**Addressing Accommodation Barriers in Higher Education: A Qualitative Study of Faculty Experiences and Recommendations**

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**Abstract**

This study aimed to explore the challenges and experiences of professors in accommodating students with disabilities in higher education. The objective was to identify the barriers that hinder the implementation of accommodations and develop an action plan to help professors follow accommodations more efficiently. The study was motivated by the recognition that faculty play a critical role in facilitating academic success, retention, and financial solvency by creating a welcoming learning environment for students with disabilities. However, negative attitudes towards individuals with disabilities may result in problematic communication and anxiety that affect students' classroom success and willingness to seek further assistance. The study sought to address this research gap and contribute to a better understanding of the barriers that hinder the achievement of equal access and participation in higher education for students with disabilities. The study was guided by four research questions, namely: (1) What are the most common barriers that professors face when fulfilling student accommodation requests? (2) How do professors perceive disability accommodations? (3) How do professors’ perceptions of disability accommodations impact their willingness to provide difficult accommodations? (4) What kind of support and resources do professors need to fulfill accommodation requests for students with disabilities? The study used a qualitative approach, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 4 professors from various disciplines at a large, public university in the United States. The study analyzed the data thematically, and three major themes emerged: (1) Challenges Faced by Professors in Accommodating Students, (2) Communicating Effectively and Making Decisions, and (3) Creating Inclusive and Accessible Learning Environments. The findings indicated that professors face several challenges in accommodating students with disabilities, including a lack of direct training by universities in accommodating students with disabilities, a lack of clarity in the accommodation letters provided by the SAEO, and a lack of awareness of the resources available to them and their students through SAEO. The study concludes that creating an inclusive and accessible learning environment for students with disabilities requires the involvement of all higher education professionals, not just disability support service providers. By identifying the challenges that professors face, this study contributes to a better understanding of the barriers that hinder the achievement of equal access and participation in higher education for students with disabilities. The findings of this study could help inform policies and practices in higher education institutions to better support disabled students and create more inclusive learning environments.

*Keywords:* disability, postsecondary education, higher education, self-advocacy, accommodations, support services, graduation rates, invisible disabilities, faculty, retention, academic success

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**Theoretical Framework**

Disability is a result of the interaction between bodily function and environmental barriers leading to limitations in activities and social participation (Fernández-Gámez et al., 2021). Individuals who are limited in one or more major life activities are classified as disabled (Frymier & Wanzer, 2003). Disabilities can be visible or invisible (Frymier & Wanzer, 2003).

The number of postsecondary students with disabilities has increased due to improved access to schools and new laws such as the Higher Education Act 2008, IDEA, and ADA (Buss et al., 2015; Fernández-Gámez et al., 2021). In the past three decades, the disability population has increased significantly, with 23% of students with disabilities enrolled in 2-year postsecondary schools and 11% in 4-year postsecondary schools (Buss et al., 2015). One in five postsecondary students report having a disability, including students with intellectual disabilities (Watts et al., 2023). However, the university graduation rate for students with LD and ADD/ADHD is only about 28%, indicating that the support system needs improvement (Buss et al., 2015).

Although young adults with intellectual disabilities achieve higher employment rates and higher wages upon program completion, students with learning disabilities continue to face barriers to completing their postsecondary programs despite increasing entry rates (Hansen et al., 2017). Young adults with learning disabilities have difficulty graduating, with only 2% of high school graduates with LD graduating from four-year colleges and universities ten years after high school (Murray et al., 2009). Additionally, youth with disabilities are less likely to pursue postsecondary education, stay enrolled, and secure employment (Lindsay et al., 2018). Despite laws providing for equal access to university education, students with disabilities do not graduate at levels proportional to students without disabilities (Fernández-Gámez et al., 2021).

Financial challenges, disclosing disabilities and asking for accommodations, inadequate transition supports in high school, finding suitable programs, accessibility and transportation issues, and discriminatory attitudes are common challenges to attending and completing postsecondary education for youth with disabilities (Lindsay et al., 2018). Students who do not feel supported are at risk of lower academic performance and higher dropout rates (Murray et al., 2009). The availability of support within postsecondary contexts is crucial to the success of students with disabilities (Murray et al., 2009). Providing adequate support and accommodations for students with disabilities is critical for retention and completion of postsecondary education (Lindsay et al., 2018).

There are significant differences between the k-12 and postsecondary educational environments regarding supports and services for students with disabilities. In the k-12 environment, support is prescribed for students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) (Buss et al., 2015), whereas in the postsecondary environment, students with disabilities are expected to self-advocate by self-disclosing to initiate the process of qualifying for services (Buss et al., 2015). Additionally, college students experience stress, frustration, and a sense of being overwhelmed due to various factors, including physical demands such as the environment, which can create distractions that cause anxiety and sensitivity to students, as well as physical or mental conditions that require medications with side effects, leading to fatigue and difficulty concentrating (Hong, 2015).

Self-advocacy skills are critical for the successful transition of students with disabilities to postsecondary institutions (Shivers, 2021). Self-advocacy refers to the ability to express one's wants and needs, understand legal rights, and communicate needs for services. It starts with an awareness of personal and academic strengths and limitations, an understanding of one's disability and associated challenges, and knowledge of the appropriate adjustments necessary to support one's needs (Shivers, 2021). Unfortunately, many students lack this knowledge and awareness, which often results in inadequate support and hindered academic success.

Incoming college students with disabilities often lack self-advocacy skills due to a lack of training and opportunity to practice self-advocacy at the secondary level (Shivers, 2021). Although support services for students with disabilities on college campuses exist, many students with disabilities fail to register or self-identify for the disability support services (Shivers, 2021). According to Hansen et al. (2017), there are more students with learning disabilities than documented due to the considerable number of students who choose not to disclose their disability or seek accommodations.

Students with physical or mental conditions have a desire for independence and self-reliance but may feel burdened when asking for adjustments or help from instructors (Hong, 2015). They may also delay asking for help because they want to prove that they can perform like any college student (Hong, 2015). Invisible disabilities, including learning disabilities, may also lead to difficulties in communication, as individuals worry about the reactions of others and may experience shame and anxiety (Frymier & Wanzer, 2003).

