

# Sense of Belonging in College Students with Disabilities



Delena Johnson and Dr. Shengli Dong



## Background:

A student's sense of belonging is strongly associated with their level of retention, academic performance, and mental health overall. Students with disabilities are becoming more prevalent especially in postsecondary institutions. Research has demonstrated that students with disabilities face several barriers such as ableism, reduced faculty awareness, and inconsistent implementation of disability accommodations. A few vital contributors to student success include the climate of the institution and relationships students have with faculty as well as their fellow peers. Access to services alone does not contribute to social inclusion. Majority of existing research is centered around accommodations and compliance instead of the lived experiences of the student. Additionally, sense of belonging is generally studied very broadly amongst college students, and the findings are dispersed across several disciplines. This can make it difficult to recognize overarching patterns. A comprehensive quality review is necessary to identify common themes that shape the sense of belonging amongst students with disabilities. The purpose of this study was to conduct a qualitative literature review to gain a more adequate understanding of how college students with disabilities experience sense of belonging during their time in college. This study answered the following question: *What factors influence the sense of belonging of college students with disabilities?* By synthesizing existing qualitative research, this study aimed to identify patterns with student experiences and highlight implications for institutional practices that are more inclusive.



## Methods:

- The focus of this study concentrated on previously published qualitative studies that examined college students with disabilities.
- Studies that were included focused on postsecondary students with a range of disabilities that include but are not limited to physical disabilities, learning disabilities, and autism spectrum disorders.
- The primary materials analyzed were peer-reviewed qualitative research articles centered around postsecondary students with disabilities, experiences with accommodations, faculty, and peers, as well as lived experiences of inclusion and belonging.
- Only studies with qualitative methods were included so that the student voice was centered.

The procedure of this study goes as follows:

- Relevant articles were identified using academic database searches and inclusion criteria was applied to ensure that studies only focused on college students with disabilities and their sense of belonging.
- Key findings from included studies were extracted and organized to find common themes. To conduct data analysis, similar findings were grouped into broader thematic categories and themes were refined to reflect consistent cross-study patterns. The themes were developed inductively from the literature.

## Results:

Thematic synthesis illustrated that there are consistent patterns across qualitative studies examining college students with disabilities. Sense of belonging emerged as multidimensional and something that is influenced by interpersonal and institutional factors. Students reported higher sense of belonging when institutions fostered a visible commitment to inclusion, disability awareness and accessibility. Environments where disability was treated as a stigma or individual deficit diminished students' sense of inclusion. Faculty knowledge flexibility and flexibility also had a significant impact on belonging as students described that felt valued when faculty demonstrated understanding of accommodations and facilitated open communication. Meaningful peer relationships were central to belonging as well. Students who developed friendships as felt socially integrated reported stronger institutional connection. On the other hand, social isolation was common when disability disclosure resulted in a misunderstanding or exclusion. Consistent access to accommodations contributed to academic confidence and institutional trust. Overall, sense of belonging was determined by how institutional systems, faculty, and peers responded to disability.



## Conclusions:

This qualitative synthesis highlights sense of belonging as a critical factor influencing academic persistence, well-being, and engagement among college students with disabilities. While accommodations provide greater accessibility, belonging requires campus culture to be inclusive, supportive relationships, and equitable practices. Belonging is shaped by daily interactions and structural systems. Institutions should go beyond compliance-based accommodation models, provide faculty training on disability awareness, and foster peer mentorship as well as inclusive student communities. For further research, sense of belonging can be examined across different types of institutions such as community colleges and PWIs, the longitudinal impacts can be investigated to determine retention and graduation outcomes, and intersectionality (gender and first-generation status) can be explored.



## References:

