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# Life Without Boundaries: A Positive Deviance Inquiry Of Communication Behaviors That Influence Academic Success Of Learning-Disabled University Students

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LIFE WITHOUT BOUNDARIES: A POSITIVE DEVIANCE INQUIRY OF  
COMMUNICATION BEHAVIORS THAT INFLUENCE ACADEMIC  
SUCCESS OF LEARNING-DISABLED UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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By

Davi Kallman

2012

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COMMUNICATION BEHAVIORS THAT INFLUENCE ACADEMIC  
SUCCESS OF LEARNING-DISABLED UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

by

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have faced many obstacles throughout the course of my life and have been able to overcome them by using a variety of intrapersonal and interpersonal communication behaviors. Like many people who face extreme obstacles, I too find that it is difficult to face them alone. I have been able to succeed and achieve my goals with the help of important individuals. In this study you will find that interpersonal communication resides in relationships with people in three categories: family, friends, and mentors. The relationships I have built and maintained throughout the years have brought me love and support. I am blessed to have individuals who have aided me in my endeavors and have traveled with me on this journey.

My whole life has been one incredible journey; a journey that would have been impossible without the help of the following people. I would first like to say that my family, Rebecca, Eddie, and Yoni Kallman are my foundation for support and success. My mother Rebecca is one of the most incredible people in the world. My mother was the first one to notice that I was having a severe problem in my classes. She was the person who always stood up for me and always made me feel important and that I matter. I attribute my self-esteem boost from 2<sup>nd</sup> grade to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade to her undying love and her persistence in getting me the academic help I needed in order to succeed. My dad has always been a wealth of knowledge and one of my biggest supporters, and I would not be who I am today without his love. My brother Yoni is my best friend and the person I turn to in times of need. Even though my brother and I are far apart he is always in my heart. I know you always tell me that I am your role model, but I want to you know that your generosity and kindness are attributes that cannot be surpassed. I hope I have lived up to be a role model to you these years. These three individuals are my foundation; I love them more than anything in this world. My grandparents, aunts, and uncles have been so

supportive throughout the years as well, whether it was attending my school performances or lending an ear when I was down. They have always been an important part of my life.

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I would also like to acknowledge my amazing teachers and mentors who have inspired me and believed in me throughout the years. After I was diagnosed with Dyslexia I was introduced to the most incredible tutor Cathy Hendrickx from Bridges Academy. Cathy embraced my disability and taught me how to overcome it. In 3<sup>rd</sup> grade I was lucky enough to be introduced to one of the most inspiring and unique teachers I have ever met. Tycha Stading proved to me that with the right guidance and support anything is possible. In college I have been fortunate to not only have incredible teachers and mentors, but also incredible friends. Joining the Department of Communication has probably been one of the best decisions of my life. The department and its faculty and staff inspire creativity and diversity.

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my thesis co-chair, whom now is always referred to as “Stacey” after our trip to Indonesia, is by far one of the most excellent teachers and human beings I have ever come across. She is truly interested in her student’s success and will spend countless hours making sure her students succeed. Dr. Arvind Singhal, there is so much to say about Arvind that I cannot simply put into words. I will say that Dr. Singhal has inspired me to see past my disability and focus on my abilities and strengths. Dr. Singhal is my thesis chair and has encouraged me to think outside of the box with his ‘what if’ questions. He has been extremely patient with me throughout the thesis writing process and has worked with me to take things “one step at a time.” I would also like to thank Lucia Durá, my outside committee member, for her dedication to my study and for her help with last minute editing and for always having a sunny disposition. I am incredibly lucky to have such an incredible, understanding, and patient thesis committee. I would like to thank Mary Trejo who is my supervisor for the Public Speaking 1301 class I teach. Mary and Stacey believed in me and nominated me for the Graduate Student Teaching Award of the year. Due to their dedication and belief in me I was the winner of the award this year. My students have also been a constant reminder that education is incredibly important to our society.

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I am very appreciative to my colleagues who were the forerunners in Positive Deviance thesis projects. Alejandra Diaz and Patricia Ayala have made a name for Positive Deviance in higher education. I hope that my thesis will live up to their image in the field of Positive Deviance.

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Lastly, I would like to thank my participants. These individuals are the most inspiring, incredible, and diverse individuals I have met. Their stories and positive attitudes have opened my eyes to how other learning-disabled students live. I truly believe I am a better person having met with you and discovering our talents and abilities together. We have already made a difference in our community and I believe we have the ability to change the world.

## ABSTRACT

The label of “disabled” causes many learning-disabled students to downplay their disability in order to avoid alienation and isolation. Hence, many of learning-disabled students go through years of education without accommodations, increasing the likelihood for academic failure. Students who do have accommodations are still at risk of failure especially if they lack strong support systems and suffer from low expectations. Simply put, dropout rates among learning-disabled students are a complex social problem. The dropout rate among these students is nearly double that of general education students (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). Dropping out has devastating financial, educational, and social repercussions for people residing in the United States (which will be discussed in Chapter 1). The odds of finishing high school and continuing onto college are rare. Students without additional resources to accommodate for academic shortcomings find it nearly impossible to achieve academic success.

While the odds of graduating from college with a high GPA and in a timely manner are low, some learning-disabled students have been able to utilize resources already present within their community. These students have utilized intrapersonal and interpersonal communication behaviors that have helped them defy the odds and achieve academic success and graduate in a timely manner. These students are considered Positive Deviants because they engage in practices that “deviate” from the norm and “positive” because these practices have desirable outcomes. This study explores “what” communicative behaviors enable learning-disabled college students in a university in the U.S. Southwest to achieve academic success relative to their peers who struggle to keep up.

Eleven Positive Deviants (PDs) were identified based on the following screening criteria: They are registered with the university’s Center for Accommodations and Support Services

(CASS), suffer from a learning disability that hinders their academic performance, have regular household responsibilities, have a job or are committed to extracurricular activities that require them to be active at least ten hours a week, and are still able to maintain a GPA of 3.0 or higher and graduate from college in five years or less without the help of specialized tutors. The 11 Positive Deviants participated in in-depth interviews and participatory sketching exercises.

Interviews and participatory sketching provided insights on the intrapersonal communication and support systems in which PD practices were identified. Several communicative practices were identified as being effective in the academic success and timely graduation of students. Their key practices included: consistent daily positive affirmations from students; positive messages from parents, family members, friends, peers, teachers, and mentors praising students for their ability to overcome obstacles; and receiving clear messages from parents to “not use their disability as a crutch” finding other ways to compensate for their disabilities. Many communicative practices were internal and required constant and repetitive self-talk and self-evaluation. Only then did students find the courage to accept their disability and ask others for help. Family, friends, and teachers also played a role in motivating success. Receiving academic support from parents, teachers, and peers allowed them to build self-esteem and gain confidence. Parental storytelling of academic failures motivated students to do better. Reminders from friends and peers about how much journey they had already covered and that they could get over any hurdle helped students cope with academic stress. In addition, involvement with jobs and extracurricular activities improved social skills and prepared them for real world experiences. Religion and spirituality also played a role in addressing, and reversing, the shame associated with students’ disabilities.

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## PREFACE

During the sophomore year of my undergraduate studies one of my best friends was having difficulties in her classes, and the symptoms pointed to Dyslexia. When I shared with her my own disability, she went down to the Disabled Student Services Center (DSSO), now renamed the Center for Accommodations and Support Services, or (CASS), to get tested for Dyslexia and receive the accommodations she deserved. My friend later told me that the DSSO did not have the funding necessary to have a diagnostician on staff and the responsibility for testing fell squarely on the student's shoulders. Through this incident I became acutely aware that many students with hidden disabilities go unnoticed and go through the rigors of college without accommodations. Some students simply do not know they have a disability while others are ashamed of the associated social stigma. Dr. Núñez-Mchiri's sociology class encouraged me to follow my passion and be an advocate for these marginalized individuals in society. Since then I have been an advocate for disability rights. I have worked diligently with the Center for Accommodations and Support Services (CASS), creating a disability advocacy organization called the Appreciation for Diverse Dispositions (ADD), creating many disability awareness videos such as "I am...abled", and have made it my goal to use my passion for disability rights to write an intriguing and thought-provoking thesis on the communication behaviors that influence academic success among learning-disabled students. Disability issues have consumed my life the past four years, but I believe that I have become a better person and have met more incredible people in just four years than many people do in a lifetime.

Once a graduate student, I immersed myself into topics such as Positive Deviance (PD) and healthy communities through classes taught by Professor Arvind Singhal. After taking these classes, I knew exactly what I wanted my thesis to be about. Positive Deviance was a new concept to me,

something that I had never heard of, but had applied throughout my life. This concept is relatively simple to grasp but quite complex to implement. Since Positive Deviance was originally used to address the issue of child malnutrition in Vietnam, I was finding it difficult to relate it to studying students with disabilities. I had already done numerous studies in my qualitative and quantitative classes about communication apprehension and able-bodied students' perceptions of disabled students, but none of the communication theories really related to what I wanted to write about. Encouraged by Dr. Singhal to continue with Positive Deviance, I became interested in finding out more about the topic. After researching the subject some more, I became increasingly aware of the high dropout rates for learning-disabled students in high school and college. Even more disheartening was the fact that many of the learning-disabled individuals who attended UTEP dropped out after their first semester. These dismal statistics made me want to take a closer look to see if there were individuals registered with CASS who defied the odds and were able to achieve academic success and graduate in a timely manner. After some self-reflection, it became clear that I had found the guiding question for my PD study.

Although I had found my topic, there was a problem. The PD intervention approach typically involves having the community take charge and identify the problem. Originally, I thought that I was simply a researcher approaching this from the outside; as a result, this would not work as a PD intervention approach. However, my committee member Stacey Sowards helped me realize that the community was being involved because I am a member of the learning-disabled community. For those of you who don't know Dr. Arvind Singhal, this is what he refers to as 'Aha' moments, when the solution to the problem becomes clearer.

Once I started the interviews for my thesis, it was apparent that I was going to be learning a lot more from these students than they would be learning from me. I was humbled by this

experience. I also found myself as a mirror reflection in the participants' stories, and had to keep myself from reliving difficult memories I had harbored from my days in school. These eleven PD learning-disabled students were more resilient and insightful than I could have ever imagined.

As I mentioned before, I am part of the learning-disabled community. I was diagnosed with Dyslexia before I entered third grade. Before I was diagnosed, my educators and classmates criticized my academic shortcomings. One of my teachers went as far as to say I was "stupid and would never amount to anything in life." Unfortunately I allowed other people's perceptions to determine who I was until I was given the opportunity to see myself in a new light. There are situations in which children feel like there is no way out and that their futures are predetermined, but this is not the case. Any negative situation can always have a positive outcome with the right guidance. My second grade teachers told my mother that I should be admitted into special education, but she saw another option. Once I was diagnosed and given the proper training and met educators that encouraged me to succeed, my life changed. By the time I was in fifth grade, I was reading at a college level and I graduated from the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) Summa Cum Laude and as a Top Ten Senior. I was given another chance at life, another chance to succeed despite all odds.

I hope my study will serve as a reminder that students with disabilities are people and should be recognized for their abilities rather than weaknesses. The stories here are empowering for they show how disabled students overcome many obstacles. I hope that this study will give other learning-disabled individuals another chance to succeed, another chance at life.



## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“Placing one foot in front of the other, I’ve climbed to higher lengths. Reaching beyond my own limitations, to show my inner strength. No obstacle too hard, for this warrior to overcome. I’m just a man on a mission, to prove my disability hasn’t won.”

-Robert M. Hensel<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of the present thesis is, through a Positive Deviance inquiry, to explore the communicative behaviors, actions, and strategies of college students who are learning-disabled and, who against all personal odds, have found a way to succeed academically.

To set up the rationale for the study, the present chapter discusses the difference between visible and invisible disabilities and how inclusion and exclusion in higher education affect the dropout rate for disabled students. Dropout trends and data among disabled students are presented at a national, state, and city level. The risk characteristics of dropout rates are explored as also their consequences. The Positive Deviance approach is briefly described and its implications are highlighted to identify disabled students’ communicative behaviors that influence their academic success.

### The Weight of Words

Words themselves may be mere sounds, but when meaning is attached to them through repetition and exposure, they can pack a higher punch. Meaning is attached to the word ‘disability’<sup>2</sup> from the beginning and it tends to carry a certain weight that brings negative

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<sup>1</sup> See Hensel (2011).

<sup>2</sup> The word ‘disability’ is used throughout the study since it is a term most commonly used by official and government entities. The term is also recognized by society because of its presence in the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). The ADA definition of disability is an inclusive definition that captures the

connotations and stereotypes. The meaning that society gives to the word ‘disability’ causes alienation and isolation for those deemed disabled.

Unfortunately, there are many inaccurate portrayals of disabilities. These inaccurate portrayals cause the able-bodied<sup>3</sup> community to avoid the disabled community entirely. Labeling results in peers altering their behavior toward disabled individuals based on the perceived academic and social stereotypes (McGrew & Evans, 2004). Even more distressing is the fact that labeling causes disabled individuals to adopt lower expectations for themselves to focus on their deficits rather than their abilities. Students often prefer to downplay their disability status in order to pass as able-bodied. Unfortunately, disabled students self-perception is aligned with how society stigmatizes and devalues individuals with disabilities (Barnard-Brak, Lechtenberger, & Lan, 2010). While I understand the critique of the word ‘disability’ as having negative connotations, for the purpose of this study I will continue to use the word disability because it is recognized in society and in the subconscious of able-bodied and non-disabled<sup>4</sup> individuals. However, it is important to state that disability is a problem of society and not the individual (Dethlefs, 2012).

The Media Awareness Network [MAN] (2010) states that there are four distinct categories for disability stereotypes that are based on physical representations: 1) people with disabilities are all the same, 2) victim, 3) hero, and 4) villain. The most common of these misconceptions is that people with disabilities are all the same. MAN suggests that the leading

---

broadest estimate of individuals with disabilities. This definition is also used by the Center for Accommodations and Support Services (CASS), which is used for the purpose of this study.

<sup>3</sup> The term ‘able-bodied’ is used to refer to those students or individuals who are able to function normally in society. Even though able-bodied is typically used to represent those who do not have a noticeable physical disability, I use the term to identify those individuals who do not have any type of physical disability and have a lack of disability experience.

<sup>4</sup> The term ‘non-disabled’ will be used to describe those individuals who do not suffer from learning disabilities. Even though individuals with learning disabilities are able-bodied they still have an intellectual disability that is long-term and limits a person’s major life activities. The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) describes disability as having an impairment that limits a person’s major life activities and having a record of such impairment.

cause for these stereotypes is due to their representation and presence in the media. As stated in MAN, Lynne Roper of Stirling Media Research Institute, states that wheelchairs tend to be predominant in the media as they are an iconic symbol of a person with a disability. Roper states that the reason wheelchairs are used to represent a disability is that it allows actors to seem disabled and still identify with their audience. While the media is not the sole reason for society's negative perceptions of people with disabilities, it does have a dominant role.

Society and the media are not the only ones to blame for these negative stereotypes. There is inconsistency, with respect to the labels that are used, and a lack of general knowledge about the different types of disabilities. Grönvik (2009) found three common ways of identifying disabilities: 1) through functional limitations (medical understanding), 2) legal or administrative definitions (distribution of welfare benefits), and 3) subjective definition (the person conceives themselves as disabled).

Many organizations and companies have their own definition of disability. For the purposes of this study I use the definition set forth by the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) and the one used by the University's Disabled Student Services Office, recently changed to Center for Accommodations and Support Services<sup>5</sup> (CASS). According to CASS (2010) Access and Excellence Guide for Students, an individual with a disability is described as having:

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<sup>5</sup> The Disabled Student Services Office (DSSO) was recently changed to the Center for Accommodations and Support Services (CASS) in 2012. It took the course of a year for the name change to be implemented to the office. W. Dethlefs, director of CASS said the name change was crucial in order to change the perceptions others have of students with disabilities. Dethlefs also claimed that the recommendation came from disability advocates and members of the disabled student community. Possible name changes were emailed to members of the disabled student community in order to select a name that best described the services the office provided. The final name change recommendations were sent to the President of the University for approval (W. Dethlefs, personal communication, January 10, 2012).

1) physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of a person's major life activities, 2) having a record of such an impairment, or 3) being regarded as having such an impairment (p. 2).

According to CASS, it is under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008 that set the foundations for this definition (p. 2). Unlike media representations of people with disabilities being the same, CASS defines each type of disability according to its impairments. CASS also describes the differences between physical impairments and mental impairments.

Even though there are very detailed and nuanced definitions for disability, people still have negative or even apathetic views of disabled people. The prefix of the word disability itself holds negative connotations. Robert Hensel, a disabilities advocate and disabled individual by definitional standards, does not consider himself disabled. In a quote, Hensel (2011) states that he “chooses not to place “DIS”, in [his] ability.” Individuals like Hensel give hope and shed light on a new perception and understanding of people with disabilities.

