



Faculty Members' Perceptions and Experiences of Working with Online Students with Disabilities

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

Limited attention has been given to faculty members' perceptions and experiences relating to working with online students with disabilities, even though they are the ones with whom students must interact most to access knowledge and have fair opportunities to demonstrate their learning; therefore, this study was guided by two research questions: What are the perceptions of faculty members relating to working with online students with disabilities? What are the experiences of faculty members relating to working with online students with disabilities? One hundred thirty faculty members (81 part-time, 49 full-time) at a private, not-for-profit, online university that primarily granted graduate degrees participated in a survey, responding to closed- and open-ended questions. A generic qualitative design and thematic analysis were employed. Most faculty members reportedly wanted to be helpful to students with disabilities but were unwilling to do anything differently and/or did not always know how or feel equipped to do so. They expressed a need for more information about both each student's unique needs and evidence-based practices to support these students' success. Confirming those of previous researchers, these findings suggest that faculty members should be given the necessary means and opportunities to focus their professional development efforts and resources on adjusting their instructional, engagement, and assessment strategies to be more inclusive of online students with disabilities. Moreover, they should be supported by their institutions and encouraged to engage proactively with online students with disabilities, collaborating with professionals in the disability services office to determine how to support these students effectively.

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According to Verdinelli and Kutner (2016), due to the presence of numerous obstacles at traditional graduate programs, students with disabilities are increasingly choosing to enroll in online graduate programs; however, they tend to have a lower graduation rate than students without disabilities. At the same time, many of the available student persistence models do not consider the unique needs of online students with disabilities, leaving those who are expected to support these students with limited information and guidance. For students with disabilities in online programs to have equal access to course instruction, materials, and evaluation, faculty members must be willing and able to provide accommodations (Lefler et al., 2025; McCarron, 2020). Despite the potential for greater access and inclusion for people with disabilities offered by online learning (Anderson et al., 2024; Gullo, 2022; Kent, 2015), limited scholarly attention has been given to faculty members' perceptions of and experiences with working with online students with disabilities, particularly at the graduate level (Mullin et al., 2021), where increasingly greater levels of independence are expected. Based on current research on the topic, students at brick-and-mortar institutions and/or the undergraduate level have often reported their views on faculty members' perceptions as opposed to the faculty members themselves reporting (Anderson et al., 2024; Huss & Eastep, 2016; Lund et al., 2023; Pérez-Esteban et al., 2023; Phillips et al., 2012), leading to questions about the accuracy and completeness of the body of knowledge.

Given that faculty members' beliefs about teaching and learning are likely to affect their teaching behaviors (Brinthaup & Eady, 2014), there have been calls for additional research on faculty members' perceptions of and experiences with working with online students with disabilities (Guilbaud et al., 2021; Hsiao et al., 2019; Hunt et al., 2014; Pérez-Esteban et al., 2023; Phillips et al., 2012; Wynants & Dennis, 2017). Understanding faculty members' perspectives and experiences is critical because they are the implementers of accommodations. That is, if faculty members are unwilling or unable to implement accommodations, those accommodations might not have their intended effect. Discovering the details of faculty members' perceptions and experiences associated with working with online students with disabilities can lead to enhanced student experiences and outcomes (Kim & Kutscher, 2021; Makwembere, 2021). To begin to address some of the methodological gaps in the existing research, the following research questions guided this study: (a) What are the perceptions of faculty members relating to working with online students with disabilities? (b) What are the experiences of faculty members relating to working with online students with disabilities? In answering these research questions, it might be possible to support faculty members at all levels in implementing accommodations more effectively, which might lead to better experiences and outcomes for online students with disabilities.

Nevertheless, individuals' perceptions and experiences do not exist in isolation. According to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems model, individuals are influenced by interconnected environmental systems, including their immediate surroundings and direct interactions (microsystem); interactions between different microsystems (mesosystem); formal and informal social structures (exosystem); cultural ideologies, attitudes, and social conditions (macrosystem); and changes over time (chronosystem). These systems shape individual behavior and growth through ongoing interactions. In the context of this study, faculty members are embedded within and interact with multiple larger systems, including the students whom they teach, the school and university at which they work, and the society in which they reside. These systems both influence and are influenced by faculty members' perceptions of and experiences with working with online students with disabilities. In addition, faculty members are at different stages, personally and professionally, with varying histories, for example, in their knowledge of and experience with disability, number of years teaching both in general and online, experience working with students with disabilities in person and online, and education and training in working with students with disabilities in person and online (Gullo, 2022). All these characteristics can and often do influence their current perceptions and experiences; therefore, it is important to consider these various system levels when examining these phenomena and discussing how they can inform efforts to increase faculty members' willingness and ability to implement accommodations, which might improve the experiences and outcomes of online students with disabilities.

