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Absent Voices: Intersectionality and College Students with Physical Disabilities

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College students with disabilities stand at a crossroads when transitioning from high school to college, and yet, are often absent from discussions regarding underserved populations in higher education. This absence is particularly notable in scholarship employing the lens of *intersectionality*. To address this gap, this qualitative case study employs a strengths-based lens to examine how typically marginalized college students used the strengths of their socially constructed identities as a dynamic force to find keys to academic success.

INTRODUCTION

"If they don't understand, educate them on it," stated Charlotte, the youngest of our study's participants. Disabled students have been referred to as having *minority* status and share certain conditions of marginalization (e.g., oppressed, powerless and/or socially excluded) with underserved groups, such as students of lower socioeconomic statuses, but are often ignored or invisible in literature addressing these groups (Brantlinger, 1991; Cooper, 2012; Gliedman & Roth, 1980; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Mapp, 2002; Milgerode, Maes, Buysse & Brondeel, 2012; National Longitudinal Transitional Study 2 [NLTS2], 2004; Warren, Soo, Rubin & Uy, 2009). Thomson (1997) posits the absence is because the disabled are the "ultimate other" and "assure the rest of the citizenry of who they are not" (p. 41).

Postsecondary education in the United States has been touted as a critical step in economic and social advancement for both individuals and society (Yu, 2001). Currently, U.S. policymakers forecast the need for a college-educated workforce, but project a shortage of an educated citizenry to fulfill this need (Institute of Higher Education Policy [IHEP], 2010). For

individuals with disabilities, obtaining the postsecondary education and training to meet these societal needs is a daunting task. According to the 2006 American with Disabilities report, 2002 census data reveals for those 25-64, 43.1 percent with no disability were college graduates as compared to 32.3 and 21.9 percent with a non-severe and severe disabilities, respectively (as cited in Steinmetz, 2006). The goal to fulfill the educational threshold for the nation's workforce is further exacerbated when high school degree completion rates for individuals with disabilities in this country are taken into consideration. According to Steinmetz (2006), for the same age range, 10.4 percent of individuals without a disability dropped out of high school as compared to 14.6 and 26.6 percent with a non-severe and severe disability, respectively. This lack of attaining a certificate jeopardizes their employability as well and the workforce as a whole. Until these considerable barriers are effectively addressed, the United States is at risk of losing out on a talented pool of contributors to the workforce (Gliedman & Roth, 1980; Harry, Kalyanpur, & Day, 1999; IHEP, 2010; NLTS2, 2004).

The current article is a direct result of the scarcity of literature on academically successful students with physical disabilities. Having a disability of any kind intersects with all representations of identity: racial/ethnic, gender, class, religious, and cultural lines (Hirschmann, 2012). Furthermore, disability scholars define disability as a term constructed by society and based on a biased lens (Gliedman & Roth, 1980; Hirschmann, 2012). Consequently, students with a physical disability are part of a socially constructed, marginalized population, a group for which the term *intersectionality* was developed. Therefore, we suggest that intersectional research, which is used to "excavate the voices of the marginalized" (Nash, 2008, p. 13), should also include the voices of students with physical disabilities. The overarching research question for this study is: What factors influence academic success for students with physical disabilities? The purpose of this article is three-fold: 1) to apply intersectionality to an often overlooked, unacknowledged sub-group, broadening the theoretical framework's utility and further expanding the field's understanding; 2) to understand intersectionality from a *strengths-based* point of view; and, 3) to give voice to an often omitted sub-group within the greater social and academic communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The labels *disability* or *special needs* are broad concepts encompassing a range of disabilities from intellectual to physical (Gliedman & Roth, 1980; Greeff, Vansteenwegen, & Gillard, 2012; NLTS2, 2004). The U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Needs and Rehabilitative Services (EDOSERS, 2006) uses three main categories under the special needs label: medical, behavioral and developmental. For the purposes of this study, we focus on the developmental category of having a physical disability, defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2014) as having a learning disability, a visual impairment, hearing loss or deafness, a speech impediment, an orthopedic handicap, or a health impairment. Students facing such challenges are entering higher education institutions at increasing rates (Katsiyannis, Zhang, Landmark, & Reber, 2009). In the United States, in 2008, 11 percent of the population enrolled in higher education institutions identified as disabled, up from six percent in 1999 (NCES, 2014). These students, regardless of cultural ethnicity or socioeconomic status, have lower persistence and degree attainment rates when compared to students without disabilities (Hirshmann, 2012). Unfortunately, having a disability is not a social phenomenon limited to a

select few, but is a societal issue (Hirschmann, 2012), which now impacts all students pursuing higher education.

