

**Faculty Attitudes Toward Online Graduate Students with Disabilities
and the Accommodations Needed by Those Students**

Dissertation Manuscript

Submitted to National University

JFK School of Psychology and Social Services

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF Philosophy

by

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July 2025

Abstract

Guided by the critical disability theory framework, this dissertation explores the attitudes of faculty members towards online graduate students with disabilities, the appropriateness of accommodations for those students, and faculty members' personal approach to providing or withholding support. A review of the literature found that graduate students with disabilities may not receive appropriate support to complete their online degree programs because they often have to deal with faculty members who have negative attitudes towards them, accommodations provided by the university which may not be appropriate, and faculty members being unaware of accommodations or not being trained in best practices to support their students. These factors may have a negative impact on their ability to complete their online graduate degree programs. Archival data from a survey done at an online university in the United States in response to a literature review which called for additional studies on faculty perceptions of working with graduate students in the online environment. Using a secondary data source gives the researcher the opportunity to gain a more in-depth understanding of the data in ways which are different from the original study. Using manual coding methods to perform qualitative content analysis on the 130 responses to the original survey questions, the researcher discovered faculty attitudes towards working with their students were generally positive. But when it came to the faculty attitudes towards providing accommodations, the prevalent academic culture of resistance and skepticism towards students with disabilities belonging in higher education was corroborated. Noting that faculty believed there was more that the institution should be doing to support both students with disabilities and the faculty working with them, the researcher also discovered faculty members who not only were transforming the way they interacted with their online

graduate students with disabilities but who also desired changes to the university policies and procedures to increase graduation rates for those students.

Acknowledgements

A PhD program is not completed alone. While I would like to acknowledge every person who has assisted me on my doctoral journey, not only would I be sure to forget someone, but there is also not enough room on this page. However, there is enough room in my heart for my gratitude.

Thank you does not seem sufficient to express my appreciation for the best Dissertation Committee a doctoral candidate could ask for: Dr. Patrick McNamara, Outstanding (and Speedy) Academic Reader; Dr. Joel Goodin, Subject Matter Expert Extraordinaire; and especially the winner of the Best Dissertation Chair Award, Dr. Susan Myers.

I would not have been able to finish this journey without the help and support of my friends, which came in the forms of lengthy late-night phone calls, kleenex, pepperoni and pineapple pizzas, sleepovers, hospital trips, text messages, and chocolate (lots of chocolate!).

Most of all, I could not have done this without my Mother, who told me I could do anything, then supported me unequivocally while I did it. This is for you, Mom, thanks.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Eleven percent of graduate students in the United States report having some form of disability (National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2023) but students with disabilities (SWD) in higher education have lower completion rates than non-disabled students (Guilbaud et al., 2021; Mowreader, 2024). Deckoff-Jones and Duell (2018) and Dowrick et al. (2005) questioned whether the disparity in graduation rates between students with and without disabilities meant simply providing accommodations was insufficient to provide equal opportunities for graduate SWD. Perez-Esteban et al. stated in a 2023 literature review that the majority of higher education instructors (57%) had a positive attitude towards SWD in the classroom. However, in other studies, faculty members reported more negative feelings of pity, awkwardness, and embarrassment for SWD (Aguirre & Duncan, 2013; Giroux et al., 2016). Perez-Esteban et al. (2023) noted negative faculty attitudes begin with a lack of knowledge and training about SWD. Researchers have studied faculty members' perceptions of undergraduate SWD and their need for accommodations at traditional brick-and-mortar institutions (Huss & Eastep, 2016; Perez-Esteban et al., 2023; Phillips et al., 2012), while other studies have been done on students' perceptions of faculty members' attitudes towards their disability accommodations (Giroux et al., 2019; Kurth & Mellard, 2006; Terras et al., 2015).

In their 2010 study of the experience of online instructors in making accommodations for SWD at one brick-and-mortar university, Philips et al. (2012) found 54% of the instructors reported they either did not have or were not sure they had the knowledge, technology, or support to handle student requests for online accommodations. Ten percent of the disabled student participants in a study by Schreuer and Sachs (2014) reported the institution's policy of time extensions as accommodations were not helpful to them and they wondered if the time extensions were just provided automatically to SWD without attention being given to individual student needs. SWD often have their need for accommodations questioned by peers and faculty, thus having the stigma of having their disability equated with lack of competence (Deckoff-Jones

& Duell, 2018; Dowrick et al., 2005). As a result of this stigmatization, SWD who need accommodations may try to get by without them, thus damaging their chances of successfully graduating (Dowrick et al., 2005). In addition, Phillips et al. (2012), in a survey of colleges and universities in 2010, found that 17% of institutions had no formal policies for Americans with Disability Act (ADA) compliance with their online courses. Current ADA laws and statutes do not provide guidance or standards to inform institutions of higher education how equal access is to be provided for online SWD (Guilbaud et al., 2021).

Some higher education institutions may marginalize SWD by having unreasonable productivity expectations of those students (Brown & Leigh, 2020; Brown & Ramlackhan, 2021; Koren & Evans-El, 2020; Olsen et al., 2020). This can lead to stigmatization, with institutions requiring students who are standardized, normative, and fully able-bodied (Brown & Leigh, 2020; Brown & Ramlackhan, 2021; Koren & Evans-El, 2020; Olsen et al., 2020). Adefila (2020) describes attitudinal barriers (e.g., stigma, fear, prejudice, and ignorance) as being additionally disabling for SWD. Svendby (2020) stated faculty members might feel uncomfortable working with SWD because of a lack of knowledge and understanding of students' specific disabling conditions. The need for faculty and administrative staff training in disability accommodations is stressed in Yssel et al. (2016) who noted evidence-based resources and disability training for faculty members should be mandatory. Previous research on faculty members working with SWD has focused mainly on undergraduate students and on students at brick-and-mortar institutions (Huss & Eastep, 2016; Perez-Esteban et al., 2023; Phillips et al., 2012). As more graduate SWD move to online education due to the added flexibility of the online course format (Perez-Esteban et al., 2023; Phillips et al., 2015; Verdinelli & Kutner, 2015), additional research on faculty members who work with online graduate SWD is warranted.

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed in this study is that graduate SWD may not receive appropriate support to complete their online degree programs (Aguirre & Duncan, 2013; Banks 2019; Lund et al., 2020); students may have to deal with instructors who are unwilling to provide support because those instructors have negative perceptions of SWD (Koren & Evans-El, 2020; Lund et al., 2020; Sniatecki et al., 2015). In some cases, the accommodations provided by the university may not be appropriate to student needs (Galef, 2024; Perez-Esteban et al., 2023), while some instructors are unwilling to provide course accommodations (Koren & Evans-El, 2020; Lund et al., 2020; Sniatecki et al., 2015). Also, faculty members often have the final authority on whether or not to allow those accommodations for their classes (Bé, 2019; Lefler et al., 2023; McCarron, 2020; Quinn, 2024). While the subject of faculty attitudes towards undergraduate SWD and their course accommodations in brick-and-mortar higher education institutions has been extensively researched (Banks, 2019; Bé, 2019; Becker & Palladino, 2016; Brown & Leigh, 2020; Perez-Esteban, et al., 2023; Steele, 2020), the current body of literature does not adequately address the issue of faculty attitudes towards graduate SWD or their course accommodations in online higher education programs. Since graduate SWD depend on course accommodations to complete their class assignments (Aguirre & Duncan, 2013; Druckman et al., 2021; Hsaio et al., 2021; Lefler et al., 2023; Mowreader, 2024), understanding the attitudes of faculty members towards those students and their course accommodations is needed to improve teaching practices which facilitate better conditions for higher academic performance and program completion (Guilbaud et al., 2021; Lomellini et al., 2011; Lorenzo-Lledó et al., 2020; Mowreader, 2024; Perez-Esteban et al., 2023; Phillips et al., 2012).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the attitudes of faculty members who work with online graduate SWD toward the appropriateness of accommodations and their personal approach to providing or withholding support. This research study is a logical response

to the problem of online graduate SWD needing support from faculty members in order to complete their degree programs because when faculty members have negative attitudes towards SWD, they are not as likely to provide the assistance those students need (Lombardi et al., 2011; Lund et al., 2020; Sniatecki et al., 2015; Toutain, 2019; Wynants & Dennis, 2017; Xavier & Meneses, 2021). Previous research on the topic of faculty attitudes towards SWD as well as faculty attitudes towards student accommodations has focused mainly on undergraduate students and faculty in brick-and-mortar institutions (Banks, 2019; Bé, 2019; Brown & Leigh, 2020; Steele, 2020). Therefore, research focusing on faculty who work with graduate students in online environments is warranted (Huss & Eastep, 2016; Perez-Esteban et al., 2023; Phillips et al., 2012).

This dissertation used archival data from an online study conducted from April 2022-May 2022 at a completely online, private, non-profit university in the United States. Data collection in the original study was done online through Qualtrics. Demographic information for this dissertation was determined using statistical analyses. Responses from the open-ended questions asked in the archival survey instrument were analyzed using qualitative content analysis coding methods (Bloomberg, 2023; Saldaña, 2021).

Introduction to Theoretical Framework

Critical disability theory (CDT) was used as the theoretical framework through which the researcher viewed the social, political, and cultural environment surrounding the concept of disability (Goodley et al., 2019; Hall, 2019). Goodley et al. (2019) called disability a phenomenon which has been shaped by external factors; those factors include stigma, ableism, and prejudice (Adefila et al., 2020; Hall, 2019; Goodley et al., 2019; Grimes et al., 2023). Grimes et al. (2023) discussed the impact of stigma on SWD in higher education, with the authors noting students are less likely to seek help from their higher education institution if they perceive they are expected to be able to deal with their disability on their own. Adefila et al. (2020) described attitudinal barriers (e.g., stigma and prejudice) as being particularly disabling

for SWD. Often, higher education institutions require students who are standardized, normative, and fully able-bodied; thus marginalizing and stigmatizing SWD who are unable to meet specific academic requirements without accommodation (Brown & Leigh, 2020; Brown & Ramlackhan, 2021; Koren & Evans-El, 2020; Olsen et al., 2020).

Adams and Buetow (2014) specified that using critical theory in research requires looking at complex interactions among the concepts being studied. Hall commented “critical disability theory is significantly aimed toward exposing and analyzing ableism” (2019, p. 5). In addition, Merriam and Tisdell (2015) stated that current critical theory research requires a goal of critiquing and challenging, transforming and empowering for change. The dissertation researcher used CDT’s aim of exposing and analyzing faculty attitudes towards SWD as stated in the first two research questions. The researcher used the goal of critical theory research requiring transformation and empowerment for change to discover answers to the final research question which examined methods faculty members are using and the techniques they need to assist online graduate SWD.

Introduction to Research Methodology and Design (Nature of the Study)

The researcher conducted a qualitative content analysis of archival data to answer questions investigating faculty members ‘attitudes about, and support for, online graduate SWD. Archival data is data which has been collected for a previous research study (Bloomberg, 2023). The decision to use archival data for this dissertation was made in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the archival data in ways which are different from the original study (Bloomberg, 2023; Heaton, J., 2004; Hinds et al., 2013). The original study was done in response to a literature review which called for additional studies on faculty perceptions of working with SWD in the online setting and at the graduate level (Guilbaud et al., 2021; Hsiao et al., 2019; Hunt et al., 2014; Perez-Esteban et al., 2023; Phillips et al., 2012; Wynants & Dennis, 2017). Seminal research from Heaton (2004) and Hinds et al. (2013) states secondary research is done to re-interpret findings from the original study, offering the researcher the prospect to find new

insights and generate new knowledge. In this dissertation, the researcher sought a more in-depth understanding of the archival data not only to gain additional insights on faculty attitudes of working with graduate SWD in the online setting, but also to examine the faculty feelings towards the accommodations used by graduate SWD in the online setting. In addition, the dissertation researcher wanted to discover methods which faculty members are using, as well as additional techniques they need, in order to assist their online graduate SWD.

Qualitative archival data content analysis can uncover powerful quotes which may be able to make significant impacts on those who are in charge of making systemic changes (Lund et al., 2023). The dissertation researcher wanted to generate new knowledge of ways in which the online graduate school experience can be enhanced for both the faculty members and SWD in order to potentially increase graduation rates for online SWD. An additional reason for using archival data for a secondary analysis was that it gave the researcher the opportunity to study a potentially sensitive topic without having direct contact between the researcher and the research participants (Bloomberg, 2023; Heng et al., 2018; Hinds et al., 2013; Lund et al., 2023). The topic of faculty attitudes of working with online graduate SWD can be a sensitive one for faculty members, students, and the larger higher education institutional environment (Wynants et al., 2017; Yssel et al., 2018). Therefore, archival data was an appropriate data source for the focus of the proposed study.

The original study was done at a medium-sized (approximately 16,700 students and 600 faculty members) online university in the United States. An important consideration made by the dissertation researcher in choosing to use archival data is that qualitative data research in general often has small sample sizes. In this case, the small archival qualitative data set may not only limit the transferability of the research results but might also have been a concern for confidentiality issues (Lund et al., 2023) were it not for the lack of direct contact between the original study and the secondary analysis (Bloomberg, 2023).

This dissertation used archival data from an online survey done from April 2022-May 2022 at a completely online, private, non-profit university in the United States. Data collection in the original study was done through Qualtrics via institutional email; 130 faculty members responded to the original survey. Data analysis included descriptive analysis of demographic information, while the responses from the open-ended questions asked in the archival survey instrument were analyzed using qualitative interpretive coding methods (Bloomberg, 2023; Saldaña, 2021). Those interpretative methods included content analysis, examining consistencies, and creating categories into which survey question responses were placed (Bloomberg, 2023; Krippendorff, 2019; Saldaña, 2021). Qualitative coding methods are an iterative process; there were multiple analyses done throughout the data examination (Bloomberg, 2023; Saldaña, 2021).

Research Questions

RQ1

What are faculty members' attitudes about working with online graduate students with disabilities?

RQ2

What are faculty members' viewpoints on accommodations for online graduate students with disabilities?

RQ3

What are the methods faculty members are using to assist online graduate students with disabilities and what additional instructional methods do they need?

Significance of the Study

Goodley et al. (2019) stated research is needed using CDT to answer the question of what matters when statements are made about persons with disabilities. In addition, CDT questions how disability and ability can be adequately addressed when attempting to find potential in the perception of disability. Society continues to portray persons with disabilities as objects of pity

who have complex needs which are a drain on perceived scant resources (Goodley et al., 2019). The higher education institutional environment continues to accept the dominant cultural consideration which holds ability to be the valued standard of student capacity (Brown & Leigh, 2020; Brown & Ramlackhan, 2021; Deckoff-Jones & Duell, 2018; Dowrick et al., 2005; Goodley et al., 2019; Koren & Evans-El, 2020; Olsen et al., 2020). A student with disabilities' lived reality of impairment does not mean their inability to succeed in higher education (Deckoff-Jones & Duell, 2018; Goodley et al., 2019).

The nature of qualitative research is one of discovery (Bloomberg, 2023; Casanave & Li 2015), and during the data analysis process, researchers can find that a new or additional theoretical framework has emerged (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). Adams and Buetow (2014) emphasize that knowledge of several different theories can be important to the psychology dissertation student since theories often intersect and are relevant to the central topic of the dissertation. A clear contribution to CDT literature and practice was not known until after completion of the data analysis process of the dissertation.

Definitions of Key Terms

Ableism

According to the Encyclopedia of Diversity and Social Justice (2014) ableism is discrimination or prejudice against persons with disabilities by making the assumption that people with disabilities are not normal individuals.

Disability

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) defines disability as any condition or impairment of a person's body or mind which limits or restricts a person's activities and interactions with the world around them (2023).

Person With a Disability

The Americans with Disability Act (ADA) defines a person with a disability as someone either with a current physical or mental impairment, who has a history or record of such an

impairment, or who is regarded as having such an impairment by others, which substantially limits one or more of the person's major life activities (2023).

Stigma

According to the online Britannica Dictionary, stigma is defined as a collection of beliefs which are often negative and unfair about something (Britannica, 2024); e.g. a person with a disability is unable to participate fully in social activities.

Universal Design

Universal design and inclusive design are methods that promote equal access, inclusivity, and participation for all people (Perrson et al., 2015). They often complement each other and in practice, elements from both approaches are used to ensure that products and experiences are as equitable, user-friendly, and accessible as possible.

Summary

The topic of faculty attitudes towards graduate SWD in online higher education institutions has been relatively understudied, leading to calls for additional research on the topic (Guilbaud et al., 2021; Hsiao et al., 2019; Hunt et al., 2014; Perez-Esteban et al., 2023; Phillips et al., 2012; Wynants & Dennis, 2017). Guided by the critical disability theoretical framework, this dissertation explored the attitudes of faculty members who work with online graduate SWD toward the appropriateness of accommodations and their personal approach to providing or withholding support. The research findings from this dissertation will inform the limited body of research on online graduate SWD (Phillips et al., 2015) by providing a fuller picture of faculty members' attitudes towards working with online graduate SWD. An enhanced understanding of those attitudes is needed to improve teaching practices to facilitate those students' higher academic performance (Deckoff-Jones & Duell, 2015; Dowrick et al., 2005). It is important to remember just offering accommodations is insufficient to provide equal opportunities for online graduate SWD (Dowrick et al., 2005; Phillips et al., 2015). In this dissertation, the researcher sought a more in-depth understanding of the archival data, not only to gain additional insights on

faculty members' attitudes of working with graduate SWD in the online setting, but also to identify faculty viewpoints on the accommodations used by those students. In addition, the researcher wanted to discover methods faculty members are using, as well as techniques they need, to assist their online graduate SWD.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem addressed in this dissertation is that graduate SWD may not receive appropriate support to complete their online degree programs (Aguirre & Duncan, 2013; Banks 2019; Lund et al., 2020) for several possible reasons. Students may have to deal with faculty members who are unwilling to provide support because those instructors have negative attitudes towards SWD (Koren & Evans-El, 2020; Lund et al., 2020; Sniatecki et al., 2015). Accommodations provided by the university may not be appropriate or faculty members may not be aware of specific accommodations needed by students or may not have been trained in ways to support graduate SWD (Deckoff-Jones & Duell, 2018; Galef, 2024; Guilbaud et al., 2021; Levinovitz, 2024; McCarron, 2020; Parsons et al., 2023; Quinn, 2024; Terras et al., 2020; Toutain, 2019; Walters & Teclehaimanot, 2023). The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the attitudes of faculty members toward the appropriateness of accommodations for online graduate students and to discover those faculty members' methods of providing or withholding support.

