Voices of Students with Disabilities: A Photovoice Study

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ABSTRACT

Students with disabilities are often the forgotten minority in higher education. The Center for Accommodations and Support Services (CASS) office at The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) initiated a Photovoice project with two main objectives: provide students with visible and invisible disabilities a space to foster validity for and bring a personal perspective regarding their lived experiences; and provide valuable insight and dialogue about these students’ issues, concerns, and successes to UTEP faculty, staff, and community partners who engage with this population. These objectives led to the ultimate goal of—directly and indirectly—improving educational outcomes for current and future students with disabilities. Student experiences are discussed in this paper through qualitative data analysis. Student affairs professionals are critical factors in this process and must be educated in order to eliminate attitudinal and physical barriers of campus environments which prevent students with disabilities from achieving successful academic careers.
Introduction

The historical treatment of people with disabilities is marked by marginalization, discrimination, dependence, stigma, abandonment, profound exclusion, and ultimate extermination (Fleischer & Zames, 2001). With the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), there has been a greater recognition of the rights of people with disabilities, yet social exclusion still exists on many levels—often implicitly found in attitudes and values. Students with disabilities in college, similar to those with disabilities in the general population, are subjected to stigmatizing assumptions and prejudices (Trammell, 2006; Wolanin & Steele, 2004), leading to fears of discrimination and concerns with negative attitudes of others toward them. Students with disabilities—sometimes thought of as the ‘forgotten minority’ of student affairs in higher education (Junco, 2004)—have been described as the most recent marginalized group to move toward equal opportunity in education. The needs of this group of students remain separated from the needs of other historically marginalized groups on college campuses, as they are excluded from benefits extended to other groups. Yet, they face many more, and different challenges across the college spectrum compared to their peers without disabilities. Statistics suggest that only 12.4% of individuals with disabilities possess a college degree, compared to 31.7% of those without documented disabilities (American Community Survey, 2012).

People with disabilities are often viewed in stigmatized ways, in addition to being disadvantaged socially, economically, educationally and vocationally. This stigmatization of students can start as early as recruitment procedures for the higher education institution. Next, students who begin their college application and self-report a disability—potentially to have the necessary assistance to fill out the application—have begun the systemic cycle of labeling themselves as ‘different’ which will follow them throughout their academic career. Students enrolled in higher education who self-disclose their disability are at greater risk on a number of levels, possibly being subjected to: negative stereotypes associated with disability, inaccurate assessments of their ability to complete college-level work, inappropriate judgments by peers or professors, lack of accommodations outside of the classroom, and/or increased likelihood of self-doubt and academic anxiety. The self-esteem of students with disabilities is eroded over time by shame, labels of incompetence, and experiences of dependency, fear, anxiety, and helplessness (Roer-Strier, 2002). Students with disabilities have been less than successful in participating fully in the college experience, often resulting in lower attendance rates and underperforming in terms of grades and graduation rates compared to their nondisabled peers (Murray, Goldstein, Nourse, & Edgar 2000; Dowrick, Anderson, Heyer, & Acosta, 2005).

The ADA has removed some access barriers to higher education, however, a complex layer of social barriers still remain beneath the surface, potentially interfering with their success (Trammell, 2009). Students with disabilities have to compete with their non-disabled peers and overcome stereotypes related to their identity and ability level. Many students with disabilities in higher education fail to seek support and request for accommodations because they had concerns about being stereotyped and labeled as incapable and vulnerable (Getzel & Thomas, 2008). This can be especially true for students with non-apparent (or invisible) disabilities such as psychological and cognitive disabilities, whose needs may not be readily recognized, comprehended, and accepted by others as valid or real. People with invisible disabilities may
suffer even more because they may be perceived as ‘taking advantage’ of resources spanning from disabled parking spaces to special accommodations and services.

Despite these risks and challenges, students with disabilities who do self-disclose their status to the accommodations department, professors, or other appropriate staff have increased chances at academic success. Edman & Brazil (2009) state that students who feel more accepted and supported on their college campuses are more likely to persist and succeed, however, the college environment can be unfriendly to students with disabilities (Wilson & Getzel, 2001). This “campus climate” refers to the attitudes held by members of the campus community including administrators, faculty, staff, and students (West, Getzel, Zhu, Ipsen, & Martin, 1993). Student affairs professionals contribute to the temperature of a campus’ climate, and unfortunately, they are comparatively less consciously aware of this group than other staff (Guan, 2008). More than ever, students with disabilities are enrolling in higher education at a dramatically increasing rate, yet the higher education community is still struggling with how to support and effectively serve them (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Stodden & Dowrick, 2000; Hall & Belch, 2000).