For many, academic success is obtaining a bachelor's degree or higher from a degree-granting institution, and is the ultimate goal of those who participate in higher education. For the purpose of this study, we define academic success as both students' transitions to college: the decision to attend college and successfully matriculate (Ward, Siegel, and Davenport, 2012); and, their persistence: "a student's postsecondary education continuation behavior that leads to graduation" (Texas Guaranteed Student Loan Corporation, 1999, p. 5). Prior research has found that students with a disability demonstrate the potential for academic success early in their academic career, yet their success is short-lived. Students with disabilities score higher on 4th grade standardized achievement tests, however, they are more likely to drop-out and have substantially lower high school graduation rates than students without disabilities (The Equity & Excellence Commission, 2012). This underscores the importance of including the voice of academically successful students with disabilities in the conversation. The success of these students and their stories is important to increasing their presence in higher education and in the workforce.

To be part of the conversation is to have a voice, which is an opportunity for individuals to share their perspectives to invoke awareness, without censorship. The use of voice in intersectional research is often employed as a qualitative tool to bring the perspectives of marginalized groups to emerging political issues (Choo & Feree, 2010; Nash, 2008). As educators, voice is the space where students and administrators make meaning of their condition and experiences. Exploring the academic career and trajectory of students with physical disabilities is a highly sensitive and audacious task; however, voice in this study is the necessary dialogue that enables the *others* to convey their reflective stories to be better understood. Voice means to be part of a greater dialogue that one has been absent from due to being overlooked both socially, and in this case, within intersectionality scholarship. Intersectional scholars advocate for the inclusion of perspectives from those at the margins of society (Choo & Ferree, 2010; Hancock, 2007). Therefore it requires, in this case, for students and administrators to insert themselves within a scholarly discourse and framework that has been restrictive up to this point, but meant to be inclusive. As a result of sharing ones' voice, participants are empowered and liberated (inspiring others) to embrace this voice.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Intersectionality is a complex theoretical framework typically applied to the plight of a marginalized or oppressed group (Gopaldas, 2013). The concept of intersectionality is rooted in Black feminist theory (Crenshaw, 1991) and was traditionally used to explore how the multiple dimensions of race, class, gender and ethnicity *intersect* to foster privilege and oppression. Its origin helped people to understand Black women at a time when their voices were unheard and invisible in specific spaces, especially in political, academic, and scholarly spheres. Since its inception, intersectional scholars have broadened the framework's scope beyond Black feminism to include various social categories and experiences that shape one's self, blurring the lines between identity, oppression and privilege (Hulko, 2009). This expansion of intersectionality's utility makes it an ideal lens for further understanding the story of three women (one being African-American, all having at least one physical disability, and all being academically successful) to better understand yet another voiceless population who is often left out of the

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political, academic, and scholarly spheres. However, applying intersectionality as a framework should not be limited to these categories of difference, nor should we constrain its application to only examine deficit perspectives for which it was historically developed. The study of intersectionality is not binary nor a study of one identity versus another, but rather the *deconstruction* of how all these categories work with one another; however, until recently, disability was not considered as a voice in the discussion.

By utilizing intersectionality to explore the academic success of students with physical disabilities, we expand the conversation to help scholars and greater academic communities understand additional groups who have been marginalized or ignored in prior research. We suggest these students used the strengths of their intersections as levers to attain academic success and strive beyond the constraints of the deficit view of their socially constructed identities. Intersectionality advocates for the inclusion of all oppressed voices, but noticeably absent in scholarship is the voice of the disabled. Museus and Griffin (2011) posit that to understand the experiences of students in higher education, researchers must evolve the use of intersectional frameworks to "ensure particular groups are not being excluded from discussions of equity in higher education" (p. 11).

The invisibility of the disabled voice in intersectional literature may be due to the broadness of the term disability, which cuts across all of the traditionally mentioned identification categories. Disabled students occupy many spaces regardless of race, ethnicity, geographic location, or socioeconomic class. Instead of viewing their intersecting identities as oppressive, the participants in our study used the *strength* of their intersections as a dynamic force to move up the ladder of academic success.

