The looks, the stares, the giggles . . . I wanted to show everybody that I could do better and also that I could read.” – Magic Johnson

Review of Research Questions

How do various stakeholders perceive the effectiveness of Hawai‘i’s community college system in serving its learning-disabled students? Overall, all of the stakeholders identified areas or circumstances in which LD students are served well and also where there are deficiencies. For example, when LD students have strong advocacy and executive function skills, they seem more likely to receive the support they need from both instructors and the disability office. On the other hand, LD students who lack advocacy and executive function skills struggle more, and in some cases, it can be argued that services are not accessible or effective. The fact that only 6% of the student population within the community college system receives services means that there are thousands of LD students each year in Hawai‘i’s community college system not receiving services at all. There is a great disservice to the number of LD students unidentified or those LD students who have services available, but do not take the steps necessary to access and implement accommodations and support into their learning.

Three additional specific questions were included as part of this research. What services are available to LD students, are they perceived as adequate, and are they being accessed? What do instructors do to meet the learning needs of these students, and have they been trained to teach students with learning disabilities? What other contributing factors interfere with or promote success for LD community college students? Unfortunately, just like the overarching research question, there is not a simple answer to
Discussion of Findings

ADA Law and Policies

While the subjects in this study seemed to clearly understand the law, multiple subjects across subgroups indicated that the differences between K-12 laws and ADA laws present obstacles for LD students transitioning out of high school. Many LD students lack the skills necessary to independently access, manage, and utilize available support services and accommodations. As a result, these students are underserved in the community college environment.

Another issue that surfaced across all subject was the topic of confidentiality. The law protects LD students, and schools are limited on what information they can share and with whom. While this policy is clear and understandable, there is a double-edged sword to confidentiality. Since colleges need to go out of their way to protect confidentiality, necessary communication gets blocked. The disability office cannot offer workshops, or bring groups of learning disabled students together without breaching confidentiality. The disability office also cannot talk to an instructor about a specific student and how best to meet his/her learning differences. Instructors cannot share and discuss with one another the best strategies for individual learners. Lastly, instructors only receive notification of accommodations for a student without any information about the student’s strengths, challenges, or diagnosis. This limits an instructor’s ability to personalize his/her instruction. For example, a student who has extended time due to an anxiety disorder requires a different kind of support from a student who requires an extended
period of time because of a slow reading rate. Although there are countless benefits for instructors to have more information about their students receiving services, one of the students I interviewed talked about his fear that professors would treat him differently if he disclosed his disability. Unfortunately, disabilities are widely misunderstood in society, and it is easy to understand why some students would choose not to subject themselves to potential discrimination or marginalization. Yet, if people do not talk about their disabilities, and educate society, then those assumptions and prejudices will never go away.

**Responsibility of the Disability Office**

The disability office seems effective in providing access to accommodations for students who advocate for support and provide the required documentation. There is inconsistent support, however, for LD students who are less adept at advocacy or unidentified. Additionally, the understaffed offices limit efforts such as professional development for instructors or increased support for students.

As stated earlier, there were distinct difference between the disability offices on Campus A versus Campus B in terms of documentation required for services, accepting referrals from instructors, and reaching out to struggling students. The high school counselors noted significant differences between campuses as well in terms of approachability and the logistical steps students need to take to receive services. Instructors, students, and high school counselors valued the disability offices on the island that were inviting, approachable, and willing to help any struggling student. Instructors appreciated information and professional development that would inform their teaching of diverse learners.
The greatest challenge the counselors at the disability offices face is mainly a lack of resources. These small offices provide services for all students with any disability. Between new intakes, counseling, communicating with professors, providing services such as assistive technology and alternative format, etc. it is amazing the counselors do as well as they do. There is simply no time for student or faculty education. For LD students, regardless of accommodations, they benefit most from instructors who understand, even on a basic level, what language-based learning disabilities are and how to tweak their instruction to meet their unique learning needs. It is similar to how an instructor may adjust a lecture for a student with a visual impairment by avoiding comments like “look at this,” or “as you can see here.” There are simple, yet effective techniques all teachers should know about such as dyslexic friendly fonts, avoiding saying things like “just read it and you’ll get it,” or “you just need to try harder.” Instructors need to understand that although these students struggle with reading and writing, they are as smart and capable as other students, but need some flexibility in a language-based classroom, so they can effectively demonstrate their strengths. I believe it is the role of the disability office to provide training for instructors, yet this is an area where both campuses interviewed fell short.