### **1.1 Difference between Visible and Invisible Disabilities**

As mentioned in the introduction, media and society tend to view disabilities as predominantly physical, but there are other types of disabilities as well. While physical disabilities are easier for individuals to notice, they are far from being the only disability. Recently, attention has focused increasingly on students with “hidden disabilities”. According to an incoming freshman survey conducted by the Higher Education Research institute [HERI] at UCLA (2011) more students identified as having ADHD (5.0%), a psychological disorder (3.8%), and learning disability (2.9%) than any other disability conditions (p.1). The research found that among these “hidden” disabilities ADHD and learning disabilities are more prevalent among men than women. In addition to these findings, they have concluded that, among those

individuals who stated they had two or more disabilities, the majority of them said ADHD was one of them (HERI, 2011). Learning disabilities are a primary interest in this study as it is especially problematic in academic contexts. Even though the study will focus on “hidden” disabilities, both invisible and visible disabilities will be explored and defined.

Frymier and Wanzer (2003) state that disabilities are both visible and invisible. Visible disabilities are those that are noticeable to others. Their research concluded that a visible disability is perceived by others and makes the disabled individual open to scrutiny. They believe that it is more difficult for someone with a visible disability to communicate with able-bodied individuals. An invisible disability is one that is “hidden” from the non-disabled population. An example of a “hidden” disability is a learning disability. According to Frymier and Wanzer, The Office of Education defines a learning disability as a:

Disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using language, spoken, or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations. (2003, p. 3)

Learning-disabled students have educational and behavioral deficits that make them vulnerable in the college classroom setting (Bryan, Burstein, & Bryan, 2001). Children with “invisible” or “hidden” disabilities are not recognized by peers or teachers until they begin having difficulty with school assignments (Demarle & Le Roux, 2001).

## **1.2 Disability and Education**

Greenbaum, Graham, and Scales (as cited in Winterowd, Street, & Boswell, 1998), found that the number of disabled individuals entering college is growing rapidly. This growth is due to a number of reasons, such as university resources available to students, increase in disability scholarships, and advances in medical technology. Legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Rehabilitation Act have improved services available to students

with disabilities (CASS, 2010; Winterowd, Street, & Boswell, 1998). With the increase of disabled individuals transitioning into higher education comes the increase of dropout rates. Disabled student dropouts are caused by a number of internal and external variables. Surveys conducted by the Higher Education Research institute [HERI] at UCLA (2011), showed disheartening results. First year students who reported having some type of “hidden” disability like ADHD or dyslexia expected to be less involved in college than other students and are also less likely to expect a B average or better grades. Results from this survey show that disabled students’ low expectations are one of their biggest obstacles to achieving academic success.

### **1.3 Dropout rates in the Disabled Student Community**

In order to understand why dropout rates among disabled students are so high in college, it is essential to understand the disabled student dropout rates in high school. According to Blackorby and Wagner (1996), the dropout rate for students with disabilities is approximately twice that of general education students. Thurlow, Sinclair, and Johnson (2002) state that today’s rate of not completing high school is even lower than the 1960s, averaging about 14% of all youth 18 years and older (p. 2). Of those who do not complete high school, about 36% are students with learning disabilities.

The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Research has some positive data when considering the dropout rates of students with disabilities. According to their 24<sup>th</sup> Annual Report to Congress, improvement has been seen in both categories. During the 1999-2000 school year, the national dropout rate for all students with disabilities age 14 and older was 29.4 percent (2002). In 1995-1996, the dropout rate for this population was 34.1 percent. The national dropout rate for students with disabilities dropped 13.8 percent between 1995-1996 and 1999-2000. During this same period the national high school graduation with

standard diploma rates for all students with disabilities age 14 and older demonstrated improvement – from 52.6 percent in 1995-1996 to 56.2 percent in 1999-2000 (See Table 1).

Table 1: Students with Disabilities Graduating or Dropping Out

Number and Percentage of Students, Age 14 and Older, with Disabilities Graduating with a Standard Diploma or Dropping Out, 1999-2000: National Data				
<u>Disability Category</u>	<u>Graduated with a Standard Diploma</u>		<u>Dropped Out</u>	
	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Specific learning disabilities	109,012	62.1	48,490	27.6
Speech or language impairments	4,802	66.1	1,787	24.6
Mental retardation	16,425	39.5	10,812	26.0
Emotional disturbance	14,842	40.1	19,032	51.4
Multiple disabilities	2,676	48.0	896	16.1
Hearing impairments	2,862	68.4	620	14.8
Orthopedic impairments	2,055	62.5	506	15.4
Other health impairments	7,325	67.7	2,423	22.4
Visual impairments	1,157	73.4	187	11.9
Autism	578	47.3	135	11.1
Deaf-blindness	47	48.5	10	10.3
Traumatic brain injury	799	65.3	221	18.1
All disabilities	162,580	56.2	85,119	29.4

Retrieved from:  
<http://www2.ed.gov/about/reports/annual/osep/2002/toc-execsum.pdf>

The U.S. Department of Education did a subsequent study in 2004 for the 26<sup>th</sup> Annual Report to Congress, which stated similar results. Among the highest disabilities to dropout from 2001-2002 are students who have suffered serious emotional disturbance (61.2%), speech/language impairments (35.8 %), and learning disabilities (35.4%) (see Figure 2). While dropout rates have decreased about 10% since 1993, the numbers are still devastating enough for academia to intervene.

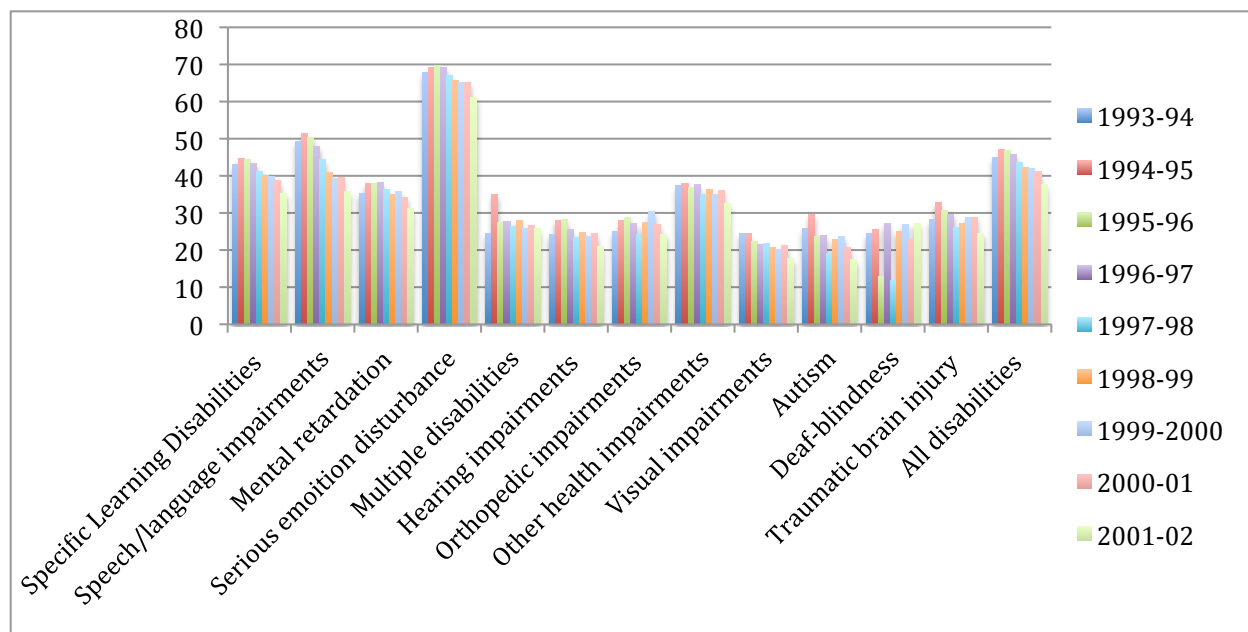


Figure 1: Percentage of Students who Exit School by Dropping Out

*Source:* U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Data Analysis System (DANS), table 4-1 in vol. 2. These data are for the 50 states, DC, Puerto Rico and the four outlying areas.

These calculations are presented here. Data are based on a cumulative 12-month count.

Two large states appear to have underreported the number of dropouts in 1998-99. As a result, the dropout rate is somewhat understated for that year. Percentages are based on fewer than 200 students exiting school.

The scenario is more complex when speaking about disabled students in college.

McGuire et. al. (1991) report that incoming college students with learning disabilities fail to recognize the different set of demands faced in college than high school. Learning-disabled students are faced with different demands that make it difficult to succeed in a college setting. It is not easy for these students to assimilate immediately, so it becomes critical to understand their disability and how it affects their ability to learn and participate in the college experience. Kessler, Foster, Saunders, and Stang (as cited in Hartley, 2010) found in a national survey that students with psychiatric disabilities typically dropped out of college without completing a degree. The dropout rate was 86%, which was twice as high as the general college dropout rate (Hartley, 2010, p. 296).



## 1.4 CASS Profile

W. Dethlefs from The Center for Accommodation and Support Services (CASS) provided a profile which showcased all the students who have been registered with the office from the 1960s to 2011 (personal communication, February 24, 2012). This disabled student profile shed light on some interesting findings such as the average GPA of students registered and the disability with the most students registered during that time. The disability category with the largest amount of students was psychological disorders at 470 and learning disabilities at 351. The graph also shows that the mean GPA of students registered is 2.43 and the amount of students with a 4.0 is 83 (See Table 2). According to Dethlefs there are 49 active undergraduates and 15 graduate students currently registered with the CASS office who have at least a 3.5 GPA (personal communication, November 3, 2011). These numbers suggest that students are making progress in overcoming their disabilities and achieving academic success.

Table 2: Disabled Student Services Office (DSSO) Profile: Baseline Snapshot

	All Students		Registered Students Fall 2005-Fall 2011	
Characteristics	1960s-2011		All Students in Subset	
Primary Disability:	2,022	100%	705	100%
Cognitive Disorder	61	3%	30	4.2%
Hearing Impairment	142	7%	38	5.4%
Learning Disability	351	17.4%	160	23%
Mobility Impairment	229	11.3%	69	9.8%
Physical Dexterity	60	3%	28	4%
Physical Disability	246	12.2%	102	14.5%

Psychological Disorder	<b>470</b>	23.2%	<b>170</b>	24%
Speech/Lang. Impair.	<b>7</b>	.3%	<b>2</b>	...
Temporary Disability	<b>175</b>	8.7%	<b>61</b>	8.7%
Visual Impairment	<b>100</b>	5%	<b>28</b>	4%
Missing Data	<b>181</b>	8.9%	<b>17</b>	2.4%
<b>Grade Point Ave.:</b>	<b>2,022</b>	100%	<b>705</b>	100%
Mean	<b>2.43</b>	...	<b>2.46</b>	...
Perfect 4.0	<b>83</b>	4.1%	<b>37</b>	5.2%
Missing Data	<b>147</b>	7.3%	<b>52</b>	7.4%

Source: W. Dethlefs DSSO Profile (personal communication, February 24, 2012).

Raw data; January 10, 2011. This reports demographic data on all known DSSO registered students, even those registered before creation of the office on October 16, 1996. Original data from ACCESS. Data is subject to change with conversion to Banner.

## 1.5 Risk Factors

Among the reasons to dropout, students with disabilities cite more school factors (lack of academic success, suspension, peer problems) than personal factors (motivation, pregnancy, family problems) (Bounds & Gould, 2000). Three-fourths suggested improved communication with teachers and flexible scheduling would decrease dropout. One-half recognized the need for personal effort and responsibility (Bounds & Gould, 2000). Risk factors comprise the biological, psychological, and cognitive or environmental conditions that impede normal development (Dole, 2000, p. 91). Poverty, low intelligence, and family dysfunction are among the risk factors that make children more vulnerable (Dole, p. 91). Megivern, Pellerito, and Mowbray (as cited in Hartley, 2010) also claimed that reasons for dropping out included lack of academic integration. Students with learning disabilities have social-emotional characteristics that increase vulnerability and would explain another reason these students dropout (Dole, 2000, p. 91).

Social-emotional characteristics for this population include poor self-efficacy, hypersensitivity, high levels of frustration, and poor self-concept (Dole, 2000, p. 91).

Glantz and Johnson (as cited in Hartley, 2010) identified risk factors that lead individuals with psychiatric disabilities to drop out of college. According to Hartley (2010), risk factors include anything ranging from interactions between individuals and environments, characteristics of individuals, and environments. Archer and Cooper (as cited in Hartley, 2010) identified risk factors for dropping out of college. These risk factors are characterized by:

- (a) high-stakes academic pressure and competition, (b) minimal academic support compared with support in high school, (c) faculty and staff who are more distant than high school teachers and counselors, (d) potential social isolation and alienation as students transition to a new environment, (e) an undergraduate culture of excessive alcohol and drug abuse, and (f) the pressure of long-term financial debt. (Hartley, 2010, p. 289)

Wolf (as cited in Heri, 2011) states that smoking and drinking among students with “hidden” disabilities is one reason that these students dropout. Wolf claims that substance abuse only increases the difficulties these students face daily.

Another risk factor for dropout among disabled students is socio-economic circumstance (Dole, 2000). Socio-economic status among physically disabled students is typically seen as a leading factor for dropout rates due to disability related expenses. Also low socio-economic status among students with “hidden” disabilities is a reason for academic shortcomings. Students in low-income households find it difficult to find funds for hiring diagnosticians, purchasing disability related medication (such as Adderall), and hiring tutors. Many of these students go throughout college without being diagnosed and suffer by either dropping out or maintaining a low GPA. Those students with hidden disabilities that are diagnosed and become registered with

their school's Disabled Students Office<sup>6</sup> still find it difficult to pay for disability related expenses. Fullura, Fullura and Yamaki, and Emerson (2003) (as cited in Emerson and Hatton, 2007) state that disabled children are more likely raised in poverty than their able-bodied and non-disabled peers. Emerson (2003) (as cited in Emerson & Hatton, 2007) state that in Britain 44% of children with learning disabilities live in poverty, while in the United States 28% of disabled children live below the federal poverty line (p. 563).

### **1.6 Consequences of Disabled Student Dropout Rates**

The consequences of the dropping out are especially devastating for disabled individuals and society. Studies have suggested that students with psychiatric and emotional disabilities as well as intellectual disabilities have the biggest difficulties in completing college, especially as their disabilities hinder them intellectually (Hartley, 2010; HERI, 2011; and Gilbert, 2005). These students are affected academically by their disabilities as their disability may exhibit problems with cognitive processes, inattention, and difficulty with class activities (Gilbert, 2005).

Blackorby and Wagner (1996) found that those students with learning disabilities (36%) and students with emotional/behavioral disabilities (59%) are among those who do not complete high school. Thurlow, Sinclair, and Johnson (2002) examined the implications associated with the dropout rates among disabled individuals. They suggest that a growing demand for the United States to be part of a global community puts pressure on schools and individuals to graduate not only with a high school diploma, but also with specialized degrees in higher education. Dropping out of high school and college is no longer an option because of the negative effects it has on these individuals and society; unemployment and underemployment are among the main consequences of these dropouts (Thurlow, Sinclair, and Johnson, 2002). One of

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<sup>6</sup> Disabled Students Office is a general term for University offices that cater to disabled students.

the more devastating consequences of these dropouts is the increase of individuals being incarcerated. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (as cited in Thurlow, Sinclair, and Johnson, 2002) state that 80% of individuals incarcerated are high school dropouts. Among those high school dropouts being arrested are students with learning disabilities at 62% and students with emotional/behavioral disabilities at 73% (p. 2). Thurlow, Sinclair, and Johnson (2002) stated that taxpayers pay an approximate \$51,000 per year to incarcerate a person when it costs only \$11,500 to educate a child with a disability (p. 2). With the alarming increase of disabled student dropouts being incarcerated, the societal value and cost effectiveness of graduating from high school is abundantly clear.

Thurlow, Sinclair, and Johnson (2002) identified a list of variables that can be altered in order to change the devastating effects of these dropout rates: “1) persistence, continuity, and consistency, 2) monitoring, 3) relationships, and 4) affiliation” (p. 3). While these variables seem attainable to providing a solution, they focus on external motivators for success. These variables focus on outside help to find a solution to the problem.

It is through the Positive Deviance (PD) approach that a solution to dropout rates can be found, but from the inside-out. Through PD existing solutions are found in the intrapersonal communication behaviors of these learning-disabled students and the interpersonal communication behaviors. PD is used for this study in order to identify exactly ‘what’ communicative behaviors these students engage in and ‘how they engage in these behaviors (what are they doing differently than their learning-disabled peers). Students registered with CASS show that it is possible to reduce dropout rates and maintain academic success. The solution to the problem is internal as well as external and will be inherent in the communication behaviors of these gifted and talented individuals.

## 1.7 The Positive Deviance Approach

The Positive Deviance approach, unlike other asset-based social change approaches, is about identifying and valuing solutions that already exist within the community. PD is anything but an externally-imposed prescriptive model. PD is about invitation rather than coercion or buy-in. PD is premised on the notion that a few people in the community, working with the same resources as everyone else, have already solved the problem (Singhal, Buscell, & Lindberg, 2010; The Positive Deviance Initiative, 2010; Pascale, J. Sternin & M. Sternin, 2010).

