

# **Students With Disabilities: Skills, Strategies, and Dispositions for Success at a Community College**

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*The objective of this study was to investigate experiences that students with disabilities have while attending a two-year commuter college, with a focus on understanding the skills, strategies, and dispositions that contribute to their academic success. A phenomenological research method was utilized for this study. Data collection method for this study involved using qualitative, open-ended, semi-structured interviews. The results of this study illustrate that students with disabilities at the community college level often face a variety of social, emotional, and academic challenges. The findings of this study suggest that students with disabilities on campus benefited from social support, family advocacy, and goal setting. Students with disabilities often have more challenges on campus experiences than their non-disabled peers. The findings of this research add to the limited research focusing on factors of success as it relates to students with disabilities. It is suggested that programs are designed and provided with the intention of supporting the emotional, social, and academic needs of students with disabilities on campus.*

*Keywords: students with disabilities, college, academic success*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Students with disabilities are attending institutions of higher education at an increasing rate (Minotti et al., 2021). While this population is increasing, they historically tend to do poorer academically than students who do not have a disability (Abreu et al., 2016; De Los Santos et al., 2019). As many as 96% of college and university classrooms have students with disabilities attending them, and faculty, administrators, and college support staff struggle to keep up with the learning needs of an increasingly diverse student population (De Los Santos et al., 2019). It is well-documented that students with disabilities often have more complicated experiences on campus than their non-disabled peers (Flink & Leonard, 2018; Lombardi et al., 2016). For example, students with disabilities who transfer from high school to college face a new set of responsibilities and may find it difficult to adjust to the demands of college life (De Los Santos et al., 2019; Plotner et al., 2020). They are now in charge of their daily schedules and are taking on more adult tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and navigating the complex world of college (De Los Santos et al., 2019). To add to the complexity of their new lives, this group of students is typically navigating their new world and making their own academic decisions, independent of the help they previously received in high school (Plotner et al., 2020). While there is a great deal of literature about students with disabilities, it is

quantitative (Mastropieri et al., 2009). Given the complexity and breadth of experiences of students with disabilities on campus, it is necessary to continue with such important research and add to it through a qualitative lens. A qualitative approach may help illuminate the lived experiences of students with disabilities on campus and allow for insight that leads to the development of interventions that support student success.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Currently, the accepted terminology about individuals with disabilities is that of person-first identification. While some smaller communities (such as those who are deaf or hard of hearing) still prefer identity-first terminology, the public and the disability community adhere to person-first identity (Flink, 2019). It is argued that utilizing identity-first language, thus placing the identity before the person, devalues individuals, perpetuates stereotypes, and promotes stigmatization (Dunn & Andrews, 2015; Flink, 2019). Identity-first language also presumes that there is something inherently wrong with having a disability (Dunn & Andrews, 2015). Oppositely, person-first language attempts to humanize the individual, showcasing her or his humanity and placing the individual before the identity. Therefore, the person-first moniker, *students with disabilities*, is used throughout this study to reference any student with a documented disability, both in general terms and for participants. Other terms, such as individuals with *learning disabilities (LD)* are also used within the literature; however, in this study, the term LD was purposefully omitted as LD has a limiting connotation, referring to students who have specific disabilities related to learning. Participants in this study had a range of disabilities that did not necessarily affect their learning; therefore, the researchers wanted to use a term that captured the diversity of their disabilities while reducing any limiting terms. It is also important to note that not all disabilities the participants had in this study are traditionally defined as LD (Daly-Cano et al., 2015).