**Introduction**

Institutions have a responsibility to promote academic success, retention, attrition, and financial solvency by facilitating support for students with disabilities (Shivers, 2021). Faculty play a critical role in effecting change and creating a welcoming learning environment for students with disabilities (Fernández-Gámez et al., 2021). Murray et al. (2009) found that faculty also influence students' decisions to seek additional support. It is the role of all higher education professionals, not just disability support service providers, to provide support to students with disabilities (Shivers, 2021).

While most faculty show positive attitudes towards supporting the inclusion of students with disabilities (Fernández-Gámez et al., 2021), some studies have reported negative or mixed attitudes among instructors (Frymier & Wanzer, 2003; Kuo et al., 2020). Faculty perceptions can significantly impact the success of students with learning disabilities in postsecondary education (Murray et al., 2009). Negative attitudes towards individuals with disabilities may result in anxiety and interpersonal distance among able-bodied instructors, who may view disabled students as more difficult to teach and less intelligent (Frymier & Wanzer, 2003). In some cases, faculty members may assume problematic roles such as "avoider" or "rejecter" when interacting with students with disabilities (Hart & Williams, 1995).

Students with disabilities may report greater dissatisfaction with interactions due to their professors' anxiety (Frymier & Wanzer, 2003). They may also experience communication problems with professors due to perceived unfair advantages (Frymier & Wanzer, 2003). Effective communication between teachers and students is crucial for the learning process, and problematic communication can negatively impact learning (Frymier & Wanzer, 2003). Students with disabilities need to interact with their instructors to negotiate accommodations, and their classroom success depends on their instructors' willingness to make accommodations for them (Frymier & Wanzer, 2003). Negative reactions from faculty negatively affect students' willingness to seek further assistance, while positive reactions encourage greater willingness to seek future help (Murray et al., 2009). Negative encounters with faculty members also create significant barriers, and students often feel singled out by their teachers and peers once they reveal that they have a disability (Hong, 2015). As a result, students with disabilities may attempt to avoid interaction with their professors altogether (Frymier & Wanzer, 2003).

While there are numerous studies exploring the barriers and experiences faced by students with disabilities, very few have been conducted to understand the experiences and challenges faced by professors when teaching students with disabilities. The objective of this study is to shed light on the thought process behind and potential barriers that professors face when fulfilling an accommodation request. This study aims to identify key themes and develop an action plan that can help professors follow accommodations more efficiently. By identifying and modifying the barriers that faculty encounter when granting student accommodations, the overall experience of disabled students in higher education can be improved.

This research problem is significant as it addresses an area of research that has been overlooked. By understanding the perspective of professors and their decision-making process, this study can identify potential solutions that can improve the experience of disabled students in higher education. Additionally, the findings of this study could help inform policies and practices in higher education institutions to better support disabled students and create more inclusive learning environments. By identifying the challenges that professors face, this study can contribute to a better understanding of the barriers that hinder the achievement of equal access and participation in higher education for students with disabilities.

**RQ1:** What are the most common barriers that professors face when fulfilling student accommodation requests?

**RQ2:** How do professors perceive disability accommodations?

**RQ3**: How does professors’ perceptions of disability accommodations impact their willingness to provide difficult accommodations?

**RQ4**: What kind of support and resources do professors need to fulfill accommodation requests for students with disabilities?

**Methods & Trustworthiness**

The sample for this study consisted of four professors from different departments at a large, public university in the Mid-atlantic region of the United States. To recruit participants, the researcher sent an email invitation to department chairs of selected departments, explaining the purpose of the study and requesting their support in recruiting professors. The departments included in the study were Biology, Chemistry, English, Forensic Science, Gender, Sexuality, & Women’s Studies, Mathematics and Applied Mathematics, Psychology, and Painting + Printmaking. These departments were chosen to represent a diverse range of professional identities, educational settings, and chosen practices. The aim was to include departments that varied in their disciplinary focus while also keeping the potential sample size small.

The researcher was recommended to conduct 2-3 interviews with professors from selected departments. However, recognizing the possibility that this may not be enough to fully capture the nuances of the participants' experiences, the decision was made to reach out to more departments than would ultimately be included in the study. By casting a wider net, the researcher hoped to increase the chances of finding participants who could offer unique and diverse perspectives on the topic at hand, thus enhancing the richness and depth of the data collected. In total, four participants responded and were selected to be included in the study. The final sample consisted of two faculty members from the biology department, one from psychology, and one from graphic design.

The research and interview questions were determined from a pool of questions that included questions written by the researcher, as well as questions written by Chatpgt (vers 3.23). This was done to encourage reflexivity and neutrality at every step of the research process, as questions created solely by the student researcher may carry inherent bias and possible emotional/aggressive undertones that would serve as barriers in effective communication. After obtaining informed consent from the participants, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with each participant. The interview guide, which included the informed consent, the research questions, and interview questions, were provided for potential participants in the initial email sent to the department heads.

Three of the studies were conducted using Zoom PWA, and one was conducted in-person in the professor’s office. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai (vers 3.23.0). The third transcript was not included in thematic analysis, as the audio quality was exceptionally poor, and the researcher, having an auditory processing disorder, was not able to edit the transcript to full accuracy within the timeframe. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions that focused on the professors' experiences and perceptions of disability accommodations, as well as the challenges they faced in fulfilling student accommodation requests. The questions were designed to address the research questions and to elicit detailed and nuanced responses from the participants. The researcher raised additional and clarifying questions during the interviews as needed.

To ensure the protection of participant anonymity and data security, the participants were assigned pseudonyms, and all data collected from the interviews was stored on a password-protected computer in a password-protected account. Additionally, all data shared with Chatgpt had already been edited to exclude identifying information, including course names and participant identities. Participants were provided ahead of time with a consent form that detailed the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, the interview questions, and their rights as participants. The consent form also assured participants that their responses would be kept confidential, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

The data was analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis. Qualitative thematic analysis is a research method that is used to identify and analyze themes that emerge from a given data set. It involves reviewing and coding the data, identifying patterns, and grouping similar ideas or concepts into themes. The researcher conducted in-vivo coding first, highlighting relevant quotes and noting their reactions and interpretations to the data. The researcher then utilized descriptive coding to abstract the in-vivo codes into shorter phrases that encapsulated the core concept of the quote. The researcher then input all descriptive codes into a code list, created using Google Sheets, which organized the codes into columns according to interview, so that the prevalence of codes could be compared across the four interviews. Additionally, Chatgpt was also fed the edited transcripts, and asked to perform its own qualitative analysis, provide three themes, and evidence for each interview. A full list of the Chatgpt prompts used throughout the process to promote researcher reflexivity and aid in developing the research are provided in the Appendix. The major ideas were then compared across the three interviews and consolidated into five major themes, each with 4-5 subthemes. Using the code list and the thematic analysis performed by Chatgpt, the researcher organized the codes into three main themes, each with three subthemes, and reviewed them for consistency and coherence with a fellow student researcher. Finally, the researcher interpreted the themes in light of the research questions, and developed an action plan to address the barriers identified.

