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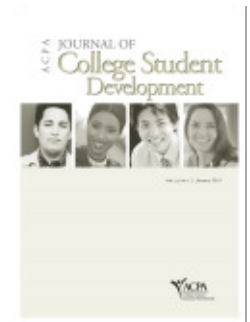
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Marginalization of Published Scholarship on Students With Disabilities in Higher Education Journals

Edlyn Vallejo Peña

While numbers of students with disabilities continue to rise in postsecondary education, little is known about the extent to which the scholarship on this student population has kept pace. A critical content analysis was conducted to review articles on students with disabilities published in top-tier journals of higher education between 1990 and 2010. Topical and methodological trends and limitations were examined, revealing that the depth and breadth of research on students with disabilities is vastly limited in mainstream journals of higher education. Recommendations are made for future research to fill gaps in methodology and topic areas.

With the implementation of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the U.S. government mandated postsecondary institutions to open their doors to students with disabilities and to provide them equal access to an education including support services. This landmark event underscored an important historical moment for educators in special education and for students with special needs alike. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, a lot of attention, resources, and effort were put forth to meet these federal regulations and to create programs and services to enable the academic success of students with disabilities. In 1990 the Americans With Disabilities Act expanded and clarified the civil rights of students with disabilities in higher education (Evans & Herriott, 2009), paving the way for continued support.

Since the implementation of these federal mandates, the number of students with disabilities enrolled in postsecondary institutions has increased, with particular states experiencing dramatic growth. In New York, for example, the number of undergraduate and graduate students with disabilities increased 40% between 1999 and 2007. Concomitantly, California experienced a 20% increase during this time frame (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2009). Even in the short time frame between 2007 and 2009, of the students with disabilities who graduated from high school, the percentage who attended postsecondary institutions increased from 55% to 59% (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). This increase held constant across all three kinds of postsecondary institutions: 4-year, 2-year, and vocational. Between 2007 and 2009, students with disabilities who graduated from high school increased enrollment rates in 4-year institutions from 14.7% to 18.4%; 2-year institutions from 37.3% to 44.4%; and vocational institutions from 28.3% to 31.3%. Today, 1 in 10 postsecondary students reports having a disability (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Meanwhile, faculty and administrators are pressed to understand the needs of students with disabilities and support them, as they are projected to enter higher education in ever increasing numbers in the coming decades.

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SCHOLARSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION LITERATURE

While numbers of students with disabilities continue to rise in postsecondary education, it is unclear if the scholarship on this student population has kept pace. Academic journals represent one source of information to which higher education professionals turn in order to learn more about critical issues in postsecondary education. This critical review of the literature suggests that little has been documented about the quantity and quality of research articles on students with disabilities. Further, whether publications are relegated to journals that specifically focus on students with disabilities or are mainstreamed and published in top-tier journals is also unknown.

Documenting the presence and visibility of research articles that focus on students with disabilities in higher education is critical for three reasons. First, the knowledge and findings that are published define what is considered important in that field; what is unresearched or unpublished (excluded) is deemed less important, insignificant, or irrelevant (Creamer, 1994; Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Taylor, 2001). Creamer (1994) astutely notes, "The number of publications about a topic, particularly in widely recognized journals, is an indication of the recognition of a topic, as well as a measure of its integration into mainstream research" (p. 35). As such, the discourse on students with disabilities within privileged forms of scholarship (i.e., top-tier research journals) in the higher education community reflects the extent to which this topic is a central part of the community's collective knowledge and consciousness.

Second, as privileged forms of scholarship shape the knowledge and consciousness of a community, they also shape the practices of the professional field (Gumport, 2001; Silverman,

1987; Townsend, Donaldson, & Wilson, 2005). Conversely, when an educational problem is not at the forefront of one's consciousness, it is not likely to be acted upon. That is, when certain areas of inquiry are marginalized, they bring less attention to the education problems in need of change because those problems and areas of change are neither addressed nor discussed: they become invisible.