Literature Review Organization

This literature review begins with a description of how the literature search was performed including the databases and search engines used, the search parameters and terms, the range of years, and the types of literature used. Seminal and current literature will be referred to throughout the literature review. Next is an explanation of the dissertation's theoretical framework which includes the definition of CDT. The discussion covers the reasons CDT was chosen over other theoretical frameworks, mentions other studies which used CDT as their theoretical frameworks, and how CDT guided the development of the problem statement, purpose statement, and research questions. The literature review continues with its themes which include concepts models of disability, a review of disability in higher education outside of the US, a short history of online education for SWD in the US, the legal aspects involved in the higher education environment, and the topic of academic accommodations. This is followed by

an examination of the state of undergraduate and graduate SWD in higher education and finishes with a description of the role of faculty members in interactions with SWD in higher education institutions.

Literature Search

The databases searched included EBSCO, PsyARTICLES, PsycINFO, PubMed, Web of Science, and Google scholar. The searches were limited to English language publications and while initial searches were limited to dates between 2019 and 2024, later searches were not limited to a specific date period. Data searches were conducted in peer-reviewed journals, scholarly journal articles, review articles, theses and dissertations, papers and posters, and government reports. The literature discussed in this dissertation was searched using three methods: keywords, exact phrases, and other related phrases. Searches included both individual words and combinations of the following terms: ableism, accommodations, Covid-19, critical disability studies, CDT, disability, discrimination, distance learning, doctoral students, e-learning, faculty attitudes, faculty opinions, faculty perceptions, graduate students, higher education faculty, legal, master's students, online higher education, online learning, SWD.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Disability Theory (CDT)

Hosking (2008) stated that CDT can be based within several theoretical frameworks including critical legal studies (Hall, 2019), the interdisciplinary disability studies (Goodley et al., 2019; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009), traditional theory and critical theory. Hall (2019) expanded the theoretical framework of CDT to include critical feminist theory, critical race theory, crip theory, indigenous theory, and sexism theory noting that the intersectionality of these theories provide a stronger interdisciplinary base for all critical theory studies. While acknowledging the importance of intersectionality in critical theory studies, Goodley et al. (2019) points out the importance of not losing sight of the unique and significant facets of disability studies.

CDT encompasses the social, political, and cultural environment surrounding the concept of disability (Goodley et al., 2019; Hall, 2019). It's task, as stated by Hall (2019) is to analyze the phenomenon of disability by thoroughly examining the social norms and conditions which stigmatize the population. These analyzations and examinations are not just for academic purposes but are meant to create knowledge and activities which support justice and equity for persons with disabilities (Hall, 2019).

Critical theory began in 1937 with Horkheimer's presentation of the critical theory of society. According to Horkheimer, showing the underlying relationship between persons is the task of critical theory as well as to “demystify the surface forms of equality” (1982/1968, p. xiii). In addition, Horkheimer's critical theory requires looking behind the facts, distinguishing “the superficial from the essential without minimizing the importance of ...” concept (1982/1968, p. xiv). Horkheimer emphasizes that theory, in the university disciplines which deal with the social aspects of life, must be empirical in its queries by both gathering large amounts of detailed data on the subject being studied and critical examination of that data, prior to the development of any type of theory (1982/1968). The critical scrutiny is suspicious and distrustful of a particular current social structure and its rules of conduct it imposes on the individuals in that society (Horkheimer, 1982/1968). The individual's acceptance of their limitations within their role in society is treated as relative rather than absolute in critical theory (Horkheimer, 1982/1968). Of specific interest to this dissertation is Horkheimer's observation that the change which critical theory “seeks to bring about is not effected gradually, so that success even if slow might be steady” (1982/1968, p. 219). While critical theories have as their goal a transformation of society as a whole, Horkheimer noted that efficacious transformations may be very different from the ideal goal but still be considered a success (1982/1968).

While traditional theory calls for the researcher to be an observer who reports on the world as it is, critical theory demands that what is being examined also be explained in an interactive relationship (Hall, 2019; Hosking, 2008). Critical theory is not objective; it has as its

purpose the objective of changing society by explaining the oppression found in the social reality being examined (Hall, 2019; Hosking, 2008; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). Hosking describes a universalist concept of disability which places everyone on a "continuum from disabled to non-disabled" (2008, p. 6) because everyone will be disabled at some point in their lives; however, he goes on to state that such a definition is too broad to be useful in analyzing the social conditions or develop policy for the diverse population of the disabled. Hall (2019) agrees, calling disability a unique identity that is also part of every person at some point in their lifetime. Within the structure of CDT, disability is viewed as part of human variety; in order for disability to be an issue of social importance, it must be included in the concepts of race, class, and gender (Rocco, 2005). Noting that critical theory continues to influence CDT, Meekosha and Shuttleworth (2009) specify that diversity must include the cultural, psychological, discursive, and carnal aspects of the struggle for social justice for persons with disabilities. Through the lens of social justice, disability has meaning and value (Wexler, 2023).

According to CDT, the needs of persons with disabilities for equality and autonomy demand acknowledging and respecting the difference between them and those persons without disabilities rather than dismissing the disability as irrelevant, which rejects and marginalizes the individual with disabilities (Hall, 2019; Hosking 2008). Welcoming and encouraging the person with disabilities to participate as an equal by adjusting the response to eliminate obstacles in the environment are the required approach to equality (Hosking 2008; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). Specific disabilities or impairments such as blindness, chronic illness, or ADHD have often been "overemphasized as explanatory variables and organizing schemes [which has the effect of] objectification and medicalization of disabled people, silencing voices and perpetuating invisibility" (Rocco, 2005, para. 1). Rocco (2005) emphasizes that persons with disabilities have unique voices and complex experiences. CDT requires the recognition and welcoming of the "inevitability of difference within the framework of diversity" (Hosking 2008, p. 10) to allow for full and equal participation with autonomy (Hall, 2019; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009) in the

societal environment. CDT examines the negative attitudes towards disability which are reflected in the language used to depict persons with disabilities as powerless, vulnerable, dependent, and valueless (Andrews et al., 2019; Hall, 2019; Hosking 2008). According to Hosking (2008), CDT is the pursuit of empowerment and substantive equality, power and value.

Policies of inclusion, equality, and autonomy are the CDT's response to disability (Hall, 2019). These policies are in direct opposition to the common practice of paternalism and inflexibility in the democratization of social programs which can, by their cost-cutting measures, heavily impact persons with disabilities (Hosking 2008). Hosking (2008) goes on to state that CDT looks past the status quo, searching for a way to make things different than they currently are for persons with disabilities.

The CDT provides understanding of the dissertation research problem which is that graduate SWD may not receive appropriate support to complete their online degree programs (Aguirre & Duncan, 2013; Banks 2019; Lund et al., 2020). It also states that students may have to deal with instructors who are unwilling to provide support because those instructors have negative perceptions of SWD (Koren & Evans-El, 2020; Lund et al., 2020; Sniatecki et al., 2015). The CDT also supports the purpose of this study which is to explore the attitudes of faculty members who work with online graduate SWD toward the appropriateness of accommodations and their personal approach to providing or withholding support.

The purpose of a critical theory is to change society by explaining the oppression found in the environment being examined (Hall, 2019; Hosking, 2008; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). It is known that higher education institutions maintain an oppressive environment towards SWD by separating them from non-disabled students, controlling access to resources, and using testing and evaluation processes which are biased towards the non-disabled dominant student population (Rocco, 2005). In addition, the accommodations provided by the university may not be appropriate to student needs (Galef, 2024; Perez-Esteban et al., 2023), and some instructors are unwilling to provide any form of course accommodations (Koren & Evans-El, 2020; Lund et

al., 2020; Sniatecki et al., 2015). It is appropriate to use CDT to examine and explain the attitudes of instructors towards graduate SWD and the accommodations they require to succeed in an online learning environment.

Using critical theory in research requires looking at complex interactions among the concepts being studied (Hall, 2019). Hall also commented CDT “is significantly aimed toward exposing and analyzing ableism” (2019, p. 5). In addition, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that current critical theory research requires a goal of critiquing and challenging, transforming and empowering for change. Using CDT’s aim of exposing and analyzing faculty attitudes towards SWD is stated in the first two research questions. The goal of critical theory research requires transformation and empowerment for change; this goal matches the goal of the final research question which examines methods faculty members are using and the techniques they need to assist online graduate SWD.

Two other theories were considered for this dissertation, Structural Stigma Theory and Disability Studies Theory. Structural Stigma Theory involves making an external evaluation of an individual based on societal norms, negative labeling of human difference, stereotyping, and categorizing people into us and them (Overton & Medina, 2008) and considers stigma as being a perceived or anticipated threat (Grimes et al., 2023). This theory was considered for the dissertation because the impact of stigma on SWD often means that students are less likely to seek help from their higher education institution if they perceive that they are expected to be able to deal with their disability on their own (Grimes et al., 2023; Lorenz, 2021). However, the theory did not provide the depth of evaluation needed to thoroughly examine the problem statement of faculty attitudes towards SWD.

Disability Studies Theory puts disability in the political area, synthesizing social constructionism and critical theory to resist stigma and increase alliance with other marginalized groups (Cory, et al., 2010). While Disability Studies Theory does examine the barriers to inclusion (Cory et al., 2010), CDT goes beyond to include the cultural environment surrounding

the concept of disability (Goodley et al., 2019; Hall, 2019). In addition, Disability Studies Theory is not a critical theory; the purpose of a critical theory is to change society by explaining the oppression found in the environment being examined (Hall, 2019; Hosking, 2008; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009).

When conducting the literature search for this dissertation, an EBSCO subject search was done using the specific phrase *Critical Disability Theory*. This search was done intentionally to discover journal articles using the CDT theoretical framework. The search found 19 articles, only four of which were related to higher education and only one of which was an actual study. Interestingly, 37 results were dissertations or theses, which made this researcher wonder why the dissertation authors had not published their work.

One of the studies reviewed for this dissertation used the framework of critical disability studies and disability justice to explore barriers to accessibility in higher education (Marom & Hardwick, 2024). The study authors argued that access to higher education is not enough; full inclusion in the institutional life is required for SWD (Marom & Hardwick, 2024). The study participants were asked to identify specific barriers to access and to share their perspectives and knowledge with the leaders of the higher education institutions to increase access and inclusion for all students (Marom & Hardwick, 2024).

Another article which utilized CDT as its framework discussed the concept of Universal Design and its association with CDT (Scoresby et al., 2023). Universal Design promotes an inclusive environment for everyone, not just the physical environment, but in all types of classrooms (Scoresby et al., 2023). The authors of this article, though focusing specifically on social work students, discussed closed captioning as a means of promoting equitable access for all students in higher education institutions (Scoresby et al., 2023).

Minich (2016) noted that critical disability studies are becoming part of the higher education curricula, bringing disability theory to equality with traditional fields and making it an important area for scholarly research. However, Minich (2016) also stated that this increase in

activity is being conducted without consideration for and participation of the disabled community. Minich proposes using the critical theory approach to disability studies, recognizing the field as "a methodology rather than a subject" (2016, para. 5) and emphasizing careful analysis of the stigmatizing social norms around disability. Finally, Minich (2016) emphasized the importance of improving instructor attitudes and responses towards SWD, focusing on the need for instructors to work directly with SWD, regardless of the students' status with the institution's DSO (DSO).

Concepts and Models of Disability

Goodley et al. (2019) called disability a phenomenon which has been shaped by external factors; those factors include ableism, prejudice, and stigma (Adefila et al., 2020; Hall, 2019; Goodley et al., 2019; Grimes et al., 2023). Disability is perceived as a problem to be solved by the individual and is looked at as a naturalized form of exclusion (Wexler, 2023). Ableism, according to Wexler (2023) is part of societal decisions made only for the "normal-bodied" person in the places where all people must live, work, and receive an education. Friedman (2018) noted that disability prejudice is difficult to define because society simultaneously portrays disability as negative yet attributes positive desirable traits such as inspirational to persons with disability and those positive beliefs can create unfair and unrealistic expectations for persons with disabilities. Goffman (1974) defined a stigma as an attribute that is deeply discrediting and which prompts people to reduce the person with the stigma from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one. Efforts to change the focus of language related to disability stigma such as using the terms "handi-capable" or "differently=abled" have been described as superficial and not useful (Andrews et al., 2019).

CDT includes exposing and analyzing ableism as the "primary social and political structures that marginalize" people and shapes institutional thinking (Hall, 2019; p. 5). CDT "challenges the distinction between impairment and disability" (Hall, 2019, p. 15), and attempts to change the negative conception of disability (Hall, 2019). Ableism can manifest itself through

institutional discrimination (Friedman, 2018). Ableist terms such as special needs or special education place SWD apart from nondisabled peers (Wexler, 2023), setting up an almost insurmountable barrier to acknowledging disability as an authentic personal experience. Academia's discipline and practice are now being seen through the lens of ableism (Hall, 2019). While the ADA legally provides access and protection against discrimination, it "cannot promise that the dispositions and presumptions of faculty and peers will afford an equitable, inclusive, and joyful experience" (Wexler, 2023, p. 214) to SWD in higher education. Uniformity, or the illusion of the need to normalize all students, is part of the ableism inherent in education (Wexler, 2023). Faculty often presume that SWD do not have the capability to achieve success in higher education (Rocco, 2000; Wexler, 2023) based on the segregating label of their disability (Wexler, 2023), especially suspecting, questioning, and doubting students with hidden disabilities. While the Covid-19 pandemic offered faculty the opportunity to have compassion for individual students and their specific situations, including their disability status, once the pandemic ended so did the extra levels of compassion (Wexler, 2023).

CDT is providing increased attention on the subject of mental illness in the concept of disability (Hall, 2019). Hall specifically noted that ableism in academic assumes and expects healthy minds as well as healthy bodies (2019). Lorenz (2021) stated that because of the pervasive atmosphere of ableism in higher education, persons with disabilities are not only unable to succeed, but are at risk if they speak out against the practice.

Andrews et al. (2019) noted that prejudice can evoke negative attitudes such as shame and fear towards persons with disabilities. Prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory behaviors against persons with disabilities are also forms of ableism, though these attitudes and behaviors are often unintentional (Dunn, 2019). Disability narratives differentiate persons with disabilities from other social groups, increasing the potential for prejudice (Andrews et al., 2019; Friedman, 2018). The Inspiration Narrative, which states that everything about persons with disabilities is inspirational because they have or must overcome their disability, creates the impression that the

person is not normal or achieves goals despite their disability (Andrews et al., 2019; Friedman, 2018). This is not the reality of life for most people and can create an unrealistic expectations for the person with disabilities (Friedman, 2018). The Pity Narrative assumes that the people with disabilities are tragic victims of their disability and that they are incapable of what is considered a normal life (Friedman, 2018). These narratives perpetuate the separation of persons with disabilities from society and increases the prejudices and discrimination which they encounter (Andrews et al., 2019; Friedman, 2018). Stigmatization of disability in higher education can involve fear of disability disclosure by students especially when they are unable to meet normative expectations set by the institution (Lorenz, 2021). Recognizing stigma as a barrier to inclusion at the higher education level, Grimes et al. (2023) and Lorenz (2021) noted that students refuse to disclose their disability status because of their avoidance of potential negative outcomes in interactions with instructors.

Access to all parts of the higher education institutional environment is part of disability justice under the framework of CDT (Marom & Hardwick, 2024). The historical structure of higher education creates barriers to accessibility; reimagination of academia with inclusion rather than accommodation is needed (Marom & Hardwick, 2024). As part of this reimagination, a full critique of the current structure must be performed, followed by recommendations for action (Marom & Hardwick, 2024).

Models of Disability

Bogart et al. defined disability models as assumptions about the "cause, nature, and treatment of disability" influencing both the definition of disability and how it is addressed (2020, p. 1). Given that many higher education institutions rely on the medical model of disability (Marom & Hardwick, 2024; Rocco, 2005), descriptions of the various disability models was determined to be important to this literature review. Hall (2019) stated that CDT is engaged in transformative work in disability studies by analyzing the origins of social culture, such as is found in higher education, and by challenging the ideology of that culture in order to

merge theory with praxis to promote emancipatory actions. Rocco (2005). Rocco (2005) identified disability as a complex experience; the various models of disability are illustrative of that concept.

Medical Model

In the medical model, disability, or the impairment of a body system (Hosking, 2008), is perceived as pathological, with the goal being to return the body to as normal a condition as possible (Bogart et al., 2020; Olkin, 2022). The person with a disability is perceived as abnormal (Bogart et al., 2020; Hosking, 2008; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009; Olkin, 2022; Wexler, 2023), those without disabilities are considered representative of the universal human (Wexler, 2023), and the general attitude towards disability is negative with terms such as deficient, powerless, valueless, and dependent being commonly used (Hosking, 2008). Often institutions of higher education continue to use the medical model to regulate and normalize the paradigm of disability (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009).

Moral Model

By depicting disability as part of a person's "character, deeds, thoughts, and karma (Olkin, 2022, para. 2), the moral model is used worldwide, particularly in the media. A person's disability may be thought to be caused by doing something wrong, it might be a personal misfortune (Hosking, 2008), or the person might have been chosen by God to have a disability as a sign of their faith or strength (Olkin, 2022). In the media, a person with a disability might be shown to be evil or as one who achieves a unique goal such as a person who is blind climbing a mountain (Olkin, 2022).