**Findings**

Three major themes emerged: (1) Challenges Faced by Professors in Accommodating Students, (2) Communicating Effectively and Making Decisions, and (3) Creating Inclusive and Accessible Learning Environments.

| **Challenges Faced By Professors in Accommodating Students** | **Communicating Effectively and Making Decisions** | **Creating Inclusive and Accessible Learning Environments** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Time & Workload Constraints | Providing Clear & Effective Communication | Proactively Designing Courses for Accessibility and Inclusivity |
| Lack of Training & Resources for Faculty | Accommodation Management | Faculty Training & Support |
| Understanding Accommodation Requirements | Handling Students Who Do Not Disclose their Disabilities | Increasing Disability Representation in Academia |

**(1) Challenges Faced By Professors in Accommodating Students**

This theme covers the challenges and difficulties that professors face in accommodating students with disabilities, including challenges in understanding and implementing accommodations, lack of resources and support, and navigating the balance between accommodating individual needs and maintaining academic standards.

**(1.1) Time & Workload Constraints**

“I don't think it's ever hard for me to fulfill the accommodation requests, but I know that it's hard for other professors to fulfill it because- I mean in talking with them, they've talked about feeling overwhelmed with class sizes, the number of classes that they have to teach. I mean, as time goes on, they wanted us to teach more students, and it's just not sustainable. I think it's just like, yeah, again, it's not the student. It's the pressures that are put on the student as an external issue that they're not in control of per se.” - Participant 2

“I would say probably the speaking in front of the class again is really hard to comply with sometimes, because I don't have- I mean, so we have a lot of students in our class, which we have a lot, and I can't focus on just one person at a time when we have to break up into groups and I'm kind of overseeing everything. So, I would say that if I can't be doing dedicated personal attention to one individual, because of the accommodation then it creates a difficult scenario, but I would say it's not the accommodation that's the issue, it's that there's maybe too many students and that the support gets diluted the more students you have.” - Participant 2

“There was one time many, many, many years ago, I do not remember the specifics, but their request, I felt, was unreasonable for me to meet, and I had to talk to the, at the time it was the DSS office, and explain to them how it was not reasonable for me to make that accommodation…The unbelievable amount of extra time it would have taken me. It was not a reasonable request with the number of students that I have to teach to spend that much time on one student. If it was a smaller class, maybe, but proportional-wise, it was just totally unreasonable to do that.” - Participant 4

**(1.2) Lack of Training & Resources for Faculty**

“I would say that there are minimal resources available to faculty. One of the biggest issues I find is that students don't even know how to go about the accommodation process. I literally just had a student last week say, 'I didn't know that mental health issues could be an accommodation requests.' They thought it was like purely physical, which, body, mind, I think it's all the same, but some people categorize it as different spaces, so, thinking about that, I think that it would be really helpful if academia as a whole at the beginning of the year or at the beginning of every semester sent out information and/or regularly sent out support or had like posters, or just regular updates, because lots of times students don't even realize that what they're going through is extremely difficult and there's ways to to mitigate and or have additional support.” - Participant 2

**(1.3) Understanding Accommodation Requirements**

“Secondly, I think again, making it very public what you need for accommodations, like endless amounts of support, streamlining the process, so that if someone thinks that they need support, you have it lined out exactly what they need to be doing. I'm sure we're all aware when we're under extreme stress from scenarios we need, I mean, I teach accessible design, this is accessible design, where you are very clean about your language about your steps, it's quick and concise, and then you plaster it everywhere, essentially, because when you're distressed and everything, you can't be going through- just because you put it on a website doesn't mean that it's accessible to you, essentially, it needs to be in front of your face, and multiple times, coming through auditory processing, through verbal processing, and through visual processing, like, there needs to be a lot of ways that we're interpreting this information for the different types of learning styles that we have.” - Participant 2

“So, the only thing that I've run into recently that has been a little bit frustrating is, I've gotten some accommodations that were not specific. It just said, 'Be flexible with the student,' and I don't know what they mean by that, and students can think flexibility means that they have until the end of the semester to do something, and that's not my definition of flexibility. So, what helps is if the definitions are very clear, there's a front end and a back end, or at least a back end on things so that we know exactly what SAEO accommodation means for the professor, and that there's no ambiguity or misunderstanding between what the student needs and what the instructor needs to be doing for them. That's the only thing that I've run into recently, which is kind of weird, because it just seemed to start happening… it just, there can't be ambiguity. So, if we're getting a letter from the SAEO office, it needs to be crystal clear what that accommodation actually is and what it means and what we need to be doing, not left open to interpretation, and I'm getting some that have left it open to interpretation, and that's not good for anybody.” - Participant 4

**(2) Communicating Effectively and Making Decisions**

This theme centers around effective communication between professors and students with disabilities, and the decision-making process that follows. Professors must communicate clearly and efficiently with students regarding accommodations, and be able to address any concerns or questions that arise. They must also be prepared to handle situations where students do not disclose their disabilities or make challenging accommodation requests. Additionally, this theme covers the importance of addressing students' expectations and managing requests that go beyond accommodations.

