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## Bridges to Employment for College: Graduates with Disabilities

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Running head: BRIDGES TO EMPLOYMENT

Bridges to Employment for College  
Graduates with Disabilities

By: Elizabeth E. Brake

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Submitted to the Graduate Program in Education  
at Messiah College  
in the partial fulfilment  
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Master of Education

Janet DeRosa, Thesis Advisor

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**ABSTRACT**

This evidence-based, qualitative study explored the experiences of college graduates with disabilities who are employed. The study used criterion-based analysis and examined the ways these graduates participated in internships, communicated, and the navigations in general that led directly to employment success. Data was collected from programs that resulted in successfully employed college graduates with disabilities, empirical studies, and case studies. The study ends with a consideration of the findings in light of theory and implications to practice. Suggestions for future research are also made pointing to the immense gaps in the literature pertaining to the process of becoming a successfully employed college graduate with a disability.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

This chapter provides an overview of evidence-based research that explores the experiences of college graduates with disabilities who are employed. The study will examine the ways these graduates participated in internships, communicated, and the navigations in general that led directly to employment success. Chapter one begins with a narrative of how I became interested in the study. This chapter then goes on to provide a background to the problem and brief overview of the literature on employment of college graduates with disabilities, and the purpose and research questions of the study. It also provides an overview of the methodology and a consideration of the limitations of the study. The chapter ends with definitions of various terms.

#### **Forging a Research Topic: A Narrative**

My interest in this topic comes from the fact that I have a disability. I knew that people with disabilities usually struggle to find full time employment, but I never thought I would be one of them. I have always beaten the odds. As far as employment goes however, that has not been the case. I completed my undergraduate degree at Messiah receiving a bachelor of arts for an individualized major in education and family services. The individualized major was suggested because I had always wanted to teach, but there were concerns about my ability to manage my own classroom because of my disability. With my individualized major I hoped to be a teacher's assistant in a special education classroom. When I could not find full time employment after a year, I decided to get a master's degree earlier than planned. I got a master's in rehabilitation counseling from Edinboro University of PA. I graduated in 2011 with the hopes

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of being an assistant director of disability services at a college or university. After being out of school for almost four years and having no luck finding full time or part time work in my field, I decided to get a second master's degree. I figured this would help get me the experience employers thought I seemed to lack.

Scripture says that God knows the plans He has for us, that they are plans for good and not for disaster. We are reminded in Romans 8:28 that God causes all things to work together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purposes. Isaiah 55: 8-9 says: “<sup>8</sup>My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts,” says the LORD. “And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. <sup>9</sup>For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.” God's plans for us are supposed to be bigger and better than we could ever imagine. It was a step of faith to pursue a second master's degree. After all, I thought I would have been employed years ago, not still going to school. Yet, I still trust that God has a plan for me that is bigger and better than I could imagine.

In the fall I will be completing my internship at Messiah in the disabilities services office. This was not my plan, but it is God's plan. I have always wanted to be back at Messiah in a professional capacity, but I never thought it would be now, I thought it would be years down the road. I am excited to see what doors are open after the internship. I want to research and write about bridges to employment for college graduates with disabilities because it is part of my story. I also want to write about this because I think very few people are aware of this topic and it is important that they know.



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**Contextualizing the Problem**

My topic is entitled “Bridges to Employment for College Graduates with Disabilities.” It is well documented that individuals with disabilities are employed less often than those without disabilities (Conyers, Koch, & Szymanski, 1998; DeLoach, 1992; Frank, Krast, & Boles, 1989; Gillies, 2012; Madaus, 2006; Oswald, Huber, & Bonza, 2015; Test, Bartholomew, & Bethune, 2015; Thompson & Hutto, 1992). Kessler Foundation & NOD (2010) indicated that employment is the largest gap between people with and without disabilities. All people surveyed were 18-64 years old. There were 645 people with disabilities surveyed. Of those 645, only 21% of them are working full or part-time. To break it down even more, only 14% are working full-time while 7% are working part time. For the 564 people without disabilities surveyed, 59% of them are working full-time or part time. Broken down, 48% of those surveyed without disabilities are working full-time and 11% are working part-time. Put simply, 21% of people with disabilities are working part-time or full time compared to 59% of people without disabilities. This is a difference of 38 percentage points. The study also states, “The 38 percentage point difference in employment between people with and without disabilities is reasonably consistent with the June 2010 Bureau of Labor Statistics employment-population ratio data, which shows a 45 percentage point difference between people with and without disabilities, 16 years and over” (p. 40).

More recent data indicates that the employment rate for people without disabilities is 74.2% compared to 34% with disabilities (Houtenville, Brucker, & Lauer 2014).

The employment rate of college graduates with disabilities is 50.6% while the rate for graduates without disabilities is 89.9% (Nicholas, Kauder, Kerpcio, & Baker, 2011). Oswald, et al. (2015) reported that the employment rate for college graduates with disabilities is 52.7% compared to 83.7% for those without disabilities. The rates of employment for individuals with

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disabilities are even lower depending on the type and severity of the disability (Kessler Foundation, 2010; Oswald, et al., 2015). It should be noted for many of these statistics it is unclear if the percentage reported is full time or part time working status.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Given the lack of literature pertaining to new trends in employment for college graduates with disabilities, the primary purpose of this evidence-based research is to explore the experiences of college graduates with disabilities who are employed. The study will examine the ways these graduates participated in internships, communicated, and the navigations in general that led directly to employment success.

### **Research Questions**

The main research question for this study is: What are key factors in employment for college graduates with disabilities?

The sub questions are:

- What navigations in general are significant for college graduates with disabilities who have experienced employment success?
- How do internships impact employment success for college graduates with disabilities?
- What communications are necessary for employment success among college graduates with disabilities?

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### **Methodology**

My methodology is qualitative as I will explore the experiences of college graduates with disabilities who have succeeded in landing a job and are successfully employed. Qualitative research provides insights into a problem and uncovers trends. Qualitative data is collected using group discussions and individual interviews (Wyse, 2011). Even though this study uses research collected by other individuals, these individuals used group discussions and individual interviews to collect their data. With qualitative research, data are also analyzed by themes (McLeod, 2008). For these reasons, a qualitative approach will serve this research best.