**Responsibility of Learners**

When LD students head off to college, they cannot expect to have coursework fed to them in teaspoons. College is tough and not just for LD students. Regardless of how talented a professor is at teaching, or the lengths to which the disability office will go to for a student, if a student is not pulling his/her own weight, they will not find success. Without a doubt, students need to attend their classes, complete their work to their best
ability and participate in the class actively. LD students need to ask questions and seek out clarification or additional support if they are unable to get what they need from the class instruction in terms of comprehension or understanding course expectations. They have to be able to ask for help and be motivated to learn and work hard. LD students are given access to accommodations, but it is up to them to utilize and implement the tools, services, and supports that are available. Overall, they need to be responsible for themselves.

Issues arise, in terms of the quality of service for LD students, when students have to argue for their accommodations, do not feel understood or safe to ask for help, or when the steps required to get access require a skillset that they are not yet equipped with. All three students interviewed experienced at least once a professor who, despite being given formal notification of accommodations, did not follow through with what they needed. During their college experience, all three students failed, or dropped one or more classes because they were failing. All three students either took, or are taking, much longer than two years to complete their associate degrees.

**Responsibility of Instructors**

The instructors I interviewed appeared to be compassionate and dedicated educators. Both instructors talked with heart about loving the classroom and wanting their students to find success; however both were limited in terms of specialized training, knowledge, and experience in working specifically with LD students. Interestingly, they both seemed to believe they were equipped to meet the needs of these students. Yet, given my many years of specialized training in this field, it was apparent that both instructors were ill-informed about LD learners. The disability office counselors shared
some of this perspective as well in terms of instructor knowledge and skill in working with LD students. They have limited resources for professional development and training, and the time they do have is usually devoted to a basic understanding of the law and school’s policy such as, including a statement about disabilities in their syllabus and being required to allow students to access their accommodations in the classroom environment. I believe, however, that instructors’ responsibilities go beyond these requirements. Instructors need to be careful not to make assumptions about a student’s abilities and to help LD students to feel safe. There may be aspects of the class that a blanket accommodation does not cover, but with a small adjustment to instruction, the instructor can accommodate that student more effectively. For example, providing written instructions instead of just oral directions, writing in print versus cursive on a white board, posting handouts digitally instead of only in print hard copy, using a slightly larger non-serif font, etc. Instructors are often the roadblocks to access for LD students. Regardless of laws, policies, disability counselors, or the student’s ability to advocate, an instructor can shut down access simply by making an LD student feel that he/she is not approachable or understanding. Overall, Instructors need to be more cognizant of the diverse learning needs of the students they serve.

**LD Culture Stigma**

Prior to collecting data, I did not realize that a negative stigma seems to engulf labels like LD, SPED, and Disability, and in turn, has a significant impact on the effectiveness of disability services delivery for LD students. However, this theme emerged in every interview conducted. Counselors and instructors confirmed that LD students often lack confidence and feel shameful about their disability. One of the
students shared that while he was not shameful about having dyslexia, he had grave concerns about sharing it with others over fear of how that information would be perceived. There is a general lack of public understanding; strong stereotypes and misperceptions surround the term “learning disabilities.” To this day, there remains debate in the country about the existence of ADHD despite brain research that shows differences in brain function of those with ADHD and those without. Instructors talked about disliking the office being called “disability services” because the name itself makes students not want to be associated with it. In the past five years or so, there has been a push to use the term learning differences; however, everyone has learning differences, and I think it misleads the general public into thinking that these differences are minor. That will create problems for the students who are so severely dyslexic that they cannot read road signs or a menu at a restaurant. It may also begin to limit accommodations if the public begins to question the need for accommodations. Instead, I think we have to somehow empower the word disability so that it does not have such a negative connotation. When people think that those with disabilities are less than or not able, it perpetuates the stereotype and will continue to interfere with the success of these individuals.

The Assets School Difference

Another theme that emerged from the data collection was the impact Assets School has on its students. Every interview conducted gave recognition to the school in preparing their LD students for college. Although some Assets graduates still need remedial courses and face academic challenges in college, they consistently demonstrate confidence, a clear understanding of who they are as learners, and a distinct ability to
advocate for exactly what they need to find success in the classroom. The two students who graduated from Assets highlighted these skills as well and recognized that those characteristics were instrumental in their academic success. It was also clear, from talking with the high school guidance counselors, that Assets School has a unique approach to curriculum and instruction that works in developing essential skills needed to transition into a college environment. Overall, Assets graduates have a distinct advantage over LD students graduating from other schools.

