

Students with Disabilities: Campus Resources and Sources of Support

Executive Summary

PURPOSE

Data from the UC system-wide climate survey (2011) revealed less favorable outcomes for students with disabilities. As part of UCLA's action plan for improvements, SAIRO was tasked with conducting a qualitative study to further explore the experiences of students with disabilities at UCLA. Interviews addressed areas of climate, challenges and difficulties, sources of support and recommendations from the students regarding potential changes to programs and services. Students discussed their individual experiences as well as how they perceived and understood the attitudes, behaviors, and standards of faculty, staff, administrators and other students. This brief explores in more detail findings related to academic resources as well as other sources of support for students with disabilities on campus.

FINDINGS

Several key findings emerged from the analysis:

- Support services provided by the campus are critical in promoting the academic success of students with disabilities. In particular, the services provided by the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) were cited as an important academic resource.
- Continuity of mental and physical health care is a concern and potential stressor for students. Counseling and health center staff play a critical role in helping smooth these transitions.
- Faculty and teaching assistants (TA's) who are attuned to the needs of students with disabilities can be an important source of support.
- Friends and peers on campus are an important source of social support, and also sometimes provide instrumental support and needed resources.

IMPLICATIONS

This brief results in several implications for practice. First, the frequency at which students identified the OSD as a resource suggests the importance of the OSD in their campus experience. However, variations in the extent to which students felt free to access those services suggest the importance of continuing resource allocation and support to expand and improve upon existing services. Similarly, the importance of the Arthur Ashe Student Health and Wellness Center (Ashe Center) and Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) in providing continuing or new services for students living with disabilities is important in meeting students' needs for customized care and support at UCLA. The stories students shared suggest the importance of continuing to provide and improve upon services. Finally, given the importance of peers and friends, it is important that UCLA continue, and strive to improve upon, students with disabilities' access to social activities on campus. It is important that all students are able to form friendships and relationships with their peers in order to persist and succeed in college. As also supported in SAIRO's Challenges and Recommendation brief, being mindful of the difficulties and needs of these students in coordinating social events could potentially help foster their social life on campus.

Introduction

Data from the UC system-wide climate survey (2011) revealed less favorable outcomes for students with disabilities. As part of UCLA’s action plan for improvements, SAIRO was tasked with conducting a qualitative study that further explored the experiences of students with disabilities at UCLA in order to inform Student Affairs’ work to improve campus climate and services to better meet diverse student needs. Accordingly, this study was intended to refine our understanding of what is working and what needs to be improved with respect to Student Affairs programs and services. This report presents key findings of twenty interviews to gain a better understanding of what it is like to be a student with disability on campus. Specifically, this report explores the findings related to sources of support for students.

Method

This study used participant interviews to explore the experiences of students with disabilities at UCLA. In winter quarter 2015, SAIRO invited undergraduate, graduate, and professional students living with a disability to share their experiences. A disability was defined as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities (Americans with Disabilities Act Amendment, 2009). Recruitment materials went out to students registered at the OSD¹ as well as to the larger campus population through the SAIRO website and emails. Nineteen students with different types of disabilities, as shown in Table 1, were interviewed. Transcripts were analyzed and coded into major thematic areas.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Types of Disabilities	Autism Spectrum Disorder (1), Blind or Visually Impaired (1), Chronic Condition (5), Deaf or Hard of Hearing (3), Learning Disability (1), Psychological Disability (3), Temporary Disability (1), Traumatic Brain Injury (2), Urinary Incontinence (1), Food Allergy (1)
Gender Identity/ Expression:	Androgynous (1), Female (13), Male (4), Gender non-conforming (1)
Self-reported Race/Ethnicity	Hispanic/Latino (4), Mixed Race/Two or more (3), White/Caucasian (11), Pakistani (1), Middle Eastern (1)
Student Status	Undergrad: 1 st (1), 2 nd (4), 3 rd (2), 4 th (8), 5 th (2) Grad: 3 rd (1), 5 th (1), 6 th (1)
Area of Study*	African American Studies (1), Anthropology (2), Biochemistry (1), Economics (), Electrical Engineering (), English (2), Environmental Science (1), Epidemiology (1), History (2), Mathematics (1) Medical School (1), MIMG, Philosophy (1), Political Science (2), Psychology (3), Sociology (1)