People with disabilities, especially students in higher education, often lack both power in society and autonomy in their lives, which continues to feed into the cycle of marginalization; these power inequalities are reflected and compounded by the absence of the ‘voice’ of people with disabilities within the community and political sphere. This lack of voice is linked to the isolation, low status, and low levels of participation of these groups in all areas of life. Our Photovoice project at UTEP, “Voices of Students with Disabilities,” aimed to give back the stolen and drowned-out voice to empower and revitalize student’s attitudes towards themselves, and raise awareness on campus and in the community about the presence of this ‘forgotten’ minority population.

Research Method

Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Photovoice

To encourage improved outcomes of students with disabilities, The University of Texas at El Paso’s (UTEP) Center for Accommodations and Support Services (CASS) office initiated a project entitled “Voices of Students with Disabilities.” This project at UTEP used the participatory action research (PAR) method of Photovoice in which individuals photograph their everyday realities (Baker & Wang, 2006). Beyond its initial purpose of empowering minority groups and marginalized peoples throughout the world (Castleden, Garvin, & First Nation, 2008; Janhke & Gillies, 2012; Kwiatkowski, 2011; Wang, 1999; Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997), Photovoice has also been previously implemented in educational settings for students with disabilities (Carnahan, 2006).

The theoretical framework of participatory action research (PAR) “seeks to understand and improve the world by changing it… The process of PAR should be empowering and lead to people having increased control over their lives” (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006, pg. 854). PAR has five main characteristics associated with the framework. The research conducted must be participatory, defined by a need for action within the community, useful and meaningful to the participants, reflective by both participants and researchers, and flexible (Animating Student Affairs On Campus

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Democracy, 2016). PAR is based on Paulo Freire’s work and teaching on critical consciousness and liberation of oppression. Freire (2005) stated:

The insistence that the oppressed engage in reflection on their concrete situation is not a call to armchair revolution. On the contrary reflection—true reflection—leads to action. On the other hand, when the situation calls for action, that action will constitute an authentic praxis only if its consequences become the object of critical reflection. In this sense, the praxis is the new raison d’être of the oppressed... To achieve this praxis, however; it is necessary to trust in the oppressed and in their ability to reason (pg. 66).

Consistent with the framework of PAR, the overall goals of this Photovoice project were: 1) to empower participating students with disabilities through their participation in the project; 2) to develop an increased awareness among the students without disabilities of the needs and distinctive life perspectives of students with disabilities; and 3) to promote positive change for the university to become more inclusive, by including disability as part of its diversity and student empowerment initiatives. Inclusive research can foster empowerment (Atkinson, 2004; Burke, et al., 2003; Povee, et al., 2014) and supports self-advocacy—as participants gain new skills and acquire new knowledge, they become empowered to act positively in their own lives (Walmsley, 2004).

One of the ways of communicating the plight of students with disabilities is to help tell their stories; the “Voices of Students with Disabilities” research project represents a channel through which students with disabilities’ issues are given a voice in shaping future policy development. Students with disabilities have few opportunities to actively participate in research which affects programs and policies. The “Voices of Students with Disabilities” project aimed to break down barriers between ‘researchers’ and the ‘researched’; students acted as researchers themselves, collecting, analyzing, and creating data to help solve problems and the very barriers they face on campus.

The narratives in Photovoice are written in accordance with the SHOWeD method (Wang & Burris, 1997; de Heer et al., 2008). The SHOWeD method is an important problem-posing and critical-thinking dialogue instrument which helped in writing these narratives; this method encourages participants to think about various subtle aspects in the photographs to facilitate discussion stemming from a personal level, reaching outwards to social analysis and action. For each photograph selected, participants developed a story using the five steps of the SHOWeD method:

1. What do you *See* happening here?
2. What is really *Happening* here?
3. How does this relate to *Our* lives?
4. *Why* does this problem or this strength *Exist*?
5. What can we *Do* about this?
Procedure

Students were recruited initially through convenience sampling methods, utilizing the CASS office email listserv. A general call for participation announcement was sent via the listserv, which yielded seven initial students interested in participating. A few students were also purposefully contacted via email or phone to have the most representative population of both apparent and non-apparent disabilities. From the initial group of students who responded to the announcement, snowball sampling methods ensued as the students disseminated the information to other students with disabilities.