Students with disabilities are a growing population in postsecondary settings. Whether it be positive or negative, having a learning disability directly affects each student's experiences in post-secondary education (Flink & Leonard, 2018). In researching the lived experiences of students with disabilities at the community college level, it was found that students with disabilities faced various social, emotional, and academic challenges (Flink & Leonard, 2018). Research demonstrates that students with disabilities tend to feel less comfortable in a college classroom than their non-disabled peers (Minotti et al., 2021). Further, some students with disabilities struggle with having a sense of belonging while on campus (Minotti et al., 2021). As such, researchers and colleges are constantly looking for specific areas of focus that can help students overcome these challenges. Student advocacy may significantly benefit students with disabilities (Flink & Leonard, 2018). There are a variety of intrinsic and extrinsic factors that can affect student success. Extrinsic factors such as having an advocate or mentor can significantly boost academic success. An advocate or mentor can be a close family member, a friend, a spouse, or a faculty member or staff at school. Students with disabilities must utilize the vast social resources available to them, calling on them when needed (Russack & Hellwing, 2019). Strong, supportive interpersonal relationships and social networking are essential elements of success for students with disabilities (Russack & Hellwing, 2019). It is well understood that social support systems can positively impact students on campus (Lombardi et al., 2016). For students who face unique challenges while attending college, having a social support network can be even more vital (Minotti et al., 2021). Social support networks can exist in a multitude of formats for students. Lombardi et al. (2016) discussed a key element of social support networks, stating that there are some important things to consider when looking at the quantity of social support versus the quality. Simply because a student has high social support (a high number of people in one's life) does not necessarily mean that the support is high quality (Lombardi et al., 2016). The quantity and quality of one's social support network can positively affect one's outlook, motivation, and success, depending on if one can rely upon people and receive the necessary support. There are a variety of social support networks, including family, friends, peers, and college staff. Even so, some students with disabilities may not seek social support systems due to the fear of being discriminated against or stigmatized (Lombardi et al., 2016). As such, there

is a continued need to engage in qualitative research to further understand the experiences and needs of students with disabilities on college campuses (Flink & Leonard, 2018).

## **PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY**

Pursuing a college degree can be challenging for many students with disabilities. Some students face accessibility issues, such as needing an interpreter or assistive technology, while others may experience stigmatization and discrimination from students, staff, and faculty on campus (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012). Internal mechanisms such as low self-efficacy or lack of understanding of specific soft skills can make college challenging. Despite the numerous obstacles that students with disabilities face, many are still successful and continue earning their college degrees. While students with disabilities graduate at far lower rates than their non-disabled peers, but they persevere.

Most of the literature about students with disabilities is quantitative in nature (Mastropieri et al., 2009). Through a qualitative lens, however, there is a need to explore the lived experiences of students with disabilities on campus (Flink & Leonard, 2018). A qualitative approach allowed for a more in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of students with disabilities on campus. For the purposes of this study, there was a need to investigate students with disabilities who are successful and understand how the factors that contribute to their success could be used to help others be equally successful. There is limited research on success factors as it relates to students with disabilities (Russak & Hellwing, 2019). Through the exploration of the experiences of students with disabilities on campus, we can help inform faculty, staff, and administrators as to how they can better serve this population (Flink & Leonard, 2018). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences that students with disabilities have while attending a two-year commuter college, focusing on understanding the skills, strategies, and dispositions that contribute to their academic success.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A phenomenological approach was used to investigate the skills, strategies, and dispositions of successful students with disabilities at a two-year commuter college. A phenomenological approach was used because it was necessary to investigate students with disabilities without the constraints of predetermined criteria (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). The lived experiences of individuals can be explored through phenomenology (Rawlings & Cowell, 2015). Given the novel approach of this study, an open, flexible method of investigation was needed. The Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) was the site for this study. BMCC is a two-year commuter college in lower Manhattan in New York City. Of the approximately 25,715 students registered at BMCC as of fall 2018 (B. Hansel, personal communication, October 25, 2018), about 1,620 students registered with the Office of Accessibility (N. Leach, personal communication, October 24, 2018).

Upon approval from BMCC's Institutional Review Board (IRB), flyers were posted around campus to recruit participants. Only individuals who self-identified as having a disability, were currently enrolled at BMCC, and had a GPA of 2.8 or higher qualified to participate in this study. For this study, academic success was defined as having a GPA of 2.8 or higher. The data collection method for this study consisted of semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews allow participants to elaborate upon their responses as they wish (Rawlings & Cowell, 2015). This flexibility with the interview protocol allowed the researchers to cast a wider net for data collection (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Participants were interviewed in person. Participants were informed that their interviews would be audio recorded to ensure accuracy in their responses; all participants consented to having their interviews audio recorded. Semi-structured interviews were appropriate protocol to gather data that were information rich (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). The majority of the interviews were about 40 minutes in length. Some interviews lasted longer because participants shared longer, more detailed responses to the questions. A total of 6 participants were included in this study. Given the nature of qualitative research, larger sample sizes are usually unnecessary (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Qualitative research aims to gather detailed, information-rich

data that can only be achieved through a lengthier investigation, and information richness is more important than the number of participants (Essl et al., 2020). Participants were assigned pseudonyms to establish and maintain anonymity and confidentiality. Participants are referred to by their pseudonyms throughout this manuscript.