Third, the ways in which a topic is represented is also of import. As Gumport (2001) argues, the language and discussions *about* issues in higher education reflect and contribute to the ways in which individuals in these settings construct reality. How a topic is framed, and in this case, researched and published, reveals a field's norms, values, and social structure (Taylor, 2001; Twombly, 1993). This construction of reality has the power to influence the ways in which students with disabilities are viewed and treated, including the degree to which inequalities are perpetuated.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to uncover and bring to light the kinds of discourse that have shaped the context and practices of higher education researchers and practitioners since the passage of the Americans With Disabilities Act in 1990. As such, 2 decades of research on students with disabilities in postsecondary institutions within four top-tier journals in higher education are critically examined. The journals selected for this analysis are: *The Journal of Higher Education*, *The Review of Higher Education*, *Research in Higher Education*, and *The Journal of College Student Development*. These journals arguably represent the top four journals published in the United States in the field of higher education. According to the ISI Web of Knowledge Social Sciences Citation Index, these peer-reviewed

journals have a high impact factor, indicating that they are widely read and cited in the higher education scholarly community, and thus, represent a form of privileged knowledge among scholars in the field.

This analysis presents one way of conceptualizing how students with disabilities have been represented in the scholarly literature. The choice to exclude journals that specifically focus on students with disabilities, like *The Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability* or *The Journal of Learning Disabilities*, is purposeful. The intent here is to examine what is included, and thereby legitimized, in mainstream, top-tier journals of higher education as a way of uncovering what is present or missing from the scholarly dialogue on students with disabilities.

The following research questions guided this critical content analysis.

1. In what ways is research about students with disabilities represented in the four top-tier, peer-reviewed research journals of higher education, published from 1990 to 2010?
2. How has this representation changed from 1990 to 2010?
3. What is missing from the discourse on students with disabilities in these journals?

METHOD

The researcher employed a content analysis of the top four ranking peer-reviewed journals in the field of higher education published in the United States from 1990 to 2010. As previously mentioned, the journals in this study were selected using the 2009 ISI Web of Knowledge Social Sciences Citation Index, which measures a peer-reviewed journal's level of impact based on number of citations and articles published. The journals identified

as the top four ranking journals of higher education were the following:

1. *The Review of Higher Education* (impact factor of 1.545)
2. *The Journal of Higher Education* (impact factor of 1.460)
3. *Research in Higher Education* (impact factor of 0.903)
4. *The Journal of College Student Development* (impact factor of 0.867)

The following keywords were used to search for articles in the four journals: *accessibility, disability, disabilities, handicapped, special education, special needs, special populations*. From this search, 25 articles about students with disabilities in higher education were identified.

While the preliminary phase of analysis included quantifying the frequency of journal articles, the content analysis portion of this study was approached from a critical lens. An inductive analysis allowed for the examination of the ways in which students with disabilities were conceptualized and represented over time. The combined quantitative and qualitative aspects of this analysis provide an understanding about the extent to which the needs and interests of students with disabilities were either rendered visible or, by virtue of their absence, invisible in the higher education discourse. Ultimately, this analysis illuminates the ways in which the needs and interests of students with disabilities are understood within the higher education community.

FINDINGS

Presence of Journal Articles About Students With Disabilities

Between the years 1990 and 2010, *The Review of Higher Education*, *The Journal of Higher Education*, *Research in Higher Education*, and

The Journal of College Student Development published a total of 2,308 articles. The search for journal articles about students with disabilities published between 1990 and 2010 in these journals yielded a total of 25 results, representing 1% of the total articles published in the four journals within the 2 decades.

An important discrepancy discovered in this analysis was that the 25 articles identified were unevenly distributed among the four journals: 1 article was identified in *The Review of Higher Education*, 2 in *The Journal of Higher Education*, 1 in *Research in Higher Education*, and 21 articles in *The Journal of College Student Development* (see Figure 1).

Upon closer examination, of the 25 articles identified, 22 of them were published in the 1990s. The remaining 3 articles were published in 2003, 2006, and 2010, all in the *The Journal of College Student Development*. Figure 2 depicts this negative trend in the number of

articles published in the top four peer-reviewed journals from 1990 to 2010.

Another way to conceptualize the numbers in Figure 2 is that 88% of articles about students with disabilities in the top four journals of higher education were published in the 1990s; only 12% were published in the 2000s. This constitutes quite a steep decline.