Thirteen students participated fully in the “Voices of Students with Disabilities” project. The study began with seventeen students, but due to varying factors, not all were able to finish. The final students included a mix of apparent and non-apparent disabilities, including Lupus, Cerebral Palsy, PTSD, Visual and Hearing Impairments, ADHD, Depression, Anxiety Disorders, and Vascular Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome [VEDS]. An initial consent form was obtained from each participant with a copy of the signed form provided to each participant. Furthering the ideology of PAR, each student participant has chosen their pseudonym used throughout the project to protect confidentiality.

Once recruited, participant orientation was conducted, which introduced participants to the Photovoice method. Orientation content included an educational component and an action component. The educational component provided knowledge on the Photovoice process; training on ethical issues that might arise such as confidentiality, photographing minors, and excluding incriminating activities in photographs; participant safety; and how to use a camera. The action component provided students with a handout of the SHOWeD method of Photovoice, which facilitated discussions surrounding what kind of issues to photograph in order to appropriately represent their experience as a student with disability, how to select photographs, and how to develop narratives.

Conducting a Photovoice project with students registered with the CASS office required ingenuity and flexibility to ensure participation across the ability spectrum. For example, how does a student who is blind or low-vision take and analyze a photograph? For these students, the Photovoice process is somewhat more intensive, as a second participant or helper must work one-on-one with the student, throughout all. In the process stage, the blind or visually-impaired student generated ideas for the pictures, and with aid from a helper, the pictures were taken. The helper verbally explained the various facets of the picture to the participant including the location of various items, which allowed the participant to give feedback and make modifications. Finally, each participant developed their story narrative.

The meeting schedule was based on the participants’ schedule as they were enrolled undergraduate and graduate students across multiple majors, while also balancing school, disability management, employment, and family responsibilities. The group met one-to-two hours once per week beginning in March of the spring 2015 semester, and wrapped up in September 2016; on- and off-campus presentations immediately followed in October-December 2016. Each meeting session was held on the UTEP campus, was audio recorded, and an agenda set by the students—but guided by the researchers—was implemented. No set format to meeting
session structure is outlined by Photovoice methodology; due to the nature of participatory action research, a preset structure would inhibit the process of allowing the participants to bring their dynamic experiences to the table. The participants shared their thoughts, views, opinions, experiences, comments, and questions regarding various concerning issues and topics during these meetings.

After sharing and discussing the photographs, pieces from each participant were selected for further discussion in the next sessions until ultimately common themes were identified and up to three photos were selected per participant. The thirteen participants acquired about 45 photographs; the final “Voices of Students with Disabilities” Photovoice exhibit during the CASS Ability Awareness Week displayed 25 photographs from nine participants. The photos depicted physical obstacles, social barriers, and academic difficulties; all pictures showed what students with visible and invisible disabilities face on campus.

The project exhibit was held at on the UTEP campus. The exhibit consisted of one poster board per photographer and a panel presentation from the student participants. Five out of the nine participants were present to sit on the panel. Following a slideshow presentation, exhibit attendees were given space to ask questions regarding the photographs and stories. Additionally, participants stood by their displays following the panel to facilitate further dialogue about their photographs and experiences in the Photovoice project. Exhibit attendees were requested to complete an evaluation feedback form of the presentation, panel, and gallery. Two presentations were facilitated on the “Voices of Students with Disabilities” Photovoice project content, one workshop during the UTEP STAIRS event and a breakout session during the TACUSPA conference, both held in Fall 2016. Attendees at both sessions were requested to complete an evaluation form.

Qualitative results of the students’ experiences as a participant in the Photovoice project were evaluated by coding similar participant responses into themes. The evaluations from the exhibit were analyzed similarly to the student participant responses. Data from the TACUSPA breakout session were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods in SPSS software. Student responses from the duration of the project, as well as narrative feedback from the exhibit and workshop sessions have been summarized and listed in the outcomes section.
Results

Participant Stories

Each participant’s demographics are listed in Table 1. The following section contains excerpts from students’ narratives; some of the photographs are included as Figures 1-11.

Table 1: Demographics of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant*</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Disability</th>
<th>Assistive Device</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jake</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>Visual impairment</td>
<td>Service Animal, White Cane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachael</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>PTSD, Anxiety, Major Depressive Disorder</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Krista</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>Cerebral Palsy</td>
<td>Walking Cane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rory</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>ADHD</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria Elena</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>Hard of Hearing</td>
<td>Hearing Aid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faye</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>Panic Disorder, Depression</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naveh</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>Lupus</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amelia</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>Cerebral Palsy</td>
<td>Wheelchair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lizzie</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>Low vision, Vision impairment</td>
<td>White Cane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cindy</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>Cerebral Palsy</td>
<td>Wheelchair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>Vascular Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome (VEDS)</td>
<td>Wheelchair or crutches</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* All participant names have been changed to pseudonyms for confidentiality

The mean age of student participants was 33 (N=11), with a range between ages 22 and 55. Participants were predominantly female (n=9), with one male participant and one participant with a nonbinary gender identity (neither male nor female), and a majority were undergraduate students (n=7, 63.6%). Disabilities self-reported by the students were split about equally between physical/visible disabilities (n=6, 54.5%), and invisible/non-apparent disabilities (n=5, 45.5%).

Three common themes (Physical Barriers, Social Barriers, and The Bright Side) emerged from the group discussions, photographs, and final narratives. One of the themes, Physical Barriers, has four elements included as they are all physical access issues or barriers, but have distinct differences associated amongst them.

Physical Barriers

Restroom Accessibility
Four students discussed issues with accessible restrooms on campus; each student’s unique take on what can be problematic provides a different kind of call-to-action in order to make restrooms
one place on campus that doesn’t—and shouldn’t—be the source of frustration. Amelia is an electric wheelchair user, and noted that in one of the laboratory buildings, there is only one accessible restroom and “getting entry to it is a nightmare” (Figure 1). Amelia said in her narrative that the main problems are twofold: “The way into the restroom is a very longish narrow hallway; if someone is coming out of the restroom either they must go back into the restroom and let the wheelchair in. There is no automatic door button on the outside or inside of the restroom. A person would be stuck until someone comes to open the door.”

Emma, an undergraduate student with VEDS, had issues in a different restroom because she “found the automatic door opener under the paper towel dispenser. The paper towels could obstruct the automatic door button” (Figure 2). Additionally, she noted that once someone does find it, “it’s a little far from the door. Someone who pushes the button may not make it out in time.”

Rory, a graduate student with non-apparent disabilities, also identifies with a nonbinary gender identity. Restrooms on campus provide a different kind of obstacle to accessibility—Rory mentioned using traditional gendered multi-stall facilities increased their anxiety and discomfort. Their photograph (Figure 3) shows something overlooked that, to many, doesn’t make a difference: “This placard may not look confusing or given a second glance, but to me, it’s a trick… When you open this door, it’s just a hallway of offices. Why isn’t there an ‘s’ at the end of ‘Restroom’?”

**Construction and Signs**

Four students discussed a multitude of physical barriers on campus. Two of the four students discussed the problems of on-campus construction and ignoring sidewalk maintenance. Lizzie and Jake both are students with low vision; Lizzie uses a white cane and Jake uses his service dog. Lizzie shared that “holes in the sidewalk are dangerous for me because even with the cane, I
sometimes cannot figure out how big they are, or if I happen to miss them, my shoes catch, causing me to fall” (Figure 4). Jake took a picture of a hole caused by the construction (Figure 5) where “the barriers are not readily visible nor are they far enough from the construction to prevent injury. It is easy to walk off in a hole. A service dog is not trained for these obstacles and does not know how to help.”

Lizzie took a picture of another problem that often happens after construction is finished: the placement of signs (Figure 6). A bike sign was positioned in the middle of a sidewalk, “it is not safe.” Lizzie continued to comment on the applicability of the issue to all students, not just those with vision impairment. “The sign not only obstructs wheelchair access, but also obstructs the flow of students that are coming and going to campus.”

Traffic and Transportation
One of the most discussed topics from the Photovoice participants was problems surrounding transportation and traffic. Many of the participants complained of reckless or distracted drivers. Cindy, an undergraduate student who is a wheelchair user, has to take a specific route to get from one building to another. Even though those buildings are adjacent, doors with automatic buttons are not in convenient locations, causing her to go around in order to use the automatic doors. Needing to travel through parking lots, this puts her safety at risk. Cindy took a picture of the parking lot (Figure 7), and mentioned “I have been close to being hit by a car at least 6 times in the last semester because the drivers failed to slow down or look before turning to exit.”

Jake had a similar problem in a different location. He took a photo of an intersection near his classroom, which is located off-campus. “This intersection, even for a person with vision, is difficult at best to navigate but for a person who is blind, it is a death trap” (Figure 8). There are no walk button signals, so pedestrians have to cross the busy intersection without safety of a protected crosswalk.
Emma took a picture of closed-off parking spaces. Many students with disabilities receive “inner-campus” parking permits, allowing them to park closer to their buildings. Emma’s narrative posed that “I park far I need to plan ahead with someone to push me in the wheelchair to my destination. I have never been notified when inner campus parking will be blocked off.”

Krista, a graduate student who uses a cane, has a transportation issue because her classes conflicted with bus routes and schedules. What may be a “simple inconvenience for students who are able to transport themselves” (such as required classes ending at 9PM) turns into a “major barrier” for students who have to “rely on public transportation or family members because you cannot drive as a result of a disability or lack of resources.” Krista continued with the fact that “the problem is even more prominent if you live outside of the El Paso city limits.”

Social Barriers: Perceptions of Invisible Disabilities and Mental Health Diagnoses

The second theme encompasses the attention the participants receive on a daily basis. Students with physical disabilities often face the pressure of unwelcome gazes and stares from non-disabled strangers or peers. Students with non-apparent/invisible disabilities also receive negative attention, but for our Photovoice participants, it manifested in disbelief about their symptoms and ignorance towards the severity of their conditions.

Naveh, an undergraduate student with Lupus, commented on the effort it takes to feel “normal,” (Figure 9) which includes dressing up “to feel good about myself.” However, instead of being seen as strong and motivated, her attitude and dress code are regarded as reasons why she cannot really be sick. “Many problems that I encounter with dressing up nice, which I shouldn’t, is that people don’t believe that I am sick. They think I take advantage of the system.”

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Rory shared a story about professors and peers trying to put them in a “smart box” without considering “the extra work that gets me to even stand next to the ‘smart’ box.” Rory said “I have ADHD, a sensory processing disorder, a comprehension-related learning disability, anxiety, two jobs, and a very young child,” and quipped “but all professors see is a graduate student with a 4.0 GPA.”

Krista included a story about how over the years she has become used to people staring, but her family has not. “I can tell my family members are still upset, but it is hard for them to ignore it. I just wished people would realize that when they stare at me they are making my family feel upset.”

Rachael, an undergraduate student with PTSD and other comorbid conditions, has had issues with the campus police department over public panic attacks. She mentioned in one of the group discussions that other students think she is having a psychotic break when all she needs is a quiet place to calm down. “The crowds between class change and the noise in almost every corner are unbearable sometimes.” Unfortunately, the one place students default to as a quiet safe haven on campus—the library—is “by far the loudest place on campus. With the coffee shop at the base of an open, cathedral-style floor plan, the sounds carry as if through a bullhorn up to the fourth floor.” Rachael recorded the noise level in the library from the fourth floor, depicted in Figure 10.

Faye, a graduate student, explained her ongoing battle with anxiety since she was 15 years old, and the effect it had on her academic career. “I was always crying, I couldn't eat or drink anything until I got home, and I was always on edge. All my senses exploded. I tried to tell my mom what was happening with me, but she didn't believe me. A professor told me to ‘get over it’ like it was that simple.”