Positive Deviance focuses on the notion that experts or trained leaders serve as facilitators through a role reversal in which the “experts become learners and the teachers become students” (Pascale, J. Sternin, & M. Sternin, 2010, p.192). Since leadership is no longer defined by traditional roles it is up to the community to step up and identify the problem by discovering the solution. Leadership itself then begins with a conceptual challenge of being able to engage others in generating a different outcome. As a facilitator, the task then is simple, to initiate conversation, paying attention to norms and customs, identifying the ‘how’, and most importantly to listen and pay attention to the community wisdom. This structure is best defined by a Taoist sage, Lao-Tzu:

Learn from the people  
Plan with the people  
Begin with what they have  
Build on what they know  
Of the best leaders  
When the task is accomplished  
The people all remark  
We have done it ourselves  
(Pascale, Sternin, & Sternin, p. 193)

In addition to the role of the facilitator, Pascale, J. Sternin, and M. Sternin (2010) state that Positive Deviance approach focuses on discovering the “who, how, and what” of every

situation. The ‘who’ describes the people who are doing things differently, those ‘who’ are deviating from the norm, the ‘how’ is the different practices that are being done (simple but effective practices), and the ‘what’ define what practices deviate from the norm and help define the solution. The three roles of Positive Deviance help to distinguish the presence of Positive Deviance in a community overwhelmed by obstacles and burden.

The Positive Deviance (PD) approach can manifest itself in multiple ways. PD in and of itself is an inquiry-based methodology and draws on differences in a community in order to make minority or marginalized voices heard. Some PD cases take on an intervention-based approach while others are more research-driven. The noted difference between the intervention and research is the level of community involvement beyond inquiry. A PD intervention is “grassroots-based, grassroots-owned, and is sustainable and replicable” (Durá, 2011, p. 141). In an intervention-based case, the participants are researchers. A PD inquiry, on the other hand, can be, and tends to be, researcher driven and does not necessarily involve an intervention. If the researcher designs solutions and imposes them on the community, it could be considered intrusive and might not be adopted by the community. However, there is another way to view PD research. Durá (2011) argues that a partnership between participants is possible when PD is viewed as a form of action research<sup>7</sup> because it focuses on power sharing through open inquiry in which participants are positioned as co-researchers.

As a member of the learning-disabled community, I take on a PD researcher driven approach, but I do so as a member of the research community, which gives me the ability to

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<sup>7</sup> In this study action research is referred to as progressive problem solving which is facilitated by individuals working with community members or organizations as part of utilizing community wisdom to solve problems. Action Research is defined in Durá (2011) and based on the work of Alricher, Kemmis, McTaggart, and Zuber-Skerritt (2002) and Huang (2010). Durá (2011) states that action research is determined by influence given to community knowledge, research practice, and the relationship between participants and researchers (p.138). Durá argues that PD fits the definitional structure of action research since its focus is on community ownership, public value, inquiry, and power sharing (p. 138).

share the results of my study as an insider. I am both a member of the learning-disabled community and a researcher focused on finding the communicative behaviors that influence academic success. After numerous discussions with members of the learning-disabled community and with the Director of the Center for Accommodations and Support Services (CASS), it became apparent that many students with learning disabilities were dropping out or failing their classes. As a member of this minority community, I felt it was crucial to understand how some fellow learning-disabled students were succeeding academically while others were not. While the study is researcher driven, the wisdom of fellow learning-disabled individuals is what counts. Both the researcher and participants will find ways to disseminate solutions identified by the learning-disabled community.

Since there is a large number of students registered with the Center for Accommodations and Support Services (CASS) who dropout of college, a Positive Deviance inquiry will be useful in order to explore the strategies that the 61 graduate and undergraduate students with learning and cognitive disabilities registered with CASS implement in order to achieve academic success.

In the next chapter, I review the literature on the Positive Deviance approach and disability and communication and disability in greater detail and pose my research questions. I will also review literature on academic resilience, buoyancy, and disability.



## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

“We, the ones who are challenged, need to be heard. To be seen not as a disability, but as a person who has and will continue to bloom. To be seen not only as a handicap, but as a well intact human being.”

- Robert M. Hensel<sup>8</sup>

This chapter will review the literature on the Positive Deviance approach and provide several examples of how the approach has been used in many countries to address and solve different types of intractable problems. I also review literature related to disability, resiliency, and buoyancy, and provide a background on communication and disability issues. In so doing, a framework is established to understand disabled students’ risk, resilience, coping strategies, academic performance, and communicative acts that deliver better outcomes. This allows me to appreciate how the Positive Deviance approach may be relevant and applicable for disabled student community. The chapter concludes with the posing research questions that guide the present study.

### **2.1 The Origin of Positive Deviance: A Small Communicative Act Goes a Long Way**

PD is founded on the premise that small communicative acts can make big differences. While Marian Zeitlin of Tufts University postulated the term Positive Deviance (PD) to understand the determinant factors that led nourished children from poor families to better outcomes than their peers, its field implementation began in the rice fields of Vietnam (Singhal, Greiner, & Durá, 2010). In December of 1990, Jerry and Monique Sternin, accompanied by his wife Monique and son Sam, arrived in Hanoi after he received an invitation from the Vietnamese Government to create a program enabling poor villages to solve childhood malnutrition (Positive Deviance Initiative, 2010; Singhal, Greiner, & Durá, 2010). Sternin had one task: to tackle a

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<sup>8</sup> See Hensel (2011).

large-scale problem in a country where two-thirds of the children under the age of five were malnourished. Sternin was appointed Director of Save the Children and given six months to use a community based approach without the help of experts.

With little time and little experience, Sternin began to consider the many challenges he faced. It was clear that traditional supplemental feeding programs were only temporary solutions and something else needed to be explored. Above all, Sternin realized that he had to develop an approach that was preventative and curative in the process (Positive Deviance Initiative, 2010). Sternin learned very quickly that in order to solve the problem of childhood malnutrition he needed to have a good rapport with community members; this is how the notion of community members as experts came into play. Instead of using the outsider expertise, Sternin enlisted the help of community members to identify the well-nourished children from “very very poor” families (Positive Deviance Initiative, 2010) and to tap into their wisdom.

Mortenson and Relin (2006) discuss a similar approach to valuing community-based knowledge. When Mortenson, a humanitarian who has been building schools for children in Pakistan and Afghanistan, wanted to hurry the process along Haji Ali, a community leader told Mortenson “These mountains have been here a long time. And so have we. You can’t tell the mountains what to do. You must learn to listen to them” (pp. 149-150). Mortenson like Sternin learned, with great humility, that community wisdom is more influential than experts and that building relationships is crucial to solving problems.

It was crucial for Sternin and his colleagues to identify what the families of these well-nourished children were doing differently. If the community self-discovered the solutions they were more likely to own and implement them (Singhal, Greiner, & Durá, 2010). The poor families in the Thanh Hóa Province who avoided malnutrition implemented certain small behaviors that made a big difference. The key PD practices used to avoid child malnutrition

included: 1) family members collected tiny shrimp and crabs which were rich in nutrients and proteins (resources already available) from rice fields and added them to meals, 2) mothers added the greens of sweet potato plants to meals, 3) mothers were feeding children three to four times a day rather than twice a day, 4) mothers took a role in the feeding process, reducing the amount of food wasted, rather than having the children feed themselves, and 4) mothers washed the hands of children before and after they ate, reducing the spread of bacteria (Singhal, Greiner, & Durá, 2010; Pascale, J. Sternin, & M. Sternin, 2010, pp. 33-34). As discussed in chapter 1, Positive Deviance focuses not only on the ‘what’ is being done differently, but also on the ‘how’ things are being done differently (Pascale, J. Sternin, & M. Sternin, 2010). The behaviors that these deviant mothers engaged in were simple and they were practices that everyone in the community were capable of implementing.

Sternin was able to discover ‘what’ and ‘how’ these Positive Deviants were doing differently to prevent child malnutrition. Now he had to figure out how to translate the community knowledge into practice. Singhal, Greiner, & Durá (2010) state that the most difficult aspect of translating community knowledge into practice is that outside solutions often are naturally resisted by the community. Hence, the Sternins had to figure out a way to spread the knowledge by having the community act, rather than telling them what to do. Once the community saw the results, they started to believe them. A two-week nutrition program was embarked on, where caregivers of malnourished children in the four villages learned how to cook new recipes using ingredients from rice fields (Pascale, J. Sternin, & M. Sternin, 2010, pp. 36-37; Singhal, Greiner, & Durá, 2010, pp. 28-29). Through repetitive action, these caregivers soon adapted these practices into their lifestyle. Also in order to attend nutrition sessions, the price of admission was to contribute by bringing handfuls of shrimps and crabs (Pascale, J. Sternin, & M. Sternin, 2010 pp. 37-38). Through these sessions, caregivers were also encouraged to practice

good hygiene and giving smaller more meals that are frequent to children to practice good nutrition. While PD is not a model, it does contain data. Caregivers fed children, weighed them on the first and last day of the two- week nutrition session and made sure to input data on charts. After a couple of weeks the caregivers saw a difference.

Five and a half months into the six-month period, the PD behaviors were incorporated in village life. Over the course of two years malnutrition decreased by 85% in communities that practiced PD behaviors. The PD approach spread like wild fire in Vietnam villages, helping 2.2 million people and improving the nutritional status of 500,000 children (Singhal, Greiner, & Durá, 2010, pp. 29-30).

It is through the implementation of Positive Deviance (PD) in the field that practitioners learned valuable lessons. Sternin found that one of the main tenets of PD is that, “it’s easier to act your way into a new way of thinking, than to think your way into a new way of acting” (Pascale, J. Sternin, & M. Sternin, 2010, p. 38). The concept employs principles of psychology: enactment and consistency. Enactment allows members to think differently by doing things differently. Practice and action were integral to enacting change. When caregivers went to the field and collected shrimps and crabs they became part of the process. Enactment also gives community members a sense of shared responsibility, they are ‘invited’ to be a part of the process, but ultimately they have a choice whether to be involved or not. Repetitive action leads to consistency for the process to be adapted in the community. Caregivers did the same practice of collecting shrimp and crabs, feeding frequently, washing hands before and after the meal, weighed children and recorded data, and attended nutrition programs consistently. Also learned was the notion that the solution resides in collective knowledge of the community (community members as experts) and social proof is an effective method of adopting the PD practices

because people in their community are using the practice. While PD's impacts are unparalleled, it is difficult to implement them into an environment where experts dominate.

## **2.2 Examples of Positive Deviance**

Several stories and examples of implementing the Positive Deviance approach in different contexts, with different problems, are provided in this section. These include from reducing hospital acquired infection in the U.S., to reducing incidence of female genital cutting in Egypt, to reducing school dropouts in Argentina and California. All these cases signify how PD can level hierarchies; flip the gender-role scripts, and tap into existing local expertise. They provide a context for the utilization of PD to address complex social problems with a lot of interwoven underlying causes.

### **2.2.1. *Lisa's Story: The Spread of MRSA at Hospitals***

Lisa is a 44-year-old nurse that encountered MRSA (a bacterial infection that is highly resistant to some antibiotics) with her 13-year-old son. Unknowingly Lisa spread MRSA to her husband who had just undergone spinal surgery. With his immune system down, MRSA took hold of his body and as a side effect had to undergo numerous surgeries and was bedridden for months. As a result of the MRSA infection, depression soon followed and Lisa's husband committed suicide. Lisa is just one of many whose life is severely tormented by MRSA (Pascale, J. Sternin, & M. Sternin, 2010, pp. 84-86).

Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) is a type of hospital-cultivated staph bacteria (Awad et al., 2009). In 2006, the Veterans Administration hospital (VAPHS) in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania turned to the Positive Deviance (PD) approach. This is the first time PD had been applied to an organizational setting in the U.S. (Pascale, J. Sternin, & M. Sternin, 2010, pp. 83-85). MRSA infections kill 19,000 Americans every year and 100,000 suffer an MRSA related infection that extends their hospital stay.

Dr. Jon Lloyd, a retired general surgeon, was asked by the Center of Disease Control to help reduce the spread of MRSA; he enlisted the help of the PD initiative. Through the approach of Positive Deviance, Dr. Lloyd and his team were able to develop several tactics to combat MRSA. The implementation of DADs (discovery and action dialogues) helped to invite others for enactment and consistency, meaning that people could generate questions on what could be done and what other departments were doing differently to solve the problems. Through DADs they invited housekeepers, clergy, physical therapists, patients and even janitors. Everyone was able to help in the process (Pascale, J. Sternin, & M. Sternin, 2010, pp. 85-88). A nurse by the name of Cathy Hill provided insight for a demonstration on the spread of MRSA. She put Glo Germ (an invisible substance) on the pens attendees used to sign in; throughout the day UV lights were used to show how the infection could easily spread (Singhal & Greiner, 2010, p. 55). Even the smallest changes made the biggest differences. Small changes included putting soap dispensers in vans that transported patients to prevent the spread of infection. Other members were invited to participate in the process, the hospital pastor learned that MRSA was passed from his bible; so disposable bible covers were created to prevent the spread. The squish alert changed the placement of hand dispensers so that it faced the patients' beds.

Glo Germ demonstrations, antibacterial foam after bingo, and DADs provided incite on MRSA prevention and elimination (Singhal & Greiner, 2010, p. 59). VAPHS had four essential elements to prevent and eliminate MRSA, they are: 1) Standard precautions, 2) Active Surveillance Cultures, 3) Contact precautions and isolation for MRSA positive patients, and 4) Leadership support (Singhal & Greiner, 2010, p. 65). However, most importantly, this Positive Deviance approach had unintended outcomes such as leveling the hierarchy. Now, new protocol brought top management to each unit for a bi-weekly meeting and the janitors were presenting

data about MRSA prevention; this also led to a shared authority between patients, staff, and administration.

### **2.2.2. *Khira's Story: Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in Egypt***

The day after Easter, twelve-year old Khira was playing with friends when suddenly her mother and her aunts took her to a tent along with a couple other girls. Later, Khira found out that this day was not just a holy day but it was an occasion to circumcise young girls. While in the tent Khira overheard the women talking and whispering, “Khira overheard her mother ask if Khira could go first, so the razor would be sharp and cut swift and clean” (Pascale, J. Sternin, & M. Sternin, 2010, pp. 54-55). Khira fainted during the procedure and awoke to a pain she could not even describe. Her wound was not only physical, but emotional as well; it was a pain she could not fathom, something deep and permanent. She wondered how people she had come to trust and love her whole life could inflict a pain so horrible on her. Little did she know, she was not alone. She could not walk for days, she was ashamed and she could never trust her family again.

Khira experienced what is known as Female Genital Mutilation, (FGM) also known as Il Rittan (excision) (Pascale, J. Sternin, & M. Sternin, 2010). In Egypt, FGM is a common practice and is done from small villages and towns to larger cities and is performed on women as young as twelve. While the ritual is the same, the manner in which it is performed is different in every situation. The use of dirty and unclean razors and blades often lead to infection or even death.

When Monique Sternin went to Egypt, she encountered several girls who wanted to identify exceptions within their own communities in order to convince mothers to stop the practice. Sternin attended several meetings on FGM and found that girls wanted social proof to stop the practice: “Show us the people who have not done this, show us the people who have

resisted, then with proof we can tell our mothers” (Pascale, J. Sternin, & M. Sternin, 2010, p. 57). Unfortunately, finding those who were willing to tell their tales seemed quite daunting, because they were ashamed and embarrassed. Sternin came to the idea of videotaping Positive Deviance interviews in order to build a rapport with community members. Questions arose such as, “how do we create trust?” this led members in the community to begin a selection process of who to invite. Sternin suggested that they focus on the 3% of women who are not circumcised and figure out the ‘who’, ‘what’, and ‘how’ they avoided FGM. Sternin and his team were finally able to have a PD workshop at a Monastery. They heard from two of their youngest participants, Warda and Khira, who both told their stories. While each experienced completely different outcomes, they both experienced similar shame. Warda was ashamed that she had not been circumcised while Khira was always wounded by the fact that she was. This particular instance of Positive Deviance focused on social proof. In this situation positive deviance was spread by the fact that community members saw that other people were defying this unjust practice; seeing is believing. In this particular situation, the unintended outcome was the creation of women’s advocacy groups that defied the odds. Thousands of female circumcisions were averted in Egypt over the past decade leading to the creation of FGM-free communities and the implementation of women’s advocates (Pascale, J. Sternin, and M. Sternin, 2010, pp. 67-81).

### ***2.2.3. An Infant’s Story: Infant Mortality in Pashtun***

In Pashtun areas of Pakistan there are approximately 85 deaths for every 1,000 births (Pascale, J. Sternin, & M. Sternin, 2010, p. 172). In a country that is typically male driven, childrearing is seen as a woman’s job and any illness or death that is related to the birth is seen to be the woman’s fault, “babies and childbirth are women’s business” (Pascale, J. Sternin, & M. Sternin, 2010, p. 172). The PD question that remained was, “why had some newborns, born



under exactly the same conditions as those who died, survived and flourished?” (Pascale, J. Sternin, & M. Sternin, p. 174).

Beginning the process was difficult because men and women lead completely different roles. Women had no precedence over shopping and handling money. Even more difficult, communication between men and women is limited, making it difficult to solve any problems. Once women were allowed to participate in the Positive Deviance process, things began to move along more smoothly. While men were the original instigators to figure out the high infant mortality rate, women began to take an active role in the process because they understood what happened to the child after birth. For women, beans were the artifacts of choice for mapping, they understood what happened after the child was born in terms of death and sickness (Pascale, J. Sternin, & M. Sternin, 2010, p. 175). Culture differences reframed the problem, from the “what” to the “how”. Since Pashtun life was captured in oral histories, storytelling occurred rather than interviews (Pascale, J. Sternin, & M. Sternin, p. 175). Homemade dolls were used to see what people did rather than show what they know. Dolls showed that caregivers were delivering babies in animal sheds and that newborn babies were put on mud floors for prayers, this led to hypothermia. They started looking for what people were doing differently to prevent infant mortality. After they found the Positive Deviants within the group they were able to implement several things such as, putting babies on mattress-like pillows for warmth after they are born, or using a clean delivery kit (clean razor blade) to reduce causes of infection. Groups used razor blades covered with a black felt tip to show how infection could be easily spread when the umbilical cord was cut. As a result of the role playing “act-your-way” sessions, husbands took responsibility to buy new blades and a few used a clean string to tie the cord (Pascale, J. Sternin, & M. Sternin, p. 178).