**Conclusion**

At the conclusion of this study, I did not find that the disability offices are a complete disservice to LD students. In fact, there are many solid and admirable aspects to their programs and several dedicated and passionate educators working tirelessly to ensure those with disabilities have equal access to their education. However, I did find that there are gaps in services, and LD students who lack executive function skills, self-awareness and acceptance, and the ability to advocate effectively for what they need, fall through the cracks of the system. It is with these particular students in mind, that I propose a specialized and unique new program within Hawai‘i’s community college system.

**A Plan of Action**

There are several common strengths between such programs as Assets School, Landmark, and Beacon College. For one, these are strong communities where there is a culture of acceptance and understanding of LD students. Within these environments, negative stigmas and stereotypes become nonexistent, and that obstacle is almost immediately lifted for students. Second, these programs are staffed with highly trained
faculties who specialize in learning disabilities. They know when a student needs a little hand holding and when a student needs firm accountability. They do not assume that a lack of production and comprehension is due to a lack of effort. They have vast knowledge in assistive technology tools, strategies, and resources to support students in both remediation and compensation for their challenges. Third, they are skills-based versus content driven. In other words, they teach students how to learn, as described in the literature review. They provide a highly individualized and personalized educational experience, where students become empowered with the skills and confidence they need to find success. These three examples are independent and expensive private schools. However, I believe it is possible to offer a similar program within the Hawai‘i Community College System by creating a satellite campus in conjunction with Assets School.

Multiple satellite campuses that already exist across the Hawaiian Islands. These campuses help to serve college students on the neighbor islands and in rural communities. They help to provide access to those who otherwise could not attend a college program. In the same sense, the Assets School Community College Satellite Campus would also provide access, but instead of being based on physical location, it would be based on individual learning needs. This campus would be available to LD students who need additional skills and support beyond what already exists. It would also target recent high school LD graduates, to help support their transition into the community college environment. Initial conversations have already begun with both community college administrators and Assets’ administration and board members.
In terms of curriculum, students would take four types of courses on this campus. First, students would fulfill their English requirements, which would include any remedial courses along with English 100. These basic English courses would be taught by qualified specialists who have been trained in teaching reading and writing to LD students. Second, students would also fulfill their math requirements, and similarly, this would include any remedial math courses through College Algebra. Again, specialized math teachers would instruct these courses. Students would continue to be required to meet the same standards of performance in their classes as they would on any campus. Third, students would be required to take a course in study skills and learning strategies. The curriculum for this course would include assistive technology, note-taking, study strategies, time management, planning, organization, forming peer study groups, reading strategies for textbooks, and practice implementing accommodations. Finally, students would receive personal coaching/counseling. This is not counseling in the therapeutic sense, but instead, a person who checks in with the student regularly, holds the student accountable for their follow through, and helps to advise and mentor. Students could take other courses of interest concurrently at one of the other community college campuses on the island.

Logistically, students would attend courses on Assets High School Campus, which will be located at the former Academy of the Pacific Campus beginning in the summer of 2015. So not to interfere with the existing high school program, college courses would be offered from 3:00 P.M. into the evenings, or weekends. Admission, staffing, and administration of the program would fall under the responsibility of Assets School. Students would pay either the same tuition as other community college courses,
or slightly higher due to the individualized nature of the program and small class sizes that would not exceed 12 students. Instructors would be paid according to the compensation for an adjunct professor at any of the community college campuses. LD high school students, who qualify for early admit, could potentially enroll in the college level math and english courses and earn dual credit.

As mentioned earlier, student confidentiality can be an obstacle in the current learning environments. Students enrolling in this program would be asked to sign consent for faculty members, administrators, and counselors to all who have full access to their learning profiles that include diagnosis. They would be permitted to discuss individual profiles with one another, in order to best meet the individual needs of that student. Students would also be asked to acknowledge that by merely participating in the program, they would in a sense be disclosing to their peers within the program that they are identified as LD. Students would be expected to contribute positively to the community so that a safe and nurturing environment is preserved for everyone. Awareness, acceptance, and advocacy would be integrated into every aspect of the program.

