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Understanding the Personal and Academic Experiences of Graduate Students with Disabilities

By Andrea Mozqueda

Claremont Graduate University

2020

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Approval of the Dissertation Committee

This dissertation has been duly read, reviewed and critiqued by the Committee listed below, which hereby approved the manuscript of Andrea Mozqueda as fulfilling the scope and quality requirements for meriting the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education.

Dr. Eligio Martinez, Chair
Claremont Graduate University
Senior Research Fellow

Dr. Linda Perkins
Claremont Graduate University
Associate University Professor

Dr. Thomas Luschei
Claremont Graduate University
Professor of Education

Abstract

Understanding the Personal and Academic Experiences of Graduate Students with Disabilities

By

Andrea Mozqueda

Claremont Graduate University: 2020

This qualitative research study explored current graduate students with disabilities personal and academic experiences. The three theoretical frameworks utilized were Disability Studies in Education (DSE), intersectionality and Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) to connect how race, gender, sexual orientation, and disability identities impact graduate students with disabilities experiences. This dissertation study had a total of four research questions to explore the impact of graduate students with disabilities higher education experiences. This research study was conducted at three different California higher education institutions: two private universities and one public university. There was a total of twenty graduate student participants interviewed that were registered with their institution's Disability Resource Center. 55% of the interview participants identified as students of color. The findings indicated how intersectionality impacted their graduate school experience by creating barriers and unique challenges as graduate students with disabilities. Based off the analysis, there are a total of seven implications for practice to recommend for higher education institutions to support graduate students with disabilities.

Keywords: Disability Services, graduate students, accommodations, identity, academic experience, personal experience, intersectionality, Disability Critical Race Theory

Dedication

To my mom, thank you for your unconditional love and support.
I love you every day.

Acknowledgments

To my dissertation committee members, thank you for your support and believing in me. Each of you have made a meaningful impact on my PhD journey. Thank you to my dissertation committee chair, **Dr. Eligio Martinez**, for your commitment, advocacy and dedication. I appreciate you taking the time and energy to be my dissertation chair. I am grateful for you always checking in with me and providing me advice on my educational career. Thank you for encouraging me to conduct research and providing me a platform to present at the American Association of Hispanics in Higher Education conference. Thank you **Dr. Linda Perkins** for your enthusiasm and encouragement throughout the PhD program. Your courses and curriculum made a substantial impact on my educational studies. Thank you for providing a platform for women of color in the higher education field. I owe much gratitude to **Dr. Thomas Luschei**. Thank you for being an inspiring professor since day one in the Proseminar class and for continuing to motivate me as an Educator. One of my favorite memories of my CGU journey has been working as your TA for Proseminar, thank you for giving me the opportunity to support you and my fellow peers.

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“I try to write every story about empathy. That's the most important thing that I've certainly dealt with having disabilities. And that's something that I hope to spread.”

-Mark, Graduate Student Participant

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Chapter 1:

Introduction

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2019) graduate student enrollment has reached 4.1 million and continues to increase. In the academic year of 2015-2016, 19% of undergraduate students and 11.9% of graduate students reported having a disability (NCES, 2019). Graduate students with disabilities are an important population to support in order to increase retention and graduation rates. Graduate students with disabilities are a unique community of students that often have different challenges than undergraduate students, but it is also a population that we know little about. Due to graduate students being considered mature, self-sufficient, and goal-orientated, it is assumed that they do not need any support in their advanced education career (Polson, 2003). However, graduate students have a variety of life responsibilities such as financial obligations, full time jobs, marriage and children (Le et al., 2016; Benschhoff et al., 2015; Hyun et al., 2006; Polson, 2003). This underrepresented community is imperative to support due to their unique life challenges.

Unfortunately, only 20% of college students with disabilities graduate from 4-year institutions (Grogan, 2015; Francis et al., 2018) and students with psychiatric disabilities are less than half as likely to graduate than students with learning disabilities (McEwan & Downie, 2013). In the United States, the percentage of individuals with a disability increased from 11.9% in 2010 to 12.8% in 2016 (Disability Statistics Annual Report, 2017). Every year, this percentage increases and, therefore, it is important for public and private higher education settings to create supportive learning environments to encourage individuals with disabilities to excel academically and professionally. The population of students with disabilities in higher education continues to grow exponentially and it is an important issue to address to help students'

graduation and retention rates. It is significant to note that there is very limited research on graduate students with disabilities and their academic experience. Specifically, more research has been conducted on the undergraduate student population than on the graduate student community (Terras et al., 2015; Rose, 2010; Fichten et al., 2014).

Given the steady increase in students diagnosed with disabilities, higher education is in need of creating an equitable and supportive environment for individuals with disabilities. The National Center for Special Education Research states that only 45% of postsecondary students who identified as having a disability in their high school reported continuing their education in a postsecondary institution (Lechtenberger et al., 2012). It is important for higher education institutions to support this community of students as the population is increasing dramatically. It is significant for faculty and staff in higher education settings to provide the best strategies of support for graduate students with disabilities to succeed in their academic and personal life (Hudson, 2013; Terras et al., 2015). Research indicates that many faculty members might not have the best knowledge of accommodations and that some faculty believe that accommodations provide unfair advantages (Cook et al., 2009; Sniatecki et al., 2015). Higher education practitioners need to learn strategies of support to help graduate students with disabilities. Support services that provide a variety of accommodations such as disability services, academic advising, counseling or consulting services for students with disabilities increase graduation rates (Hudson, 2013; Button et al., 2019). Overall, it is imperative that both faculty and staff members provide support services for graduate students to succeed and complete their academic programs.

One of the limitations of the current literature is that we know little about how other student characteristics, such as gender and race, can impact the experiences of students with disabilities. The National Center for Education Statistics (2019) states that in the academic year

of 2015-2016, the percentage of students under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) was highest for those from marginalized communities: American Indian/Alaska Native (17%), Black (16%), two or more races (13%), Hispanic and Pacific Islands (12% each) and Asian (7%).

These historically underrepresented communities need support to persist in the higher education field due to the limited resources they may have to access advanced higher education. It is significant to study data like this to understand how intersectional identities can influence academic success. To encourage more students with disabilities to enter graduate school, higher education practitioners need to create a holistic environment of support.

The purpose of this study is to understand graduate students with disabilities' academic experiences. One of the main challenges in this field is that the research on graduate students with disabilities in higher education is limited and outdated. Increased knowledge about how to support graduate students with disabilities will facilitate better strategies to help institutions increase retention and graduation rates. The intersectional identities of individuals with disabilities can compound marginality for some students, which can be a contributing factor to their academic success and retention rates. Furthermore, it is important in this dissertation study to research how the intersectional identities of graduate students with disabilities impact their overall academic experiences and how they access resources and disability services. Graduate students with disabilities deserve the right to access and equity in their higher education career.

Significance of Study

The graduate student population is a unique community to support and unfortunately there has not been much research conducted on their student development (Benshoff et al., 2015; Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Le et al., 2016). Graduate students with disabilities are a distinct population to serve and it is important to support their persistence in their higher education

career (Terras et al., 2015; Verdinelli & Kutner, 2016). About 54% of graduate students are full-time and have a variety of responsibilities to attend to (Benshoff et al., 2015). Students with disabilities continue to increase in the United States. In 2014, the National Center for Learning Disabilities reported that 52% of young adults were diagnosed with a learning disability and received accommodations in high school but did not consider themselves to have a disability two years after their high school graduation (Kallestinova, 2017). Stigma plays a huge role in the experiences of students with disabilities in the higher education field, from registering with Disability Services to requesting accommodations from their professors. If students with disabilities are not requesting accommodations due to stigma, this will limit their academic success (Sniatecki et al., 2015; Rao, 2004; Hadley & Archer, 2017).

It is vital to encourage individuals with disabilities to continue their advanced educational career to support their academic development. Houtenville (2007) states that individuals with disabilities are much less likely than those without disabilities to possess a college degree (13% vs. 30%). DaDeppo (2009) shares that students with disabilities have encountered a variety of challenges in education such as lack of academic preparation, financial barriers, disability stigma and lack of reasonable accommodations. Public and private institutions that are federally funded have a mandated requirement to provide reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities inside and outside the classroom (ADA National Network, 2020; U.S. Department of Justice, 2020; Rose, 2014). It is imperative that faculty and staff administrators are aware of the best strategies of support for graduate students with disabilities. In this paper, I urge the significance of further studying graduate students with disabilities. Due to the limited amount of research conducted, there is a critical sense of urgency in researching graduate students with disabilities to support retention and graduation rates.

Given the limited research that exists on graduate students with disabilities, it remains unclear whether or not we have an accurate description of their experiences. Peña (2014) critically evaluated the presence and context of students with disabilities in research in the following four top-tier higher education journals published between the years of 1990-2010: (a) *The Journal of Higher Education*, (b) *The Review of Higher Education*, (c) *Research in Higher Education*, and (d) *The Journal of College Student Development*. The findings indicated that between the four main top-tier journals a total of 2,309 journal articles were published and only 25 journal articles evaluated students with disabilities which represents 1% of the total articles published. Of the 25 articles identified, 22 of the journals were published in the 1990s and 3 articles were published in 2003, 2006, and 2010. This indicates that there is a critical need for more research to be conducted on students with disabilities to expand the knowledge on this community and learn inclusive strategies of support, but also the need for more recent scholarship.

Another similar study conducted by Leake and Stodden (2014) evaluated 906 articles published between the years of 2006-2012. The researchers evaluated the following journals: (a) *The Review of Higher Education*, (b) *Research in Higher Education*, (c) *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice*, (d) *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, and (e) *Journal of College Student Development*. The findings indicated that only 1.2% (11 articles) pertained to students with disabilities. The limited research conducted on students with disabilities in higher education implies that there is a crucial need for further research to understand how to better serve their needs across higher education settings. These examples are significant to my dissertation study because they reflect the limited amount of research conducted and how my dissertation can contribute to the gap in literature.

Definitions & Research Questions

For the purpose of this dissertation, the following are specific terms and definitions that are relevant to this research study:

- 1) Graduate student: Any individual who has completed their college bachelor's degree and is in a current master's, doctoral, or professional higher education program.
- 2) Student with a disability: Any student with a physical or mental impairment that substantially impacts one or more major life activities.
- 3) Support services: Any department, faculty, or staff member that provides personal or professional resources at an academic institution (e.g., disability services center, counseling center, cultural center, etc.).
- 4) Academic success: The cumulative grade point average (GPA).

The following research questions will support this dissertation study:

Research Questions:

- 1) What factors shape the academic and personal experiences of graduate students with disabilities?
- 2) How do graduate students with disabilities from different backgrounds experience graduate school?
- 3) How do race, ethnicity and gender shape the experiences of graduate students with disabilities?
- 4) How do various support services impact the academic experiences of graduate students with disabilities?

Organization of Dissertation

In chapter 2, I will share how the literature review and theoretical frameworks pertain to graduate students with disabilities. I will describe the historical timeline of governmental policies granting students with disabilities access and equity in education, share undergraduate and graduate students with disabilities higher education experiences and describe support services impact on students with disabilities academic success. In chapter 2, I will also share the theoretical framework that guides this dissertation study. I will describe how Disability Studies in Education (DSE), intersectionality and Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) are prevalent frameworks for supporting graduate students with disabilities. In chapter 3, I articulate my methodology practices specifically sharing my research design and participant information.

During chapter 4, I share the results of my qualitative dissertation research study and provide concrete quotes from student participant experiences. I section off chapter 4 into three separate themes to share the student's with disabilities academic and personal experiences. I also provide participant background information to account for their lived experiences. Finally, in chapter 5 I provide a discussion and conclusion to the dissertation research study. I share a summary of findings and implications for research. In this chapter I also provide implications for practice to help higher education practitioners increase student retention and support strategies for graduate students with disabilities. Finally, I end the chapter with recommending future research that should continue to be conducted for graduate students with disabilities.

Chapter 2:

Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

Graduate students with disabilities present an area of research that is much needed. Specifically, our understanding of students with disabilities is limited by the research on graduate students with disabilities experiences in colleges and universities (Damiani & Harbour, 2015; Le

et al., 2016). It is crucial to review the literature to understand the different dynamics between undergraduate students and graduate students since support services can impact students with disabilities academic experiences differently.

This literature review is organized in three different sections: (a) historical timeline of policies and procedures for students with disabilities (b) students with disabilities in higher education, and (c) support services' impact on students with disabilities academic success. I will begin by discussing the historical context of disability services and the disability movement in higher education. Government laws and regulations are articulated within the historical timeline to provide the context to understand disability services in higher education. In this section, I will also describe how financial aid impacts students with disabilities academic success.

The second section will discuss students with disabilities in higher education, specifically focusing on the experiences of undergraduates and graduate students with disabilities in regards to support services and academic experiences. Understanding how the experiences of students with disabilities differs between undergraduate and graduate school years is important to understand how their needs change during these two levels of higher education. In the final section of the literature review, I will review the impact of support services on students' academic success.

Historical Timeline of Events

Understanding the historical policy context of students with disabilities helps lay the foundation for their experience in higher education. The historical timeline of students with disabilities in higher education begins with an interesting dynamic. It was not considered proper for higher education institutions to admit individuals with disabilities until the late 1800s (Jaeger et al., 2005). It was even very rare for individuals with disabilities to be tutored. However, in

1846, physician and educator Edouard Seguin wrote *The Moral Treatment, Hygiene, and Education of Idiots and Other Backward Children* and proposed that people with disabilities could be educated (Jaeger et al., 2005). This was the first piece of educational literature written by a physician that addressed educating individuals with disabilities. In 1864, President Abraham Lincoln signed into law a funding measure for Gallaudet University to provide higher education for students who were deaf (Armstrong, 2014). This law created a fundamental change in the disability movement, thus marking the beginning of governmental influence on higher education policy to support students with disabilities.

It was not uncommon in higher education for there to be discrimination towards individuals with disabilities (Cory, 2011; Madaus et al., 2009). Students with disabilities encountered difficulties with the infrastructure of facilities, specifically on campus with physical accessibility (Gelbar et al., 2015). When finally accepted into a university, students with disabilities then encountered a variety of challenges when attending classes. For example, it was not uncommon for college campuses to have limited accessibility around the community. Many individuals recall seeing students who were wheelchair users being carried upstairs because infrastructure failed to be accommodating (Jarrow, 1993; Gelbar et al., 2015). There were many physical and architectural barriers that individuals commonly encountered at universities. Government regulations forced institutions to accommodate students with physical disabilities by reducing physical barriers to provide accessibility (Madaus, 2011; Gelbar et al., 2015).

Prior to the 1970s, students with disabilities were discriminated against and denied equity and accommodations in higher education (Paul, 2000). Senator Hubert Humphrey proposed an amendment of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability in all programs that were federally funded (Weber, 1994). Moreover, Senator

Humphrey announced a significant political change indicating that any federally funded program had to comply and provide reasonable accommodations for individuals with disabilities.

Impact of Veterans with Disabilities

Veterans with disabilities had a huge influence on the disability movement, dating back to World War I. In 1914 Congress approved “The Commission to National Aid to Vocational Education” to support veterans with disabilities in the workforce (Madaus et al., 2009). Veterans with disabilities studied industry, trade and agriculture during this time. Then in World War II, the Disabled Veterans Act of 1943 established another vocational rehabilitation program and one year later the GI Bill of Rights was created (Madaus et al., 2009; Bonney, 1984; Ryan, 1993; Madaus, 2000). When veterans from the Vietnam War came back to America, they had limited options in the workforce, thus many needed to obtain a university degree (Madaus et al., 2009). Additionally, veterans who came back from the Vietnam War were either permanently or temporarily disabled. In 1974, the U.S. Department of Labor surveyed more than 7,800 veterans and found that the unemployment rate of these veterans were twice as high as non-disabled veterans (Madaus et al., 2009).

It has been reported that 51% of student veterans report having a veteran affairs disability, although only 21% of veterans receive disability services during college enrollment (Innovative Educators, 2019). Government regulations mandate that Veterans Affairs and the Department of Education have a responsibility to support veteran students with disabilities in their education career. The number of veteran students with disabilities is expected to increase as nearly as 213,000 due to the military personnel who have experienced a traumatic brain injury since 2000 (Innovative Educators, 2019). Due to this high population of veterans with disabilities, there is a crucial need for more government support and educational access. The

government plays a major role in the disability movement and it is important to continue supporting all underrepresented communities. In this next section, I will elaborate on how higher education policy impacts students with disabilities academic success. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 are two major governmental laws that impacted the disability movement by supporting accessibility in the field of higher education.

Higher Education Policy for Students with Disabilities

The disability movement truly created a pathway for individuals with disabilities to enter higher education. There are two primary laws that influence higher education procedures for accommodating students with disabilities in higher education. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 are two government laws dedicated to serving individuals with disabilities from all racial backgrounds, gender and sexual orientation (ADA National Network, 2020; U.S. Department of Justice, 2020; Rose, 2014).

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in programs conducted by federal agencies, programs receiving federal financial assistance, federal employment and in the employment practices of federal contractors (EARN, 2018; U.S. Department of Justice, 2020). People with disabilities may not be excluded from participation in, or denied the services, benefits, or aid related to occupational training, housing, health insurance, counseling, academic programs, research opportunities, financial aid, physical education, recreation, athletics, transportation or higher education programs (U.S. Department of Education, 1980). The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 helps individuals with disabilities in all settings, especially in higher education institutions that are federally funded. However, individuals with disabilities are required to provide physician verification documentation to confirm their

disability diagnosis, which can be a barrier to access for those individuals who do not have secure health insurance (U.S. Department of Justice, 2020). The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 regulations require that individuals be evaluated properly, and it is the full duty of the student to provide documentation and identify themselves as having a recorded disability and request the appropriate accommodations and resources (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2009).

The second government law that pertains to supporting students with disabilities in higher education is the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. The ADA serves to ensure equal protection of people with disabilities in both public and private sectors (U.S. Department of Justice, 2020; U.S. Department of Labor, 2020; Jarrow, 1993). The ADA of 1990 defines an individual with a disability as someone who has a mental or physical impairment that limits one of more major life activities (Wilhelm, 2003). When the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was signed, there was no influence over private sector that were not federally funded institutions. However, due to discrimination and bias against individuals with disabilities in the private sector, there was a change in the government sector that influenced equality for all in higher education. Furthermore, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 is an impactful government regulation that creates equal rights in the public and private sectors for individuals with disabilities.

To maintain federal funding at an institution, staff and faculty need to understand how their actions can affect not only the university status of federal funds, but also how their work impacts student development. One of the missions of higher education is to prepare students for the employment world, which can be complicated if institutions do not meet the needs of their students (Rose, 2010). The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016) states that people with disabilities have lower employment rates than people without disabilities. Overall, the disability rate was 16% for 25 to 64-year olds who had not completed high school, compared to 11% for those who

had completed high school, 10% for those who had completed some college, 8% for those with an associate's degree, 4% for those with a bachelor's degree, and 3% for those with a master's or higher degree (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). It is important to understand how a disability can impact an individual's educational attainment and how finances can also be a barrier into higher education. Now that we have reviewed the historical timeline of the disability movement and the higher education policy, I will describe how financial challenges impact students with disabilities academic success.

Financial Challenges for Students with Disabilities

There are many financial barriers for students with disabilities, specifically when they enter higher education. College costs can be very expensive, and it is crucial that the government understand the financial need students with disabilities encounter in their pursuit of higher education to encourage college attendance. Wolanin (2005) has dedicated much of his research towards students with disabilities and stated in this most recent article that about 37% of students with disabilities in high school came from families with household incomes below \$25,000. Individuals from low-income communities need the financial aid support to enter higher education.

When a student has a disability there are additional costs that they must take on, that can include dietary foods, doctor visits, equipment maintenance, medications and other bills associated with assistive devices (Wolanin, 2005). The unmet financial need can limit their access and ability to complete their college degree. There are a variety of federal campus-based programs that are available to help students: Pell Grants, Federal Perkins Loan, Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants and Federal Work-Study (Wolanin, 2005). However, much of the federal loan programs are very specific and limited for individuals with

disabilities. Even though federal legislation supports the availability of reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities on college campuses that are government funded, many students do not make regular use of their accommodations or do not seek support (Marshak et al., 2010). Gardner (2000) states that the federal government is the single largest source of financial assistance for postsecondary education. For students who may come from lower socio-economic households or nontraditional backgrounds, financial aid plays a huge role in college students' access into higher education (Chen & Hossler, 2017). If a student has limited access to financial aid and has cost associated with a disability, this can hinder their ability to finance their education.

There are other forms of financial aid that students with disabilities are able to receive. Specifically, students with disabilities are able to receive social security disability insurance (SSD) and Social Security Administration (SSI) (Berry et al., 2004). SSI individuals are less likely to receive loans (18%) than SSDI participants (24%) and nonparticipants with disabilities (31%) also borrowed less than these groups (Berry et al., 2004). Another government financial aid package is the federal Pell Grants, which maximize students' financial aid package specifically for low-income students. However, the Pell Grant maximum award was 84% of the average total price of a public four-year institution in the mid-1970s and by the mid-1990s it was 34% of that price (Wolanin, 2005). The access of federal funds can support the financial hardships for individuals with disabilities, however there are limited funds available.