SETTING

This research was conducted at a completely online, private, not-for-profit, graduate-focused university. The university employed a one-to-one model, meaning that the size of every class was one. The length of each course was either 8 or 12 weeks. All faculty members held a doctoral degree. Learning occurred both synchronously and asynchronously. Students generally took one course at a time. Rather than having a term-based structure, the university had weekly course starts. At the time of this research, approximately 16,516 students were enrolled.

RESEARCH METHOD AND APPROACH

Given the limited research on the topic and the exploratory nature of the research, a qualitative methodology was employed.

DATA COLLECTION TOOL AND PROCEDURE

In preparation for data collection, approval for this study was requested and granted in April of 2022 by the Institutional Review Board of the university in which the research took place. The approval process was done online via a document in which the researchers presented details about the problem under investigation, the purpose of the study, the research questions, as well as the instrument chosen to gather the views of the faculty participants. Given its relevance, the work of Phillips et al. (2012) served as the foundation for this research. Permission was obtained via email from Dr. Amy Phillips to adapt their instrument to be more appropriate for use at the university, where the Qualtrics survey was conducted and included questions informed by a comprehensive literature review. Similar to the original instrument, the questions in the instrument used in this study were divided into three sections: Participant Information, Perceptions of Accommodations, and Course-Specific Accommodations. The first and third sections included fixed-response questions relating to faculty members' teaching and accommodation experiences. The second section included open-ended questions about their perceptions of working with online students with disabilities. The instrument, which took approximately 15 minutes to complete, is included in Appendix A.

An email was sent to all 607 faculty members at the university inviting them to participate in the online survey. The invitation contained information about the study's purpose, as well as statements regarding the confidentiality of their responses and their right to withdraw from the study without any negative consequences. Two weeks later, a reminder email was sent to those who had not yet responded, and the survey was closed two weeks later. The first page of the questionnaire included details about the purpose of the study, nature of participation, potential risks and benefits, and confidentiality measures as well as a statement that participation was voluntary. Participants indicated their informed consent by clicking the "I Agree" button prior to proceeding with the electronic questionnaire. Only the researchers had access to the responses on Qualtrics, which did not provide any identifiers about the faculty members surveyed.

SAMPLE

Of the 607 faculty members at the university, 130 completed the survey instrument (21.45% response rate). Minimal demographic data were collected to protect confidentiality. For a complete depiction of the characteristics of the faculty members who participated in this study, see Table 1.

The majority of the faculty members (62.3%) worked at the university part-time, and the greatest proportion of them taught in the School of Education (33.57%) and at the doctoral level (45.14%). On average, these faculty members reportedly had 9.72 (SD = 7.13) years of online teaching experience and were currently working with an average of 2.13 (SD = 1.78) students who they knew had a disability. When asked to indicate all the ways they were made aware of the students' disabilities, 105 (53.30%) selected the disability services office, 82 (41.62%) selected the students themselves, and 10 (5.08%) selected "other."

CHARACTERISTIC	<i>n</i>	%
Employment status		
Part-time	81	62.3%
Full-time	49	37.7%
Teaching level ^a		
Undergraduate	5	1.95%
Certificate	21	8.17%
Master's	95	36.96%
Post-Master's	20	7.78%
Doctoral	116	45.14%
School		
Education	47	33.57%
Social and Behavioral Sciences	42	30%
Business	28	20%
Health Sciences	8	5.71%
Technology	6	4.29%
Undergraduate Studies	5	3.57%
Graduate School	3	2.14%
Law	1	0.71%

Table 1 Participants' demographic characteristics.

^aFaculty members could select all degree levels as well as schools in which they taught.

ANALYSIS

To analyze the qualitative data, Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis was employed. Two of the authors/researchers (TL and VD) manually coded the responses. They read responses line by line in search of patterns of information before creating categories and, ultimately, themes. All disagreements were resolved through discussion involving all four researchers until a consensus was reached. As all the researchers have personal experience with disability, an active process of reflexivity was used throughout the data analysis. Such exercise forced them to come to terms with unearthed themes that did not correspond to their individual reality, thus allowing them to learn from these new insights.