Basic demographic information was collected at the beginning of each interview to allow for the contextualization of participants. Interview questions for this study were designed to gather as much information as possible regarding participants' skills, strategies, and dispositions of success within the college environment. Participants were asked to provide a brief history of their educational experiences, such as attending high school or another college. Participants were asked to define *success* and to explain whether they believed they were successful in their previous educational experiences. Participants were asked to explain factors that contributed to their academic success, such as influential people in their lives, key personal traits or values, and any skills or strategies they have learned and utilized. Finally, participants were asked what advice they would offer to newer students with disabilities in college. This final question was developed in hopes of framing participants' dispositions as they related to academic success.

Data from the interviews were transcribed from the audio recordings verbatim and subsequently analyzed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA allows for an examination of data without the restrictions of a theoretical framework--IPA allows the data to speak for itself, representing phenomena as they exist in the world (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Rawlings & Cowell, 2015). To ensure accuracy with data transcription and analysis, interviews were read multiple times, detailed notes were taken, compared, and double-checked by each researcher (Smith et al., 2009). From the data analysis, themes emerged and were identified. To ensure the accuracy of data analysis, the emergent themes were discussed and double-checked between both of researchers. IPA was an appropriate data analysis method for this study given the phenomenological perspective of the study and the qualitative approach to data collection.

## RESULTS

A total of 6 participants were included in this study, with 4 self-identifying as male and 2 as female. The average age of participants was 31. After careful, repeated review, data were analyzed and categorized into four themes: definitions of success, experiences with academic role models, strategies that promote success, and personal traits that promote success. Participants' responses are provided below, and all quotations from participants are provided verbatim to maintain the integrity of their responses.

### Theme 1: Definitions of Success

Definitions of success varied significantly among participants. Some participants defined success more broadly, while others tailored their definitions to the academic world. Joanne, for example, stated that being successful means being consistent, persistent, and going after "what you've been craving for, that you [...] have been craving so much." Antonio also defined success in general terms, responding with:

I feel like it [success] depends on what you're aiming for. Success is determined by what you feel is a success because you could be accomplishing many great things but you could feel like that's not enough. In your eyes, it wouldn't be a success. I guess like how high your goals are.

Similarly to Antonio, Joseph also spoke in general terms regarding his definition of success. He did not have a clearly defined idea of success as it relates to education, but he conveyed his understanding and views of this term:

... I think it's objective, but I think to give a definition, I would just say when you're at a point when you realize you have achieved so much and... it's hard to define. But I think there's no way to really define it because no matter what, even successful people still want

more. So I think they can define it by achievement. So I think it's just when you're satisfied, when you reached the point where you're just satisfied mentally and you just know your goals have been accomplished. I think that's success.

Jason also shared his thoughts regarding how he defined success. His definition was broad and he spoke about success as it relates to life in general:

[Success is] achieving a goal, whichever it may be. Well, I mean, if you have something that you want to get at, and you try your best with devotion or perseverance to get there, and you get there, and that's my idea of success.

Several participants defined success through the lens of academic achievement. For example, Joanne said that "a lot of studying" contributes to being successful. Tony similarly stated that earning a grade point average at the end of a semester that meets or exceeds your expectations is successful. Chelsea also shared her views regarding success through the perspective of education, stating that:

Success [...] is somebody that has a high degree like a bachelor's, and has a great job like a nurse or a master's or professor or a doctor [...] You have to have some sort of degree.

One participant (Chelsea) viewed success outside of the world of education, and in general terms, but with some specific caveats. Chelsea said:

You have to have a nice home. You have to be able to balance everything out. If you have children, you have to be able to maintain them properly. You're not lacking on any resources or money.

## **Theme 2: Experiences With Academic Role Models**

In this study, each participant was able to easily and clearly identify individuals who positively influenced their academic progress and achievement. While family support was consistently noted in participant responses, many participants mentioned the family unit in general terms at first, before focusing their responses on specific people. Antonio discussed the example his sister set and how her experiences helped him to feel more confident:

[...] she basically helped set that example. And it's kind of easy to forget how big key that is because a lot of the things that goes into that can just be helped by having someone in your family that has, that knows those things. She could just explain things to me like if I didn't understand something or like something that I had to do for college and understand that [...] She could just help me.