Federal programs can hinder a student with disabilities financial aid package (Wolanin, 2003). Moore (2003) states that receiving funds from vocational rehabilitation agencies or the social security administration may negatively affect students' ability to secure financial aid from their schools or to participate in work-study programs and internships. Thus, students may

receive less financial aid options for their college expenses and may not have any additional means to supplement it. Moore (2003) interviewed 53 students with disabilities to review their challenges and opportunities in financing higher education. In her research, she found that students with disabilities are concerned about taking out student loans due to their future employment challenges. Students with disabilities also reported that they often felt unwelcomed at four-year institutions because their financial aid offices were not responsive to their financial aid need. Specifically, their vocational rehabilitation counselors highly discouraged them from pursuing a bachelors or graduate degree and instead encouraged vocational training (Moore, 2003). This results in less students with disabilities continuing their education path.

In comparison, grants and scholarships from private sources account for less than 2% of all college financial aid, specifically private sources require additional applications, examinations, essays and interviews, which can be another barrier for students with disabilities to overcome when searching for additional financial aid options (Gardner, 2000). Research has found that private loan officers are not a reliable, secure or safe choice for students with disabilities. Unfortunately, two thirds of students obtaining their bachelor's degree take out loans to fund their college education (Velez et al., 2019). This extreme loan borrowing is a substantial issue, especially for students with disabilities who require more financial aid to support their accommodations and they are also likely to encounter barriers of loan payment after graduation.

In order to gain the most financial aid-based support, it is essential for students with disabilities to notify their intended university ahead of attending. Gardner (2000) states that students with disabilities are their best self-advocates, they should not delay in notifying appropriate faculty and support services departments in order to fulfil their financial aid package. The Higher Education Act also funds programs that prepare students for higher education, it

specifically includes several provisions for the needs of students with disabilities including a nondiscrimination clause, funds for student support services, and increases student financial aid when disability-related expenses are expensive (Wolanin, 2003; Moore, 2003). It is mandated that federally funded institutions provide academic accommodations for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities must have financial aid knowledge in order to navigate the higher education system. Furthermore, reviewing the historical timeline, higher education policy and financial challenges of students with disabilities was essential in the literature review to understand the context of this communities' personal experiences and access in universities. In this next section, I will discuss the literature review on undergraduate and graduate students with disabilities and their academic success experiences with support services.

Students with Disabilities in Higher Education

For the purpose of this literature review, I will discuss a variety of types of disabilities and how support services impact academic success experiences for undergraduate students and graduate students with disabilities in higher education. The literature in this area is limited and largely outdated, thus more research needs to be conducted. Specifically, more research has been conducted on undergraduate students than on graduate students, thus limiting our understanding of what graduate students experience. In most research studies, undergraduate and graduate students are blended together in the participant pool, obscuring potential differences in the needs of each group. In this section of the literature review I will expand on the main differences between the academic success experiences of undergraduate and graduate students with disabilities.

Types of Disabilities

The Center for Disease and Control Prevention defines disability as “any condition of the body or mind (impairment) that makes it more challenging for the individual with the condition to do certain activities (activity limitation)” (Disability and Health Overview, 2020). There are also different categories of disabilities that individuals can be diagnosed with such as the following: hearing, visual, mental/psychological, mobility, chronic illness and learning disability (Disabled World, 2019). Even more in depth, there are also individuals with invisible disabilities, meaning their disability is not readily apparent to others (Vaccaro et al., 2015). The Invisible Disabilities Association (2012) states that there are 19 million people who have an invisible disability. In this section, I will share how visible versus invisible disabilities can dramatically affect an individual’s life experiences.

It has been researched that individuals with visible disabilities can experience stigmatizing challenges such as: 1) aesthetic aversion, 2) spreadphenomenon, 3) discriminatory hiring practices, and 4) difficulty adjusting to one’s disability (Ysasi et al., 2018). These hardships can be very detrimental to an individual’s life experiences. Research represents that there are a variety of challenges that individuals with visible disabilities encounter. People with visible disabilities are vulnerable to challenging obstacles in their life experiences. Uniquely, people can have negative stigmas towards individuals with visible disabilities such as the following: 1) threat to body image, 2) fear of losing one’s physical integrity, 3) fear of contamination, and 4) disability as a reminder of death (Livneh, 1982; Ysasi et al., 2018). These hardships can dramatically create unwelcoming experiences for the student’s sense of belonging on campus.

Individuals with invisible disabilities such as mental illness can also encounter unique barriers such as discrimination, unstable housing, financial stress, and not understanding how to navigate and receive educational accommodations (Venville et al., 2016; Ennals et al., 2015; Manthey et al., 2015; Mealings et al., 2012). Specifically, student veterans with invisible disabilities encounter the following hardships: 1) fear of negative perception from their faculty members, 2) concerns about being treated differently by peers, and 3) the dire to feel autonomous (Kranke et al., 2017). As mentioned earlier in the literature review, veteran students with disabilities are a unique population of students. Another research study conducted on 8 first-year college students with invisible disabilities describe findings of how important supportive relationships are and how self-advocacy is connected to a sense of belonging (Vaccaro et al., 2015). Specifically, the research describes how students with invisible disabilities who successfully are able to self-advocate for themselves inside and outside the academic classroom shape their sense of belonging on campus. Moreover, individuals with invisible disabilities can encounter a variety of unique barriers that impact their life experiences.

Lastly, a research study conducted with 59 college student participants varying from visible and invisible disabilities find that disability identity could function as both a positive inspiration and negative burden, creating self-doubt (Newman et al., 2019). Individuals type of disability identity heavily impacts student journeys, however in more depth visibility versus invisibility can also play a huge role in student experiences. Moving forward, I will share the literature review on undergraduate students with disabilities higher education experiences.

Undergraduate Students with Disabilities Experiences

The pathway for students with disabilities to enter college can be a challenging road. Undergraduate students with disabilities encounter different barriers than graduate students with

disabilities. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016) about 1 in 5 people with a disability had less than a high school diploma, compared with 1 in 10 people with no disability. Individuals with disabilities encounter a variety of challenges and experiences in the higher education field and subsequent employment. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016) states that 26.1% of people with a disability who had completed at least a bachelor's degree were employed in 2014, whereas 75.9% of college graduates with no disability were employed. The low employment rates for individuals with disabilities can be a challenging impact in student loan repayment. This can also discourage individuals with disabilities in entering the higher education system. The results of the American Community Survey (2017) indicated that an estimated 14.8% of individuals with a disability aged 21 to 64 years had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher (Disability Statistics, 2018). Overall, individuals with disabilities need more support services to increase grades and graduation rates (Fichten et al., 2014). The National Center for Education Statistics states that about one in ten undergraduate students report having at least one or more disabilities (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). While students with disabilities receive support services, their experiences can vary.

The most common theme regarding the experiences of undergraduate students with disabilities is the process of seeking support services and thus their attitude toward formally disclosing their disability. As stated earlier, the Americans with Disabilities Act requires that a student self-discloses their disability to obtain accommodations (U.S. Department of Justice, 2020; Barnard-Brak & Lechtenberger, 2010; Norton, 1997). Research has shown that seeking support services can be seen as either a negative or positive experience for undergraduate students due to their interactions with higher education practitioners (Thompson-Ebanks & Jarman 2018; De Cesarei, 2014). Students can either have visible or invisible disabilities and

requesting accommodations can be an uncomfortable conversation with higher education practitioners. In a study conducted by Lombardi, Murray and Gerdes (2012) the researchers state that one out of ten college students have either an apparent (physical) or nonapparent (invisible) disability. Undergraduate students encounter a variety of unique challenges that can hinder their academic success (Thompson-Ebanks & Jarman, 2018).

Requesting accommodations in the classroom can be a challenging experience for students. Thompson-Ebanks and Jarman (2018) conducted a qualitative study and interviewed nine undergraduate students with disabilities to learn the reasons why students decided to disclose their disability and their perceptions of their decisions. The students all indicated both positive and negative consequences of disclosing their disability to support services on their campus. Positive experiences of disclosing their disability to support services included quick accommodations and assistance in the academic classroom. However, the researchers also found how some faculty can disclose an individual student's accommodation and out them to their peers (Thompson-Ebanks & Jarman, 2018). Other research also indicates that faculty members believe when students utilized accommodations it can compromise the integrity of the academic program or course (Beilke, 1999; Sniatecki et al., 2015; Cole & Cawthon, 2015; Rao & Gartin, 2015). According to Rao & Gartin (2015), faculty questioned if employers would even be willing to provide individuals extra time to complete a project. Thus, faculty members can be a hindrance for students who may be seeking accommodations.

De Cesarei (2014) explores the three factors of social support, self-efficacy and metacognitive skills on the attitudes towards disclosing a disability. The findings indicated that it is important for professionals in higher education to promote conditions that facilitate the communication between students and the academic world. The academic support environment

can be an intimidating setting and the social support students encounter in school (faculty and staff members) can be advocates for individuals with disabilities. De Cesarei (2014) reviewed how social support through friends, family and partners play a crucial role in disclosing a disability. Sharing a disability diagnosis can be seen as a factor that can embody a positive or negative experience in the academic setting. De Cesarei (2014) stated the metacognitive skills are related to the constructs of “self-determination” and “self-awareness”, which can impact a student’s academic success. Moreover, strong metacognitive skills may help students with disabilities improve their academic performance, thus increasing their self-efficacy.

Social support is a key factor that differentiates undergraduate students with disabilities from graduate students with disabilities. Personal and environmental factors can influence academic achievement. According to research (Chiu et al., 2019) found that students who seek social support and registered with disability services earlier in the academic semester for accommodations were much more likely to have higher grade point averages. Specifically, students who were approved with note taking accommodations had an increased chance at a better grade point average. Horn and Berktold (1999) conducted a statistical analysis report and the findings indicated eighth graders revealed that despite the fact that over half of the students with disabilities (57%) aspired to obtain a bachelor’s degree and another 29% aspired to attend some type of postsecondary education, only two-thirds had enrolled in a postsecondary institution after completing high school. For undergraduate students, social support and seeking accommodations in postsecondary institutions plays a huge role in continuing to persist in education. In this next section of the literature review, I will describe graduate students with disabilities experiences in higher education.

Graduate Students with Disabilities Experiences

There are a variety of key factors that influence academic support services for graduate students. The following are key components of the unique experiences of graduate students with disabilities in higher education: (a) scripted request for seeking accommodations, (b) online program participation, and (c) mental health impact on academic success. One of the major challenges in attempting to understand the experiences of graduate students is the very limited research that analyzes graduate students with disabilities due to the limited participation pool of graduate students with disabilities (Barnard-Brak et al., 2010)

The first common theme between graduate students with disabilities is their mature role in seeking accommodations, positive disability services experiences and having a scripted method to request accommodations (Terras et al., 2015; Barnard-Brak et al., 2009). Graduate students encounter different challenges such as meeting new peers, connecting with faculty members and professional associations to excel in their career (Le et. al, 2016). Support services play a vital role in graduate students' academic success as they can promote student retention. Kallestinova (2017) conducted a study at a graduate writing center and surveyed 1,292 graduate and professional students. The analysis of the data included the hardships the students encountered related to their academic writing skills in their graduate programs. Specifically, participants' hardships were the most prominent in the following categories: (a) procrastination/writer's block, (b) organizing writing, (c) wordiness, and (d) developing a timeline/deadlines. Furthermore Kallestinova (2017) argues that graduate students face academic challenges, however when more graduate students engage in support at the graduate writing center, they will improve their writing skills. The more support graduate students with disabilities have in seeking accommodations, the more they can improve their academic success.

Barnard-Brak, Lectenberger and Lan (2010) conducted a research study and interviewed 5 students (2 graduate students, 2 undergraduate students and 1 recent alum). The overall objective of their study was to analyze the method of the students with disabilities strategy in seeking classroom accommodations. In this study the findings indicated that it was common for graduate students to have a scripted method of requesting accommodations due to their previous college experience. In another study, Troiano, Liefeld and Trachtenberg (2010) investigated how students with learning disabilities (LD) interact with the Learning Resource Center. Results indicated that students who attended the Learning Resource Center had consistently higher cumulative grade point averages than students who did not attend or attended less consistently. Students with failing grade point averages typically attended fewer than 50% of scheduled appointments. When students failed to seek disability support services, their academic experiences also faltered (Troiano et al., 2010). Furthermore, support services play an integral role in graduate students with disabilities academic success.

Prior research has found that graduate students with disabilities participation in online programs are enhancing their academic success (Verdinelli & Kutner, 2016; Terras et al., 2015; Roberts et al., 2011; Fedynich et al., 2015). Verdinelli and Kutner (2016) study of graduate students with disabilities who were enrolled in blended or online programs found that students who participate in online programs encounter resiliency, self-determination, motivation, goal commitment, institutional assistance and other external resources of support. Specifically recognizing that some participants in this study had to adjust expectations and career trajectories based on their disability and accommodations. One of the major limitations of this study was that a majority of the participants were Caucasian, creating a void in understanding of the experiences of students of color with disabilities. In another disability services research study,

the authors interviewed 16 college students (only 1 graduate student participated) and the entire participant pool was also all Caucasian (Marshak et al., 2010). The authors identified five barriers to why students with disabilities don't seek accommodations in higher education: (a) identity issues, (b) desire to avoid negative social reaction, (c) insufficient knowledge, (d) perceived quality and usefulness of services, and (e) negative experiences with professors. Despite their findings, this study tells us little about the barriers that graduate students with disabilities encounter that prevent them from accessing resources.

Now more than ever, graduate students are often gearing towards online programs in order to accommodate their busy, professional and family schedule (Terras et al., 2015; Verdinelli & Kutner, 2016). In another research study (Terras et al., 2015), the authors interviewed graduate students with disabilities to analyze their experiences with accommodations and perception of their academic success. The findings indicated that the flexibility of online learning was accommodating even though the setting presented concentration challenges. Online programs provide flexibility with schedule and assistive technology can be a positive experience for graduate students with disabilities. The researchers (Terras et al., 2015) found three themes within their analysis that detail the following: (a) previous experiences with special education motivated students to complete a master's degree, (b) fears of academic experiences were minimized after understanding flexibility and willingness of professors to accommodate, and (c) students found successful accommodations as a result from the entire class (including students and professors). Moreover, technology has a way of enhancing experiences for many people, however for graduate students this is a unique contributor to their accommodations.

The last theme that distinguishes differences among graduate students with disabilities is the impact of their mental health on their academic success. Wyatt and Oswalt (2013) analyzed

the comparison of mental health issues between undergraduate and graduate students and how it could negatively impact the health and academic performance of college students. Overall, mental health plays an important role in students with disabilities higher education experience (Jorgensen et al., 2018; Wyatt & Oswalt, 2013). Wyatt & Oswalt (2013) examined the relationships between stress, mental health, and academic classification in a national sample of undergraduate and graduate students. The results indicated that graduate students were 74% more likely to seek mental health care services in the future than undergraduates at 64.8%. Moreover, this article is important to review because mental health plays such a huge role in students with disabilities and it can deeply affect their accommodation support inquires. In another study, Ganschow, Coyne, Parks and Antonoff (1999) conducted a 10-year longitudinal study and compared programs and services for students with learning disabilities in graduate and professional schools between the years of 1985-1995. The findings stated that one third of students reported that they would seek care for an academic program, more than half of them said they would seek care for emotional programs (Ganschow et al., 1999). Of significance, the researchers found that female graduate students were significantly more likely to seek care for these reasons. Furthermore, gender plays a factor in graduate students with disabilities experiences and mental health impact on academic success experiences. A review of the literature reveals that graduate students with disabilities often have a higher level of understanding their disability needs, thus self-accommodation and self-advocacy are vital to their academic success experiences (Terras et al., 2015). Overall, undergraduate and graduate students with disabilities have their own unique challenges and barriers in education. Moving forward, there are a variety of factors in support services that can impact students with disabilities academic experiences.

Students of Color and Graduate School Experience

There is very limited representation of students of color in graduate programs in the United States (Benshoff et al., 2015). NCES (2019) reported that of the 2.5 million graduate students enrolled in fall 2016, about 1.6 million were White, 363,000 were Black, 260,000 were Hispanic, 200,000 were Asian, 71,000 were of two or more races, 14,000 were American Indian/Alaska Native, and 6,100 were Pacific Islander. The Hispanic and African American graduate student population has actually doubled between the years of 2000 to 2016 (Syverson & Brown, 2004; NCES, 2019). There are a variety of barriers for graduate students of color that can hinder their academic success (Benshoff et al., 2015; Smith & Virtue, 2019). Specifically, graduate students with disabilities encounter unique challenges due to their personal backgrounds (Annamma et al., 2013). As mentioned in the literature review, there is a limited number of graduate students of color with disabilities participating in research studies (Marshak et al., 2010; Barnard-Brak et al., 2010; Rose, 2010). However, there is research conducted on graduate students of color (McCallum, 2020; Curtis-Boyles & Bourg, 2010; Brunnsma et al., 2017; Reddick & Young, 2012). Further research must be considered for graduate students of color with disabilities to support graduation rates and fill the void in literature.

Graduate students of color need mentors, engaging faculty members, positive counseling services and advisors (Benshoff et al., 2015; Reddick & Young, 2012; Nadal et al., 2010). According to research, graduate students of color who have mentors complete their graduate studies more quickly, land a job in the academy, and find long term job security (Brunnsma et al., 2017; Curtin et al., 2013). According to McCallum (2020), research finds the following four characteristics support faculty and PhD student of color relationships: (a) caring, (b) keeping it real, (c) high expectations and (d) identity connections. McCallum (2020) also found that

African American faculty and student relationships during their undergraduate career influenced the student's decision in enrolling in doctoral study. Mentorship can have a heavy impact on graduate students' academic success. Nadal, Pituc, Jonston, Theresa (2010) conducted a research study analyzing Filipino American graduate students and found that the lack of mentoring created challenges such as alienation, networking and finding community. The authors also mentioned that peer mentoring and student associations were a positive influence on Filipino American graduate students.

It is significant to support graduate students of color by creating a safe learning environment and providing the opportunity to learn about self and others (Curtis-Boyles & Bourg, 2010). According to Curtis-Boyles & Bourg (2010), graduate students of color need to be supported inside the classroom and faculty members should create curriculum to integrate culturally diverse populations. It should be noted that not all graduate students of color have similar experiences (Smith & Virtue, 2019). Specifically, women of color graduate students can also have different higher education experiences by having isolating experiences due to the marginalization of race and gender combined (Ashlee et al., 2017). Uniquely, intersectionality identities can play a major role in graduate students of color. Furthermore, there is a high need to conduct research on graduate students of color with disabilities to support this community of students.

Support Services Impact on Student's with Disabilities Academic Success Experiences

The National Center for Special Education Research states that 45% of postsecondary students who identified with having a disability in their high school reported continuing their education in a postsecondary institution (Lechtenberger et al., 2012). It is imperative to understand how support services impact students with disabilities academic success experiences.

In this last literature review section, I will be articulating how support services play an integral role in students with disabilities academic experiences.

Disability Services Role

Disability services play a significant role for students with disabilities and their academic success (Barnard-Brak et al., 2010). Overall, there are a variety of supportive measures staff and faculty can provide to support students with disabilities in higher education. Research indicates that disability service departments reported that while 9% of full-time college students report having a disability, only 1%-3% of students actually requested accommodations (Barnard-Brak et al., 2010). Kayhan, Sen, and Akcamete (2015) evaluated the practices of students with disabilities and the students' opinions about the quality of services at their higher education institutions. The findings from this study indicated seven issues that affected student's academic success: (a) registration, (b) awareness, (c) adaptations, (d) social support, (e) communication and security, (f) academic support, and (g) service quality. Specifically, the student's disability services registration was highly regulated by Student Affairs and supported thoroughly for systemic academic progress. Participants felt that the disability services department organized events that helped raise awareness and advocacy for students with disabilities.

Disability services departments should be collaborating not only with students, but equally with faculty and staff to create a holistic and successful academic success experience for students with disabilities (Cory, 2011; Scott et al., 2016). De Los Santos, Kaczynski, and Mundy (2019) evaluated students with disabilities academic success in higher education and found that 63.1% of the participants were not receiving academic accommodations while only 18% of the them used academic accommodations since their first semester. Also 38.5% of the participants stated that accommodations influenced their academic progress. The findings (De Los Santos et

al., 2019) also stated that the disability office registration did not fully predict a student's academic success and it is important that the University administration seek out strategies to educate students with disabilities about the registration process. Creating methods of assessment to measure students' academic success should be a primary goal for disability services departments.

Students also have the choice to not pursue academic accommodations. Squires, Burnell, McCarty, and Schnackenberg (2018) studied the experiences of students with disabilities in a college's professional preparation program. The findings indicated participants wanted to be independent, challenge themselves, avoid stigma, and overcome their disability on their own. The researchers stated that it was a limitation to only conduct research at one institution which could have affected the findings. Overall, higher education practitioners have such important roles in the institution such as creating inclusive learning opportunities and creating a safe space for accommodations. There are a variety of models of support that can help higher education practitioners create supportive learning environments for students with disabilities.

Models of Support

The second common theme of support services impacting academic success is the interaction between students with disabilities and higher education practitioners. Faculty and staff in higher education settings play an integral role in the academic success experiences of students with disabilities. Research indicates that faculty and staff members feel that they need more training, resources and funding towards supporting students with disabilities (Datta, 2015; Scott et al., 2016; Rao et al., 2003). Walker (2016) found that academic support services departments need to be supported by the entire institution and become more inclusive for accommodations.