The Bright Side

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The final theme that surfaced during group discussions and review of narratives was positivity in how students view themselves, their ability levels, and their future. Maria Elena, a graduate student who is hard of hearing, chooses to view her disability as an opportunity to be more mindful (Figure 11). She said, “As a child, I had to adapt and find other ways of obtaining my information. One way was through observation, which reminds me that sound is not always required to enjoy life fully.” Faye and Rachael shared how developing coping mechanisms eased times of distress. Faye overcame her anxiety through a variety of methods such as “recognizing episodes, and I learned to self-medicate and how to cope by learning where all the exits were, where could I go for support, and knowing who to trust.” Rachael was able to advocate to “get a private cubicle on the library’s fifth floor” which provided her “a place to go to practice my coping skills and decompress in private. No longer do I have to calm myself in a bathroom stall.” Naveh’s insight about her strength and will for a bright future with Lupus has made her “become stronger to overcome and defeat anything in my way. There is only the present, and in the present, there is only one road, and that is to keep moving forward.”

Outcomes

The outcomes of this study explore the immediate effects coupled with longer-term impacts in three areas that the “Voices of Students with Disabilities” Photovoice project introduced. First, student participants provided descriptions of how they made sense of their journey during and following the project. The narratives produced by participants assisted to understand their lived experiences and form an integral part of the analyzed data. This included a group discussion on what participating in the project meant to each student, looking back in retrospect over the challenges and successes as students with disabilities, and envisioning what the future campus climate and environment would look like if the cycle of discrimination and stigmatization against students with disabilities was eradicated.

Second, changes to on-campus policies and structures were initiated as a result of this project. Many of the concerns that arose during the Photovoice discussion or presentation sessions have been addressed by the Facilities and other on-campus departments, creating a movement towards a more accessible campus.

Third, UTEP Faculty and staff attitudes and knowledge were assessed after attending one of two events held during Ability Awareness Week on campus (Photovoice Exhibit consisting of a photo gallery and student panel, or, workshop session during the Student Annual Interdisciplinary Research Symposium [STAIRS]). In addition, attendees during a workshop session held at the Texas Association of College & University Student Personnel Administrators (TACUSPA) Fall 2016 Conference were also asked to provide feedback on change in knowledge and attitudes to provide an external perspective of the project’s objectives.

Personal Insight

A common theme emerging from student participants was the Photovoice project hosted a space to connect with others like them, at a much deeper level than the simple connection of all being students registered with the CASS office:

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The Photovoice project helped connect with other individuals whose concerns are similar to mine. Being able to share my concerns freely and feeling understood was the most significant aspects of the project.

A second theme was feeling a greater sense of empowerment towards taking control over their needs, including advocating for themselves and others:

I think the Photovoice project has helped me be more assertive and verbal about what I need on campus as a student with disabilities... I’ve been empowered to take control of my own learning environment and not feel like I have to apologize for what I felt were inconveniences to professors and classmates.

A third theme found was students noticed greater personal insight and understanding regarding the role ability levels play in their personal lives and the lives of others around them:

[The project] helped me realize things I had not considered before, like realizing that the same way I come from a different walk of life, other people do as well.

The final theme that emerged was a hope for this project to have a positive effect on the campus community, and future aspirations of understanding, acceptance, and openness towards students with disabilities on the UTEP campus:

I hope this helps people deal with an individual like me and become more aware of many others with such diversity. [This project] gives individuals an opportunity to visualize what it is like to live with a disability and maybe make them more aware and sensitive to others. It allows people with a disability to express themselves without words because many times pictures are more effective and can say a lot when words are not available.

**UTEP Makes Changes**

Various photo-based changes to the physical environment and campus climate have been implemented or are in the works as prompted by the project. Five examples follow. The picture and story of “Bike Sign” (Figure 6) resulted in the relocation of this sign from in the middle of the sidewalk to a landscaped area between the road and the sidewalk. It is no longer considered a hazard to any campus member—sighted or low-visibility alike. In the picture and story featured in “Close to Being Hit by a Car” (Figure 7), the CASS office is actively working with the Parking and Transportation office to advocate for the installation of speed bumps in the area and increased signage to slow down and caution vehicles.

Another participant, whose photograph “Automatic Door Sign” (Figure 2) was included in this article, also submitted a picture of closed-off parking spaces. The UTEP campus has limited parking for individuals with disabilities, and the Event Services office would reserve these spaces for visitors to events. The CASS office advocated to the Parking and Transportation office on behalf of this participant. In the future, whenever there is an on-campus event that
needs to save parking, an email notification will be sent out to all parking permit holders in this area so they can make other arrangements ahead of time.