*Some participants have double majors

Findings

This study sought to explore the questions of who or what functioned as sources of support for students with disabilities and what kinds of support these sources provide. In many cases, the students also shared challenges or ways that the sources of support could be improved. Students were asked about what academic resources and sources of support they utilized on campus. The definition of “support” was within the context of their role as a student and this support included practical, physical, and emotional support. This support had the potential to lead directly and indirectly to academic success. Much of this support related to classroom needs. Other support related to emotional needs and personal integration with the campus community. Nineteen or 95% of students identified sources of support. The most common sources of support were the OSD, faculty and TA’s, and UCLA mental and physical health services (i.e. Ashe and CAPS). Other important sources of support were peers and friends and other university staff members. This brief will detail these sources beginning first with the institutional resources identified as sources of support, followed by other members of the campus community and sources external to the campus.

¹ The Office for Students with Disabilities underwent a name change in 2016 to the Center for Accessible Education. However at the time of the study the OSD moniker was in place, so that was used in the report for accuracy.

Office for Students with Disabilities

Many students (13) identified campus resources and accommodations as important sources of support. Utilization of campus resources and accommodations most often came through the OSD. Students cited several services provided by the OSD that helped them to perform better as students. These services were primarily related to completing classroom requirements and managing their course load as students, including testing accommodations, note-taking, priority enrollment, and flexibility in course load.

Support to Complete Classroom Requirements

The three resources provided that most helped students successfully complete their classroom requirements were testing accommodations, having access to note-takers, and captioning. For example, one student struggled with their² coursework prior to learning that OSD could provide captioning in all their classes. The student said, “I didn’t really understand at first why I couldn’t – why I felt like I wasn’t set up for success. When I was taking those classes I felt like I had an inherent disadvantage. But since I’ve gotten captioning in all my classes it hasn’t really been as much of an issue.” Having access to captioning made something that was such an issue before (i.e. being successful in class) into something that was no longer an issue. Another student talked about how they were not finishing tests prior to enrolling with OSD. “I literally left like two pages blank on the final but everyone else had finished it. I was like, “Oh, my gosh. I want to drop out of UCLA. It’s so bad.” After the student received the testing accommodations, they no longer had any issues finishing exams.

Many students identified note-taking as a useful accommodation that supported their academic success. At the same time, almost all of the students who identified note-taking as an important resource also discussed some of the challenges with the service and how variations in quality potentially jeopardized their academic success. For example, one student discussed many of the potential concerns and challenges they face when utilizing note-taking as a service.

“Basically how it works is that they post the notes onto the system and then I log onto the system and I see the notes. However, there’s sometimes problems with that. If the person doesn’t post up the notes on time and there’s a mid-term and then I can’t see the notes, it’s like I don’t know who to contact. But I mean, I contacted the office and they immediately fixed it for me. So that helps but there’s other concerns like is it a normal student? If it’s just a student like me, how can I trust the notes, like rely on the notes, like of the quality of the notes? And if it’s a – versus if it was a TA, you know, or the professor.”

Another student shared that having a note-taker still does not provide enough information to support academic success. In addition, the student also records their own audio when the class does not provide podcasts or other recordings. “I’ll go to lecture and I get notes through OSD, also. But even that I feel like it’s really hard to read other people’s notes. If I sat in lecture and tried to listen but I didn’t get it but then I read someone else’s notes later without listening to the teacher saying it on my phone or whatever, then it’s hard to understand it.”

Another student acknowledged the value of having a note-taker, while acknowledging some of the limitations of a system that relies on other students’ skills and organization habits.

“Well some of the data, like minor details are sometimes incorrect. Or like the notes are not exactly organized in a nice manner. Sometimes it’s uploaded under the wrong week like right now there’s like three uploads of week 3 but it’s supposed to be week 4 and 5, you know, included into it. So it’s not organized very well but I think it’s because they rely on whoever’s uploading the information to be on top of things.”

These findings suggest the importance of the services provided, but also the importance of oversight from OSD regarding the availability and quality of the notes.