Case studies, as well as empirical and conceptual research, regarding college graduates with disabilities who are successfully employed will be reviewed. Each study will be examined to find common themes that seem to make these graduates successful. Therefore, I will be using a criterion based analysis to conduct the study. A criterion based analysis “holds each work up against another and finds it more or less acceptable” (Cooper, Hedges, & Valentine, 2009, p. 4). The three criteria used in the analysis are as follows: navigations, internship significance, and communications.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study uses secondary data. This in itself is a limitation because “the available data are not collected to address the particular research question or to test the particular hypothesis” (Cheng & Phillips, 2014, p. 374). A second limitation to this study is that it is unclear if the statistics reported indicate full-time or part-time working status. This could make the reported percentage of college graduates with disabilities who are working seem high if it includes both part-time and full-time working status. It is important to highlight the fact that the percentage of individuals working full-time is actually very low. A third limitation is that there may be

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common themes found that make college graduates successful in obtaining employment that do not fit the criteria used in the study.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)**- “Federal civil rights legislation in the United States that provides legal protection from discrimination to people with disabilities and ensures equal access to employment and certain other services” McNaughton, Light, & Arnold, 2002, p. 68).

**Disability**-“A physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities” (A Guide to Disability Rights Law, 2009, para. 2). There are 13 categories of disability: Autism, deaf-blindness, deafness, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, or, visual impairment (including blindness). For in depth definitions of each of these go to NICHCY - National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (2012). (See website link on reference page).

**Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)**-Gave children with disabilities the right to receive an education in public schools.

**Internship**-Experience that takes place during an individual’s college career that is similar to the tasks they will complete when working. For the purposes of this paper, the term field placement may also be used.

**Communications**-Things such as disclosing disability and requesting accommodations. It also includes interpersonal skills such as confidence, self-motivation, flexibility and leadership.

Interpersonal skills are interactions that occur between people.

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**Navigations**-Anything that has to happen before employment can occur. Things such as setting up personal care or transportation for employment or knowing how employment impacts disability benefits

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

This study is an examination of the factors that led to successful employment for college graduates with disabilities. The research is an exploration of the experiences of college graduates with disabilities who are employed. Given the lack of literature pertaining to new trends in employment for college graduates with disabilities, the primary purpose of this evidence-based research is to explore the experiences of college graduates with disabilities who are employed.

This chapter is divided into four main sections. The first section reviews programs and the elements within those programs that have helped college graduates with disabilities become successfully employed. The second section reviews empirical studies of successfully employed college graduates with disabilities. Section three covers case studies of college graduates with disabilities who are successfully employed. The final section discloses findings not related to empirical or case studies, nor are they specific to any particular program, but relevant to the purpose of this thesis.

### **Partnering Programs**

Research shows that the number of students with disabilities attending college is increasing (Conyers, et al., 1998; Gillies, 2012; Hadley, 2011; Oswald, et al., 2015). Since this is the case, measures must be taken to help these individuals become successfully employed. In recent years, agencies are arising throughout the country partnering with corporations and creating internships for college graduates with disabilities. Statistics are showing that these work-based internships are proving successful and that the interns are being hired. These programs include Emerging Leaders, Career Opportunities for Students with Disabilities

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(COSD), and Lime Connect (Nicholas, et al., 2011). There have also been programs implemented at various universities to improve employment outcomes for college students with disabilities. One was at a mid-sized state university in the Midwest (Oswald, et al., 2015). The other was at Mississippi State University (Thompson & Hutto, 1992).

### **Emerging Leaders**

A program entitled Emerging Leaders “partners with businesses to help them access talented, career-minded college students with disabilities... [and] provides paid summer internships for highly qualified undergraduate and graduate students with disabilities at major employers throughout the United States” (Nicholas, et al., 2011, p. 36). Part of the mission of the program is also to help the businesses that participate think about hiring someone with a disability. Emerging Leaders reaches out to corporate businesses to establish internship sites and reaches out to schools so that students are aware of the program. There is an application that must be completed to be accepted into the program and telephone interviews are completed as well. Once an applicant is accepted into the program, they are matched with one of the established internship sites that fit their interests. Once the intern accepts the offer, “Emerging Leaders provides support prior to, during, and following the internship for both the intern and the employer” (Nicholas, et al., 2011, p. 65).

Interns in this program also take part in a three-day leadership development conference. During this conference they learn about teamwork, respect, professionalism, other work-related skills, and strategies for effectively managing disabilities in the workplace (Nicholas, et al., 2011). These strategies include things such as how to ask for accommodations in the workplace or how to disclose a disability to an employer. Conyers, et al. (1998); Gillies, (2012)

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Greenbaum, Graham and Scales (1996); Oswald, et al. Bonza, (2015) also found that these things were instrumental in college graduates with disabilities obtaining employment.

Emerging Leaders has produced results. From 2001-2009, the program placed 105 students in internships and 19 of them were given jobs at the various internship sites in the program. A survey was conducted and 90% of those who responded were employed at least part time. Data also shows that many of the individuals who participate in the program are employed within a year. The program has been found to provide the interns with contacts for their personal and professional development. In addition, the program gives each intern insight into their personal career objectives. Emerging Leaders also benefits the businesses and internship sites that participate in the program by helping them realize that people with disabilities are good employees (Nicholas, et al., 2011).

### **Career Opportunities for Students with Disabilities (COSD)**

This was started at the University of Tennessee when the director of career services there felt that they were not effectively supporting students with disabilities. COSD encourages stronger partnerships between career and disability services on college campuses. Their mission is to “improve the employment rate of college students and recent graduates with disabilities on a national basis” (Nicholas, et al., 2011, p. 69). They are now developing a portal that gives career services people on campuses strategies to help college graduates with disabilities. The organization also has a website where individuals with disabilities can post their resumes and employers can post job openings. All of the employers who post job openings on this site have an interest in hiring individuals with disabilities. This knowledge gives individuals with disabilities peace of mind, as many are afraid of how employers will respond to them (Gillies, 2012; Nicholas, et al., 2011).



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Another service COSD provides is summits. These bring together as many as 60 individuals with disabilities and employers for networking and sharing information. Summits are not career fairs, but endeavor to make individuals with disabilities more comfortable when talking with employers. They also help educate employers about recent graduates with disabilities. Finally, summits also remind employers to include individuals with disabilities in their recruitment plans (Nicholas, et al., 2011).

As far as how effective COSD is, unfortunately there has been no actual data collected. There are however success stories told by career services workers from various universities. Employer representatives from places like Walmart and SunTrust share stories of how they have recruited individuals with disabilities as a result of COSD (Nicholas, et al., 2011).

### **Lime Connect**

This program has elements similar to that of Emerging Leaders and COSD. The mission of this program is “to add demonstrated value to the global corporate community by unlocking economic potential through employment of people with disabilities” (Nicholas, et al., 2011, p. 74). It has networking events to connect students with disabilities to companies in the United States and Canada. The individuals that come to these events are recruited through disability and career services offices on college campuses. Similar to COSD, these events are not career fairs, but give individuals a chance to speak with employers. Companies at these events are interested in hiring individuals with disabilities, so like COSD, this gives the individuals that attend peace of mind. Just like Emerging Leaders, Lime has businesses that serve as internship sites and the interns will go on to become employees for the various companies. Unfortunately, there is no data to prove if Lime Connect is successful (Nicholas, et al., 2011).