In addition to changes made regarding the physical environment, participants reported that the Photovoice project had brought important changes to the campus climate as well. According to their feedback, their peers were more aware of how to assist them because of the increased knowledge about the challenges that they tended to face. Some noted changes in ways how instructors interacted with students with disabilities. One participant with a non-apparent disability utilized a partnership between the CASS office, Equal Opportunity Office, and Department Chair to facilitate a mediation intervention with a professor who was not adhering to classroom accommodation requests. The intervention was successful and the student is now rightfully receiving their accommodations in the classroom.

Finally, the picture and story of “Where Do I Go?” (Figure 3) resulted in multiple actions. Following the photo gallery presentation, the student filed an informal complaint with the Equal Opportunity Office for not providing accessible facilities, thereby discriminating on gender identity. The Equal Opportunity Office eventually located three single-stall restroom facilities on campus, and the student is currently conducting a campus-wide needs assessment to determine the level of need for these facilities on campus, and if more than three facilities are available. Additionally, the building manager where the photo was taken has submitted a work order to change the sign for clarity.

**Audience Feedback**

The “Voices of Students with Disabilities” Photovoice exhibit was attended by 50 UTEP campus and community members; the exit survey was completed by 15 attendees. Attendees included family members and friends of the Photovoice participants, general community members, university students and faculty, and service providers to individuals with disabilities. Attendees overwhelmingly provided positive feedback about the exhibition. The STAIRS workshop session had a low attendance rate of five people, and no surveys were received.

Survey results showed that all respondents found the exhibition was a valuable investment of their time. All respondents also indicated they felt their attendance had positively impacted their perceptions of individuals with disabilities, and especially invisible disabilities. Finally, all respondents indicated increased awareness of issues faced by these students, and the impact of barriers to community participation and inclusion. Most (86.67%) of respondents found the stories of invisible disabilities to be more impactful than the stories of those with physical/visible disabilities. Some comments from survey responses included:

> I liked that the project worked with the students on understanding and dealing with the issues. I think there is still much work to be done to help the students identify, label and then process the feelings associated with this project.

> The biggest take away for me is the number of invisible disabilities there are and the number of students that have them.
This project contributed to better understanding of the issues, as the project has highlighted how this city is old and not friendly to those with disabilities under ADA.

Of those who attended the breakout session at the TACUSPA Fall 2016 Conference in Austin, TX, 16 completed evaluations of the presentation. Total results from the survey respondents are listed in Table 2. Evaluation results display positive trends related to presentation outcomes (questions eight, nine, and ten). Question eight states “I am able to articulate ways to promote positive change for the University and the community to become more inclusive” to which 62.50% indicated “Agree” and 31.25% “Strongly Agree.” Questions 9 states “I am able to identify tangible ways to increase awareness on campus” to which 100% of respondents indicated they “Agree” or “Strongly Agree.” Question ten states “I can articulate how to empower students with disabilities through their participation in Photovoice” to which 81.25% indicated they “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” (62.50% and 18.25%, respectively).

Table 2: TACUSPA Evaluation Survey Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation Question</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>N/A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The session content was what I expected from the program description.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The session has increased my knowledge and understanding of the relevant subject matter.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The materials provided will be useful to me.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I would recommend this session to others.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The presenter was knowledgeable about the topic.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. The presenter was well organized and effective.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I would attend other sessions by this presenter.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I am able to articulate ways to promote positive change for the University and the community to become more inclusive.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I am able to identify tangible ways to increase awareness on campus.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I can articulate how to empower students with disabilities through their participation in Photovoice.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Comments from the survey question “What did you like best about this session?” included:

- I appreciate you furthering discussion about inclusivity on our campuses.
- Thank you for including invisible disabilities.
- Making the group take a look at our students’ everyday struggles... got us to think and really open our eyes.
- Acknowledging a diverse but often unspoken topic

Limitations

The traditional procedure and implementation method of Photovoice was not conducive to the collegiate environment. Photovoice is intended to have a participatory structure with set meeting times and deadlines, but it was discovered when working with college students—especially students with increased needs stemming from the management of disabilities—this structure is not flexible enough to accommodate the reality of hectic schedules.