FINDINGS

As previously stated, faculty members' perceptions and experiences of working with online students with disabilities do not occur in a vacuum. On the contrary, these faculty members simultaneously influence and are influenced by other systems with which they interact directly and indirectly. These systems include the *microsystem* (i.e., individuals and settings with which they have direct interactions), *mesosystem* (i.e., the connections between microsystems), *exosystem* (i.e., individuals and settings with which they indirectly interact), *macrosystem* (i.e., broader social influences like norms, laws, and values), and *chronosystem* (i.e., life events and stages). For this reason, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model, beginning at the individual faculty member level and extending to the macrosystem level, was used to organize the theory generated based on patterns across the faculty members' responses in this study.

Findings showed that faculty members were generally eager to support the learning of online students with disabilities; however, most were not always willing to make adjustments to ensure that these students received adequate support. There did not appear to be differences by degree level. Nevertheless, some faculty members, mostly those with part-time employment status, did not share this desire to support online students with disabilities through the implementation of accommodations. They indicated that their doing so was not an expectation of their job, cited the lack of compensation for any additional work, reported that they believed that some students are "gaming the system," and shared that they did not believe that their providing accommodations was preparing online students with disabilities for "the real

world.” Ultimately, five distinct groups were identified: (a) those who supported the idea of their providing accommodations who believed that they were equipped to provide them, knew what to do, and did it; (b) those who supported the idea of their providing accommodations who believed that they were equipped to provide them and knew what to do but did not do it because of perceived systemic barriers; (c) those who supported the idea of their providing accommodations who believed that they were equipped to provide them but did not know what to do; (d) those who supported the idea of their providing accommodations but felt they were not equipped to provide them; and (e) those who did not support the idea of their providing accommodations. Those faculty members who expressed a desire to support these students often described emotional reactions when they were unable to do so as effectively as they would have liked.

MICROSYSTEM

The following themes relate to the *microsystem* dimension of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model (1979), which reflects the direct experiences of individuals with specific phenomena as well as their views and positionality in response to events.

Faculty Members’ Exposure to Disability and Empathy

Several personal circumstances seemed to awaken stronger feelings of empathy in some faculty members toward students with disabilities, which led to more willingness and/or ability to offer accommodations. Rather than simply their number of years of general instructional experience, the extent of faculty members’ previous education, training, and insight relating to working with students with disabilities was important. Those with an earned degree in special education reportedly felt more equipped to work with online students with disabilities. Furthermore, faculty members with prior education and training in working with students with disabilities were reportedly more willing to provide accommodations. Moreover, faculty members with previous education, training, and experience relating to working with students with disabilities were more likely to recommend training focusing on accommodations and modifications for faculty members who do not have as much education, training, and experience. In addition, faculty members with a loved one with a disability reportedly felt more equipped to work with online students with disabilities. A part-time (PT) faculty member teaching master’s students in the School of Education explained, “This is not the first time I have dealt with students with disabilities, so my support is all in. I have a family member with disabilities, so I work harder to help.” Those with previous experience relating to working with students with disabilities were also generally more willing to provide accommodations to students with disabilities or even all students. In particular, those in the School of Education highlighted the importance of differentiating instruction to meet the unique needs of all students.

Faculty Members’ Personal Ethics

At the same time, faculty members who reported a personal desire to promote equity and justice in higher education and, ultimately, their profession were reportedly more willing and able to provide accommodations. A full-time (FT) faculty member teaching doctoral students in the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences shared that they were “Very glad when students have an accommodation. I feel like they have better odds for success. The accommodation feels like a way to ‘level’ the field for students before they even begin a course (i.e., they aren’t beginning the course at a substantial disadvantage).” Whereas this desire was seemingly more frequently expressed among faculty members in the School of Education, it did not appear to be more common among those with a relevant earned degree or personal experience with disability.

Students’ Disability Disclosure

Faculty members focused on students and their interactions with them to a limited extent, usually when describing barriers that they faced in supporting online students with disabilities. Most often, due to the sensitivity of the topic and concerns for legal requirements to protect the confidentiality of medical information, they indicated that they expected students to have an awareness of and proactively communicate their specific needs with the faculty member, as they did not know how to initiate these conversations. At the same time, several faculty

members noted that few students disclose having a disability. A full-time (FT) faculty member teaching master's, post-master's (EdS), and doctoral students in the School of Education shared, "I have not had many students self-identify, which is typical based on my experience in higher education." Consequently, a full-time (FT) faculty member teaching master's and doctoral students in the School of Business reportedly believed that "we probably underestimate the number of students that actually need [accommodations]."