Lastly, Assets School can extend its expertise by offering professional development workshops geared specifically toward community college instructors. It is unlikely that the current disability offices will be granted additional staff, and therefore, training will continue to be neglected. This partnership could open up the doors so that instructors receive the information and training they need to best serve the highly diverse population of students sitting in their classrooms. This training could occur throughout the school year, particularly during summer sessions when there is more time and
resources available. Workshops could be held either at Assets School’s main campus, or Assets faculty could go on site to the community colleges to conduct the training.

One of the best aspects about Hawai‘i’s community college is also its greatest downfall. Just about everyone has the opportunity to continue their education through the Hawai‘i Community College System. Unfortunately, this means they are faced with the challenge of being everything to everyone. The proposed community college and Assets School partnership is one step in being able to accomplish this grand task of more effectively serving the community college LD population.
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APPENDIX A – IRB APPROVAL

University of Hawai‘i
Mānoa

June 14, 2013

TO: Susan Travis
Principal Investigator
College of Education

FROM: Denise A. Lin-DeShetler, MPH, MA
Director

SUBJECT: CHS #21304- “Learning Disabilities in Hawaii’s Community Colleges and the Effectiveness of Disability Services; Case Study of Various Stateholders’ Perspectives”

This letter is your record of the Human Studies Program approval of this study as exempt.

On June 14, 2013, the University of Hawai‘i (UH) Human Studies Program approved this study as exempt from federal regulations pertaining to the protection of human research participants. The authority for the exemption applicable to your study is documented in the Code of Federal Regulations at 45CFR 46.101(b)(Exempt Category 2).

Exempt studies are subject to the ethical principles articulated in The Belmont Report, found at http://www.hawaii.edu/irb/html/manual/appendices/A/belmont.html.

Exempt studies do not require regular continuing review by the Human Studies Program. However, if you propose to modify your study, you must receive approval from the Human Studies Program prior to implementing any changes. You can submit your proposed changes via email at uhirb@hawaii.edu. (The subject line should read: Exempt Study Modification.) The Human Studies Program may review the exempt status at that time and request an application for approval as non-exempt research.

In order to protect the confidentiality of research participants, we encourage you to destroy private information which can be linked to the identities of individuals as soon as it is reasonable to do so. Signed consent forms, as applicable to your study, should be maintained for at least the duration of your project.

This approval does not expire. However, please notify the Human Studies Program when your study is complete. Upon notification, we will close our files pertaining to your study.

If you have any questions relating to the protection of human research participants, please contact the Human Studies Program at 956-5007 or uhirb@hawaii.edu. We wish you success in carrying out your research project.

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An Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Institution
APPENDIX B – PARTICIPATION AGREEMENT

University of Hawai‘i

Consent to Participate in Research Project:
Learning Disabilities in Hawai‘i’s Community Colleges and the Effectiveness of Disability Services: case study of various stakeholders’ perspectives

My name is Suzy Travis, and I am a doctoral student at the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa (UH), in the Department of Educational Foundations. As part of my degree program, I am required to conduct research for my dissertation. The purpose of my current research project is to analyze various stakeholders’ perspectives of the effectiveness of disability services in Hawai‘i’s community colleges. I am asking you to participate in this project because of you were identified as having personal experience and knowledge of this topic.

Project Description - Activities and Time Commitment: If you participate, I will interview you once during a face-to-face interview. The interview will last for about 30 to 40 minutes. I will record the interview using a digital audio-recorder. I am recording the interview so I can later type a transcript – a written record of what we talked about during the interview - and analyze the information from the interview. If you participate, you will be one of a total of 10-12 stakeholders who I will interview individually. One example of the type of question I will ask is, “Are the disability support services adequate for the learning disabled students attending Hawai‘i’s community colleges? Why or why not?” If you would like to preview a copy of all of the questions that I will ask you, please let me know now.

Benefits and Risks: I believe there are no direct benefits to you in participating in my research project. However, the results of this project might help me and other researchers learn more about how well the disability services support their learning disabled students, and determine if various stakeholder’s have consistent or inconsistent perceptions. I believe there is little or no risk to you in participating in this project. If, however, you are uncomfortable or stressed by answering any of the interview questions, we will skip the question, or take a break, or stop the interview, or withdraw from the project altogether.