In order to spread the PD practices, men began gathering once a month at a teashop, shared information and status of newborns, learned about pregnancy and delivery, and made commitments to practice new behaviors (Pascale, J. Sternin, & M. Sternin, 2010, p. 178). In order to sustain PD practices, they had healthy baby contests focusing on children in three age categories (0-1, 1-2, and 2-3). In healthy baby contests, parents with healthiest babies received prizes. This reinforced the PD practices and highlighted the importance of participation from both parents (Pascale, J. Sternin, & M. Sternin, p. 180). A desirable but unintended outcome was that many husbands and wives had an opportunity to share experiences and for the first time husbands and wives became partners in maternal and child care issues.

#### ***2.2.4. Girl Trafficking in Indonesia***

Sex trafficking is a growing problem in Indonesia; even more prevalent is the high incidence of girls' trafficking. In 2000, 30 to 40 percent of commercial sex workers in Indonesia were under the age of 18 (Durá & Singhal, 2009, p. 1). The problem had to be addressed, hence, Save the Children (SC) along with local Indonesian forces, such as the East Java Institution for Community Research and Development, were set in force to reduce the number of girls trafficked into the sex industry through grassroots anti-trafficking initiatives.

Desa Gadungsari, a village in East Java, was a SC model of success for keeping girls at home. Positive Deviance (PD) was used to identify and work with those families that managed to keep their girls at home (Durá & Singhal, 2009, p. 2). Since the topic of sex trafficking is unmentionable, it became difficult to develop a strategy in which a PD meeting could take place. Several precautionary measures had to be in place before community members supported the topic and they could finally set a campaign to reduce sex trafficking (Durá & Singhal, p. 8). One of the exercises that were implemented to identify the problem was an exercise known as mapping. Around 50 people in the village participated in the mapping process that led to the

discovery that 140 people were missing and 90 percent of those missing were girls ranging from 14-17 years in age. Mapping also painted a bigger picture for the community in terms of identifying the underlying problems that led to girls' sex trafficking. Questions were identified such as, why do girls leave, where do they work, what are bars, and so on.

PD criteria were identified after the mapping process. Criteria for girls included: 1) had to be poor and under 18 years, and 2) must have made a conscious decision not to work in the sex industry. In order for families to be considered PD's they had to be 1) poor, 2) have at least three children with one daughter who was 15 years or older and no longer in school, 3) parents who had no more than a junior high education, and 4) and would not permit their daughters to work in the sex industry (Durá & Singhal, 2009, p. 9). By talking to families that met this criterion they found that they engaged in certain behaviors that reduced the risk for their daughters being involved in sex trafficking. These behaviors include: 1) engaging in income-generating activities (growing crops), 2) help daughters establish a small business, 3) openly discuss with their children the risks of working in sex trafficking and giving them alternatives, 4) emphasize the value of formal and vocational education, 5) allows daughters to work outside the village only after they have investigated their employers, and 6) require daughters to keep in contact via letter or phone if they work outside the village (Durá & Singhal, p. 9).

Community driven-implementation took place through social proof. Community Watch Committees consisting of community members monitored brokers and traffickers. Change was seen in the amount of volunteers gathered to make migration safer. Due to the efforts of PD practices, several improvements were made in the village. One of the most noticeable of these improvements was the fact that no new girls left Gadungsari to enter the sex trade (Durá & Singhal, 2009, p. 10).

### ***2.2.5. Nurse-Patient Communication in Family Planning***

Patient-nurse communication is extremely important, especially when it comes to family planning. Unfortunately, studies show that many factors contribute to low or nonexistent forms of communication between patient and practitioner. Kim, Heerey, and Kols (2008) found that there are many factors that contribute to a lack of communication. Factors include workplace policies and practices (preventing them from spending time with patients), lack of time and privacy, and work-related stress (p. 1412). While there are many factors that contribute to a lack of communication, apathy and a lack of communication skills are rarely the main issues. While the issue of communication between nurse and patient is strenuous enough, it is even more difficult in developing countries like Indonesia. In these countries there is a distinct hierarchy, doctors and nurses are superior to patients and patients are “passive and deferential” during family planning consultations (Kim, Heerey, & Kols, 2008, p. 1412). Hence, in order to ‘flip the scripts’, Indonesia’s Sustaining Technical Achievements in Reproductive Health/ Family Planning (STARH) instituted a project that wanted to capture the insights of the positive deviants (PD) so that practical interventions to improve communication could be implemented.

The first step in this study was to find the nurses and patients who were already engaging in Positive Deviance activities throughout 64 randomly selected public clinics, with one nurse as a representative of each clinic in East Java, Indonesia (Kim, Heerey, & Kols, 2008, p. 1413). Several experimental methods were conducted on a test group of 768 patients, where half of them were assigned to the intervention group. There, they received coaching on communication skills before seeing the nurse and the remainder received a HIS/AIDS pamphlet before seeing the nurse (Kim, Heerey, & Kols, p. 1413). Consultations were taped and coded with the Roter Interaction Analysis System (RIAS) and PD nurses were identified on facilitative communication. PD nurses were identified as going above and beyond what was in their job

description by asking lifestyle and psychological questions relating to their wellbeing and understanding. Just like PD's origin in Vietnam, it is formed by enactment and consistency. PD nurses were only given the highest scores by how well they performed and how consistent they performed with each patient (Kim, Heerey, & Kols, p. 1413).

Two coding systems were used to identify PD patients, the Cegala codes (for supplying information) and the top patients according to RIAS codes on active communication. What was so interesting about this study was that PD nurses served about 78% of PD patients. The study suggests that PD personalities tend to attract since they are both striving to solve problems within their immediate community (Kim, Heerey, & Kols, 2008, p. 1414). Since culture and socio-economic status do provide a barrier between patients and nurses, PD nurses suggested tips to make communication easier with patients. PD nurses suggested independent learning (cost effective and lets the nurse work at their own pace) and seeking feedback from colleagues. Once again, the frequency of the behavior and the consistency is a PD staple and is something that distinguishes the positive deviants from the community.

#### ***2.2.6. Techniques to Improve Smoking Cessation Outcomes***

In New South Wales (NSW) the average smoking prevalence among prisoners exceeds 72% (Awofeso, Irwin, & Forrest, 2008, p. 72). Prisoners, with no intention of quitting smoking, make it difficult on cessation (quit) programs. NSW's Tobacco Action Plan identifies prisoners as a priority group for smoking cessation programs, especially since the structures programs cost the Justice Health about \$400 per inmate (Awofeso, Irwin, & Forest, p. 72). Positive Deviant initiatives were set in motion in 2006 to change the structure of smoking session programs and explore more community driven approaches that would help prisoners quit (Awofeso, Irwin, & Forest, p. 72).

The authors were able to define the problem and gain a desired response from Positive Deviants (PD). The prison was able to reduce the prevalence of smoking by 30% over a five-year period by changing the behaviors and attitudes of prisoners. In order to determine the Positive Deviants, researchers conducted a survey that showed less than 30% of people at New South Wales (NSW) prisons were non-smokers. Also a list of prisoners that did not buy tobacco for three weeks was added to the list of possible PDs. What were these prisoners doing differently than the 70% of inmates who were smoking? PD inmates reported that 23 participants on the Quit program stopped tobacco purchase on the set Quit date, were honest on their smoking history when speaking to counselors, experienced regular peer support from non-smokers, initiated positive self talk, changed their activity patterns during usual smoking periods, saved money instead of spending it on tobacco, and monitored their own health improvements (Awofeso, Irwin, & Forrest, 2008, p. 42).

The results from these Positive Deviants' give insight into the power of Positive Deviance in a prison setting. Consistency and frequency are repetitive patterns from other case studies that are prevalent here as well. Inmates experienced consistent and frequent support from non-smoking peers and are involved in positive communicative behaviors. Like the case of nurse-patient communication in family planning, Positive Deviant inmates were honest in their communication with counselors. This means that inmates were practicing good communicative behaviors by discussing their smoking history. Social proof is also a reoccurring theme in these studies. For the World No Tobacco Day, posters were designed to include statements and quotes from Positive Deviants describing the behaviors and practices they had adopted to keep from smoking. These posters showed smoker inmates that there were individuals within their community who were able to combat smoking through simple communicative acts.

### ***2.2.7. Safe Sex Practices Among Rwandan Youth***

HIV and AIDS are rapidly growing epidemics in Rwanda. Adolescents under the age of 25 make up 10% of the infected population (Babalola, Awasum, & Quwnum-Renaud, 2002, p. 11). Reasons for the spread of infection among youth in Rwanda include unprotected sex and lack of education about sexually transmitted diseases. A Positive Deviance (PD) approach was used to explore the factors associated with PD in sexual behaviors. An analysis of PD was done against an ideation theoretical framework, which focused on the notion that changes in value orientations are transmitted through different channels. Different channels include, the childrearing process and through the mass media and social interactions (Babalola, Awasum, & Quwnum-Renaud, p. 12). The ideational variables explored for the study included self-esteem, perceived social support for premarital sexual abstinence, perceptions about peer sexual behavior, attitudes toward premarital sex, and measures of perceived self-efficacy to refuse sex (Babalola, Awasum, & Quwnum-Renaud, p. 12).

Through surveys they were able to find that girls from Rwanda were less likely to have sex before marriage. Also, behaviors such as living in the same household as the father seem to protect girls from early sexual experimentation. Other findings include Muslims being less likely to have premarital sex than Christians and alcohol as having a negative correlation to premarital sex. The study suggests that Positive Deviants focus is on using preventative measure to reduce the spread of HIV and AIDS infections by educating rural Rwandans at a very early age.

### ***2.2.8. Dropout Rates in Argentina and California***

About 56 % of the children in the rural province of Misiones did not complete their education causing blame to alternate from teacher to parent. Teachers were angry, had not been paid in months and were less than skeptical of the PD process (Pascale, J. Sternin, & M. Sternin, 2010, p. 94). These teachers and parents had to be told that they did not have to rely on experts to

find the solution, because they already have the solution. They have been able to retain 85% of their students despite all obstacles. After working in liberating structures of small groups, teachers soon figured out that one school was able to retain 100% of their pupils up to sixth grade (Pascale, J. Sternin, & M. Sternin, p. 95). Teachers were flabbergasted, how was it that these teachers were able to retain their students when they were not being paid either. After meeting with parents, they soon realized that retention had little to do with what happened inside the classroom. They found that the teachers at schools where retention was great had developed “learning contracts” with rural parents before the school year began (Pascale, J. Sternin, & M. Sternin, p. 97). Teachers of at risk schools were able to implement the strategies at their own schools due to social proof.

In Merced California, 831 students entered Merced High in 2005-2006, but only 459 students exited with diplomas (Po, 2011, p. 2). The problem was approached in a nontraditional way. Positive Deviance (PD) was looked at as a possible approach to combat dropout rates in Merced. The PD approach looked at those students who received a diploma despite evident poverty, gangs, and crime. African-American and Latino students as well as Hmong and Vietnamese girls are more likely to dropout (Po, p. 2). *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, discusses how Hmong girls are typically more likely to dropout of school or fall behind on there studies because they are burdened to take care of their family members (Fadiman, 1997).

In order to combat this increasing number of dropout rates among at risk students, the school developed a program where students meet every other week during lunchtime to go over solutions. Teachers in this program simply act as facilitators and allow the students to lead discussions. Teachers focused on opening lines of communication between students by pinpointing factors that led to dropouts rather than dropouts themselves. Teachers saw an



increase in enthusiasm and determination from students as they learned from others through social proof.

### **2.2.9. *Summary***

From the above reviews of PD case studies, it is clear that the PD approach has several foundational tenets. PD is an approach that is best learned by acting one's way, and is best suited where behavioral change is needed, but the solutions are not obvious to the community. A set of guiding principles for implementing PD were mentioned in the previous studies:

1. The solution is already in the community. Community ownership is needed for the entire process. It is needed in defining the problem, discovering the 'who', 'what' (uncommon practices and finding ways to spread these practices to others), and the 'how' (how these deviants are doing these uncommon practices). This means experts act only as facilitators.
2. PD is focused on those deviants that are doing things differently and find a solution to the problem with the same resources as everyone else.
3. Members of the community must be invited and not forced to participate. Community members will be resistant to change if they feel they are forced. Members need to feel like they are a part of the process by becoming part of the solution.
4. PD practices include enactment and consistency.
5. Social proof is a way to change behavior. Seeing is believing, and as soon as community members realize that others in their community are solving the problem with the same resources, they will be sure to follow. PD starts with the notion that you can act your way into a new way of thinking and involves transferring behavior instead of knowledge.

### **2.3. Studies on Academic Resilience, Buoyancy, and Disability**

According to Martin and March (2009), academic resilience is known as a student's

ability to overcome acute or chronic adversities that are major obstacles to the educational process. Academically-successful disabled students are paragons of academic resilience. Wang et. al. (as cited by Martin & March, 2009) stated that resilience in the academic context is the heightened likelihood of success in school and life despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits (p. 355). There are typical signs of students identified as being at-risk which include low reading scores, poor academic performance, poverty, abuse, and struggling family dynamics which make them vulnerable for academic failure (Dugle & Grigorenko, 2011). Those students who are academically resilient are those who are able to sustain high levels of motivation and performance despite stressful situations that place them at risk of doing poorly academically and eventually dropping out of school (Martin & March, 2009, p. 355; Dugle & Grigorenko, 2011). Typically, academic resilience is focused on ethnic groups who face adverse conditions such as poverty and violence. However, some studies have focused on clinical groups such as students with learning disabilities (Martin & March, p. 355). It is important to note that academic resilience, like positive deviance, focuses on a small number of students who are able to overcome extreme adversity.

Academic buoyancy refers to the academic setbacks students face in regular academic life (Martin & March, 2009). Academic buoyancy deals with isolated groups of students who are performing poorly, experiencing low-level stress, and dips in motivation and confidence. Martin and March take on an approach that is similar to a Positive Deviance approach. In their study, they learn from the students who are able to turn around their academic misfortune by overcoming the disadvantages they face. Even though there are students who perform poorly, they focused on the students who are able to overcome their disadvantages and succeed (Martin & March, 2009). College students who experience negative emotions are at risk of being less resilient with college life than their disabled peers who experience positive emotions

(Winterowd, Street, & Boswell, 1998). Hence, it is believed that academic resilience and buoyancy are positively correlated to optimistic views of school and academic life (Martin & March, 2009, p. 354). In Hartley (2010), resilience is seen as interplay between an individual and their environment in which the individual can overcome adversities by using internal and external protective factors.

### ***2.3.1. Internal and External Factors***

Garmezy (as cited by Dole, 2000) organized a list of protective factors that act as a form of academic resilience: personality factors, family cohesion, and external support systems (p. 91). Resistance to stress is not absolute and changes depending on the situation. Dole (2000) studied a life-span development perspective that takes into account the pressures faced by individuals during different phases of their lives. A life-span development perspective was taken into account because literature suggests that resilience changes with circumstances (Dole, 2000, p. 91).

Leong, Bonz, and Zachar (as cited in Hartley, 2010) have found that active coping is a strong predictor for successful college matriculation and can increase resilience and retention in colleges. For example, Aspinwall and Taylor (as cited in Hartley, 2010) conducted a study that found that entering college students who participated in active coping, had positive moods and higher optimism led to a more positive outcome on college retention. Brockelman (as cited in Hartley, 2010) found that active coping was a predictor of a student's cumulative GPA (p. 303).

Since resilience changes with circumstances, Werner and Smith (as cited in Dole, 2000) used a longitudinal study of infants born in Kauai, Hawaii, in 1955 to understand resiliency in at-risk children. A life-span development perspective was initiated in these at-risk individuals from childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. The life-span development perspective resulted in the emergence of three visible protective factors. Factors included having average intelligence and

dispositional attitudes (self-efficacy and self-esteem), having affective and supportive ties within the extended family, and having external support systems (school, work, church) (Dole, 2000, p. 91). Werner (as cited in Dole, 2000) found that the longitudinal study was important to find shifts with developmental stages and with gender. The three stages indicated that early on boys were more vulnerable than girls until the second decade when the balance was in favor of the male participants, because girls were confronted with role confrontations. Around the third decade, balance shifted again in favor of girls who relied more on outside support systems than male participants (Dole, 2000, pp. 91-92).