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### **University Program**

Similar to the findings of COSD in Nicholas, et al. (2011) Oswald, et al. (2015) found that very few students with disabilities were using the career services offices on college campuses. Others found that students without disabilities got employment information from the Career Office on campus, while students with disabilities did not (Frank, Karst, & Boles, 1989). Moreover, only 26% of two to four year colleges provide career services aimed at college students with disabilities (CSD). In addition, very few career services employees knew how to help students with disabilities (Oswald, et al., 2015). These authors describe services put in place by a disability services office “at a midsized state university in the Midwest to improve previously unacceptable employment outcomes of CSD prior to and after graduation” (Oswald, et al., 2015, p. 376).

Services for this program are put in place by many people. First and foremost is the disability services office vocational support coordinator (VCS). The VCS also works with a professional development organization that specializes in helping CSD. Other key players in providing services for the program are the career services office, the state vocational agency, and other community or campus organizations if necessary. The VSC coordinates everything and tries to tailor to each student’s needs (Oswald, et al., 2015). Since it takes that many people to run the program, one would hope there are many participants.

The campus serves students mobility and sensory impairments as well as multiple disabilities. Students can choose to participate in the program offered by career services and may stop the program at any time (Oswald, et al., 2015). Now that the participants have been discussed, we will turn the specific elements of the program.

The first and most important element of the program is communication skills as this is paramount to getting a job. Even after getting a job, many times to get a promotion, good

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communication skills are a key factor. The program encourages students to do practice interviews, take communication courses, participate in class discussions, and public speaking (Oswald, et al., 2015). All of these things give individuals practice in effectively presenting themselves to others, which is what must happen during a job interview to get the job.

A second element of the program is making sure individuals have knowledge of their disability. This includes things like arranging housing, personal care, and transportation (Oswald, et al., 2015; Thompson & Hutto, 1992). Knowledge of disability also entails knowing what kind of accommodations they will need on the job, understanding how their benefits will be impacted, and making sure they can complete all the tasks the job requires. This part of the program is also where individuals can really think about whether it is realistic for them to work full-time or part-time due to how their disability effects them (Oswald, et al., 2015).

Campus involvement is also encouraged in the program as it can develop professional skills with leadership roles students may choose to take on. These kinds of things give chances for social and self- advocacy skills to develop. In addition, any leadership roles that a student has while on campus can be put on their resume. These things can be seen as experience which is also important in landing a job. Oswald, et al. (2015) noted that field placements or internships are also important to getting that first job. Field placements and internships provide real life experience, which can, “increase opportunities in the workplace by promoting practical and flexible skills that are essential in the field” (Flanagan, Benson, Fovet, 2014, p. 1). These experiences can then be put on a resume making the individual more marketable. Resume development is also another aspect of the program at the University (Oswald, et al., 2015).

The program has been found to be successful. From 2008 to 2013, 254 CSD choose to participate in the program. Of those, 106 have graduated and 42 are employed. Two specific

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success stories are shared in the article. It is noted however that more research needs to be done to really assess the effectiveness of the program (Oswald, et al., 2015).

### **Mississippi State University**

This program was put in place by a student who was working on her master's degree in rehabilitation counseling to meet her internship requirement. The purpose of the program was to "assist college students with disabilities in the transition from college graduation into employment" (Thompson & Hutto, 1992, p. 16). There were 12 participants in this program. They either had visual or orthopedic disabilities (Thompson & Hutto, 1992).

Each participant completed an inventory to determine their individual needs to be successful in their job search. Inventories revealed anything from putting together a resume to knowledge about disability laws. Based on the inventory findings, the student and the counselor prepared an individualized plan that would address the student's needs/goals. Students were given tasks to complete based on their needs/goals, and would meet with the counselor one hour a week until all goals were met (Thompson & Hutto, 1992).

During the weekly sessions with the counselor there would be counseling, mock interviews, and would practice focusing on their strengths and ways to highlight those strengths for employers. Students who needed transportation to and from work were advised to work this out before an interview so they would convey to the employer that they were ready to work. Another thing covered in the weekly sessions was how to disclose a disability (Thompson & Hutto, 1992).

The program stressed the importance of holding a work study position or some other type of job during college and would help students find internships in their field of study. These experiences would give students a chance to present their resumes, have a job interview, and

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gain work experience which they could put on a resume. Finally, the program made students aware of the various disability laws and what their rights were as someone with a disability (Thompson & Hutto, 1992).

There is no report on the outcome of this program as far as how many students became employed after graduation. Students did report however, that the program allowed them to set their own goals and put a plan in place. It also helped them develop and improve their communication skills (Thompson & Hutto, 1992).

### **Postsecondary Access and Training in Human Services (PATHS)**

This program is offered at Texas A & M University. Its “top priority is to support individuals with disabilities in accessing post-secondary training to gain and maintain competitive employment” (PATHS, 2015, para. 3). The program has two tracks: Direct Support Professional and Child Care Professional. The Direct Support Professional track prepares participants to serve individuals with disabilities and older people to live independently, with family members, or a community setting. The Child Care Professional track enables graduates to work with kids from birth to five in a child care facility. PATHS takes one academic year to complete. The first semester is spent taking required courses. (No description of the courses is given). The program is working on adding courses on professionalism, communication, self-advocacy, self-determination, assistive technology and life skills. The second semester is a paid practicum where students learn skills for their future jobs. PATHS has graduated 59 students since 2012, 84% of which have graduated with jobs (PATHS, 2015).

### **Empirical Studies**

While several empirical studies were reviewed and considered for this paper, very few of them actually met the criteria (communications, internships, and navigations in general) to be

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included in great detail in the review of literature. In addition, there are very few studies on college graduates with disabilities and employment (Conyers et al., 1998; Gillies, 2012). Further illustrating that very few studies exist on college graduates with disabilities and employment, Aune (1992) references 40 sources relevant to this thesis, but only three pertained to individuals who had a college education.

The first study reviewed was Gillies (2012). There were 10 participants in this study, three males and seven females. They were graduates from three universities in Southwestern Ontario. Each had to have completed their degree at least six months before the interview. Participants had various disabilities: visual and hearing, learning, and physical (Gillies, 2012).

The purpose of this study was to understand the lives of graduates with disabilities as they attempted to enter the workforce. One of the research questions was “What helped or hindered the transitional process” (p. 5)? The research was conducted via interviews. The data in the study was analyzed to identify relationships among concepts but also included the actual thoughts of participants.

Four themes were found in this study: attaining meaningful employment, experiencing discrimination, disclosing a disability, and constructing an identity (Gillies, 2012). Only attaining meaningful employment and disclosing a disability will be discussed, as those are the areas applicable to this study.