Representation of Students With Disabilities in Journal Articles

Types of Disabilities Included in the Research. In more than half of the articles identified, researchers treated students with all disabilities as an aggregate group, which included students with disabilities in the areas of learning, mental development, speech, orthopedics, hearing, vision, psychiatric health, and general health. Other articles focused exclusively on one type of disability. More specifically, Javorsky and Gussin (1994) studied students with Attention Deficit

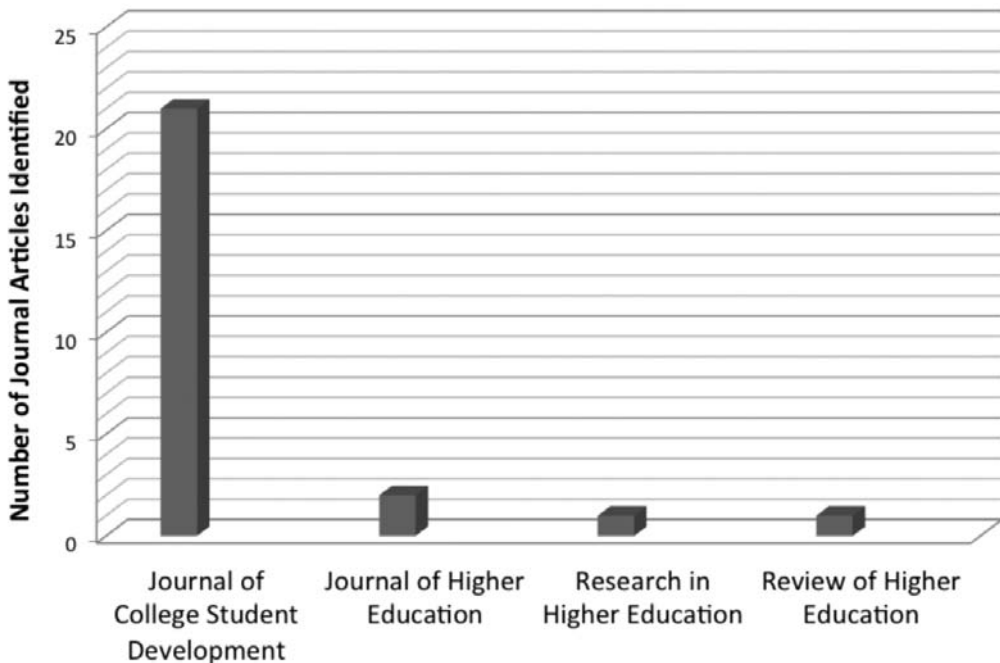


FIGURE 1. Number of Articles on Students with Disabilities Identified in Each of the Top Four Peer-Reviewed Journals of Higher Education from 1990 to 2010

