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## Understanding the Experiences of JMU Students with Disabilities

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# Understanding the Experiences of JMU Students with Disabilities

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JMU Diversity Conference

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## Acknowledgement

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## Session Objectives

- Participants will be able to articulate the ways that JMU excels at supporting and including individuals with disabilities.
- Participants will be able to articulate the challenges JMU faces regarding inclusion of students with disabilities in all areas of campus life.
- Participants will brainstorm strategies for improving inclusion and support efforts for students with disabilities at JMU.

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## Background

- Students with disabilities have both a lower graduation rate and poorer academic success measures than their non-disabled peers.
- Supporting student success goes beyond compliance (e.g. ODS accommodations).
- It is everyone's responsibility to help create an overall culture of inclusion for students with disabilities, enhance services, and cultivate belonging and access.
- Faculty play an important role but do not always understand the law and their role in compliance for supporting students with disabilities.

Bartolo et al., 2023; Brown et al., 2021; Clouder et al, 2019; Evans & Zhu, 2022; Parsons et al, 2022; Roth et al., 2018; Safer, 2020; Wu et al, 2022

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## Highlights from the Literature Regarding Experiences of Students with Disabilities

- Students with disabilities experience stigma, social isolation, negative well-being (e.g. emotional distress, stress, sleep disturbance, family tension, substance abuse)
- Peer victimization occurs frequently.
- Students with a disability and another intersectional identity (e.g. racial, sexual orientation, female, gender diversity, veteran, etc.) had worse outcomes/experiences.
- Compliance mandated accommodations are helpful but not sufficient to meet all needs of students with disabilities.
- Universities tend to have an ableist culture and faculty and staff need more training about disability.
- Students with disabilities respond differently to challenges (e.g. develop resilience v. guilt for needing support).

Bartolo et al., 2023; Brown et al., 2021; Clouder et al, 2019; Francis et al., 2022; Kim & Kutcher, 2019; Kimball & Thoma, 2019; Lund & Ross, 2021; Parsons et al, 2023; Safer, 2020; Squires et al., 2018; Sturm & Kasari, 2019; Vaccarro, 2015; Wu et al, 2022

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## Individuals with Disabilities at JMU

**# JMU ODS-registered Students in 2023:** 2144 (9.4% of total enrollment)

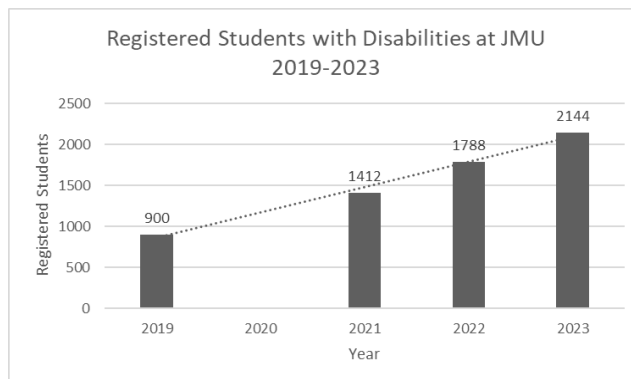
- National Trends indicate that this number will continue to grow in the coming years.
- Many students with disabilities do not seek accommodations.

(National Center for Education Statistics, 2022)

**JMU 2021 Climate Study indicated that**

- Students with disabilities were “less comfortable with the climate in their classes than student respondents with no disability” (p. 79).
- Some students experienced barriers to receiving accommodations from faculty.

(Rankin & Associates)



Note: Data is not reported for 2020 due to inconsistencies secondary to migration to new database.

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## Methods

- Qualitative survey
- Invitation sent through ODS listserv, then to all students (to possibly capture those without accommodations)
- End of survey invitation for an in-depth interview
- Survey and interview included open-ended questions framed around the student's experiences in the following areas:
  - Academics
  - Social life and belonging
  - Support services
  - Accessibility
  - Well-being

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## Our Sample

- 38 survey responses that met inclusion criteria
  - undergraduate
  - at least 1 year at JMU
  - have a disability (may or may not be registered with ODS)
- Age range 18 – 57, mean = 21.6
- 12 sophomore, 14 juniors, 9 seniors
- 9 male, 22 female, 2 non-binary, 1 queer
- 30 white, 3 Hispanic, 1 African American, 1 multiple races
- 11 in-depth interviews (average 40 minutes)

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## Disabilities Represented

- ADHD/ADD – 19
- Learning Disability – 7
- Anxiety – 6
- Mental health (not specified) – 4
- Chronic illness (not specified) – 3
- Mobility impairment – 3
- Depression - 3
- POTS – 3
- Neurodivergent – 3
- Autism – 3
- Bipolar – 2
- Dyslexia/Dysgraphia - 3
- OCD – 1
- Traumatic Brain Injury – 1
- Reynaud’s Phenomenon – 1
- hEDS – 1
- Spondyloepiphyseal Dysplasia Congenita – 1
- Ehlers Danios Syndrome – 1
- Paraplegia – 1
- Orthostatic Intolerance – 1
- Deaf – 1
- Heat Imbalance – 1
- Migraines – 1
- Seizures – 1
- Celiac Disease - 1

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|--------------------|
| 1 Disability: 14   |
| 2 Disabilities: 14 |
| 3 Disabilities: 3  |
| 4+ Disabilities: 4 |

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## Theme 1: Academic Impact of Disability

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### Positive

- Learning to cope with academic challenges makes students feel stronger and more resilient.
- Students are succeeding in classes and feel good about that, despite the challenges they face.

### Negative

- Learning is more difficult than for others (those without disabilities).
- Accommodations make you feel different/other/stand out.
- Figuring out accommodations is difficult, an added challenge when things are already harder due to having a disability.

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## Theme 1: Academic Impact of Disability

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### Positive

“I have grown far more confident in my academic ability.” (18)

### Negative

“When I have to miss a class for a test, since I am taking it in the ODS office, and how I'm absent in class during that time may negatively affect how my peers view me.” (20)

“When I have to miss a class for a test, since I am taking it in the ODS office, and how I'm absent in class during that time may negatively affect how my peers view me.” (20)

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## Sub-theme: Professor's Response to Disability

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### Positive

- Faculty are very understanding and accommodating.

“I love JMU. It's a great school. I think what made me love it more is just how supportive all the professors I've had have been. And like understanding of all of the struggles that I have. It's like, 'okay, I know this thing is hard for you, what can we do to make it better for you?'” (40)

### Negative

- Faculty are not understanding and make the student feel bad about using their accommodations.

“Some professors guilt people who miss classes. Sometimes when I have to miss class due to my chronic pain flaring up I get really guilty about not going even though I physically can't go. Then it seem like I am a burden to them because I missed.” (23)

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## Sub-theme: Professor's Response to Disability

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### Positive

"Generally, our professors do truly care about us." (45)

"I've had a lot of professors who have been very helpful and just a lot of professors in general who like make my accommodation process incredibly easy on my side where they're like, 'yep, yeah, I see that I'll like go in and make sure all of your quizzes you have extra time for and like I've got you.'" (35)

### Negative

"Professors really don't like it when you ask them to clarify what their questions are because they think you're trying to cheat. But in reality, I'm frequently asking if I'm answering the question correctly for the question I'm reading, but the question I'm reading is not the question as written." (39)

"Some professors treat accommodations as an inconvenience to them." (18)

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## Theme 2: Social Impact of Disability

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### Positive

- Most students seem to find a niche, and report that finding a friend group is very important.
- People want to spend time with other people who they perceive to be "like" them.
- Students appreciate the diversity of JMU (people and opportunities) and feel that there's a place for everyone at JMU.

### Negative

- When students do have social struggles, which are often disability related, there isn't institutional support to help them resolve those.

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## Theme 2: Social Impact of Disability

### Positive

“I have people who I know support me and they're there for me. And particularly since they're also struggling, I don't feel pressured.” (36)

“It's so much easier when you can meet people that are like you.” (40)

“I finally have real friends.” (16)

“There are so many different activities and places to get involved on campus. Like if you're somebody who likes to build Lego dioramas on the weekends and you don't like to go out you don't like to drink there's a spot for you. I'm sure if you only like to play sports and you're not really into, oh, I don't really want to talk to people very much like, oh, I just want to play rugby or whatever, yeah, there's a spot for you too... There's definitely a place for everybody here.” (12)

### Negative

“There's no accommodation, so to speak, for the social side of campus life.” (23)

“I really don't have much of a belonging besides my friend group. It is hard to join activities because it is hard for me to go to a certain amount of events. It makes me feel left out since this university has such a push towards activities that require a lot.” (23)

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## Sub-theme 2: General Disability Acceptance or Bias

### Positive

- In general, disabilities are accepted.
- Professors are accepting of disabilities (regardless of how they handle accommodations).

“Normalization of accommodations has been great at JMU.” (18)

“Most students either don't know or don't care that there are people with disabilities (not in a mean way though).” (28)

### Negative

- Culture of ableism
- Other students have biases or misunderstanding about disabilities.

“Students who can't hide their disabilities are ostracized and stared at and asked invasive questions. We're like zoo animals... The problem is almost entirely within the students.” (45)

“It seems that this small minority of hyper achievers sets the pace for the rest of us which in my opinion is a critical mistake.” (36)

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*“Those with physical disabilities are easily accepted, but neurodivergence is harder for the average person to understand and I have definitely heard people say awful things about those with neurodivergence.” (22)*

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## Theme 3: Support Resources

### *Office of Disability Services*

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#### **Positive**

- Accommodations help students to be successful in their classes.

#### **Negative**

- Accessing and using accommodations is difficult.
- Specific frustrations centered around the following areas:
  - testing room distractions
  - scheduling tests
  - testing for night classes
  - ODS staff working ineffectively with Residential Life
  - paperwork requirements
  - not knowing who to contact
  - not feeling heard by ODS staff
  - ODS can not meet all needs\*

\*note that this complaint is likely due to students misunderstanding the roles and responsibilities of the ODS office

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## Theme 3: Support Resources

### *Office of Disability Services*

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#### Positive

"I utilize accommodations granted to me by the office of disability services, such as extended time on tests, which has been a huge help. As a result, my grades since I have been involved with the office of disability services have improved." (22)

"I like the ease of getting my accommodations" (28)

#### Negative

"If my class is late at night I cannot get my accommodations. If I forget to schedule my exam room three business days in advance, I cannot get my accommodations...it is impossible to utilize my accommodations." (12)

"I mean, I wish that ODS were more accessible, but there's not a lot they can do because they have no money. And such limited staff and such limited time. And their legal office. So it's it really sucks that ODS isn't more accessible." (39)

"I guess something else that I have really struggled with is the testing room with ODS." (not consistent, not distraction free) (12)

"I think the biggest thing to me was how difficult it was to try to enact the accommodation." (17)

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## Theme 3: Support Resources

### *Other*

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- Many students had used the counseling center, positive and negative thoughts were mixed but more negative.
- Some students were resourceful and accessed every possible support office, some had no idea what was available or where to start.

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## Theme 3: Support Resources

### *Other*

#### Positive

"I struggle academically and thought the resources at the SSC sounded super helpful." (26)

"The people are friendly and helpful, I feel that I have most of the resources I need to succeed." (22)

"I'd say that the counseling center is highly accessible." (29)

#### Negative

"I've found the counseling center here to be really unsupportive, unfortunately." (16)

"I have noticed for like mental health support, it can be a bit difficult...for people I know it's been difficult for them to like get an appointment to talk to somebody." (31)

"The way that the university presents itself is very, we are welcoming, we will do our best to help you. We will do our best to accommodate you and work with you. And I have not been finding too much of that." (17)

"[Counselors] have, frankly speaking, hindered and/or invalidated me at most steps along the way... they don't want to help me." (17)

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## Theme 4: Accessibility

Comments from students with disabilities were overwhelmingly negative.

"How could someone like me ever feel like I belong in a place that barely has wheelchair ramps?" (45)

"Inaccessible areas/ large curbs and poorly maintained sidewalks." (33)

"They have the button at the entrance, [but] it's not necessarily wide enough for a manual wheelchair. And it's things like that where it's just like they've put it in effort but not enough. And I wonder sometimes how many people who struggle with these issues they have looking at the solution." (36)

"They do not have automatic door openers at the loading dock for King Hall which is considered a handicap entrance, also the ramp is awful." (11)

"There are systemic issues at play here. I don't know that JMU is particularly inaccessible but that American universities tend toward inaccessibility." (17)

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## Theme 5: Recommendations from Students with Disabilities

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- “Provide more discrete help for students that may have a disability but might not want to get an ODS accommodation” (14)
- “Have a liaison maybe for ODS...Like, let's say a professor told me I couldn't have my accommodations. I would have no idea who I would talk to, I guess I would email ODS but I don't really want to email the general email you know, I wish there was a person.” (12)
- “Advocates? Someone to be with me when an issue flares up as I try to navigate all the different resources, kinda like the Victim Advocacy center.” (16)
- “Offer specialized events for neurodivergent students who are seeking guidance and advice, delivered from an educated professional on the subject.” (22)
- “Improved maintenance towards sidewalks roads and walkways as well as keeping disability in mind when construction is occurring.” (33)
- “Train professors and instructors on Universal Design of Learning and Cultural Sensitivity, better enforce that ODS accommodations are respected.” (13)
- “Having a really open discussion surrounding disability at orientation...where It's something all students have to listen to or watch. And especially if you center the voices of students that are disabled that share what they experience because I think that helps.” (35)
- “This survey is a good start. Listen to us. Genuinely, actually listen. Don't just guess what you think we probably need.” (45)
- “Make it easier to use accommodations.” (28) *Note that this recommendation was repeated in similar words by many students.*

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## Insights: ODS Can Not Solve This Problem Alone

- Disability Service Centers (ODS) are, and should be, compliance units--established to facilitate the ADA requirement for provision of accommodations (academic, digital and physical access)
- The role of ODS is important but not sufficient to wholistically support students with disabilities.
- **A multi-pronged approach is needed.**

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## Recommendations & Action Steps

- **Education and Training**
  - For students, faculty, and staff
- **Staffing and Support Services**
  - Increased funding to expand ODS to better meet student needs and compliance requirements
  - Establish a *Disability Access and Identity Center* that aligns disability with other minoritized groups on campus
- **Culture and Environmental Changes**
  - Including physical accessibility and strategic planning
- **Ongoing Research**
  - Exploring unique experiences of specific disability groups

The State Council of Higher Education for Virginia. (2023) recently released a document titled: *Best Practice Guidelines for Accommodation Practices for Students with Disabilities at Virginia Public Higher Education Institutions.*

Through collaboration with ODS, the ADA Coordinator, and VP of DEI, JMU has the opportunity to become the model in Virginia for meeting and exceeding the SCHEV guidelines for "best practices" for serving students with disabilities.

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Questions

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