Joseph shared a similar experience of being motivated by the example set by his older brother which allowed him to see a model of success. For Joseph, the idea of success was modeled through his older brother, allowing him to see a real-world example:

...because he was another factor growing up. My mom always use him as an example, like 'Be like him.' And so I always carry that in the back of my mind. I'm going to try to be like him. Not exactly like him per se, but just in terms of the success... I think that's how I also define success. I will look at him and, for me, I saw him as being successful. So that was the image in my mind of success [...]

In addition to being a behavior model, Joseph's brother provided support that allowed him to access his academic experience with greater ease. The story Joseph shared had stuck with him and was an integral part of his development:

I remember one time, I think for my birthday it was kind of like a joke I said, 'Can you buy me a printer?' And this is going back to high school when high school started having a printer was a big deal. I mean, not a lot of people at that time in my area were able to get printers for school. So for him to actually go and buy me a printer and for me to have... He's the same person that gave me the desktop computer at my home at that time. So it was a big deal for me to be able to print my work in high school and come to this class with my assignments done instead of going to the library. I think for me it was a big like emotional boost or confidence boost.

Chelsea continued with the theme of family as role models, while also noting the need for additional emotional support. It appears that several participants viewed individuals whom they were close to as examples of particular behaviors and goals:

I think it's mainly my parents, they both did get degrees back in my home country, Peru. Just from that, I automatically know that I could get a degree and I'm capable of getting one. Mainly my mother, because now she's still fighting for the best future and stuff like that. I always had support from them. If I ever was doing bad, they told me, 'You can do it. You're smart,' this and that, 'Don't give up.' Just emotional support mainly helped me.

Jason also discussed parental support, but noted the influence that occurs when monetary support is part of the experience:

Well, I mean, my mother, they had a lot of money saved up, so they did contribute money. Since they're grandmothers, they don't have money as it is, is kind of like I don't want the money to go to waste. So, do well. The stuff that I want to do, I need to do well in.

Joanne shared that while she needed to connect with an outside tutor to receive academic support, she found that this person was able to offer her more than academic support as they were able to also take on a familial-like role as noted by other participants:

They helped me to, um, helped me to focus more on, you know, going after what I believe in. And, not only is she tutoring me, she's inspired me, she's helping me to continue on going forward no matter what.

Tony mentioned his family as support, saying, "I think my family is supporting me. My brothers and sisters are all on board with me returning me to school and I think they're proud of my return to college." Tony expanded his definition of support system to include the faculty and staff in the school. "[...] I think that many people in this school are supportive and help me on an everyday basis. I count on staff to be professional and the professors to be supportive in the endeavors I set for myself."

### **Theme 3: Strategies That Promote Success**

Participants were also asked to consider what strategies they employed that helped them experience success. Joanne discussed skills connected to executive functioning with a focus on time management and the ability to successfully engage. In addition, she noted the power of being able to teach these strategies to other students:

That actually, that is tremendously really really worked for me. Uh, time management. Um, also the, how, how, how do I ach-, uh, what, what, what are the different techniques I can do to study or the different techniques I can do actually to take a test. 'Cause a lot people take a test and they get, they know the answers to the questions, even though it's right there and there, and, they, their mind gets blocked. So I'm actually teaching in my, um, my club, again a women's club. of what you could do, to not have a panic attack when you're taking a test.

Joseph discussed several strategies that he used to experience success. The first focused on gaining knowledge through experience. Experiential learning appears to have a powerful impact on Joseph and his experiences of success:

[...] books. I think that's a big one. I've read a lot of books. I've spoke to a lot of people. Like in the military I try to speak to as many people as I can to help me become, I guess, better. So one of my strategies was to speak to people that are smarter than me. I mean, it's okay to speak to people that... In the end we all attain different skills so I think there's no really this person is smarter, but I always try to communicate with people that know a lot more to me because then I'll have something to gain or learn from.