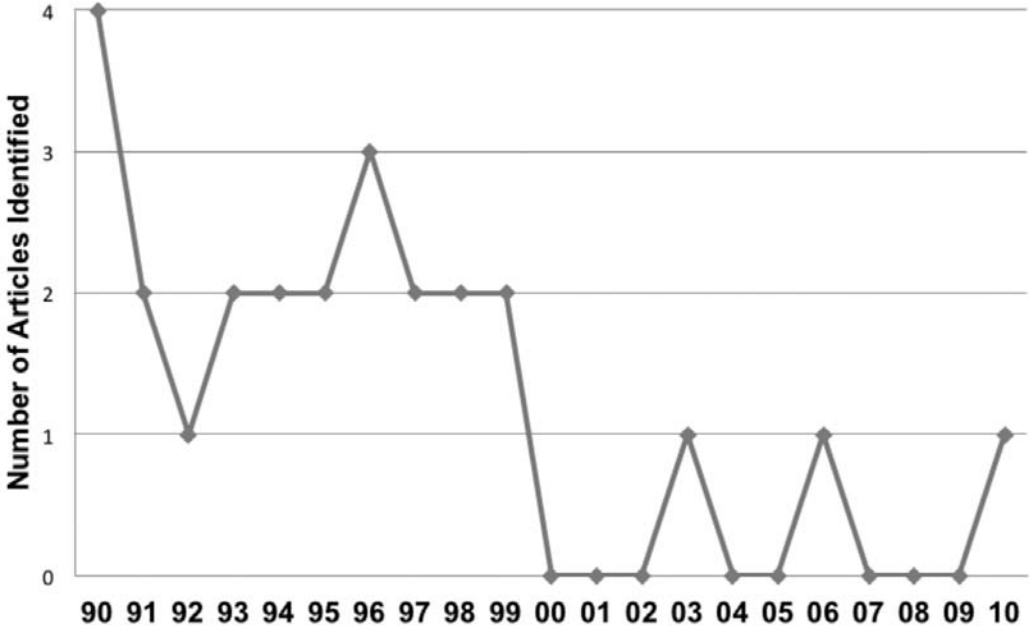


FIGURE 2. Number of Articles on Students with Disabilities Published in Top Four Peer-Reviewed Journals from 1990 to 2010

Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Hodges and Keller (1999) examined students with physical disabilities, Myers and Bastian (2010) explored the experiences of students with visual disabilities, and Dowaliby (1993) studied the integration of deaf students. Further, of the articles that focused exclusively on one kind of disability, the majority examined students with learning disabilities in particular: Dunn (1995); Keim, McWhirter, and Bernstein (1996); McGuire, Hall, and Litt (1991); Proctor, Prevatt, Adams, Hurst, and Petscher (2006); Stage and Milne, (1996); Suthakaran and Sedlacek (1999); Troiano (2003).

Methodological Trends. With regard to method and methodology, almost two thirds of the studies were quantitative in nature. Researchers employed surveys to compare students with disabilities to those without disabilities to assess the needs and experiences of students with disabilities or to determine the attitudes of others toward students with

disabilities. Some studies comprised program evaluations with an aim to assess programs and services for students with disabilities. These program evaluations typically utilized a mixed-method approach with surveys used as the favored source of data collection.

Most of the qualitative research studies identified among the articles did not surface until the late 1990s and 2000s in keeping with the increasing recognition of the value of these methods to the scholarly educational literature. The emergence of qualitative research designs changed the ways in which the needs and interests of students with disabilities were examined. For instance, early on in the 1990s studies usually treated students and institutional structures separately without deeply exploring the interplay between both. When studies utilizing qualitative inquiry methods emerged, researchers began to problematize the needs and interests of students with disabilities in the context of

institutional cultures. In 1996 Stage and Milne qualitatively examined the intersections of students' disposition, institutional factors, and coping strategies that affected college experiences. This was the first study of its kind in the four top-tier journals that paved the way to explore the complex juxtaposition of personal agency and institutional structures which either promote or hinder student success.

In terms of particular qualitative methodologies, only two articles in this review used a grounded theory approach, both of which were published in the 2000s: Myers and Bastian (2010) and Troiano (2003). In general, with the exception to the two articles, theory-building was nonexistent. Interestingly, no articles employed ethnographic or phenomenological research designs, although some studies used nuanced elements of these approaches, such as Stage and Milne (1996). In addition, only two studies focused on policy analysis. Most qualitative studies involved interviews with students or disability program staff.

Academic Performance and Achievement. Academic performance and achievement were of great interest to the authors in a number of the identified articles. Studies found that when compared to students without disabilities, students with disabilities were less likely to graduate high school and enter institutions of postsecondary education (Fairweather & Shaver, 1990). Individual and family characteristics, such as ethnicity and income, impacted the level of participation in postsecondary education, similar to peers without disabilities (Fairweather & Shaver, 1990). When students with disabilities did access higher education, Wilczenski and Gillespie-Silver (1992) found that they tended to enter college with lower high school ranks, lower SAT scores, and they earned a lower first-year college grade point average compared to their typical peers. Similarly, Dunn (1995) found that test scores and self-reports of

students with learning disabilities indicated lower academic achievement compared to other students who reported learning problems or lower achievement. Students with visual impairments tended to have the highest participation rates in higher education compared to students with other disabilities (Fairweather & Shaver, 1990).