Higher education practitioners can learn how to support students with disabilities accommodations through a variety of approaches. Murray, Lombardo, and Wren (2011) explored the aspects of training (number of types of training experienced, duration of training experiences, and time since training) to examine how these training factors affected university staff members' attitudes and perceptions towards students with disabilities. Overall, the results from this study indicated that the staff members who participated in training had greater knowledge, sensitivity, lower ratings of insufficient knowledge, and lower interest in receiving additional training. The authors argue that staff perceptions of training suggest that attending workshops is very important, however staff that previously experienced other forms of training (such as reading articles and resources) also had greater understanding of accommodations than did staff who had no prior training. Lastly, specific types of training experiences that are more direct (such as workshops and courses) are more strongly associated with positive experiences than any other types of training.

There are unique ways that faculty and staff members can create a supportive learning environment. Cory's (2011) article strives to educate how campus administrators understand obligations to students with disabilities, current best practices in disability services provision, and timely issues challenging disability services staff members. Universal design (UD) is one tool faculty members can use to create successful classroom environments that promote student learning and reduce stigma and the need for accommodations (Cory, 2011). Specifically Cory (2011) describes how UD is structured so the learning environment is accessible for all students whether it be physical or curricular.

In this literature review, I have discussed the overall experiences of students with disabilities support services in higher education. It should be acknowledged that students with

disabilities experiences are molded through faculty and staff practices, but most importantly pedagogical philosophies. In order for university support services to be successful, the structure of the higher education practitioners needs to be enhanced with best practices. Faculty and staff interaction with students with disabilities are an integral part of the student's experiences.

To conclude, the purpose of this literature review was to examine the existing research on undergraduate and graduate students with disabilities academic experiences. First, the literature that exist is largely outdated. Second, the literature on graduate students of color with disabilities is very limited. The lack of diversity in the research is a gap in the literature and there is a need for further research to analyze a diverse pool of graduate students of color with disabilities to understand the impact of their academic experiences. This literature review provides a context of understanding and argues that there is a critical need for further research for graduate students with disabilities. Researching graduate students with disabilities academic experiences can increase retention and persistence rates in higher education. With further research conducted, higher education practitioners will be able to learn strategies of support to help graduate students with disabilities excel professionally and academically. In this next section, I will articulate the theoretical framework for my dissertation research study.

Theoretical Framework

For the purpose of this dissertation study, I will be utilizing intersectionality and Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) to support my analysis in evaluating graduate students with disabilities. The theoretical framework section is divided into three sections. First, I will discuss intersectionality, second I will write how Disability Studies in Education (DSE) impacts DisCrit and lastly I will articulate how Disability Critical Race Theory creates an impactful connection between intersectionality and graduate students with disabilities. This is vital in

understanding the foundation of graduate students with disabilities in the field of education. There are a variety of oppression forms in the history of disability discrimination which chronicles a relentless infliction of segregation, dehumanization, and exploitation (Baglieri et al., 2011). It is imperative to understand the theoretical frameworks to learn how graduate students with disabilities are impacted in higher education.

Intersectionality

In this dissertation study, intersectionality plays a key role in understanding graduate students with disabilities higher education experiences. In 1989, intersectionality was brought to the mainstream by critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw who widely discussed the connection between race and gender to demonstrate how U.S. systems discriminate against the experiences of Black women (Gillborn, 2015; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018; Harris & Leonardo, 2018; Harris & Patton, 2019). Crenshaw's work is especially significant because it brings attention to how the needs of Black women were ignored by larger social and political movements and how their experiences are not represented within the discourse of feminism and antiracism (Harris & Patton, 2019; Bilge, 2013; Crenshaw, 1991; Collins & Bilge, 2016).

Building off of her initial work, Crenshaw (1991) further pushes intersectionality into three separate forms that further define how violence against Black women is continually perpetuated. Specifically, Crenshaw (1991) articulated the following forms of intersectionality: 1) structural intersectionality, 2) political intersectionality, and 3) representational intersectionality. The theory specifically analyzes how race, gender and other marginalized identities are treated in mainstream situations and experiences. Structural intersectionality examined the way that institutions maintain the oppression of women of color by maintain barriers that prevent women from accessing social services based on their racialized, classed and cultural

backgrounds. Political intersectionality examined how women of color are often positioned within two subordinated groups whose political agendas often conflict with one another. Lastly, representational intersectionality examines how the depiction of Black women and women of color in media and popular culture contribute to their marginalization. Thus, employing intersectionality allows scholars to examine how social structures continue to marginalize specific communities and can maintain oppression by the dominant culture.

Within Crenshaw's (1991) definitions of the three forms of intersectionality (structural, political and representational) there are limitations. Crenshaw (1991) discusses how race and gender are all experiences of social injustices for women of color specifically. Women of color have a variety of identities that can impact inequalities such as disability status, and thus can be challenging to navigate life experiences. Another limitation that can be discussed is intersectionality invisibility and how it can be a societal failure for individuals to recognize and understand intersectionality identities. Individuals can have either invisible or visible disabilities which impact their experiences. Now, intersectionality has played a key role in the higher education sector by connecting marginalized populations and their educational experiences (Harris & Patton, 2019). To further explore, Bowleg (2012) described intersectionality's impact on historically marginalized populations:

Intersectionality is a theoretical framework for understanding how multiple social identities such as race, gender, sexual orientation, SES [socioeconomic status], and disability intersect at the micro level of individual experience to reflect interlocking systems of privilege and oppression (i.e., racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism) at the macro social-structural level. (Bowleg, 2012, p. 1267)

Intersectionality creates a foundation for understanding how individuals are impacted by their oppressed identities and how it can further influence their higher education experiences. While navigating the higher education field, intersectionality plays a key role in the challenges and experiences individuals encounter. Bowleg (2012) and Crenshaw (1991) further express how specific identities are vulnerable and stereotyped which can impact specific experiences. In essence, intersectionality analyzes a variety of oppressed identities. Gillborn (2015) essentially states that intersectionality is significant in understanding racial inequity and other identities inter-relate in different factors through life experiences. As Harris & Patton (2019) stated, intersectionality should be seen as a way to transform social justice activism.

In relation to this dissertation study, I specifically interviewed current graduate students with disabilities to analyze their experiences, however it was evident through the responses that their other personal characteristics also emerged that were central to defining their identity and impacted their higher education path. Racial identity, first-generation college status, international student status, gender, religious identity, and parent roles all played a significant factor in shaping their experiences in higher education. A variety of the graduate students with disabilities also identified with other oppressed identities which should not be overlooked. Intersectionality plays a key role in the graduate students with disabilities experiences. Furthermore, intersectionality is significant in this dissertation study because it truly helps us understand the connection between identity experiences.

Disability Studies in Education

Disability Studies in Education was named in the early 2000s and examines disability in a social and cultural context (Taylor, 2006; Bacon et al., 2017; Danforth et al., 2006). Specifically, the purpose of DSE centers on issues related to academic, social exclusion and oppression for

individuals with disabilities to create and sustain inclusive and accessible schools (Bacon et al., 2017; Connor et al., 2008). For the purpose of this dissertation study, Disability Studies in Education will be defined to formally introduce its connection with graduate students with disabilities. According to Polson (2003), graduate students with disabilities need diverse support from multiple providers such as advisors, specialized campus student support services, and graduate studies departments. DSE urges accessibility in the university setting and graduate students need that support.

DSE introduced research questions that prompted educational scholars to create theoretical foundations in order to support students with disabilities. Such research questions were posed as the following (Baglieri et al., 2011, p. 268):

- 1) “What is the nature of disability? (Bogdan & Biklen, 1977; Bogdan & Taylor, 1994; Danforth & Rhodes, 1997; Shakespeare, 1994; Sleeter, 1986)
- 2) What are appropriate teaching practices for students with disabilities? (Heshusius, 1984; Iano, 1990; Poplin, 1988)
- 3) What counts as research and inquiry in the field of special education? (Danforth, 1999; Gallagher, 1998; Heshusius, 1989; Iano, 1986; Poplin, 1987; Skrtic, 1991)”.

With such important research questions, it has been chronicled that special educators were aware of major movement demanding equality for people with disabilities as it emerged through the Civil Rights Movement in the United States during the 1960s (Baglieri et al., 2011). As noted earlier in the literature review, the United States was heavily involved in creating equitable support for individuals with disabilities. DSE emergence in the United States became a worldwide “social phenomenon” to support individuals with disabilities in schools and universities (Taylor, 2006; Danforth et al., 2006; Bacon et al., 2017). To create a theoretical

understanding, DSE has been a growing field internationally among higher education practitioners.

Since the emergence of DSE there have been scholars and practitioners that continue the educational research. National-Louis University hosts an annual conference titled “Disability Studies in Education: Critical Reflections on the Themes of Policy, Practice, and Theory” and the purpose of the conference is to seek a more pluralistic approach toward theory and practice in educational and rehabilitation services for people with disabilities (Baglieri et al., 2011). There are a variety of practitioners that focus on DSE and create a holistic environment to support individuals with disabilities. DSE scholars could be found in the fields of arts and humanities, medicine, sociology, critical theory, economics, law, and social natural sciences (Danforth et al., 2006; Baglieri et al., 2011; Taylor, 2006). Overall, DSE scholars in the higher education field play an influential role for graduate students with disabilities as they are able to advocate in different academic pillars. According to Anderson and Swazey (1998), graduate education departments need to evaluate their faculty policies, requirements and expectations to effectively support their students’ academic experiences. As DSE is related, graduate students with disabilities require a diverse amount of support from advisors, faculty members, departments and student services (Polson, 2003). Through DSE, higher education practitioners can learn unique strategies of support for graduate students with disabilities.

Disability Studies in Education is imperative to connect with graduate students with disabilities due to the unique challenges this community encounters. Graduate students often manage multiple roles such as parenting, full time employment, and elder care all while seeking an advanced degree (Hyun et al., 2006; Polson, 2003). Thus, DSE social and cultural context can interconnect within the graduate student community. Graduate students with disabilities need

that social support to excel in their academic experiences. Overall DSE brings light to the accesses and equity within the disability movement, but Disability Critical Race Theory is a theoretical framework that expands on intersectionality within race and disability.

Disability Critical Race Theory

DisCrit is the final theoretical framework that is significant to the disability movement and in my dissertation study in evaluating graduate students with disabilities. Annamma et al (2013) first coined the term Disability Critical Race Studies with the purpose of combining Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Disability Studies (DS) to create a new theoretical framework that encompasses dual analysis of race and ability. The purpose of DisCrit is to combine Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory to academically bridge commonalities to utilize tensions between the theories as places for growth instead of resistance and separation (Annamma et al., 2013). I will be utilizing DisCrit as my secondary theoretical framework in my dissertation study and expand the framework by applying it to graduate students with disabilities.

Annamma, Connor & Ferri (2013) introduced DisCrit theory in education as a foundational framework that theorizes about the ways in which race, racism, disability and ableism are built into interactions, procedures, discourses and institutions of education which affect students of color with disabilities. Specifically, the theory examines the processes in which students are simultaneously raced and disabled. DisCrit creates a bridge of connection for students of color and their disability identity. The embodiment of their identity position reveals ways in which racism and ableism inform and rely upon each other in interdependent ways (Annamma et al., 2013). Within identity, there are many branches such as gender, ethnicity, religious beliefs, social capital, cultural capital and human capital. DisCrit is a culmination of how an individual's racial background impacts their disability identity and how it impacts their

higher education attainment. The theorists examine the connections between interdependent constructions of race and disability within education and society. DisCrit seeks to address the structural power of ableism and racism by recognizing the historical, social, political and economic interests of limiting access to educational equity to students of color who have disabilities (Annamma et al., 2013).

Annamma, Connor, and Ferri proposed seven DisCrit tenets to analyze the connection between the interdependent constructions of race and disability in education and society. The DisCrit tenets as discussed by Annamma et al. (2013) are the following:

- 1) DisCrit focuses on ways that the forces of racism and ableism circulate interdependently, often in neutralized and invisible ways, to uphold notions of normalcy.
- 2) DisCrit values multidimensional identities and troubles singular notions of identity such as race or disability or class or gender or sexuality, and so on.
- 3) DisCrit emphasizes the social constructions of race and ability and yet recognizes the material and psychological impacts of being labeled as raced or disabled, which sets one outside of the western cultural norms.
- 4) DisCrit privileges voices of marginalized populations, traditionally not acknowledged within research.
- 5) DisCrit considers legal and historical aspects of disability and race and how both have been used separately and together to deny the rights of some citizens.
- 6) DisCrit recognizes whiteness and Ability as Property and that gains for people labeled with disabilities have largely been made as the result of interest convergence of white, middle-class citizens.

7) DisCrit requires activism and supports all forms of resistance (p. 19).

Uniquely, DisCrit seeks to understand the macro level issues of racism and ableism and how it affects the everyday experiences of students of color with disabilities (Annamma et al., 2013). With tension and caution, the authors do believe that disability must be primarily understood as a political and social category. The authors also believe that DisCrit can be utilized to help push past the impasse experiences in researching the perpetual over-representation of individuals of color within disability categories. For the purpose of this theoretical framework section, I will elaborate on how each tenet impacts graduate students with disabilities.

Graduate students with disabilities are an integral part of the student population and require special attention from higher education practitioners (Benshoff et al., 2015; Polson, 2003). DisCrit influences unique outcomes for graduate students with disabilities due to its tenets that flourish equity in the academic setting. In tenet one, DisCrit focuses on how racism and ableism are often neutralized and invisible in society. It is significant to start the discussion of how racial and disability oppression is very much alive. The graduate student community should also be advocated for within the higher education field. Specifically, self-advocacy is important for academic success for students with disabilities (Terras et al., 2015). It is vital to understand how racism and ableism can be invisible in today's society without advocacy. DisCrit's tenet two is committed to emphasizing multidimensional identities rather than only singular identities. Graduate students with disabilities have a variety of intersectional identities that are unique to the student community that remain unexplored. Specifically, graduate students experience a variety of financial, employment and family pressures (Hegarty, 2011) which can contribute to their multidimensional identity responsibilities. It is important for higher education practitioners to

learn strategies to support this unique community of students. Graduate students' unique identities are truly constructed as multidimensional identities.

In tenet three, DisCrit recognizes how race and ability can have psychological impacts on an individual with a disability. Graduate students with disabilities intersectional identities also have an impact on their academic success. Unfortunately, there is a very limited amount of diversity in the graduate student population in the United States and it is vital for practitioners to eliminate psychological impacts for graduate students with disabilities (Benshoff et al., 2015). Tenet four seeks to disrupt the practice of ignoring the voices of traditionally marginalized communities and instead privileges insider voices (Matsuda, 1987). Many individuals with disabilities have encountered experiences in which they do not have "voice" shared with the community.

Through tenet four, DisCrit "gives voice" by recognizing people of color and/or those with disabilities already have their own unique voice (Annamma & Handy, 2019). It is important for the graduate students with disabilities population to grow their voice in their community as it is becoming more important for individuals to obtain a graduate degree. Faculty advisors play such an influential role in graduate student's education and can help students advocate their "voice" (Baird, 1995). Graduate education is important and continuously expanding in the United States. By 2018 the US Commission projects an additional 2.5 million jobs requiring an advanced degree (Wendler et al., 2010). It is important to continue to educate and support graduate students with disabilities, especially since there will be an increased need in advanced degrees.

DisCrit's tenets five and six considers legal, ideological and historical aspects of disability and race and how both have been used separately and together to deny the right of

certain citizens (Annamma et al., 2013). Graduate students with disabilities encounter many stress factors such as such as conducting research, teaching, publishing and finding employment (Hyun et al., 2006). Hegarty (2011) states that personal motivation plays an important role for graduate students to persist in their academics. In tenet seven, DisCrit supports activism and promotes diversity in forms of resistance. DisCrit holds a high standard to supporting and advocating for people of color with disabilities who hold a variety of significant identities and struggles. DisCrit is an influential theoretical framework that connects well with graduate students with disabilities.

Furthermore, I will be utilizing DisCrit as my secondary theoretical framework for my dissertation study in evaluating graduate students of color with disabilities by integrating personal experiences through the tenets. With the interview responses I receive, I will be able to integrate the DisCrit tenets from the participants lived experiences. For example, in DisCrit tenet four, the authors describe how DisCrit privileges voices of marginalized communities that are not traditionally acknowledged within literature. I will be able to bridge that voice of the student's voices through their lived experiences. It is crucial to understand how graduate students of color with disabilities are affected by their racial background in order to support them. Moreover, DisCrit has continually grown to be a helpful resource for the disability movement in higher education as it creates a foundational understanding of supporting students of color with disabilities. Utilizing DisCrit will be a fundamental approach in my dissertation study to increase retention and graduation rates for graduate students of color with disabilities.

Chapter 3:

Methodology

This study is a phenomenology qualitative research study that explored the experiences of graduate students with disabilities. Through this approach, I hope to contribute to the limited amount of research for graduate students of color with disabilities, which can help impact research and practice. To learn about graduate students with disabilities academic experiences the following research questions will guide this dissertation study:

- 1) What factors shape the academic and personal experiences of graduate students with disabilities?
- 2) How do graduate students with disabilities from different backgrounds experience graduate school?
- 3) How do race, ethnicity and gender shape the experiences of graduate students with disabilities?
- 4) How do various support services impact the academic experiences of graduate students with disabilities?

Phenomenology Qualitative Research

A phenomenology qualitative approach guided this research study as it aimed to understand the meaning of everyday experiences and first-person perspectives (Patton, 2002; Gallagher, 2012). Utilizing a phenomenological qualitative approach in my dissertation study helped gather themes from the data that conveyed multiple perspectives from the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). A key role of phenomenology is understanding how people experience a phenomenon, “how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it and talk about it with others” (Patton, 2002, p 104). This type of study is significant as I explored the academic experiences of graduate students with disabilities.

Qualitative research data consists of quotations, observations, field notes and allows for the researcher to tell a story (Patton, 2002).

The most appropriate type of phenomenology qualitative research data are interview responses (Padilla-Díaz, 2015). For my dissertation study, I utilized semi-structured interview questions to fully capture the participants lived graduate experiences (Patton, 2002).

Understanding the graduate students of color with disabilities academic experiences will fill a gap in literature. Interviews will be a powerful tool throughout this qualitative research study in order to explore in-depth opportunities and unique lived experiences (McGrath et al., 2019).

Furthermore, in this dissertation study I utilized open ended interview questions and a demographic questionnaire in order to fully gain valuable phenomenology qualitative data.

Institutions & Participants

For the purpose of this research study, I conducted a total of twenty interviews at three different California higher education universities. In this research study I will utilize pseudonyms for the universities and participants privacy protection. The first university is public (Northern University), the second university is private (Southern University) and the third university is private (Eastern University). Phenomenology research involves a range of three to ten participants in a research study (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In this section, I will describe the three higher education institutions and twenty participants in this research study.

Northern University is a public research higher education institution with a population of 20,000 students, of which 2,000 are graduate students. Northern University is part of the California state's public university system and offers Master's and Doctoral programs. The graduate students' gender break down is: 44% female, 54% male and 2% unknown. The graduate student's racial and ethnic population is the following: 40% White, 27% International, 10%

Hispanic, 11% Asian/Pacific Islander, 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 3% African American and 7% unknown. There are approximately 66 undergraduate majors and 64 graduate programs. Northern University has more than 140 clubs and organizations to encourage student engagement. The Disability Services Center at Northern University organizes a variety of events and workshops for their student community. They also send out monthly newsletter with updates, resources and more to support the student population regarding Disability Services. The Disability Services Center has a staff of around 15 individuals that support both graduate and undergraduate students. As a public university, Northern University has a variety of California governmental resources and funding for their students registered with Disability Services.

Southern University is a private higher education institution with a population of approximately 10,000 students, 3,000 of which are graduate students. Southern University offers Master's and Doctoral programs. At Southern University, a total of 20% of students are first generation college students. Over 40% of their student population identify as a person of color. About 40% of students identify as male and 60% of students identify as female. There are approximately 170 student clubs and organizations. The Disability Services Center at Southern University has a staff of less than 10 people who support the entire student community. In addition to providing accommodations the department provides counseling to students, ADA trainings, workshops and presentations to educate the community about Disability Services.

Eastern University is a private higher education institution with a population of about 600 graduate students. At Eastern University the racial and ethnic breakdown population is the following: 1% Native American, 1% Pacific Islander, 4% Multi-ethnic, 6% African American, 14% Hispanic, 19% White, 40% Asian, and 5% unknown. The gender break down is the following: 40% males and 60% females. There are over 35 clubs and organizations for student

life and engagement. At Eastern University there is one staff member responsible for overseeing Disability Services. The staff member support students with organizing accommodations, advises students with disabilities, presents ADA training workshops for the community.

For my dissertation study, I specifically utilized purposeful sampling in my dissertation study in order to select information rich cases (Patton, 2002) and identify participants in order to locate individuals who identified with the following: (a) a current graduate student and (b) registered with the Disability Services Center at their respective university. Purposeful sampling is a specific technique for the identification and selection of information-rich experiences (Patton, 2002). It is important to utilize purposeful sampling in order to obtain participants that are related to the research study and can provide meaningful and authentic findings. I inquired at the university's Disability Services Center to interview their graduate students who are registered for accommodations with their department. The Disability Services Center Directors were my primary connection in inquiring to participants if they are interested in the research study. The Disability Services Center Director's emailed out my recruitment email to all current graduate students registered with Disability Services. I conducted interviews between June 2020-October 2020.