Support to Manage Course Load

Having the option to take fewer classes at UCLA when needed, and having priority enrollment helped students to design schedules that best accommodated their needs. For example, one student mentioned the importance

² Gender-neutral pronouns (they/their/theirs) are used throughout.

of priority enrollment because it allowed them to choose classes at the times of day at which their bodies and minds functioned best. “That was really great for me because there are certain times of the day that work better for me and some that don't, and that I have more focus.”

Another student talked about the importance of being able to reduce their course load when necessary. The student noted, “One other thing I've taken advantage of is fee reduction, which is I take two classes to be full time. So I don't take three classes like all the other students, and that helps a lot.”

Support from OSD Counselors

Many students reported having utilized a person in OSD to help them set up particular accommodations with faculty. For example, one student talked about the process, “So I go to my counselor at OSD, I explain my situation and my counselor at OSD contacts my faculty for me and the faculty member contacts back my counselor at OSD and then my counselor contacts me. So she's my liaison.”

Although the students highlighted the important services provided by OSD, there was some confusion regarding the extent to which OSD counselors should be involved aspects of their student lives beyond arrangements with faculty. For example, one student stated,

“I don't wanna bash OSD, 'cause I don't know if their job even entails any social support, but I think – and maybe because I don't have like disabilities other than like [names disability], I don't understand. But I feel like the social component is really important, because you are like different, and sometimes, you're noticeably different, and sometimes, I think it just feels nice to have someone who understands in a way that other people can't.”

The findings from this section suggest the need for OSD to clarify expectations regarding the role OSD counselors will play in a student's life. Additionally, it seems as though there are things that students would welcome, such as more social support, from their OSD counselors.

Ashe Center and Counseling and Psychological Services

Seven participants identified Ashe and CAPS as sources of support. Utilizing these resources, however, sometimes came with challenges that potentially interfered with students' treatment plans and daily lives. One student identified Ashe as the source that identified the chronic issue the student was dealing with.

“I think the most positive thing was going through the Ashe clinician here and her recommending me to a [specialist] and really seeing it as a problem, because other doctors, I feel like me coming here was also a benefit, because seeing this doctor in regards to this problem helped me realize that there are options to this issue and that I don't have to live with it for the rest of my life.”

For this same student, not utilizing Ashe for years prior was a source of stress and disrupted their ability to have consistent care. “It's so hard, with all my medical records scattered, and then doctors prescribing me different antibiotics, and...going through urgent care, no one's really keeping track of anything.”

Many students identified CAPS as an important source of support. For example, one student utilized the CAPS Mind and Body Group for their particular chronic issue. Another student spoke about their CAPS counselor as an important source of support beyond his/her personal network.

“CAPS gives me alternatives. I'm not just stuck with my boyfriend, I can go to I guess specialists about it and I know that they don't only deal with me. Unlike my boyfriend, he only deals with me. They deal with a bunch of students and I know they have a broader range and idea of what's going on. So I feel like I can completely trust them and I feel very welcomed by them and I would most definitely recommend CAPS to everyone. They don't even need a disability, like just whatever, grievances, yeah, just go to CAPS and they'll catch you right back up. And they really help with the psychological aspect of your life.”

Another student talked about the role CAPS played in normalizing their experiences and improving their outlook on life.

“Once I started to get psychological help and they made it clear to me you know, first of all, you’re not alone. You’re not alone. Second of all, there’s nothing wrong with you, you’re not broken; you’re not bad. And you just got to figure out what works for you for learning and yeah, so this is just a strategy that changed. Instead of me trying to push so much blame on myself, I kind of blame the strategy. It’s the strategy that’s wrong, let me change it, let me fix it, let me figure out what will work for me.”

Having a disability that was identified while enrolled at UCLA, either through CAPS or Ashe, seemed to make the process of finding accommodations much more seamless. Although many students identified CAPS as an important resource, one student shared an experience that dissuaded them from utilizing CAPS. Although this experience was not common, it exemplifies how for some students, transitioning from healthcare providers prior to college to those offered by UCLA, can make it difficult for students to transition and utilize their resources fully. They noted, “I don’t go to CAPS. Well, ‘cause when I first got medication, I want to say, it was towards the end of high school, so I’ve always just gone home and got the medicine with the same provider ‘cause I trust him.” The student went on to share an experience she had witnessed from a family member who had also been a student at UCLA. That student was required to undergo additional testing at UCLA in order to receive the same medication as before. During this process it was determined that the current medication was not necessary, and steps were taken to wean the student off it. This scared the student who was interviewed into not seeking out CAPS as a resource, out of fear that they would try to alter the treatment plan the student had worked so hard to establish.