Disconnection from the Disability Services Office

Due to a perceived lack of appropriate support for both them and the students, many faculty members expressed their frustration with the university's disability services office. The overall perception was that once the faculty member was informed about a student's disability status, there was no follow-up process that reflected an effort to collaborate on behalf of the student. An FT faculty member working with master's and doctoral students in the School of Business shared, "I believe there are probably some technology or support tools that would help me better assist students. I have expressed my concerns that we are not finding all the ways to help students reach their goals." Further, the perceived lack of information from the office reportedly left these faculty members "in the dark" and required them to engage in "guesswork" or "revert back to one brush for all."

Many of these faculty members called for a stronger relationship between the faculty and disability services office. A PT faculty member teaching master's and doctoral students in the School of Business explained, "It seems that once a disability has been established and a course extension accommodation has been made, it falls into the lap of faculty to figure out the next steps. There needs to be a closer working relationship with the disability services office and suggestions from that office on how a student can best be supported." However, some faculty members identified what they believed should be limited to the disability services office's involvement. According to an FT faculty member teaching master's students in the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences, "There are rules for how the accommodations are to be administered according to the law. All faculty should be made aware of these rules and should be expected to follow them. If a faculty member feels that exceptions should be made to further 'level the playing field,' then they should be allowed to do so. The [disability services office] should not be allowed to make that decision for faculty members. It's their job to be sure we are doing what the law requires, not to dictate how we teach."

Unclear Institutional Expectations and Guidance

For the most part, faculty members cited factors within the university and their related interactions that impacted their willingness and/or ability to support online students with disabilities. Whereas a few faculty members seemingly felt certain that their job was only to teach the course content and not "manage students," most faculty members described a lack of clarity regarding university expectations about their role in supporting online students with disabilities relative to those of students, the disability services office, and other university departments, which created confusion and inaction. A PT faculty member teaching students in the School of Undergraduate Studies shared, "I feel fairly well equipped to help students with disabilities, but I don't feel like I know a lot about the support available to them at [the university] or the expectations on me to create alternative content or adapt my content for their needs." An FT faculty member teaching master's, certificate, and doctoral students in the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences stated, "I am happy to accommodate students in whatever ways I can, but I also am concerned sometimes that the expectations of students to be accommodated are out of alignment with realistic expectations of my duties as a faculty."

In particular, many faculty members expressed a desire to learn more about the specific steps they should take to support each student. A PT faculty member teaching master's, certificate, and doctoral students in the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences explained, "I understand the student should have the ability to oversee the amount of disclosure, if any, and I don't ask. But there have been a few students that I felt I should have been told or at least guided by someone in terms of how best to help. My impression is that *the advisors always know, so why are faculty not looped in?*" Several faculty members stated that they believed that academic

advisors should be asking online students with disabilities about their unique learning needs and telling them about disability services.

Relatedly, many faculty members offered suggestions for “workarounds” that would allow them to be more helpful to students without violating legal requirements, most of which involved personalized, just-in-time support. Numerous faculty members suggested placing “vital resources for student success at [the] faculty’s fingertips” (FT faculty member teaching master’s and doctoral students in the School of Health Sciences). According to a PT faculty member teaching master’s and doctoral students in the School of Business, “Perhaps if we are given a student that needs special help, we should be trained in how to provide that help...on an individual basis.” An FT faculty member teaching doctoral students in the School of Social and Behavior Sciences stated, “In the absence of telling faculty outright what the disability is, [the disability services office] could ask students who apply for the accommodation to indicate what kinds of things help them and share that with the faculty...For example, if a student has a visual impairment, perhaps the notification can be accompanied with [sic] a note saying what the student prefers or does best with (for example, prefers written feedback over video, or similar).” Relatedly, an FT faculty member working with master’s and doctoral students shared, “This may be a pipe dream; however, when I receive an email telling me that a student has accommodations, in addition to receiving that email, it would be great to have a link to some teaching resources related to the student’s specific disabilities.”

Lack of Institutional Incentives

Faculty members also frequently cited a lack of necessary resources, including time and compensation, to support online students with disabilities, who often need support beyond what faculty members can provide. They explained that they have to be extra thoughtful to remember updated due dates and take extra steps like submitting a grade change because the technology has not caught up. They added that many students with extra time do not follow the extended due dates associated with their accommodation, requiring the faculty member to adjust them once again. Many of them emphasized the inconvenience associated with adapting their practices. This was especially true for PT faculty members, who emphasized that they were not compensated for the additional weeks in an extended course and any increased quantity and quality of support offered to online students with disabilities. A PT faculty member teaching master’s, certificate, and doctoral students in the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences shared, “Based on a few less-than-desirable experiences I have had, I typically feel hesitant about teaching [online students with disabilities], especially as a part-time faculty [member]. I have found that often a student with a disability tends to need more of my time for which I am not compensated.”