The reality of the disability journey is predominant in academic culture due to the challenges students encounter on a daily basis. In total I interviewed twenty students across three different higher education institutions. A total of 55% of the participants identified as people of color. In entirety, 65% identified as female and 35% as male. Although there are a variety of disability identities represented within the participant pool, it should be noted that 60% of the participants were diagnosed with a mental/psychological disability. A majority of the participants did identify with having an invisible disability which impacted their personal and academic

graduate student experiences uniquely. I interviewed a total of eight students at Northern University (Table 1), six students at Southern University (Table 2), and six students at Eastern University (Table 3). In each figure below, I detailed the participants’ pseudo name, disability type, degree, race/ethnicity, gender and graduate school location.

Table 1: Northern University

Pseudo Name	Disability Type	Degree	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Graduate School
Ellen	Learning & Mental/Psychological	PhD, Biology	White	Female	Public, Northern University
Heather	Learning & Mental/Psychological	PhD, Social Sciences	White	Female	Public, Northern University
Rachel	Mental/Psychological	Masters, Engineering	White	Female	Public, Northern University
Danny	Mental/Psychological	PhD, Engineering	Hispanic/Latino	Male	Public, Northern University
Greg	Learning	PhD, Engineering	White	Male	Public, Northern University
Marcus	Visual	PhD, Engineering	White	Male	Public, Northern University
Maria	Mobility	PhD, Biology	White	Female	Public, Northern University
Julia	Chronic Illness & Mental/Psychological	PhD, Biology	Hispanic/Latina	Female	Public, Northern University

Table 2: Southern University

Pseudo Name	Disability Type	Degree	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Graduate School
Crystal	Mental/Psychological	Masters, Educational Studies	White	Female	Private, Southern University

Michelle	Mental/Psychological	PhD, Sciences	Asian	Female	Private, Southern University
Adrian	Chronic Illness & Mental/Psychological	PhD, Sciences	Middle Eastern	Male	Private, Southern University
Mark	Visual & Hearing	Masters, Humanities	White	Male	Private, Southern University
Amelia	Mental/Psychological	PhD, Sciences	Middle Eastern	Female	Private, Southern University
Frank	Mobility & Chronic Illness	Masters, Sciences	White	Male	Private, Southern University

Table 3: Eastern University

Pseudo Name	Disability Type	Degree	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Graduate School
Emily	Learning	Masters, Sciences	Asian	Female	Private, Eastern University
Serena	Mental/Psychological	PhD, Sciences	Middle Eastern	Female	Private, Eastern University
Jane	Learning & Mental/Psychological	PhD, Sciences	Hispanic/Latina	Female	Private, Eastern University
Megan	Chronic Illness	Masters, Sciences	Black	Female	Private, Eastern University
Rogelio	Learning	Masters, Engineering	Hispanic/Latino	Male	Private, Eastern University
Olivia	Mental/Psychological	Masters, Sciences	Asian	Female	Private, Eastern University

Research Design & Data Collection

Two forms of data collection occurred for this study: demographic questionnaire and interviews. In order to confirm the participants for my study I asked the Disability Services Center's Directors to forward my recruitment participant email (Appendix A) to possible participants with the following information: volunteer rights, requirements for completing the interview, compensation, deadline to respond, contact information, and consent form (Appendix B). As an incentive to participate in my research study, I provided a \$15 Target gift card to each participant after the interview process.

It was imperative for this dissertation study that I received the most authentic responses to understand graduate students with disabilities academic and personal experiences. I completed the Claremont Graduate University institutional review board application and when it was approved, I started to conduct my research. For the purpose of this qualitative research study, I requested each participant to complete a demographic questionnaire (Appendix C) in the beginning of the interview. I utilized a demographic questionnaire to understand the interviewees' background and identities. Learning the demographic questionnaire answers was a very helpful contribution to my study. Specifically understanding the participants' background information was a helpful guide as I conducted my individual interviews.

After providing the demographic questionnaire, I asked the interview questions (Appendix D) to the participants. I utilized semi-structured interview questions to learn about the participants feelings, thoughts, and experiences to determine themes and dimensions (Patton, 2002). The questions specifically involved "story telling" in order to obtain rich descriptions from my participants. I was dedicated to creating a safe space for my participants to share their personal experiences. I conducted my interview questions with the participants in a one on one 90-minute meeting setting via Zoom.

For this study, I utilized the Otter.ai app on my personal smart phone to record the interviews with the participants. The Otter.ai app is a resource that provides voice to text transcription and audio recording. To secure the confidentiality of my research study, I am the only person with access to my smart phone and have the login and password to the Otter.ai app. The protection of human subjects is very important to my study since the participants are sharing personal disability and background information with me thus, I will be committed to keeping their information secure. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I had to complete all of my interviews remotely via Zoom in order to follow appropriate CDC safety procedures.

Protection of Human Subjects

It is significantly important as the researcher to protect the participants in the study in evaluating support services for graduate students with disabilities. Specifically, the population of students with disabilities can be a vulnerable community in discussing their personal journeys and experiences with their disability. The sensitive subject of discussion is very important, and I secured the identities of the participants I interviewed by completing the following: (a) I used pseudo names in substitution of the participants' real names and (b) I kept the passwords to the research material confidential. Furthermore, the protection of my participants is critically important because I understand the sensitive and personal material that is being shared.

Data Analysis

In my methodological approach, I analyzed the interview answers by reviewing the raw data transcription. After each interview was completed, I reviewed the Otter.ai transcriptions and evaluated if there were any missing items or misspellings. I then reviewed the audio recording from Otter.ai and transcribed the interview again to make sure all interview transcription was

clean, edited and organized. It is important to first organize the raw data in order to move to the next step of preparing for the data analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

To create an organized data analysis process, I utilized Dedoose to code and collect a thoughtful evaluation of my interview transcriptions. I began coding to analyze the raw data and pulled specific themes from the transcription. Through coding, I found common themes that helped me evaluate the dissertation research questions. Coding requires the process of organizing the data by structuring the data into sections and writing theme words that represent the specific category (Rossman & Rallis, 2012; Creswell & Creswell, 2017). For the purpose of this dissertation, I analyzed the interview questions utilizing a theme coding to find common themes. It is significant to evaluate the themes in order to interpret the meaning and description of the raw data (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Conducting this method helped align my framework of analysis and kept a structured evaluation. I solidified themes that pertain to my dissertation study and utilized concrete quotes within my analysis.

Limitations

There was a total of three limitations that impacted this dissertation study. The first limitation in this dissertation study was the interview process being conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. I conducted the interview process from June 2020-October 2020. Due to COVID-19 I had to follow appropriate CDC protocols and conduct my 1:1 interviews remotely via Zoom. Having face to face interviews is always a different experience and due to COVID-19 I had to have my interviews remotely to comply with safety precautions. Fortunately, my participants had the means to video conference me via Zoom and I'm truly thankful for that opportunity. Due to the student population I was interviewing I also needed to be cautious of their comfort level in participating in an interview during COVID-19. As

individuals with disabilities can be vulnerable to the COVID-19 virus, I had to conduct my interviews remotely via Zoom. When I first started the data collection process, I only received 14 participant responses. I believe since I conducted my data collection over the summer and COVID-19 was occurring, this dramatically affected my participant recruitment. It was challenging to recruit a total of 20 participants overall due to the summer and COVID-19 pandemic conflict.

The second limitation to this research study was the specific criteria I had for students to participate in my research study. I specifically wanted current graduate students with disabilities who were registered with their Disability Services department, because of this I did not have the opportunity to personally email my recruitment information which could have hindered the participation numbers. Since student information is confidential, the Disability Services department Directors sent out the recruitment email on my behalf (one time only) to gather participants for my research study. Also, many graduating alums reached out to me, however it was crucial for me to interview only current graduate students for the purpose of the research questions.

The third limitation to this research study, were the participant's overarching academic programs. A total of 90% of the participants in this research study identify as being in a STEM related graduate program. As mentioned earlier, I did not have the opportunity to email specific students in academic programs for confidential purposes, so it was interesting to see how a majority of the student responses were from STEM related fields.

Overall, I feel that although these three limitations occurred, I still have rich data that provides a voice and platform for graduate students with disabilities. Through my dissertation study, I was able to interview marginalized communities and research a gap in literature. I was

fortunate enough to find twenty graduate students with disabilities that were willing to participate in my research study to provide a feedback of their higher education experiences. Learning about students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic truly contributed to my research study because it provided another layer of experiences and challenges. It was meaningful for my research study to interview current graduate students with disabilities who were registered with Disability Services because these students navigated the college system to receive accommodations which impacted their graduate student experiences. Lastly, I think it is unique to this study that a majority of the participants in this research study were STEM majors. It is beneficial to learn through STEM access how graduate students with disabilities experience their higher education path, especially through their intersectionality. Furthermore, I believe this research fills the gap in literature pertaining to graduate students with disabilities higher education experiences.

Positionality

My passion for Disability Services started when I was a graduate student in 2014 at the University of San Francisco as an Assessment in Student Life Graduate Intern in the Student Disability Services department. I analyzed qualitative and quantitative measurements to assess the Student Disability Services programs and student learning outcome goals, organized educational programming events and advised the Delta Alpha Pi Academic Honor Society for students with disabilities and counseled them on leadership strategies, creating events and philanthropy opportunities.

Since 2017 I have worked at Keck Graduate Institute, a member of The Claremont Colleges, in supporting graduate students with disabilities. As the Assistant Director of Student Affairs and Disability Coordinator I conduct intake case management appointments, advise

students, review physician documentation, create letters of accommodation and provide accommodations to graduate students with disabilities. I also facilitate Disability Services training workshops for the staff and faculty community. With over seven years of professional experience in Disability Services, I have advocated, interacted and supported students with disabilities. Graduate students are truly a unique population of students that have different barriers, opportunities and challenges.

As a current Disability Coordinator, I truly believe it is the responsibility of higher education members to learn and create strategies to best support graduate students with disabilities. At Keck Graduate Institute, I have conducted focus groups and developed surveys to assess the graduate students' disability services experiences and how it impacts their overall academic success. The data represents the challenges and unique experiences that the graduate students encounter through their support services experiences. As a current full-time employee at a graduate institution I have encountered many different experiences with students and departments that contribute to their overall academic success. Support services truly make an impact on students' academic success experiences and I am passionate about contributing to the higher education field by conducting my dissertation study to help promote student retention and persistence for graduate students with disabilities.

Chapter 4:

Results

In this chapter, I will present the findings from my twenty participant interviews with graduate students with disabilities. This study was guided by four research questions, which are the following:

- 1) What factors shape the academic and personal experiences of graduate students with disabilities?
- 2) How do graduate students with disabilities from different backgrounds experience graduate school?
- 3) How do race, ethnicity and gender shape the experiences of graduate students with disabilities?
- 4) How do various support services impact the academic experiences of graduate students with disabilities?

Data analysis produced three main themes that highlight the experiences of graduate students with disabilities. The first theme of *Reality of Disability Journey* answers research questions two, three and four by sharing experiences of students challenges of their intersectionality identities, stigma encounters, financial instability, and COVID-19 hardships. The second theme *Breaking Barriers & Creating Community* will articulate student's disability identity impacts, faculty interactions through microaggressions, peer support experience, and imposter syndrome which will provide further insight into answering research questions one, two and three. Lastly, the third theme described as *Shaping the Future* will elaborate on the student's personal motivational experiences, mentorship and Disability Services experiences which will answer research questions one and four. Furthermore, within this chapter there are honest and critical graduate students' experiences that truly fill the gap in literature.

Reality of Disability Journey

Graduate students with disabilities have a unique journey navigating the educational pipeline and during the interview process it was repeated how each graduate student with a disability was impacted by different circumstances. The participants in this research study

identified with a variety of backgrounds, experiences and barriers. In this section, I will share the challenging and impactful experiences graduate students with disabilities encounter throughout their higher education journey. I will further break down this section by sharing the graduate student participant challenges with their intersectionality identities, how prevalent stigma and advocating for accommodations exists, financial hardships through the higher education journey, and how the COVID-19 pandemic has presented additional difficulties.

How Intersectionality Shapes Experience

Intersectionality was prevalent in the experiences of graduate students which shaped how their identities were impacted in different forms and spaces. This was salient amongst students who identified as being: students of color, first-generation college students, international student status, parents, specific sexual orientations, and religious identities. Each element of their identity uniquely impacted their graduate student experience. In the interview responses, many of the graduate students identified as being first-generation college students and the troubles of navigating their educational journey in the academy. Serena, a first-generation college student at Eastern University, shared how she takes personal blame for not understanding how to navigate the higher education system. She shared how she was a refugee and when she moved to America, that's when she started her higher education journey and the challenges that came with it.

So higher education was after I moved to the U.S. and I struggled a lot in undergrad because that was the first years of me in the United States. And I think it took me six years to finish undergrad. And that's okay, for now. I made peace with it, but I needed all the support. I was just talking to another PhD student yesterday, and I was telling her because we both wanted to go to medical school and the things that you don't know, when you're in undergrad, I didn't know a W is bad on your transcript, I didn't know that

repeating a class looks bad. I didn't have a mentor and the advisors won't guide you, if you don't go to them, they don't ask you if you need the help. But if you don't know you have that resource, then you just don't reach out. I'm not blaming the school, but I'm blaming myself that I didn't know the resources that were out there.

Serena internalized oppression by blaming herself in not understanding how to navigate the higher education sector. Serena felt her language barrier and cultural differences as a practicing Muslim played important factors in her early college years and graduate school experience. Through these challenges, Serena approached higher education with a different lens and gravitated more towards people with similar backgrounds to find a safe community. She shared how being a Global Ambassador in the International Department welcoming new students helped shape her identity of connecting with other students of similar backgrounds. However, Serena explained how she gravitated more towards students with a similar background in order to feel a sense of community on campus. Another graduate student from Eastern University named Jane also identified as being a student of color and first-generation college student. As a first-generation college student, Jane shared how she spent four years at a local community college because she didn't understand how to navigate the college system. Moreover, she described how her community college experience was impactful because of her mentors. Jane shared that in her early undergraduate years, she always gravitated more towards students with similar backgrounds:

Yeah, I feel like at my undergrad, that's where I made a lot of lifelong friends. Because they were all transfer students and first-generation students. They understood, like, my strict parents or cultural stuff. But it was like the first time I was able to talk to people about that. And then we would always do like hangouts after and before meetings and

then study together. So, I felt like that was the first time I was able to collaborate more with peers.

As Jane discussed, part of her success during her undergraduate years was due to identifying people who had a similar background as her and understood what she was going through. Jane shared that her ethnic identity is truly an important aspect to her graduate studies and how most of her friends at Eastern University also have similar racial backgrounds.

Amelia, a graduate student from Southern University, shared how intersectionality isolated her experiences in her academic program. Amelia shared in the interview that she identifies as being a student of color, parent and is Jewish practicing.

Again, I am a very tiny, tiny minority. I'm a lot of things, I am the only Jewish person in my class. I am a mom. So, I'm 10 to 15 years older than the majority of the students in my class. So, my life, the place I have in my life is much different than the others. So, it's isolating. I feel like sometimes, I want to be proud of who I am and my background, but it often feels like I don't have any. Like if I have to explain Yom Kippur to somebody or explain what we do on Friday night. Or if I have to explain, like, why I wasn't in class on Passover.

Amelia felt that some of her peers in her graduate program didn't necessarily understand the significance of her background, which contributed to her isolation. Amelia shared that identifying as an older student of color and being a parent can bring much stigma inside the academic classroom. Amelia highlights how being a mom, her age difference and her religion contributed to her feel isolated from her graduate program. Rather than being proud of her identities, her background often added a burden to her experience.

In respect to racial background, it is also important for students to feel that they talk to someone in their own language. An international student of color from Northern University named Julia mentioned how her racial background was also a key impact in her graduate school experiences.

Yeah, I will say it feels, maybe in general having a disability feels isolated. And I heard that from other students too. And but yeah, it's like being a student of color I felt even more isolated because maybe there are less people you can relate to. There is less people who you can relate to or maybe talk about my disability in my language. I never had someone that I could talk in my language about my disability. Yeah, maybe there were other students of color, but they didn't speak Spanish. And just like having support in your language, it feels different when you can communicate in your own language. Yeah, I will say those were the most meaningful impacts.

Julia also shared that she was a first-generation college student and how her marginalized identities impacted her academic experiences. She explained how impactful her international student identity contributed to her academic experiences by incurring challenges of language barriers to discuss her disability. Being an international student, Latina, and English learner has been a challenging journey for her. It was evident in the interview process that it was important for students of color with disabilities to be able to communicate with individuals about their challenges and experiences, especially in their native language. Especially for Julia who is an international student and was diagnosed with her disability two weeks into the PhD program. Julia has not had the opportunity to discuss her disability in her first language (Spanish) which is a critical component to coping with her disability identity. Many of the students shared they not only utilized Disability Services, but also Counseling Services in order to support their disability

identity. Julia shared in the interview how she is from South America originally and English is her second language. She shared that she currently attends counseling sessions, but it is challenging for her to share her experiences in her second language. Julia shared how the intersectionality her background causes, has created hardships during her graduate student experiences:

Yeah, there's this intersection of, you belong to these two underrepresented groups. And I feel well, this is personally because I don't know if people will see it like that, but it's just my experience that it was even harder for me to express how I was feeling because it was not my language. And then maybe also people who see me like that is because there's this stereotype of Latinos being dramatic. So, I will feel sometimes they are thinking, okay, she's being very dramatic, and it's not really the case. So, maybe that's how I feel that is how it could have impacted my experience.

Julia shared how her identity is compounded by stereotypes about Latinos being dramatic which hinders her graduate student experiences, this is further compounded by her inability to adequately express herself in English. She explained how challenging it has been for her to share her frustrations while also being a woman of color in a predominately white institution. Due to her marginalized identities, Julia shared how she feels uncomfortable sharing her disability experiences with other students.

Similar to Julia, Megan, a master's student from Eastern University, shared how her identity of being an international student was more prevalent to her than her actual racial identity. When asked if she felt a sense of belonging on campus, she answered the following:

No, but it's just because some students are not that welcoming to international students, mainly, more or less a personal thing. So, everything is different. It's not the same as

home. So, I don't feel that way. I don't feel like- this is normal. It's a new culture, a new system.

Megan pointed out that part of her marginalization as a graduate student was caused by the treatment that international students received from other students, which made her international student identity more prevalent. During the interview Megan shared how she identified as an international student from Africa and during her undergraduate years in her home country there was no Disability Services offered to students which highly impacted her academic studies. When she moved to the States, Megan was unaware that Disability Services was an available resource until she became very ill her first semester in the master's program. Her disability identity and international status has been very dominant in her cultural experiences.

Throughout the interview process, some of the students also explained how they have the role and responsibility to educate their family on their disability identity and graduate school experience. Crystal, a participant from Southern University, stated how she is responsible for educating her family on her graduate school path and disability.

I am the first person in my family who's going to graduate school. They're (family) very supportive and proud of me, but it's kind of similar to my mental health issues where it was me figuring it out and educating them.

Crystal shared that she often feels that she has the responsibility to educate her peers and family regarding mental health challenges while navigating graduate school. She discussed how she has brought up the importance of disability accessibility to her classmates and has also educated her family from a young age regarding her disability. It is evident that Crystal had many challenges navigating her disability while also educating her family and peers. Having multiple identities

and responsibilities in graduate school is very impactful and can be a challenging factor in navigating the higher education realm.

Participants also felt the weight of their culture on their disability. Michelle, a student from Southern University, identifies as being Asian and feels high stigma from her culture, especially from her parent's generation regarding disability identities.

Yeah, I guess. It's kind of like frowned upon within like Asian culture, just sounds like something is wrong, I feel like a lot of people are just suffering in silence. When it comes to depression, or even look at it as like a sign of weakness to seek that external help, like you should be able to get over it yourself, or like, just not being able to just keep like going on, I guess, or God I guess there is just a lot of silence about it, which I don't think is very healthy at all. I think the stigmas getting better. It's just harder like the power of the older generation about it so like our parents like generation, I think my generation, or people our age are a little more open to it.

Michelle feels due to her Asian racial background, there is a high stigma to overcome which can be challenging to navigate when requesting accommodations for a graduate program. As a woman of color, Michelle hopes future generations will not stigmatize disability identities, but engage in conversations to acknowledge support. Michelle didn't know she had a disability until her graduate school education, which she believes wasn't recognized due to her family background. Furthermore, many graduate students of color that participated in the study shared how they feel their identity is a heavy impact.

A graduate student from Eastern University named Olivia shared that she personally feels high expectations from her family and how being a person of color adds another layer of unique

barriers. Olivia described how being a student of color is an impactful identity and how it has influenced her disability status.

Being a person of color there's a lot of high expectations. Not just from society but from my parents too. Ever since I was a little girl, I was expected to do everything perfectly, be the greatest at everything. My sister and I both graduated valedictorian from high school and both graduated with two degrees from undergrad. Yes, the pressure to be great is something that is very much ingrained in our entire lives since we were little kids. And that just springs from being people of color, having to work a little bit harder to be successful. And having such high expectations and being pushed so hard does contribute to your anxiety level. Because you're constantly thinking, if I fail what's going to happen? If I don't do this what's going to happen? Should I take on more because if I don't, will I even make an impact?