This study found that even though 8 out of 10 participants were employed, very few of them had jobs in their field or jobs that matched their level of education (Gillies, 2012). This is common among graduates with disabilities (Nicholas, et al., 2011).

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Gillies (2012) also found that for many of the participants in this study, it was helpful for them to disclose the fact that they had a disability either before or during an interview. For others they struggled with when to disclose that they had a disability.

Participants of this study indicated that there are some things that would be helpful for colleges and universities to do in order to help graduates with disabilities obtain employment. These include resume writing, interviewing, and job searching, “all specifically geared to address the particular challenges faced by persons with disabilities. A transitional support worker could [also] be hired as a liaison between the university and the workforce” (Gillies, 2012, p. 13). Mentor programs, social support, and networking could also be helpful (Gillies, 2012).

Conyers, et al. (1998) conducted a study that had nine participants with physical or sensory disabilities. All participants had college degrees and were 23 to 35 years old. This was a qualitative study and the data was collected via interviews. The purpose of this study was to gain more awareness of how employed college graduates with disabilities perceived factors that impacted their career development. The findings from this study were put into three categories: establishing an occupational self-concept, launching a career, and career. For the purpose of this paper, only the findings of launching a career will be discussed (Conyers, et al., 1998).

Part of starting one’s career is having field placements or work study positions in college. Not all the participants in this study had those opportunities. One participant shared that it seemed like students with disabilities were not expected to work because their education was paid for by an organization such as the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation. As a result, they did not need a work study position. Others were encouraged by family members not to work because of how it would affect the student’s benefits, which brings me to the next finding of this study (Conyers, et al., 1998).

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Many individuals with disabilities receive some type of health care coverage or money as a result of their disability. When the individuals start to work, these benefits are taken away. Even though the person is now working and making money, there are still things that they got from their disability benefits that they need but are no longer eligible for because they are working. Participants found it important to know how the system works and how to navigate it in order to get what they needed while they were working (Conyers, et al., 1998).

Another thing this study found was that knowing how to request accommodations was important to obtaining employment. This included knowing what accommodations you need and knowing what accommodations you could ask for. Knowing how to navigate the transportation system or arrange transportation to and from work was also found to be important in obtaining your first job (Conyers, et al., 1998).

A third study was conducted by Greenbaum, et al. (1996). There were 49 participants in this study. They all had learning disabilities and had been students at the University of Maryland from 1980 to 1992. Most participants were from middle and upper class families and all but one was white. Thirty of the participants were male.

In this study participants were asked questions about employment rate and history, wages, benefits, job satisfaction, disclosing their disability, accommodations, and how their disability continued to affect their lives. This study addresses what participants feel made them successful. Data was collected via telephone interview (Greenbaum, et al., 1996). The areas of employment, disclosure of disability, and success factors will be summarized.

Thirty-five participants were employed (Greenbaum, et al., 1996). The study does not indicate if it is part-time or full-time work or if the employment is actually in the participant's field of study.



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Only nine of the study participants shared with their employer. Reasons for NOT sharing that they had a disability were: there is a stigma attached to it, less would be expected of them, or people would look at them differently. The biggest reason for not disclosing a disability was fear of not getting the job as a result. Eighteen people had this fear and many of them still did not disclose even after getting the job for the reasons previously mentioned (Greenbaum, et al., 1996).

In light of the fact that so many participants did not disclose their disability, the study suggested that it is important that employees with disabilities know their rights. These can be learned in high school, but high school and college personnel need to make sure that individuals with disabilities know their rights. It is also important that employers know the rights of people with disabilities (Greenbaum, et al., 1996).

Participants shared that they felt they were successfully employed because they knew how their disability affected them, they had a mild rather than severe disability, family support, and high socioeconomic status (Greenbaum, et al., 1996).

McNaughton, et al. (2002) conducted a study with eight participants. These individuals were all male, had Cerebral Palsy (CP), and used assistive technology to communicate (liberators, EZ Keys, and DeltaTalker). The age range of the participants was 30-57 years old and they were all employed full time.

The purpose of this study was to gather information about the experiences of individuals with CP who were employed full time and used assistive technology to communicate. Data was collected in a focus group over the internet that lasted nine weeks. A moderator would post a new discussion topic every five days. Discussion topics included anything from reasons participants felt they were successful in finding a job to frustrations with assistive technology.

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There were 10 discussion topics and participants were asked to post responses to each topic.

Six themes were found from the discussion: descriptions of employment activities, benefits of employment and reasons for being employed, negative impacts of employment activities, barriers to employment activities, supports to employment activities, and recommendations for improving employment outcomes. Supports to employment activities will be discussed, as they address the factors that helped these individuals obtain full time employment (McNaughton, et al., 2002).

The participants in this study identified several things that helped them become successfully employed. The first thing mentioned was personal characteristics. These included “strong commitment to employment, hard work, determination, persistence, and good time management skills” (McNaughton, et al., 2002, p. 67). Internships and volunteering were also found to be helpful in obtaining employment, as they helped individuals gain experience. Specific to this study, technology was instrumental in getting a job given the need of assistive technology for participants to communicate. Knowing your rights and the laws that protect you as a person with a disability is also important when it comes to employment. Arranging personal care and transportation are also keys to finding and keeping a job. Finally, networking was found to be an important element when it came to employment. This study in particular mentioned the importance of networking within the work place so you would have people to go to if you did not know how to do something (McNaughton, et al., 2002).

The last study that was reviewed was one by Adelman and Vogel (1990). There were 89 participants in this study. All of them took part in a Learning Opportunities Program at Barat College for at least a semester from 1980 to 1988. Of the 89 participants, 56 actually took part in

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the study and 36 actually graduated from college. The 36 participants that actually graduated from college are the focus of this study.

The purpose of this study was to determine if the employment outcome was better for the students who participated in the Learning Opportunities Program. Data was collected via questionnaires that asked about school attendance and work experience since leaving college. The questionnaires were sent in the mail and participants who did not respond were called and had the option of responding over the phone (Adelman & Vogel, 1990).

While it is not clear if the employment outcome was better for the students who participated in this program, it is clear that the skills they learned in the program helped them to be successful at work. In the program, they learned how their disability affected them and how to compensate for it. As a result, they compensate in the same way at work. For example, one of the participants in the study is a kindergarten teacher who has trouble with written language. As a solution to this problem, she talks to parents over the phone instead of sending notes home with children (Adelman & Vogel, 1990). It seems that the Learning Opportunities Program helped individuals learn how to be successful at their jobs in spite of their disability. This in turn suggests that the program also helped them become successfully employed. It should be noted that even those who participated in the program who did not have a college degree were successfully employed.