Both PT and FT faculty members seemingly agreed that it was not appropriate to have the same expectations of PT and FT faculty members, as the latter “have a greater capacity to serve.” For this reason, several of them suggested that online students with disabilities might only work with FT faculty members. A few faculty members (nearly all in the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences) suggested that only a small pool of professors work with all online students with disabilities, although others in the School of Education rejected this idea. A PT faculty member teaching master’s, post-master’s, certificate, and doctoral students in the School of Education stated, “One of my ‘pet peeves’ is for teachers to assume they can’t work with students with disabilities because they are not ‘special education’ teachers. Differentiation is the key. For training purposes at the post-secondary level, I think we just need to realize that all students have different needs, and we must be willing to differentiate our instruction to meet their needs as we identify them. [The university] provides a plethora of resources to assist students, and all faculty should be readily aware of these *resources and services*.”

Inadequate Faculty Training at the Institution

Faculty members also reported that they had inadequate professional development relating to supporting online students with disabilities, specifically on how to best support them, focusing on topics like what questions to ask and how to ask them, as well as what evidence-based strategies are most effective in promoting the success of these students. They offered recommendations regarding trainings for both faculty members and students (at onboarding/enrollment and periodically). More than asynchronous online courses, faculty members

suggested that these training interventions be engaging and interactive, for example, by including “simulations that if a student presents with this question or need, what is the best way to help them?” (FT faculty member teaching master’s and doctoral students in the School of Health Sciences) or “...activities that include role reversals followed by approaches to support students with disabilities” (PT faculty member teaching master’s and doctoral students in the School of Business). Moreover, a PT faculty member teaching master’s, post-master’s (EdS), and doctoral students in the School of Education shared, “I would include other instructors who have had lived experiences with students and also student experiences as well (as long as they are comfortable participating).”

Overwhelmingly, faculty members suggested that there should be training interventions to increase awareness of services as well as support resources to include tools and assistive technologies for students with disabilities above and beyond additional time. In addition, several faculty members recommended soliciting feedback from online students with disabilities regarding what the university is doing well and what can be improved to inform continuous improvement efforts. Moreover, several faculty members reportedly desired training on evidence-based practices (e.g., Universal Design for Learning and the American Psychological Association’s DisABILITY Resources Toolbox (DART) for Faculty and Administrators), especially relating to those disabilities that are most commonly experienced among students at the university. Similarly, faculty members noted that training events surrounding expectations and responsibilities of faculty members to provide accommodations are warranted. Multiple faculty members suggested that any guide or training detailing teaching and learning practices at the institution should include specific details about how they can be applied and adapted when working with online students with disabilities.

MESOSYSTEM

The following themes relate to the *mesosystem* dimension of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model (1979), which reflects their views of the connections between microsystems.

Bureaucratic Accommodation Processes

Faculty members mentioned university policies and practices, most frequently the “cumbersome” process required for students to access formal accommodations through the disability services office. Bureaucracy makes support for students with disabilities a discouraging process. Despite the expectation that these students proactively make their needs known, faculty members reported that many, especially those with short-term disabilities, often lack awareness of the services and accommodations to which they are legally entitled. In other words, these students seemingly were not aware that they could have taken advantage of helpful support systems. Or, at the very least, they might have believed that accommodations would only occur after enduring an arduous process to achieve them.

One-Size-Fits-All Approach to Accommodations

Faculty members also frequently lamented that the only university accommodation for online students with disabilities seemed to be extra time. Many of these faculty members noted that a “one-size-fits-all approach” is not aligned with the diversity of needs across students with disabilities and can sometimes be insufficient for students with some disabilities and/or have unintended negative consequences. An FT faculty member teaching master’s, certificate, and doctoral students in the School of Business stated, “While extra time is the most common accommodation, I feel uninformed of other solutions. The awareness of extra time seems to slow students’ progress more than the disability itself.”

MACROSYSTEM

The following themes relate to the *macrosystem* dimension of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model (1979), which reflects broader social influences like norms, laws, and values.