Olivia identifies as Asian and shared how she grew up in a strict household where she was held to a higher standard academically. These high expectations impacted Olivia, especially in her mental health status. Olivia shared that her mental health status has been disrupted due to her managing a variety of academic studies, extracurricular activities and job responsibilities while navigating her disability. Overall, Olivia shared that she feels emotionally and physically burned out while balancing her multiple responsibilities which can cause a huge barrier in the higher education sector.

In the interview responses, students also shared how gender and sexual orientation were impactful in their academic graduate experiences. Rachel, a student from Northern University, described how being a first-generation college student in STEM has been extremely challenging to navigate.

Yeah, I mean because I'm a female which is a minority in STEM. And then I'm also bi so like, I don't get the straight card. Yeah, so being female, you have like an extra set of obstacles in terms of, you know, like, trying to not turn down people, while trying to focus on your studies. You don't fall into the cliques as easily as if you were a male. If you're not social, then like, your kind of screwed as a female, because otherwise you won't find any people to work with or study if you're not pretty social. Otherwise, you're confined to like either them reaching out to you. It's just harder.

Rachel shared that she is truly a first-generation college student as her mother finished school between 5th and 6th grade. Her mother also did not encourage her to attend college but instead encouraged her to work at a local grocery shop. As Rachel mentioned in the interview, she encountered many different challenges navigating the STEM field being a woman, bisexual, first generation college student and diagnosed with a disability.

Furthermore, intersectionality has a huge impact for many graduate students with disabilities. The identities of being a student of color, international student, first-generation college student, and religiously affiliated all impact the disability identity in the educational journey. During the interview process, many of the graduate students shared how their multiple identities were impacted through their language barrier and lack of understanding how to navigate the academic system. In this next section, I share the graduate students' experiences with stigma in graduate school and their personal experiences with advocating for accommodations. Moreover, the intersectionality challenges that students of color encounter in their graduate school experience has very heavy impacts. Students of color need to feel unity and support from their graduate program, peers, staff and faculty members.

Stigma & Advocating for Accommodations

Many of the participants stated that they accepted their disability identity as a graduate student, however they still felt stigma from their peers and faculty members. Specifically, the graduate student participants shared their fear of being treated differently among their peer community and losing their faculty member's respect if they disclosed their disability. Emily, a graduate student from Eastern University, shares that she chooses not to disclose her disability to her peers in her academic program due to stigma. Emily shared that she wants to be seen in a professional manner and fears having a disability identity could hinder that perspective.

I honestly tried not to disclose as much as possible just because I feel like some people might treat me differently or like have a perception that I'm lesser in a way so I would try to associate myself with those without disabilities.

Emily described that her goal in her master's program is to network and find career opportunities, thus she feels a harsh stigma disclosing her disability identity. The unique part of the interviews is that as graduate students, the participants stated they felt comfortable requesting accommodations and resources from Disability Services; however, they felt like they still needed to advocate for their approved accommodations with their faculty members. Asking and advocating for their accommodations can be seen as two separate entities.

Participants shared experiences of being unafraid to request accommodations from Disability Services, however they felt a need to advocate for their accommodations with their professors. Maria, a graduate student from Northern University stated how she feels there are different forms of accommodations for undergraduate and graduate students, although graduate students shouldn't be treated differently. Through her perspective, advocating for graduate accommodations can be seen as a challenge:

I think because accommodations for graduate students look different, in many ways, and accommodations for undergrads because they're not in classes, the whole time you're not necessarily taking tests. I think there's really no system in place. I know one student who had to really work and push with her department to get accommodations for her qualifying exam, because she had a shoulder problem and they wanted to cram into the test period, but I think it's really on the individual student to say hey, I need this, work with me to figure out how and usually it's directly with the department and not even with the Disability Resource Center.

Maria described different challenges for both undergraduate and graduate student accommodations, however graduate students specifically are not typically in academic classrooms throughout their program, thus will require more creative accommodations. She shared that graduate students usually have to advocate for their creative accommodations during their academic program. Maria also mentioned that, "in general, DRC is understaffed." Which can serve as a component in advocating for accommodations. A graduate student from Southern University named Amelia described how she felt heavy stigma from early on with her peers in her undergraduate program and how she was not registered for Disability Services at that point in time. In the interview, she states how she felt that the peers in her program were not supportive of her disability identity.

I did encounter a lot of pushback from my peers. And also, culturally, I come from a little bit of a complainer background. And so it was, it wasn't me trying to be ungrateful. From my experience, it was me just venting and letting out my frustrations maybe because I didn't have a mentor. Or I didn't use the Disability Services at (my undergraduate school). So I would just vent to whoever was around to listen to me. And I remember one time I

was saying how, like, you know, my parents are pushing me into doing this. And it's not something that I saw and wanted and one student said to me, then why are you even here like just leave the program and that was really discouraging and offensive. On the other hand, I was kind of like, I'm just going to prove this one person wrong. And then literally, at graduation she was like, I can't believe you made it, but good. So, I'll always remember that because it was just so blatantly, like offensive and like, I get it like people don't want to hear other people complaining. But rather than to encourage and uplift, she was just like, just give up, you know? And so that was something that stuck with me.

Amelia shared that this undergraduate peer experience really impacted her graduate school experience in coping with her disabilities. Due to her family responsibilities, Amelia did not have the time or energy to complete her physician verification forms to receive Disability Services accommodations. As months went by and her academic challenges became more apparent that she needed accommodations, Amelia finally caved. This stigma finally broke when she realized in order to pass the program, she needed to advocate for herself and register for Disability Services.

Another student from Northern University named Danny mentioned how challenging it was to work with faculty members and advocate for accommodations. Danny described one specific example of advocating for accommodations with the faculty member and the Disability Services Center Director.

That was the worst experience I've ever had in any classes of all the classes I've ever taken in my life. It was a (course name) class with a professor. And I mean, I told them, I got the documentation from DRC. And I sent it to him, stating which accommodations I had. And so I sent it to him like the first or second week of school as required. And he

didn't respond to me. He never got back to me. So I followed up with him. I don't know, maybe a week later, or two. Because all I needed was just extra time on assignments.

That's all I had requested. And when I followed up with him, he told me that 'Oh, yeah, like I saw your email. I didn't respond. But I actually went ahead and emailed the Director of the DRC directly to see if we had to comply with these accommodations.'

And then he sent me their whole exchange via email. Where basically he asked the DRC Director, like, 'Okay, do I have to do this? Do I have to accommodate this?' And then the Director was like, 'Well, you know, you don't have to accommodate it by law. If it's going to disrupt the flow of the class.' I'm going to say here, I felt like the DRC Director was a spineless octopus. I felt like there was no support from him. I felt like he didn't do anything to like, try to pressure or persuade or talk to the professor to like find the way to work it out.

Overall, Danny felt he was not fully supported by the Disability Services support staff thus he described the resource being seen as "lip-service accommodations." He explained how he followed the appropriate protocol registering for Disability Services, was approved for accommodations, and then not having the support of staff members was a breaking point. This was Danny's most challenging experience at Northern University which impacted him significantly in the academic program. Danny views himself as an advocate for graduate students, specifically with finances and accommodations. He participated in events that promote financial security and continues to discuss how accommodations are necessary for the graduate student community. One of the most common themes that also developed in the interview responses was graduate students' challenges with financial hardships. In the next section, I will

share specific examples of the graduate student experiences with financial challenges through their higher education experience.

Financial Instability

For graduate students with disabilities participating in this research study, finances were a key impact on their academic and personal experiences throughout their higher education journey. Many of the students had graduate assistantships that paid for a portion of their graduate school however their salary was not enough to suffice their unique personal financial hardships. Participants discussed how as graduate students they had a variety of financial responsibilities, but for graduate students with disabilities there are additional expenses that are not covered through graduate assistantships. Many of the participants also shared their graduate school decision making factors were based off location to be close to their family, friends, therapists, and medical doctors. Many students of color also stated that they wanted to be close to their families to be near a support system. While location was a key factor of picking their graduate program, it also came with additional expenses based off of cost of living. Many graduate students with disabilities shared that they have to pay for additional expenses such as specialized doctor appointments, counseling appointments, emotional support animal items, prescriptions, and ergonomic and laboratory equipment. All of these finances are additional expenses as a graduate student with a disability. Some students even had graduate assistantships or teaching assistantships that did not pay enough for the cost of living.

One student from Northern University named Greg stated how students need multiple sources of income:

Um, (finances) it is a big issue at (Northern University). They do not pay people enough at Northern University for the cost of living. I had heard that it was expensive to go to

school there. They do not pay enough, they expect you to either be able to get summer jobs or, you know, some other source of income.

Despite his understanding of how expensive it would be to live near Northern University, Greg felt pressured to attend graduate school since both his parents had advanced degrees. Greg stated during the interview how he saved up financially before the start of his program, however he has since been struggling with finances. Greg added that he felt like he didn't feel a sense of belonging in the graduate program specifically. As a graduate student, he feels that the higher education institution as a whole and academic program was not supportive towards the graduate student community.

Cost of living was a significant issue that students at Northern University had to manage. Danny, a student at Northern University, stated how inadequate graduate positions are paid at the university and how location impacted their financial means:

Because (Northern University) is one of the most expensive places in the country to rent and TAs were being, are being paid, like minimal amounts like 20 K, maybe give or take. And the cost of living here is obviously ridiculously expensive. And the rent burden for many graduate students was ridiculously high. So their students are paying upwards of 70% of their income to rent. And they're expected to like not only teach but to do the research, take classes. So the amount of things that graduate students are doing which is like ridiculously high, the support we're getting is ridiculously low.

Danny shared that financial stress causes much hardship on the overall graduate student experience. Graduate students have a variety of expenses and when they are barely able to cover the cost of their rent it can cause stress and impact their mental health. Danny described the

expectations of graduate students responsibilities is very high at Northern University and the barriers student face are challenging compared to undergraduate students.

The stress of paying for graduate student tuition is a huge challenge, however when graduate students are being paid at a minimal it can cause more stress and impact their disability. Maria, a graduate student participant, specifically mentioned how her mobility disability impacts her educational career:

So for me, absolutely, I need to have a car. I just moved back to California on Wednesday. Just having the hip replacements, and I flew because I can't do a cross country road trip. And so we're having my car shipped. So I have to have a car here. Also, I swam for exercise, and also for like, mental clarity. But that means, when the last summer that the university pool was being renovated I paid to go to a community pool, so that I could still get that exercise because running or jogging is just not an option for my body. I've also invested in some ergonomic furniture. I can't carry that much weight. So I don't bring my laptop to and from work every day, when we were going into the office. And right now, I am about to buy myself an iPad for when I want to teach. I am very short, so I can't reach the full chalkboard, which means I can't use the blackboard if I want to teach so I'm gonna invest in a really nice iPad for my career, so that I can project that and be able to write in real time, but this has been a lot of equipment I've had to get.

Maria identifies with having a mobility disability since she was born and having multiple surgeries over her lifetime has impacted her academic experiences. As a graduate student at Northern University, Maria has had to learn how to navigate the institutions campus facilities through a disability lens. Unfortunately, she has not had the appropriate accessibility features through infrastructure and academic classroom settings. It is interesting to share that she decided

to not register for Disability Services in her undergraduate institution (Ivy League university), because she felt heavy stigma in her undergraduate career. Then when she started at Northern University, she decided to start “advocating more as a grad student” and encourage better infrastructure on campus. Maria aspires to become a professor one day; she believes that accessibility should be considered in the learning classroom environment for students and faculty members. Paying for additional disability related expenses creates hardship for many graduate students with disabilities and should be considered in the higher education sector.

Financial hardships can be seen as an invisible struggle for graduate students with disabilities. The participants stated how financial hardships were a unique struggle for them and that many students could not support their additional expenses. One international student participant named Julia, even mentioned how she has to conduct physical therapy at home and how finances impact her:

Yeah, I will say I do have extra expenses. Yeah medicines, then I had to buy things for physical therapy to do it at home. Then when I had outside doctor's appointments, I had to pay for those. And when I am in (home country) doing fieldwork, I always had to pay for my appointments there.

Julia shared that she was born in South America and was diagnosed with her disability two weeks into her PhD program. She shared that although she had a full scholarship for the program, the expenses associated with her disability impacted her. Financial hardships can be seen as an invisible struggle and time is also an additional expense that isn't met through university funding. Ellen, a graduate student participant, mentioned they have an emotional support dog and she also needs to travel for doctor's appointments which takes additional time and energy as a graduate student.

So I have all of these expenses that go to dog food, all that stuff and then I have some issues with chronic migraines and vertigo. And so last summer it affected me a lot and I had to go to the doctor a lot. And so thankfully I have pretty good student health insurance, but there was just those like co-pays and traveling expenses stuff.

Ellen explained in the interview that having additional expenses related to her disability causes her stress, especially because of her busy graduate school schedule. Taking the time and energy to travel to doctor's appointment can be seen as an additional hurdle for graduate students with disabilities. Ellen identifies as a first-generation college student and has encountered many financial struggles in graduate school. Although Ellen has a TA and tutoring position, she shared that it has been challenging to pay for additional expenses like traveling to doctor's appointments. Financial hardships can come in many different forms for graduate students with disabilities. It can be evaluated as additional finances, extra time spent outside their academic studies and personal time completing billing information.

There are unique challenges that graduate students with disabilities encounter in their academic and personal lives. In this section *Reality of Disability Journey*, I shared how intersectionality impact their graduate student academic experiences. I also shared stigma experiences and how financial challenges effect the graduate student journey, however this research study was unique because it also took place during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in the United States. In this next section, I will share students' personal experiences of how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their graduate school experiences.

COVID-19 Pandemic Challenges

Unique to this research study were the implications from the COVID-19 pandemic and how it influenced the graduate student experience dramatically. On March 13, 2020 the President

of the United States declared a national emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Taylor, 2020). Across the nation, many higher education institutions were mandated to move remote and the nation was required to a stay at home quarantine. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted many students from K-12 and higher education. It also impacted a variety of student needs and educational pursuits. When I started the interview process in June 2020 and ended in October 2020, many of the participants discussed how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their academic and personal experiences. Frank, a student from Southern University, mentioned how abrupt the COVID-19 pandemic was on his academic studies:

Um, that's a tough one. I mean, I'm just getting out of my first year, and we've been dealing with COVID. I think that people just need more training in getting used to it (remote learning), because when the transition kind of happened this last semester, I mean, it was kind of abrupt for everyone. So there was no time to get people used to it.

In the interview, Frank shared that he also attended Southern University as an undergraduate student so when the COVID-19 pandemic started, completing classes remote was very new to him. He shared that both faculty and staff members should have been trained more on virtual remote formats. Frank also shared that he works full-time and is a full-time student which was challenging to navigate working remote. Especially because he also mentioned that “Southern University always felt like home.” For students who felt their campus was a safe haven and welcoming environment, completing their educational coursework remotely was a challenging and new experience, especially for graduate students with disabilities.

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted graduate students with disability in a unique way as it added the burden that all students had to adjust to, to everything else that students were already

dealing with. Amelia, a full-time graduate student from Southern University mentioned how parenting became a huge challenge during COVID-19:

There's a lot of mom guilt. I feel a lot of guilt. But the mom guilt was really impactful. It added to the anxiety it definitely didn't help. And, and then of course COVID came around and I was a full time student and my husband is full time working from home, and the kids are stuck at home, no school, no activities, sitting on the iPad all day like makes me crazy because not only do they have screen time 10-12 hours a day, they're sitting on their butts not moving. Um, but yeah, those family roles definitely flipped upside down for sure.

Amelia shared that as a mother to three children she felt heavy mom guilt when the COVID-19 pandemic struck. In the beginning of the interview, Amelia shared how she took a big step in her life to attend graduate school while being a mom. Then when the COVID-19 pandemic struck, her mom guilt increased due to the new remote working environment. During the interview process, she even welcomed to have one of her children sit on her lap because she understood how much her children miss her while she is studying throughout the day. COVID-19 brought challenging times, many graduate students with disabilities encountered a variety of new barriers and it has especially been difficult for student parents to navigate.

Some of the interview participants also mentioned how the pandemic was harmful to their disability identity. For many of the graduate students with disabilities, this pandemic only increased mental health challenges. Marcus, a student participant, mentioned how isolating it felt to abruptly work remote:

As a student, you can work remotely, but the world isn't really optimized for that you know, definitely isolating and stuff. So also, psychologically people have different reactions to that.

The COVID-19 pandemic effected people in multiple ways, however Marcus expressed how it also impacted individuals psychologically. Working remotely and being quarantined had major effects on people especially mental health wise. Marcus shared how he was raised in the mid-west and did not have any family located in California that he was able to meet during the COVID-19 pandemic. Being truly alone without a family support system can cause major stress issues. Many graduate students have a variety of life experiences that impacted their graduate school program as well. Marcus shared he was married when he first began the graduate program, but then divorced in the middle of the program due to his disability. Marcus found it challenging to quarantine alone without any human interaction which impacted his disability.

Furthermore, many of the graduate students with disabilities encountered a variety of challenges due to COVID-19. There were a variety of challenges such as parent responsibilities, isolation, working remotely and learning new ways to cope through graduate school. COVID-19 impacted this dissertation study uniquely because it was a worldwide pandemic that affected many individuals, especially graduate students with disabilities across the nation. Furthermore, the truly reality of the disability journey for graduate students with disabilities is a harsh path to follow. There are a variety of barriers that graduate students with disabilities encounter during their academic journey. In this next theme section, I describe how graduate students with disabilities are encountering hardships in their academic programs while interacting with faculty members and peers. In the section *Breaking Barriers & Creating Community* I share unique

participant challenges and how eager graduate students with disabilities crave connection with their peers.

Breaking Barriers & Creating Community

Throughout this theme, I will share how types of disabilities impact the graduate student experience, faculty interactions through microaggressions, a need for peer support and how the imposter syndrome is still prevalent in graduate school. This theme's name is subsequently connected to the graduate students with disabilities experiences of breaking through barriers and creating a sense of community to overcome their challenges. It was evident in the interview process that the graduate students with disabilities encountered a variety of barriers that tied to their intersectionality, however through different avenues they experienced community.

Type of Disability

The participants graduate school experiences were heavily impacted by their type of disability. There are a variety of factors when I state, "type of disability" for example the following are types of disabilities discussed in this research study: learning disability, mobility disability, visual disability, hearing disability, mental/psychological and chronic illness. Students also identify with having visible and/or invisible disabilities which impacts their academic and personal graduate experiences. During the interviews, I asked questions regarding how their type of disability impacts their graduate school experience and many responded on how it depends on their type of disability. One of the most dominant responses was how mental health disabilities is very challenging to navigate in the higher education sector due to the invisibility factor. Many of the students felt that their disability category truly impacted their unique experiences as graduate students at their institution. Within the research study a variety of participants identified as having either visible and/or invisible disabilities. Maria, a student with a mobility and visible

disability, stated how the Americans with Disability Act (ADA) was construed to be very limiting for accommodations.

I think one of the reminders or one thing that universities need to remember too is that the ADA is the bare minimum. So I think a lot of buildings at least on Northern Universities campus have been retrofitted to kind of be the ADA standards, but it is like an almost laughable and dark humor way, you know- they have handicap parking at the back of the building. Just to have a space, but then you still have to navigate to try to find the accessible entrance so I think that is an important reminder for people including myself, because I just assumed, you know, this piece of legislation exists, so everyone is held to a higher standard. And that is certainly not the case.

It is important to note that ADA requires higher education institutions who are federally funded to provide reasonable accommodations and when students see their institutions facilitating a mediocre standard of compliance it truly impacts their student population. Maria envisions herself as a disability advocate and shares that it's important to hold institutions to a high standard, especially when they are serving students with disabilities. Maria discussed how she felt that Northern University campus was not mobility friendly and it was unfair as a graduate student to have to navigate the campus very differently than a non-disabled student. Maria shared that she did not register for Disability Services at her undergraduate institution because she felt too stigmatized to advocate. She shared the below:

I was really deep in that stigma and also had thought since I went through undergrad, without any accommodations, I assumed that I wouldn't need them in grad school as well.

Having a visible mobility disability, Maria did not want to be stigmatized registering for accommodations at her undergraduate institution. She explained how she would try to participate in as many activities as possible even past the point of what was comfortable and healthy for her. Once Maria started at Northern University, she had a realization to advocate for better infrastructure on campus. Now as a graduate student she is more comfortable with her disability identity and her ability to advocate for student accommodations such as infrastructure.

In the interview process, other students shared that there are no elevators in some buildings on campus which impacts heavily on infrastructure ADA compliance. Moreover, infrastructure was a huge theme that arose within the interview responses. Even individuals that did not have a physical disability stated how Northern University could improve accessibility to support students with physical disabilities. Ellen, a Northern University student, mentioned how accommodations vary from different disability identities:

I think there's definitely room for improvement. I think that there's a lot that the campus does to accommodate students with disabilities. There's a lot of resources available on our Disability Resource Center, and they have a wide range of those resources for all different types of disabilities, which is nice. It's not just a one size fits all. Reduce distractions, extra time, that should be fine. There's a lot more services that they offer, but I'm sure there's, there are definitely ways that they could improve, especially with students that have more physical or mobility disabilities.