Psychological Model

According to the American Psychological Association (APA), the psychological model of disability looks at disability as a dynamic process requiring continuing and individualized evaluation to be effective (Parker et al., 2024). Disability includes advocating for equity, inclusion, and opportunity for persons with disabilities who are "entitled to the development of

their abilities, support of their current assets, a sense of belonging, and necessary alterations to their environment that eliminate interpersonal and structural barriers” (Parker et al., 2024, p. 5).

Psychosocial Model

The psychosocial model of disability encourages a culture organized to embody inclusivity (Parker et al., 2024). This model uses the equity, diversity, and inclusive framework in workplace settings, focusing on removing or lessening barriers and creating a supportive environment for everyone (Whelpley et al., 2023). In addition, the model looks at factors such as the individual’s personal beliefs about their disability, as well as stress and motivation and how they affect that person’s work performance (Whelpley et al., 2023).

Social Model

In the social model, disability is one part of a person’s identity and results from a disparity between the person and their physical and social environments (Bogart et al., 2020; Hall, 2019). The social model does not always recognize individual agency (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009), with negative stereotypes, discrimination, and oppression being barriers to full inclusion in society (Hall, 2019). By understanding the social impact of either inclusive or discriminatory environments, organizations such as higher education may be able to develop better practices to combat stigma and change the negative environment (Bogart et al., 2020; Hall, 2019; Lovell, 2020; Whelpley et al., 2023).

Disability Rights Model

Unlike the medical model which is linked to formal equality or the social model with substantive equality, the Disability Rights Model corresponds to transformative equality (Degener, 2016). The Disability Rights Model is based on the paradigm shift that persons with disabilities are human rights subjects and holders of individual human rights; it is the first model which specifies that impairment may not be used to justify denying or restricting human rights to persons with disabilities (Degener, 2016). In addition, the Disability Rights Model states that no

one should be denied their full rights in society because they do not have certain capabilities and discrimination should be considered legally and ethically wrong (Degener, 2016).

Biopsychosocial Model

The biopsychosocial model of disability, the one which is used in CDT, combines factors from the psychological model as well as the social model and includes impairment, personal response to impairment, and the barriers of the social environment in its concept of disability (Hall, 2019; Hosking, 2008; Whelpley et al., 2023). Disability is seen as a “complex interrelationship between impairment, individual response to impairment, the social environment, and the physical, institutional, and attitudinal environment which fails to meet the needs of people who do not meet the social expectancy of normalcy” (Hosking, 2008, p. 7).

Disability in Higher Education Outside the United States (US)

While conducting the literature search, the dissertation researcher found recent studies on faculty attitudes towards SWD in higher education in countries outside of the US including Australia, Catalonia, China, Norway, Ontario, Palestine, South Africa, Sweden, Taiwan, and the United Kingdom, . Many of those articles commented that most of the research which has been done on the topic has been done in the US (Bartz, 2020; Edwards, 2022; Goodley et al., 2019; Langorgen et al., 2020; Lister et al., 2021; Makwembere, 2021; Prinsloo & Uleanya, 2022). As has been found in the US research, much of the research on the topic done outside of the US has been based on brick-and-mortar institutions and focused on undergraduate SWD. Goodley et al. (2019) emphasized the tendency of CDT and disability studies to be Anglo-American-focused, even to the extent of being centric to the US, with US authors framing their theories and writing completely within the US borders. According to Goodley et al. (2019), global perspectives on disability are needed especially using CDT.

The studies done outside of the US found that faculty attitudes in countries outside of the US found, for the most part, that faculty attitudes are similar to those of the counterparts in the US including lack of knowledge about SWD and accommodations, stigmatization and

marginalization of SWD, and exclusionary practices by the higher education institutions as well as by the faculty members. Institutions of higher education need to expand research in CDT which will not only expand comprehension of the exclusionary practices which SWD face but will increase critical thinking on accessibility to all levels of higher education for SWD (Makwembere, 2021; Prinsloo & Uleanya, 2022). When examining the articles based in countries outside the US, the common theme was that instructors in the higher education institutions need to make efforts to have inclusive seminars and lectures, considering individual learning conditions of all students, not just those with disabilities (Bartz, 2020; Encuentra and Gregori, 2022; Edwards, 2022; Kocdar et al., 2023; Langorgen et al., 2020; Lister et al., 2021; Prinsloo & Uleanya, 2022; Svendby, 2020; Zhang et al., 2018). But the research authors from many of the countries, noted that for SWD, institutional accommodations are still difficult to receive, and stigmatization and marginalization are still present among the faculty and staff members at those higher educational institutions (Bartz, 2020; Encuentra and Gregori, 2022; Edwards, 2022; Giroux et al., 2020; Kocdar et al., 2023; Langorgen et al., 2020; Lister et al., 2021; Makwembere, 2021; Prinsloo & Uleanya, 2022; Snounu, 2019; Svendby, 2020; Wang, 2020; Zhang et al., 2018).

Interestingly, Snounu (2019) provided a contrast to the prevailing research findings in their examination of SWD in higher education in Palestine. According to Snounu, faculty in Palestine higher education are strongly supportive of SWD, providing individual accommodations and advocating for their students by avoiding "rigid academic practices" (2019, p. 72) which exclude students who are unable to participate. Snounu (2019) also stated that faculty members in the study emphasized the importance of high expectations for all students which establishes an environment of mutual respect and trust between faculty and SWD. In addition, Wang (2023) found that faculty members in Taiwan have more positive attitudes towards SWD at universities which have special education centers, suggesting that having those

special education centers promotes greater awareness of the inclusivity and accessibility needs of SWD.

Disability in Online Higher Education in the US

Beattie et al. (2021), while noting that distance education is not new to higher education, commented that research has shown that though students and faculty are comfortable using online technology, some studies have shown that there is a lack of confidence and skill with, as well as a lack of research examining the roles and experiences in, online learning environments. The Covid-19 pandemic has broadened the knowledge of faculty member experiences with online learning, especially in showcasing the need for new course development and the importance of communication between faculty and students (Beattie et al., 2021). Online education settings might be considered the ultimate accommodation for SWD (Murphy, 2018, unpublished), however the format of online courses may be inaccessible for students with visual or auditory disabilities (Huss & Eastep, 2016). Richardson (2015) stated that SWD often decide to avoid access problems on campus by choosing distance education courses while Verdinelli and Kutner (2015) reported that the most common reason for choosing online studies was the flexibility that the online format granted students to manage their disability needs while pursuing their higher education goals.

History

In the 1980s and 1990s, innovation in online education, especially with the invention of the World Wide Web in 1990, opened up a new era in higher education opportunities (Cooper, 2021; Harasim, 2000). The first online non-credit courses began in 1981, undergraduate courses began in 1984, graduate courses started the next year, and the first online degree program was launched in 1986 (Harasim, 2000). With online environments being able to provide education courses at any place, any time, and, in multiple formats such as group meetings or text-based, the opportunities for customized participation for SWD were substantially increased (Gullo, 2022; Harasim, 2000). The expanded educational benefits provided by online education allowed for all

voices to be heard, thus overcoming traditional discrimination factors such as ableism (Harasim, 2000). Noting that in the early days of online higher education courses, SWD were slow to participate in the new format, Huss and Eastep (2016) found that as the course offerings expanded and the accessibility of the courses improved, student participation increased.

Covid-19

In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared Covid-19 a global pandemic and many higher education communities around the world switched to online learning (Beattie, 2021; Cooper, 2021; Finemore et al., 2022; McClure et al., 2021; Mullins & Mitchell, 2022; Parsloe & Smith, 2022). Some of the challenges encountered by non-disabled students making the change to online learning were similar to those experienced by SWD including the lack of instructor knowledge and expertise in online instruction (Beattie et al., 2021; Cooper, 2021; Finemore et al., 2022; McClure et al., 2021), challenges in using the technology (Beattie et al., 2021; Cooper, 2021; Gullo, 2022; McClure et al., 2021; Mullins & Mitchell, 2022), mental health issues such as stress and depression (McClure et al., 2021; Mullins & Mitchell, 2022), lack of instructor communication (Gullo, 2022; Mullins & Mitchell, 2022), student lack of a feeling of belonging to the higher education institution (Finemore et al., 2022; Parsloe & Smith, 2022), and a lack of support and resources (Beattie et al., 2021; Cooper, 2021; Gullo, 2022; Mullins & Mitchell, 2022).

McClure et al. (2021) noted that there have been many studies on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the field of higher education; however, this researcher was only able to find one study specifically on graduate students (Beattie et al., 2021). While there have been several studies focused on SWD (Cooper, 2021; Gullo, 2022; Mullins & Mitchell, 2022; Parsloe & Smith, 2022), none of those studies focused specifically on graduate SWD. A common theme among the articles covering the status of online higher education during and after the Covid-19 pandemic was the difficulty encountered by faculty in having to adapt their courses to the online format very quickly (Beattie, 2021; Cooper, 2021; Gullo, 2022; McClure et al., 2021; Mullins &

Mitchell, 2022). Cooper (2021) made the point that in the case of faculty members who had SWD in their courses first had to adapt their courses to the online format and then had to figure out how to make their courses accessible to SWD, often without assistance from their institution.

Legal Aspects of Disability in Higher Education in the US

The Americans with Disability Act (ADA) defines a person with a disability as (a) someone with a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities; (b) someone who has a record of such impairment; and (c) a person who is regarded as having such impairment (2024). In 2004, Wolanin and Steele wrote that SWD were beginning to work toward equal opportunity in higher education. However, Guilbaud et al. (2021) and Cooper (2021) found that, while the ADA, Sections 504 and 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, the Higher Education Act (HEA), the Technology-Related Assistance for Individuals with Disabilities Act (TRIAID), the Assistive Tech Act, and the 21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act (CVAA) have all been put into place to provide legal protection for SWD, they do not include specific ways to determine the legal requirements for accessible online courses in higher education. Nor do these legal programs provide specific guidance or standards to ensure legal compliance in accessible online course delivery (Cooper, 2021; Guilbaud et al., 2021).

The federal laws surrounding disability are based on the medical model of disability which defines persons with disabilities in terms of their impairments and the obstacles and barriers to full inclusion in higher education (Wolanin & Steele, 2004). The social model of disability considers persons with disabilities as full members of society who are not to be stigmatized or marginalized while participating in all aspects of the social environment (Wolanin & Steele, 2004). Since disability is considered a natural part of human experience, the social model views the "disabling" environment as one with artificial barriers which fails to meet the needs of persons with disabilities (Wolanin & Steele, 2004). This social model of disability states that law and policy objectives are not to "fix" people with disabilities but to recognize the

obstacles to opportunities are the things that need to be identified and "repaired" (Wolanin & Steele, 2004).

The importance of legal rights for equality for students with disability is recognized as part of their full integration as part of the diversity in the higher education environment (Hosking, 2008). Higher education institutions, being voluntary unlike K-12 levels, can terminate SWD for being unable to maintain a standard level of academic performance, as long as those students disclose their disability and that the accommodations they receive are considered reasonable (Wolanin & Steele, 2004). A significant barrier to success in higher education for SWD is the academic climate which demands a high level of academic performance which may not acknowledge additional time demands for self-care and activities of daily living (Wolanin & Steele, 2004).

In 1998, the Higher Education Act was reauthorized and, in part, enacted a new federal program, *Demonstration Projects to Ensure SWD Receive a Quality Higher Education* with the purpose of supporting projects providing technical assistance and professional development to improve and enhance the higher education experience for SWD. The Higher Education Act was most recently renewed in 2008, officially expired in 2013, but has been extended while its renewal is being debated in Congress (<https://www.aacrao.org/advocacy/issues/higher-education-act>).

Phillips et al. (2012) noted that in a survey of colleges and universities in 2010, 17% of institutions had no formal policies for ADA compliance with their online courses. In their 2016 study, While Wynants and Dennis (2017) noted that faculty members often do not have sufficient knowledge of legal requirements for accessibility compliance, Huss and Eastep (2016) discussed that the problem at many higher education institutions offering online courses was the uncertainty about exactly what is required to be ADA and Section 504 compliant and the question of which department at the institution is responsible for making online courses and websites accessible to SWD. If faculty members are considered the main point of contact with

the institution of higher education for SWD, then the importance of their knowledge of course accessibility is pivotal in meeting student needs and avoiding legal issues (Cooper, 2021; Huss & Eastep, 2016).

In response to a common belief about SWD in higher education, Wolanin and Steele (2004) noted that evidence is lacking to substantiate the belief that students inflate or outright lie about their disability status; in their discussion of the court case of *Elizabeth Guckenberger et al v. Boston University* in 1997, it was found that there were no documented cases where disability status was fabricated. In the college admissions cases in 2023 where students were found to have lied on their applications, disability status was not found to be a status that was fabricated (<https://www.intelligent.com/6-in-10-college-students-lied-on-their-applications/>).

Academic Accommodations

Academic accommodations for college SWD have traditionally been comprised of structural modifications, time extensions, transportation assistance, technology, and personal assistance. While these accommodations may meet the criteria for inclusive services required by the ADA and the Rehabilitation Act, Sections 504 and 508 (Buggey, 2000; Wolanin & Steele, 2004), today's students are asking for, and finding their own, accommodations that are not only relevant to their needs (Terras et al., 2015; Toutain, 2019), but which will aid them in their ability to graduate from college (Terras et al., 2020). A lack of accommodations can cause SWD to have a suboptimal higher education experience and can cause delays in degree completion (Lister et al., 2021).

Academic accommodations in a college setting must be efficacious and personalized (Buggey, 2000; Kurth & Mellard, 2006; Wolanin & Steele, 2004) whether managed through a Disability Services Center (DSC) or obtained by the student; the problem is that often students receive minimal or standardized assistance without making sure the accommodation is individualized to meet the student's specific needs (Buggey, 2000; Yssel et al., 2016). Online education relies heavily on written text, posing particular challenges to students with difficulty in

writing (Richardson, 2015) if they don't have access to speech recognition software. Roberts, et al. found that students had a variety of difficulties in adapting to an online course format including problems with concentration making it hard to keep "on task" (2011, p. 246) and medication "affecting their ability to think clearly" (2011, p. 246). Online courses can allow for standing, lying down, or otherwise changing positions while completing class assignments. Terras et al. (2015) while Roberts et al. (2011) noted that using a specific technological device might be the only accommodation a student needs to succeed in an online class.

Buggey (2000) and Paist (1995) both noted that in the [then] new field of online higher education instructors have to consider how to enable SWD to be able to participate fully in their online courses. In addition, Cooper (2021) mentioned that instructors have to stay aware of updates and new technology that will improve the online experience for SWD. Including SWD in higher education course planning can change attitudes in both students and instructors, leading to increased tolerance and empathy for those students who are different (Buggey, 2000). Reasonable accommodations do not have to significantly change or modify course curriculum nor do they have to cause a financial or administrative burden to the institution (Wolanin & Steele, 2004).

SWD are required to disclose their disabilities and have to provide proof of their disability, often at their own expense and usually more than once throughout the accommodation process throughout their academic years (Wolanin & Steele, 2004). Accommodations are usually accessed by students through a campus DSC (O'Shea & Meyer, 2016) and these centers are often used as the liaison between students and faculty (O'Shea & Meyer, 2016). New college students need to be able to identify appropriate accommodations for themselves (Kurth & Mellard, 2006) and advocate for those accommodations, either via the university's DSC (Kurth & Mellard, 2006; O'Shea & Meyer, 2016) or directly from faculty members (Terras, et al., 2015).

The most common academic accommodation discussed in the references located for this literature review is time flexibility, whether in class attendance modifications (Terras et al.,

2015; Wolantin & Steele, 2004; Yssel, et al., 2016), for extensions to completing assignments (Giroux et al., 2020), or to extending testing time (Terras, et al., 2015). The higher education system is focused on deadlines (Lund et al., 2014). When setting up a flexible time accommodation, the importance of communication between students and faculty is stressed by Lund et al. (2014) and Terras et al. (2015). However, the time pressure on SWD can, even with accommodations, be overwhelming and time flexibility might not be helpful, as illustrated by a student in a Yssel et al.'s study: "If I don't know the answer, putting on more time isn't going to really help me" (2016, p. 388).

Faculty members define the standards and expect unchallenged control over course content; accommodations can be seen as a threat to those academic standards, values, and authority, as well as the faculty perception of academic freedom (Parsloe & Smith, 2022; Wolantin & Steele, 2004). Faculty members may resent their inability to gain access to the specifics of a student's disability or to review the appropriateness of the accommodation (Wolantin & Steele, 2004). Ignorance, fear, and resentment can create resistance to the concept of disability accommodations in faculty members (Wolantin & Steele, 2004). Faculty members may not be able to determine the appropriateness of the accommodation, leading to instructor frustration and resistance towards any level of accommodation (Wolantin & Steele, 2004).

Accommodation Funding

Funding for accommodations is not often mentioned in research, but Schreuer and Sachs (2014) noted that worldwide economics can mean that costs associated with university accommodations must be proven efficacious in order to be considered for continued support. Higher education institutions have difficulty making what are considered to be time-consuming and costly accommodations for SWD (Lister et al., 2021). SWD can be perceived as wasting scarce educational resources (Giroux et al., 2016). Increased workloads with online SWD do not always mean adequate compensation and evaluation for faculty members (Hsiao et al., 2019; Hunt et al., 2014; Huss & Eastep, 2016). Huss and Eastep (2016) found that 26% of faculty

members felt that their institution lacked financial resources for developing accessible online courses while 58% stated that they lacked compensated time to make their current online courses fully accessible. Moreover, faculty members could not see spending time or money in adapting course materials (Huss & Eastep, 2016), especially if they had never had a student with disabilities in their courses (Phillips et al., 2012).

