

First-Generation College Students with Disabilities Attending a Four-year College: How Did They Get There?

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Abstract

Postsecondary education is essential for all students. Despite an increase in high school graduation rates and an increase in postsecondary enrollment overall, students with disabilities are less likely to enroll in a four-year postsecondary program than their general education peers. They are also more likely to drop out and not complete their degree than their general education peers. Using Espinoza's research on pivotal moments as the framework, this qualitative study used a combination of a case study approach and grounded theory to answer the research questions. In-depth interviews were conducted with ten current first-generation college students with disabilities. This study suggests that first-generation students with disabilities can benefit from pivotal moments.

Keywords: *Pivotal Moments; first-generation; students with disabilities; four-year university.*

1. Introduction

Workers who have higher levels of education typically have higher wages and higher employment rates independent of their disability status (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Current Population Survey for 2020, workers with a bachelor's degree had median weekly earnings of \$1,305, compared with \$781 for workers with a high school diploma (Torpey, 2021). The unemployment rate for bachelor's-level workers was 5.5 percent, compared with 9.0 percent for those with a high school diploma (Torpey, 2021). The need for higher education impacts the livelihood of people with disabilities, who are attending college at a lower frequency and experience lower employment rates than people without disabilities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Only 19% of high school graduates with disabilities attended a four-year college in 2015-16, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2018). Students with disabilities are less likely to enroll in a four-year postsecondary program. They are also more likely to drop out and not complete their degree than their general education peers (Newman et al., 2011). This study aimed to explore how first-generation college students with disabilities experienced relationships with institutional agents in their educational careers that set them on the trajectory to college. The study also aimed to explore how these relationships affected the student's help-seeking behaviors.

2. Literature review

The study of social capital and how it relates to postsecondary transition could increase the effectiveness of transition planning and services for youth with disabilities and others who are marginalized (Trainor, 2008). Social and cultural capital have *not* been part of the special education vernacular (Trainor, 2008). Analyzing transition through the theoretical lens of social and cultural capital is important when examining issues of inequitable results experienced by individuals who belong to marginalized groups. Educational institutions and the agents working within them are often viewed as gatekeepers, reproducing socio-economic status (Bourdieu, 1973; Espinoza, 2011). Meaningful access to the general education curriculum is important in the education of students with disabilities, and this access may provide cultural and social capital. For example, an academic trajectory carries capital of higher value because it provides access to a college degree and degree attainment, which is associated with higher-paying employment (Trainor, 2008). Educators encourage students to take programs of study and academic courses to prepare them for the challenges of postsecondary education (Espinoza, 2011). They can expose students and their families to information and resources about higher education.

The framework for this research study is *pivotal moments*. According to Espinoza (2011), an educational pivotal moment is "a significant intervention initiated by a college-educated adult

who intentionally reaches out to a student to provide the student with the guidance and support to reach an academic goal" (p. 33). The pivotal moments theory has three components: 1) trusting relationships, 2) mentoring and advocacy, and 3) transmission of knowledge.

Timing of the pivotal moment can impact a student's success in college (Espinoza, 2011). Early pivotal moments, which occur before college, lead to good adjustments to higher education, positive experiences, the development of help-seeking behaviors, and academic success (Espinoza, 2011). Whereas students who experience late pivotal moments, which occur after the start of college, report difficulty adjusting to higher education, negative experiences, fewer help-seeking behaviors, and limited academic success (Espinoza, 2011).

3. Methodology

This qualitative study used a combination of a case study approach and grounded theory to answer the research questions. Using the two methods allowed the researcher to analyze the data using the pivotal moments framework while simultaneously looking for new and emergent themes driven by the data. The sample consisted of ten first-generation college students, and the sampling method used was a purposeful sample. For this study, participants needed to meet specific criteria to be included in the sample. The criteria include:

1. Being a registered student at the selected university
2. Currently in their sophomore year or higher
3. Having a documented disability (registered with the disabilities services office)
4. Being a first-generation college student
5. Being age 18 or over

The selected university for this study was a public university located in Southern California. One-hour-long in-depth interviews were conducted with all ten participants. Eight of the interviews were conducted in person, and two were conducted over the phone. The interviews were recorded with a digital recorder. The interview questions were semi-structured and followed a specific sequence, and open-ended questions were used to allow participants to tell their stories. Each interview session began with a script that reviewed and asked for informed consent. The interview recordings were transcribed, and the transcriptions were compared to the recordings and checked for accuracy. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants and used on the transcripts. The recordings were kept on the recording device locked in the interviewer's office for one year and then destroyed.