### Case Studies

#### **Greatbatch: Success through Networking**

Lee Greatbatch is a blind professional speaker. It is assumed that he has a degree because his time at the University of Worcester is mentioned. Things that helped him to be successful while getting his degree are also mentioned. He brought up the fact that the same things that helped him to succeed in getting his degree also helped him become employed. One example he gave was arranging people to help him with his various needs (Use My Ability, n.d.).

Lee also talked about the importance of networking. He discussed how he spoke with the assistant director of disability services at Worcester about what he does. Lee felt the using some of the assistant director's knowledge would improve his success for his business. He also mentioned how he surrounded himself with or networked with other business people to improve his chances of success (Use My Ability, n.d.).

A final thing that has helped Lee to be successful is having interpersonal skills. He mentioned how you get to interact with many different types of people and how you can use those experiences later. An example given was you spoke with somebody high up in business. Later, when you are in a similar situation you will be able to draw from that previous experience and know how to interact with that person. He also gave the example of body language. Since he is blind, he cannot see facial expressions or read other body language to check for understanding in a conversation. Therefore, when someone gets silent, he knows he has to rephrase something (Use My Ability, n.d.).

#### **Carrington: Passion and Commitment in Career Success**

Laura Carrington is a paraplegic and uses a manual wheelchair. She moved from England to Australia in 1982 to start working on her degree in education. She was an elementary teacher for 10 years. In addition, Laura was a qualified French teacher and started

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the Languages Other Than English Program in her school. She has also worked in the Regional Office of the Grampians Region in Ballarat, in Student Wellbeing and Disabilities. Laura has been employed with the department of Education and Training for 20 years (Myriad Consultants, 2005).

Laura attributes her success to her passion and commitment to her work and students. She feels that her continued success as well as the success of other individuals has to do with various laws that have been put in place for individuals with disabilities. An example is Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, which allows students with disabilities to be in schools and get an education. Laura also mentioned how, in the field of education, people now seem more receptive to hiring people with disabilities. Finally, she suggested that a supportive manager is important to employment success. This is someone who will support your accommodations and create a positive work environment (Myriad Consultants, 2005). Although she does not say it, she implied that communication is important, communicating her needs as well as the needs of other people with disabilities.

### **Other Important Findings**

There were some findings related to successfully employed college graduates with disabilities that were not programs, empirical studies, or case studies. First, Gillies (2012) found that having a disability in and of itself was helpful in getting a job. This was due to the fact that employers got incentives such as tax breaks for hiring someone with a disability. Employers also felt it made them appear to value diversity if they hired someone with a disability. While participants were happy to have a job, some were concerned that they were hired just because they had a disability rather than their ability to do the job (Gillies, 2012). This was the only source reviewed that found having a disability was helpful in becoming employed.

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One other interesting finding was that things put in place to help individuals with disabilities throughout their college career actually hurt them in finding employment. This included disability benefits (Conyers, et al., 1998). Another example is funding for the college education itself. Because some students with disabilities got their education paid for by various organizations, they did not need to have work study positions. As a result, they missed out on gaining experience (Conyers, et al., 1998). Participants in Conyers, et al. (1998) and Gillies (2012) expressed how there was support while they were in college, but not after.

### Chapter 3

#### Methodology

The primary purpose of this evidence-based research is to explore the experiences of college graduates with disabilities who are employed. The study examined the ways these graduates participated in internships, communicated, and the navigations in general that led directly to employment success. The main research question for this study was: What are key factors in employment for college graduates with disabilities? The sub questions were:

- What navigations in general are significant for college graduates with disabilities who have experienced employment success?
- How do internships impact employment success for college graduates with disabilities?
- What communications are necessary for employment success among college graduates with disabilities?

As the study was qualitative in nature, this chapter describes a qualitative approach and explains why it was appropriate for this research. The first section also explains why using a criterion-based analysis was a fitting way to analyze the data. Secondly, the findings of the three criteria are shared. Section three discusses findings not related to navigations, communications, or internships, but relevant to the purpose of this thesis. The fourth part of this chapter goes into my personal background and describes how I as the researcher could possibly taint the analysis with some bias. The chapter closes by discussing limitations to the research.

### **Qualitative Research and Criterion-Based Analysis**

This study was conducted using a qualitative approach, which was appropriate for three reasons. First, “qualitative research is useful for exploring phenomena that are not clearly defined” (Conyers, et al., 1998, p. 2). There is very little research on successful employment factors for college graduates with disabilities, which means it is a phenomena not clearly defined. The best way to gain insight then, is through interviewing college graduates with disabilities who are successfully employed. This brings me to the second reason a qualitative approach was appropriate for this study.

Qualitative data is collected using group discussions and individual interviews (Wyse, 2011). Even though this study used research collected by other individuals, these individuals used group discussions and individual interviews to collect their data. For example, Gillies (2012) conducted interviews to collect her data. The data in the study included actual thoughts of participants. The same is true for Conyers, et al. (1998).

A final reason that a qualitative approach was appropriate for this study is qualitative research provides insights into a problem and uncovers trends. With qualitative research, data are also analyzed by themes (McLeod, 2008). Conyers, et al. (1998) and Gillies (2012) both analyzed their data for themes.

Not only was a qualitative approach used for this study, but criterion-based analysis was also used. A criterion based analysis “holds each work up against another and finds it more or less acceptable” (Cooper, et al., 2009, p. 4). Each program, study, and case study was examined to find common themes that seemed to make these graduates successful in becoming employed. The three criteria used in the analysis were as follows: navigations, communications, and



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internships. Each study was examined for these criteria and placed in Table 1 to find patterns and themes and organize data.

### Criteria Findings

#### Navigations

Navigations are defined as anything that has to happen before employment can occur. This includes things such as setting up personal care or transportation for employment or knowing how employment impacts disability benefits.

**Determining accommodations.** There were many navigations found to be important in order to become successfully employed. One of them was accommodations in the sense that individuals must determine what accommodations they need or what accommodations work for them (Adelman & Vogel 1990; Conyers, et al., 1998; Nicholas, et al., 2011; Oswald, et al., 2015). Nicholas et al. (2011) asserted that internships were good places to “explore different accommodations” (p. 62). Conyers, et al. (1998) discussed how some individuals “were not initially aware of the options available to them” (p.7). Adelman and Vogel (1990) mentioned that in order to determine what accommodations were needed, individuals had to know how their disability affected them. Oswald, et al. (2015) implied navigating accommodations when they wrote: “The student and VSC consider individual needs in the home and at the job site. Assistive technology...need[s] to be addressed” (p. 2).