Huss and Eastep (2016) noted that many institutions do not have the budget to update and maintain websites and course content to meet the continually changing needs of their students; since the inaccessibility of websites is only important to a small portion of students, it is easy for higher education institutions to allow website updates to fall lower on the budget's priority list.

Universal Design and Inclusivity

Another topic gaining mention in accommodation research is the reality that just as all types of campus-goers can use ramps for easy access to buildings and then use elevators to reach the upper floors, all types of students can utilize the principles of Universal Design (Altowairiki, 2023; Bartz, 2020; Giroux, et al., 2016; Kurth & Mellard, 2006; Lorenzo-Lledo et al., 2020; Schreuer & Sachs, 2014; Terras, et al., 2015). The idea behind the concept of universal design is that the higher education setting “be designed to accommodate all kinds of users and learners and so ameliorate the concerns of post-secondary institutions” (Schreuer & Sachs, 2014, p. 29). Lorenzo-Lledo et al. (2020) stated that the goal of higher education must be to promote inclusive education because success does not just depend upon the student; particularly in the case of the SWD, resources to provide a quality education must be made available to the SWD.

The principles of UDL are designed to provide equitable access to higher education for all students and faculty are required to adapt and revise their teaching methods in response to the needs of all students, particularly in the online higher education learning environment (Lorenzo-Lledo et al., 2020). Instructors need to make efforts to have inclusive seminars and lectures, considering individual learning conditions of all students, not just those with disabilities (Bartz, 2020). Altowairiki stated that because online learners have such a large variety in their "abilities,

experiences, expertise, languages, cultures, learning styles, and non-academic commitments" (2023, p. 297), online learning must look beyond the obvious matter of accessing course materials. Instructors and students must use a wide range of interactions to encourage growth from the learning experience (Altowairiki, 2020; Bartz, 2020; Lorenzo-Lledo et al., 2020). Using the principles of UDL, educators can design that learning experience to be flexible as well as to meet the rigors of academia (Altowairiki, 2023).

Students and instructors have positive attitudes towards UDL and inclusivity (Altowairiki, 2023; Bartz, 2020). For instructors, UDL provides multiple teaching methods for instructors to implement, all of which are flexible and adaptable to student needs (Altowairiki, 2023). However, Altowairiki (2023) and Lister et al. (2021) noted that for instructors to be successful at using the principles of UDL, they must receive extensive and continuous training on their implementation. In addition, implementing UDL principles in higher education relies on the institution being willing to facilitate the process by including faculty incentives, encouraging faculty to invest their time in training, recognizing excellence in faculty teaching, fostering a culture of camaraderie and collaboration among faculty members, and providing resources and ongoing support (Altowairiki, 2023). Bartz (2020) reported that when lecturers use the principles of UDL, e.g., recognizing and considering the different learning styles of all of their students while modifying or adjusting their lectures, seminars, and course materials to be as inclusive as possible, students report better engagement and more feelings of inclusion. Incorporating UDL into the online learning environment also requires intensive knowledge of the "relationship between UDL, technology, and online pedagogy" (Altowairiki, 2023, p. 300) in order to facilitate the process of online learning and to support instructors and students in achieving success in the online environment.

Students with Disabilities in Higher Education

Ohrstedt et al. (2024) made the point that with the increase in diversity among students in higher education, more SWD are now attending universities and colleges; faculty and student

communication and relationships are especially important in this environment, with flexibility, interaction, and inclusivity being emphasized. There is, however, the well-documented phenomenon of SWD preferring not to disclose their disability status even in the online environment due to the fear of stigmatization and marginalization from faculty (Pearson & Boskovich, 2024; Terras et al., 2014; Verdinelli & Kutner, 2015). Anderson et al. (2024) emphasized that only 37% of SWD actually disclosed to their higher education institution that they had a disability. Though this dissertation is focused on faculty members who work with online graduate students, it is important to be aware that most previous research on the topic of faculty attitudes towards SWD as well as faculty attitudes towards student accommodations has focused mainly on undergraduate students and faculty in brick-and-mortar institutions (Banks, 2019; Be, 2019; Brown & Leigh, 2020; Steele, 2020).

Undergraduate Students

Many of the issues noted in the studies on undergraduate SWD also impact graduate SWD. For example, instructors may have negative perceptions of SWD (Koren & Evans-El, 2020; Lund et al., 2020; Sniatecki et al., 2015). Accommodations provided by the university may not be appropriate to student needs (Galef, 2024; Perez-Esteban et al., 2023), while some instructors are unwilling to provide course accommodations at all (Koren & Evans-El, 2020; Lund et al., 2020; Sniatecki et al., 2015). When faculty members have the final authority on whether or not to allow accommodations for their classes, students may not be able to complete the required coursework (Bé, 2019; Lefler et al., 2023; McCarron, 2020; Quinn, 2024).

Some higher education institutions may marginalize SWD by having unreasonable productivity expectations of those students (Brown & Leigh, 2020; Brown & Ramlackhan, 2021; Koren & Evans-El, 2020; Olsen et al., 2020). Adefila (2020) describes attitudinal barriers (e.g., stigma, fear, prejudice, and ignorance) on the part of faculty members as being additionally disabling for SWD. When faculty members have negative attitudes towards SWD, they are not as likely to provide the assistance those students need to succeed in higher education (Lombardi et

al., 2011; Lund et al., 2020; Sniatecki et al., 2015; Toutain, 2019; Wynants & Dennis, 2017; Xavier & Meneses, 2021).

Graduate Students

Beattie et al. (2021) noted the complexity of roles that all graduate students experience in the online higher education environment, particularly in the blending of personal and student roles and the difficulty of balancing the conflicting demands between them. Supporting online graduate SWD requires cooperation and collaboration from students, faculty, and the higher education institution, though students must be assessed and assisted on an individual basis (Anderson et al., 2024). Graduate students “who have excelled in traditional classroom-based learning but have difficulties with hands-on clinical education have become more likely to challenge their dismissals from these programs” (Lee, 2014, p.44). A student may need extended time for assignments or exams while in a classroom setting, but not during an internship program (Lund, et al., 2014). On the other side of the efficacy issue, Lund, et al., (2014)’s study of graduate psychology students found the participants to be very satisfied with a mentor match program which paired mentors with disabilities to SWD during their training. In the Yssel, et al. (2016) study, students praised the efforts of faculty members to apply requested accommodations to their classes. However, graduate SWD, especially at the PhD level, often work closely one-on-one with their faculty advisors and committees (T. Lehan, 2024, personal communication). If the faculty member has ableist attitudes, they may be unable to give their student who has a disability the support required to complete their graduate program (T. Lehan, 2024, personal communication).

Faculty Attitudes Towards Students with Disabilities in Higher Education

Faculty attitudes towards SWD vary depending on their experiences (Bartz, 2020; Wynants & Dennis, 2017; Yssel et al., 2016). According to Yssel et al. (2016), faculty members seem to focus on a student’s disability rather than their abilities, often have lower expectations of a disabled student, or may even encourage a student with disabilities to switch to a less rigorous

major. Giroux et al. (2019) stated that faculty members, who often do not feel adequately prepared to assist students with chronic illnesses, need to overcome skepticism about invisible disabilities. Faculty expect disabled students to have knowledge of all types of accommodations as well as being able to use every type of assistive technology available (Aguirre & Duncan, 2013; Phillips et al., 2012). In addition, some faculty find accommodations inconvenient, disruptive (Giroux et al., 2016), and unfair to non-disabled students (Giroux et al., 2016; Wynants & Dennis, 2017).

Faculty attitudes can include resentment towards a system which often does not allow for questions about a student's disability, especially in the instance of "invisible" disabilities, which can increase skepticism towards all SWD (Wolanin & Steele, 2004). Faculty attitudes and the academic culture of resistance and skepticism rather than collaboration and cooperation towards SWD can be major barriers to success in higher education institutions (Bartz, 2020; Lorenzo-Lledo et al., 2020; Wolanin & Steele, 2004). Faculty may be uncertain about how to interact with SWD or fearful of doing the wrong thing and being held legally liable for themselves or the institution (Wolanin & Steele, 2004).

Students describe being excluded from group projects because faculty did not feel that they could fully participate due to their disability (Lorenzo-Lledo et al., 2020; Yssel et al., 2016). Students do not want to disclose their disability because they do not want to be judged by faculty members (Hughes et al., 2016; Kurth & Mellard, 2006). In addition, some disability types may be viewed as less deserving of accommodations, leading to negative attitudes towards all SWD (Deckoff-Jones & Duell, 2018; Wynants & Dennis, 2017).

Negative faculty attitudes begin with a lack of knowledge, training, and understanding about SWD (Lorenzo-Lledo et al., 2020; McCarron, 2020; Milman, 2020; Perez-Esteban et al., 2023; Svendby, 2020). When faculty members have negative attitudes towards SWD, they are not as likely to provide the assistance those students need (Lombardi et al., 2011; Lund et al., 2020; Sniatecki et al., 2015; Toutain, 2019; Wynants & Dennis, 2017; Xavier & Meneses, 2021).

Faculty report feelings of pity, awkwardness, embarrassment, and nervousness about student with disabilities (Aguirre & Duncan, 2013; Giroux et al., 2016).

Wynants and Dennis (2017) noted that faculty have more negative attitudes towards students with psychiatric and attention disabilities than with physical disabilities. Students with sensory disabilities were noted by faculty to be more of a challenge in providing accommodations (Phillips et al., 2012). Faculty members may not consider disabilities as a form of diversity, which may add to negative attitudes towards SWD (Wynants & Dennis, 2017). Lack of knowledge of the various types of disabilities may lead to faculty perceptions of lowering academic standards by making accommodations for SWD (Betts, 2014; Hsiao et al., 2019; Wynants & Dennis, 2017). Wynants and Dennis (2017) also noted that cultural perspectives can negatively affect faculty perceptions of SWD.

In Hunt et al. (2014) instructors described their concerns for teaching disabled students in online courses in terms of problems with access to needed technology, difficulties in communication without in-person cues (Phillips et al., 2012), lack of sufficient communication with students (Hunt et al. 2014); and having to adjust to various levels of student abilities. Students who do not disclose their disability at the beginning of a course may fall behind and then expect the instructor to provide accommodations to get them through the course (Aguirre & Duncan, 2013; Phillips et al., 2012). Phillips et al. (2012) found that instructors either perceive students as wanting to self-manage their accommodations or believing that students choose not to ask for accommodations at all.

Rocco discussed the potential for dilemmas in providing accommodates to college SWD, the first being “if one believes an accommodation simply provides an alternative format for learning” (2000, p.388) then there is no reason to avoid giving students accommodations to match their learning format. Alternatively, if one “believes accommodations somehow are like cheat sheets-an attempt to make up for a lack of studying or inability to learn, then all accommodations are suspect” (Rocco, 2000, p. 388). Faculty members repeatedly stated the need

for fairness towards all students; with the implication that no one group of students should be getting special treatment (Rocco, 2000). Bartz (2020) reported that when lecturers use the principles of UDL, e.g., recognizing and considering the different learning styles of all of their students while modifying or adjusting their lectures, seminars, and course materials to be as inclusive as possible, students report better engagement and more feelings of inclusion.

The importance of communication between students and faculty members on exactly what is needed when setting up an accommodation is also stressed in the research (Lister et al., 2021; Lund et al., 2014; Phillips et al., 2012; Terras et al., 2015; Verdinelli, & Kutner, 2016). Lund et al. (2014) observed that university programs encourage students to work directly with faculty members and program supervisors to manage needed accommodations. However, Huss and Eastep (2016) found that most faculty believe that the DSO should be the only university office that is responsible for student accommodations. When faculty members are unfamiliar with specific disability challenges, appropriate accommodations are not made (Hsiao et al., 2019; Kurth & Mellard, 2006; Terras et al., 2015; Verdinelli & Kutner, 2016).

Faculty members often make an assumption that SWD need help, offering assistance even when it is not requested by the student (Rocco, 2000). Some examples included giving students notes from class lectures, changing a student's seat so that they are closer to the front of the classroom, or recommending a different course which might have easier requirements (Rocco, 2000). Actions such as these might be considered advocacy for the student with disability or they might be interpreted as paternalism/maternalism, depending on the student's reaction (Rocco, 2000). Altowairiki (2023) noted that there can be misconceptions that UDL is only meant for SWD when it is truly a method of inclusivity for all students.

Giroux, et al. found that orientation and continuing education for faculty which provides knowledge on the variables of chronic illness, as well as information on flexibility in accommodations will provide an environment that promotes "full participation in the postsecondary environment" (2016, p. 414). Making the instructor-student relationship one of

mutual respect will assist in providing an effective learning environment for SWD (Terras, et al., 2015). “Faculty need to recognize that no two days will be the same for students with chronic illnesses and that some of the most helpful accommodations are discretion, understanding, and adaptability” (Giroux, et al., 2016, p.411)

Faculty Workload and Training

Faculty members may not be sure if they have the technological knowledge, time, or support to handle online accommodations (Altowairiki, 2023; Hsiao et al., 2019; Huss & Eastep, 2016; Wynants & Dennis, 2017). In Phillips et al.’s (2012) study, instructors who were not sure of their abilities to handle a student requesting online accommodations stated that they did not have enough experience in providing accommodations. Faculty members are often expected to provide notice to students of course accommodations and accessibility on their syllabi, as well as providing transcripts and/or captions for any videos without having adequate training in how to make adaptations of their course materials (Guilbaud et al., 2021).

Both Phillips et al. (2012) and Yssel et al. (2016) stressed the need for faculty training in disability accommodations, with an emphasis on evidence-based resources and instructional strategies. Inadequate equipment, support, and training were all mentioned as faculty technological concerns by researchers such as Guilbaud et al. (2021) and Hunt et al. (2014). According to Altowairiki (2023), implementing UDL in higher education requires policy and vision at the institutional level, making UDL part of the institution's strategic plans and providing resources and rewards to promote its use. Guilbaud et al. (2021) mentioned that faculty often prefer training that is less time-intensive, customized to specific needs and learning styles, and available at convenient times. Anderson et al. emphasized that there is a "need for faculty to be proactively educated about and for disability and the role they play in supporting graduate SWD is critical (2024, p. 16).

Summary

This literature review began with a review of the dissertation problem and purpose statements followed by a full description of how the literature search was performed. Next was an explanation of the dissertation's theoretical framework and including significant definitions. The discussion covered the reasons CDT was chosen over other theoretical frameworks and how CDT guided the development of the problem statement, purpose statement, and research questions. The literature review continued with a review of disability in higher education including a short history of online education for SWD, the legal aspects involved in the higher education environment, the topic of academic accommodations, and the role of graduate SWD in higher education and concludes with a thorough description of the role of faculty members and their experiences with SWD.

As observed by Philips et al. (2012), more than half of instructors (65%) 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. Faculty describe the need for initial training on specific disabilities as well as the need for regular refresher sessions, possibly included as professional development or continuing education courses (Guilbaud et al., 2021; Hsiao et al., 2019; Phillips et al., 2012; Terras et al., 2015; Wynants & Dennis, 2017). Phillips et al. (2012) found that instructors believed that making appropriate accommodations for online SWD was very important, but that students also must be aware of their responsibility to report their disabilities and to request accommodations. Current ADA laws and statutes do not provide guidance or standards to inform institutions of higher education how equal access is to be provided for online SWD (Guilbaud et al., 2021). SWD often have their need for accommodations questioned by peers and faculty, thus having the stigma of having their disability equated with lack of competence (Deckoff-Jones & Duell, 2018; Dorrack et al., 2005).

Previous research on the topic of faculty attitudes towards SWD as well as faculty attitudes towards student accommodations has focused mainly on undergraduate students and

faculty in brick-and-mortar institutions (Banks, 2019; Bé, 2019; Brown & Leigh, 2020; Steele, 2020). As more graduate SWD move to online education due to the added flexibility of the online course format (Perez-Esteban et al., 2023; Phillips et al., 2015; Verdinelli & Kutner, 2015), additional research on faculty members who work with online graduate SWD is warranted. Also, since graduate SWD depend on course accommodations to complete their class assignments (Aguirre & Duncan, 2013; Druckman et al., 2021; Hsaio et al., 2021; Lefler et al., 2023; Mowreader, 2024), understanding the attitudes of faculty members towards those students and their course accommodations is needed to improve teaching practices which facilitate better conditions for higher academic performance and program completion (Guilbaud et al., 2021; Lomellini et al., 2011; Lorenzo-Lledó et al., 2020; Mowreader, 2024; Perez-Esteban et al., 2023; Phillips et al., 2012).

While Hall commented “critical disability theory is significantly aimed toward exposing and analyzing ableism” (2019, p. 5), Merriam and Tisdell (2015) stated current critical theory research requires a goal of critiquing and challenging, transforming and empowering for change. In looking at CDT through the critical theory framework, this dissertation will discuss the current reality of online faculty attitudes towards graduate SWD and identify the actions which might be needed to change that reality by describing achievable and practical goals.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The problem addressed in this study was that graduate SWD may not receive appropriate support to complete their online degree programs (Aguirre & Duncan, 2013; Banks 2019; Lund et al., 2020) and students may have to deal with instructors who are unwilling to provide support because those instructors have negative perceptions of SWD (Koren & Evans-El, 2020; Lund et al., 2020; Sniatecki et al., 2015). In some cases, the accommodations provided by the university may not be appropriate to student needs (Galef, 2024; Perez-Esteban et al., 2023), while some instructors are unwilling to provide course accommodations at all (Koren & Evans-El, 2020; Lund et al., 2020; Sniatecki et al., 2015). Also, faculty members often have the final authority on whether or not to allow those accommodations for their classes (Bé, 2019; Lefler et al., 2023; McCarron, 2020; Quinn, 2024).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the attitudes of faculty members who work with online graduate SWD toward the appropriateness of accommodations and their personal approach to providing or withholding support. This research study was a logical response to the problem of online graduate SWD needing support from faculty members in order to complete their degree programs. When faculty members have negative attitudes towards SWD, they are not as likely to provide the assistance those students need (Lombardi et al., 2011; Lund et al., 2020; Sniatecki et al., 2015; Toutain, 2019; Wynants & Dennis, 2017; Xavier & Meneses, 2021).