It was evident in the interview, that although Ellen doesn't have a physical disability, she still understands the need for better infrastructure on campus. Ellen's comment, "it's not just a one size fits all", speaks volumes to graduate students with disabilities experiences and challenges navigating the higher education sector. There are many unique accommodations and creative

strategies that should be implemented within Disability Services procedures. Participants constantly discussed how graduate students with disabilities, regardless of their visible or invisible disabilities, are impacted by infrastructure decisions by the university. During the interviews it was shared how infrastructure is a major ADA compliance issue and should be handled respectfully and professionally to provide reasonable accommodations to their disability community. In other cases, some students felt that their campus had safe and reliable infrastructure. Frank, a student from Southern University, shared that the campus was ADA friendly even though it has many older buildings.

But as they've kind of updated and grown, you know, they've made an effort to keep all the old and maintained buildings just as accessible as the new ones that they've added.

So, you know, that I think that goes a long way.

Although Frank is a graduate student with an invisible disability, he shared how important it is that Southern University complies with ADA infrastructure (even with older buildings). The student population Frank mentioned how he also attended Southern University for both his undergraduate and graduate degree because he felt comfortable with the Disability Services support. Infrastructure was a common topic that arose in navigating the graduate school experience, especially from people from different backgrounds, experiences, and disability identity categories. What was clearly evident was how identity and responsibilities impact student experiences.

Intersectionality impacted graduate student experiences in different ways. Amelia, a student of color from Southern University, mentioned that her disability identity was even more impactful than her racial identity.

I feel like the disability (identity) is more impactful than my student of color identity.

Yes. It's harder for me to explain my disability to others, because often again, feels like complaining. And while I'm not complaining, I don't like to do it. But I feel like having to explain my disability is, I feel like I sometimes have to explain my disability so that people don't, so that people don't isolate me. I feel like if I was isolated, or shunned because of my race, or my religion or my background, it's something that I can stand up to and it can be like, I don't care what you have to say like, I'm proud of who I am. But I feel like with the disability that I have, I feel like it's very easy for someone to say, 'well, you know, yeah, you have a disability, but we're all stressed. We all need more time, we all are worried about our grades, we're all worried about our future. So just like we're dealing with it, you can deal with it too.' And it's hard to explain to people that it's debilitating. Whereas I don't feel that my religion or my background is debilitating because I can't remove my disability because it impacts my day to day, so much. Whereas my background doesn't affect me as a person and my abilities of doing daily activities.

When Amelia shares her disability identity and challenges, she is essentially experiencing the imposter syndrome. She feels out of place because her peers do not understand her identity experiences and often make her feel isolated by oppressing her own barriers. Amelia identifies as Middle Eastern and practicing Jewish, which are prevalent to her personal identities as well, however she shared how her disability identity has been a challenging experience throughout her graduate school journey due to how much it impacts her academic studies. As a graduate student, Amelia discussed how she has not met other students who are parents and also identify with having a disability which contributes to her imposter syndrome.

A master's student named Olivia from Eastern University described how her mental health disability has been overlooked by her Asian community. She described her experiences with the Asian community as not finding mental health disabilities as a real disability. Olivia shared how challenging her experiences has been while also being a student of color:

I think this goes back to me saying, most people don't think anxiety or mental illness is a disability or something that could prevent you from performing correctly or efficiently.

And most of the time, a lot of people with mental illness are able to perform and produce the work. But it is a lot. I feel a little bit more difficult, because we also have to navigate our mental health.

Olivia shared how challenging it has been to balance her graduate student responsibilities while having a disability. She described how her disability can be so exhausting at times and she won't have enough strength for her academic studies. Mental health was a very common topic that arose within the graduate student interviews and it was very explicit how these participants silently suffer among their peer community. Furthermore, the disability identity is a huge factor in graduate students' experiences because of how it impacts their daily life. From infrastructure to race, and ability, there are unique roles that graduate students have and the disability identity is so crucial to support from many different levels in the institution. Furthermore, it is important as a higher education institution to value the variety of identities of graduate students, but to also support ADA compliance in a variety of ways. It is important to understand how race, disability, gender, parent responsibilities and more can impact graduate students' experiences. There are multiple identities that graduate students identify with, but it is important to also identify how to support each of their identities uniquely.

Faculty Interactions & Microaggressions

Graduate students work very closely with their faculty members while completing their degree. Many of the faculty members are even the graduate students' advisors and can be seen as mentors for their graduate school experience. One common theme that developed from the graduate student interviews was how faculty interactions impacted their academic and personal experiences. Many of the graduate students felt that their direct faculty advisors were either very supportive of their disability or very discouraging of their ability to finish the program. A variety of graduate student participants shared how their advisors were not understanding of their disability and thus experienced many personal microaggressions. Heather, a student from Northern University, shared that because she was registered with Disability Services her advisor attacked her intellectuality:

He (my advisor) also told me I'm not smart in the right ways, that was really not great to hear.

Heather shared that she took off three years in between her undergraduate and graduate school programs which impacted her academic study habits heavily. She shared that due to the time gap and her disability identity she was really searching for encouragement with her professors. Within faculty interactions, many of the interview participants mentioned how they felt their professors could practice more empathy towards their identity. Heather recommended that faculty attend empathy training, disability services training and racial diversity training in order to support more students with diverse identities.

Empathy was a common topic that developed in the interview process. Many of the graduate student participants mentioned how they felt their faculty members were not practicing empathy regarding their disability identity and providing appropriate accommodations. A graduate student from Northern University named Ellen described her challenging experiences

with her accommodations. Ellen mentioned how her approved accommodations were disruptive to her academic experiences.

One professor in the (subject) department on campus I had a really bad experience with, like, I was supposed to get like extra time and reduce distraction accommodations for these quizzes that we would have in the big lecture hall, but he just kind of took all the DRC students and stuck us like outside the lecture hall where this coffee cart was and there was all this loud coffee machines and people hanging out and talking and yelling across. It was just like, not a good accommodation. And when I tried to talk to him about it, he got really defensive and was rude.

All students, regardless of their disability status, should be treated equally. In this case, the professor created a disruptive learning environment for his students with disabilities by creating an uncomfortable testing setting. When Ellen approached the professor regarding the accommodation provided, his abrupt disregard for his behavior proves his inability to be accommodate appropriately. In the interview, Ellen shared how she heavily felt the imposter syndrome in the first year of her graduate program due to being a first-generation college student and female in the STEM field. For individuals who feel the imposter syndrome, it is important for them to feel safe and encouraged within their graduate program. Faculty interactions are crucial to graduate students academic and personal success in their educational career, especially when they are mandated by law to provide reasonable accommodations. In another example, Julia who is an international student was even told to leave the program due to her disability:

Yeah, I wish I had someone that was supportive. I couldn't find a person once I talked to a different PI. But again, I didn't feel that she was supportive, and she told me if you don't

feel good up here, you should leave this program. So that was disappointing for me. So, then I never talked to her again.

Telling a student that they should leave the program due to their disability is not appropriate. After this interaction, Julia is very careful in who she discloses her disability too. She feels a sense of isolation, especially because she was trying to confide in her advisor. Being an international student, Julia shared how often she feels isolated. She shared that she felt “abandon” by her advisor and how that impacted her academic studies. During the graduate school experience, there are many challenges and barriers that students encounter. However, the faculty in graduate school programs should be mentors that uplift their graduate student population regardless of their identities.

Many of the graduate student participants felt that they did not have mentors in the program that would advocate for their accommodations or support their educational pursuits. Olivia, a graduate student from Eastern University, shared during the interview how a faculty member was not receptive and understanding of her disability. She shared how she feels at a loss due to that fact that her professor keeps pushing her over boundaries.

There was actually one professor that's been giving me a hard time. I expressed to her, I do have a very big obstacle when it comes to my mental health and she hasn't been the kindest and I don't really know what to do about it. I don't know if she just thinks that she's trying to help me grow as an individual, but I told her I'm not in the mental state to grow in this area right now because it's too emotionally triggering for me, and she hasn't been very receptive of that.

Olivia's experience with her faculty member contributes to her mental health. It can be mentally taxing to constantly remind faculty members of an individual's limits and barriers. As Olivia

shared the faculty member was not kind even after she described the impact of her interactions. Olivia shared that as a student of color, she has to overcome many obstacles and expectations in the higher education field. Being a first-year master's student, she is struggling to make those deep connections with her faculty members and peers. Lastly, a student from Southern University named Adrian described how he views his faculty members within his academic program. Adrian believes more of the faculty need to practice empathy towards graduate students with disabilities. When I asked Adrian what types of recommendations to the university would he make to improve the graduate experience, he directly responded with describing how faculty need to be more empathic:

That the faculty become more caring, we the students don't feel like they are caring. Furthermore, these are concrete examples of how faculty members interactions are very impactful for graduate students with disabilities to persevere in their academic programs. During the interviews it was very evident how faculty members' interactions with their graduate students are extremely impactful for their academic and personal experiences. In graduate school, many students also search for peer support. In this next section, I share how graduate students with disabilities are eager to find community with their peers.

Peer Support System

During the interviews, I asked many questions regarding student's graduate experiences such as how they navigate the academic program, extracurricular activities, peer connections and mentors. Many of the graduate students shared how they feel isolated within their graduate programs between peers and personal relationships. Focusing on marginalized communities, participants also shared how they would gravitate more towards students who identified with similar backgrounds and identities. Uniquely, some students even mentioned that feeling isolated

helped them create community to form relationships with common identities. Maria, a student from Northern University, took the initiative to even create a community to support the graduate student population:

Now that I am much more comfortable with my identity as being disabled. I do have more of a community of disabled peers. And so I did start a group for graduate students with disabilities. And at first it was really successful and there were many people there, I cried the first session. And it was just great to be in that room with mutual understanding.

Maria discussed that she created this club in order to create a support system specifically for graduate students with disabilities. Maria shared that she took the initiative to work with the Disability Services Director to create this community and even started a Slack channel to continue communication with the students. In the club meetings that she would lead there was no formal agenda because it was her mission to create a safe space for the students to discuss their identity experiences, concerns, and connections. Many of the interview participants from Northern University even shared that they were a part of the club and enjoyed meeting other students (from different programs) to discuss their disability identities. Building community with other individuals who identified as having a disability was a common theme within the interview responses. One graduate student named Ellen even mentioned how important it was for her to mentor undergraduate students with disabilities to create community.

I've mentored a couple undergrads who have also been affiliated with the DRC. So that was nice. So I could talk to them and share my experiences and give them advice.

Whether it was finding community within the graduate or undergraduate level, many of the participants felt it was important to have that safe space to discuss their identity and share experiences. Ellen shared that mentoring undergraduate students was a positive impact and

helped her feel a sense of belonging in the academy. Creating community and finding individuals with similar disability identities was very prevalent in the interview responses, it should be noted that students of color also shared how important it was for them to find friendships with students who had similar backgrounds and identities. For example, a graduate student from Eastern University named Jane shared how all of her peers in her program were the same racial identity as her:

Yeah, I think I do. I think my close friends here at (Eastern University) they're all the same background as me. And I feel like it makes it a little bit easier to learn together. We just kind of click and then we're able to study together and do that kind of stuff.

During the interview, Jane started noticing a pattern within her responses and mentioned that ever since she started her higher education journey, she has always gravitated towards peers that have similar cultural backgrounds. Jane identifies as Latina and is in the third year of her graduate program. She felt that having peers with similar cultural identities has made her feel a sense of belonging on campus. Mark, a student from Southern University, mentioned during his interview that one of his biggest challenges during graduate school has been the social aspect of building community and making friends. Mark discussed how his social life has been impacted due to his disability identity, he described a need to work harder at building relationships with people. Specifically, Mark is obtaining a master's degree and he shares that he hopes to be a screen writer in Hollywood one day. However, he understands that Hollywood is a very interactive and social environment with peers. Through his interview, Mark shared:

I try to write every story about empathy. That's the most important thing that I've certainly dealt with having disabilities. And that's something that I hope to spread.

As mentioned, empathy was a common topic that arose within the interview responses and students mentioned how important it was between peers and faculty members. Peer support is extremely crucial in order to feel a connection in graduate school. A first-year master's student at Eastern University named Rogelio discussed in the interview how he is seeking peers who identify as Hispanic.

I have always had the core group of my friends be Hispanic. And so, here at (Eastern University), I haven't been able to meet many other Hispanics. So that's just been at the back of my mind like, it's something I've paid attention to kind of. I haven't been able to meet as many other Hispanics. So that's been interesting.

Rogelio described that most of his friends at his undergraduate institution also identified as Hispanic, which was important to him entering Eastern University. Rogelio shared that starting a master's program during the COVID-19 pandemic has been a hindering experience finding peers with the same racial background. However, Rogelio has taken initiative by seeking out clubs and organizations that encourage collaboration for the Hispanic community. It should be noted that some of the participants discussed isolation within their personal life as well. Marcus, a student at Northern University, mentioned he got a divorce in the middle of his graduate program due to his disability:

So, I've had some mental illness or, you know, mental health challenges. Since I was married before my wife left me and one of the reasons that she left me is that I'm disabled. She didn't want to be married to somebody who's blind and who can't drive.

That says a lot. And that was just so discouraging, offensive, and disgusting.

Marcus shared that this was a challenging impact on his graduate studies, however he took the initiative to create community within the university. He mentioned in order to move forward

with his personal life he started creating connections with the graduate school and attending more social events, he even started attending dance classes. Moreover, creating community was especially important for graduate students with disabilities from all different backgrounds. From the diverse pool of participants, many of them had visible and/or invisible disabilities which impacted their personal and peer relationships in graduate school. The graduate participants felt that they needed to create a community to support their disability identity due to the psychological impacts of being labeled. For example, Marcus' divorce was due to his disability identity and he shared its psychological impact on him, but he decided to pursue community in different forms. It is important in this society to not label individuals with their disability identities because of the heavy impacts it may cause. A variety of the participants identified as different genders, racial backgrounds, disability types, first-generation college status, and sexual orientations which impact their imposter syndrome. In this next section, I will share how the student participants encountered the imposter syndrome while navigating their graduate school experience.

Imposter Syndrome and Graduate Education

During the interview process it was evident how graduate students with disabilities can experience the imposter syndrome within the academy. As a graduate student, many of the participants felt they were a unique identity being diagnosed with a disability and identifying with other backgrounds and experiences. In the participant responses, the graduate students responded that they felt the imposter syndrome due to their disability, ethnicity, first generation college status and/or gender. It was not due to their academic experience or qualifications as a student, but rather their unique and personal marginalized identities. In particular, a participant

named Ellen stated how she experienced the imposter syndrome due to being a first-generation college student, a female in STEM, and a student diagnosed with a disability.

I think I definitely experienced impostor syndrome because I'm a first-generation student. And so, there's, you know, I'm learning a lot about like not only about the content of my research, but also about academia, in general, and how things function in the system. And also, being a woman in science in our department, there's in our building, there's four floors, and I think there's one woman PI per floor. So just the lack of role models, the lack of women in science is definitely at least a little discouraging. But yeah, being first gen woman in science and having these invisible disabilities, has made me feel, like is this even possible? Should I even be in this program? Am I just tricking everyone into thinking that I'm smart? But I'm not actually smart. Yeah, all those thoughts definitely go through my head.

Ellen shared her experience being a first-generation college student can be a challenge in the STEM field, especially while navigating the academy. Questioning identities in the academy is a huge example of the imposter syndrome. There are a variety of identities that graduate students with disabilities have and participants shared how it is imperative to have role models and mentors that uplift students from different backgrounds and experiences. Even if a first-generation student completed their undergraduate career, the imposter syndrome is still a significant factor in graduate school; probably even more during graduate school due to the different demands and responsibilities as a student. Danny, a student from Northern University, mentioned how challenging it has been to balance his racial identity, gender and disability identities:

I mean, sometimes I feel like I have to work harder and still balance this shit. Yeah, I mean, just based on what I've heard from people I've talked to and stuff it feels like sometimes other people get away with being mediocre just because they're a white dude.

I don't know how else to put it.

Danny described that being Hispanic in the STEM field has been a challenging aspect while competing with White identities. Being a student of color in a graduate program can come with different challenges and barriers. Danny also mentioned in the interview that he is very careful about how he dresses (clothes and jewelry) because he's afraid his peers and faculty members might not take him seriously. Identifying as a student of color and having a disability can be a challenging journey for graduate students. The crucial part to understand is that these issues that are being discussed are not related to the academic classroom, but to the entire higher education setting. Jane, a graduate student from Eastern University shared how she recently discovered the definition of imposter syndrome.

I just learned about imposter syndrome the other day, like, a few months ago or something, and I've like been looking into it because I was telling my boss like, I feel like I just get this feeling that it's not real, like I don't know, like, it just feels weird. It doesn't feel like I deserve it (education). And then they were talking about like imposter syndrome. And I was like, oh, my God, a lot of people feel this way?

Jane shared during the interview how she didn't know as a graduate student the imposter syndrome existed and that others could feel the same way she felt. As a first-generation Latina, Jane discussed she didn't understand the path of the higher education field because it took her four years to finish her community college course work. Amelia, a student from Southern University, shared how her religion is really important to her identity and it has been a hardship

because she feels her peers are not supportive of her religion. Once in her graduate program, she created a religious event for her peers to attend and no one showed up to support.

I posted on our Facebook group I said, can you guys come and show your support (for Yom Kippur)? And can you just come just show your face just for five minutes so that you all are aware of what's going on. Nobody from my class showed up. I was sitting in a room with the head of the department, my mentor, several other professors, a few students from different programs actually, I think the majority of the students who came were students of color. Not Jewish, but other students of color, and the Dean was there and I cried in front of all of them because I was distraught by the situation, but more so that none of my classmates showed up to support me.

When Amelia's peers from her academic program did not attend her event, that's when she knew how impactful her isolation has been. She had no peers in her academic program that supported or encouraged her religious identity; thus Amelia has not felt a sense of belonging. Having that peer support in graduate school is extremely important to build a support system and feel connected with the institution. The imposter syndrome was very prevalent during the interview responses, but the most common factor that came up was how the students had limited role models and mentors as graduate students with a disability. In the next theme I articulate how mentorship is valued for graduate students to not only feel a sense of belonging, but to also persevere within the academic programs, career and beyond.

Shaping the Future

In this final theme Shaping the Future, many of the graduate student participants shared their motivation to finish their academic program, how vital it is to have mentors, and their impactful experiences with Disability Services. The impact of support services was discussed

throughout the interview responses and graduate students with disabilities shared their unique experiences.

Motivation to Finish

In this final theme, I will share concrete data of how graduate students with disabilities find the motivation to finish their academic program. Many of the interview participants shared their challenges and barriers throughout their graduate student experience, however during the final interview questions I asked the students what their main motivation was to complete their academic program. I will share that many students described how their identity was extremely inspiring for them to complete their graduate program. Most participants described how important it is to be a person of color in a professional field, to be a woman in the STEM field and to feel that sense of accomplishment for their identities. Other participants shared how they want to be the inspirational role models for individuals with similar backgrounds and identities. During an interview with Jane from Eastern University, she described participating in an extracurricular activity for school and her connection to making an impact on the Hispanic community.

So, we (students) did the flu clinic on Saturday. And then when I was giving the flu shot, one of the Spanish patients, or she only spoke Spanish, when she saw me speaking Spanish, she was like, 'Oh, I'm so happy, you're helping me. Like I was kind of scared because I don't speak English.' So that kind of brought it all together, because I am super close to finishing or more towards the second half. So, then it kind of gives me that push to hear that people are really happy seeing me represent them and helping them. So, I think when we do like clinics like that, like extracurricular stuff, it kind of helps me-

reminds me why I'm doing it. Like when we go to conferences, or when we go to the other flu clinics and stuff like that. I think it kind of brings it all together.

Jane described the event as very motivational for her to finish her graduate program and support the Hispanic community. She described that being a Latina and creating a safe space for other Hispanics was very important for her. In this quote, Jane shares how her extracurricular activities play a meaningful factor in her graduate student experience. Participating in extracurricular activities where she interacts with the Latinx community motivates her to continue her academic graduate program.

Another graduate student at Eastern University named Megan described how vital it is for her to tell her story. When I asked Megan what her motivation is to finish her academic program, she shared that she wants to make a name for her international student identity:

I want to make a name for the average (African decent) girl. For the average achievement child who has (disability identity). You can dream, it's okay to dream, is okay to aspire. It's okay to reach far. I don't know, but I want to go back and tell my story. I want to tell them that you can be it, you can set your mind to as long as you don't put your limitations ahead of you. So, I want to be able to tell the average girl child back home, to the average child with a disability, I want to share my story that should inspire them. That we can do it.

The intersectionality of identities is extremely important for Megan, as she described her racial background, disability identity and international status is very prevalent to her motivation to succeed. Megan expresses how her racial identity, gender and disability status play a role in her achievements. Although she faced many barriers that connected to her identity, she has the motivation to succeed because she truly wants to be a role model for other individuals in similar

situations. Other student participants had a challenging time answering the interview question about their motivation to finish the academic program. For example, Danny a student from Northern University described his challenges of continuing the program, but how he is motivated to be a mentor one day.