Despite the presence of risk, researchers have been able to identify an array of internal and external protective factors associated with success (Hartley, 2010). According to Masten and Reed (as cited in Hartley, 2010) the following are internal protective factors: “(a) good cognitive capacities, (b) adaptable personality, positive self-efficacy, (d) faith and a sense of meaning, (e) self-regulation of emotional arousal and impulses, and (f) a sense of humor” (pp. 296-297). Some researchers refer to internal factors as proximal factors, because they are factors inherently close to the individual. Martin and March (2009) identify these proximal factors by psychological factors, school and engagement factors, and family and peer factors. According to Finn and Rock (as cited in Martin and March, 2009) psychological factors include self-efficacy, self-control, and motivation. School and engagement factors include class participation, enjoyment of school, relationships with teachers, teacher feedback, attendance, extra-curricular activities, value placed on school, and a challenging curriculum (p.360). Family and peer factors include family support, a network of friends, peer commitment to education, authoritative and caring parenting, and social organizations (Martin & March, 2009, p.360). External protective factors include: “ (a) good emergency social services, (b) high levels of public safety, (c) access to positive peer relationships, and (d) an adult who shows interest and caring” (Martin & March,

p. 297). In order for a student to be resilient, they must use a combination of protective factors. Such is especially important for students who face difficulties associated with disabilities.

### ***2.3.2. Resiliency in Individuals with Learning Disabilities***

The discovery of both risk and resilience is extremely relevant for the field of learning disabilities. These individuals are at-risk of failure, because they manifest problems such as underachievement, high dropout rates, low self-esteem, and lack of social skills (Kvalsund and Bele, 2010). A study by Sowa, McIntire, May, and Bland (as cited in Dole, 2000) found that gifted children as young as nine years old used cognitive appraisal to deal with stressful situations. Cognitive appraisal includes two ways of dealing with stress such as problem-focused strategies and emotion-focused strategies (Dole, 2000, p. 92). They used these strategies to adapt their behavior to stressful situations as a display of resilience.

Among the internal and external protective factors, mentioned above, similar protective buffers were identified in individuals with learning disabilities that allowed them to transition successfully. Dole (2000) states that there are five clusters of protective buffers identified with learning-disabled student success. The protective buffers are:

- 1) self-efficacy (enabling positive responses from others), 2) skills and values (making efficient use of abilities and faith in their abilities), 3) parental management characteristics that fostered self-esteem, 4) support from extended family and mentors (grandparents, teachers, or church), and 5) opening up of opportunities in life transitions.
- (Dole, 2000, p. 93)

Self-determination of students with learning disabilities is another internal protective factor. Students, who regulate their own behavior by engaging in activities typically performed by the teacher, usually perform better academically (Wehmeyer, Hughs, Agran, Garner, & Yeager, 2003). Students with learning disabilities are typically dependent on others for academic help.

However when given the responsibility to regulate their own activities they tend to step up to the plate. Varieties of communication behaviors were identified for increasing self-determination among learning-disabled students: using picture cue and audio cue strategies, self-instruction (providing own verbal cues), self-monitoring, self-evaluation, self-reinforcement, and goal setting (Wehmeyer et. al., pp. 416-417). Learning-disabled students who learn to self-direct the learning process are less likely to depend on others for academic help.

Goddard and Sendi (2008) studied the effects of self-monitoring on the quantity and quality of creative writing of fourth-graders with learning disabilities. They found that those students who self-monitored both the quantity and quality of their writing showed a significant increase in the quality of their work. Self-monitoring is also an act of resilience among learning-disabled individuals. The act of self-monitoring would fit in the internal protector factors that learning-disabled students use to achieve academic success. Watson and Tharp (as cited in Goddard and Sendi, 2008) state that self-monitoring provides information and feedback that allow these learning-disabled individuals to gradually improve their work (p. 411).

Dole (2000) discussed how support from churches and other spiritual institutions can serve as a channel of resilience with disabled students. Clark and Cardman (2002) found that the spirituality of people living with disabilities promotes wellness and allows them to live normal and healthy lives. More importantly, Clark and Cardman described that their participants used spirituality and religion to reverse the shame of their disability. Spirituality as a form of resilience is crucial for these disabled students, because it helped these individuals increase their self-value and find meaning in their lives (Clark & Cardman, 2002, p. 28).

#### **2.4. Disabled Students and Academic Performance**

According to a report from the National Longitudinal Transition Study [NLTS] (2006) by

The U.S. Department of Education, academic achievement of students with disabilities is the result of the relationship between many factors. The factors are either intrinsic to disabled individuals or are the characteristics of their immediate environment and school related environment.

Academic performance of students is typically determined by two objective measures such as Grade Point Average (GPA) and the Success Index (Sachs & Schreuer, 2011, para. 6-7). Foreman, Dempsey, Robinson, and Manning (as cited in Sachs and Schreuer, 2011) define the Success Index as the rate of courses the student has completed without failure (para. 6). However, since GPA and the Success Index are outdated, insufficient measures of a student's academic success, new subjective measures have been added to reflect self-evaluation. Self-evaluation questionnaires and surveys refer to personal factors of success and satisfaction (Sachs & Schreuer, 2011, para. 6-7). In recent years, students' performance and success has been examined from a perspective of experience and activities. Academic performance has been conceptualized to include participation and learning outside the classroom. This means that academic success is not only determined by GPA and by courses passes, but also by the student's involvement in extracurricular activities and organizations. Enhanced social interaction with faculty and peers is also a measure of academic performance and success. Another thing to consider is that the majority of disabled students work or have a job. A student's involvement in a job also increases social interaction with co-workers and gives them the opportunity to practice and learn by doing.

## **2.5 Communicative Behaviors that Encourage Academic Success**

The Positive Deviance (PD) approach was applied to in study in order to discover the wisdom that already exists within the learning-disabled community that allows them to overcome

obstacles to achieve timely academic success. This study focused on the intrapersonal<sup>9</sup> communication behaviors of these individual students as well as the influence of their relationships with others. Interpersonal<sup>10</sup> communication practices with family, peers, and teachers led to successful outcomes were also identified.

### ***2.5.1. Intrapersonal Communication***

Students with learning disabilities are typically seen to have low self-concept, depression, and anxiety (Dahlbeck & Lightsey, 2008). Among low academic self-concept, social self-concept of learning-disabled individuals is not to be taken lightly. Learning-disabled individuals are at risk for social skills deficits (Zelege, 2004). Children with disabilities are not only exposed to daily stressors but to a number of disability-related stressors that challenge their learning environment. If challenges are not addressed appropriately and in a timely manner, these disabled students can experience a low self-concept and low self-esteem (Dahlbeck & Lightsey, 2008).

Unfortunately, learning-disabled individuals tend to have a more negative self-concept than their non-disabled peers (Zelege, 2004). In fact, individuals with invisible disabilities (learning disabilities) have difficulties communicating with others because they worry about the reactions from others and experience shame and anxiety (Frymier & Wanzer, 2003). Low self-esteem and low self-concept can affect a learning-disabled student's willingness to communicate. Students are more concerned with the perceptions that their non-disabled peers have of them and this often leads to a lower self-esteem on the part of the 'disabled' student (Olney & Brockelman, 2010). Having a low self-esteem and low self-worth makes communication with

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<sup>9</sup> Intrapersonal communication takes place within a single person. Three aspects of intrapersonal communication include self-concept, perception, and expectation (Brewster, 2010). Self-talk is one aspect of intrapersonal communication that will be repeated throughout the study.

<sup>10</sup> Interpersonal communication occurs when we interact with another person and mutually influence each other. It is a tool to maintain relationships with people in our lives (Brewster, 2010).



others almost unbearable. Studies show having a greater self-esteem and more confidence will increase students' chances of interacting in the classroom (Singh & Ghai, 2009; Dole, 2000; Sachs & Schreuer, 2011; Hartley, 2010). Learning-disabled students are more willing to communicate if they feel more comfortable in the environment. Those who are uncomfortable in an environment will adapt and find new ways to cope (Dole, 2000).

In Singh and Ghai's (2009) study of children with mobility impairments, they found that students did not want to be taught separately and did not need additional assistance. Moreover, these students indicated that their participation in any activity was equal to other children. Other studies focused on learning-disabled students. Dole (2000) found that gifted and talented learning-disabled students use internal behaviors to deal with stress. McIntire, May, and Bland (as cited in Dole, 2000) found that gifted children used cognitive appraisal to deal with stress and anxiety (p. 92). In this study students used problem-solving approaches to adjust their behavior to the environment (Dole, 2000, p. 92). The American Academy of Pediatrics (1992) suggests that students can emphasize their best assets to achieve academic success: develop compensation skills, be patient, work with useful aids (calculators, tape recorders, and typewriters), and not to be afraid to ask questions.

Bray (2003) suggests that learning-disabled students can improve communication with others by being completely transparent. Students need to be upfront with teachers and peers by telling them exactly what they need and want. Bray (2003) says that students with learning disabilities tend to show their frustration through other communicative behaviors. When learning-disabled individuals get frustrated they will communicate in other forms: speech, facial expressions, body language, and print (Bray, 2003; Downing, 2005). Severe learning-disabled students might have problems communicating simple tasks. These individuals might be able to use skills that enable them to express basic concepts but have limitations in using complex

language patterns (Downing, 2005). Despite the difficulty to communicate with others, students with learning disabilities still have the same need as their peers to acquire knowledge and skills that are necessary for functioning independently (Sturomski, 1997). Many of individuals with learning disabilities who have problems communicating want to have better communication with others and want to function normally. Communication with others improves their lives and increases their ability to thrive in an academic setting.

### ***2.5.2. Communication with Parents***

In order for effective communication to occur, two people must always be involved. Research has shown that relationships with family and parents are directly associated with academic success (Diaz, 2010; Ayala, 2011; Alberta Learning, 2002). Focusing directly on learning-disabled students and their intrapersonal communication is not enough, parents and family members have a direct impact on learning-disabled students academic success and self-esteem (Bray, 2003; Downing, 2005). Parents have an early and ongoing impact on learning-disabled students academic success and self-esteem (Alberta Learning, 2002).

Bray (2003) says that in order to have effective communication with learning-disabled students, others (parents and family members) have to be willing to adapt their communication style. Family members need to be willing work harder to understand what the person is trying to say. Bray (2003) provides communication strategies families can implement with learning-disabled students: listen carefully, spend more time interacting with the person, and use special forms of communication that are easily understood to individuals (reading, using pictures, pointing, etc.). If family members adapt their communication style they will have an easier time communicating and getting their message across. Although there is little research on family dynamics and students with learning disabilities, one study in particular says there is a direct link to parental involvement in their children's education and academic success (grades, student

attitudes, and behavior). Alberta Learning (2002) says meaningful parental involvement leads to greater personal satisfaction of learning-disabled students. Meaningful parental and family involvement leads to the development of a collaborative partnership between parent and child. If done correctly, collaborative partnerships could build between teachers, school administrators, and the learning-disabled student.

Research suggests that maintaining relationships in family communication is crucial. Stafford and Canary's (as cited in Ledbetter, 2009) 5-factor model for relational maintenance examines communication behaviors that help maintain close relationships. The model suggests that in order to maintain relationships there must be: positivity, openness, assurances, shared social networks, and shared tasks (Ledbetter, 2009). Ledbetter (2009) uses this model to determine family communication patterns.

Some researchers see parents as highly important communication partners for learning-disabled students (Bray, 2003). Krauss, Seltzer, and Goodman (as cited by Bray, 2003) reported that a majority of learning-disabled adults live with their family. They saw that family networks with learning-disabled adults were characterized by durability, high level of contact, and proximity (Bray, 2003). Family members have an easier time initiating communication with learning-disabled students due to the emotional bonds that are initiated at a young age.

### ***2.5.3. Communication with Peers***

Positive reinforcement from family and friends is crucial for learning-disabled students continuing into higher education. Research suggests that close friendships are very important for children's academic success and social adaptation (Estell, Martin, Pearl, & Van Acher, 2009). Winterowd and Boswell (1998) say that students with disabilities are at increased risk for isolation and not coping well with college life compared to their nondisabled peers. They also

say that in order for these students to overcome isolation they need to receive social support from friends and peers.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (1992) says that it is important for friends and family to praise learning-disabled individuals. When students experience failure, the right support from friends and peers can help build a student's positive self-esteem. Students without the proper support system have a much harder time coping in social and academic life (The American Academy of Pediatrics, 1992). Friends and peers can become partners with students by helping them work on assignments and helping them work on new solutions. Estell, Martin, Pearl, and Van Acher (2009) conducted a two-year study in which they examined the friendships of 55 students with learning disabilities and their peers. The study found that learning-disabled students were just as likely to have best friends as their nondisabled peers. The study also found that learning-disabled students were less likely to have the same friends overtime and typically had friends who also had learning disabilities because they could relate to them.

#### ***2.5.4. Communication with Teachers and Mentors***

Learning-disabled students have a difficult time navigating in academic settings. These students have the potential to be misunderstood by professors, especially if professors are unaware of the accommodations associated for specific learning disabilities (Frymier & Wazner, 2003). Frymier and Wazner (2003) report that communication between persons with disabilities and their teachers tend to be mixed but the majority of cases are negative. They also claim that the teaching-learning process is dependent on communication effectiveness; hence if the communication between teacher and student is not productive, learning will be negatively affected (Frymier & Wazner, 2003). Adversely, if communication between teachers and learning-disabled students is positive, then learning will be positively affected.

Teachers and mentors provide emotional support and have the capacity to nurture self-esteem in learning-disabled students. Many of the relationships with teachers and mentors develop early on in a student's life. Mentors could be coaches, club advisors, bosses, or teachers (Dole, 2000). Dole (1999) (as cited in Dole, 2000) states that some individuals credit partners as being mentors in their life and developing self-esteem. In order for teachers to be effective in communicating positively to learning-disabled students they must have a full understanding of the disability and be familiar with how they learn best. Dole claims that teachers must be able to recognize students' abilities as well as their struggles (2000). Teachers and mentors need to collaborate with students and work together to make sure the student has a grasp of the material.

#### ***2.5.5. Engagement in Extra-Curricular Activities***

Research studies have shown that students who are active in extracurricular activities are more likely to be successful in school, less likely to drop out, and more likely to have a positive attitude (Diaz, 2010; Ayala, 2011; Dole, 2000). Stoloff (2009) reported that one of the most important elements of school is a non-academic activity. Students who participate in these activities develop talent, skill, social skills, leadership, and teamwork (Stoloff, 2009).

Involvement in extracurricular activities gives students the opportunity to communicate with their peers, increasing their confidence and self-esteem. As students with learning disabilities inherently suffer from a wide range of communication difficulties, it is important that these be addressed at a young age in order to prevent social and academic problems in the future (Bray, 2003). Since learning-disabled students have difficulties communicating in social settings, involvement in extracurricular activities would give them an opportunity to make friends outside of school and outside of their network of disabled peers (Stoloff, 2009).

Dole (2000) suggests that only a portion of learning for children and adolescents take place in school (p. 95). Activities outside of school give these students an opportunity to be part

of a cooperative effort with their peers and friends. Their role in extracurricular activities allows them to develop self-esteem and self-efficacy in their high school years (Dole, 2000). Dole (2000) also suggests that part-time work and being active at work will improve self-efficacy.

#### **2.5.6. *Communication and Disability***

Over the years, the literature on communication and disability has grown in accordance with how disability is defined and represented in society. An influx in definitional changes for the word ‘disability’ has had an impact on communication and disability literature. At one level, the word ‘disability’ stigmatizes disabled individuals, causing avoidance between able-bodied and disabled students (Frymier & Wanzer, 2003; Braithwaite & Labrecque, 1994). A stream of literature focuses on communication between disabled and able-bodied students and the difficult situations that arise during interaction (Frymier & Wanzer, 2003; Braithwaite & Labrecque, 1994; Thompson & Siebold, 1978). Research in this area has focused primarily on able-bodied perceptions of disabled individuals (Braithwaite & Labrecque, 1994; Grove & Werkman, 1991), not the other way around (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1994, 1997; Braithwaite, 1990, 1991; Braithwaite & Labrecque, 1994). Researchers have looked at the communication of disabled and able-bodied individuals as a cultural anomaly and have often studied these relationships from a cultural perspective (Braithwaite, 1990).

Many of the problems we see in disabled-able-bodied interaction have been linked to uncertainty between the interactants (Thompson & Seibold, 1978). Disabled individuals are uncertain about how they will be treated by able-bodied people and about the expectations others have of them. Able-bodied people are also uncertain about how they should interact with disabled individuals. Grove and Werkman (1991) compared conversations between physically disabled and able-bodied strangers to conversations between two able-bodied strangers. They found that uncertainty and discomfort associated with interacting with a disabled individual

resulted in less learning and awareness about the disabled stranger's activities. Literature on the interaction between teachers and disabled students suggest that teachers maintain interpersonal distance while interacting with physically disabled students (Fine & Asch, 1988). However, Frymier and Wanzer (2003) found that disabled students reported interactions with instructors as being positive and similar to their able-bodied peers.

The communication and disability literature also focuses particularly on one group of stigmatized individuals. Even though there are different types of disabilities, society lumps disabled individuals into one category. Many researchers focus primarily on physically disabled individuals (Lindemann, 2008, 2010, 2011; Lindemann & Cherney, 2008; Braithwaite, 1990, 1991; Frymier & Wanzer, 2003).

Braithwaite (1990) examined persons with acquired disabilities and how they transitioned from being members of the able-bodied majority to the disabled minority. She found that members with acquired physical disabilities more easily made adjustments in their communication and relationships with others (Braithwaite, 1990, 465-467). Lindemann (2011) utilized the ethnographic performances from a disabled student and his own narratives of (dis)ability to investigate the (dis)abled body in the communication classroom. He used interviews with his student to help him design future iterations with a focus on ability and disability (Lindemann, 2011, 288). Lindemann (2010) also examined masculinity and disability in sport because disabled men are stigmatized for their physical appearance and are subject to stereotypical sport participation that emphasizes "able-bodied heterosexuality" (p.437). Lindemann and Cherney's (2011) study on masculinity and disability in wheelchair rugby recognized that organized sports help quadriplegic individuals learn strategies for coping with their physical disability.

There is a big gap in the literature on positive models of disability although there is some

literature about post-secondary institutions in the United States that effectively transition disabled students into the university environment (Peterson & Vlasman, 2004). In 2004, there were thirteen universities with “transition programs” that helped special education students’ transition into the university environment (Peterson & Vlasman, 2004, p. 1-2). Those numbers are likely up by a good margin in 2012. Interestingly, most “transition programs” take place in contexts other than the university campus -- i.e. in community colleges and technical institutes. Peterson and Vlasman (2004) studied The Go Project, one of many nationwide public education programs aimed at transitioning disabled students into higher education. The Go Project is hailed as a model of excellence as it engages students and the community in the process of transition. However, scholarship on the positive representations of disability (such as The Go Project) is thin. More studies are needed on positive models of disability.

#### ***2.5.7. Communication Contributes***

Few studies exist on the experiences of the learning-disabled college student. Several studies have been aimed at learning-disabled youth rather than students’ transition into, and experiences within, college. Lack of studies on the learning-disabled college student could mean two things: more learning-disabled students are attending college and/or there is a bigger problem with learning-disabled youth. Recent studies suggest that the number of disabled students entering college is increasing due to a rise in resources available to them (Winterowd, Street, & Boswell, 1998). Preoccupation with learning-disabled elementary students and their challenges consume communication and disability literature. The emphasis on learning-disabled youth is beneficial because many negative behaviors usually associated with these students can be circumvented through early intervention. However, this emphasis should be on integrating students with disabilities who are entering college. Not all students who are registered with their students’ disability office were diagnosed with a disability at a young age. In addition, the



majority of learning-disabled adults are not diagnosed until college and some are never diagnosed.

While there are several studies found in the field of communication that highlight issues related to physically disabled students and relationships with their able-bodied peers, there seems to be a lack of academic papers dedicated to studying learning-disabled students. The leader in communication research on disabled students is Kurt Lindemann. Lindemann examines communicative performances of identity in organizational contexts, focusing on gender in sport and has done several studies dealing with access and ability and performing (dis)ability in the classroom (Lindemann, 2008, 2010, 2011; Lindemann & Cherney, 2011). While Lindemann is a great contributor to the field of communication in terms of disability research, there is a lack of specific focus on learning-disabled students in higher education.

The majority of articles found on learning-disabled students and communication were in Education and Disability Journals. Studies found in these journals discuss learning-disabled students and their ability to cope in an academic setting (Zelege, 2004; Hartley, 2010; Dole, 2000).

My study specifically addresses the communicative behaviors of Positive Deviants among learning-disabled students. These Positive Deviants have achieved academic success against all odds.

## **2.6. Positive Deviance and the Disabled Student Community**

The Positive Deviance (PD) approach will be applied to this study to identify those learning-disabled students who are able to maintain a 3.0 GPA or higher, achieve academic success, are involved in extracurricular activities, and still graduate in a timely manner without the help of specialized tutoring. This study will uncover the solutions that are already present in

the learning-disabled student community. These students, against all odds, have not given up and have not dropped out of college.

The researcher will simply act as a facilitator in order to use the PD inquiry approach as a mechanism to identify the communicative behaviors of learning-disabled students, their parents, their peers, their mentors, their partners, and their teachers that help to prevent them from dropping out of college. This study will not only focus on the communicative behaviors of disabled students (intrapersonal communication), but also on the interactional relationships they have with their family, peers, mentors, and teachers. The interpersonal communication skills will identify how communication with extended members has affected the student's ability to achieve academic success. Hence, the study explores the factors associated with a disabled student's decision to stay in school and maintain a good GPA.

The research that has been written up to this point, states that external factors must intervene in order to reduce dropout rates among disabled students. However, this is not the only method of intervening. Other studies on academic resilience among learning-disabled students have identified the student as having the ultimate power in dropout prevention (Dole, 2000; Dugle & Grigorenko, 2001; Givon & Court, 2010; Goddard & Sendi, 2008; Hartley, 2010). Internal and external protective factors act as a form of academic resilience. Students use these protective factors to overcome regular academic and disability-related obstacles and stressors (Martin & Marsh, 2009). While these studies identify the protective factors students use to be resilient against chronic obstacles, they do not identify exactly 'what' communicative behaviors these students engage in and 'how' they engage in these behaviors (what are they doing differently). This investigation is designed to find solutions that already exist in the learning-disabled community and magnify them to the entire disabled student community.

This study is distinguishable from other PD inquiries in that I am already a member of the learning-disabled community; hence, the initiative has already been taken. As a member of the learning-disabled community, I understand how I was able to achieve academic success and graduate in a timely manner. However, I had access to resources that most students do not have. The primary purpose of this study was to understand how those, without access to an additional resource<sup>11</sup> are able to achieve academic success. We have already identified the tenets of the PD approach in the previous sections and will apply them to the disabled student community.

1. *The solution is already in the community:* There are students who already exhibit positive deviant characteristics. Community ownership is needed in discovering the ‘who’, ‘what’ behaviors are being used and ways to spread these practices to others and ‘how’ they are being used (Pascale, Sternin, & Sternin, 2010; Singhal, Buscell, & Lindberg, 2010)
2. *Resources must be available to all:* When dealing with the learning-disabled community it is important to note that those students who get extra assistance that is not available to all students will not be considered to be part of the study. This study will only apply to those learning-disabled students who do not get extended assistance through specialized tutoring. Those students who against all odds are able to succeed academically. Hence, only communicative behaviors will be addressed and analyzed.
3. *Members of the community must be invited and not forced to participate:* More importantly members of the disabled community need to feel like they are a part of the process. (Singhal, Buscell, & Lindberg, 2010). As a student with a learning disability, I am already a part of the process. I have a vested interest in what students in my community do differently to achieve academic success.
4. *PD practices include enactment and consistency:* Once these students are identified, learned behaviors need to be spread throughout the community.

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<sup>11</sup> In this study the additional resource includes specialized tutoring. This additional resource is expensive and is typically not accessible to the entire learning-disabled community.

Research suggests that disabled students who self-monitor and self-motivate do so gradually and consistently overtime (Goddard & Sendi, 2008). Once the knowledge is spread, other members of the disabled community must engage in these behaviors and do so consistently (Pascale, Sternin, & Sternin, 2010).

5. *Social proof is a way to change behavior:* As soon as community members realize that others in their community are solving the problem with the same resources, they will follow. Members in the disabled student community will learn by doing. Information found in this study will be disseminated to members in the learning-disabled community through the form of presentations given by the researcher and Positive Deviants. Information learned from this study will also be given to incoming learning-disabled students so that they can use these techniques and practices to achieve academic success.

### Research Questions

Based on the above review of literature on Positive Deviance and resilience among the learning-disabled population, the following research questions are posed:

- RQ1: What are the specific intrapersonal communication behaviors that learning-disabled Positive Deviant students engage in that assist them in achieving academic success and timely graduation?
- RQ2: What are the specific communication behaviors and practices that learning-disabled Positive Deviant students engage in with their parents and family that assist them in achieving academic success and timely graduation?
- RQ3: What are the specific communication behaviors and practices that learning-disabled Positive Deviant students engage in with their peers and friends that assist them in achieving academic success and timely graduation?

RQ4: What are the specific communication behaviors and practices that learning-disabled

Positive Deviant students engage in with their teachers and mentors that assist them in achieving academic success and timely graduation?

In the next chapter, the methodology and data-collection procedures will be discussed to address the above research questions.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

“I was a child with a speech and ambulation disability, born into a middle class family with only typical sibling conflict. I completed my education, had a successful career, and enjoyed marriage. There were problems along the way, but they were overcome or circumvented.”

- Bob Segalman<sup>12</sup>

This chapter discusses the methods and data-collection procedures employed to conduct the present research. Prior to engaging in data-collection, the present researcher completed IRB training. An IRB application was filed and revised through several iterations with inputs from reviewers. Once IRB approval was received, the consent forms were distributed and signed before any data was collected.

### **3.1 Site of Research**

For the purposes of this study, college students with learning disabilities from a mid-sized state university in the Southwest border region of the United States were interviewed. Factors considered for this university selection included easy access to the campus and access to the Center for Accommodations and Support Services (CASS) that could help with present research. Currently CASS has over 420 students registered with the office. Of those registered, psychological disorders, learning disabilities and mobility impairments were the three largest types of student disabilities. CASS provides accommodations to undergraduate, Masters, and Ph.D. students in over 700 courses per semester (Dethlefs, 2012).

### **3.2 Selection of Respondents**

While college students faced many internal and external challenges that play a role in their academic success or failure, the Positive Deviance (PD) Approach focused on those people,

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<sup>12</sup> See Segalman (2009).

who against all odds found ways to overcome the problems that are present in their community with the same resources as everyone else. For this study, the main focus was: Why is it that some students with learning disabilities flourish academically while others fail and dropout? As a member of the learning-disabled community I found it disconcerting that there was such a large number of learning-disabled students who dropout and yet there were members in the community who have above a 3.5 GPA and a large number of them have a 4.0 GPA. Perhaps the successful ones could provide some guidance to those who had to dropout. After communicating with my learning-disabled peers and the Director of CASS, I decided to make it my task to identify the Positive Deviants who are able to achieve academic success without additional resources such as specialized tutoring.

I developed research questions in order to understand the intrapersonal communication behaviors that these students engage in and how their interaction with their family, peers, and teachers helped them achieve academic success. After speaking to the Director of CASS and through the review of literature, the screening criteria for selecting the PD learning-disabled students were identified. Screening criteria included: 1) must be at least a Freshman in their second semester at UTEP to determine GPA; 2) must be registered with Center for Accommodations and Support Services (CASS); 3) must have a GPA of 3.0 or higher; 4) must graduate from college in 5 years or less; 5) have household responsibilities; 6) must not have specialized tutoring; and 7) have a job or be involved in extracurricular activities that require them to be active at least 10 hours a week.

### **3.3. Identifying Positive Deviants for In-depth Interviews**

The Director of CASS has identified registered students with disabilities that have above a 3.5 GPA. Over 64 students with all types of disabilities meet the identified 3.5 GPA criteria. A

second iteration was carried out to see how many of those students had cognitive and learning disabilities. The sample size shrunk to 34. In a third iteration I reduced the criteria of 3.5 GPA to a 3.1 GPA. This increased the sample of learning disabled students from 34 students to 61 students. Once IRB was approved students who met the 3.1 GPA criteria received an email from CASS representatives that included a flyer discussing the study and the screening criteria. The flyer contained my contact information so that students would contact me directly. Students who did not contact me directly would contact CASS for more information on the study. Volunteers who worked in the CASS office also implemented another approach of contacting students by calling them and letting them know they qualified for the study.

The PD criteria for inclusion in the study was adapted as new information came up. Such is an essential part of the PD process. For instance, I found that some of my participants had been in individualized education programs and took disability related medication. I also set my GPA criteria at 3.0 since several students were below the 3.1 criteria. Also, by reducing the GPA criteria further from 3.1 to 3.0 allowed me to focus on a pool of 43 respondents who were specifically learning-disabled. Learning-disabled students include: attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, attention deficit disorder (ADD), traumatic brain disability, brain tumor, dyscalculia (mathematical disability), dysgraphia (writing disability), auditory and visual processing disorders, and nonverbal learning disabilities. 12 students contacted me but only 11 were selected for the study based on the screening criteria. Through the screening process, I also found that the majority of my participants had multiple learning disabilities that hindered their academic success.

The selected respondents included undergraduate and graduate students who majored and minored in diverse academic fields. Participants varied in gender and age. There were five male



participants and six female participants. Three of the participants were over the age of 40 and the other eight ranged from 20 to late 30s. The Positive Deviance (PD) approach was utilized as a guide to formulate interview questions. Fifteen semi-structured interview questions were formulated to identify what communicative behaviors and practices learning-disabled students engage in intrapersonally and interpersonally with their families, peers, and mentors that help them achieve academic success. The interviews were recorded by audiotape and were approximately one to two hours. The students' part in the study was confidential and none of the information identified them by name. All records were stored in a secure location and heard only for research purposes by me and my faculty adviser. Audiotapes of the interviews were coded so the student would not be personally identified. Audiotapes will be retained for possible future analysis. In addition the selected PD students who volunteered for the study were asked to take part in an optional participatory sketching exercise after their interview.

### **3.4. Participatory Sketching**

Participatory sketching (PS) is a participant-oriented method to collect data and insights that are difficult to gather with typical survey-and-interview questions (Durá & Singhal, 2009). Rattine-Flaherty and Singhal (as cited in Durá and Singhal) used PS to collect impressions from health promotoras in the Peruvian Amazon about life changes after listening to a popular radio program. In this study, PS was used to allow disabled students to visualize and conceptualize a difficult situation they have overcome. In addition, PS has allowed the researcher to understand better how the student has dealt with their disability through different stages of life. Sketching allowed students to give a life-span development perspective from middle school to college. This gave an account into the different demands and stressors faced by these disabled individuals through their childhood, adolescence, and adulthood (Dole, 2000). In order to gain knowledge of

the participants experience in different phases of their life, they were asked to describe and draw an obstacle, which affected them academically in middle school, high school, and college. These participants were asked to draw these pictures in order to demonstrate how their obstacles have changed overtime. Participants were also asked to draw solutions to the obstacles they faced. This process provided insightful observations to how students overcame specific academic obstacles. This participatory exercise was optional.

For those who carried out participatory sketching, some encouraged me to take photographs of their planners, degree plans, and extracurricular activities. Photographs were not sought actively but the few that I took provided insight on methods of organization that were not introduced in the participatory sketching exercise. These few photographs are included to contextualize the sketches.

The results of the in-depth interviews and observations of participatory sketching are presented in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

“Nobody can do everything, but everybody can do something.”

- Author Unknown<sup>13</sup>

In the present chapter, I draw upon my in-depth interviews and participatory sketching exercises conducted with Positive Deviants to answer the four proposed research questions. The answers shed insights on how learning-disabled students are able to achieve academic success and graduate in a timely manner despite the many obstacles they face. I identify and detail the micro-behaviors of students and their support networks and provide a foundation of actions that others can replicate and adapt to suite their own personal needs.

While many Positive Deviant participants were highly positive in their outlook and viewed their disability as enhancing their other abilities, they also shared the barriers they routinely face, and have somehow overcome. Not all of the participants experienced a loving and supportive network from family and friends. Some were discouraged from continuing higher education, others were ridiculed by their peers, and some have struggled with lack of resources for diagnosis and testing that prevents them from getting proper accommodations. Despite overwhelming obstacles, these students have been able to use a variety of interpersonal communication behaviors that have helped them to succeed.

Interestingly, all learning-disabled participants in the study noted how the unique attributes of their disability, their education status, gender, and their age influenced their experiences. A majority of the participants had dyslexia, ADD, and ADHD. Two of the participants with dyslexia had one other learning disability such as ADD or ADHD,

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<sup>13</sup> See Quote Garden (2012). This quote was selected due to its relevance with the chapter's theme. Learning-disabled student's abilities are highlighted in this chapter. By focusing on what they do differently to achieve academic success the quote identifies that these students understand their weaknesses, but they harness and enhance their strengths.

compounding their academic difficulties. One participant had epilepsy in which seizures can cause brain damage and memory loss. This participant was able to account for his/her experiences in school before and after the onset of the seizures. This participant moved from communicating as a member of the able-bodied majority to doing so as a member of the disabled minority (Braithwaite, 1990). Further, interviewing both undergraduate and graduate students made for richer and rewarding insights given that graduate programs have higher workloads and expectations. The presence of five male and six female participants in the pool was useful to see how different genders perceived academic success. Also, the presence of older students (above 40 years of age) in the pool was useful as they were able to express their motivations to return to school, and to show the different perspectives that age and wisdom can bring to the practice of Positive Deviant behaviors.

#### **4.1 Intrapersonal Behaviors of Participants**

RQ1 asked: What are the specific intrapersonal communication behaviors that learning-disabled Positive Deviant students engage in that assist them in achieving academic success and timely graduation?

Although not all participants received the same level of support or encouragement from family, friends, and teachers, similar intrapersonal behaviors helped them to succeed academically. Participants noted a wide range of responses in behaviors that helped them to achieve academic success and many were common to the respondents.

##### ***4.1.1. Open Acceptance of Disability and Self-Talk***

Participants were generally confident and accepting of their disability, which gives them a sense of self-worth and self-identification. One participant whose learning disability is triggered by epilepsy explains that his self-worth has increased through acceptance:

Honestly over this short amount of time, I feel that my self-worth is more important. I value myself so much more because with my seizures, it has caused brain deterioration to my right hippocampus, so my memory is not what it used to be. Before I just tried to identify, now I have realized what it is like to be on both sides. (Participant BrHa 1, April 5, 2012)

One participant provided advice to other learning-disabled students:

Denying your disability is a crutch and you will struggle, I do not see a disability is a crutch, I see it as something I am overcoming. It allows me to understand what I am going through, it will not stop me, it will actually help to succeed. (Participant RiLe 3, April 10, 2012)

Participant RiLe 3 openly accepted her disability, “I am not ashamed of my disability; I am not going to hide it” (April 10, 2012) as a way of overcoming obstacles in school and being a better employee. Participant RoSa 2 says that adjusting to college is difficult with or without a disability and those who do have a disability have to work three times as hard to adjust. Accepting one’s disability is important to participant RoSa 2, “You first have to admit you have a disability and understand to deal with it” in order to adjust to college (April 6, 2012).