Ableism

Potentially influenced by ableism, some faculty members reportedly believed that providing accommodations to online students with disabilities was not reflective of and, therefore, did

not adequately prepare these students for the “real world.” A PT faculty member teaching post-masters and doctoral students in the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences stated, “I have mixed feelings [when I am notified that a student has an accommodation]. We will grant a degree to that student, suggesting to society that this student met all the expectations. The other students get the same degree, but when it comes to ‘accommodations’ in the real world, all industries don’t allow for accommodations. A deadline is a deadline.”

Fears of Fraudulent Claims of Disability

Some faculty members explained that they believed that some students were “gaming the system.” Confronted with media reports of the growing incidence of scamming, particularly in the online environment, some faculty seemed hesitant to believe a student’s claimed need for accommodations. A PT faculty member teaching post-masters, certificate, and doctoral students in the School of Business shared, “In certain circumstances, [an accommodation] is needed; however, I do believe some students use minor issues that a lot of people suffer from to gain more time when it is not truly needed.”

Stigma of Disability

Contrary to their colleagues who hesitate to believe when a student discloses a disability, some faculty noted that students only disclose a disability if they have a genuine need for an accommodation due to the stigma often associated with disclosure. According to a PT faculty member teaching master’s and doctoral students in the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences, “In my experience, most students do not want to ask for accommodations unless they really need them...they do not want to be labeled. I strive to make sure that students with disabilities are provided the support they need and that they should not be concerned or ashamed.” Relatedly, several faculty members described the harmful impacts of the stigmatization of disability. An FT faculty member teaching master’s, certificate, and doctoral students in the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences stated, “I have had a few students who felt that receiving accommodations was somehow ‘cheating,’ and they just needed education about stigmas.”

DISCUSSION

Consistent with the findings of previous research (e.g., [Collins et al., 2019](#); [Pérez-Esteban et al., 2023](#); [Phillips et al., 2012](#); [Svendby, 2020](#)), overall, the majority of faculty members in this study reported positive attitudes toward the presence of students with disabilities in their online courses. However, in alignment with the findings of [Hong \(2015\)](#) and [Parsons et al. \(2023\)](#), a few faculty members reported unfavorable attitudes. Although most of the participating faculty members expressed a desire to be helpful to these students, they admitted not always knowing how or feeling equipped to do so effectively. Those with formal education or training in special education or who had a loved one with a disability were exceptions. It is unclear whether the experiences of the latter caused them to feel more willing and able to provide accommodations or whether these individuals already possessed these traits, in addition to a greater amount of empathy, which influenced them to seek out a profession in education.

[Kutscher and Tuckwiller \(2019\)](#) and [Anderson et al. \(2024\)](#) found that online students with disabilities regularly encountered both positive and negative attitudes from faculty members, which influenced their willingness to approach faculty members about their needs in the future. [Anderson et al. \(2024\)](#) also noted that building positive relationships between graduate students and instructors is critical for student success in the online learning environment. Correspondingly, the faculty members in this study reported myriad (and sometimes conflicting) emotions and motivations in association with their working with online students with disabilities. Patience, compassion, sympathy, curiosity, uncertainty, nervousness, frustration, and distrust were all cited, often by the same faculty member. Some faculty members matter-of-factly stated that they were required to provide accommodations to online students with disabilities by external forces (i.e., laws), whereas others expressed an innate desire to do what they believed was right and fair. Many faculty members indicated that they viewed accommodations as necessary to “level the playing field” by increasing the likelihood that students with disabilities have a fair and equal opportunity to succeed.

The wide range of disabilities with which students present in courses can generate feelings of frustration in faculty members when they feel overwhelmed by their responsibilities and unable to offer a quality educational response (Collins et al. 2019). Previous researchers (e.g., Betts, 2014; Giroux et al., 2019; Hsiao et al., 2019; Jackson, 2013; Pérez-Esteban et al., 2023; Svendby, 2020; Wynants & Dennis, 2017) have argued that faculty members might feel uncomfortable working with students with disabilities because they lack knowledge and an understanding of specific natures of disability, a contention that was supported by the findings of this study. According to Bunbury (2018), faculty members might feel distrustful when working with students with disabilities because they feel obligated to discern the veracity of the students' reported needs; this was also reported by some faculty members in this study. In particular, PT faculty members were overwhelmingly more likely to voice their perception that accommodations were granted too liberally. Giroux et al. (2019) argued that faculty members need to overcome such skepticism; when they appear positive and approachable, students with disabilities feel more secure and included.

