

Traumatic Brain Injury and the College Transition: Challenges from a Student Support Services Perspective

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DESCRIPTION

The purpose of this study was to collect the experiences of five undergraduate students in working with student services to gain accommodations for traumatic brain injuries they had sustained in high school. Through semi-structured individual interviews, researchers will elicit narratives from five students with TBI and offer recommendations to improve services for and better accommodate the needs of college students with TBI.

RESEARCH METHODS & PROCEDURES

This study followed the tenets of an instrumental case study involving five participants (see below table), chosen to allow the researchers to chart the parallel trajectories of the students' experiences, and to gain insight into the relationship between students with traumatic brain injuries and their college experiences with disabilities services. By drawing on the participants' histories and experiences, the authors seek to explore the ability to successfully accommodate students with TBI and assist them with their transition into higher education and beyond.

Name	Gender	Race	Class	Tran. Status	Institution	2 or 4 Year	TBI Type
Casey	Male	Caucasian	Senior	Origin	Private	4-year	Car Accident
John	Male	Caucasian	Sophomore	Transfer	Public	4-year	Car Accident
Jesse	Male	Caucasian	Junior	Origin	Private	4-year	30ft Fall
Karen	Female	Caucasian	Freshman	Origin	Private	4-year	Sports Injury
Melissa	Female	Caucasian	Senior	Origin	Private	4-year	Car Accident

HIGHLIGHT OF FINDINGS

Effect of a Traumatic Brain Injury

- Both the effects and the severity of traumatic brain injuries vary widely, and the extent and consequences of an injury can have a significant impact on a student's ability to transition from high school to college.

"So I had a little dizziness, and fatigue was a big one. If I did any form of exercise, even moving off the couch. Getting up to make lunch made me tired. . . So I had trouble concentrating, which was a really big thing. And when I did concentrate, I would get a headache really, really quickly, and then I would lay down. Then that whole process would take like two hours because I would nap forever." – Karen

"The last doctor I saw was a therapist because I got anxiety because I was missing all of this school and not functioning like a normal person. And then my anxiety gave me headaches, and I was really emotional. I couldn't be social because everything gave me a headache." – Karen

"Things were slower but also . . . [it's] different from procrastination, but sometimes I totally have the motivation to do something, but it's like the push to do it isn't there. I know I need to do it, but sometimes I just don't know how or it just doesn't click. That's the biggest struggle I guess." - Casey

Accommodations Received

"I think it helps with my anxiety to know that I have more time even if I don't need it. But last semester, I needed it for a lot of tests and that was really helpful, and I'm going to request it again." - Karen

"The tests and stuff, if I have a tiny bit of extra time, then I can perform academically as well as any other person. So I've proved that." – Melissa

"One of my accommodations is books on audio because it takes me legitimately forever to read. I have to read things multiple times to get it to click. They downloaded it to a Kindle and would let me listen through that...When I had a note taker [at the first institution], they used . . . that paper where you write on the top sheet and it goes through. At my current school, he would actually take his notes, scan them, and then send them to me over email. It's great." – John

Other accommodations included having a single dorm room and allowing the student to be registered for fewer semester hours while still qualifying as a full time student. The single room allowed for necessary quiet space, while the full-time status allowed the student to progress at his own pace without losing full-time allotment such as on – campus housing or financial aid.

Challenges Associated with Transitioning from High School to College

"It's not a bad thing to ask for help at any time. [The institution] has the resources for you to succeed, and that's all they want, for you to succeed." Although John's experience was less positive, he nevertheless urged students with traumatic brain injuries to sign up with disabilities services. Even though it only helps a little, it still helps." – John

"Sometimes I'll get more upset about something but there's not really anything that could be fixed about that. I just have to know how to deal with it. I guess if anything, just having someone to talk to you. After the accident . . . they had me go to a neuropsychologist every week, and it was just hanging out, saying what was on my mind and it was a nice connection to have. If I ever needed to call him up, I could call him. If I ever got really upset, we could talk." - Casey

"I'm actually employed as a mentor . . . they said, 'You've excelled academically and we want you to help others through disabilities services to do well.' The one girl I was tutoring in the fall, she had a really bad concussion. She had similar accommodations that I did, but she was really struggling. I taught her everything that I did. I learned a lot from rehab, but a lot of it I taught myself through figuring out what worked. So studying for tests, writing papers, outlining stuff, all the review sheets I do . . . she's my pride and joy. She pulled a D to an A- after she used the things I taught her and now she's doing so well. It's fantastic." - Melissa

Challenges Associated with Disabilities Services

"After that [first audio book], they gave me PDF files and gave me a website where I could download reading software. Something that could read PDF files, but it doesn't exactly work that well. Honestly, I might as well be reading them myself." – John

"I know we already send out accommodation forms, but I feel that with HIPPA, they're not allowed to say a lot on the form. But it'd be helpful to have more on the form to give more information on what's going on" - Karen

"People who have disabilities and people who have traumatic brain injuries, [my disabilities services staff member] understands they're different and she didn't try to baby me or anything and I loved that. She understood that I wasn't a vegetable, like I'm fully functional." – Melissa

"I'd just say to keep being open minded that every TBI is different. Like you've probably seen in these five different interviews where it's not like ADHD or dyslexia where it can be baseline; everyone comes in at a different spot, so using other people's cases, it's nice to have an example, but just keep being flexible about each case." - Karen

LIMITATIONS

Limitations of this study include a small sample size, and a limited number of institutions from which participants were located. Furthermore, the public institution was not equally represented. Another limitation includes the method through which participants were gathered, which represents only those students who are registered with disabilities services. The nature of the injury itself also acts as a limitation, as the effects of TBI vary greatly.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

- The present study drew on interviews of five undergraduate students with traumatic brain injuries to identify qualitative themes that may help disabilities services offices at colleges and universities better assist this population.
- The academic success of students who have suffered traumatic brain injuries depends on the quality and quantity of accommodations and support offered to them by their various institutions.
- The narratives provided by the participants afford a view into exactly what works and doesn't work in the realm of accommodations.
- Certain accommodations are not always fulfilling. In John's case, for example, though the school may have believed the audio books were fulfilling the student's needs, the reality was far from successful.
- There are many critical skills these students need that cannot be provided through classroom accommodations, but are more effectively taught through one-on-one instruction. These skills can be conveyed and implemented through this type of mentoring program.
- As the participants in this study expressed time and time again, the circumstances and needs of each student who suffers a traumatic brain injury are vastly different from those of any other student. As a result, it can be very difficult to train staff to identify and provide the necessary accommodations for this population.
- Participants also observed that it was helpful to be provided with a list of accommodations that others in their situation had found useful, allowing students to select the accommodations that best fit their unique needs.
- Implementing such suggestions, along with training disabilities services staff to be flexible and understanding, may provide the keys to fostering student success.