**Networking is key.** A second navigation found to be important in obtaining employment is attending networking events or conferences (Gillies, 2012; McNaughton, et al., 2002; Nicholas, et al., 2011 Oswald, et al., 2015; Use My Ability, n.d.). McNaughton, et al. (2002) discussed the importance of networking in the workplace, while the other authors discussed networking at conferences. It was noticed that Nicholas et al. (2011) implied that while at

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conferences, individuals could also work on interpersonal and communication skills. The following took place at the Emerging Leaders Conference:

While simultaneously learning about and modeling values of teamwork, respect, and professionalism, the class of 2009 incorporated numerous ideas and diverse perspectives in their case studies. Working collaboratively in small groups, students were able to practice patience and active listening while recognizing the contributions of others (64). Again, this implied that while at conferences, individuals could also work on interpersonal and communication skills.

**Knowing the law and other programs available.** According to the information in Table 1, knowing the laws and rights as they relate to employment is another key navigation (McNaughton, et al., 2002; Myriad Consultants, 2005; Thompson & Hutto, 1992). McNaughton, et al. (2002) mentioned policies participants felt provided support in their jobs such as the Americans with Disabilities Act. Vocational rehabilitation programs and other programs to help with the cost of personal care were also mentioned. Myriad Consultants (2005) mentioned how the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act has helped people with disabilities to be successful.

**Self-advocating.** Navigating personal care, transportation, and medical benefits are also key factors in becoming successfully employed. Three studies found navigating personal care important. (McNaughton, et al., 2002; Oswald, et al., 2015; Use My Ability, n.d.). Three studies found transportation crucial (McNaughton, et al., 2002; Oswald, et al., 2015; Thompson & Hutto, 1992). Three studies found medical benefits were a necessary navigation for successful employment (Conyers, et al., 1998; Oswald, et al., 2015; Thompson & Hutto, 1992).

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**Writing with expectancy.** There are still other navigations that impact employment outcomes. One of them is resume writing (Gillies 2012; Oswald, et al., 2015; Thompson & Hutto, 1992). Thompson and Hutto (1992) had students write resumes for practice. This helped them focus on their strengths and abilities and learn how to bring them out.

**Disclosure the how and when.** A final navigation factor for successful employment is disclosing disability in that one must decide how and when to disclose (Gillies 2012; Greenbaum, et al., 1996; Thompson & Hutto, 1992). Gillies (2012); Greenbaum, et al. (1996) brought out that individuals were afraid if they disclosed on an application or during an interview, they were afraid they would not get the job. Thompson and Hutto (1992) on the other hand just discussed the options available to participants as far as when and how to disclose.

### **Communications**

Communications are things such as disclosing disability and requesting accommodations. It also includes interpersonal skills such as confidence, self-motivation, flexibility and leadership. Interpersonal skills are interactions that occur between people.

**Communicating to win.** Two studies found communication itself was a factor in obtaining employment (Nicholas, et al., 2011; Oswald, et al., 2015). Oswald, et al. (2015) stated: “Generally, effective and confident communication is the cornerstone of finding employment...Once a job is obtained, retention and promotion decisions often hinge on internal and external communication” (p. 2).

Communications also includes interpersonal skills. Use My Ability (n.d.) found interpersonal skills important for employment. Examples given included reading body language and facial expressions, listening for silence, and using knowledge from past interactions.

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Communication can also include communicating your needs as a person with a disability as well as the needs of others with disabilities. Myriad Consultants (2005) found this to be important. Laura implied the effect of communicating needs when her boss stated:

It is important to have open communication and create opportunities where staff with disabilities can highlight to me [Jim] and to others how we can do better. We can always learn more and always do better...She has broken down many barriers with children and parents, and also with other agencies, particularly local government (46).

**The mock interview experience.** Two studies found mock interviews to be significant in terms of communication and employment (Oswald, et al., 2015; Thompson & Hutto, 1992). During mock interviews individuals learn how to communicate their strengths, the importance of maintaining eye contact, and body language (Thompson & Hutto, 1992).

**Disclosure equals success.** In three studies, disclosing a disability was identified as a communication as individuals were simply telling employers they had a disability (Gillies, 2012; Greenbaum, et al., 1996; Nicholas, et al., 2011). All three of these authors mentioned that there was fear of not getting a job because of disclosing a disability. Gillies, (2012); Greenbaum, et al. (1996) discussed how some individuals were comfortable disclosing disability while others were not. Nicholas, et al. (2011) brought up that internships were good places to practice disclosing a disability.

**Communicating accommodations.** Communicating accommodations is paramount to becoming successfully employed (Conyers et al., 1998; Nicholas, et al., 2011). Conyers, et al. (1998) addressed frustrations in communicating accommodations. Nicholas, et al. (2011) mentioned that internships were good places to practice communicating needed accommodations.

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### **Internships**

An internship is an experience that takes place during an individual's college career that is similar to the tasks they will complete when working. For the purposes of this paper, the term field placement is also used.

Four studies mentioned that internships were helpful to gaining employment as they provide experience and networking opportunities (McNaughton, et al., 2002; Nicholas, et al., 2011; Oswald, et al., 2015; Thompson & Hutto, 1992). Oswald, et al. (2015) discussed how internships are helpful but not required for all college students. They stated: "Although not always required by specific degrees, practicums and internships support skill development, networking opportunities, and relevant experience that can lead to job opportunities" (Oswald, et al., 2015, p. 3).

Nicholas, et al. (2011) mentioned that there are not very many programs to place college students with disabilities. These authors also said that internships "are critical to helping students with disabilities explore different accommodations, as well as provide opportunities to practice disclosing their disabilities and requesting accommodations from employers" (p.62).

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**Table 1: Employment Factors for College Graduates with Disabilities**

<b>Study</b>	<b>Internship</b>	<b>Communications</b>	<b>Navigations</b>
Nicholas, et al. (2011)			
<b>Introduction</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Cornerstone” p. 63 but few programs exist to place college students with disabilities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accommodations</li> <li>• Disclosing disability</li> <li>• Communication itself is important</li> <li>• Leadership</li> <li>• Problem Solving</li> <li>• Decision making</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accommodations</li> </ul>
<b>Emerging Leaders</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teamwork</li> <li>• Respect</li> <li>• Professionalism</li> <li>• Patience</li> <li>• Active listening</li> <li>• Recognizing strengths of others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conferences/networking events</li> <li>• Disability (Accommodations)</li> </ul>
<b>COSD</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Potential employers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conferences/networking events</li> </ul>
<b>Lime Connect</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Pipeline to full-time employment” p. 78</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Potential employers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conferences/networking events</li> </ul>
Oswald, et al. (2015)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internships/field placements helpful but not required by all majors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication cornerstone to finding employment</li> <li>• Mock interviews</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Networking</li> <li>• Resume</li> <li>• Medical benefits</li> <li>• Personal care</li> <li>• Transportation</li> <li>• Housing</li> <li>• Accommodations</li> </ul>

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(Table 1 Continued)