Huss and Eastep (2016) reported that faculty members identified time constraints as well as a lack of sufficient incentives (e.g., compensation) as barriers to ensuring that their online courses are accessible to students with disabilities, which they viewed as being beyond the parameters of their regular duties. Similarly, many faculty members in this study emphasized that working effectively with online students with disabilities required them to invest more time and effort, for example, to diversify instruction and adapt course materials. According to Bartz (2020) and Langørgen et al. (2018), these additional requirements can be associated with negative attitudes among faculty members toward students with disabilities. Although the findings of this study do support this notion to some extent, some faculty members reported that they used inclusive methods and made adaptations to meet the needs of all students with whom they work, regardless of their disability status, as was found by Bunbury (2018) and Lledó et al. (2020).

Phillips et al. (2012) found that most instructors at one brick-and-mortar university reported that they either did not have or were not sure they had the knowledge, technology, and support to handle student requests for online accommodations. Conversely, nearly all the faculty members in this study reportedly felt somewhat or completely equipped to work with online students with disabilities. However, most of them desired to learn and/or further develop their skills. Simply receiving a notification of the accommodation from the disability services office often left them guessing about how to best support a student with a disability. The "silo disconnection" is evident when faculty members feel they need to continue the work started by the office without any mechanisms to work in collaboration. They indicated that they wanted to know about the unique needs and preferences of such students, preferably in the documentation detailing the accommodation so that they could align their instructional and assessment practices accordingly. Additionally, the faculty members in this study lamented that extra time seemed to be the only accommodation granted by the institution and reportedly wanted to increase their knowledge of other types of accommodations available. Although most of them focused on their lack of awareness of available tools, such as assistive technologies, a few stated that they wanted to know more about effective instructional techniques. Some faculty members recommended including a link to teaching resources related to the student's specific disability in the documentation detailing the accommodation. Consistent with the contention of Yssel et al. (2016) that faculty members should be provided with evidence-based resources and instructional strategies in addition to mandatory training relating to working with students with disabilities, the faculty members in this study emphasized the need for highly relevant training for both students and faculty members (at onboarding as well as periodically as refreshers).

Regarding their role in supporting online students with disabilities, the faculty members in this study frequently highlighted the importance of flexibility and differentiation in their instructional and other practices. Nevertheless, many of them also expressed frustration relating to their perception that supporting online students with disabilities effectively requires them to deviate from their routine practices. Many faculty members stated that they did not differentiate between online students with and without disabilities, as they aimed to meet all students' unique needs and preferences. These faculty members did not seem to distinguish between accessibility needs associated with a disability (e.g., a need for an accessible PDF due to a vision impairment) and preferences of students (e.g., a preference for text-to-speech technology to

listen to course content on the drive to work). That is, they sometimes seemingly conflated “differentiation” and “accommodation,” albeit rarely mentioning altering assignments to meet the needs of online students with disabilities.

Some faculty members in this study reported taking proactive steps to understand the unique needs and preferences of online students with disabilities, such as scheduling a meeting with them during the first week of the course, but others shared that they did not. The latter reportedly did not believe that it was the responsibility of faculty members to do anything beyond teaching the course content. Some faculty members were concerned that the expectations of students to be accommodated were misaligned with the realistic expectations of faculty members. Others reported fearing that providing accommodations to online students with disabilities does not prepare them for the “real world.” Similar to the findings of Phillips et al. (2012), the faculty members in this study agreed that students need to become more aware of their responsibility to disclose their disabilities and request accommodations. Although many faculty members in this study highlighted the importance of students’ understanding and clearly communicating their specific needs, they often reported that these students rarely disclosed their disabilities (in alignment with the findings of Phillips et al. (2012) due to stigma and/or the fear that they would be perceived as “cheating.”

Many faculty members in this study indicated that it was unclear who was responsible for providing accommodations to online students with disabilities, such as making readings available in PDF; nor did they know whom they should contact for support when needed. They generally believed that the university was responsible for providing learning resources to online students with disabilities, most notably assistive technology and tutors/academic coaches. Although some faculty members were satisfied with the institutional support they received, others were less satisfied, particularly with the perceived disregard for the importance of working in collaboration with the disability services office.

IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The findings of this research can inform practices among faculty members working with online students with disabilities. Individually, they should be given the necessary means and opportunities to focus their professional development efforts and resources on adjusting their instructional, engagement, and assessment strategies to be more inclusive of online students with disabilities. Moreover, they should feel supported by their institutions and, thus, encouraged to engage with online students with disabilities proactively, working in tandem with professionals in the disability services office to determine how to support these students effectively. Through collective action, such as faculty governance, faculty members can inform the continuous improvements of policies, practices, and procedures at their institutions, such as those relating to compensation and the process of being notified that a student needs one or more types of accommodations. This way, universities can facilitate faculty members’ meeting the unique needs of online students with disabilities rather than serving as barriers to their doing so. At the same time, supporting online graduate students with disabilities requires cooperation and collaboration from students, faculty, and the higher education institution (Anderson et al., 2024; Banks, 2019).