METHOD

To capture the experiences of students with physical disabilities and debunk the deficit point of view that is most often linked to intersectionality, we utilized a collective case study approach (Merriam, 2009) with "issue-oriented questions" (Stake, 1995, p. 65) to amass and compare information across three student respondents and two administrators. We were particularly interested in exploring the ways in which students reached academic success and what they attributed to it, as well as the ways in which administrators supported the students' efforts and shape the university's climate regarding students with physical disabilities. By working directly with the director of the disability services office, Cy, and the associate vice president for equity and inclusion, Virginia (names, places, and positions are pseudonyms), we focused on three *successful* students with physical disabilities: Charlotte, Stella, and Monica. The participants were divided into three subsets: undergraduate, graduate, and administration.

Site Selection: Bubbler University

The study took place at Bubbler University, a private institution on the West coast, situated in an urban setting, serving over 5,000 undergraduate and graduate students across three city campuses. We chose this University's Disability Services Office because of their credible reputation and array of services. It is an all-encompassing office serving both its primary student constituency, as well as its larger tri-campus community, by providing a variety of support including: note-takers, classroom aids, braille embosser, faculty education and training, among other services.

Our purposive sampling strategy was specifically homogeneous because we were interested in how students with physical disabilities exceeded social expectation, transitioned to college, persisted, thus achieving academic success. The Disability Services Office's website describes physical disabilities as being related to issues of mobility, visual, hearing, or other on-going health limitations. Some of these *physical* disabilities are visibly evident, while some are not. The term physical disability can be interchangeable with physical impairment, and according to the Americans with Disabilities Act' s Title III Regulations (2010), it is "[a]ny physiological disorder or condition, cosmetic disfigurement, or anatomical loss affecting one or more of the following body systems: neurological; musculoskeletal; special sense organs; respiratory, including speech organs; cardiovascular; reproductive; digestive; genitourinary; hemic and lymphatic; skin; and endocrine" (p. 30).

Participant Selection

Our student participant sample met the following criteria: (1) have at least one documented physical disability (for which they may or may not utilize support services); (2) are currently enrolled; (3) in *good* academic standing with the university; and, (4) self-selected to participate in this study.

Charlotte. Charlotte was the only undergraduate participant in the study. Charlotte is White and comes from an upper-middle class family. She started her elementary education in an urban environment, but attended a public high school located in a rural farming community. She took Advanced Placement (AP) classes and graduated from high school with well over a 4.0 grade point average (GPA). Charlotte is the only student in this study who is not a first-generation student; both her parents and paternal grandfather earned bachelor's degrees. Charlotte, who utilizes services from the Disability Services Office, entered Bubbler University as a freshman political science major. And just as she was in high school, is socially popular, following in her family's footsteps by becoming a sorority girl.

Stella. Stella, an African-American, first-generation college student, describes her background as low-income. She first entered the University as a freshman, but stopped out to take care of family. Sometime later, she finished her general education at a two-year college before transferring to Bubbler University. Her undergraduate major was teacher education and early childhood education, and as a graduate student, she is studying to be a special education teacher. Like Charlotte, she too utilizes services from the Disability Services Office.

Monica. Also a graduate student, having completed her undergraduate career in the Midwest, she describes her background as middle-to lower-middle class. Monica is the only one of the three who does not receive and has not received accommodations since elementary school. She transitioned from an urban region, where she grew up and attended K-12 schooling, to a college in a rural community. Monica is White, happily married, and a former special education teacher. Like Stella, she is a first-generation college student, now earning her doctorate in education.

The following table (Table 1) is a summary of the three student participants. It provides an easy reference to the overall picture of the participating academically successful students with disabilities.

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Table 1. ***Background Information about Student Participants***

Student Participant's Name	Disability	Background Information	Background Academic Information	Higher Education Information	Educational/Career Aspirations
Charlotte	Ankle-foot orthotic (AFO) and Upper –limb impairment	Female White Upper-middle class	Undergraduate student; high school GPA > 4.0 and took Advanced Placement courses (AP) Urban elementary; rural farming high school; self-described as popular	Political science major; sorority girl; utilizes services from the Disability Services Office; getting ready to attend law school	Law degree focusing on environmental and water rights law
Stella	Eye-sight impairment	Female Black Low-income Referenced having been married	Attended an urban high school in densely populated crime ridden area; grew up near Bubbler University; first-generation	Attended a two-year college; undergraduate teacher education major Graduate student; utilizes services from the Disability Services Office	Master of Arts degree in early childhood education; wants to teach at a school for the blind overseas
Monica	Orthopedic impairment	Female White Middle-to low-middle class Married	Utilized accommodations in elementary school; first generation; graduated from a Midwestern high school	Graduated from a Midwestern university; doctoral student; Does not utilize the Disability Services Office	Educational doctorate; wants to be a faculty member teaching special education courses