Confidentiality and Privacy: During this research project, I will keep all data from the interviews in a secure location. Only I will have access to the data, although legally authorized agencies, including the University of Hawai‘i Human Studies Program, have the right to review research records.

After I transcribe the interviews, I will erase the audio-recordings. When I report the results of my research project, and in my typed transcripts, I will not use your name or any other personally identifying information. Instead, I will use a pseudonym (fake name) for your name. If you would like a summary of the findings from my final report, please contact me at the number listed near the end of this consent form.
Voluntary Participation: Participation in this research project is voluntary. You can choose freely to participate or not to participate. In addition, at any point during this project, you can withdraw your permission without any penalty.

Questions: If you have any questions about this project, please contact me via phone (808) 342-0076 or e-mail susannt@hawaii.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, in this project, you can contact the University of Hawai‘i, Human Studies Program, by phone at (808) 956-5007 or by e-mail at uhirb@hawaii.edu.

Please keep the prior portion of this consent form for your records. If you agree to participate in this project, please sign the following signature portion of this consent form and return it to ***.

Signature(s) for Consent:

I agree to participate in the research project entitled, “Learning Disabilities in Hawai‘i’s Community Colleges and the Effectiveness of Disability Services: case study of various stakeholders’ perspectives”. I understand that I can change my mind about participating in this project, at any time, by notifying the researcher.

Your Name (Print): _____________________________________________
Your Signature: _____________________________________________
Date: _____________________________________________
APPENDIX C – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Instructors

• Share about yourself (education and work experience)
• Describe your current position?
• How often and what capacity do you interact with LD students?
• Typically, how well do LD students perform in your course? Or, do some perform better than others? If so, why do you think that is? Why are some more successful than others?
• What kinds of support services are available through disability services? Do students access what is available? Why or why not? Are the services adequate? Why or why not?
• In what ways do you support your LD students beyond what is required?
• Have you had any professional development as an instructor for teaching methods and strategies that are effective for LD students?
• What support, if any, does the disability office provide to you as an instructor? Is this something you feel you need?
• What other support or help do you think would benefit your LD students?

Disability Office Counselors

• Share about yourself (education and work experience)
• Describe your current position?
• How often and what capacity do you interact with LD students?
• Typically, how successful are LD students in the community college system? Or, do some perform better than others? If so, why do you think that is? Why are some more successful than others?
• What kinds of support services are available through disability services? Do students access what is available? Why or why not? Are the services adequate? Why or why not?
• In what ways does the program support LD students beyond what is required by ADA?
• Does the program provide professional development for instructors for teaching methods and strategies that are effective for LD students? If yes, explain, if not, why?
• What support, if any, does the disability office provide to instructor?
• What other support or help do you think would benefit LD students?
LD Students

- Share about yourself (basic demographics)
- What was your K-12 educational experience? What were the highlights and what were the challenges?
- When were you diagnosed with a language-based learning disability, and what do you remember about that experience?
- What kinds of services, if any, did you receive as a K-12 student for your learning disability?
- Where did you graduate from high school? What were your career goals at that time?
- Explain your story of transition. Did you apply to other colleges? What happened? Why did you choose to attend a Hawaii Community College? What was your initial goal post high school? Were your college guidance counselors helpful? Why or why not?
- Explain your experience as a community college student. What are the highlights and what are the challenges? Have you had any difficulty with coursework or exams?
- What support service do you receive now and what is available to you? Are services readily available? Are there services available that you chose not to utilize? If yes, why? Are the support services adequate? Why or why not?
- Do your instructors know of your learning disability? If yes, in what ways do they support you as an LD student? If no, why did you choose not to disclose that information? Do your instructors understand how you learn? Why or why not?
- What are your goals now? Have they changed and if so why?
- What other help or support would you benefit from that you don’t currently receive?

High School Guidance Counselors

- Share about yourself (education and work experience)
- Describe your current position?
- How often and what capacity do you interact with LD students?
- Approximately what is the breakdown for your LD students in terms of percentage of graduates who attend 4 year college, local community college, specialized school such as an art or trade school, no plans for post secondary education.
- How do you support LD students in transition from high school to college
- What is your experience in working with the local community colleges
- Do you recommend that your LD graduates attend the local community colleges? Why or why not?
- What do you know about disability services in the community college system and do you think your students have this same knowledge?
- Do you think LD students are adequately served in the community college system, why or why not?