Joseph also pointed to his ability to make connections between experiences, "...but connections, I guess meeting new people. Connections because everyone has different personalities and just heard it from different, I guess, ideas." Finally, he mentioned ambition that was positively reinforced, with personal balance:

[...] in the military I was always ambitious and I had a kind of... For me, I've always felt maybe it was a bad thing. Now I'm starting to think of the other side of it because I always thought it was so good to be ambitious and be an overachiever because that's the way I was in the military. I achieved way more than I... Like my supervisor was so proud of me. They gave me this little progress report every six months. And they were telling me like, "Wow, you surpassed expectations. You're doing so great." And for me it was good, that's what they want. But for me in the long run, I think it burns you out a little bit. So I think for me, I've learned over time to just relax a little bit. It's good to have those goals. You don't have to do so much and that's just what I'm taking from it now.

Antonio's response had similar themes focused on the importance of one's emotions and ensuring a self-perception of balance in approaching academics and other aspects of life. Antonio's response was insightful as it involved the importance of caring for one's mental well-being:

Managing my, both my mental state and my like ... I feel like for me to be successful also to like have my me time. So I've been able to better balance both working efficient and having my me time and in turn I've been able to produce more work output when I'm doing such things.

Jason illustrated the need to focus, be attentive, and review, "So I just pay attention in class mainly, try to take in as much as the teacher can say and review at home, not for a long time, just go over something, maybe rewrite my notes. But, he also returned to the need for having help from others, "It's even better if somebody helps you, like somebody just helps you." Chelsea shared the importance of a schedule and typical routine can help to avoid the stress that occurs when leaving things until the last minute:

Mainly every day, I would just make sure I do something related to school. If it's just reading or getting a little part of an essay done and make sure I don't procrastinate. That

really helps me because when I don't procrastinate, I could get help in my essays. When I leave everything for last minute, I get anxiety-I set a schedule. I'm not that organized but I jot things down in my phone. Make sure I get everything done I need in a week, at least. Well, most of the time I'm home doing something school-related.

Finally, Tony shared his strategy of goal setting as his tool for success. Tony was able to articulate the need for long-term planning and visualization as part of one's goal setting:

I think one strategy in terms of obtaining your goals would be having the ability to map out where you see yourself later on in life in five years or ten years, or what your goals are and how you're going to get there. I think one strategy is that you can map out short-term goals for classes in terms of academia, where you want to be in this class. What you can pull out of this class? And if you can't pull something out of the class, at least have a conversation with somebody, a professor or a dean about the class, that you didn't see certain things happening in class.

#### **Theme 4: Personal Traits That Support Success**

Participants were asked to consider internal traits or characteristics they had which they believed contributed to their success. Participants cited a variety of personal traits, including motivation, determination, confidence, promptness, and knowing one's capabilities, to name a few. Chelsea shared her thoughts on motivation and determination:

I guess I'm just really motivated and determined. I feel like every time I feel like I can't do something, I just think about my future and that motivates me to never give up. Every time I think I can't do something, I just push myself and I do everything I can just to make sure I pass the class or I do good in a test or something like that.

Jason succinctly described his personality traits that led to success, saying, "What I personally do is I do what needs to be done. As long as it's done prompt or not, it's done." Joseph described confidence as a key trait in his success:

I think the biggest skill is just being confident because I think that comes down to everything in life. But just specifically in school if you're confident, not just confident, but that's one of the traits or skills. I think another one is just finding something interesting in every class. Like for me, I always try to find something in every single class. And I told that to another student that was asking me for, I guess, advice. I said, 'Just find something interesting in every single class, even if you find it boring, it has to be something in there that you like.' And that's what I try to do.

Tony focused on skills related to connecting with others and advocating for himself:

I think my interpersonal skills, my verbal skills assist me a great deal. I think that my ability to navigate systems help me. My skills to define goals and what they are, and my skills defining who I am as a person in terms of my goals and define what my identity is, and the skills of setting rules, boundaries and limitations in my life is helping me succeed.

Some participants described traits in vague terms, but terms that were familiar to themselves. They shared examples of how their experience or understanding were traits that led to success. Joanne for example shared:



Knowing where I'm going and, and, how, how my getting there. As far as about um hypothetically I have a class ever, I'm taking two classes, and I have never took two classes before in my whole entire life. Because I knew bottom line that I couldn't do it there's no way. But now since I have taken, knowing my limits, fortunately um, [...] my strategy is basically just to see that, that, that chord, you know people that are running for a race- I can see their court. And the whole issue that they're actually just finishing their race. And, I, I, could finally see that. I didn't see it before. The past ten, eleven years, I've been here and I didn't think I could make it until all of a sudden I found out that I could.