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Data Collection

The data collection method for this study was implemented in two phases for both students and administrators, and two separate sets of interview protocols were developed. For students, in the first phase, a demographic survey preceded the face-to-face two-on-one interviews to collect basic background information and inquire about students' academic support prior to enrolling in Bubbler University. In the second phase, we conducted three two-on-one interviews with the participants. The interview protocol for the students was divided into five sections to solicit responses about *self*, *family*, *high school*, *college*, and *social interactions*. The purpose of these categories was to inquire about the ways in which the participants navigated and capitalized on their experiences, and how the intersections of being a woman, having a physical disability, and attaining an education created opportunities for success versus being at an intersection of oppression.

To maximize face-to-face interview time with the administrators, Cy and Virginia, the first phase of the interview protocol was conducted via email, and they were given the option to bring typed responses to the interview or submit them via email. In the second phase, we conducted a one-on-two interview. The interview questions were developed to gauge the University's campus climate regarding support for students with physical disabilities and how they facilitate and ensure academic success from an administrative perspective. Immediately following the one-on-two interview, follow-up questions were developed and emailed to the administrators to delve deeper into their initial responses and to capture the mechanisms that have been put in place to support students with physical disabilities. Cy submitted his follow-up responses via email, while Virginia's responses were collected in a one-on-one interview and transcribed.

All interviews were conducted in the Spring of 2014, ranged from 60-90 minutes, and were audio recorded. The questions were open-ended in order to elicit responses that would incite meaning-making of these students' *interactivity* (Gopaldas, 2013) of being physically disabled and academically successful, as well as to explore the role administrators play in supporting and facilitating academic success for students with physical disabilities.

Data Analysis and Coding

Data analysis and coding are critical steps in qualitative research. Data analysis is "the process of making meaning or revealing the meaning of the actions at the site…something that happens during data collection and…engaged in by the researcher throughout the project" (Horvat, 2013, p. 106); whereas coding "begins the process of analyzing the large volume of data generated in the form of transcripts, fieldnotes…and the like" (Schwandt, 2001, p. 26). We, therefore, interpreted and organized the data we generated from interviews to provide an understanding of the participants' experiences and their academic success.

As explained by Horvat (2013), data analysis [and we would add coding] began at the start of this study. Having chosen Bubbler University, engaged with a purposive sampling process, and developed research instruments that explored the various intersections of our student participants, we were intentional in mapping our analytic direction. Therefore, data analysis and coding, like the data collection process, was conducted in several phases, keeping the research question and theoretical framework in mind at all times.

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In the first phase of data analysis and coding, extensive field notes were taken by each researcher during the interviews. Oftentimes during the interviews, codes were generated by each researcher, and then later compared. Field notes were analyzed and not only led to coding, but also supported the basis for follow-up questions. During the student interviews, follow-up questions were developed on the spot to delve deeper into student responses, while during administrator interviews, follow-up questions were generated post-interview once the one-on-two interview was transcribed. In either case, we were constantly analyzing responses to make sense of our data for answering the research question.

In the second phase of data analysis and coding, we developed emerging themes that were consistent discoveries across all three student cases. Themes also emerged from the administrative interviews; however, since administrators were interviewed together, and were part of the study to help us understand their role in facilitating academic success for students with physical disabilities, their themes were developed irrespective to the students' responses or to each other's responses, but based on what emerged as their means of support to ensure academic success for students within the University community. Given the fact not all of the student participants utilized services from the Disability Services Office, we were most interested in and coded the administrators' responses as they related to the overall University climate regarding students with physical disabilities. We shared our field notes, compared our interview-codes, and developed a spreadsheet to house the themes. As explained by Merriam (2009), "you should be compiling ['themes or category names'] in a separate memo retaining those that seem to hold across more than one interview" (p. 182). This allowed us to organize our thoughts, name and revise our categories, create subcategories, and sort our findings.