Self-talk was a reoccurring behavior that was prevalent in participants’ responses. Participants would use internal dialogue to overcome difficult situations. While some students would say positive affirmations daily, others had positive sayings on posters in their rooms. Participant LySa 4 has a saying on her wall that says, “I am bigger than anything life throws at me” to motivate herself to succeed (April 12, 2012). Other participants use experience and prior accomplishments to motivate their self-talk. Participant CaLo 5 tells herself that she will get past the assignment because, “I know through prior experience that my grades are good and I get

good feedback.’ I bring good feedback from others to mind” (April 12, 2012). Participant RaCo’s self-talk is about:

‘just keep going, you can do it.’ Every time I get a good grade, I feel positive about myself, I just keep thinking I will keep going. I tell myself that ‘I got the classes done, I passed them, and just need to continue in order to reach my goal’. (April 19, 2012)

Often self-talk is spurred because of their frustration with their disability. Participant JeGe 11 makes sure that in times of frustration she tells herself, “‘I have dyslexia, it will get better, and I will get through this. I have gotten through this before...I can do this now’” (April 19, 2012). Others use support from family and friends as a motivator of self-talk. Participant LuVa 6 sees herself as having to go uphill and climb a huge mountain, but she tells herself, “‘it will be good for you, you will make it, all the people who support me are behind me [and] will help me up that hill’” (April 12, 2012). Participant RiLe 3 proved to herself that positive affirmations work. She used positive affirmations and self-talk continuously saying, “‘you will do good, you will do good’” and in one of her classes, she raised her grade from a 70 on the first test to a 94 on the second test (April 10, 2012). JeMe 12, a PhD student tells himself constantly “‘this is not hard. I can do it’. Also I tell myself to ‘relax, it is okay to be different, it is all right’” (April 20, 2012).

#### ***4.1.2. Surrounding Oneself with Eagles***

One of the notable intrapersonal behaviors these participants practiced mindfully and purposely was accepting their weaknesses and surrounding themselves with people who could fill in the gaps for them i.e. surrounding oneself with people who strengthened them in areas where they fell short. Surrounding themselves with a network of strong people allowed them to succeed academically and help build their self-esteem. Participant CaWi 8 emphasized: “It is hard to soar like an eagle when [I] am surrounded by turkeys. I try to surround myself with

eagles so that they can help me soar with them” (April 16, 2012). Participant BrHa 1 added: “Here in El Paso I have surrounded myself with good people and I have had to learn to do that, not just anyone, someone who is worth it” (April 5, 2012). Participant CaLo 5 noted: “Mostly my relationship with the students is better because they help me build on what I cannot do” (April 12, 2012). RoSa 2 says that surrounding himself with the right team is the foundation of his academic success:

First thing that you have to do is to have the right tutor and the right team. I have learned the trick of the game and I know what works and what does not work and I try to put the right people around me. I look at school like if I was an athlete and I figure it is a game to challenge myself to figure out how many A’s I can get. I do it as a game because I want to win. If I can make a lot of A’s then I have won the battle. A lot of people say I am smart, no I am not smart, I just have a lot of common sense and make sure to surround myself around the right people. (April 6, 2012)

Participant JeGe 11 surrounded herself with good people to help her with the writing process:

Having people help me to get the writing process done. Having people help you to overcome some of your inabilities because you are not dumb, you are very smart and you can overcome things. It might take you longer to get there, but you are a critical thinker and it comes easy to you. (April 19, 2012)

As discussed in the literature, one of the hardest things for learning-disabled students is to accept their disabilities and their weaknesses. These Positive Deviants have used their strengths to overcome their weaknesses and compensate by surrounding themselves with people who help them succeed.

#### **4.1.3. *Motivation to Prove***

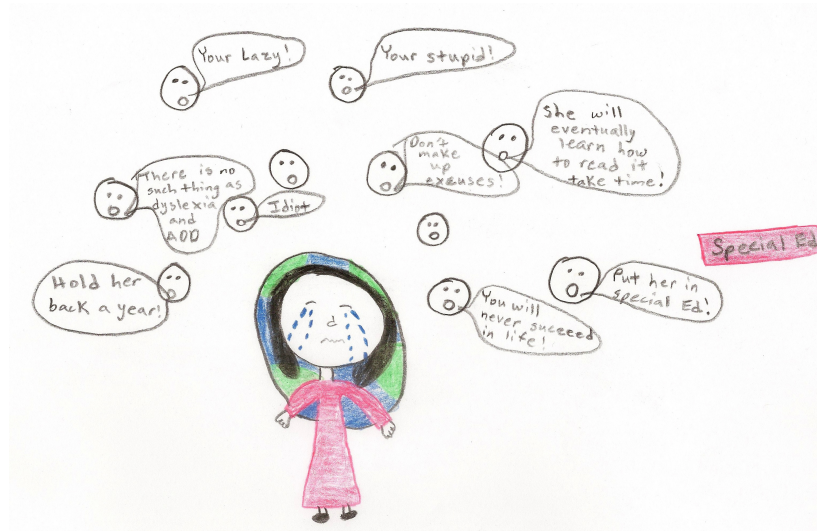
Motivation to stay in school or to return to school varied among participants, but one common theme was notable. One of the biggest motivators to stay or return to school was to prove to others and to prove to themselves that they could succeed. Participant JeMa 12, noted that his biggest motivator to pursue his Pd.D. was: “I wanted to prove that I could do better and thinking about improving myself” (April 20, 2012). Negative comments from others were just as powerful as positive comments. Negative comments spurred students to prove others and themselves wrong. Participant RoSa 2 said that his biggest motivating factor was the negative comments he received from his teacher in his senior year of high school:

I was going to find a way to better my education by finding a better outlook on life. I wish she [high school teacher] was still alive so I could go back and show her. What I have learned throughout my life, I cannot prove society wrong, I need to prove to myself that I am doing this for me. (April 6, 2012)

Another participant used negative comments from peers and teachers to motivate her to tackle high school and college at the same time, finishing college in a year and a half. In elementary school, this participant was ridiculed by her peers and neglected by her teachers, forcing her mom to intervene. Participant ReGi 7 described her years in elementary as being the worst because this is when she had to retake third grade and her teachers told her parents that she was “stupid and should be put in special education.” Because of her horrible experience, she motivated herself to do better and prove others wrong. She emphasized that: “My biggest goal in life is to close down public schools because they hurt kids” (April 12, 2002). Negative comments from others motivated her to finish school fast so that she could start a school of her own that catered to learning-disabled students.

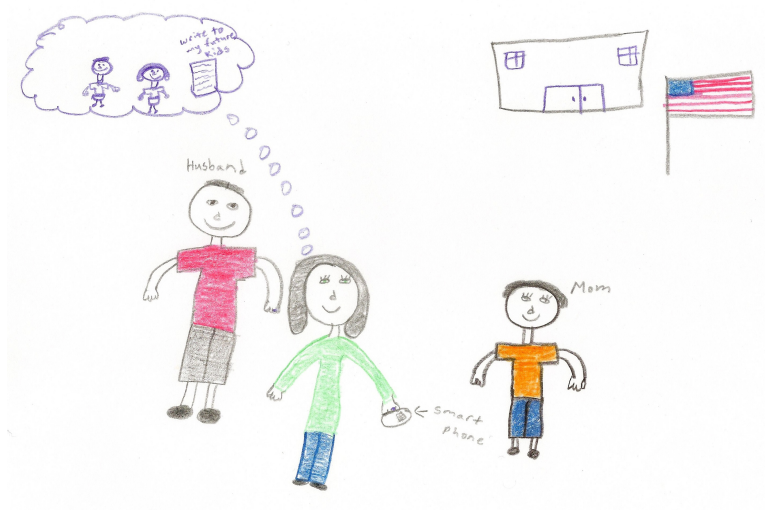


The sketches (1, 2, and 3) that follow illustrate the burning desire the participants had to prove to themselves and to others that they were no less. If anything, they were better.



Sketch 1: Overcoming Obstacles in Elementary School

Sketch 1 illustrates the difficulty participant ReGi 7 faced in elementary school. In this sketch she drew the faces of people screaming at her and showed that her shoulders were carrying an enormous weight of the world.



Sketch 2: Overcoming Difficulties in School

Sketch 2 illustrates the solution to overcome difficulties in school. In this sketch she drew a Montessori school, her husband, and her mother. All three motivate her to overcome obstacles. She also drew her smart phone because it helps her stay organized with daily tasks.



Sketch 3: Finishing College to Start Daycare

Sketch 3 is a picture of ReGi 7's day care. She was motivated to finish college early to create this daycare center. She currently has four students who attend her daycare full time.

#### ***4.1.4. Self-Evaluation, Organization, and Micro-Behaviors***

Even though participants brought different motivations to succeed, most participants used self-evaluation as a coping mechanism for overcoming their disabilities. Evaluating and compensating was a mechanism students used to accommodate for life long disabilities and newly discovered disabilities. Participant BrHa 1 said that when he was first diagnosed with his disability he was depressed. BraHa1 overcame his depression by:

Realizing that I had built a house on crappy foundations. I had to go back to nothing and rebuild, and build a strong foundation and it was time to become organized...I took a personal self-inventory and there was a lot of inventory that was worthless that I kept using and I had expensive inventory that I never used. For instance, I was a leader but I was not organized. So I had to teach myself how to become organized...I had to accommodate for losing my memory. (April 5, 2012)

Participant RoSa2 said that he was at a fourth grade level in all areas of study coming out of high school. When he entered college he fell apart, "I evaluated myself and realized that I needed to understand college before I could take on college" (April 6, 2012).

Many of the participants said that having a learning disability requires others, and they themselves, cultivate both patience and compassion. Many of the students described their inability to complete assignments. Writing a simple paper could cause much stress and anxiety. One participant noted how she got frustrated with herself because she processes information much slower than others and she becomes mentally exhausted (Participant CaLo 5). She used meditation to cope and compensate:

I make sure it is in a quite space, I do it in between studying, I take deep breaths and think about nothing for 10 to 15 minutes at a time...it helps me to find an inner peace... it allows me to be a better person. I can reflect and fix things that might be an issue or a problem. (Participant CaLo 5, April 12, 2012)

One of the most prevalent strategies that students use in overcoming their disabilities involves purposive organization in their academic and social lives. Students found that being organized allowed them to keep up with class assignments, maintain good grades, and keep track of extracurricular activities. Students used many methods to be organized in their daily lives such

as calendars, color-coding dates, planners, alarms, and keeping their syllabus with them at all times. All participants use some form of organizing tool to keep track of their classes. The most frequently used was a smart phone, as it could consolidate their emails, schedules, reminders, and notes.

ReGi 7 said that getting a smart phone enhanced her organizational skills:

I know the smart phone helped tremendously for UTEP. Before I had it, I was not doing as well. I used it to alert me and I was even able to do my homework on my phone because I was already on the go. (April 12, 2012)

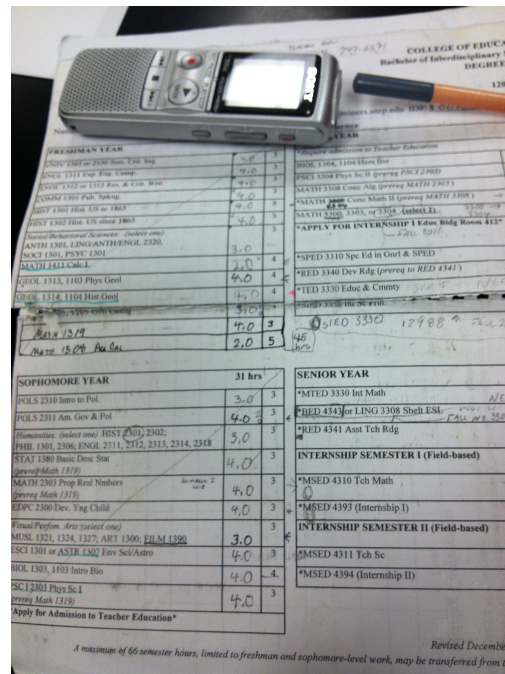
Along with smart phones, participants used old-fashioned forms of organization such as printed calendars, notepads, planners, and alarms. Participant BrHa 1 says that he is able to adapt to his memory loss by organizing his daily school life. He keeps organized by writing on his schedule on his mirror at night with a dry erase marker. He also sets at least 15 alarms to remind him to take his medication. Like other participants he has also adapted to consolidation of technology, “I have also had to adapt on my phone to save my location on an application on my phone to see where I parked my car, because I might forget” (BrHa 1, April 5, 2012). Participant JeGe 11 noted:

I am very organized, and all my classes are very organized. In my room, I have color-coordinated calendars of what is due. I have a chart by my calendar of where my classes are and my test days. (April 19, 2012)

Participant RiLe 3 says it is crucial to be organized and keep up with tasks because it is easy to fall behind, especially if you work or volunteer. RiLe 3 recalls that “you have to keep your syllabus with you and do things ahead of time in order to stay on task... I will highlight the dates that have already passed” (April 10, 2012). Participant CaWi 8 implements a variety of strategies

to not be overwhelmed by assignments, “On the back of my planner I glued my degree plan and I put my grades next to each class to help me keep on track” (April 16, 2012).

The photo that follows is an example of an organizing tool participant’s used. Participants utilized organizing tools to keep track of grades, class schedules, and assignments.



Sketch 4: Carry One’s Degree Plan

This is a picture of participant CaWi 8’s degree plan glued to the back of a planner. He used this organizing tool to keep track of grades throughout college.

Participants used other organizing tools to keep up with classes and assignments. Some participants remained organized by color-coding. In academic settings, students expressed a desire to highlight everything; some even used different colors of highlighters to help them decode certain information. Participant JeGe 11 used the colors green and purple when highlighting because they help her to associate terms. CaWi 8 color-codes his planner and schedule to avoid mixing class assignments (See Sketch 5: Color-coding).

CLASS SCHEDULE			
Semester/Quarter Fall 2011		Semester/Quarter Spring 2011	
Time	Class/Location	Time	Class/Location
1:30-2:30	CEW 10913	Mon 11:00-11:20	OFFICE HOURS
3:00-4:20	CEW 10913	12:00-12:20	UNIV 1301 UGLC 334
5:30-7:20	Math 301 MSEO 3330	1:50-2:50	Math 3309 LAET 305
8:00-9:45	INTERNSHIP 1R45	Tue 8:00-8:15	STUDENT TEACHING
9:30-5:30	LAET 309 Math 3304	5:30-8:20	MSED 4310 EDVL 203
		Wed 11:00-11:20	OFFICE HOURS
1:30-2:50	UNIV GLC VA CEW 10913	12:00-12:20	UNIV 1301 UGLC 334
3:00-4:20	GLC P&D CEW 10913	1:30-2:50	MATH 3309 LAET 305
8:00-9:45	INTERNSHIP 1R45	6:00-8:50	MSED 3330 EDVL 409
9:30-5:30	LAET 309 Math 3304		
5:30-8:20	LAET MSED 4311		
		Fri	
Instructors		Instructors	
NAME		NAME	
PHONE		PHONE	

Sketch 5: Color-Coded Planner

This picture is of participant CaWi 8's day planner. Each class is color-coded to help the student with organization (April 16, 2012).

In order to be organized in classes, participants recalled doing little things consistently. These participants said that checking Blackboard Learning System, sitting in the front row in all classes, studying more than ten hours a week, participating in extra credit assignments, going to study groups, having perfect attendance, having others read to them, using sticky notes, and highlighting were all behaviors they did consistently over time. Students took advantage of extra credit assignments and study groups to improve their grades in classes that were harder. In addition, these students said that sitting in the front row of class was crucial in preventing distractions. JeGe 11 stated:

Even as an undergraduate I feel like I am always behind and if I miss then I feel like I have missed even more. I always sit up front. I have tried sitting in the back and it does not work. (April 19, 2012)

Participant RoCo 10 expressed a similar sentiment:

I always sit in the front of class and try to participate in the class as much as possible. I never miss class; I try to show up to every class period. Even if I am sick, I go to class. I had the flu once and went to school, I do not like missing. (April 19, 2012)

In addition to using highlighters and sticky notes, students recall checking Blackboard Learning System<sup>14</sup> regularly in order to track grades and communicate with professors. While all of these behaviors help these students maintain their GPA's, consistency in these behaviors is key to success.

#### ***4.1.5. Transparent Communication and Asking for Help***

I have discussed many of the micro-behaviors students engage in to achieve academic success and will now discuss how transparency with teachers and peers also allows for better communication between student and teacher and how it also helps encourage academic success.