Study	Internship	Communications	Navigations
Thompson & Hutto (1992)	Encouraged	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mock interviews- Maintaining eye contact, body language, dress, strengths</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Benefits</li> <li>• Transportation</li> <li>• Housing</li> <li>• Resume</li> <li>• Rights/laws</li> <li>• Disclosing disability</li> </ul>
Conyers, et al. (1998)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accommodations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Medical benefits</li> <li>• Transportation</li> <li>• Accommodations</li> </ul>
Gillies (2012)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disclosing disability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resume writing, job searching &amp; interviewing tips networking, &amp; mentoring would have been helpful</li> <li>• Disclosing disability</li> </ul>
Greenbaum, et al. (1996)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disclosing disability</li> <li>• Explaining how disability affected them</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disclosing disability</li> </ul>
McNaughton, et al. (2002)	Important to gaining employment		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Networking</li> <li>• Transportation</li> <li>• Personal care</li> <li>• Rights/laws</li> </ul>
Adelman & Vogel (1990)			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge of how disability affected them (accommodations)</li> </ul>

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(Table 1 Continued)

<b>Study</b>	<b>Internship</b>	<b>Communications</b>	<b>Navigations</b>
Use my Ability (n.d.)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interpersonal skills-Reading body language &amp; facial expressions, listening for silence, using knowledge from past interactions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal care</li> <li>• Networking</li> </ul>
Myriad Consultants (2005)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Needs of the individual person as well as others with disabilities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Laws</li> </ul>



### **Other Important Findings**

While analyzing the data, there were factors of successful employment found that were not related to navigations, communications, or internships, but relevant to the purpose of this thesis. First, there were personal characteristics. These included “strong commitment to employment, hard work, determination, persistence, and good time management skills” (McNaughton, et al., 2002, p. 67). It was mentioned how it is important for people with disabilities to have these characteristics (McNaughton, et al., 2002). Myriad Consultants (2005) implied that perseverance is also important to becoming successfully employed.

Having a disability was another important factor to successful employment (Gillies, 2012). (See “Other Important Findings” in chapter 2 for an explanation). One last factor was knowledge of how to help college students with disabilities. Many career services employees admit to not knowing how to serve this population (Oswald, et al., 2015).

Other important factors to successful employment outside of navigations, communications, and internships were not the only things noticed while analyzing the data. It was noticed that the programs have specific ways they help those with disabilities land a job. For example, Emerging Leaders walks a potential employee through six vital steps to being hired. First, they connect the potential employee to a company. Second they walk the potential employee through applying for the job. The third step is encouraging the potential employee in the interviewing process. Fourth, the program initiates interning opportunities. The next thing the program does is offer conferences/training for the person to continue developing professionally. Finally, Emerging Leaders does requisitioning for accommodations. These steps seem to be vital to a successful hire, whether a "program" walks a person with a disability through these steps or the person advocates for themselves in taking these steps. If data had been

analyzed in this, other programs would have been found to fulfill several of these steps. The studies would have been found to touch on some of these steps as well.

### **Background of the Researcher**

My decision to conduct research on successfully employed college graduates with disabilities was based on personal interest in an effort to secure employment myself as someone with a disability. I struggle to see where my bias is in the sense that it was not as if I was an able-bodied employed person doing research on people with disabilities. Rather, I am a person with a disability doing research on people with disabilities. That said, there could have been some bias in agreeing positively with findings. For example, I could relate to the finding that things put in place to help individuals with disabilities throughout their college career actually hurt them in obtaining employment. I had to be careful not to insert my own thoughts or experiences into the research.

Just as I could have some bias by positively agreeing with findings, I could also have some bias by not understanding or agreeing. For example, navigating medical benefits was important to obtaining employment. Even though I have a disability, I did not understand why this was such an issue. This is due to the fact that I do not have additional medical needs as a result of my disability, so losing medical benefits because of employment does not concern me. Once again, I had to be careful not to insert my own thoughts or experiences into the research.

### **Limitations**

This study used secondary data. This in itself is a limitation because “the available data are not collected to address the particular research question or to test the particular hypothesis” (Cheng & Phillips, 2014, p. 374). A second limitation was it was not always clear if individuals had college degrees. Sometimes it had to be assumed. A third limitation was that

that there were factors found that made college graduates successful in obtaining employment that did not fit the criteria used in the study. A final limitation was the lack of research on successfully employed college graduates with disabilities. Related to the lack of research, there were some sources that could have been included, but I could not access them.

## **Discussion**

The primary purpose of this evidence-based research study was to explore the experiences of college graduates with disabilities who are employed. The first section of this chapter discusses theories that emerged from the research: The Self Theory and Iron Theory. Next, practices that could be implemented at colleges to improve the employment outcomes of graduates with disabilities are discussed. Section three addresses the gaps in this research and gives suggestions for future research. The chapter closes by describing my journey throughout this research process.

## **Implications to Theory**

### **Notion of Knowing Self**

One notion that emerged from this research is the Notion of Knowing Self. The literature indicates there is a notion that theoretically embraces the concept of "self" as being the key person in the process of landing a job as a person with a disability. This notion aligns well with the wisdom Polonius shared with his son, Laertes. In Act I of Shakespeare's play "Hamlet" when Polonius said to Laertes, who was about to depart for Paris, "Above all, to thine own self be true."

This concept of knowing oneself above all else is grounded in the idea that as one navigates the coastline of job opportunity they must determine what accommodations they need before accommodating others in their place of employment. Adelman and Vogel (1990) suggested that in order to determine what accommodations are needed, an individual must know how their disability affects them. They must know themselves. Notion of Knowing Self can also be applied when it comes to communicating accommodations. In order to communicate what accommodations an individual needs, the individual must first know what it is they need, they

must know themselves. This was seen in Adelman and Vogel (1990) when participants mentioned the need to be able to explain to employers how their disability affected them.

### **The Iron in Networking Notion**

The literature indicated that there is real value in coming together with other people of like-mind. Thus, there emerged this notion that as iron sharpens iron, as stated in Proverbs 27:17, so do people sharpen people in ways that enhance job opportunity. A similar idea is seen in Hebrews 10:25: “And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another.” Once again like-minded people are coming together. The Iron in Networking Notion also comes from Acts 2:44: “And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had.”

The Iron in Networking Notion applies to the research in many ways. Networking is when people come together in one place and share what they have. This is seen at the COSD conference or summit as part of its purpose is for information sharing (Nicholas, et al., 2011). Individuals are coming together to share what they have. The idea of sharpening or making better can also be seen at conferences. For example, the COSD conference has “presentations on disability issues and employer best practices... [and] provides a valuable opportunity for discussion between corporations and career service offices regarding recruiting strategies for students with disabilities” (Nicholas, et al., 2011, p. 71). All of these things help to make employers better by getting ideas or strategies from others. Not only do employers get sharpened at conferences, but the individuals with disabilities do as well when they get to practice active listening skills and communicating with potential employers (Nicholas, et al., 2011).