Immediately following the student and administrator interviews, in our third phase of analysis and coding, the audio recordings were transcribed. While listening to the recordings post-interview, and after having time to reflect on what was shared, additional notes and themes were added to the spreadsheet. Once the interviews were all transcribed, each researcher took notes individually and collaborated to analyze and discuss final themes. These notes along with the students' verbatim responses were used as support for the final themes found in this article and were also recorded in the spreadsheet. By engaging in this process, we were able to gain a deeper understanding of the students' experiences, namely the strengths associated with the intersection of having physical disabilities and being academically successful.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness has also been touted as a major component of qualitative research; yet, the concept also poses some *dangers*. According to Hallett (2013), having the participants review the material generated by their participation lends itself to validity and trustworthiness; however, as researchers, it is important to take into consideration our relationship with the participants, the psychological consequences of the participants *re-living* their experiences, as well as the idea of whether the information and documents need to be approved at all. We took both the standard practice of trustworthiness, also referred to as member checking, as well as some of the pitfalls outlined by Hallett into consideration when having the participants review the materials of this study. We employed first-level member checks (Hallett, 2013; Horvat, 2013). Since we were seeking to incorporate the voices of socially marginalized students, it was fitting that the participants had the opportunity to review the respective transcript of the interviews. This ensured that we had obtained the information they wanted us to have, and that

the data yielded from the interviews were an accurate portrayal of their experiences. We also separated any personal or professional relationship we might have had with the participants during the consent process, prior to conducting the interviews. We shared with the participants the potential psychological and sociological risks associated with participating with the study and did not use any proprietary information in collecting or analyzing data. Additionally, as researchers who may have had dealings with the participants after their involvement with the study, we assured them that anonymity was our priority and that the integrity of the data were maintained by only sharing related material between the researchers and being available to the participants for questions.

FINDINGS

Strengths of the Intersections

The interplay of the social identity structures we explore are disability and education. By employing a strengths-based view to the lens of intersectionality, we began to understand how the participants thrived at this intersection of their socially constructed identities. One might assume that, in addition to their disability, gender and/or race would be a factor, however, this was not the case. In multiple ways they transformed the challenges of their intersections to disrupt the status quo, which allowed them to flourish. The shape of their academic trajectories were guided, not by what societal contexts dictated, but instead, by how they pushed over barriers placed in their way. Along the path they engaged advocates and change agents who empowered them to achieve and inspired them to advocate for others.

Independence. This theme emerged as a component for all of our participants. Although the levels of their independence vary, each student participant classifies herself as an independent and successful person. The interplay of their intersections includes freedom: the freedom to choose how to maintain their independence; the freedom to choose their careers; and, the freedom to be viewed as or not viewed as the *disabled* person in the room. We asked our two administrator participants for their definition of independence. One thinks of independence in literal terms, defining independence as "the student's ability to manage life details on their own," while the other defines independence in terms of accommodations leading to academic and personal success by "empowering a student to feel more comfortable about communication and independently problem-solving disability-related challenges." Each of our student participants demonstrated these traits.

Charlotte stated she had a "great childhood …other than my physical disability, which I myself don't really consider a hardship because I know no difference." Her disability is her "normal" state, and although she relied upon her mother for personal assistance, she considered herself independent. Her biggest challenge was not academic, but in the ability to obtain a reliable source for the personal assistance she requires to maintain her independence. Much like Monica, she "hated" having a personal assistant in grade school and negotiated her own accommodations with the school administration. Stella also displayed her independence early, not willing to carry "heavy, large-type" textbooks to her high school classes, she purchased a tape recorder and taped all of her class lectures. She is very adamant when stating she "can't get lost in the shuffle" and ensures she is ahead of the curve when using technology to maintain her independence. She finds her disability empowering as she stated, "Everything I need I have within myself in order to go the direction I want to go." Stella makes her own travel

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arrangements using the city bus system get to school, work, and home. Charlotte, Monica, and Stella view their individual situations as part of normal life. They do not see themselves as different or special, but as individuals who are doing what they need to do to fulfill their aspirations.

Although they identify as independent, each rely upon one or more types of aide whether it be in the form of a person or technology. However, their independence empowers them to recognize their need, to seek out the assistance they need, and the freedom to use it to move ahead in pursuit of their academic aspirations. When asked who helped her identify a personal assistant from an outside agency, Charlotte matter-of-factly stated, "[I] took care of it myself." In part, their independence is also reliant on their ability to be flexible and adapt. Each of the participants "manage life's details" on their own and are empowered to arrange for their own accommodations. Even though each has a physical challenge, which society may view as a barrier, when facing an intersection they used it as a springboard to freedom of choice. They did not come to these decisions alone, they are empowered by family members who assist in shaping their independence.