Chapter 3 begins with a description of the research methodology and design, followed by an explanation of the archival study including its population and sample, its instrumentation, and its study procedure. A detailed description of the proposed data analysis is included. Study assumptions, limitation, and delimitations are defined, and the chapter concludes with complete details on ethical assurances and the IRB procedures which will be followed.

Research Methodology and Design

The dissertation researcher conducted a qualitative content analysis of archival data to answer questions investigating faculty members' attitudes about, and support for, online graduate SWD. Archival data is data which has been collected for a previous research study (Bloomberg, 2023). The original study was done in response to a literature review which called for additional studies on faculty perceptions of working with SWD in the online setting and at the graduate level (Guilbaud et al., 2021; Hsiao et al., 2019; Hunt et al., 2014; Perez-Esteban et al., 2023; Phillips et al., 2012; Wynants & Dennis, 2017). The decision to use archival data for this dissertation was made in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the archival data in ways which are different from the original study (Bloomberg, 2023; Heaton, J., 2004; Hinds et al., 2013).

Seminal research from Heaton (2004) and Hinds et al. (2013) states secondary research is done to re-interpret findings from the original study, offering the researcher the prospect to find new insights and generate new knowledge. In this dissertation, the researcher sought a more in-depth understanding of the archival data not only to gain additional insights on faculty attitudes of working with graduate SWD in the online setting, but also to examine the faculty feelings towards the accommodations used by graduate SWD in the online setting. In addition, the dissertation researcher was looking to discover methods which faculty members are using, as well as additional techniques they need, to assist their online graduate SWD.

Qualitative archival data content analysis can uncover powerful quotes which may be able to make significant impacts on those who are in charge of making systemic changes (Lund et al., 2023). The dissertation researcher wanted to generate new knowledge of ways in which the online graduate school experience can be enhanced for both the faculty members and the SWD in order to potentially increase graduation rates for online SWD. Using archival data for a secondary analysis also gave the researcher the opportunity to study a potentially sensitive topic without having direct contact between the researcher and the research participants (Bloomberg,

2023; Heng et al., 2018; Hinds et al., 2013; Lund et al., 2023). The topic of faculty attitudes of working with online graduate SWD can be a sensitive one for faculty members, students, and the larger higher education institution (Wynants et al., 2017; Yssel et al., 2018). Therefore, archival data was an appropriate data source for the focus of the dissertation research study.

There are several alternative methodologies and designs which could have been used in place of the content analysis which was chosen for this current study. Because the archival data is qualitative, except for its population demographics, a quantitative design was not considered for this dissertation. The researcher did contemplate performing a mixed methods study using both quantitative and qualitative methods concurrently in this study, which could have provided a more “in-depth and comprehensive understanding of the research problem” (Bloomberg, 2023, p. 70). However, after a review of the archival data, it was determined that there was not enough quantitative material available to provide such an analysis. In addition, the dissertation researcher was not completely assured of their ability to conduct quantitative data analyses; according to Bloomberg (2023), a researcher who is contemplating a mixed methods research design is often more comfortable with one or the other type of methodology and it is recommended that they stay within their philosophical and practical research design method.

Two other types of qualitative research methodologies and analyses were considered for this dissertation: case study and narrative analysis. Case study, which is an extensive examination of a specific, individual, bounded, phenomenon or case (Bloomberg, 2023), was determined to not be an appropriate method to use in answering this study’s research questions. Often, a case study is used in a longitudinal research design (Bloomberg, 2023); this dissertation utilizes archival, or static, data making a longitudinal research design not feasible.

A narrative inquiry research design which is focused on interpreting the stories or narratives told by the study participants (Bloomberg, 2023) was also considered for this dissertation. However, after careful comparison between narrative inquiry and content analysis, the decision was made to use content analysis. Narrative inquiry research analysis requires in-

depth answers from the study participants (Bloomberg, 2023); the original study design did not provide the study participants an opportunity to expand on their responses to the questions in its survey.

Population and Sample

The current section expanded on the information about the archival study's population presented in Chapter 1. First, the relevant US population statistics were described. Second, a description of the university used in the archival study was described. Third, specific demographics of the sample that was obtained from the faculty population at the archival study, were presented. Finally, a description was provided of how the participants in the archival study were recruited.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2022) gave the total number of faculty members at higher education institutions as 1,507,641. Of those, 842,407 faculty members were employed full-time and 665,234 were part-time employees. Though most faculty members, 1,011,869, were working at for-profit institutions, 495,772 faculty members were employed at non-profit institutions.

This dissertation used archival data from an online survey done from April 2022-May 2022 at a completely online, private, not-for-profit, graduate-focused university. The university was chosen because the researchers were all affiliated with the institution, three as faculty, one as student. The university employed a one-to-one model, meaning each class was composed of one student and one faculty member. At the time of the original study, there were 607 faculty members working for, and approximately 16,516 students enrolled at, the online university.

Demographics

Since archival data was used, no participant data was collected for the current study. The population of interest in the original study was the 607 part-time and full-time faculty members who were employed at the university during the study period while the sample population was the 130 faculty members who responded to the email survey (21.45%). The large sample of

qualitative data in the original study was desired to enable the researchers to reach data saturation. Only archival data from the original study was used in this dissertation.

The archival study population is appropriate for this dissertation research because the population understands the dissertation problem that graduate SWD may not receive appropriate support to complete their online degree programs. The archival study population is appropriate for addressing the problem because the population of interest were faculty members at an online graduate institution of higher education. The archival study population is aligned with the purpose of this dissertation which is to explore the attitudes of faculty members who work with online graduate SWD towards the SWDs, towards the appropriateness of accommodations, and the faculty members' personal approach to providing or withholding support. The original study population has the experience to answer the dissertation research questions which ask questions investigating faculty members' attitudes about, and support for, online graduate SWD.

Finally, recruitment for the original study was done via an email, including the electronic Survey Instrument which included the Participant Consent Form (See Appendix A), which was sent to the 607 faculty members; a reminder email was sent two weeks later. The dissertation researcher was one of the original study researchers and thus had access to the archival data.

Instrumentation

The survey instrument used in the archival study (See Appendix A) was adapted from a survey instrument used in a research study done by Phillips et al. in 2012. Permission was obtained from Dr. Amy Phillips from the original researchers to adapt the original survey instrument (See Appendix B). The original researchers adapted the survey instrument to meet the requirements of the archival study, making sure it was appropriate for the university where the research was being conducted and included questions determined from the comprehensive literature review. Other than demographic questions, the study questions were primarily open-ended and 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 SWD. The survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete via Qualtrics and can be found in Appendix A. The permission letter from Dr. Amy Phillips can be found in Appendix B.

Study Procedures

Data collection in the original study was done through Qualtrics. An email which contained the electronic survey instrument which included the Participant Consent Form was sent to the 607 faculty members at the online university; a reminder email was sent two weeks later. Archival research does not require primary collection from a live sample population of human subjects since it is the analysis of secondary data previously collected. The dissertation researcher was part of the original study researcher team and thus had access to the archival data.

Data Analysis

According to Bhavnani et al. (2014), critical theory research is an understanding of social and power inequalities; the researcher, while conducting critical theory research, used reflexive techniques throughout the process in order that their relationship with the topic framed the practice as well as the theory of the research. Qualitative critical research must not only make the essence and cause of the social phenomenon being studied conceptually and analytically clear, the relationship between the essence and society must be established (Bhavnani et al., 2014). In addition, any contradictions within the social phenomenon must be identified and the reflexive practices must note the interrelations between the data generation and the data analysis and the challenge to the existing social power relationships (Bhavnani et al., 2014).

According to Kuckartz & Rädiker (2023), using the hermeneutic approach to qualitative content analysis means to look at both the individual pieces of data and as the sum of those parts to understand the entire text. Any attempt at understanding the text to be examined means an expectation of preconceptions of the meanings of the text on the part of the researcher (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023). In the hermeneutics rules of understanding qualitative data there is no right or

wrong interpretation of the data, there is only the approximately suitable interpretation of data by the researcher (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023).

Qualitative content analysis is a systematic and carefully controlled analysis of different types of data (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023). For this dissertation, qualitative content analysis of the data included descriptive analysis of demographic information while the responses from the open-ended questions asked in the archival survey instrument were analyzed using qualitative content analysis coding methods (Bloomberg, 2023; Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023; Saldaña, 2021). The full data analyses process involved content analysis, examining consistencies, and creating categories into which survey question responses were placed (Bloomberg, 2023; Krippendorff, 2019; Saldaña, 2021). The researcher did not choose to use a specific coding scheme, preferring to use a descriptive approach to the coding process by reflecting on what each piece of data meant prior to placing that data into a specific category (Bloomberg, 2023).

The dissertation researcher also utilized some of Kuckartz & Rädiker's (2023) rules of understanding qualitative content analysis including: using the reflexive journal to examine any preconceptions and assumptions of the research questions, paying attention to topics during the first reading of the data, and identifying new and unexpected topics discovered in the analysis process. Qualitative coding methods are an iterative process; there were multiple analyses done throughout the data analysis (Bloomberg, 2023; Saldaña, 2021). The dissertation researcher chose to utilize manual qualitative coding using Excel spreadsheets and multiple-colored sticky notes. Saldaña (2021) and Bloomberg (2023) noted that for the beginning qualitative researcher, learning a coding software program can be more difficult and time-consuming than using manual coding methods. The role of the researcher is to carefully and thoughtfully analyze the archival data using the appropriate coding methods described in order to answer the research questions with the ultimate goal of addressing the identified problem.

Assumptions

The first assumption associated with this research study was that the original researchers displayed integrity during the data collection, particularly in presenting the data in a nonbiased manner. In addition, an assumption was made that the study participants honestly and thoroughly answered the questions. The original researchers also assumed that the small study population adequately represented the larger population. Finally, the dissertation researcher assumed that all research questions would be thoroughly answered from the analysis of the archival data.

Limitations

The use of archival data can often mean that there will be an inability to apply research findings to a larger population (Bloomberg, 2023). Archival data collection was done in a specific timeframe and in a specific higher education institution which can limit its ability for application to present day and its application to other higher education institutions. Potential biases of the original researchers are limitations which also must be considered when examining archival data. The original researchers listed their limitations as being their status as disabled faculty members and a graduate SWD, as well as being faculty members and a student at the university where the study was conducted.

The overriding limitation in qualitative research, according to Bloomberg (2023), is research bias. The dissertation researcher has several biases that might have affected the study results including the fact that the researcher was a student at the university at which the original study was conducted. In addition, the dissertation researcher is an SWD and has had both positive and negative experiences with faculty members in the course of her studies both at the university where she received her master's degree and at the university which was the site of the original study.

To mitigate the potential for identification of study participants by the dissertation researcher a complete removal of all identifying markers from the original study data was done prior to its release from the original researcher team to the dissertation researcher (Lehan, T.,

personal communication, 2024). Mitigation of the personal limitations of the dissertation researcher will be done by reflexive methods including, but not limited to, reflexive journaling and extensive discussions with the dissertation chair.

Delimitations

Bloomberg (2023) stated that research study delimitation refers to the initial boundaries the researcher puts on their study. Seminal research from Heaton (2004) and Hinds et al. (2013) states that secondary or archival research is done to re-interpret findings from the original study. Delimitations in archival research state which specific archival data will be examined. In this study, the dissertation researcher determined that the boundaries of the dissertation study would include the entire data set from the original study, so there were no delimitations in using the entire archival dataset. Delimitations in archival research can include the potential for missing records or incomplete information within the archival data. The dissertation researcher confirmed with the lead researcher on the original study that all archival data was delivered to the dissertation researcher (Lehan, T., personal communication, 2024), so there are no known delimitations on the archival materials.

Ethical Assurances

The dissertation researcher was one of the original researchers from the archival study and thus already had access to the archival data set. The study received approval from NU's IRB on April 2, 2025 (see Appendix C), prior to beginning the data analysis. Because the study used archival data, there is no risk to participants. All identifying participant information was removed from the data prior to it being turned over to the researcher (Lehan, T., personal communication, 2024). The data is being kept on an encrypted, password protected flash drive which, when not being used, is locked in a secure filing cabinet. The data will be wiped from the flash drive and the flash drive will be destroyed five years after completion of the dissertation.

There were two potential areas of concern with confidentiality and bias: first, the original study was done at a medium-sized (approximately 16,700 students and 600 faculty members)

online university in the United States. The small archival qualitative data set (130 participants) might have been a concern for confidentiality (Lund et al., 2023), however there is a lack of direct contact between the original study and the secondary analysis (Bloomberg, 2023). Second, the topic of faculty attitudes of working with online graduate SWD can be a sensitive one for faculty members, students, and the larger higher education institutional environment (Wynants et al., 2017; Yssel et al., 2018).

The role of the researcher in a qualitative research study is one that uses an insider point of view. The researcher must be flexible while discovering and gaining understanding of the meaning of the experience (Bloomberg, 2023). The researcher must consider their personal viewpoints and remain reflective throughout the process (Bloomberg, 2023). Because the dissertation researcher is a SWD who is currently attending the university used in the original study, an active practice of reflexivity was used throughout the research process to prevent any biases from influencing the analysis or results (Bloomberg, 2023). Reflexivity included journaling, discussions with the dissertation chair, and meticulous recording-keeping of the decisions made during the analysis process (Bloomberg, 2023).

Summary

Chapter 3 began with the problem and purpose statements to give the context for the description of the research methodology and design, followed by an explanation of the archival data used in the dissertation including its population and sample, its instrumentation, and its study procedure. The qualitative content analysis of archival data aimed to answer questions investigating faculty members' attitudes about, and support for, online graduate SWD. Archival data was chosen for this dissertation in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the data in ways which are different from the original study (Bloomberg, 2023; Heaton, J., 2004; Hinds et al., 2013). The chapter continued with definitions and explanations of the study assumptions, limitations, and delimitations and concluded with complete details of ethical assurances and the

IRB procedures which was followed. Chapter 4 describes the results from the qualitative content analysis of the archival data.

Chapter 4: Findings

The problem addressed in this dissertation was that graduate SWD may not receive appropriate support to complete their online degree programs because they may have to deal with faculty members who are unwilling to provide support due to negative attitudes towards SWD. In addition, accommodations provided by the university may not be appropriate, faculty members may not be aware of specific accommodations needed by students, or faculty may not have been trained in ways to support graduate SWD. The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the attitudes of faculty members toward online graduate SWDs and their attitudes towards the appropriateness of accommodations for online graduate students, as well as to discover faculty members' methods of providing or withholding support. Gaining new knowledge about faculty attitudes towards graduate SWD and the accommodations that they use and need may enhance policies at online institutions, potentially increasing graduation rates among graduate SWD.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the trustworthiness of the data comprising the criteria of credibility: confirmability, dependability, and transferability, which define the concept of trustworthy qualitative data analysis (Bloomberg, 2023). This discussion is followed by the participant demographics, a description of the data analysis process, the results that were found during the data analysis process, and the interpretation of those findings. Using the framework of CDT, the following Research Questions guided the data analysis.

RQ1: What are faculty members' attitudes about working with online graduate students with disabilities?

RQ2: What are faculty members' viewpoints on accommodations for online graduate students with disabilities?

RQ3: What are the methods faculty members are using to assist online graduate students with disabilities and what additional instructional methods do they need?

Trustworthiness of the Data

The researcher used the strategies of thick, rich descriptions from the data; thorough journaling and careful reflexivity; and audit trails to meet the criteria of credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability that define the concept of trustworthiness in qualitative research (Bloomberg, 2023). When using secondary data, as was done in this dissertation, the researcher must also establish the viability and the quality of the data when looking into the concept of trustworthiness in qualitative data analysis (Bloomberg, 2023). Determining the authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and meaning of the data assisted the dissertation researcher in validating the trustworthiness of the data (Bloomberg, 2023).

Credibility

The qualitative criteria for trustworthiness begins with credibility which corresponds to internal validity in quantitative research (Bloomberg, 2023). Research strategies for credibility may seem duplicative with other trustworthiness criteria, however, that duplicity serves to enhance the overall trustworthiness of the research. The specific research strategies for credibility, according to Bloomberg (2023) include reflexive journaling; thick, rich description; triangulation between methods, data, and theory; seeking negative or unexpected incidents; participant checks; and peer review. Due to the use of archival data, participant checks and peer review strategies were not employed in this dissertation research.

Because this research used extant secondary archival data which were responses to anonymous survey questions, the researcher used a systemic approach to the data analysis process (Bloomberg, 2023). Saldaña (2021) mentions that in the content analysis process of determining categories and themes, there is no specific number of categories or themes necessary to achieve a coherent analysis. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) concur, stating that for analytic outcomes “the fewer the categories, the greater the level of abstraction, and the greater of ease with which you can communicate your findings to others” (p. 214).

Using Excel, the researcher reviewed each survey question response multiple times, first noting categories of responses then, when appropriate, identifying themes within those categories. Each survey question was reviewed separately, and the categories and themes were kept separate until all questions had been reviewed. The researcher continued the analysis process by choosing responses which matched the categories for each survey question. In addition, the researcher made sure to note instances where the survey responses challenged expectations and assumptions (Bloomberg, 2023). A reflective journal was also kept providing the researcher with the opportunity to carefully examine their personal biases and experiences while performing the data analysis (Bloomberg, 2023).