It is usually like-minded people as well. Lee Greatbatch from the case study in chapter 2 says as much as he was a business person or entrepreneurial: “mixing with people who are also

entrepreneurial was important, being with the kind of people you need to surround yourself with in order to improve your chances of success” (Use My Ability, n.d.). He was talking about networking and surrounding himself with like-minded people, the Iron in Networking Notion.

### **Implications to Practice**

Given the findings of this research, there are many practices that could be implemented at colleges to improve the employment outcomes of graduates with disabilities. There could also be professional development training for college career services personnel. This in turn would improve the employment outcomes for college graduates with disabilities.

One of the practices that could be implemented at colleges is a program coordinator for students with disabilities. Throughout the literature, several programs were mentioned. As discussed in chapter three, these programs had six steps. (See “Other Important Findings” in chapter three for these steps). It seems that if colleges would implement programs with these six steps, employment outcomes for college graduates would improve. Even if programs did not use these steps, they could use any of the elements found in the programs mentioned in the literature review (Emerging Leaders, Career Opportunities for Students with Disabilities, Lime Connect, the program at a midsized state university in the Midwest, and the program at Mississippi State University).

A program could also be coordinated using the sub-headings found in chapter 3. These include: teaching students about accommodations and the law and self-advocating to name a few. (See chapter 3 “Criteria Findings” for the full list and description of sub-headings). No matter how the program is created, it seems more universities and colleges need to create them. There is transition planning for students with disabilities from high school to college. There could also be transition planning from college to work in the form of any of the discussed programs.

Creating a program is not the only thing a college can do to improve employment outcomes for disabilities. Colleges can also make sure those with disabilities participate in internships. The literature brought out the fact that internships are vital to becoming employed (McNaughton, et al., 2002; Nicholas, et al., 2011; Oswald, et al., 2015; Thompson & Hutto, 1992). However, the literature also mentioned that internships are helpful but not required for all college students (Oswald, et al., 2015). Advisors of college students with disabilities need to make sure that even if an internship is not required by a student's major, the student takes part in an internship in order to gain experience.

A final thing that colleges could do to improve the employment outcomes of graduates with disabilities is give them the opportunity to attend conferences while they are completing their undergraduate degree. As discussed in the literature, attending conferences or networking events is another important factor to obtaining employment (Gillies, 2012; McNaughton, et al., 2002; Nicholas, et al., 2011; Oswald, et al., 2015; Use My Ability, n.d.). Even though networking may be an element in a program a college has in place, if it is not, students with disabilities need to be given networking opportunities. Personally, attending conferences was not even mentioned when I was completing my undergraduate degree. Looking back, I wonder if I had attended one if I would be employed.

Not only could colleges do things to improve employment outcomes for graduates with disabilities, career services personnel could use some training as well. It was brought up in the literature review that there are not very many colleges providing career or placement services aimed at college students with disabilities (Oswald, et al., 2015). This suggests that perhaps career services personnel need professional development training on how to effectively serve

those with disabilities. If career services employees receive training in serving this population, employment will most likely increase.

### **Implications to Future Research**

Now that my research is concluded, I can see where there were gaps or areas of void. These areas of void need to be further researched. One suggestion for future research is an updated study on college graduates with disabilities and employment as there was only one actual study found dated 2012. All other sources found were either older or not an actual study. Not only does there need to be an updated study conducted, when it is conducted the sample size needs to be larger. (All of the studies found for this paper had 8 to 10 participants and there are certainly more employed college graduates with disabilities). When the new study is conducted, it also needs to be clear whether the individuals have college degrees. This was not always clear during this research and sometimes had to be assumed based on context clues.

Another area for future research would be the whereabouts of the program participants from Emerging Leaders, Career Opportunities for Students with Disabilities, Lime Connect, the program at a mid-sized state university in the Midwest, and the program at Mississippi State University. These programs did not have a 100% success rate in helping graduates with disabilities obtain employment. It would be interesting to research where the individuals are that were not successfully employed after the program and what help they are now receiving if any. Future research could also be conducted to see how these programs have changed and if their employment outcomes have increased as a result. Some of the programs did not even have outcome data, so obtaining this data could be another area for future research.

Given the lack of research on employed college graduates with disabilities, I have included a list of additional resources for future research. (See Appendix A).



## Epilogue

When I began this research on factors that result in successful employment for college graduates with disabilities, I expected to find that internships and networking would be key factors. I did find that they were, but what surprised me was the vast amount of other factors that were important as well. For example, there are so many navigations to consider in order for a person with a disability to become successfully employed: transportation, personal care, and housing, just to name a few. While I knew these were things that individuals must consider upon accepting a job (assuming they had to move), I never considered them factors to successful employment per se.

Though I never thought of housing, transportation, and personal care as factors for successful employment, I can speak to the fact that these things indeed must be navigated and it is challenging to do so. At the present moment, I am less than three weeks away from beginning my internship. In mid-April I started making calls to begin the process of setting up personal care and transportation. It is now the beginning of August and these things have yet to be finalized. Finding accessible housing was a challenge as well, but I have been successful.

There were other times during my research I found I could relate to some of the stories I read. For instance, Conyers, et al. (1998) spoke to a participant who expressed that students with disabilities were not expected to work because their education was paid for by other organizations. Although it was not that I was not expected to work, the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation did pay for my first master's degree. As a result, I chose not to take a graduate work study position because it was not financially necessary. I also figured that the academic work would be time consuming and challenging enough in and of itself. I did not want to add the stress of a work study position if it was not necessary. Looking back though, I think I should have taken a work study position as it would have given me something to put on my resume.

Now that this research has been completed there are many things I will take away from it to use in my future professionally and personally. Professionally, I will encourage colleges to have programs in place that connect college students with disabilities to potential employers. Perhaps I can even be a program coordinator thus, creating a job for myself. I will encourage and try to find conferences for undergraduate students with disabilities to attend while they are still in school, giving them networking opportunities.

Personally, I will take away that there are a vast amount of things for college graduates with disabilities to navigate in order to become successfully employed. Some navigations that even I as a person with a disability, was not aware. As I conclude this paper, I am hopeful for what is to come for me. I am a few short weeks away from beginning an internship. I will also be presenting at a conference in the fall. Both of these things have the potential to help me obtain employment. I am confident now more than ever that I will be employed when I complete my degree in December.

## Appendix A

### Additional Resources for Future Research

AAPD summer internship program (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.aapd.com/summer-internship-program/>

Association of Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) <https://www.ahead.org/>

Davis, P. A. (2009). *Quality of life of people with disabilities: Stories of successful adults*.

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What can you do? The campaign for disability employment. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.whatcanyoudocampaign.org/blog/index.php/about/>

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