Finally, Antonio similarly to Joanne, referenced experience and insight as a personal characteristic that has helped him be successful:

Okay. Trying to find like the right way to say it. I guess when like it's like down to the wire like a deadline or whatever, everybody flips a switch and I'm able to like [...] everything I didn't see before, I'm able to like recognize it right away. So I guess that's a skill that I have to like be able to finish things on the deadline. Yeah. It's weird because not like I have particular, such a crazy amount of skills, it's just like I know what I need to do and the amount of time I have to do it and I'm just like able to do it. It's just weird.

### **Theme 5: Recommendations for Students With Disabilities**

Participants had a variety of responses when asked what advice they would give to another student with a disability who was having a difficult time in college. One of the more prevalent recommendations that emerged from the interviews was the need to connect with others. Several participants cited the importance of having key people in one's life as a means of support and guidance. Tony for example said:

...try to make sure that they [the people around you] understand the limitations, the boundaries, the issues that you have in completing assignments. If you need help, ask for help. That's really, really important. If you help to do something, ask for help. There's always help out there. If you can't, you can't. Don't beat yourself up over it, but utilize everything available to you [...] make sure that you seek help within the community that you're in, meaning the collegiate-academia community, but outside the community as well. Because there's a lot of resources for people with disabilities. Whether it be mental health, or disabilities of the mind, or disability on walking, that's basically it.

When discussing the need to connect with others as a means of support, participants tended to focus on connecting with positive people, and clearly avoiding negative people. Chelsea elucidated this point, stating: "I guess they [other students with disabilities] should stick around positive people that are not going to put them down." Chelsea also stated that there are many people who believe in stereotypes regarding people with disabilities, and those types of people will only negatively impact someone. People with this thinking "could really put your confidence down" (Chelsea). Jason similarly stated the need for students with disabilities to connect with positive people. Jason shared a story of a music teacher who told him that he couldn't play the saxophone because of his disability. Determined, Jason worked hard and eventually learned how to play the saxophone. He was proud of his ability to not only learn, but to prove his music teacher wrong. To summarize his success with the saxophone, and overcoming negativity, Jason said, "I just did what I got to do."

Another theme that emerged when asking participants what advice they would give to a struggling peer, was the need to believe in oneself. Chelsea bluntly stated, "If you don't believe in yourself, then who's going to believe in you? You have to believe in yourself first before anybody else." Joanne also discussed the importance of believing in yourself, despite obstacles. Joanne stated that it doesn't matter how slow you go, just as long as you keep going, and "you're still going to be making it no matter what." Joann added, "just because you have a disability doesn't mean you can't do it [be successful]."

Tony stated that one piece of advice he would share would be to care for one's mental and physical health. He said:

The advice I would give to a student is, understand what your disability is. Take care of yourself. That's the first and most important thing to do. Your health, your mental health is more important than anything else, okay. So make sure that your health is taken care of.

Several participants discussed the importance of having goals or a plan, and understanding how to work toward such goals. Having goals aids in being successful, as shared by participants. When discussing goals and plans, Jason stated:

...no matter how hard it is, anything, literally anything, can be accomplished if you have the determination, you put your priorities straight, and you try your best, and you have a plan, and you go with that plan fully.

Finally, some participants discussed how to be successful with a disability in more general terms. Antonio said, "I guess just finding that way where you can just learn because everyone has a different way of learning, you just have to go out and find it." Chelsea mentioned overcoming difficulties with other people. She shared:

I know there's a lot of stereotypes and they [students with disabilities] get picked on. People say "you can't do this," or, "you can't get this job because you have a disability," or this and that [...] it's important that they should go to programs that support them [...] everybody needs some type of support, no matter where they can get it from.

Tony mentioned the importance of using a smartphone to create schedules, get enough sleep, and take prescribed medication. Lastly, Joseph shared his thoughts regarding being successful with disability, stating:

You have to find time [to study]. I know it's easier said than done, but it depends on what your goals are like. You got to find out what's worth it to you more [...] Just have the ultimate goal with that picture in your head to say, 'Okay, I'm going to get through this and it's going to be a brighter road ahead.'

## **DISCUSSION**

This qualitative study sought to investigate the skills, strategies, and dispositions of students with disabilities that have led to success at a two-year commuter college. Participants in this study had self-identified as having a disability and were enrolled at BMCC. Participants also self-identified as having had at least a 2.8 GPA. Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were used to gather data and thus allow participants flexibility in their responses. Participants had various responses when asked to define success. Some participants described success within the framework of achieving academically, while others believed that one must have earned something outside of education. It was evident that participants' personal goals and desires influenced how they defined success.