Confirmability

The concept of confirmability in qualitative research is concerned with making sure that the research findings are plainly developed from the data; therefore, the qualitative researcher must carefully check the data to make sure their study findings are able to be repeated by other researchers (Bloomberg, 2023). While confirmability corresponds to objectivity in quantitative research (Bloomberg, 2023; Creswell & Poth, 2018), this qualitative dissertation researcher acknowledged that their biases and prejudices may affect the data interpretation and attempted to mitigate their effect by providing descriptions of the methodological and analytical processes, as well as the coding scheme used. The researcher also engaged in reflective journaling throughout the dissertation.

Dependability

Though the dependability of a qualitative study is similar to reliability in quantitative data, it is not measurable by statistical methods. The researcher must demonstrate the stability and consistency of the data and whether or not the data provides adequate responses to the research questions (Bloomberg, 2023). Each step of the data analysis procedure is thoroughly explained and no details are left out of the explanatory process.

Transferability

The goal of qualitative research is to produce thick, rich descriptive context-relevant findings (Bloomberg, 2023) and those findings are then expected to be able to be applied in other settings and in broader contexts. The comparable quantitative terminology for transferability is external validity and the research strategies include thick description and the depth of information provided within the reporting of the results to assist future researchers in duplicating, or building upon, the research described. Though a qualitative researcher is not able to guarantee transferability, that is left up to the readers of the study (Bloomberg, 2023), the researcher is responsible for providing a complete description of their research procedure as well as the thick, rich descriptive content of their findings to aid the reader in their determination.

Finally, Creswell and Poth (2018) discussed the importance of reporting any negative case findings or nonconforming evidence to provide a realistic assessment as a validation strategy for qualitative data and the researcher took this into account while writing the results of the study. While both Bloomberg (2023) and Creswell and Poth (2018) mentioned the importance of using multiple researchers or a peer review process to establish trustworthiness of the research, the dissertation researcher must work alone, without this additional strategy for trustworthiness. The dissertation researcher was careful to keep this in mind while performing the data analysis process.

Participant Demographics

At the time of the original survey, there were 607 faculty members at the university; one hundred thirty of those faculty members (81 part time/49 full time) completed the survey instrument for a 21.45% response rate (Lehan et al., in press). It is important to note that the faculty members selected to participate in the initial research study which might have had a biased effect on their responses. On average, the faculty members who responded to the initial survey had 9.72 (SD=7.13) years of online teaching experience (Lehan et al., in press). They were currently working with an average of 2.13 (SD=1.78) students whom they knew had a disability (Lehan et al., in press). When asked to indicate all the ways they were made aware of

the students' disabilities, most faculty members (105/53.30%) selected the DSO, 82 (41.62%) said that they learned from the students themselves, while 10 (5.08%) selected "other" (in press). See Table 1 (Lehan et al., in press, p. 4) for the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1

Initial Research Study Participant Characteristics

Participant Characteristics	N	%
Employment Status		
Part time	81	62.3%
Full time	49	37.3%
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%

^aFaculty members could select all degree levels as well as all schools in which they taught. Reprinted from Faculty Members' Perceptions and Experiences of Working with Online Students with Disabilities by Lehan et al., in press. Open Praxis. Table 1, p. 4.

Data Analysis Process

Qualitative content analysis was used for the data analysis process. Qualitative content analysis is also known as textual analysis because unlike quantitative content analysis, nothing is counted (Bloomberg, 2023). The dissertation researcher chose to use manual coding techniques for the content analysis. While some research has shown that automated coding via a software program such as NVivo is faster (Saldaña, 2021), de Graf and van der Vossen (2013) noted that using software can be more time-consuming, especially in the preparation time before running the software analysis. However, decisions about qualitative data interpretation are always subjective, which can require additional time reviewing the coding done by a software program (de Graf & van der Vossen, 2013). Saldaña (2021) and Bloomberg (2023) agreed, noting that

especially for the beginning qualitative researcher, learning a coding software program can be more difficult and time-consuming than using manual coding methods which also provide a level of comfort for the researcher and a strong sense of ownership of the data. In addition, de Graf and van der Vossen (2013) found that automated coding does not preclude errors in reliability and validity since automated methods may be systematically biased due to the inability to make distinctions between different word meanings in different contexts.

To begin the manual analysis process, the dissertation researcher examined the archival survey questions to determine the placement of those questions into the three dissertation Research Questions using the framework of CDT. Because the archival survey questions were written in response to a different research framework and thus did not exactly match the dissertation’s Research Questions, the researcher used differently colored sticky notes placed on a wall in order to gain a visual display of the survey questions as they related to the Research Questions (Bloomberg, 2023). During this first review of the archival data, it became apparent to the researcher which survey questions fit the parameters of each Research Question, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Research Questions Matched with Survey Questions

<p>Research Question 1: What are faculty members’ attitudes about working with online graduate students with disabilities?</p>	<p>Research Question 2: What are faculty members’ viewpoints on accommodations for online graduate students with disabilities?</p>	<p>Research Question 3: What are the methods faculty members are using to assist online graduate students with disabilities and what additional instructional methods do they need?</p>
<p>Survey Question 7: What thoughts come to mind when you are notified that a student with whom you are working has a disability?</p>	<p>Survey Question 8: Overall, how do you feel about students’ receiving accommodations?</p>	<p>Survey Question 11: What sort of training should there be for faculty to support online students with disabilities?</p>
<p>Survey Question 9/10: To what extent do you feel equipped to work with students with disabilities</p>	<p>Survey Question 14: What barriers do you believe exist at the university that prevent students from</p>	<p>Survey Question 12: How can the university improve its ability to provide</p>

<p>Research Question 1: What are faculty members' attitudes about working with online graduate students with disabilities?</p>	<p>Research Question 2: What are faculty members' viewpoints on accommodations for online graduate students with disabilities?</p>	<p>Research Question 3: What are the methods faculty members are using to assist online graduate students with disabilities and what additional instructional methods do they need?</p>
<p>(e.g., knowledge, technology, support)? Please explain your response.</p>	<p>obtaining the accommodations they need in relation to their disability? If no barriers exist, please write "None".</p>	<p>accommodations for online students with disabilities?</p>
		<p>Survey Question 13: How do you think the university's faculty can help online students with disabilities?</p>
		<p>Survey Question 15: What accommodations have you made at the university in conjunction with Disability Services for any online students who have been verified to have functional limitations due to disabilities? (please select all that apply) - Selected Choice</p>
		<p>Survey Question 16: What instructional arrangements have you made at Northcentral University for any online students who had not notified Disability Services or who were not approved for an accommodation but who informed you that they had a disability? (please select all that apply) - Selected Choice</p>

The full data analyses process involved content analysis, examining consistencies, and creating categories into which survey question responses were placed (Bloomberg, 2023; Krippendorff, 2019; Saldaña, 2021). The researcher chose not to use a specific coding scheme, preferring to use a descriptive approach to the coding process by reflecting on what each piece of data meant prior to placing that data into a specific category (Bloomberg, 2023). Using a manual

data analysis process allowed the dissertation researcher to immerse themselves into the data, becoming completely “familiar with its nuances and subtleties” (Bloomberg, 2023, p. 345). Examining the raw data for consistencies allowed for the reduction of information relating to the research questions by identifying categories (Saldaña, 2021) for each Research Question. Then, using Excel, the researcher separated the survey question responses into individual spreadsheets and printed out the responses to visually set the responses into each Research Question. Several final reviews of the data placed the individual survey responses into the categories as discussed in the Findings Section.

Findings

RQ1: What are faculty members’ attitudes about working with online graduate students with disabilities?

Survey Questions 7 and 9/10 were found to meet the parameters for Research Question 1, and the survey answers were grouped into two categories, negative or positive attitudes. Most of the survey responses from Question 7 were positive in the attitude expressed when the faculty member found out that they had been assigned an SWD: “Happy to help;” “Every student is unique, and I never paint any individual with a broad brush or make assumptions about the individual;” and “I typically think [when I find out I am assigned a student with a disability] ‘oh that’s great to know! I’m glad they are getting support’;” and “I am fully committed to give all students the opportunity to succeed.” Other responses were more neutral such as “It is the law and it is the right thing to do,” or “How can I help?” or “I want to be supportive.” Very few responses were completely negative: “I trust some students, but I think that some are gaming the system” or “[some students] really are not equipped to adequately complete the work;” or “based on a few less-than-desirable experiences I have had, I typically feel hesitant about teaching [them]...”

When analyzing the survey responses to Question 9, which first asked how equipped the faculty member felt working with SWD and gave three options: completely, somewhat, and not

at all, then requested an explanation of their choice, there were answers which were positive: “Having been trained, educated, and experienced in instruction for 33 years...I have experiences in provide [sic] supports for specific learning challenges;” “if I am unsure about how to help the student I know there are many resources for me to tap into to learn how I might do my best for the student;” and “...I know I am a student-centered educator.” However, there were other responses which were negative including the potentially ableist statement: “I treat all students the same.” Other negative responses included “...I cannot help students when I do not know the specifics of their personal issues;” “I am not feeling equipped to deal with these students’ emotions, especially those who have mental issues;” “I feel very limited in working with individuals with a learning disability;” and “I had a student with possible schizophrenia and just needed to reach out to those above me instead of knowing how to handle it myself.” There were some neutral responses such as “Disabilities are so varied, so individual, and sometimes “invisible” (e.g., mental challenges), it is hard to be aware of all the ways to help students;” “Legal issues are a concern for me;” and “Since I’ve never had a student with disabilities I was not sure how to respond.”

There were positive and negative statements about how faculty members felt about SWD found in the responses to other survey questions. Survey Question 8 asked how faculty members felt about students receiving accommodations, and some of those responses were more about how they felt about the students themselves, e.g., “Many have hidden disabilities, good to have them known” and “In my experience, most students...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.” But some of the responses had ableist connotations such as “...it is good for the student to continue developing themselves despite their condition” and “Generally I respect their perseverance and motivation despite the challenges.”

Then, there were responses which were definitively negative: “...sometimes I have wondered how they expect to be able to complete the work or overall program” and “...when

some students do not have the competencies to complete the dissertation even with added time, it disturbs me that they are wasting time and monies.” This comment made in response to Survey Question 11, which asked how the university could help SWD, seemed to fit best into the Research Question 1 section:

I do feel students should be better vetted for being able to complete the work. My concern is that students are running up great student loan debt that will never be repaid because many students are not able to complete their degrees.

RQ2: What are faculty members’ viewpoints on accommodations for online graduate students with disabilities?

Survey Question 8 specifically asked how faculty members felt about students receiving accommodations. Again, the content analysis put the responses into positive and negative categories, with the addition of a mixed feelings category. However, some themes did emerge under the categories as shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Survey Question 8 Themes

Positive	Negative
Ensures parity	Too easily given
Required by law	Not enough information
Much needed	Too much time

Positive comments included “I believe accommodations are critical to ensure parity in education opportunities for all students;” “It’s not only the law, it’s the right thing to do;” “Gratifying because I am able to support people who are committed to the hard work of education;” and

I think it is exceptionally important to provide accommodations to students with disabilities. These students are frequently incredibly hardworking, represent a group of individuals that need to be involved in the field to reduce ableist frameworks, and, outside of their disability, have many important ideas that will help our field progress.

Negative responses included: “I do feel that [the university] grants this very liberally;” “...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;” “...for the part-time faculty, it asks for additional course time without pay;” and

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 “accommodation” in the real world all industries don’t allow for accommodations [sic]. A deadline is a deadline. This creates more work for faculty members.

Some of the mixed responses were “Good for the students, but it adds extra loads to the faculty;” “While extra time is the most common accommodation, I feel uninformed of other solutions;” and “I have no problem with students needing an accommodation. But besides having extend [sic] time to complete work it is not always clear what student needs.” In addition, one faculty member provided the following commentary on the subject of accommodations:

I do not like the word “accommodation” at all. Accommodation infers the student is getting “special” or “preferential treatment.” Whereas the student is receiving equitable services. I believe education needs to engage in a paradigm shift because language matters. I work with many students who are in the symbolic “closet” because they do not want a stigma attached to them. From an inclusive lens or framework, we need to evolve from “accommodation” to “equitable services.” With all of that said, I am a bit [sic] advocate for students’ receiving equitable services during their educational tenure.

Survey Question 14 asked about the barriers faculty members believe exist which prevent students from obtaining the accommodations they need in relation to their disability. Content analysis of the responses to this question found four distinct categories: stigma, lack of student awareness of accommodations, lack of training, and none/don’t know. Faculty responses included “Stigma around asking for accommodations especially at the graduate/doctoral level...;” “Stigma related to learning disabilities and mental health disorders;” “...stigma of

applying for/having accommodations;” and “Stigma and the crudeness of the accommodation that is extra time is not really dismantling of barriers. In fact no meaningful accommodation is really made in the sense of actually mitigating the disability.”

Other comments were “They may not know about accommodations;” “Not knowing what resources exists and having access to them;” “Understanding that there are accommodations to be had;” and “...lack of awareness of either 1. Being qualified for accommodations or 2. Being aware of what possible accommodations would be possible and most effective.” Faculty members also mentioned that “...training faculty to recognize alternatives students may need,” and “training faculty to provide support to those students with disabilities who self-disclose but do not have accommodations.” Some faculty members were not aware of any barriers to accommodations, commenting “I am not aware of obstacles;” “I’m not sure. I don’t know much about the process;” “To the best of my knowledge, my answer would be ‘none’;” and “I cannot think of any barriers, that does not mean they are not there.” One faculty member stated “The issue needs to be explored. How many students with a disability ‘make it’ and how many ‘drop out?’ Then the question of ‘why’ would be telling and highly informative.” While another asked “Do we have people trained to understand what learning strategies work for people with various disabilities?”

RQ3: What are the methods faculty members are using to assist online graduate students with disabilities and what additional instructional methods do they need?

Survey Questions 15 and 16 asked faculty members about the types of accommodations they were using for their SWD. The respondents were given five choices (Table 4) as well as the option of picking “other” and expanding on their answer in a comments section.

Table 4

Survey Questions 15 and 16 Respondent Choices

Alternative Assignment
Extended Time
Weekly Zoom/Phone Conferences With You
An Assignment Help Document That You Developed

PDF
Audio Textbook

Faculty responses for “Other” included auditory feedback, how to provide a blind student with feedback, weblinks to information or videos, interpreter in meetings, using UDL principles, flexible assignment submission, and how to appeal a grade. For question 16, faculty commented that they referred students to the DSO and encouraged their students to apply for accommodations. However, several comments made were negative, e.g., “We are simply to follow the instructions of the office accommodation which is minimal in content and then try to wing it based on what students indicate” and

I’m not in a position to grant accommodation and have no resources available. The weekly meetings are more or less done anyway except the students most in need of accommodation often don’t have the mental resources to engage consistently.

Survey Question 11 asked for ideas from the faculty members on what types of training are needed. Responses included “Training on how accommodations work and how much flexibility we can have with extended due dates;” “Would be nice to have training modules specific to the type of disability;” “Focusing on the awareness that people can have a variety of complex issues and that no two students should be treated the same;” “Faculty should know what resources are available, for example, does the faculty provide the PDF’s or the Disability office;” and “I don’t think faculty need further training.” Two other comments were significant to the Research Question: “None, it is not faculty responsibility to manage students. It is faculty responsibility to only teach the content,” and “Again you assume we are privileged to the information about what they’re [sic] disability entails. We are not. It’s protected info. So training can only really be about how to apply the office of disability’s very superficial instruction.”

Survey Question 12 asked how the university could improve its ability to provide accommodations to SWD. Faculty responses were thorough and often very thoughtful including, “Make crystal clear to faculty what the requirements are, particularly regarding the assignment submission schedule;” “Students should be better assessed to assure they have the basic skills for

graduate work;” “...the University should provide software for students that help them learn better online. For example, software that reads landing pages for them;” “Perhaps, develop a pool of faculty who could be trained in supporting students with accommodations...and be able to assign those students to those professors;” and

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.

Other comments included “Create faculty awareness; end the stigma;” “I think we do a great job;” “A streamline process for applications and better faculty trainings;” “Typically you only translate disability into an accommodation of extra time. In many cases that does not accommodate the disability just extends the agony;” and “Explain to all why/how it can be required of them without getting extended pay or loss of income for part-timers when more than two students with disabilities are in a course...;” and

I think that an all-or-nothing approach is an issue in terms of extra time. I have see [sic] where students use accommodations in the middle of a course – that’s fine, but the coordinator then moved all the due dates, including the ones from the work already completed. That made no sense to me at all, as it prolonged the course unnecessarily. I don’t see why a student needs an additional week for every assignment. That hurts students’ time to completion. Seems like a one-size fits all approach to the issue regarding extra time.

More positive comments included “Provide professional development for the professors and assign a one-on-one faculty mentor for the student;” “Encourage students to self-identify, have a strong office for support resources...;” “Early identification of each student’s needs...Assigning students who need accommodations to full-time faculty who have a greater capacity to serve;” “Besides extended time, many of these students need access to writing

support;” “...better support for students seeking technical assistance...and core skills...;” “If short training videos are available, deans could periodically remind faculty to view these. When a student with disabilities is assigned to a faculty member, a link to a short training video could be included...;” and “Make its commitment to inclusion more visible through advertisement and recognition of students and staff – hire additional instructors and staff with disabilities.”

Finally, Survey Question 13 asked how faculty can specifically help SWD and the responses included “Be transparent and helpful;” “Better and more varied means of communication and feedback;” Listening to the students’ needs and asking them how they can help...;” “Have consistency around course expectations and provide more consistent check-ins;” “By providing detailed feedback, responding quickly to students’ concerns; being patient;” “We must incorporate technologies that will assist all students no matter their disability. We should examine best practices in the industry and consider any gaps we may have in our capabilities;” “We can appreciate the extra efforts it takes students to complete coursework. We can also talk about universal design;” and

I believe the best thing we can do is provide accommodations cheerfully, but don’t go beyond the accommodations in the letter. If a faculty member feels bias or animosity, they can hopefully seek training to learn that providing accommodations is the law, and that it is natural, and that we all need accommodations in some area of life. The idea that higher education is not for everyone is a little outdated.