Disability Programs and Services. Researchers studied disability programs and services in different ways. Not surprising, many of these focused on the efficacy of disability programs and services to meet students' needs: Albert and Fairweather (1990); Schuh and Veltman (1991). While students benefitted greatly from these services (Kruse, Elacqua, & Rapaport, 1998), frustration with the lack of communication between service providers and students was also noted (Albert & Fairweather, 1990). One study found that students with severe disabilities expressed more satisfaction with services than students with low to moderate disabilities (Albert & Fairweather, 1990). Another study reported that when students received academic advising from an office of disability services, even at low levels, they experienced higher grade point averages than students who did not receive advising (Keim et al., 1996). Frank and Wade (1993) and Javorsky and Gussin (1994) did not conduct original research studies for their articles; instead, they reviewed policies and regulations to which offices of disability services needed to comply.

Student Needs and Experiences. Examinations of students' needs and experiences permeated a majority of studies. Issues of accessibility emerged as a critical construct across articles that included access to financial assistance, campus structures (e.g., Albert & Fairweather, 1990), use of computers (e.g., Lance, 1996; Suthakaran & Sedlacek, 1999), study skills (e.g., Proctor et al., 2006) and an examination of peers and social involvement

(e.g., Hodges & Keller, 1999). Indeed, a wide range of needs in the area of accessibility were identified. When particular attention was paid to academic and classroom support needs, assistance in study skills and writing helped students (McGuire et al., 1991), but requesting classroom accommodations was more stressful for students with “invisible” disabilities (e.g., ADHD and learning disabilities) than for visible disabilities (e.g., physical disabilities; Kruse et al., 1998). Career development needs and employment concerns were also studied, usually exclusively and not among other variables or factors: Aune and Kroeger (1997), Hitchings, Luzzo, Retish, Horvath, and Ristow (1998), Schriener and Roessler (1990), Silver, Strehorn, and Bourke (1997). These studies examined career maturity, experiences with employment and feelings about career support services. Two of the more recent articles presented theoretical models that richly described students with disabilities: Myers and Bastian (2010) addressing the preferences of students with visual disabilities in interacting and communicating with others in the higher education setting, and Troiano (2003) investigating the complex meanings students make of their learning disabilities.

Attitudes of Peers and Faculty. Attitudes and perceptions about students with disabilities by peers and faculty impacted the experiences of students, particularly in the extent to which they felt supported socially (Hodges & Keller, 1999; Myers & Bastian, 2010) and academically (Silver et al., 1997). McQuilkin, Freitag, and Harris (1990) found that female and religious students tended to have favorable attitudes toward students with disabilities. Negative attitudes from peers usually stemmed from feeling apprehensive or guilty around students with disabilities, being “annoyed” with them and their conforming with other students without disabilities. In two studies (Kruse et al., 1998; Myers & Bastian, 2010)

students stressed the importance of faculty member support. Students wanted more faculty members to understand the implications of disabilities and to offer respect, confidentiality, and the belief that the students could succeed. In another study (Silver et al., 1997) students felt that faculty members served as a major source of discouragement.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

A number of important discoveries were made in this critical literature review. Even though students with disabilities now represent over 10% of all students enrolled in institutions of higher education, articles about students with disabilities published from 1990 to 2010 represent only 1% of the articles published in the *The Review of Higher Education*, *The Journal of Higher Education*, and *Research in Higher Education*, and *The Journal of College Student Development*. In general, the visibility of scholarship on students with disabilities in the past 2 decades is limited in the top four peer-reviewed journals of higher education, particularly from 2000 to 2010, even though the enrollment of students with disabilities in postsecondary education has increased.

The factors that explain the decline in publications about students with disabilities in top-ranking journals of higher education are not yet well understood. One possible contributing factor to the decline is that throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, a number of specialized journals emerged that focused solely on research pertaining to students with various disabilities. With the advent of these specialized journals, researchers have had more options when deciding to submit their manuscripts for publication, potentially causing a decline in the number of manuscripts submitted to the top-ranking journals. To complicate matters, the extent to which a manuscript is well-written and the

research design is well-conceived additionally affects the likelihood that it will be published, particularly in top-tier journals.