**(2.1) Providing Clear & Effective Communication**

“So, after I receive the letter from SAEO, I send- I would say it's a somewhat generic letter- to the student saying, 'I have received your letter,' especially for my class, it's an online asynchronous class, I state that I believe the most common accommodations are already baked into the course structure, but if they come across anything in the syllabus that they think might need to be addressed, then I welcome that communication, and then close it now with, 'Hope you have a successful semester.' For my other class, which is an in-person, a more traditional course, I email the student and say, 'I received your letter from SAEO, and so I look forward to working with you to be successful in the course. Let me know if you're not familiar with how to schedule (if their accommodation is that they take the exam in a different setting), let me know if you're unfamiliar with the process for how to schedule this, and I'll be happy to assist you. I look forward to having a great semester.'” - Participant 1

“I usually have a talk with them at the beginning of the semester, but also sometimes if it's just really straightforward, I write them an email and I just say to keep in touch with me and to make sure that they're circling back if anything is not working for them, but I also extend this to just generally all of my students as well that if they need additional support, or if there's a way that we're going about something that isn't working for them, that they should reach out to me to set up a meeting and/or an email or something.” - Participant 2

“So the students will email me their accommodation letter anytime over the course of the semester, I usually get most of them at the very beginning of the semester, and then I reply to their email and explain how my course accommodations meet or exceed their accommodations or that they just don't apply due to the nature of the course, and then that's typically it. I don't see where I have any additional communication with students with SAEO compared to other students, it's not like I'll hear from them more, or that they need more from me. They seem really happy with the accommodations that are already built into the course, it's one course they don't have to worry about notifying their professor that they need something, they can just do their work and they know that they're already accommodated.” - Participant 4

**(2.2) Accommodation Management**

“I had a student who was going to be taking my course in the fall and she had a visual impairment, and she wanted to know if my course was set up in such a way that her screen reader and whatnot would work… So, I allowed her to have access to my summer course so that she could just kind of go through and click on assignments, and see how that would work with her software, whatever it was that she used to help her, and she found everything worked fine, except for this external tool that I was using. It was like a textbook company thing that they had, and she said the screen reader would not work on that. So, I contacted the textbook company and I said, 'Hey, this doesn't meet ADA standards for screen readers, and so what are you going to do about it?' and they said, 'Nothing.' I said, 'Oh, okay, well, maybe I won't use your product anymore,' but I still had to, it was still incorporated into that semester and for the fall, I couldn't actually pull out those assignments that quickly. What I did for her, she actually made it pretty easy for me, she said, 'If you don't mind, can I have my mother read that to me, and then answer the questions related to it?' So she offered me an alternative way of doing those types of assignments, and I agreed to allow her mother to read the things that the screen reader wouldn't read. Then I got rid of the textbook company external tool, and have been more mindful since then to make sure that anything that I use that's external meets the needs of anyone who might require accommodation.” - Participant 4

“ In the fall of '22, a student contacted me in August before the semester started, and she was legally blind. And so that was challenging, not because of the items that were on her accommodation letter, but this is a course about sensation and perception, and 9 of the 12 chapters are about vision. And so it made me really rethink, how do I present material in class, and how is this not going to work for a student who does not have sight? And it made me even rethink when I'm standing in front of the class and say, 'As you can see here,' because in fact, she could not see there, and it made me think about, there may be other students that have a disability with vision, even if they're not legally blind, and I've been standing there in front of class saying, 'As you can see here,' or even though I try to get the students engaged, I might say, 'Well look at this and now turn to your neighbor,' and so that was really challenging for me… And, well, it also- I couldn't do anything about it, but it really made me question the assessment. So I didn't change my exams, but I thought, 'If this person has not experienced these things in real life, is this fair to assess them on it?' So they would just be memorizing little factoids about, 'Oh, blue is 400 to 460 nanometers,' but the concept of blue doesn't mean anything to her. So in some ways, it did make me rethink, 'Does this student need to be assessed differently, because their lived experience has not allowed them to experience the world the same way as other students?' That was just a thought exercise, I didn't change how I assessed her work…Well, I would be going on assumptions about what her lived experience is, and I don't think that's a good way to go about things, and the inherent work that would be involved in swapping out questions specifically for this student. As it turned out, she was a really, really strong student and whether she was just memorizing factoids, you know, I don't know, but she performed strongly in the class.” - Participant 1

“I'm trying to think of times when it has been my discretion, and the letter is pretty clear cut of, if student does x, then I grant extension. I guess it might be somewhat discretionary. Usually I think it's they're supposed to request it 24 hours in advance, but maybe if the student has migraines or seizures or something, you know, they might not know that morning when they wake up, and so if if they said they had to seek medical help, and so couldn't get the request in early enough, I give them the benefit of the doubt. If it become becomes habitual, so in my class, they have weekly reflections that are due, and if I notice a student is routinely after it is due saying, 'Oh, with my accommodation letter, I get 48 hours extension,' I remind them of the the policy that they're supposed to follow, but even then that's built in. So that course has, when teach it in the fall, students get two buys on the weekly reflections and two buys on the homework assignments, meaning the lowest two grades are dropped. And so if a student contacts me after it's been due, I'll say, well, per your accommodation letter, you're supposed to let me know before the assignment is due. So let's just go ahead and use this as one of your buys, and that usually works. But if we get to the point that they've used up two of their buys and they have disclosed, but again, there are vast disparate impacts because not every student is comfortable disclosing that they have an ongoing medical situation and they were not able to let me know ahead of time. I will usually give them the benefit of the doubt. I just try to reinforce what the letter says should be happening.” - Participant 1

“I mean, if a student needs it, and the accommodation is there, then they can take it or not take it if they want to. I don't think it's up to me, necessarily. I think the accommodation is to support a student in what they need, and I don't think it should be up to the professor ever, to be honest. I think that a student should have more autonomy over this, and that their grades shouldn't suffer as a result.” - Participant 2

“So my general philosophy is, if I can't do it for all students, I won't do it for one, because it's not fair. So, before I make any kind of exception to any policy, in my mind I have to be willing to offer that to everyone, and if I can't go back and back-date because I've already told somebody no, then I'm not going to make an exception for someone there. So, my driving force in making decisions is to be fair to everyone across the board as best as I can.” - Participant 4

**(2.3) Handling Students Who Do Not Disclose their Disabilities**

“Well, I'm sure that there are students out there who have not gone through the steps to receive accommodations, and so those students are not being accommodated. As far as I think, I have found that most students, if they have gone through the process and have the accommodations, they're not necessarily reluctant to discuss it. I mean, there is still some stigma involved. So I think fewer students approach me at the end of class, they would be much more comfortable emailing me to discuss it or setting up a Zoom meeting, but I try to be respectful and confidential and don't call students out in class or you know, even if there's a few students waiting to speak with me afterwards. If a student hasn't brought it up? I don't bring it up.” - Participant 1

“So I never would pressure a student to disclose any disability. Majority of the time, I mean, I would say 99% of the time, I actually don't know what the actual disability is, I just know what the accommodation is, and so I've had some students who have gone through multiple semesters with other faculty and then they get to me and they're like, 'The same thing keeps happening over and over again where I'm having issues with X, Y, and Z and I'll say, 'Okay, why don't you talk with your advisor,' which I'm very lucky in design, we have an amazing advisor, who is extremely supportive, and I know that if they have a more in-depth conversation with them that it will go well most likely, or benefit them in a way that will support their academic needs, but that's not always the case.” - Participant 2

“Well, accommodations don't take effect until the day I get it. So, if they don't give me an accommodation until mid-semester, I can only start making accommodations from that point on. I can't backdate those, so they have to give me a letter for me to make the accommodations. That might have pertained to what I used to do in in-person lectures, if they had additional time on exams or whatnot, but that doesn't apply to my online classes. Now, they can give me an accommodation at the end of the semester, but they've already been accommodated all semester long anyway based on my syllabus policies.” - Participant 4

**(3) Creating Inclusive and Accessible Learning Environments**

This theme covers the ways in which instructors can proactively design courses to incorporate accommodations for students with disabilities, such as providing captioned videos or accessible course materials.

**(3.1) Proactively Designing Courses for Accessibility and Inclusivity**

“Another accommodation that I find very easy to work with in my class, because I built it into the course, that there are suggested days to turn in submissions, but they literally have until the end of the semester. So May 5th, Cinco De Mayo, is when everything is due for the course and so there's no penalties for late work. I don't want to be the one who has to make the decision whether a reason for a student not submitting the work is legitimate or not, and we know that there are cultural variations in how students disclose that, so no penalties for late work. Then students with accommodations, a common one is if they want an extension, they have to request it, I think it's 24 hours before the assignment is due, and so they don't even have to go through that step in my class, they just submit it when they have it ready.” - Participant 1

“I teach fully online asynchronous courses, and so over the past few years, the number of SAEO accommodations has really dramatically risen in my opinion, so there are a whole lot more requests. There used to be maybe one or two out of about 800 students and now I get at least 10% of that each semester, and so the number of requests has arisen, but there is a pattern to the requests. There's a lot of disability accommodations that don't apply to my class, like being able to leave the classroom or quiet setting for exams or stuff like that, those things. There are some accommodations that just don't apply to my classes, but the ones that do, like the flexibility with due dates, and additional time on exams, I just build those right into my course so that I don't actually have to make additional accommodations, which keeps it nice for the student because they don't have to notify me, and to me, it just makes it fair across the board. As far as flexibility with due dates go, typically the accommodation request is an additional two days and the student has to notify the instructor, but I always give a minimum of three extra days for everyone, so that incorporates SAEO people as well, but you know, it's not just SAEO students who need accommodation. Sometimes somebody has a death in the family, or whatever, so it just encompasses everything, and so it's typically three days or more. It depends on the type of assignment, but that's already built in. As far as additional time on exams, I just don't time exams, and they usually can take the exam over a period of days, like a week or whatever. So those are, you know, the challenges would be how do you meet that with so many students in an asynchronous course, and that's how I meet those two particular ones.” - Participant 4

“I have this semester, for all of my classes, there's one assignment type that did not have as much flexibility with due dates because I'm using an external tool, and so there was less time. They had no more than one week to submit an assignment and before the review and the feedback phases started as a pure self and peer assessment type of assignment, and they were hard deadlines there. There was no wiggle room for those, and those were the ones I got the most emails about, 'Oh, I didn't get it submitted this week.' You know, it was bad, and I get it, sometimes students just have a really bad week. So what I have done is, it was not on the syllabus, basically the syllabus says once assignments close, they close, and that's it. What I've done is created an opportunity at the end of the semester for those types of assignments to be resubmitted that last week of class, and so it was like three assignments in one class and four assignments in another, and the phases are all done in one week periods rather over a two week period, so they have a very short period of time to do it, but it's an additional opportunity. If they missed it, they can do it. So I've done that, but I've done that for everyone.” - Participant 4

“The only thoughts that I have is, I think everyone should be thinking more about how they can incorporate as many accommodations into their courses as possible from the start, to reduce the number of exceptions that they have to meet, or not so much exceptions, but it's easier. It's more inclusive. You know, these are inclusive practices if you do these things anyway, and then we just don't have to see as many accommodations being adjusted for in the courses.” - Participant 4

**(3.2) Faculty Training & Support**

“Oh, man, if I was in charge, I would hire at least two to three faculty that are disabled for every department, like either visibly disabled and/or very outspoken about disabilities. That will profoundly help the situation, although it's not, you know, visibility is definitely not everything. But if you were working with the faculty that we have right now, I would say that mandatory lectures, mandatory workshops, and not- I mean, we're required to be doing online, kind of, like, tech support scenarios, like we have these, I don't even know what you'd want to call them, but they're like these training modules of sorts that we have to go through, but like you absolutely cannot teach disability in that regard, it needs to be with people who are actually disabled. Also in training, in the workshops, we should be saying, ‘If 25% of our population is disabled, then if you are bringing in X amount of artists, then at least 25% of those artists should be disabled.’” - Participant 2

“But another really important element to this is that everyone needs to be understanding of access needs before we bring these individuals in, because we don't have separate funding for access needs, it comes straight out of the department budget, which is very problematic. So, for instance, if I have access needs, where it's costing my department $2,000 every semester for my access needs, that means that we're short $2,000 every semester, and then people start to resent that immensely. So, access needs need to be funded through a separate department that is not out of the department budget, like the school needs to create a separate fund that is large, and that supports ASL for every single public facing lecture, it supports captioning, it supports transcribing, and CART, and so on and so forth.” - Participant 2