Families and independence. The role of each participant's family was important in their journey to independence. Charlotte, Monica, and Stella all had one parent—whether it was their mother or father—who believed in them. Students with physical disabilities are often linked and regarded in the same context as students with cognitive impairments. Each of our participants' families were adamant that their child's academic journey would be in a general education classroom and their families expected them to function like their peers and/or siblings. Stella's mother told an elementary school teacher "she doesn't see well there is nothing wrong with her brain, she's not going into special education." In Stella's case, her mother "instilled a strength" in her. She credits her mother with helping her to be "fiercely independent." Charlotte's mother insisted "she had to work for everything" and relied on Charlotte to take on the role of "sibling parent" to her younger brother. Monica's father shaped her views of being normal and inspired her academic goals. She stated that he was her "anchor" who "pushed her to do things" and "treated her like a normal kid." Each woman has a very strong sense of self and identified themselves as "self-aware," "fiercely independent and headstrong," and "comfortable" with themselves. Instead of wallowing in their situation, they seem to revel in it. When we asked Charlotte about this she said, "You've got to accept yourself before you can ever expect anyone to accept you; get over yourself." For these three strong women, much of their strength is drawn from their families who gave them the freedom to choose independence by creating a space for them to recognize the power of their intersections.

Advocacy. Each time their disability intersects with another identity, they use it to advocate for themselves. Intersections are tools that empower them to move up the academic ladder. The participating administrators define advocacy as "an individual who ideally takes control ensuring that they get what they want" and "helping the student become his or her own best advocate." They see advocacy as two-pronged in that it is necessary for these students to have "someone who is sort of championing [the students'] success." Charlotte, Monica, and Stella speak up for themselves and others, but also had another person or persons along the way who "championed for them."

Self-advocacy. Charlotte, Monica, and Stella are all initiators in seeking services and accommodations. As Charlotte so succinctly put it, "You can't rely on mommy anymore." Stella went to the Disability Services Office of a junior college seeking note taking services and she found that "we had to go out and ask for someone … [the office] never assisted us." She not

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only initiated the search for her services, she then had to find the resource on her own. They must be resourceful and persistent in finding what they need. Monica believes that to get what she needs she has to "give 110 percent and really kind of push and do more." We asked the three women to give advice to students who are in similar situations and are struggling. Stella was emphatic that the key is to "get the services you need and advocate for yourself." Monica believes one must be resourceful and "embrace your disability to use it to your advantage." Charlotte stresses a student should "advocate for yourself, speak up and use everything that is available to you. You just look for what's in life that you can work with." All three of these women are instilled with a strong sense of self and are driven to find what they need to thrive. Instead of withering in the face of a challenge, they view their intersections as levers to engage others to achieve academic success. Each woman is not only strong self-advocates they are equally as driven to help others.

Advocacy for others. Charlotte, Monica, and Stella each advocate for others in a number of peer and community organizations. Additionally, each said, in one way or another, that they are "fine with being the disabled person in the room" and "do not mind being the disabled person in the room to help change minds." Even though each is from a different cultural and economic background, they know their disability is the first thing others in the room see. Charlotte and Monica were the first physically-disabled students in their respective high schools. Each said they wish they "had not been the first," but in doing so, they brought a "fresh perspective" to the table. Charlotte and Stella were quite active in community organizations. In high school, Charlotte participated as a peer advocate in youth court for teens in trouble with the law; this has helped shape her career aspirations of becoming a lawyer. Stella is a strong advocate for the blind. She stated "that those with visual disabilities get *even less* attention in the literature and research than other disabilities." She has volunteered at the community center for the blind and hopes to do missionary work in Africa teaching at a school for the blind. Charlotte, Monica, and Stella are continually finding ways to grow and keep moving ahead. Finding the strength in their intersections is due in part to having others recognize and acknowledge their contributions. We suggest that having a person—other than a parent—advocate for them inspired them to advocate for others.