The findings of this study are consistent with the literature about the impact that role models can have on an individual's academic success. Participants found support from mostly their family and other individuals in their lives. Participants spoke highly of the family who supported them over the years, sharing stories of how their actions impacted their success. It is known that family support can positively affect success outcomes for students with disabilities (Lombardi et al., 2016).

For participants who cited mentors outside of their families, they also had spoken highly of them. Academic tutors and professors, for example, had played a role in supporting some participants. While one

participant had a negative experience with a professor, that experience led to understanding how he could overcome such challenges. Thus, both positive and negative experiences appeared to have value as a means of supporting participants. Positive experiences with college staff, such as tutors, are essential elements of persistence to graduation (Markle et al., 2017). No matter the form in which a mentor exists, it is well documented that such support is critical in supporting the needs of not only students with disabilities but all students. Mentors can assist with academic success skills such as time management and can be a guide to navigating services on and off campus (Markle et al., 2017). Family mentors perform similarly, albeit within a more personal, intimate domain.

### **Implications for Research and Practice**

As the goal of this study was to both investigate the lived experiences of students with disabilities on campus and to add to the body of qualitative data within the field, several recommendations can be made based upon the findings of the study. First, participants cited the impact that certain people have had on their success. Given the results of this study, and the research in the field, further work on developing mentoring relationships on campus should happen. Mentoring programs exist in various formats and can be used to support this group of marginalized students. Secondly, participants also discussed their own strategies and dispositions for success, sharing how they overcome obstacles, doubts, and difficulties to be successful. Programs of support that help students with disabilities use their strengths to build on their skills can add value to their experiences on campus, but help lead them toward success. Often, at the college level, a variety of programs are in place to help students succeed. In addition, instructors are often provided with tips and tools that they may employ to help students; however, it is important to note that not all strategies help all students. This study focused on having students name what works for them. While this may have applications for other students, it is more important to find ways to engage students in a conversation where they can make strategies that help them. In this mode, instructors can also leverage past strategies to have students try new ones. This approach can help the instructor better prepare to work with each student. Having an open dialogue about success is likely more beneficial than simply implementing techniques, even if research-based, without student input.

### **Limitations**

Several limitations could exist with this study. The first limitation concerns the generalizability of the study's results. The population of students with disabilities is highly diverse, and students may have any number of disabilities, as well as varied life experiences and lifestyles that add even more diversity to the population. This study does not intend to discover meaning and insight that pertains to all students with a disability; instead, the goal is to shed some light on a small sample of students to inform pedagogy, student support services, and future research. Participants in this study self-reported multiple types of disabilities representing only a small fraction of possible disabilities and, thus, experiences.

Academic success is a conglomeration of multiple factors (De Los Santos et al., 2019). Therefore, the purpose of this study was not to objectively investigate academic success wholly but through the lens of students' lived experiences and subjective realities. The small number of participants and the focused nature of this study should be used only to understand one element of the complexity: academic success related to students with disabilities. Participants in this study were volunteers and perhaps had a more outgoing personality and view of their college experiences than other students. Their outgoing nature and willingness to participate may be a factor in the data collected and how it could compare to other students' data.

### **CONCLUSION**

Students with disabilities are a growing and increasingly diverse (Lombardi et al., 2016). There is an impetus to continue researching and understanding the academic and social needs of students with disabilities so that appropriate college interventions can be developed (Lombardi et al., 2016). For example, supporting and encouraging mentors and advocates can significantly increase the success of students with disabilities. Mentors can provide a wealth of advice and guidance for not only students with disabilities but

all students. Students with disabilities often experience some difficulty when transitioning to college, and having a mentor can help alleviate such difficulties (Markle et al., 2017). Supporting students' emotional needs and academic soft skills is another area for continued growth on campus. There are significant benefits for students with disabilities who attend college; they are given more employment opportunities and increased social status (Plotner et al., 2020). Therefore, it is essential to create environments and systems within colleges and universities to support the overall well-being of students with disabilities (Minotti et al., 2021). Research about students with disabilities must continue to understand better and address their unique and, at times, highly complex and nuanced needs.

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