“Another thing I'll add to that is also like, state schools and private schools have certain things that they're allowed to do, we'll call it, and there are certain accommodations that butt up against public school allowances, essentially, like for instance, and this actually happened, we had an individual we were trying to bring in to our department, and because of their disability, they needed more time to stay in town, they couldn't- the turnaround time for a visiting artist is very fast, essentially, and they needed an additional two more days, but that funding is frowned upon by public universities, because it's seen as a wasteful expense, because most people don't need four days in town to come do a lecture. But like, if I was giving a lecture elsewhere, physically, I would definitely need that much time. It partly is that we need to reframe this idea that that's wasteful spending, because it's not, but that is a state issue as well, where the state has these regulations, and so someone needs to say, 'We need to change these regulations, because this is no longer true for a lot of the people that are coming in, and it's not wasteful, it's an accommodation.' So, for the person that we were trying to bring in, unfortunately, I didn't realize that this was an issue, and so that individual just ended up doing it online and we couldn't bring them in physically, but that's a huge disservice to our students. I mean, sometimes we have to do it online, and that's fine, but having students face-to-face and seeing the materiality of things is really important.” - Participant 2

**(3.3) Increasing Disability Representation in Academia**

“Also, I think speaking to that, being more present about disability in all facets of our school. So, lecturers need to be disabled, visiting artists need to be disabled as well, artists and designers that we're talking about as examples in our departments need to be disabled. You know, majority of the people that are coming to all academic spaces are non-disabled, as I would call it, and it's a huge problem, actually, it's extremely rare that we're seeing the success of so many, either disabled faculty members or disabled individuals, who are successful in the facets of the higher careers that we're seeing in life, which is unfortunate, but we need to show that there are success stories and be uplifting those stories and showing them to our disabled students, because ultimately, disabled individuals make up a quarter of our population, probably even higher after COVID to be honest, and a lot of those individuals don't know they're disabled as well, which is even more stressful, and right now, across the board in academia, and all other realms, we're pretending like disability is a very small percentage of our population, and it's not true at all. It's a significant amount.” - Participant 2

“Okay, well, first thing is having more visibly disabled and/or engaged in disability rights, disability justice, you know, faculty that are engaged in that, I think is extremely important… I guess also changing the name of the office to just like, something very straightforward, meaning that it should be about disability. I think a lot of people are very afraid of the word disabled, but it's not a bad word, and that we need to embrace that more and across the board.” - Participant 2

**Discussion**

One of the main findings of the study is the lack of direct training by universities in accommodating students with disabilities. Professors are not fully aware of what is expected of them, or the consequences they could face if they do not follow accommodations. The only thing provided by the university are the accommodation letters from SAEO, which are made to be as general as possible to encompass all classes. Moreover, professors are not receiving clarification from SAEO until a problem or complaint arises. As a result, there is a disconnect between SAEO’s expectations for accommodations and the professor’s understanding of their role in accommodating disabilities. Additionally, professors are not aware of the resources available to them and their students through SAEO, and either dealt with problems themselves or referred students to their major advisors, who likely have little training in providing accommodations themselves.

To address this issue, we recommend that training programs for professors should focus on outlining the process for both students and professors in requesting accommodations, the ADA grievance process, how to implement accommodations, who to contact for assistive technology and other third-party accessibility needs, what is classified as a disability, what are the forms of accessibility, how to design courses according to UDL, and how to interact with students with disabilities in order to promote an inclusive and welcoming learning environment. It is imperative that professors fully understand the magnitude of their role in the success or failure of students with disabilities, and take an active responsibility in incorporating principles of UDL into their courses and improving accessibility to information.

Another important finding is the effect of class size on the professor's ability to properly implement accommodations and provide individualized learning. While professors who incorporated UDL into their courses as a framework described fewer time constraints around accommodating students with disabilities, all of the professors agreed that increasing class sizes in higher education is a significant problem and is inversely related to giving each student the individualized education they deserve. Larger class sizes interfere with the professor's ability to get to know their students and may make it more intimidating for students to disclose. Therefore, professors feel overwhelmed by the idea of having to make individualized education plans for a quarter of their students, when they may be teaching several hundred. Additionally, none of the professors were aware of other resources available to them on campus, besides the SAEO office. In fact, most of them struggled to recall the office's name and referred to it as the disability services office. It is essential to communicate more effectively with professors about the resources available to them for supporting students with disabilities.

Many professors have acknowledged that they have had limited interactions with students with disabilities. However, they have expressed that the interactions they did have with students who had accommodations vastly improved their understanding and attitude towards disability in higher education. To foster greater understanding and interaction between professors and students with disabilities, it is imperative to employ a range of methods across the university. It is not enough to leave it to chance whether a professor encounters a student with a disability through a grad student or undergraduate research assistant who happens to disclose this information. All professors should have the opportunity to work with students with disabilities in some capacity, such as a personal assistant, a lab researcher, or a teaching assistant. Such an opportunity would allow the professor to observe the struggles and triumphs of the student in a setting outside of the classroom, enabling them to develop a more nuanced and evidence-based understanding of students with disabilities. Rather than relying on assumptions or general training, professors should be able to modify their own worldview through firsthand experience. This will lead to more effective implementation of changes to support students with disabilities. Therefore, creating a system that allows professors to interact with students with disabilities in their research or teaching is critical to promoting inclusivity in higher education.

The second participant, who is a professor with a disability, emphasized the need for accurate representation and appropriate support for disabled individuals in academia. Despite VCU's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), students with disabilities are often overlooked in programs and events. To truly represent the student population, VCU must not only reflect the 25% of the population with a disability in their hiring practices, but also include and highlight disabled individuals in DEI practices, programs, celebrations, and advisory committees. Additionally, a central fund must be established to support the needs of students, faculty, and guests with disabilities, and VCU must effectively communicate its availability to all departments.

**Recommendations and Implications for Practice**

In the context of a critical qualitative research approach, an action plan refers to a systematic and strategic plan of action that is developed based on the findings of a critical qualitative research study. The goal of the action plan is to identify practical steps that can be taken to address the social, economic, or political issues highlighted by the research. The plan should include clear goals and objectives, a timeline for implementation, and a list of resources required to execute the plan. The ultimate aim of the action plan is to create positive social change by addressing the root causes of the problems identified in the research.