Mentor advocates. Mentors played an important role in the academic success of each of these students. As our administrative voices said, having someone to champion them is essential to the academic success of disabled students. Charlotte, Monica, and Stella all identified a teacher or advocate in high school who helped them grow socially and provided the creative accommodations they needed to achieve academic success. In Charlotte's case, a high school agriculture teacher involved her in Future Farmers of America (FFA); Charlotte excelled, thrived and achieved one of the highest awards the FFA bestows upon student members. Because of her involvement in FFA, she has a vast social network and a friend she has kept in touch with. Charlotte said the teacher "pushed me out there." She also identified a college faculty advisor who is "amazing." She stated he is the "one person that does not see me as disabled."

Like Charlotte, Monica transferred to a new environment where she was the "disabled kid." On her own, she tried to negotiate accommodations with a math teacher who had given her numerous detentions for not making it to class on time due to the four flights of stairs she had to climb and descend to get to class. A journalism teacher recognized the challenge and Monica's love for journalism. She knew Monica did not like to be "excluded or to stand out" so she created "press passes" for the entire editorial staff. The passes allowed all of the editorial staff an excuse for lateness. Monica is still in touch with this teacher. She also identified an

undergraduate faculty advisor who noticed she was struggling her freshman year. He talked to her and told her "[the other students] are expecting you to fail." Monica thrived and continues to thrive under the mentorship of this professor. He helped shape her career aspirations of becoming a faculty member.

Stella had a high school teacher who recognized her talents and mentored her to go to college. She helped Stella take the required entrance exams and obtain full scholarships to college. Like Monica, Stella identified a college faculty mentor who helped shaped her career aspiration of working in early childhood education. She also stays in touch with this mentor who provides additional guidance.

Whether they draw the conclusions or not, Charlotte, Monica, and Stella consciously or unconsciously advocate every day for those with disabilities. Through their everyday actions and successes, they are examples of what strengths can be drawn from their intersections. The three of them have crossed generational, cultural, ethnic, and economic lines to achieve academic success. Their experiences are best summed up by Monica: "I have embraced it (disability) not manipulated it and used it to my advantage. My disability is part of me, but it is not the whole part of me but it is part of me and that's ok."

PATH TO ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Academic success of students with disabilities is typically not part of the narrative when discussing barriers to academic achievement for marginalized groups and within the context of intersectional research. Through their stories, we see how Charlotte, Monica, and Stella's intersections are not single lines crossing at distinct paths but rather multiple axes of strength they use to shape and transform their lives (Gopaldas, 2013; Hirschmann, 2012). The success of these three students surpasses national statistics and expectations for students with physical disabilities. Entering this study we assumed one of the contributing factors to their achievement would include a peer circle comprised of students with similar challenges, yet that was not the case. We found that the larger themes across all three student cases were independence and advocacy. More specifically, independence and the freedom independence can bring to exercise choice, as well as the importance of at least one family member's support, created the freedom and independence to pursue a higher education. We also found advocacy is present in many forms including: exercising their voice as they lobbied for themselves, the choice to advocate on behalf of others, and lastly, the role mentor advocates played in helping them to set, actualize, and take ownership of their academic and life expectations.

We approached intersectionality from a strengths-based perspective versus one of oppression and strife. From a collective case study approach, we explored how three students: Charlotte, Monica, and Stella, all faced what most would consider to be challenges: Being a woman (one being an African-American woman), having a physical disability, and being within the confines of higher education. Instead of any one of these social categories shaping a negative sense of self, each of the participants are empowered by the challenges of their disability, and did not mention race or gender; they capitalized on the one socially constructed identity that had the most impact—their disability—to reach academic success. The participants used the complexities of their intersections to succeed instead of being limited by their fundamentally embedded gender, race, or class identities (Choo & Ferree, 2010).

By interviewing both students and administrators we were able to see how such students navigated academia, and how the mechanisms that were put in place by each participant and

person they encountered created opportunities for success. The results of this study demonstrate that the students in this study perceive themselves at an advantage well before attending college. Instead of being limited by any physical barriers, they chose to turn what could be viewed as a weakness into a strength, going beyond their transition to college to degree attainment. It is important to reiterate that these students entered higher education with a strong sense of self, despite their multi-layered identity. Their intersections created positive influences and shaped their academic success. Therefore, the role of administrators is two-fold: 1) support: providing campus-community access to reinforce what was already instilled in and given to these students prior to entering college; and 2) advocacy: to work on behalf of students with disabilities to prepare the university community for such students' arrivals, ensuring the academic environment is suitable for these students to persist and ultimately graduate. Since the services and programs provided by disability services offices are used at students' discretions, if at all, it is a testament to how critical the pre-college factors revealed by this study are for students with physical disabilities to achieve a college degree and how important it is to share these voices.

CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS

This article had a three-fold purpose: First, to apply intersectionality to an overlooked sub-group: students who have physical disabilities who have reached academic success. We find that these students are actually empowered by the interactivity of their physical disability and their pursuit of higher education, and not suppressed nor marginalized by social identity structures. Further, the participants did not identify race or gender as having an impact on their academic success. Perhaps, as Hirschmann (2012) reminds us, disability is solely a socially constructed idea not an abnormal state for those with the impairment.

Our second purpose was to understand intersectionality from a strengths-based perspective. It is clear that these students do not perceive themselves at a disadvantage, but are strengthened by their intersections, so much so, that neither their disability nor the traditionally mentioned social categories are even of concern for these students. As noted by Nash (2008), "It is time for intersectionality to begin to sort out the paradoxes upon which its theory rests in the service of strengthening its explanatory power" (p. 14). Contrary to the deficit lens often used to examine students with disabilities, we found these women to be indomitable, confident, focused, and inspiring. All three students perceive themselves as strong, independent, enabled, and invested in their own success and the success of others, thereby disrupting the dominant intersectional discourse highlighting the connections between these students instead of their socially constructed differences (Hirschmann, 2012). Again, having a disability goes beyond race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion, or any other socially constructed marginalizing attribute. Therefore, this study concludes that intersectionality is no longer a frame to only understand the plight of the oppressed, since neither the students nor the administrators see having a disability as a deficit, or mentioned race, gender, or socioeconomic status as incapacitating factors. Instead we believe that intersectionality is a lens to also view the strengths of those who have been socially constructed as a marginalized other and chose to reconstruct their identity and view how the strengths of their intersections led to academic success.

Further, the administrators, acting as the liaison between students and the university community, work to facilitate and ensure academic success by providing support and life skills that will carry these students beyond the classroom and their academic career. The director of

the disability services office and the associate vice president for diversity and inclusion have made it their personal and professional mission to create opportunities of access and equity for students with disabilities. Therefore, these advocates for social justice go beyond *surface-level diversity* (Robbins, 2005) to join forces with a group of seemingly marginalized students who have been misjudged and unheard; thus, taking us to our third purpose: to give voice to an omitted subset of the college population that is worth hearing.

Though we are adhering to the recommendation of Museus and Griffin (2011), who called to expand the voices included in intersectionality research, we would be remiss by not acknowledging the fact that these students—individually as well as collectively—had found their voice prior to participating in the current study. However, we have designed a study that provided a platform from which the academic community and institutional agents can hear them loud and clear. Charlotte, Monica, and Stella, though all very different from one another, each view themselves as strong and empowered students who transform the socially constructed views of their identity and live life as a "typical college student." We would argue that these extraordinary students live life beyond that of a typical college student. They articulate that they would not give up their physical disability to be *normal*; they do not struggle, are proud of their identity, and are empowered to define what that is. They also embrace their role as educators and change agents. Through their voices, we learn that their disability is not a challenge for them, but their muse that inspires them to be successful academically, professionally, and socially, and we used intersectionality as a lens to examine what outsiders might view as the complexities of their identities, but what actually for the participants was a strength (Rasky-Levine, 2011).

Although the climate of an academic environment for students with physical disabilities is comparable to the climate for students of color and *others* given minority status, this article explains how those who are physically impaired combat it, establish their place in higher education, and in some cases, surpass their peers. Moreover, the participants' academic success is not a selfish gain, but necessary for them to reach their goals, including giving back to students with special needs. These students have now positioned themselves in a place of power and influence, which further re-conceptualizes intersectionality as a theoretical framework applied to the plight of the marginalized or oppressed other.

It is imperative that in future research, studies continue to value voices of students with physical disabilities. These voices nurture hope and empower both storytellers and listeners. We now understand that disability services offices of colleges and universities primarily influence the academic climate and assist in reinforcing the identities students come to college with. Such centers, through their advocacy and services, also aid in students' identity development and voice, but as we have found, it is imperative that students enter college with a strong sense of self. By illuminating the narratives of these three students, we highlight the importance of researchers further interrogating these narratives to gain a deeper understanding of how and why the strengths of intersections can lead to academic success. Consequently, such an understanding can add a meaningful layer to inform our efforts to expand the discourse around intersectionality and increase educational achievement for these students.

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