I asked myself the same question because I'm not very motivated to continue to be honest. Yeah, I'm not motivated to continue but that's the only thing that was motivating me was the prospect of teaching and helping other students and being a mentor for other students in the way that professor (name) was a mentor for me.

As mentioned earlier, mentors are extremely important for graduate students with disabilities and Danny described how his motivation to complete the program is to merely be a mentor to other students with similar identities. Honest feedback represents that not all graduate students with disabilities have the motivation to succeed, however everyone has their own reasons why they are in their academic program. Danny is dedicated to being a mentor one day to students who have similar backgrounds and challenges. Graduate students with disabilities shared throughout the interview responses their unique and challenging experiences.

Adrian, a graduate student from Southern University, described how long his journey has been in higher education. He shared that he was born in Iran and went through many different channels to attend graduate school. Adrian discussed how he was first admitted into a graduate school in the Midwest, but unfortunately left the program due to his mental health challenges and academic concerns. Now, Adrian is only two years away from completing his graduate program at Southern University. When asked what his motivation is to continue his program, Adrian shared:

I'd like to have a better life. I don't want to be (living) under \$900 a month and just have a low life. I like to have a better life, a better life. I like to be called a doctor, to be honest with you.

Adrian shared how important it was to work on his mental health and persevere within his academic program. Overall, the intersectionality of racial ethnicity, disability status, first-generation college student and international student identity were very dominant in the interview responses. Graduate students with disabilities are hungry to succeed and overcome their barriers. Mentorship and role models are key to this happening. In this next section, I will share the graduate student responses on how important mentorship is to navigate graduate school journey.

Mentorship & Role Models are Key

As shown in the previous section, imposter syndrome is still very much prevalent for graduate students in their academic programs, moreover many students inquire about having role models and mentors to help them overcome the imposter syndrome. In the participant interviews, it was proven how mentorship is truly valued as a graduate student. Specifically, students shared that they want to see faculty members who are female, first-generation, racially diverse, and identify with having a disability. Participants explained how mentorship is specifically valued when they see their similar identities within their role models. In the student interviews, many of the participants were eager to meet mentors with similar background identities. One student from Northern University named Maria mentioned how they had never met an academic person who spoke out about their disability identity until graduate school.

It has really impacted me, one faculty member at Northern University during her kind of welcome research talk she mentioned that she has chronic pain. And so I went out, I reached out to her and I went out to lunch with her, but it was the first time I had ever

witnessed an academic person, naming their disability in such a casual way that she did. It was very impactful to hear that to see that she is struggling, but succeeding and those two can coexist, you know, not that it's easy but it is possible, and just having I think having someone to talk to who understands and having that mutual understanding is really important for me.

Maria was born with a mobility disability and had to overcome many surgeries in her lifetime. During the interview she shared how much her disability has impacted her life and watching an academic person share their achievements and disability identity was really impactful, especially during graduate school. It was the first time in her entire life that she finally met someone she could relate to and set as a role model. Another student participant from Southern University named Michelle described how she was first diagnosed with a disability in graduate school. Michelle shared how she comes from an Asian culture that is not understanding of disability identities. During a graduate school course, one of her faculty members saw Michelle struggle through her academics and scheduled a check in meeting. During the meeting the professor discussed Disability Services and then referred Michelle to this student service. Michelle described in the interview how her professor has become her mentor because she truly takes the time to support her students.

So I guess I get more mentorship from like professors, just any professor that teaches that process they're really like friendly. Yeah, like really open. They're really receptive to it so they notice that you're sad about something like, they'll actually pull you out and say you look sad lately.

Through an empathetic standpoint, Michelle truly appreciated her faculty mentor's concern and support. It was imperative to Michelle that her professors in her program were actually

motivational mentors that could support her throughout the academic program. Michelle appreciated that her professional faculty members were able to connect her with Disability Services instead of shaming her. In another student interview, Frank from Southern University also had great experiences with professors who became mentors. Frank completed his undergraduate studies at Southern University and was registered for Disability Services as an undergraduate student. He had such a positive impact with support services and faculty members that he decided to pursue his graduate studies at Southern University as well.

I had this professor; he was very big in helping me prepare for graduate school. Kind of prepared me for the classes I needed to take in pursuing graduate school and then he also just kind of helped me get in the right mindset for education and learning in a way that I don't think I had before. So it was kind of this good growing experience. He kind of helped me through the last few hurdles I kind of had to, to really commit to pursuing higher education.

This mentor was very impactful for Frank because he helped him navigate the higher education sector to continue his graduate studies. However, there are also circumstances in which students do not find any reliable mentors during their graduate school experience. During the interview process, another graduate student from Eastern University named Jane described how she didn't have a mentor in graduate school, and she is in her third year of her academic program. Jane described how she doesn't feel a bond with her faculty members:

No, I was actually discussing this with a few of my teammates. I think I've only had like one or two professors that I really like during my first and second year. And then third year, I feel like I've had really good professors, like right now. But we're all through Zoom. So, I don't know how, because we were talking about like residency and stuff.

Like, I know, some of my teammates want to do it. And then I was asking them about mentors and stuff. And then when I was thinking about it, I don't know if I would ask anybody for a letter of rec. I just don't feel like I've bonded that much with professors.

Jane identifies with being a first-generation Latina graduate student. Specifically, she shared that at Eastern University there is only one Hispanic professor which can impact the student of color population to persevere. During the interviews, it was very evident how graduate students are eager to find mentors with similar backgrounds and identities. Students shared that when they see mentors and role models in the academy with their similar identities it is proof that they can also accomplish their goals. Furthermore, mentorship is truly valued for individuals with disabilities because it not only helps them persevere in their academics, but it also helps them learn how to achieve greatness in their career. Representation among all identities is extremely important to graduate students with disabilities. Positive and influential mentors that uplift graduate students was a key factor during the interview responses.

Disability Services Resource Experiences

In order to participate in this research study, participants had to be currently registered with Disability Services. A variety of the graduate student participants shared during the interview process that they registered with Disability Services in the middle of their academic graduate program. There were a variety of reasons why they decided to register for accommodations, however one of the most common responses was how Disability Services would help them with approving accommodations to utilize in their academic classroom setting. There was a mix of responses of Disability Services accessibility concerns such as the center not being directly advertised to graduate students, understaffed, no direct support for graduate students and poor infrastructure on campuses. However, there were also positive experiences that

arose from Disability Services accessibility. Even though students felt the Disability Services was not directed to the graduate student community, they still felt it was a great resource when they finally registered for accommodations. When I asked students about their experiences with registering for Disability Services, they described many of their challenges and how it impacted their graduate student experiences. A student named Maria from Northern University stated below how they felt the Disability Resource Center was understaffed and not directed toward the graduate student community. Maria identifies with having a mobility disability and specifically discussed her registration experiences with the Disability Resource Center on campus.

So, in general, the Disability Resource Center is significantly understaffed. So I don't think they can even serve all of the undergraduate students that they need to serve, but it is definitely not directed at graduate students, whatsoever. I wasn't even sure if graduate students could use their services until talking more to the Director. And it's talked about less. I think all of their programming, while everyone is welcomed, they do not advertise it to graduate students.

Maria took the initiative to go and meet with the Disability Services Director to discuss infrastructure on campus. However, when she met with the Director, she then decided to register for accommodations. Maria shared that because she took the initiative to find and connect with Disability Services, that's how she was able to receive accommodations and discover specific resources for graduate students. She shared that the Disability Resource Center also organizes programming events and they even have a newsletter that they share with the community to students registered. Students shared that the programming events are not completely directed towards the graduate student community which can hinder the impact of Disability Services.

Understanding how to navigate the support services realm was a very common response in the participant interviews. Registering for Disability Services was a positive impact on their graduate student experience overall due to the accessibility and resources provided. It was evident how important Disability Services is for graduate students and how it can also be impactful for a variety of other students. A common connection with students registering for Disability Services is that they also sought support from their Counseling Services department on campus. Julia, an international student from Northern University, mentioned how Disability Services has been a welcoming environment and even recommended her to the counseling center on campus which was a fruitful experience.

Because I think just being an international student, you feel very lonely here. And you don't really have a support system. So you have to build everything in this new place. And the DRC people have been very welcoming since the beginning. And that felt nice that I could always just ask for support from them. From my counselor, I talked to that person like three times I went there and I talked to that person. And then like CAPS is the counseling services. I found a counselor off campus and I was working with her for more than a year. So when I was having these very deep depression moments, I would talk to her like we have meetings every week. So, it was nice to be able to talk to her. And when there was a time where I had suicidal thoughts. So she helped me make a plan like what I have to do if I feel too nervous about that, like so I have all the resources, the numbers where to go, or specific things I could do.

Julia shared how the support services were impactful as an international student feeling isolated and how it helped her cope with her mental health challenges. During the interview, Julia shared her challenging experiences with mental health crisis, however the counseling center was a

helpful resource in supporting her through challenging experiences. Many of the graduate students stated that Disability Services was a step towards progress and that they wished they either registered for Disability Services earlier or had known about the support service earlier in their academic program. Overall, Disability Services and Counseling Services have a direct alignment between the participants in this research study. Both centers were a positive impact for the graduate student community even though there were significant challenges and perspectives for each of the center's accessibility.

During the interview responses many of the students stated how a variety of support services offered at their institution should be tailored directly to graduate students and their background identities. The common topics that arose were support services locations, unique graduate accommodations, career development, and intersectionality identity centers. Adrian, a student from Southern University, even mentioned how a majority of the support services offered were not on the graduate student campus and how separation was a huge deal in accessing support services.

I don't have access at the office. I don't even know when they (support services) are offered to me to be honest with you.

Adrian explained how there are two separate campuses (undergraduate and graduate campus) and a majority of the support services are located at the undergraduate campus. As mentioned in the literature review many graduate students have a variety of roles and responsibilities, so when a university has support services in a far location it can be detrimental to the student success. Another student from Southern University named Mark also mentioned they don't feel that the support services are tailored towards graduate students specifically.

I don't think it is specific to graduate students, so I wouldn't say, I wouldn't say so. I would say that it's not tailored to graduate students specifically.

Mark shared that he was not aware of support services being directly tailored for graduate students and he is already in his second year of his graduate program. Participants stated if graduate students do not feel that their primary Disability Services center is not organizing programs directly for their community, they do not feel compelled to participate. A student from Northern University named Ellen mentioned that the Disability Services center could be beneficial if more students knew about the resource and accommodations.

There needs to be more diverse accommodations for graduate students, and also there's just not a lot of advertisement around it. Like when I went to my like graduate students with disabilities meeting, some of the students there didn't even know what accommodations the DRC offered for grad students. And so it's not really talked about as much in grad school, and as an undergrad. And it's so unfortunate that there's a lot of people who could benefit from accommodations and they aren't getting it.

Ellen discussed how there is not enough advertisement around Disability Services resources which can be detrimental to student success. She shares that if Disability Services was better advertised to different student populations (undergraduates and graduate students combined), it can overall impact student experiences. Having support services catered towards the graduate student population can be a massive impact for a wide community of students. It takes a lot of energy, perspective and creativity to facilitate support strategies to accommodate a variety of student communities. Participants also discussed the Disability Services role in supporting students beyond the academic classroom. One student from Southern University named Crystal

discussed how she even needed help with the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) when she was applying for graduate school:

Honestly, the biggest challenge was getting accommodations for the GRE and it would have been nice if our Disability Resource Center on campus had more support or ways to help students with disabilities, navigate how to get accommodations for graduate testing or any sort of like advanced program, or advanced degree testing.

Crystal explained how she was registered with Disability Services in her undergraduate program and when she was navigating graduate school applications, there was no career support from Disability Services. In the interview, Crystal shared how she was applying to get academic accommodations for the GRE however she didn't know how to navigate the application system and her undergraduate Disability Service center did not help her. Regardless of student identity, there should be support services beyond the academic classroom to uplift and encourage academic success and perseverance. Many students stated how there were support services, but no support services specifically tailored to intersectionality identities. Danny, a student from Northern University, stated how there are specific racial identity support services, however they also seem to be only be tailored toward undergraduate students.

Uh, yeah, I guess but I think those are more geared for undergraduate students. I think they have a Black Student Union. I think they have an American Indian Resource Center or something like that. And you know all these other spaces, but I think they're aimed at undergrad.

Danny shares that the racial student centers are geared more towards the undergraduate student population which is a disadvantage for graduate students. He expressed that the centers were not tailored toward graduate students and their schedules. Danny shared that there is no center on

campus that supports both racial and disability identity combined. Ultimately, the graduate student participants felt that a majority of the support services were not directly related to their graduate student intersectionality identities. It was apparent that they felt that the resources were either limiting or narrow towards undergraduate students. It is important to voice the concerns and perspectives of student communities from marginalized populations. Graduate students with disabilities are a unique population that deserve the right to have support services tailored directly to their academic success and personal experiences to increase retention and perseverance. In conclusion, this chapter discussed three overarching themes regarding graduate students with disabilities experiences in the academy. There are a variety of key factors that impact the students personal and academic experiences. In this next chapter I will articulate the discussion and conclusion for this dissertation research study.

Chapter 5:

Discussion & Conclusion

In conclusion, graduate students with disabilities need the support and advocacy from higher education institutions to persevere throughout their academic program. This dissertation study indicates how graduate students with disabilities' backgrounds and their graduate school experience are impacted by intersectionality. The four research questions were answered with appropriate themes found in the analysis. The themes help create a sense of understanding of how graduate students with disabilities are impacted by their academic program.

As stated in the literature review there is very limited amount of research conducted on graduate students with disabilities and understanding intersectionality impact. Graduate students with disabilities who also identify with a variety of other identities are impacted in unique ways as represented in chapter four. Graduate students can identify with a variety of identities,

experiences and challenges. DisCrit tenets supplemented intersectionality and highlighted key aspects of graduate students throughout chapter four that prove how important it is to obtain information from individuals with disabilities in order to provide critical feedback to the academy. Intersectionality and DisCrit will help explore the results by indicating how race, gender, sexual orientation, and disability status are vital identities that impact life experiences. In order to fill the gap in literature, I conducted a dissertation research study on graduate students with disabilities academic and personal experiences. In this final chapter, I will discuss a summary of key findings, a discussion of the analysis, implications for research, implications for practice, and my conclusion.

Summary of Key Findings & Discussion

It is important that peers, staff, faculty and other higher education administration work closely together to provide a safe space and strategic plan for graduate students with disabilities to succeed. Throughout the interview process, I collected rich data that pertains to graduate students with disabilities experiences. The first research question asked *what factors shape the academic and personal experiences of graduate students with disabilities?* It was evident in the theme *Breaking Barriers & Creating Community* that graduate students with disabilities in this research study experienced hardships due to their disability identity. Further, the students type of disability and whether their identity was visible and/or invisible were also key factors in their experiences. For example, students with invisible disabilities had greater challenges obtaining accommodations from their faculty members. Due to their invisible disability, many of the students shared their faculty had a hard time believing in their need for accommodations. Thus, many of the students with invisible disabilities had to negotiate their accommodations. The graduate student experiences were impacted within their faculty members interactions through

microaggressions. As revealed in chapter four, a variety of professors utilized microaggressions which contributed to their academic and personal experiences. While faculty interactions were a heavy weight on the student's higher education journey, students gravitated towards creating community. Students shared how creating community with individuals from similar backgrounds and identities was very important to their graduate student experience. Lastly, the imposter syndrome was also evident through the student responses as many graduate students shared that they felt their marginalized identities such as race and disability were the most impacted through the imposter syndrome. Graduate students with disabilities in this research study specifically felt their marginalized identities were the key factors of their imposter syndrome.

The second research question asked *how do graduate students with disabilities from different backgrounds experience graduate school?* Through the analysis it was shown that in themes one *Reality of Disability Journey* and two *Breaking Barriers & Creating Community*, graduate students with disabilities from different backgrounds were heavily impacted. The intersectionality of students was remarkably shown by sharing students' experiences of hardship through their racial identity, international student identity, first-generation college student status, sexual orientation, gender and disability. The students of color in this research study explained how they gravitated more towards peers and faculty members with similar backgrounds and identities. It was truly important for a variety of student identities to feel a connection and create community within their graduate student experience. COVID-19 created many hardships for graduate students with disabilities, especially those with family responsibilities, full-time jobs and mental health challenges.

The third research question asked *how do race, ethnicity and gender shape the experiences of graduate students with disabilities?* It was prevalent within the first theme *Reality*

of Disability Journey and second theme *Breaking Barriers & Creating Community* that graduate students with disabilities are truly impacted by their race, ethnicity, and gender in their higher education path. Within the analysis, it is construed that there are a variety of intersectionality identities that impact the graduate student experience. The participants shared that their racial background, sexual orientation, first-generation college status, international student status, gender and disability identity are key factors in influencing their graduate student experiences. It was also evident within the analysis that graduate students with disabilities continue to experience stigma and challenges in advocating for their accommodations due to the microaggressions from their faculty members. The graduate student participants explained that when their own faculty members, who are suppose be mentors, are unempathetic it truly creates an uncomfortable graduate student experience. Empathy was a common topic that arose within the interviews and was a key factor in student experiences. Many of the participants shared how empathy within their faculty and peer relationships was extremely important for student success.

Lastly, the final research question asked *how do various support services impact the academic experiences of graduate students with disabilities?* The first theme *Reality of Disability Journey* and third theme *Shaping the Future* truly cultivate the key factors of support services impact on student experiences. It is essential to state that there are two key support services that were connected to student experiences within the analysis: Disability Resource Center and the Counseling Center. These two support services heavily impacted the graduate student academic experiences due to the resources and staff members. The *Reality of Disability Journey* theme prevails the concrete experiences of the graduate students with disabilities experiences and shares stories of hardships throughout the student's path in academia, however the theme *Shaping the Future* truly reflects the motivation and inspiration for this community of students to

persevere through the shared hardships. Building a bridge, these two themes truly answer the last question of the dissertation research study and also creates a sense of hope in learning new strategies to support the community of graduate students with disabilities. In this next section, I will share a further look into the theoretical framework's connection and impact on graduate students with disabilities.

Reality of Disability Journey

The findings from this dissertation study share three prevalent themes that impact graduate students with disabilities. The first theme, *Reality of Disability Journey*, provides answers to the challenging experiences graduate students with intersectionality identities encounter during their academic experiences. There were four main sub themes that were evident within this theme such as intersectionality identities impact on graduate students, stigma experiences, financial instability, and COVID-19 hardships. Graduate students with disabilities experience many challenges as they are faced with unique and extreme barriers. It was evident in the interview responses that the participants' multiple identities were impactful in their graduate student experiences.

Bowleg (2012) frames intersectionality to identify how multiple identities such as race, gender, class, sexual orientation and disability intersect on a micro and macro level. It should be noted that during the interviews, the participants also shared other elements of their identity that impacted their experiences such as: parent roles, international student identity, and first-generation college identity. These three key identities were so prevalent in the student's graduate experiences as it impacted the way they navigated the academy. Students who identified as parents had distinct experiences that made them feel a sense of isolation. While individuals who identified as having international status were more impacted by this identity than their racial

background. They expressed how their international status was more dominant than their ethnic identity and they gravitated more towards people who also identified as an international student. For individuals who identified as first-generation college students, it was apparent that they did not have the expertise or resources to navigate the higher education sector. There were also other key identities and responsibilities the graduate students identified with such as having full-time jobs and internships which impacted their experiences.

During specific interviews, it was also apparent that graduate students with disabilities who identified as female had challenging experiences in the STEM field, which is typically dominated by males. This is where Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality plays a key role in focusing on how gender and race are interconnected in oppressed experiences. Graduate students with disabilities who identify as women of color had distinct marginalized experiences in their higher education path. Students experienced microaggressions with their faculty members which impacted their sense of belonging on campus. Gender and race played a crucial part in the interview responses, as students shared their experiences in the STEM field were limited based off their identity. Intersectionality plays a crucial role within race and gender, especially in the STEM field. It was evident that these women of color did not have key role models that they could look up to and help overcome their unique challenges.

Through these themes, there were a variety of DisCrit tenets that developed within the participants responses. These findings affirm Annamma et al.'s (2013) following DisCrit tenets:

- 1) DisCrit privileges voices of marginalized populations, traditionally not acknowledged within research.
- 2) DisCrit focuses on ways that the forces of racism and ableism circulate interdependently, often in neutralized and invisible ways, to uphold notions of normalcy.

- 3) DisCrit requires activism and supports all forms of resistance.
- 4) DisCrit considers legal and historical aspects of disability and race and how both have been used separately and together to deny the rights of some citizens.

Within the theoretical framework it has been explored that graduate students with disabilities encounter many different factors that impact their academic and personal experiences.

Fortunately, this research study provided a platform for marginalized communities that are typically not researched. Depicting racial background, gender, disability type and other identities were key influences on graduate students with disabilities academic experiences. This dissertation study shared the true experiences of graduate students with disabilities and how their intersectionality identities impact their academic and personal experiences. DisCrit reveals how individuals with disabilities are affected in their personal and professional academic journey. There are key challenges identifying with different racial backgrounds, statuses and identities that can impact the graduate student experience. Overall, graduate students with disabilities who identify with multiple intersectionality identities are impacted heavily in their graduate school journey.