4. Results

All ten participants in this study attended a public university in Southern California. Four participants were aged 20-29, three were 30-39, one was 40-49, and two were 50-59. Half of the participants were male. Five participants were Caucasian, three Hispanic, one African-American, and one Asian. The participants represented a variety of disabilities, including specific learning disabilities, emotional/behavioral disabilities, visual impairment, hearing impairment, other health impairment, gifted, speech and language impairment, and orthopedic impairment. Of the ten participants, six spent the majority of their school years in the special education setting, and the other four spent their entire education in the general education setting. Three participants were sophomores, three were seniors, and four the participants were in Graduate school. All participants identified their family's socio-economic status as low or working class. Additionally, four participants receive assistance from the Department of Rehabilitation. See Table 1 for the demographic profile of the participants.

All ten participants reported experiencing a pivotal moment at different times in their educational careers. See Table 2 for the participants' pivotal moments timing, college adjustment, and help-seeking skills. Of the seven who experienced an early pivotal moment, three were in elementary school, and four were in high school. The other three participants experienced late pivotal moments in college. The timing of their pivotal moments impacted the participants in several ways. Of the seven participants who experienced an early pivotal moment, four reported having an easy adjustment to college and felt prepared. Two participants had a more difficult college adjustment, and one had multiple problems adjusting to college. When asked about help-seeking skills, of the seven, four reported having help-seeking skills before college, two developed them in college, and one was still struggling with help-seeking skills.

The three participants who experienced late pivotal moments had difficulty adjusting to college. Two of the three did not feel prepared academically. One did not mention academic preparation but did struggle to navigate the system and build a support network. All three of these participants had to learn how to navigate college independently. They also struggled to acquire help-seeking behaviors.

Several factors seemed to influence the participants' college preparedness, adjustment, and help-seeking skills: the participant's disability type, number of pivotal moments, and timing. In contrast, there were no notable differences based on gender.

Table 1. Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Disability
Jessica	39	Female	Caucasian	Specific Learning Disability
Jacob	50	Male	Caucasian	Visual Impairment
Diego	20	Male	Hispanic	Orthopedic Impairment
Carlos	29	Male	Hispanic	Emotional/ behavioral disability/ Learning Disabilities
Nick	20	Male	Caucasian	Orthopedic Impairment/ Traumatic Brain Injury
Stephanie	21	Female	Caucasian	Orthopedic Impairment
Ashley	39	Female	African- American	Specific Learning Disability/ Gifted
Jesus	31	Male	Hispanic	Speech or Language Impairment/ Other Health Impairment
Debra	54	Female	Caucasian	Hearing Impairment
Alice	44	Female	Asian	Emotional/ behavioral disability

Table 2. Pivotal Moments Timing and College Adjustment and Help-Seeking Skills

Participant	Early/Late	Quantity	Timing	College Adjustment	Help seeking Skills
Jacob	Early	Multiple	Elementary	Prepared	Acquired
Diego	Early	Multiple	Elementary	Prepared	Acquired
Stephanie	Early	Multiple	High School	Prepared	Acquired
Ashley	Early	Multiple	High School	Prepared	Developed in college
Nick	Early	Individual	High School	Some problems	Acquired
Jessica	Early	Individual	Elementary	Some problems	Developed in college
Carlos	Early	Multiple	High School	Multiple problems	Still struggling
Debra	Late	Multiple	Community College	Multiple problems	Developed in college
Jesus	Late	Multiple	Four-Year College	Multiple problems	Developed in college
Alice	Late	Individual	Four-Year College	Multiple problems	Still struggling

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5. Discussion

Students with disabilities face unique obstacles in their transition to postsecondary education, and yet, they want to pursue the same educational opportunities as their general education peers (Newman et al., 2011). Research on pivotal moments found that relationships with institutional agents could put first-generation students on the path to a four-year college (Espinoza, 2011). This study has added the element of students with disabilities to the pivotal moments theory to connect social and cultural capital with the postsecondary transition for youth with disabilities (Espinoza, 2011; Trainor, 2008). Participants who experienced multiple early pivotal moments had the easiest time adjusting to college and acquiring help-seeking skills. This supports the pivotal moments theory which states that students who experience early pivotal moments also experience good adjustments to higher education and develop help-seeking skills (Espinoza, 2011). The outcomes of participants that experienced late pivotal moments also mirrored the pivotal moments theory. They experienced difficulty adjusting to college and difficulty developing help-seeking skills.

Two findings are important to note. Both students with emotional behavior disabilities (EBD) reported multiple problems adjusting to college and were still struggling with help-seeking skills. This was not a surprise as a defining characteristic of EBD is an inability to build or maintain satisfactory relationships with others (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004). Another finding is that two participants who experienced late pivotal moments developed help-seeking skills in college and eventually experienced successful outcomes.

First-generation college students with disabilities can benefit from pivotal moments. This finding is vital to the academic trajectory of first-generation college students with disabilities. With the support of pivotal moment educators, students with disabilities who have multiple obstacles to overcome can successfully obtain a college degree.

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