Overall, the action plan focuses on addressing the key themes and deficits identified in the discussion, such as the lack of direct training for professors, the effect of class size on implementing accommodations, limited interactions between professors and students with disabilities, and inadequate support for disabled individuals in academia. The solutions proposed in the action plan include developing training programs for professors, advocating for smaller class sizes, creating systems that allow professors to interact with students with disabilities, and establishing a central fund to support the needs of disabled individuals.

| **Action Plan** | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Lack of Training for Professors in Accommodating Students with Disabilities** | **Effect of Class Size and Professor Time on Providing Individualized Learning** | **Limited Interactions Between Professors and Students with Disabilities** | **Inadequate Support for Disabled Individuals in Academia** |
| **Solutions** | | | |
| Partnering with the SAEO Office this summer to create a series of video trainings on Kaltura that will later be developed into a Canvas course. | Create a presentation on the potential of using Chatgpt in teaching students with disabilities, planning to partner with the Provost to present to Professors. | Provide opportunities for professors to observe the struggles and triumphs of students with disabilities in settings outside of the classroom. | Ensure that DEI practices and programs include and highlight disabled individuals. |
| Educate professors on what is classified as a disability and the various forms of accessibility. | Encourage professors to incorporate UDL into their courses to create a more inclusive learning environment. | Encourage professors to work with students with disabilities as personal assistants, lab researchers, or teaching assistants. | Reflect the 25% of the population with a disability in VCU's hiring practices and through the guests invited to the university |
| Develop training programs for professors on how to request accommodations, implement accommodations, interact with students with disabilities, the ADA grievance process, third-party accessibility needs, and how to design courses according to UDL. | Advocate for smaller class sizes to enable professors to provide individualized education. | Create a program in collaboration with ASDCC, SAEO, OMSA, and the Office of Student Advocacy that allows professors to be paired with TAs, graduate students, interns, and undergraduate researchers with disabilities. | Establish a central fund to support the needs of students, faculty, and guests with disabilities on campus. |

**Conclusion**

Based on the analysis of the data and the discussion of the results, it is clear that there is a need for further research on the experiences and perceptions of professors when it comes to teaching students with disabilities and chronic conditions. The study revealed that there are differences in how professors perceive their responsibility to accommodate students, with some feeling overwhelmed and underprepared and others feeling confident and experienced. It also revealed that there are structural and cultural barriers that prevent professors from providing accommodations, such as lack of training and support, as well as the belief that accommodating students with disabilities is not their responsibility.

The discussions that emerged from these findings have significant implications for future research and practice. First and foremost, there is a need for increased awareness and training around disability accommodations in higher education. This can include providing resources for professors, such as workshops or online training modules, as well as creating a culture of inclusion and accessibility throughout the university. Additionally, the study highlights the importance of considering the diversity of experiences among students with disabilities and chronic conditions. This includes not only visible disabilities, but also those that are invisible or less well-known. Professors must be prepared to accommodate a range of needs and preferences, and to approach their teaching with flexibility and sensitivity.

While the findings of this study cannot be generalized to all professors, they do shed light on the complex and multifaceted nature of the issue. It is clear that there is a need for more research that includes a larger and more diverse sample of professors, as well as students, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities in teaching students with disabilities and chronic conditions. Additionally, future research should examine the impact of implementing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles in the classroom on student success, both for students with disabilities and chronic conditions and regular students.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing body of research on disability and education and highlights the need for more attention and resources to be devoted to improving the experiences of students with disabilities in higher education. The results of this study can inform the development of policies and practices that support professors in providing accommodations and ensuring that all students have equal access to education. Ultimately, by addressing the challenges and barriers faced by professors in accommodating students with disabilities and chronic conditions, we can create more inclusive and equitable learning environments for all students.

**Limitations and Future Research**

However, the study has limitations that need to be considered. One limitation is the small sample size, consisting of only four participants from three departments. Moreover, although data were collected from four participants, the third interview was not included in the data analysis due to irreparably poor audio quality. There may be variation by department in the culture around teaching students with disabilities, and therefore not every department's opinions are accurately represented. Furthermore, there is potential for selection bias, given that participants were self-recruited through email. Professors who chose to participate in the study may already hold students with disabilities in high regard and may not provide an accurate representation of the average opinions of a professor in higher education.

To address these limitations, the researcher aimed to recruit a diverse range of participants from various departments, with different professional identities and educational settings. Additionally, a rigorous data analysis approach was used to ensure that the data was analyzed systematically and comprehensively. Despite these efforts, the limitations of the study should be kept in mind when interpreting the results.

Future research needs to focus on representing professors from all diversities, walks of life, and from every department to mitigate the potential for sample bias. Communication bias may also exist, where professors who are most outspoken about providing individualized education may be more likely to use available resources and supports. Due to constraints such as time, professors may not have been able or willing to participate in the study. Furthermore, those who are struggling and overwhelmed may not have had the time to participate in student research instead of working. In addition, the departments represented in this study may have a trend towards accessibility, and more research needs to be done to explore how different departments within a university consider accessibility and practice it. Future research should also examine the relationship between implementing Universal Design for Learning standards in the classroom and student success, both for students with disabilities and chronic conditions and regular students.

**Researcher Reflexivity**

As a student with SAEO accommodations and the current President of the Association of Students with Disabilities and Chronic Conditions (ASDCC) at my university, I have had personal experiences with professors not respecting or following my accommodations, particularly with the extension accommodation. The extension accommodation is supposed to grant me 48 hours of extension on an assignment, as long as I request it at least 24 hours in advance. However, I have faced problems with professor response time, where they would wait until after the assignment was due to respond to my email, and then claim they cannot grant me an extension without letting everyone make up the assignment. This has put me in a difficult position where I would then have to seek help from SAEO, who unfortunately could not help me once the assignment due date had passed, despite my following the rules of my accommodation.

I have found that this is a strange gray area in accommodations, where the professor is deemed to have the ultimate choice in the situation. This is not typical, as the fulfillment of accommodations is protected by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and generally professors must comply with stated accommodations or face fines and other consequences. However, due to ambiguous power dynamics, my SAEO representative could not defend me when professors ignored my accommodation requests, resulting in my overall letter grade dropping in 3 or 4 classes from missed assignments. As an Honors student going into a competitive field, this is extremely frustrating, especially knowing that only one day of extension would have been enough time for me to complete the assignment. I am concerned that other students may be struggling with this same issue, without the same access to clear communication with SAEO that I have.

Serving on the board of ASDCC has given me the opportunity to serve as a direct line of communication between disabled students and the university. I have had numerous conversations with other students about accommodation, and I have found that the lack of communication or outright denial of accommodations by professors is the most common barrier to student success. While I feel like I understand the barriers of the student experience, I am also interested in understanding the process professors have to go through in order to follow accommodations.