As Hyun et al. (2006) and Polson (2003) mentioned, graduate students have many different responsibilities such as being parents, having full time jobs, and marriages that can impact their graduate student experiences. The themes found in the coding process shows that graduate students with disabilities have unique experiences that impact their graduate school navigation, but specifically states how these results can be seen as invisible challenges to other non-disabled individuals. As stated in this theme, financial instability was a reoccurring finding in the interview responses. As Wolanin (2005) affirms students with disabilities encounter unique financial hardships as they face disability related expenses that are not common among

non-disabled students. It is critical that Financial Aid departments and the United States Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) create a solution to support the financial means for graduate students with disabilities. Graduate assistantships and scholarships directed towards graduate students with disabilities can be a powerful resource. These invisible struggles for graduate students with disabilities impact their academic journey and can also affect their life beyond school. As graduate students with disabilities accumulate more additional expenses related to this disability this can increase their student loans which can also impact their life after graduation. Paying back student loans directly related to disability expenses is an invisible challenge that is not adequately portrayed.

Many of the participants stated how they feel COVID-19 changed their academic program and their graduate schooling in general. Especially graduate students with disabilities who entered their academic program remotely, this community truly experienced different peer and faculty interactions. Through these unique times of a world-wide pandemic, graduate students with disabilities will encounter even more challenges and barriers in a remote education setting. Educational accessibility is a huge factor in supporting graduate students with disabilities. There are many personal challenges that graduate students with disabilities face and their intersectionality identities are impacted as well.

Breaking Barriers & Creating Community

The second theme that emerged from this research study was *Breaking Barriers & Creating Community* which articulated how student's types of disability impacts their graduate experience, faculty interactions through microaggressions, peer support systems, and how the imposter syndrome continues to affect the graduate student community. Navigating the academy was described as a hardship for many different reasons, however graduate students stated that

they felt their experiences were truly impacted by their marginalized identities. First, their type of disability and visible/invisibility factor played a huge role on the impact of their academic path. Student participants shared that if they identified with an invisible disability it was more challenging obtaining accommodations from their professors. Many students who were diagnosed with mental/psychological disabilities also stated that their professors were not as understanding and empathetic regarding their disability. It is crucial to note that Bowleg (2012) explained how disability status was an impact on the intersectionality theoretical framework. Diving into this disability status even more by depicting the visible vs invisible factor plays a huge role in their graduate student experiences. Students explained that their disability identity definitely impacted their graduate student experiences and created barriers. However, they also indicated that whether their disability was visible versus invisible also created a different layer of barriers. Specifically, students with visible disabilities had different relationships with their faculty members and most likely their faculty would understand their approved accommodations, however students with invisible disabilities often had to advocate for their accommodations. Students with visible disabilities also discussed their need for better infrastructure on campus. It was also evident that even if the student participants identified with having visible or invisible disabilities, they still believed infrastructure was a common concern on their campus. Infrastructure was a common concern for the student participants, mainly because campus infrastructure was a representation of the institution's ADA compliance. Thus many students wanted compatible and accessible infrastructure for all students with disabilities.

It is important as a higher education institution to value the variety of identities of graduate students, but to also create ADA compliance procedures efficiently. Infrastructure was a common concern that arose within supporting disability related accommodations. DisCrit tenet

two states the following, “DisCrit values multidimensional identities and troubles singular notions of identity such as race or disability or class or gender or sexuality, and so on” (Annamma et al., 2013). It is important to understand how race, disability type, gender, parent responsibilities and more can impact graduate students’ experiences. There are multiple identities that graduate students identify with, but it is important to also identify how to support each of their identities uniquely.

Faculty interactions was also a key influence on the graduate student experience since many of the students often looked up to their professors as key role models. Many of the graduate student participants felt that they did not have mentors in the program that would advocate for their accommodations or support their educational pursuits. In DisCrit’s fifth tenet, “DisCrit considers legal and historical aspects of disability and race and how both have been used separately and together to deny the rights of some citizens” (Annamma et al., 2013), it is prevalent throughout the findings that many of the students felt they had to continuously advocate for their approved accommodations and receive support from their faculty members. As mentioned in the literature review, due to the Americans with Disabilities Act, it is illegal to discriminate against students with disabilities. It was also evident that through microaggressions, the faculty members were discouraging students with disabilities to complete their graduate studies. This was mostly evident through women of color in the STEM field. As Crenshaw (1991) described intersectionality plays a key role between women and gender. Especially because the STEM field creates a space typically set aside for white males. DisCrit explains how the legal impacts and higher educational supremacy can be seen as a factor to deny the right of individuals with disabilities. Furthermore, these are concrete examples of how faculty members

interactions are very impactful for graduate students with disabilities to persevere in their academic programs.

In the analysis, it was prevalent how graduate students with disabilities were pushing boundaries to break barriers and eventually create community through their peer support system while navigating the imposter syndrome. As a graduate student, many of the participants felt they were a unique identity being diagnosed with a disability and identifying with other backgrounds and experiences. Specifically, DisCrit tenet three states: “DisCrit emphasizes the social constructions of race and ability and yet recognizes the material and psychological impacts of being labeled as raced or disabled, which sets one outside of the western cultural norms” (Annamma et al., 2013). Being labeled through race or disability can be a negative impact on an individual. DisCrit tenet three is explored in this theme because the student participants stated how being labeled through by their race and disability identity has been an isolating impact. In the participant responses, the graduate students responded that they felt the imposter syndrome due to their disability, ethnicity, first-generation status and gender.

Shaping the Future

Lastly, the third theme *Shaping the Future* shared students’ personal motivational experiences, mentorship and Disability Services experiences that impacted their academic and personal journey. A variety of graduate students shared their deep motivational stories to finish their academic program, while many were inspirational some students also shared their fears of not finishing their program due to limited role models. As Annamma et al. (2013) states in her DisCrit tenet seven, “DisCrit requires activism and supports all forms of resistance.” In order to continue the motivation to finish their academic program, many of the participants shared they

wanted to be the voice for their marginalized communities and discussed how they wanted to shape the future by continuing to advocate within their field.

As shared in the literature review, graduate students of color need the support of mentors, engaging faculty members, positive counseling services and advisors (Benshoff et al., 2015; Reddick & Young, 2012; Nadal et al., 2010). This was proven by how expressive the interview responses shared how graduate students search for key role models in order to succeed in their graduate experience. Representation among all identities is extremely important to graduate students with disabilities. Positive and influential mentors that uplift graduate students was a key factor. DisCrit tenet four states “DisCrit privileges voices of marginalized populations, traditionally not acknowledged within research” (Annamma et al., 2013) and it is proven in the findings how individuals with different identities participation is crucial in the higher education field. Students from marginalized communities and identities are starving for mentors that truly encompass their identities and provide a platform of succession.

Implications for Research

The findings from this dissertation study explore the importance of researching graduate students with disabilities. As stated in the literature review, there is a gap in literature specifically pertaining to graduate students with disabilities. However, this dissertation study provided a platform for marginalized student voices. The student experiences and perspectives shared describe the significance of continuing to research this community of students. This study explored how intersectionality plays a key role in graduate students with disabilities experiences. There are a variety of identities and graduate students are already a distinct population in the higher education field. This study created a platform for intersectionality exploration in the graduate students with disabilities sector. Race and gender were also dominant factors in the

research study findings. Crenshaw (1991) states how oppressed identities are impacted in political and structural intersectionality platforms. It was evident in the results that graduate students with disabilities were highly impacted by their racial background and gender status. As these two dominant identities created a substantial effect in their academic experiences.

Furthermore, when I first explored the opportunity to conduct this topic for my research study, I was nervous about how much I would receive in student engagement responses. With my positionality and interview questions, I was able to navigate the interview process smoothly. Throughout the interviews it was surprising how open and comfortable the participants were in sharing their experiences. I was thrilled to learn that these graduate students with disabilities were grateful for the platform to share their stories, experiences and perspectives. Finally, through this dissertation study I was able to engage and learn about graduate students with disabilities experiences in order to create implications for practice.

Implications for Practice

It is important to acknowledge that graduate students with disabilities have had a limited platform in previous research. DisCrit states how it provides a platform for marginalized communities that have not been represented in traditional settings. I had a responsibility writing this dissertation study to share perspectives from graduate students with disabilities and voice their student feedback. The graduate students with disabilities I interviewed provided such rich, informative and significant information that I would like to share with the higher education community. These implications for practice can be utilized by higher education practitioners, faculty members, student peers and others who identify as interacting with this population of students. Their real-world experiences truly provided excellent recommendations that higher education institutions can commit to improving. Below are the seven key recommendations to

higher education institutions that were developed from analyzing the findings of the dissertation study:

- 1) **Provide Adequate Financial Support** -Improve financial stability for graduate students with disabilities. Whether it is increasing salary for graduate assistantships or creating scholarship opportunities for graduate students with disabilities. There are additional expenses and financial struggles that graduate students with disabilities encounter. Paying graduate students with disabilities a living wage for their assistantship or internship will not only help them survive but will decrease financial hardships and disability related stress.
- 2) **Mandatory Training**- Create mandatory Disability Services and diversity training for faculty and staff community. Having a platform for the higher education community to learn about disability identities and the intersectionality of students can help increase awareness and support strategies.
- 3) **Practice Empathy**- Encourage peers, staff and faculty to practice empathy towards graduate students with disabilities. Creating spaces for safe conversations, motivating students to complete their academic program, mentoring, providing accommodations through an empathetic lens, and listening to student concerns can be a positive impact for graduate students with disabilities.
- 4) **Direct Advertisement and Communication**- Facilitate direct advertising and communication efforts to graduate students with disabilities. If programs, resources, centers or events are open to all students, be sure to advertise that it is open to all communities and groups. Another recommendation is that Disability Support Centers communicate their resources during the admissions process, New Student Orientation,

and programming events to advertise their resources are available and open to all student communities.

5) **Disability Services Support in Advocating Accommodations-** Advocate, advocate, advocate. Graduate students with disabilities rarely have role models or mentors with similar backgrounds and experiences. The role of Disability Resource Center is crucial to student success. This recommendation is initiating that it is important to not only approve reasonable accommodation, but that the Disability Resource Center also provide advocacy support regarding accommodations. When students are having difficulties with their approved accommodations with faculty members, it should be the responsibility of the Disability Resource Center to advocate for the students' requested accommodations.

6) **Create Community-** Organize community building events that support graduate students with disabilities. Creating community among graduate students with disabilities will help inspire, uplift and encourage a sense of belonging. A few examples are the following: create mentor programs, creating clubs that support graduate students with disabilities, inviting speakers that identify with having a disability or facilitating academic success seminars.

7) **Conduct Assessment-** Conducting annual assessment surveys or focus groups to explore findings of how to support graduate students with disabilities on campus. It is important to acknowledge student voices and to create a platform where graduate students with disabilities can provide critical feedback. When assessment is completed, it's important to also take action and cultivate the student feedback into action items the institution can conduct.

These seven recommendations are stated to support graduate students with disabilities and create a strategic plan of support. As a participant in the interview stated, “ADA is the bare minimum”. It’s important to provide resources and support beyond the mandated government regulations. Graduate students with disabilities have a variety of challenges and experiences that impact their educational career and beyond. Graduate students’ experiences in their academic program will impact their personal life and career trajectory in a variety of ways and it is important that higher education institutions provide support in order for students to succeed, graduate and persevere.

Conclusion & Need for Future Research

Moving forward, there is still a need for further research to be conducted for the graduate student population. Graduate students with disabilities need the support and advocacy from their higher education institutions to flourish in their academic programs. More research needs to be conducted for graduate students with disabilities in a variety of methods and variables. For example, more research can be conducted on graduate students of color, navigating careers, disability legislative policies and more. In this section, I will share the variety of future research that needs to be conducted in order to support this community of students.

Students who are diagnosed with disabilities live with their identity forever. It does not stop in the academic setting or in their career. There is a need to continue research on graduate students with disabilities during their academic program, but also when they graduate. Findings from this dissertation research study show how Disability Services might not always provide support outside the academic setting of the higher education institution. A research question to consider is how are graduates with disabilities navigating their careers with their intersectionality identities? Location is another important aspect in conducting this research. This dissertation study was completed in California, however there might be different findings that vary in the

United States or around the world. Individuals with disabilities are protected in the United States with federal regulations and policies, but further research should be conducted on students outside of the United States as well. As an international student participant mentioned in the interview process, their home country does not have government regulations that support individuals with disabilities in the higher education sector. Lastly, as mentioned in the limitations section, 90% of participants in this dissertation study identify being in STEM academic graduate programs. It would be interesting to research graduate students with disabilities in other academic graduate programs such as: social sciences, humanities, fine arts, education, and religious studies.

It's important that all variables are being researched to continue supporting the graduate student population. Furthermore, this dissertation study provides strategic recommendations for higher education institutions to improve support services for graduate students with disabilities. Utilizing these recommendations can increase student retention, engagement and community with graduate students with disabilities.

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Appendix A:
Recruitment Email

Dear Student,

My name is Andrea Mozqueda and I am a current doctoral student at Claremont Graduate University. For my dissertation, I am conducting a research study evaluating graduate students with disabilities academic experiences. The purpose of this interview is to learn about your academic experiences. The results of this study will provide important information for higher education practitioners to learn retention and support strategies for graduate students with disabilities.

Your participation is voluntary. You may choose to decline participation and withdraw from participation at any time without penalty. Participants must fit the following criteria: 1) be a current graduate student and 2) registered with Disability Services Center. The interview will take approximately 60-70 minutes. The interview questionnaire includes opinion and experiential questions. Interviews can be conducted either via phone, Zoom or Skype. All participants in this study will remain confidential. There are no anticipated risks for participating in this study. Each participant will receive a \$15 gift card to Target after the interview. Information collected will be stored on a password protected computer.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please email me the signed consent form attached to this email and send to andrea.mozqueda@cgu.edu by (set deadline). I will contact you to arrange an interview. Participants will have one week to review the interview transcription for any inconsistencies. I look forward to your response.

Thank you for your time,

Andrea Mozqueda, MA
Doctoral Student
Claremont Graduate University

Appendix B:

Consent Form

STUDY LEADERSHIP: This research project is led by Andrea Mozqueda, a doctoral student at Claremont Graduate University (CGU), who is being supervised by Dr. Eligio Martinez.

PURPOSE: The purpose of this interview is to learn about how your identity impacts your graduate student experience.

ELIGIBILITY: To participate in this study you must identify as the following: 1) be a current graduate student and 2) registered with Disability Services Center.

PARTICIPATION: During the study, you will be asked to participate in a 60-70 minute interview. This interview will be recorded. The interview can be conducted via either phone, Zoom or Skype and will be recorded. There are no risks participating in this study.

COMPENSATION: You will be directly compensated a \$15 gift card to Target for participating in this study. Each participant will receive this gift card after reviewing and approving the interview transcription.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may stop or withdraw from the study or refuse to answer any particular question for any reason at any time without it being held against you. Your decision whether or not to participate will have no effect on your current or future connection with anyone at your university.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Your individual privacy will be protected in all papers, books, or presentations resulting from this study. I may use the data I collect for future research or share it with other researchers, but we will not reveal your identity with it. In order to protect the confidentiality of your responses, I will keep all data in a password protected computer and use pseudo names in my study.

FURTHER INFORMATION: If you have any questions or would like additional information about this study, please contact Andrea Mozqueda at andrea.mozqueda@cgu.edu. The CGU Institutional Review Board has approved this project. If you have any ethical concerns about this project or about your rights as a human subject in research, you may contact the CGU IRB at (909) 607-9406 or at irb@cgu.edu. A copy of this form will be given to you if you wish to keep it.

CONSENT: Your signature below means that you understand the information on this form, that someone has answered any and all questions you may have about this study, and you voluntarily agree to participate in it.

Signature of Participant _____ Date _____

Printed Name of Participant _____

Appendix C:
Demographic Questionnaire

1. Which graduate program are you in? _____
2. Are you a full time or part time graduate student? _____
3. What is your gender? _____
4. What is your racial background? _____
5. How old were you when you were diagnosed with a disability?
6. What is your cumulative grade point average (GPA)?
7. Are you a parent or legal guardian? _____
8. What is your relationship status?
 - a. Married
 - b. Single
 - c. Divorced
9. What year are you in your graduate program?
 - a. First year
 - b. Second year
 - c. Third year
 - d. Fourth year
 - e. Other: _____
10. Which category best describes your disability?
 - a. Learning
 - b. Mobility
 - c. Visual
 - d. Chronic Illness

- e. Mental/Psychological
- f. Hearing
- g. Speech
- h. Other: _____

11. Please state your disability: _____

12. What accommodations have you been approved for in your graduate program? Circle all that apply.

- a. Audio books
- b. Digital text
- c. Extended time on exams
- d. Reduced distraction room for exams
- e. Note taker
- f. Scribe
- g. Priority classroom seating
- h. Interpreter
- i. Word processor
- j. Recording lectures
- k. Other: _____

Appendix D:

Interview Questions

Background Questions:

1. Can you share with me a little bit about yourself and your background?
 - a. Where did you grow up?
2. Can you tell me about your path into higher education? (probe: high school experience, 2 year or 4 year college)
3. Why did you decide to attend the college that you attended? (probe: disability)
 - a. Did you communicate with the disability services department prior to attending the university?
4. Can you share with me your experience when you were first diagnosed with a disability?
 - a. How old were you? What prompted the diagnosis?

Undergraduate Experience:

5. What was your experience like as an undergraduate student?
 - a. Can you share with me your experience in registering for disability services in your undergraduate program?
 - b. What were your experiences like working with faculty or staff members regarding your disability?
6. Do you feel that the campus was receptive and welcoming to students with disabilities?
 - a. Were all students with disabilities treated equally? (probe: race, gender, background)
7. Did you participate in any extracurricular activities in your undergraduate program?
 - a. How did this impact your academic experience?
 - b. If no, what prevented you from participating?

8. Can you please share if you had a mentor in your undergraduate program?
 - a. How did they impact your academic experience?
9. Do you feel like your peers supported your academic experience?
10. Who was your support system in your undergraduate career?
 - a. Were you able to socialize with peers who did not have disabilities?
11. What was access like to disability services?
 - a. Do you feel like the office was supportive in your academic experience?

Graduate Experience:

12. What motivated you to pursue graduate school?
 - a. Did you speak to others about going to graduate school?
 - b. Did you have any concerns about going to graduate school because of your disability?
13. What factors did you consider in choosing your program?
14. What influenced your decision to pick the graduate school and program that you are currently enrolled in?
 - a. Did you inquire about support services for students with disabilities?
 - b. How much information was available to you regarding support services?
 - c. Was your disability status and/or finances a contributing factor in picking your graduate program?

Experiences with Services and Accommodations:

15. What have your experiences been like with student disability services on your campus?
 - a. Have you had any challenges accessing the services that you need?

16. Did you experience any challenges when registering for disability services in your graduate program?
17. Which accommodations have been the most helpful and why?
18. If you utilize support services (counseling center, advising center, specialized services etc.), what types of support services do you utilize at your institution?
 - a. How do you feel support services has impacted your academic success?
19. How do you notify faculty or staff members you need to utilize your disability accommodations?
 - a. Are faculty receptive to your accommodations? (probe: any challenges)
20. Are there any different accommodations that you need in graduate school that you did not need before?
 - a. Has your institution been receptive in providing these accommodations?
21. Do you feel that your institution provides the same level of support to undergraduate and graduate students with disabilities?

Type of Disability:

22. Do you have an invisible or visible disability?
 - a. How do you feel your disability impacts your academic experience?
23. How has your type of disability (and student of color) identity impact your graduate school experience?
 - a. How do you feel like your peers, faculty or staff treat you regarding your disability?

Family Responsibilities:

24. Do you have any family/parent responsibilities?

- a. How do you feel like your family supports your academic experience?
- 25. What advice has your family provided to you regarding navigating graduate school?
- 26. How have family responsibilities and having a disability impacted your academic experience?
- 27. Do you feel like you have a positive support system?

Students of Color:

- 28. Do you feel that your race, gender or sexual orientation has impacted your ability to access disability resources on campus?
 - a. Has your race, gender or sexual orientation influenced your experience in general in graduate school?
- 29. Can you share with me your experience of being a student of color with a disability?
- 30. How has your family, peers, faculty, or staff embraced or challenged you?
- 31. Do you feel a sense of belonging on campus and in your graduate program?
- 32. How do you feel like your advisor, faculty or staff treat you based off your race, gender, disability or sexual orientation?
- 33. Are there resources on campus that support your student of color and disability identity?
- 34. How do you feel like the support services at your school treat your identity?
 - a. Do you feel like there is a support system tailored to graduate students with disabilities at your school?

Graduate School Experience:

- 35. Has your disability identity impacted the way you navigate your graduate program?
 - a. Have you experienced any challenges in graduate school because of your disability?

36. Do you feel that you have been treated differently by others on campus because of your disability? If so, can you explain by who?
37. Do you participate in any extracurricular activities in your graduate program?
 - a. How has this impacted your academic experience?
38. Do you have any mentors in your current graduate program?
 - a. How have they impacted your academic experience?
39. How have finances impacted your experience in your graduate program?
 - a. What are some additional expenses you have as a student with a disability?
40. What motivates you to continue your graduate program?
41. What recommendations to the university might you make to improve your graduate experience?
42. If you could provide advice to any graduate student with a disability who is thinking about attending graduate school, what would you share?
43. Is there anything else you would like to share that we did not discuss?