Though 17 participants were eager to initially participate in this project, 13 were able to finish the project. Due to the extensive amount of time required for involvement, potential students may have been deterred from participating. Busy school, work, and family schedules, unplanned illness or worsening conditions, and the restrictions of the physical composition of campus were a hindrance to many who responded to the original call for participants.

Not all students were able to make each group discussion meeting, so many sessions were held with smaller numbers of students. This information was eventually comprised into one report for the purposes of this study, however, this factor may have limited the sharing of ideas, situations, and experiences among student participants. However, it should be noted that regardless of the meeting structure and number of attendees, data provided by the participants was rich in context and details, validly conveying aspects of living as students with disabilities. Additionally, not all students who participated in the project were able to attend the Photovoice exhibit during the CASS Ability Awareness Week which may have limited overall outcomes and impact of the project.

Photovoice projects typically include a stipend for participants through financial incentives, the loan of a camera, etc. However, due to budgeting limitations, the “Voices of Students with Disabilities” project was unable to provide any financial stipends or incentives. This may have served as a limitation from the lack of perceived reward in the form of physical, monetary means versus the overarching reward of personal development and potential policy change. Additionally, students who did not have access to a digital camera or cell phone with a camera may have been barred from participating due to inability to provide a camera for participants.

Discussion

The “Voices of Students with Disabilities” Photovoice project at UTEP was not without its challenges but was marked as a successful attempt to involve students with disabilities in research pertaining to their own population. This example of meaningful participation and inclusion gave students the confidence to plan and implement changes which both directly and
indirectly affected their lived experiences on campus and the experiences of other current and future students with disabilities at UTEP.

Consistent with the information found in the literature review, our participants in this project face multilayered levels of discrimination, ranging from treatment by professors and peers, to barriers found in the physical campus layout and architecture. Students with self-identified invisible disabilities agreed with what was found in the literature, reporting higher levels of frustration with, and lower levels of acceptance by professors and peers who did not view them as having a ‘real’ disability. Additionally, the literature mentions that students with disabilities who register at an accommodations office within the institution have increased chances for academic success; however, other literature notes that a substantially lower number of individuals with a disability hold college degrees compared to their more-able peers. Many of the students registered with the CASS office successfully graduate. From the eleven participants of this Photovoice project, four students have already graduated with baccalaureate or graduate degrees, and another three have applied to graduate in the current semester. This result poses a question to other student affairs professionals regarding the effectiveness of a Photovoice intervention—are more students with disabilities graduating because of their participation, or did the students who chose to participate generally have higher and stronger academic goals?

The “Voices of Students with Disabilities” project resulted in various outcomes related to increased levels of empowerment in the participants, consistent with the purpose of participatory action research methodology, and changes towards inclusive campus environment for students with disabilities with regard to both soft (attitudinal) and hard (architectural/physical environmental) aspects. As their individual voices are heard more frequently, their collective opinions will increasingly be seen as valuable; this value will manifest in their ability to advocate for social change in the context of the rights and responsibilities relating to the treatment and worldview of students with disabilities on campus. This project had a positive effect on the students who participated, giving them insight into their own lives and the lives of others, empowering them to be more assertive and vocal regarding their needs and rights under the ADA, and establishing a strong, collegial network among the participants for future contact.

Participants articulated with their photographs and associated narratives what constituted barriers to their full participation in the campus community, they successfully brought about changes that were warranted. The extent of the project’s reach did not end with the students; the students began the process, and disseminated their information to UTEP faculty, staff, and community members who are involved with those who have visible and invisible disabilities; regional student affairs staff were also made aware of the student concerns at the university.

The photos and narratives showcased in the “Voices of Students with Disabilities” project tell powerful personal stories, and our university community and city community members learned from the students’ amazing hard work. However, there is a lack of publications using Photovoice methodology and qualitative, participatory action research with minority students in higher education settings; there is a plethora of PAR/Photovoice in other settings. The authors strongly suggest future research to be conducted in this area (college students with visible and non-apparent disabilities) as well with closely related populations such as students who identify as aged-out of the foster system, homeless, LGBTQ+, and immigrants. These listed are a select few

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out of many possible populations who could benefit from their stories brought to the attention of the institution, thereby potentially facilitating a shift in the campus cultural climate towards a more accepting, open, and understanding institution.
References