While there may be a number of additional explanations regarding the lack of scholarship published in top-tier journals, the fact remains that this area of inquiry is largely invisible in the most privileged sources of research. Over the past quarter century, research about other historically marginalized groups has been increasingly and purposefully included and infused in top-tier journals of higher education. If research on issues of race, class, and gender can be included and legitimized in these journals, why not research on differing abilities? Journal editors and researchers have a shared responsibility to close the gap in the literature; editors must thoughtfully consider the inclusion of this work and researchers must mindfully design robust studies, write strong manuscripts, and submit them to mainstream journals in higher education

Without question, in the 21 years from 1990 to 2010 *The Journal of College Student Development* has made more contributions to knowledge about students with disabilities than the other three top-ranking mainstream journals in higher education, publishing 21 of the 25 identified articles on the topic. One factor for this discrepancy may be that the readership for *The Review of Higher Education*, *The Journal of Higher Education*, and *Research in Higher Education* arguably represents a broad population of researchers and practitioners in the field of higher education. The topics covered in these journals speak to governance, faculty issues, policy, organizational theory and practices, among others. *The Journal of College Student Development*, in contrast, provides a specific forum for the conversation by focusing on student-centered issues, such as student development and student affairs. The greater number of articles published in *The Journal of College Student Development* may reflect

the editors' and readers' inclination to focus on scholarship that aims to understand and support particular student populations.

As previously suggested, the articles published from 1990 to 2010 focused on four broad themes: academic performance and achievement, disability programs and services, student needs and experiences, and attitudes of peers and faculty. The extent to which studies contributed ground-breaking knowledge about students with disabilities to theory and practice varied significantly. For instance, while one study minimally focused on reporting that students with disabilities value a college education as much as their typical peers (Bailey, 1994), another study developed a rich theoretical model about the meanings college students make of their learning disability (Troiano, 2003).

Researchers who made a compelling case about the needs and experiences of students with disabilities did so by exploring personal experiences in tandem with structural and contextual circumstances. This approach was often taken by employing qualitative methods. As stated earlier, this kind of qualitative inquiry did not emerge until the publication of Stage and Milne's (1996) study. In 1997, Aune and Kroeger followed suit by publishing a study that examined in depth the intersections of personal and environmental constraints with regard to students' career development. The fact that qualitative research studies on students with disabilities only represented about one third of the identified articles suggests that researchers and editors tend to understand the experiences of students with disabilities through a positivistic lens (Ferri, Gallagher, & Connor, 2011). Researchers with a diversity of epistemological stances and methodological approaches can surely contribute rich knowledge to the body of scholarly work on students with disabilities in higher education.

To be sure, pluralizing methodologies will allow researchers to examine issues about the needs and interests of students with disabilities in ways that are not represented in the 2 decades of research in top-tier journals of higher education. Clear gaps exist on topics regarding institutional change, organizational climate, the impact of policy, student development, and theory-building or theoretical interpretations of students with disabilities. Future research should address issues about students with disabilities from these perspectives and through these lenses. More research about students with particular types of disabilities beyond learning disabilities would also yield important contributions to the field of higher education by expanding the current, more limited discourse. The enrollment of students with autism, for instance, is growing in postsecondary settings. Research on this student group would greatly benefit practitioners and students alike. Different methodologies beyond survey research should also be employed to study issues about students with disabilities in order to offer scholars and professionals a more robust foundation of research-based knowledge from which they can draw.

What is written about students and where it is written have critical implications. Without doubt, the presence or absence of this scholarly work shapes the knowledge and perspectives of researchers and educators. To change that which is studied, portrayed, and presented about students with disabilities requires changing what is known about students with disabilities. This knowledge informs the practices of higher education professionals who have the potential to

fundamentally impact the lives of students with disabilities. When scholars, researchers, and editors of top-tier journals do not engage in or include scholarship on students with disabilities, even if unintentionally, they communicate that understanding these needs and interests is less important than other issues in higher education. In other words, the indifference of the scholarly community to inquire into the growing needs of this student population in privileged scholarly venues has effectively deemed the research in this area as marginally important.

The declining number of journal articles on students with disabilities in top-tier higher education journals over the past 2 decades, coupled with the increasing numbers of students with disabilities enrolling in postsecondary institutions, is problematic on several levels. Educators in postsecondary institutions must address the needs and interests of a growing special population without the benefit of research or theory to inform their practices. This article calls for enhanced efforts among researchers to engage in scholarship on students with disabilities and submit manuscripts to top-tier, peer-reviewed journals of higher education. Additionally, journal editors must begin to acknowledge the importance of including these works in an effort to broaden the discourses on accessibility and social justice.

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