Interpretation of the Findings

In the hermeneutics rules of understanding qualitative data there is no right or wrong interpretation of the data, there is only the approximately suitable interpretation of data by the researcher (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023). The purpose of this qualitative content analysis of archival data was to explore the attitudes of faculty members who work with online graduate SWD toward the appropriateness of accommodations and their personal approach to providing or withholding support. CDT was used as the theoretical framework through which the researcher

examined the higher education environment in which online graduate SWD interact with faculty members. (Goodley et al., 2019; Hall, 2019). Previous research has shown that when faculty members have negative attitudes towards SWD, they are not as likely to provide the assistance those students need (Lombardi et al., 2011; Lund et al., 2020; Sniatecki et al., 2015; Toutain, 2019; Wynants & Dennis, 2017; Xavier & Meneses, 2021) and the accommodations provided by the university may not be appropriate to student needs (Galef, 2024; Perez-Esteban et al., 2023).

The researcher examined three research questions in this study. The content analysis process found that the categories in the responses to all three research questions were both negative and positive, with a small number of neutral responses to Research Question 1. While some of the faculty participants in the original study stated that they had no problems with the idea of working with SWD, others were ambivalent, and there were a small number of faculty members who want nothing to do with SWD. Findings in the literature showed that the reason instructors were unwilling to provide support for SWD was because those instructors had negative perceptions of SWD (Koren & Evans-El, 2020; Lund et al., 2020; Sniatecki et al., 2015) such as stigma and prejudice (Adefila et al., 2020). This finding was affirmed in this dissertation research as indicated by the statement “I trust some students, but I think that some are gaming the system.” However, in this dissertation research it was found that more faculty members were positive about working with, and generally supportive of, SWD, which was more indicative of the literature from other countries including Palestine (Snounu, 2019) and Taiwan (Wang, 2023). Statements such as “I am happy to work with them” and “I am comfortable having SWD in my courses” were commonly found through the data analysis process. Faculty members repeatedly stressed the need for fairness towards all students; with the implication that no one group of students should be getting special treatment (Rocco, 2000).

Responses to the question about faculty feelings towards accommodations were more negative, which followed the literature review findings closely. The higher education system is focused on deadlines (Lund et al., 2014) and as noted with Giroux et al. (2020), the most

common academic accommodation mentioned by the faculty respondents was time flexibility for extensions to completing assignments. A faculty member mentioned that they "...believe some students [try to] to gain more time when it is not truly needed," while another stated "seems like a one-size fits all approach to the issue regarding extra time." Other negative responses also confirmed findings from the literature review, e.g. faculty members may resent their inability to gain access to the specifics of a student's disability or to review the appropriateness of the accommodation (Wolanin & Steele, 2004); this was seen in faculty statements such as: "I cannot help students when I do not know the specifics of their [needs]."

The literature review also found that faculty members were fearful of doing the wrong thing and being held legally liable for themselves or the institution (Wolanin & Steele, 2004). Their main concern was that they did not have enough knowledge of the legal aspects of disability accommodation compliance (Wynants & Dennis, 2017). The faculty responses to the survey questions confirmed this finding, e.g., "...providing accommodations is the law;" "I assume that [the university] is compliant with all relevant federal regulations pertaining to this;" and "...I fear being sued."

The final survey questions requested the faculty members offer suggestions for improvement in the management of accommodations and support both for the SWD at the university and for other faculty members. Minich (2016) emphasized the importance of improving instructor attitudes and responses towards SWD, focusing on the need for instructors to work directly with SWD, regardless of the students' status with the institution's DSO. Faculty responses generally agreed with this noting the need to "Be clear about knowing about an accommodation and being committed to providing support. Be extremely clear about what that support will look like and what it will not include." However, there were also many faculty members who stated that if the student had not contacted the DSO, their response was to send those students to the DSO: "I asked students to contact their advisor and disability services to notify them of any special accommodations required."

When it comes to instructor training on working with SWD, there were faculty members who had had training before they came to the university and stated that they do not need any additional training (“Having been trained, educated, and experienced in instruction for 33 years, I believe that my experiences allow me to understand and apply the accommodations as required”), and others said that they do not want training at all (“I have not had any issues with this student group that requires special training”). However, many other faculty responses requested extensive training in various types of assistance (“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”) which matches the findings in Guilbaud et al. (2021) who noted that faculty often preferred training that is less time-intensive, customized to specific student needs and learning styles, and available at convenient times. These findings will be discussed in depth in Chapter 5.

Summary

The findings of the qualitative content analysis showed that graduate SWD may not receive adequate support to complete their online degree programs because they have to deal with faculty members who are unwilling to provide support due to negative attitudes towards SWD. In addition, it was found that faculty members may not be aware of specific accommodations needed by students, or faculty may not have been trained in ways to support graduate SWD. Seminal research from Heaton (2004) and Hinds et al. (2013) states that secondary research is done to re-interpret findings from the original study; in this dissertation, the researcher did discover new insights from the data. The categories which were found in the content analysis supported the conceptual framework of CDT by providing information that can be reinterpreted to create a supportive environment for SWD in higher education. Finally, the dissertation researcher discovered methods which faculty members were using, as well as additional techniques and resources they need, in order to assist their graduate SWD to complete their online degree programs.

Chapter 5: Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusions

The problem addressed in this dissertation was that graduate SWD may not receive appropriate support to complete their online degree programs because they may have to deal with faculty members who are unwilling to provide support due to negative attitudes towards those students. In addition, accommodations provided by the university may not be appropriate, faculty members may not be aware of specific accommodations needed by students, or faculty may not have been trained in ways to support graduate SWD. The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the attitudes of faculty members toward online graduate SWDs and towards the accommodations for those students, and to discover faculty members' methods of providing or withholding support for graduate SWD. Gaining new knowledge about faculty attitudes towards graduate SWD and the accommodations that they need, and use, may improve and enhance policies and procedures for disability services at online institutions, potentially increasing graduation rates among graduate SWD.

Chapter Overview

The restatement of the problem and purpose statements introduced this final dissertation chapter, followed by a review of the research design, its methodology, results, and limitations. A discussion of the implications of the findings from the research analysis follows, with the results organized around the research questions and based on the study's framework of CDT. Identification of the most significant implications and consequences of the dissertation is included in this section, as are factors which might have influenced the interpretation of the results. After this discussion are recommendations for practice and for future reference and the final research study summary and conclusions.

Study Design

The original study was done in response to a literature review which called for additional studies on faculty perceptions of working with SWD in the online setting and at the graduate level (Guilbaud et al., 2021; Hsiao et al., 2019; Hunt et al., 2014; Perez-Esteban et al., 2023;

Phillips et al., 2012; Wynants & Dennis, 2017). The dissertation researcher chose to use this archival data set in order to gain additional insights on the faculty attitudes of working with graduate SWD in the online setting, to examine the faculty feelings towards the accommodations used by graduate SWD in the online setting, and to discover methods which faculty members are using, as well as additional techniques they need, to assist their online graduate SWD. Using archival data for a secondary analysis gave the researcher the opportunity to study a potentially sensitive topic without having direct contact between the researcher and the research participants (Bloomberg, 2023; Heng et al., 2018; Hinds et al., 2013; Lund et al., 2023). Qualitative archival data content analysis, based on the framework of CDT, was chosen in order to uncover quotes which may be able to make significant impacts on those who are in charge of making systemic changes in the online graduate school environment.

Methodology

Qualitative content analysis using manual coding techniques was chosen for the data analysis process of the archival data. Because the original study used a different theoretical framework, the survey questions did not match the dissertation research questions. The researcher first decided which of the archival survey questions would fit best into the three dissertation research questions by using words and concepts within the data text. Using Excel, the researcher then reviewed each survey question response separately multiple times, first noting categories of responses then, when appropriate, identifying themes within those categories, and the categories and themes were kept separate until all the questions had been reviewed. The researcher preferred to use a descriptive approach to the coding process, reflecting on what each piece of data meant before placing the data into specific categories. By also using the hermeneutic rules to qualitative content analysis, the researcher also noted that there was no right or wrong data interpretation, only their suitable interpretation of that data (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023).

Results

The nature of qualitative research is one of discovery (Bloomberg, 2023; Casanave & Li 2015), and during the data analysis process, the researcher can find different results than the one expected. Based on the results of the literature review, the expectation was that the faculty members would have mostly negative attitudes towards online graduate SWD (Yssel et al., 2016), negative attitudes towards accommodations for those SWD (Giroux et al., 2016) and would be minimally supportive of the accommodation process (Perez-Esteban et al., 2023). Finally, the researcher expected to find that the academic climate towards the graduate SWD at the online university, as experienced by the faculty members, would be one of indifference, hostility, or completely unsuitable to the students' needs (Galef, 2024; Perez-Esteban et al., 2023; Yssel et al., 2016).

As discussed in Chapter 4, the actual results were surprising. Most of the faculty attitudes towards the graduate SWD were positive. The questions about accommodations for the SWD produced the negative responses, mostly due to the lack of any variety in the available accommodations and the perceived tendency of students to take advantage of the accommodations provided. When it came to the findings of the faculty attitudes specifically about the university and its policies and procedures for the graduate SWD, the researcher discovered that the faculty attitudes varied from exceptionally positive to completely negative with some responses being a mixture of both.

Limitations

The use of archival data for this study means that the research findings may not be applicable to other populations. The original research study data collection was done in a specific timeframe and in a specific higher education institution which can limit its ability for application to present day and its application to other higher education institutions. The size of the archival qualitative data set may not only limit the transferability of the research results but might also have been a concern for confidentiality issues (Lund et al., 2023) were it not for the lack of direct

contact between the original study and the secondary analysis by the dissertation researcher (Bloomberg, 2023). Participant biases from the original study included their self-selection for participation, the decision of which questions were answered, and to what extent those responses were made. Potential biases of the original researchers were listed as their status as being disabled faculty members and a disabled graduate student, as well as being faculty members and a student at the university where the study was conducted.

The dissertation researcher has several biases that might affect the study results including the fact that the researcher was a student at the university at which the original study was conducted. The researcher was also a member of the original research team. In addition, the dissertation researcher is a SWD and has had both positive and negative experiences with faculty members in the course of her studies both at the university where she received her master's degree and at the university which was the site of the original study.

The researcher noted during the data analysis process that their expectations of discovering nothing but negative attitudes on the part of the faculty members was a reflection of their personal bias as an SWD. Though the researcher deliberately chose to move away from a completely negative focus in the dissertation by using the CDT framework rather than one of the ableist theories, they really expected to find a strong set of negative attitudes on the part of the faculty members who responded to the original study. The preliminary data analysis findings produced a distinct reaction of disappointment in the researcher who was prepared, even eager, to highlight ableist attitudes, stigma, and prejudice in the faculty, only to find that though there were some of those attitudes found in the survey answers, with a very small number of exceptions, the faculty members have good attitudes about working with SWD. Most of the negative statements that were found were directed towards the university and its policies.

Implications

In this dissertation, the researcher sought an in-depth understanding of archival data based on the CDT framework to gain insights on faculty attitudes of working with graduate

SWD in the online setting. The researcher notes that the biggest factor which might have influenced their implications of the results were their status as an online graduate SWD at the university in which the original study was conducted. Supporting online graduate SWD requires cooperation and collaboration from students, faculty, and the higher education institution. Anderson et al. noted students must be assessed and assisted on an individual basis (2024) and a faculty member response to a survey question agreed stating that, "...more support systems are needed for students. We need reading specialists to help students with comprehension issues as well as writing coaches. The need for more support services is typical in institutions who admit underprepared students." Moreover, qualitative archival data content analysis can uncover powerful quotes which may be able to make significant impacts on those who are in charge of making systemic changes (Lund et al., 2023) such as this comment on what a faculty member felt was needed to assist the online graduate SWD:

Understanding the different kinds of learning challenges and the tools available is a start. Beyond that, returning frequently to that training with refreshers on services and support. Finally, having someone to reach out when there are outstanding or new compounding issues. Conditions for students change and we need to be agile in our ability to respond to those changes.

RQ 1: What are faculty members' attitudes about working with online graduate students with disabilities?

As noted in Chapter 4, the original research study did not have a question which specifically dealt with this dissertation research question. However, the dissertation researcher was able to find responses to several of the original survey questions and as discussed in the Limitations section in this Chapter, the researcher expected to find more negative comments from the respondents such as "Can they realistically meet the expectations just like any other student?" But for the most part, faculty members were very positive about teaching SWD as indicated by the following answer to the question of how they feel when they learn they will have a SWD in a course, "I get excited and happy to see the student feels confident to utilize our equitable services at the university!" While another instructor said, "If a student tells me that

they have a disability, I do not make any arrangements other than what I would do for students who do not have disabilities.” These responses challenge the prevailing CDT theory of a prevailing attitude of ableism in higher education institutions suggesting that online higher education faculty are less likely to have ableist attitudes towards graduate SWD.

Many faculty members made specific suggestions on how the university and faculty could improve the system for SWD, for example, “By being flexible in how we manage student learning. Not all students will benefit fully from how our courses are designed. The more alternatives we can provide to students, the better we can meet their learning needs;” and “There should be annual training on inclusivity and neurodiversity. Provide success stories and how adapting teaching can be beneficial to many students.” Another faculty member recommended that the university be “...more flexible in how content is designed in our courses and training faculty to recognize alternatives students may need.” Online universities should consider incorporating strategies to promote faculty engagement in creating policies, procedures, and processes to address the problem of low graduation rates for graduate SWD.

RQ 2: What are faculty members’ viewpoints on accommodations for online graduate students with disabilities?

The research findings from this dissertation increase the amount of research on online graduate SWD by providing a fuller picture of faculty members’ attitudes towards providing accommodations for those SWD. The dissertation researcher did not expect to discover the number of negative comments regarding SWD and accommodations such as “When students do not show signs of investment, the accommodations only serve to drag out the course and delay the student's progress;” “I’m not in a position to grant accommodation and have no resources available...the students most in need of accommodation often don’t have the mental resources to engage consistently;” “...an accommodation likely means less income for me for part of the time the student with disabilities is my student;” and “the crudeness of the accommodation that is extra time is not really dismantling of barriers. In fact no meaningful accommodation is really

made in the sense of actually mitigating the disability.” One faculty member responded to the survey question asking what accommodations they had made for SWD by stating “We are simply to follow the instructions of the office of accommodation which is minimal in content and then try to wing it based on what students indicate;” while another instructor responded with,

I would like to know what we are required by law to provide and what we provide in terms of goodwill. I would also like to know what the expectations are of faculty to provide support for accommodations that require significantly more effort on the part of the faculty.

These findings suggest that while faculty members do not mind working with online graduate SWD, when it comes to providing the accommodations that SWD require to succeed in their degree programs, the faculty attitudes towards SWD and their accommodations discovered in this study reflect the stigma and ableism currently prevalent in higher education (Grimes et al., 2023) as was shown in this comment, “The University is doing more than enough to help such persons.” Because stigma is a factor that creates an impact on SWD, if students perceive that they are expected to deal with their disability on their own, they are less likely to seek help from their university or faculty (Grimes et al., 2023). Since graduate SWD depend on those course accommodations (Aguirre & Duncan, 2013; Druckman et al., 2021; Hsaio et al., 2021; Lefler et al., 2023; Mowreader, 2024), additional evidence of negative faculty attitudes towards those accommodations means that there is a need to improve the training on accommodations and SWD which faculty members receive both during their onboarding experience and in their continuing education. Faculty responded to the original survey by asking for additional training, making comments such as, “[I] would personally love additional training about how to be more supportive when working with students with disabilities;” “I'd like some training on how to better support students with disabilities;” “I'd like more training in terms of technology;” and “[we need] at least some kind of module in initial training. Or in yearly mandatory training.” This additional training could lead to improvements in teaching practices which would facilitate better conditions for higher academic performance and program completion rates for graduate

SWD (Guilbaud et al., 2021; Lomellini et al., 2011; Lorenzo-Lledó et al., 2020; Mowreader, 2024; Perez-Esteban et al., 2023; Phillips et al., 2012).

Research by Wolanin & Steele (2004) found that reasonable accommodations do not have to cause a financial burden, however, faculty members in this study consistently commented on the loss of income they experience when they have a SWD, “I have found that often a student with a disability tend to need more of my time for which I am not compensated.;;” “Sometimes they have taken more of my time than regular students to work with them, for no additional compensation to me;” “No problem but should be paid for the extra time...” These findings should be considered by online institutions when planning instructor compensation; faculty who teach graduate SWD should be fully compensated for the additional time required for those students’ accommodations, “[the university] should provide compensation to adjunct/part-time faculty as they are only compensated for the number of weeks the course was originally supposed to take.” Other faculty members mentioned that they would prefer not to work with SWD and suggested “...assign a one-on-one faculty mentor for the student;” “Assigning students who need accommodations to full-time faculty who have a greater capacity to serve;” and “Perhaps, develop a pool of faculty who could be trained in supporting students with accommodations (similar to ESE teachers in Education) and be able to assign those students to those professors.”

RQ 3: What are the methods faculty members are using to assist online graduate students with disabilities and what additional instructional methods do they need?

The dissertation researcher particularly wanted to generate new knowledge of ways in which the online graduate school experience can be enhanced for both the faculty members and the SWD in order to potentially increase graduation rates for online SWD. Grey and Lopez stated that “in the modern era, where education increasingly welcomes nontraditional students, professors must adapt their teaching styles to accommodate students who may not fit the cookie-cutter model” (2025, p. 17) and a faculty member agreed by saying, “I believe that we must

provide resources and the extra time needed to support the student's unique learning need (s)..."

Other responses included "Do we have people trained to understand what learning strategies work for people with various disabilities?" and "The only communication about accommodations comes in an email with explicit dates. This presents a barrier to flexibility.