The Ashe Center and CAPS serve as important resources for students managing disabilities. However, these findings also highlight some of the challenges of continuing and managing mental and physical healthcare as students’ transition into and out of college. UCLA healthcare providers should consider these concerns and provide transparency and acknowledge how transitioning care may result in different diagnoses and recommended treatment plans that may cause uncertainty and fear for the students.

Faculty and Teaching Assistants

Ten students, total, identified faculty members (8) and teaching assistants (2) as resources and sources of support. One student mentioned how a faculty member noticed symptoms of their condition and expressed support.

“The one professor that mentioned that I fall asleep in class, and told me to check it out, he was – I had him last spring quarter, and he’s kept in contact with me, and I’ve been meeting up with him. And I told him, and he was like really surprised, but at the same time, he was like, ‘I knew something was off, like something was different,’ and he’s had like all positive things to say. I don’t think he’s said anything negative about – like I asked if I could work with him, and he was like, ‘Yeah.’ It was never like a question of like, “I don’t know if you can work in a lab with dangerous chemicals because you may fall’ you know?”

Another student reported faculty as less supportive, but noted that TAs were important sources of support. “Some others were a lot more responsive, but they weren’t even professors. They were TAs that I was emailing and saying, you know, this happened. And they were a little bit more understanding.”

Other Staff

A few (4) students identified other staff members as important sources of support at UCLA. These other staff members ranged from student Resident Assistants to dining hall staff. One student identified a staff member on their sport team who took interest in their condition and consequently ended up teaching the student more about the condition. “When I was diagnosed with [my condition], I was working under the [staff member for the sports team], and he was like just interested in it...And I learned so much from him...with like science and sports medicine, and I guess he’s another mentor that I have.”

Another student developed a relationship with the Student Affairs Director in their academic department. “The fact [that] she took a personal interest in my case and my situation was a huge thing because I can email her and be like, ‘...I don’t think I can handle a full course load next quarter. Can we talk about the paperwork?’ And

since she is the Director of Student Affairs she can just sign off on something while I don't have to jump through a bunch of hoops." That Director was able to support the student by eliminating barriers to academic accommodations.

Peers and Friends

Ten students identified peers and friends at UCLA as important sources of support. Some of these peers were neighbors in the residence halls, others were friends and peers in class, and others were affiliated with student organizations such as fellow transfer students. One student identified a friend as someone who filled a great need for better access to meals on campus. "Actually, one of my friends here, she's like my lifesaver. She would call me twice a day, 'Do you need food? Do you need food?' any time she had an availability and she was just awesome. I didn't know how cool of a person she was until I had this, so wow, that's really nice." Another student, when asked what the biggest source of support on campus was, stated,

"your friends are the people you can count on because I had a very strong support system outside of the authoritative system, that's where I found my support system and my sense of community was this group of people and these college students as they came passing through this program. And so having that support system, that's where I would go when I was upset. I would call one of those people and talk and even at any hour of the night there were certain people I knew were going to pick up the phone and so that's where I would turn rather than telling my school counselor or dealing with whatever it was."

In many cases, these students had shared experiences, sometimes related to the student's disability or condition. Other times, these were other shared experiences such as being a transfer student. For example, one student stated, "I think a lot of the transfer students are amazing, and I have so much respect for transfer students, being one especially. A lot of times I talk with them and we come from a culture where sharing notes, sharing information, sharing ideas, just plain-old sharing is common, and we have to share to survive, not just survive but to thrive."

Conclusion and Implications

It is apparent that support services provided by the campus are critical in promoting the academic success of students with disabilities. Services provided by OSD, CAPS and Ashe Center were the main institutional sources of support. Students also received support from faculty, teaching assistants, staff and peers. Across all sources of support, what benefited students most was when supporting individuals took interest and formed relationships, listened to and understood their struggles, and provided genuine help and information in dealing with them. Other systemized support such as being able to adjust the course load and test accommodation were very helpful to the academic success of students with disabilities. Overall, students experienced varying level of supports from different groups and while most of them were very well supported, it is also important to continue resource allocation and support to expand and improve upon existing services.