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**APPENDIX**

| **Prompts for Chatgpt:** |
| --- |
| Continue writing this email for me please: |
| Please flesh out this research problem statement: |
| Generate 3-4 qualitative research questions from the following background information: |
| What is the initial topic of this research? |
| What are 3 subconcepts of this research? |
| Write an email template for reaching out to department heads to ask their professors to participate in this research. |
| Write 10-12 interview questions based on this research. |
| Will you write a list of keywords for this research for me please? |
| Please generate a list of key words for the research article I give you based on its introduction. Here is the introduction: |
| Can you give me some title ideas for my qualitative research paper? My current title is: A Qualitative Analysis of the Barriers Professors in Higher Education face While Accommodating Students with Disabilities and Chronic Conditions, but I feel like that doesn't fully capture the purpose of the research. The objective of this study is to shed light on the thought process behind and potential barriers that professors face when fulfilling an accommodation request. This study aims to identify key themes and develop an action plan that can help professors follow accommodations more efficiently. By identifying and modifying the barriers that faculty encounter when granting student accommodations, the overall experience of disabled students in higher education can be improved. |
| Will you please describe the main points in 10-20 BULLET POINTS for this article? This will be used later in a research paper, so please be descriptive, use full sentences, and use professional language! Here is the article section (please note it will not be considered unless it's in bullet points): |
| You did not finish writing your response. Please finish your response from where you left off at,”[paste last line or two of text here] |
| Can you please summarize what qualitative methods these authors used for their paper? Here's their methods section: |
| Please take the following bullet point summary of this article and write a list of phrases to be used in a qualitative research paper about the barriers professors face when fulfilling accommodations (please include in-text citations based on the citation given following the article title): |
| I am writing a qualitative research paper and I need help writing my introduction. I have done a literature review in the form of bulleted lists, and I need you to take the information from the bulleted lists and write a professional, cohesive research introduction. I can't give you all of the literature review information at one time, so I will give you increments and have you update the introduction accordingly.  Here is the introduction to edit:  Here is the literature review: |
| I need you to combine these two texts together homogeneously, blending any similar or duplicate sentences (while retaining the appropriate in-text citations), and drawing any relevant connections between ideas within the text. Please make sure you keep any in-text citations and give proper credit for ideas.  Here is the first text:  Here is the second text: |
| Can you please copy-edit this and make it sound more polished and professional please? The order of the information also needs to make sense. Please keep all of the in-text citations (the information will not be considered without the in-text citations). Here is the text: |
| I need to write a methodology section for my qualitative research paper. I'll give you my notes and I want you to restructure them into a professional, convincing methods section that could be used in a qualitative research article. Tell me if you want an example methods section to base your answer off. Here are my notes: |
| I'm writing the Coding process & Analysis part of my qualitative research paper and I need help expanding what I have written and making it sound more professional. I also want you to make sure that it sounds like the writing of an upperclassman college student, not a natural language processing AI. I have a tendency to write in very flowery script. I'm going to give you a sample of some of my writing, and then I'm going to give you a sample of a research paper whose style I like, and lastly I'm going to give you the piece of writing I want you to revise. Do you understand? |
| I need you to analyze the following transcript and perform a qualitative thematic analysis on it. You should have at minimum 3 themes, and you should provide exemplary quotes from the transcript underneath each theme that demonstrate the concept. Please also explain why you chose each theme and why you put each quote underneath the theme. Here is the transcript: |
| Can you give me 5 options for a theme title to choose from for the theme you just made? |
| Can you combine together themes #2 & #3 and their subthemes into one cohesive theme and rename it with something catchy accordingly? |
| I want to do a subtheme about accurate representation of the disabled community, for example, if 25% of the population is disabled, then 25% of hired professors should be disabled as well, but I don't know how to phrase it. Can you give me 5 options of a subtheme that would encapsulate my idea? |
| Okay, so, I love all of your sub-themes for this theme, but for the sake of giving a short presentation of the results, I need you to somehow incorporate the subthemes together into 2-3 subthemes that still encompass all of what the other subthemes would have said. Here is the theme and subthemes: |
| Can you rewrite this to be smaller, more easily understandable bites of information? This will be used for a poster, so it needs to be short but communicate a lot of information. Here is the text to edit: |
| Which quotes out of these do you think best illustrate the core concept of the theme and description? |
| I'm writing the discussion section for my research, and I want you to copy-edit what I have and make it sound suitable for a research presentation without sacrificing or removing any of the core substance of what I'm communicating. Here is the text to edit: |
| Please copy-edit this paragraph for me. I want it to be professional, but still creative and exuberant, and it should reflect my personal style. Here is the text: |
| Based on this discussion, I want you to develop a step-by-step action plan that addresses each major theme/deficit and provides at least one or two solutions to them. Specifically, I want you to consider the potential of using Chatgpt to increase student communication, professor communication, and to decrease the amount of time it takes to create alternative assignments & exams for students with disabilities. I want you to use a qualitative critical approach to guide your creation of the action plan. You should also clearly delineate in your formatting what problems your solutions are addressing. Here is the discussion: |
| I need help writing a conclusion section for my qualitative research paper. The conclusion should briefly restate the methods, process, framework, results, discussion, and future directions of the research while retaining the focal point of the 'So What,' of the research, i.e. why it matters. Here is the link to the project so you can read/analyze the whole thing: |
| Analyze this paper and write a research abstract that incorporates the research questions, methods, major themes, and conclusions. Please remember when you're analyzing this that the purpose of this study is to analyze and understand the barriers and supports professors in higher education face when accommodating students with disabilities, so the focus of the research is on the professors, not the students. Here is the link to the paper: |
| Given the link to access the full paper, as well as everything you've been given in this chat so far, rewrite this research abstract to its fullest potential. I want this abstract to be captivating, accurate, and to clearly communicate the purpose and results of the research. It should be something that immediately makes people want to keep reading more. Please note that the ideal length for an abstract is between 300-400 words, so your abstract should fall into that word count. Here is the link to the paper:  Here is the text I want you to edit: |
| I'm going to give you a list of citations and I need you to put them in alphabetical order and update the citation format to fit the specifications of APA 2021 or as recent as you have. Here is the citation list: |