At universities offering online courses and programs, the three-tier system of “training” described by Phillips et al. (2012) can be expanded. For the bottom tier, universities can require faculty members to engage in meaningful professional development, at onboarding, periodically, and on an as-needed basis. Such opportunities could focus on the areas highlighted in this study, including faculty expectations and responsibilities, available accommodations and resources, effective communication strategies, and evidence-based practices relating to working with online students with disabilities. As recommended by participants in this study, training should be active and engaging (as opposed to asynchronous online courses) to include, for example, simulations, role reversals, success stories, and narratives of the lived experiences of online students with disabilities and faculty members who have been helpful to and supportive of them. Training must focus on (a) expectations and responsibilities of faculty members, (b) available accommodations and resources as well as assistive tools and technologies, (c) effective communication strategies, and (d) evidence-based practices relating to working with online students with disabilities, especially those that are commonly experienced among

students at the university (based on data from the disability services office). At the same time, just-in-time support must begin when faculty members are made aware that they are working with an online student with a disability. Moreover, these students should be given opportunities to provide input and feedback to inform the development and continuous improvement of policies, practices, and training relating specifically to online students with disabilities.

Also fundamental, there can be a focus on dispelling myths and acknowledging the realities associated with providing accommodations to students who need them. For the top tier, academic advisors and disability services office staff members can have conversations with students about their accommodations and other unique learning needs and preferences at or near the time of disability disclosure. The faculty members in this study emphasized that they desired easily digestible, comprehensible, and highly relevant and precise information about how to support each online student with a disability with whom they work; thus, this information can be shared with the faculty member along with specific resources in the official notification that the student is working with the disability services office. Beyond faculty training, universities can also consider ways to ensure that faculty members are adequately supported when working with online students with disabilities (e.g., workload reduction, teaching assistants, collaborative work with the disability services office, and assistive technology).

LIMITATIONS

These findings should be considered in light of the study's limitations. First, it captured faculty members' perceptions and experiences at one online institution primarily granting graduate degrees; therefore, the degree of transferability is limited. Second, although all faculty members at the institution were invited to participate in the survey, those who chose to respond might not have been representative of the larger population. Specifically, the faculty members who volunteered to complete the questionnaire might have had stronger (positive or negative) perceptions of and/or engaged in different practices while working with online students with disabilities than the population as a whole. Third, given that a survey approach was used to collect the data, it was not possible to probe faculty members' responses for greater detail and/or clarity, so critical details might have been missed. Fourth, as all the authors, including the two coders, both worked or studied at the university and lived with disabilities themselves, despite the open discussion of their biases, it is possible that their beliefs, values, and affiliations at the university influenced the findings. Fifth, because the data were self-reported, it is possible that the faculty members provided what they perceived to be socially desirable responses.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study showed that the majority of faculty members were eager to support the learning of online students with disabilities; however, many were not always willing to do anything different to ensure that these students were provided with adequate support for various reasons, including lack of related training, insufficient time and inadequate compensation. These findings confirmed some of those reported by Phillips et al. (2012) and added insights to provide a fuller picture of faculty members' perceptions of and experiences with working with online students with disabilities. The findings of this study can significantly impact the effectiveness with which accommodations are implemented and their intended effect. In addition, these findings have numerous implications for higher education institutions seeking to improve experiences and outcomes not only for online students with disabilities but also for the faculty and staff members who support them.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the university at which the research was conducted, but restrictions apply to the availability of these data. They were collected following approval for the current study; therefore, they are not publicly available. However, the data are available from the authors upon reasonable request and with the permission of the university.

This study is linked to the following SDG(s): Quality education (SDG 4), Reduced inequalities (SDG 10), and Peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16).

ADDITIONAL FILE

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Appendix A.** Researcher-developed open-ended questionnaire used in this study.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55982/openpraxis.17.3.859.s1>

ETHICS AND CONSENT

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the university's institutional review board.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS (CRediT)

Tara Lehan: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Zoann Murphy: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Vera Dolan: Formal analysis, Investigation, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Lisa St. Louis: Validation, Writing – review & editing. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript OR The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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