Faculty ignorance is a barrier to students. Student ignorance regarding disability services is a barrier." In addition, one faculty members stated that barriers faced by students with disabilities "maps back to need for more resources for the support staff." While another offered both critique and suggestion in their comment:

Lack of information from the advisers. Some students tell me of their issues, and say that they have discussed these with the adviser. Yet the adviser did not tell them of the services of the disabilities offices. Maybe we need to bypass this step and give all students this information during the onboarding phase/and we can train advisers better in spotting needs for disabilities services in students.

One of the most significant implications of this dissertation are the faculty attitudes towards the university's policies and procedures relating to the graduate SWD, their accommodations, and the DSO as evidenced by this extensive explanation of one faculty member's frustration at their experiences,

I do not know what to do when disability services sets a schedule of submission (with extension) and the student doesn't meet any of the goal posts due to their disability. I don't know what to do when a student shares a disability and resulting condition that will severely crimp performance, and I refer the client to disability services to attain aid in clearer plan to honor student goals and I receive no communication from the student or disability services with how I should approach no submissions from the student.

While another faculty member explained,

I feel like I understand what I need to do but do not know about all accommodations that may be needed. For example, I worked with a student who was a mute. While this student did not make it past the proposal, how would we have done a defense?

These findings demonstrate that there is a definite need for coordination of efforts by all participants in the online higher education environment to provide graduate SWD with the most effective educational experience as faculty members stated, "disability services could ask students who apply for the accommodation to indicate what kinds of things help them and shar

[sic] that with the faculty;” “If short training videos are available, deans could periodically remind faculty to view these;” and “Ensur [e] there is a good line of communications between students, advisors, and their faculty.”

Recommendations for Practice

This dissertation study focused on faculty attitudes towards online graduate SWD and their accommodations; its findings pointed towards the need for additional training for faculty members as shown in this faculty observation, “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.” There is a need to reimagine academia in general, but especially online higher education with inclusion rather than accommodation as the priority for all students (Maron & Hardwick, 2024). As part of this reimagination and according to CDT, a full critique of the current structure must be performed, followed by recommendations for action (Marom & Hardwick, 2024). The faculty members who responded to the original study agreed,

Right now services provide additional time. Having more time to complete their work is beneficial, but perhaps there are other methods these students need. Maybe it's seeing the content in another way or providing more options on completing assignments which is beginning to be built into some new course revisions.

Many of the faculty mentioned their concerns about the amount of uncompensated time they spend working with SWD, stating that when they discover they have been assigned a SWD they immediately think about, “The extra amount of time that the student is provided while you, the professor, is not further compensated for your time.” However, reasonable accommodations do not have to significantly change or modify course curriculum nor do they have to cause a financial or administrative burden to the institution (Wolanin & Steele, 2004). Universal design and inclusive design are methods that promote equal access, inclusivity, and participation for all students (Perrson et al., 2015), not just those with disabilities. Lorenzo-Lledo et al. (2020) stated that the goal of higher education must be to promote inclusive education and many faculty members concurred, “...being flexible in how we manage student learning...The more alternatives we can provide to students, the better we can meet their learning needs.” But

implementing Universal Design principles in higher education requires the institution being willing to facilitate the process by encouraging faculty to invest their time in training, recognizing excellence in faculty teaching, fostering a culture of camaraderie and collaboration among faculty members, and providing resources and ongoing support to faculty and students (Altowairiki, 2023); a faculty member thoughtfully provided suggestions to the university,

1. Training on how accommodations work and how much flexibility we can have with extended due dates
2. Clarity on the process when a student is referred, and how faculty would ideally work with such students while awaiting the process.
3. An FAQ document addressing common questions and mistakes that faculty make.
4. I'd like to understand whether academic advisors also refer to disability services.

Recommendations for Future Research

As noted in earlier chapters, most of the previous research on the topic of faculty attitudes towards SWD and accommodations has focused on undergraduate students and faculty in brick-and-mortar institutions, and most of that research centered on the student perceptions (Banks, 2019; Bé, 2019; Brown & Leigh, 2020; Steele, 2020). The calls for research understanding the attitudes of faculty members towards online graduate SWD and their course accommodations have been extensive (Guilbaud et al., 2021; Lomellini et al., 2011; Lorenzo-Lledó et al., 2020; Mowreader, 2024; Perez-Esteban et al., 2023; Phillips et al., 2012), especially as more graduate SWD move to online education due to the added flexibility of the online course format (Perez-Esteban et al., 2023; Phillips et al., 2015; Verdinelli & Kutner, 2015). This dissertation study provides a glimpse into the faculty attitudes towards online graduate SWD and their accommodations, further research in this subject area could add to the success of online graduate SWD and, potentially, lead to an increase in graduation rates.

Future research on online faculty members could directly compare undergraduate instructors with graduate faculty on their attitudes towards SWD and their accommodations. The dissertation researcher would have liked to have used individual faculty interviews to discover deeper insights into their attitudes towards their online graduate SWD. Research on online graduate SWD would include examining how they perceive the online higher education

environment. A faculty member asked, “How many students with a disability ‘make it’ and how many ‘drop out?’ Then the question of ‘why’ would be telling and highly informative.”

It has been noted that SWD are asking for, and finding their own, accommodations that are not only relevant to their needs (Terras et al., 2015; Toutain, 2019), but which will aid them in their ability to graduate from college (Terras et al., 2020). A study investigating what accommodations online graduate students find most helpful, those accommodations which are not helpful, and suggestions for accommodations that are not currently offered at their institution would also provide valuable insights into the higher education experience for graduate SWD. Questions about whether the SWD at the online university in this study were aware of the institution’s DSC or the other resources available to them were found throughout the faculty responses, e.g., “I think that some students don't realize that they can tap into any resources;” and “...many students are not even aware that they may be entitled to an ADA accommodation.” Future research examining student awareness of the process needed to access resources as well as the list of those resources available at the higher education level could furnish online universities with a list of the specific needs of their SWD.

Additionally, research is needed on direct comparisons between brick-and-mortar and online institutions, their faculty members, and their policies, procedures, and resources for SWD. Another comparison study might examine whether there are differences in DSO between online and brick-and-mortar universities. Finally, an investigation into the attitudes of both online and brick-and-mortar university staff members towards SWD is needed to complete the picture of SWD in higher education.

Summary and Conclusions

The dissertation researcher used the CDT aim of exposing and analyzing faculty attitudes towards students with disabilities throughout the examination of the responses to the first two research questions. While the researcher found that faculty attitudes towards working with SWD were generally positive, when it came to their attitudes towards providing accommodations, the

findings from the literature review that the academic culture of resistance and skepticism towards SWD belonging in higher education were corroborated. Current CDT research also requires a goal of critiquing and challenging, transforming and empowering for change. The researcher did find faculty attitudes towards supporting graduate SWD that were in need of critiquing and challenging, as was stated in Chapter 4. The researcher found that the faculty attitudes towards the university's level of support for SWD were mixed, but with a definite belief there was more that the institution should be doing to support both students and the faculty working with them. However, the dissertation researcher also discovered faculty members who were transforming the way they interacted with their SWD and who were empowering change within the university.

In conclusion, CDT research requires transformation and empowerment for change. Online universities could be a haven for graduate SWD, but only if the institution incorporates professional development not just for its faculty members, but for staff, and administration personnel (Lopez & Grey, 2025). These trainings should include, but not be limited to, information on disability awareness, inclusive teaching methods, accommodations, legal frameworks, and campus resources. The good news is that online universities do not have to develop this disability education by themselves; the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) is available with trainings, webinars, conferences, and connections to other higher education institutions to share resources and support (www.ahead.org). In their responses to the research question about how to support online graduate SWD, faculty members consistently asked for more professional development. Faculty also particularly wanted information about the resources which are, or should be, available for both faculty and their graduate SWD. As a respondent said, "I would like a training that explains the support available through the university, what the expectations are of faculty, and some best practices and strategies for us to use in the more common scenarios."

The higher education environment often requires students who are standardized, normative, and fully able-bodied. But it doesn't have to. With the knowledge of what faculty

members need to support their online graduate students with disabilities and with the backing of its administration and staff, an online university can be a haven for those students.

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Appendix A

Survey Instrument

Faculty Perceptions of Working with Students with Disabilities

Consent Letter

Introduction

My name is Tara Lehan, and I am a professor in the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences. I also hold a role as the Director of Strategic Research in the [Office of Planning and Institutional Effectiveness](#) at Northcentral University (NCU).

Alongside my co-researchers, School of Education professor Vera Dolan and doctoral student Zoann Murphy, I am conducting a research study on the perceptions and experiences of faculty who have worked with students with disabilities. The title of this study is “Faculty perceptions and experiences: Working with students with disabilities.” I am seeking your consent to participate in this study.

Please read this document to learn more about this study and determine if you would like to participate. Your participation is completely voluntary, and I will address your questions or concerns at any point before or during the study.

Eligibility

You may participate in this research if you meet both the following criteria:

- You are a faculty member working either part time or full time at NCU.
- You have worked with at least one student with a disability.

We hope to include a minimum of 120 people who will be completing an online Qualtrics survey in this research.

Activities

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following activities:

- Fill out a 15-minute online questionnaire.

During this activity, you will be asked questions about:

- Your professorial status at NCU as well as your school of affiliation.
- Your perceptions of your preparedness to deal with such students as well as your impressions of the support you and/or your student(s) have received from the university.
- Your experience with guiding students with disabilities, either because they disclosed a disability to you directly or because you were notified by university staff member.

This survey is optional: you may skip any part that you do not wish to complete and may stop at any time.

Risks

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with this study. You can still skip any question you do not wish to answer or stop participation at any time.

Benefits

If you participate, there are no direct benefits to you. This research may increase the body of knowledge in the subject area of this study.

Privacy and Data Protection

I will take reasonable measures to protect the security of all your personal information, but I cannot guarantee confidentiality of your research data. In addition to me, the following people and offices will have access to your data:

- My NCU co-researchers, Dr. Vera Dolan and doctoral student Zoann Murphy
These data could be used for future research studies or distributed to other investigators for future research studies without additional informed consent from you or your legally authorized representative.

I will securely store your data for 3 years. Then, I will delete electronic data and destroy paper data.

How the Results Will Be Used

We will share the results with the NCU community. We may also share the results in a presentation or publication. Participants will not be identified in the results.

Contact Information If you have questions, you can contact us at: tlehan@ncu.edu, vdolan@ncu.edu, or z.murphy3091@o365.ncu.edu.

My immediate supervisor's name is Heather Hussey. Ze works at NCU. You can contact zir at hhussey@ncu.edu.

If you have questions about your rights in the research or if a problem or injury has occurred during your participation, please contact the NCU Institutional Review Board at irb@ncu.edu or 1-888-327-2877 ext. 8014.

Voluntary Participation

If you decide not to participate or if you stop participation after you start, there will be no penalty to you. You will not lose any benefit to which you are otherwise entitled.

I consent (9)

I do not consent (12)

Q1 For how long have you been teaching online at any institution?

Q2 What is your employment status at Northcentral University?

Part-time (adjunct) (1)

Full-time (2)

Q3 At what academic level do you teach Northcentral University students? (please select all that apply)

Undergraduate (1)

Master's (2)

Post-Master's (EdS) (3)

Certificate (4)

Doctoral (5)

Q4 In what school(s) do you teach at Northcentral University? (please select all that apply)

School of Education (1)

School of Social and Behavioral Sciences (2)

School of Business (3)

School of Health Sciences(4)

School of Technology (5)

School of Law (6)

Graduate School (7)

School of Undergraduate Studies (8)

Q5 Currently, how many students with disabilities are you teaching at Northcentral University, regardless of whether they were identified by Disability Services?

Q6 How were you made aware of these students' disabilities? Who gave you the information? (please select all that apply)

The students (1)

Disability Services (2)

Other (3) _____

Q7 What thoughts come to mind when you are notified that a student with whom you are working has a disability?

Q8 Overall, how do you feel about students' receiving accommodations?

Q9 To what extent do you feel equipped to work with students with disabilities (e.g., knowledge, technology, support)?

Not at all (4)

Somewhat (5)

Completely (6)

Q10 Please explain your response.

Q11 What sort of training should there be for faculty to support online students with disabilities?

Q12: How can Northcentral University improve its ability to provide accommodations for online students with disabilities?

Q13 How do you think Northcentral University's faculty can help online students with disabilities?

Q14 What barriers do you believe exist at Northcentral University that prevent students from obtaining the accommodations they need in relation to their disability? If no barriers exist, please write "None".

Q15 What accommodations have you made at Northcentral University in conjunction with Disability Services for any online students who have been verified to have functional limitations due to disabilities? (please select all that apply)

- None (1)
- Extended time (2)
- Alternative assignment (3)
- Weekly Zoom/phone conference with you (4)
- PDF (5)
- Audio textbook (6)
- An assignment help document that you developed (7)
- Other (8) _____

Q16 What instructional arrangements have you made at Northcentral University for any online students who had not notified Disability Services or who were not approved for an accommodation but who informed you that they had a disability? (please select all that apply)

- None (1)
- Extended time (2)
- Alternative assignment (3)
- Weekly Zoom/phone conference with you (4)
- PDF (5)
- Audio textbook (6)
- An assignment help document that you developed (7)
- Other (8) _____

Appendix B

Permission to Adapt Survey Instrument

From: Phillips, Amy <amy.phillips.1@minotstateu.edu>

Sent: Monday, August 16, 2021 10:24:26 AM

To: Tara Lehan <tlehan@ncu.edu>

Subject: RE: permission to adapt instrument

Oh, THAT instrument – ha! I published several articles around that time referencing survey instrument results so I wasn't sure which one you wanted to use! Thanks, Tara. Yes, please feel free to use/adapt the instrument.

Best wishes for you research!

Amy

Amy Phillips, MSSW, PhD
Professor & Site Coordinator
MSU Social Work @ NDSU
1310 Centennial Blvd., EML 277
Fargo, ND 58102

From: Tara Lehan <tlehan@ncu.edu>

Sent: Monday, August 16, 2021 9:15 AM

To: Phillips, Amy <amy.phillips.1@minotstateu.edu>

Subject: RE: permission to adapt instrument

Hi, Dr. Phillips,

I apologize for the lack of clarity. I realize that this work was done some time ago. I'm referencing the instrument in the attached document and below.

Survey Questions

Section 1. Participant Information

1. At what level do you consider your online teaching experience?
2. What online delivery method(s) have you used?
3. At what academic level do you teach online students?
4. Are your online courses semester, non-term, or both semester and non-term?

Section 2. Course-Specific Accommodations

1. Have you made accommodations for any online students who have been verified by Disability Services for Students to have functional limitations due to disabilities?
2. Have you made accommodations for any online students you know who had not notified Disability Services for Students but who informed you that they had a disability?
3. How many students and what types of accommodations have you made for various disabilities?
4. Did you contact any university support services to assist you with making accommodations? If so, which ones?

5. Have you referred one or more students to formal university support services in relation to disabilities/

accommodations? If so, which ones?

Section 3. Perceptions of Accommodations

1. Have you seen requests for online accommodations change over time?

2. What thoughts do you have about accommodations in an online versus face-to-face environment?

3. Do you feel you have the knowledge, technology, and support to handle online accommodations?

Explain your answer.

4. What recommendations do you have for how UND could improve its ability to provide online accommodations for students with disabilities/impairments?



Tara Lehan, PhD

Director of Strategic Research, Office of Planning and Institutional Effectiveness

Professor, School of Social and Behavioral Sciences

tlehan@ncu.edu

From: Phillips, Amy <amy.phillips.1@minotstateu.edu>

Sent: Monday, August 16, 2021 9:56 AM

To: Tara Lehan <tlehan@ncu.edu>

Subject: RE: permission to adapt instrument

Hello, Tara. Could you tell me which instrument you're referencing? Thank you.

Amy Phillips, MSSW, PhD
Professor & Site Coordinator
MSU Social Work @ NDSU
1310 Centennial Blvd., EML 277
Fargo, ND 58102

From: Tara Lehan <tlehan@ncu.edu>

Sent: Sunday, August 15, 2021 10:46 PM

To: Phillips, Amy <amy.phillips.1@minotstateu.edu>

Subject: permission to adapt instrument

Hi, Dr. Phillips,

I am writing to see if you would grant us permission to adapt the instrument that you published in Phillips et al. (2012). We are planning to survey our faculty on online disability accommodations as well. Of course, we would acknowledge you and your co-authors in any resulting deliverables, such as a manuscript. Thank you in advance for your consideration.



Tara Lehan, PhD

Director of Strategic Research, Office of Planning and Institutional Effectiveness

Professor, School of Social and Behavioral Sciences
tlehan@ncu.edu

Appendix C

IRB Approval Letter



9388 Lightwave Ave.

San Diego, CA 92123

irb@nu.edu

Notice of Exemption

April 2, 2025

To: Zoann Murphy

Project Title: Faculty Attitudes Towards Online Graduate Students With Disabilities **NU IRB Number:** IRB-FY24-25-572

Determination: Exempt from further review 45 CFR 46.101

Status: Active - Research activities may begin as of April 2, 2025

Dear Zoann Murphy:

The study referenced above has been reviewed by the National University IRB. The IRB has determined your research is exempt from further review under 45 CFR 46.104, which means you will not need to renew your study and may begin your study effective immediately.

However, if you find the need to change your

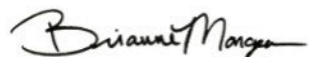
will allow the IRB to determine whether or not the study still meets exemption criteria.

Please review your Post Approval Responsibilities here: [Approved Documents Guidelines](#) For any questions regarding your protocol, please reach out to the IRB at irb@nu.edu.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Joseph M. Marron in cursive.

Dr. Joseph Marron, IRB Chair

Handwritten signature of Brianne Mongeon in cursive.

Dr. Brianne Mongeon, Director, HRPP & IRB

Handwritten signature of Jenessa Eberhardt in cursive.

Jenessa Eberhardt, Associate Director, HRPP & IRB