Participants reported keeping a good relationship with professors is incredibly important and relationship building begins the first day of class. Many used an accommodations letter from the Center for Accommodations and Support Services (CASS) or a letter they draft themselves to be transparent about their disability with their professors. Participant RoSa 2 who had experienced negative reactions from teachers in the past, used his past experiences to write a note to his professors:

So I send these letters to teachers to educate them on how I learn. After the first semester we were all on the same page, the teacher had a better understanding of how I learned...I

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<sup>14</sup> Blackboard Learning System is an online interactive system allowing students and teachers to connect. With Blackboard, students can email professors, check grades, and interact with other students.

ended up getting an A in he class. Now that [teacher] always talks very highly about me.  
(April 6, 2012)

RoSa 2 also noted: “you must have a good dialogue with teachers and start right off the bat, if you do, you can be very successful” (April 6, 2012). Another participant echoed a similar statement: “My teachers know me and they know who I am. I go and talk to them and the majority of them are good about it” (JeGe 11, April 19, 2012). CaWi 8 says he makes it a point to get to know professors personally starting the first day of class:

I make it a point to get to know the professors personally and they all know my situation because I show them my letter of accommodation at the beginning. [I] will also email professors and keep in contact and see them through the class. I try to visit them at least once or twice their office throughout the semester. (April 16, 2012)

RoCo 10 is transparent about his disability:

I tell them upfront about my disability so that they get to now me a little better...I usually talk to my teachers the first or second day of class about my disability and what they can expect from me. (April 19, 2012)

Participant LySa 4 specifies the time she allocates to talk to professors the first day of class:

Always when I first go to class [first day] at the end I introduce myself and we have a ten minute conversation so that they acknowledge I need accommodations. I tell them what I need and if I have a specific question, I can meet them in their office. I tell them I am going to put in 100 percent effort in your class and I hope you can see it in my work. I also keep in touch through email throughout the semester. (April 12, 2012)

Students registered with CASS are not required to speak to professors personally. CASS automatically sends letters of accommodations to professors; these Positive Deviant students take it upon themselves to build rapport with professors the first day of class. They all provided



examples of building a good rapport by speaking to professors on the first day of class such as, telling them about their disability, providing expectations for the class, and continuing communication with professors throughout the semester. One participant in particular used transparency of his disability as an educational tool for nondisabled students. “I use it [the disability] as an educational tool to teach those without a disability what I have to go through on a daily basis” (April 6, 2012). Participant BrHa 1 said he is open with his professors about his disability:

I am as transparent as possible and let them know what is going on... [I]f you are transparent you're your teachers they tend to want to be the same way back with you.  
(April 5, 2012)

Students found that being transparent with their teachers on the first day of class sets the foundation for a healthy relationship early on.

Many of the participants were also transparent with other students in their classes to help lay the foundation for asking help in the future. Nondisabled peers who are aware of the participants' disability are more understanding and more likely to help with class assignments than those who are unaware of the disability. Participant JeGe 11 noted that she also has a very transparent relationship with her classmates. One of her peers in particular is very protective of her disability and will help her in areas she falls short (April 19, 2012). Those participants who work say that it is crucial to be transparent in their jobs. Transparency with bosses allowed them to ask for accommodations.

Asking for help is a behavior that most disabled students typically refrain from. Striving for independence gets in the way. In order to gain independence many refrain from asking for help for fear of labeling. Barnard-Brak, Lechtenberger, and Lan (2010) explain that students downplay their disability status in order to pass as general education students. This affects

students with hidden disabilities the most since they are able to hide their disability easily. The ability to ask for help suppresses and many learning-disabled students go throughout college without help and without accommodations. Participants in this study deviated from the norm and embraced transparency and asking for help. These students asked for help and their academic success is a direct result of that behavior.

The people that participants asked for help varied, but the result was the same. Several participants asked their partners for help. Participant RiLe 3 noted: “my husband would read the chapters for my University class and would it explain it to me in a way I would understand” (April 10, 2012). One participant needed help with his Dragon Dictation software and asked for help from a technician from the local community college (RoCo 10, April 19, 2012). Participant ReGi 7 claims that asking for help is the easiest way to find a solution;

If you want to do good, you have to set your mind and you have to ask. Do not be shy, do not be scared, especially if you think you will do wrong. I went out and went as far as I had to in order to change the problem. (April 12, 2012)

#### ***4.1.6. Spiritually Aware***

In the literature review I mentioned how support from churches and other spiritual outlets can help bolster resilience among disabled students (Dole, 2000). Participant responses supported Dole's findings. Most participants noted that they used spirituality and their faith as a way of overcoming their disability and achieving academic success. Clark and Cardman (2002) support the notion that spirituality of people living with disabilities promoted wellness and the ability to live normal lives. Participants claimed their religion and spirituality allowed them to accept their disability and some participants said that prayer and meditation before a test helped them to increase scores. Participant JeMa 12 said that religion has played a role in reversing the shame of his disability:

I can say that religion has played a huge role in getting [me] to work with my condition, especially when I was a kid. It alleviated some moments when I questioned [God] about my abilities in school and with any major problems. Now I realize that is it was not for those years of struggle, I could not have learned how to ‘compensate’ other things in life. (April 20, 2012)

Participant LuVa 6 used faith and prayer as a way to prepare for tough situations associated with her disabilities: “spirituality helps me. I have had a lot of faith since I started school. Meditation and praying has helped me a lot. It is very special to me, I have learned to pray more and meditate to help me with my studies” (April 12, 2012). One participant used his faith to help him have a different outlook on life, “Make me believe no matter how bad it gets, it will always get better” (CaWi 8, April 16, 2012). Participant RiLe 3 prays every morning to have patience for others and her:

I pray to give me strength. When I was ready to quit and drop out of college because of my first paper I would pray to God and ask for help, encouragement, patience, and knowledge to get through. (April 10, 2012)

Participant BrHa 1 has suffered health complications associated with his disability. When he was diagnosed with Epilepsy, he donated his kidney to his friend’s child. He had a negative reaction to a post-surgery medication causing him to have seizures up to four times a day, rapidly increasing brain damage and memory loss. BrHa 1 used his faith to bolster himself:

I think if it was not for my faith, faith in myself, faith in a higher power, faith in my family and friends. I do not think I could make it through this. Do I get angry with God? No, because I do not feel like this was God’s doing. Having a disability is a test of my faith. (April 5, 2012)

BrHa 1 used many behaviors and mechanisms to cope and overcome his disability, including reliance on his faith and the practice of meditation. He also used sticky notes, reading and writing, and painting to compensate for his inability to do certain tasks.

The sketches (6 and 7) that follow illustrate mechanisms participants used to overcome obstacles. Students used faith and other mechanisms to make them resilient.



Sketch 6: Explanations for Academic Success

The sketch above illustrates the many mechanisms and behaviors that influence the participant's academic success. Included above are images of faith and spirituality. The sketch also displays other mechanisms used to compensate for this disability such as sticky notes, reading and writing, and painting.



Sketch 7: Importance of Overcoming Obstacles

This sketch illustrates BrHa 1's obstacles. He prefers to overcome his obstacles rather than take the easy way out. BrHa 1 drew himself going over a stop sign and up the mountain instead of walking on the grass.

Participant responses show that faith and spirituality are not only an act of resilience, but it is crucial for these students in social and academic realms. Religion and spirituality increased their self-value and allowed them to find a sense of meaning.

#### ***4.1.7. Utilizing Available Resources***

Participants also suggest taking advantage of resources already available to them is helpful. Participants utilized the services of CASS, which are available to all registered students. Students took advantage of the writing center, tutoring center, Technology Support Services

Center, and CASS accommodations<sup>15</sup>. Participant RoSa 2 utilized the services provided by the Student Support Services Center:

If it was not for the one on one tutoring I do not know what I would have been able to do it. It is designed for the first time college students in heir family, if you have a disability they waive the situation. Anyone with a disability can be tutored in this program. I am there almost three times a week. It is up to the individual student on how well they want to do in school. (April 6, 2012)

RoSa 1 expressed that it is up to each individual student to take advantage of the resources provided to disabled students. He goes to tutoring three times a week because he wants to succeed academically.

#### ***4.1.8. Involvement with Extracurricular Activities***

All participants were active at least ten hours a week in jobs or extracurricular activities. Students said that being involved in things outside of school allowed them the ability to improve their interpersonal skills. Students who worked while attending school used their jobs as practice for dealing with real life situations. Students who practiced micro-organizing behaviors in school also did so at work. Participant RiLe 3 said that once she realized how to tackle her disability she also implemented it at work making her workspace more organized (April 10, 2012). Students who are involved in extracurricular activities such as in a Fraternity, a band, or do volunteer work said they gained communication skills from the experience. Participant BrHa 1 said that being in a fraternity and going to school taught him not to overextend himself: “I do not overextend myself. I have to realize what I can do and I will spearhead that” (April 5, 2012). Participant RiLe 3 says that volunteering and working allow her to build on her intrapersonal and interpersonal communication skills:

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<sup>15</sup> CASS accommodations include note takers, reader/scribe services, priority registration, and testing accommodations.

I think all the extracurricular things I do in the department continuously increased my interpersonal skills. Donors know who I am, if I need their help outside of here, I know they will help me. (April 10, 2012)

One Participant JeMa 12 was a graduate teaching assistant and used his experience teaching to find problems in his teaching that were caused by his disability (April 20, 2012).

#### **4.1.9. Summary**

Participants identified various communicative behaviors and practices that increased self-determination, self-motivation, self-evaluation, and self-reinforcement. Students said having a positive attitude and having a positive outlook on life made dealing with disability related obstacles much easier. Wehmeyer et al. (2003) said that other communication behaviors for increasing self-determination among learning-disabled students included picture cues, audio strategies, self-evaluating, and goal setting. Earlier in the chapter I discussed how participants self-evaluated, self-monitored grades and assignments, and set goals after graduation. Students suggest that on top of practicing micro-behaviors such as use of sticky notes, highlighting, and color-coding, having a positive outlook is also another way of self-motivating.

In conclusion, participants listed many micro-behaviors that helped them to achieve academic success despite their disability. Students surrounded themselves with people who complemented their shortcomings. Students also used organization to make keeping up with classes, assignments, and extracurricular activities easier. Students also used organizing tools and practices to keep up with classes such as sitting in the front of class, keeping an open line of communication with teachers, using sticky notes, highlighters, the Blackboard system, and color-coding. Many emphasized how hardships and obstacles motivated them to set realistic but important goals. Acceptance of their disability and transparency about it was a reoccurring behavior that students exhibited. Many worked and were involved in extracurricular activities to

help them build relationships, improve social skills, and have a balanced and healthy lifestyle. Participating in extracurricular activities helped participants increase their self-esteem and overcome the shame of having a disability. Students also exhibited asking for help as being an important aspect of academic success. Among the many motivators for academic success, participants said spirituality and faith served as anchors. Also having a positive attitude towards life was crucial to achieving academic success and overall well-being.

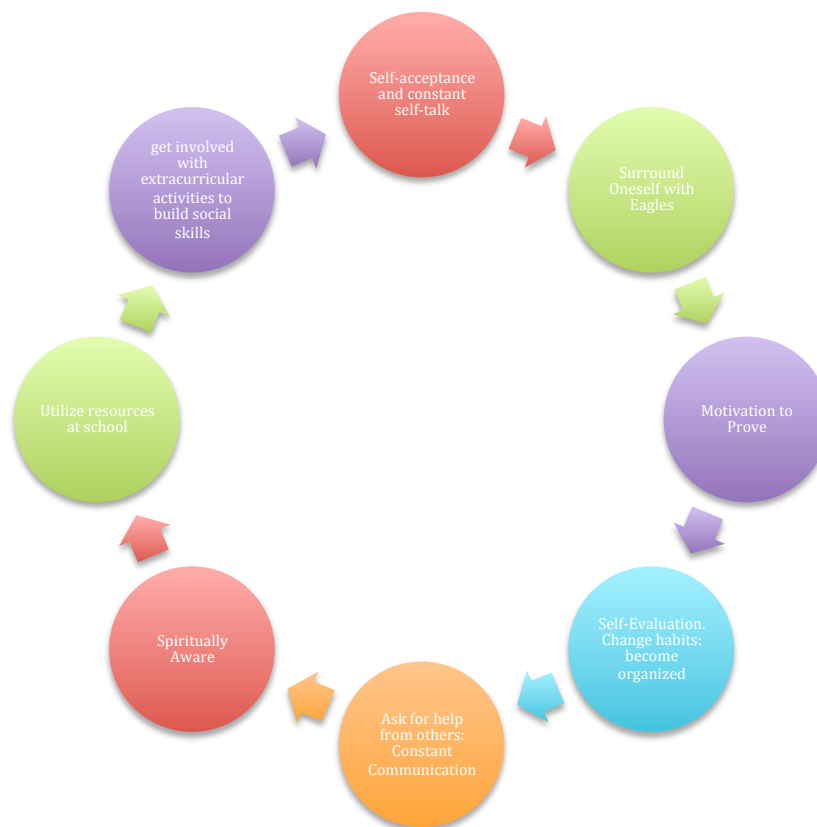


Figure 2: Intrapersonal Communication Behaviors and Practices That Contribute to Academic Success of Learning-Disabled Students

This figure represents the eight main behaviors and practices that Positive Deviant participants utilize to achieve academic success at the given institution. This cycle begins with acceptance and thus allows the participants to use positive self-affirmation. This then leads to better study habits and better organization in general. With an increased



confidence, participants felt comfortable to ask for help. Also noted was the importance of spirituality and religion. Participants utilize all resources available to them. In addition, being involved in extracurricular activities increased their social skills and self-esteem.

## **4.2 Interpersonal Behaviors of Family**

RQ2 asked: What are the specific communication behaviors and practices that learning-disabled Positive Deviant students engage in with their parents and family that assist them in achieving academic success and timely graduation?

### **4.2.1. Parental Involvement**

Participants in the study had mixed experiences in terms of support and affirmations from their parents. While some participants noted that support from parents and family was a key ingredient in their academic success, others were less enthusiastic. The relatively older participants (over the age of 40) noted that they had trouble in classes when they were younger. Teachers overlooked them and either put them in special education or let them barely scrape through in general education. Their parents were not aware of their learning disabilities and assumed their children were slow learners. Today it is evident that many of the difficulties these students faced when they were younger can be attributed to learning disabilities.

Parental involvement or lack of involvement seemed to have a direct influence on the academic success of participants. Interestingly, even for those who lacked support from parents noted that they wished to succeed and prove them wrong. One student confessed about not even informing their spouse about their own learning disability because of the spouse's negative reaction to a case of disability in the family.

Many of the respondents felt that their motivation to succeed mostly came from within, but parents and family members helped feed their internal desire to succeed. Some participants

particularly identified their grandparents as being their biggest support system. Participant BrHa 1 said:

My grandma is my rock. Growing up I lived between here and my grandfather. They are the most stability I have had until recently. My grandma tells me to laugh about things and not take things so seriously. Even when she had cancer, she never wore a wig. She looks at things so positively. (April 5, 2012)

#### **4.2.2. *Encouraging Success***

Even in families where no one had previously earned a college degree, participants found encouragement to continue with their education.

My family encourages my academic success. No one in my family has a degree, but it was not even a question. I had to go to college. If you want to go anywhere you have to be educated. (BrHa 1, April 5, 2012)

JeMa 12 is the oldest child in his family and the only one to go to college, but he was encouraged by his family and used internal motivation to succeed (April 20, 2012). JeGe 11 said that being educated is a big deal in her family:

They encourage me, my mom is a huge motivator, especially since she got me diagnosed. None of them are college educated. It is a huge thing for me because I have a learning disability and here I am getting my Masters. (April 19, 2012)

#### **4.2.3. *Self-Disclosure and Storytelling***

Many of the participants had family members who had a similar or the same disability as theirs. Participants found that communication with family members who had similar disabilities made academic success much easier to achieve because they experience things together. Many learning-disabled students find it difficult to relate to family members and parents because they do not understand what they are going through. Participants who were lucky enough to have

family members with disabilities were able to relate more. Two students have daughters with the same disability and they help and motivate each other to succeed. RiLe 3 has found that taking classes with her daughter makes it easier for both of them as they are able to go through the situation together (April 10, 2012). RiLe 3 says:

We are very supportive of each other because we know what each other is going through.

She is going full time and she gets overwhelmed like me. I try to help her on the computer and I encourage her. At the same time she helps me too. (April 10, 2012).

Participants also noted that they learned from their parents' self-disclosed mistakes. LySa 4 elaborated:

My dad has bad Dyslexia, he cannot read very well and he would tell me 'I feel so stupid'. When I would ask him to read to me when I was younger, I saw his negative attitude toward his disability and I promised I would not have that attitude. I learned from him to do better. My disability is always with me, but I do not see it as a negative. (April 12, 2012).

Another participant said that her aunt had Dyslexia, and when she saw her aunt working at Wal-Mart because of no educational qualifications, it spurred her to pursue an education and do better (ReGi 7, April 12, 2012).

#### **4.2.4. *Positive Comments***

Parents who saw their children struggling provided advice on how to cope. Parents would tell participants that they "could do anything you put your mind to", "do not use your disability as a crutch, find ways around it", "don't be afraid to ask for help", and to "surround yourself with a network of good people". Participant ReGi 7 noted: "My mom told me eventually I would have to ask for help. It was really hard, I did not know how to do it" (April 12, 2012). She said that her mom's advice really helped her and she started going to the tutoring center and

asked for help. Ever since that day, she has seen an increase in her academic success. Participant JeGe 11 said that her mom gives her little pep talks and “tells me I can get through it, I have done it before” (April 19, 2012). Participant RoSa 2 voiced his parents’ advice:

My mother and father always told me I needed to surround myself around a network of people who are my main core. To have these people try to help me improvise things that I could not do. Those were the people who have helped me to achieve my goals and my assignments. I have been doing that ever since I left the public school system. (April 6, 2012)

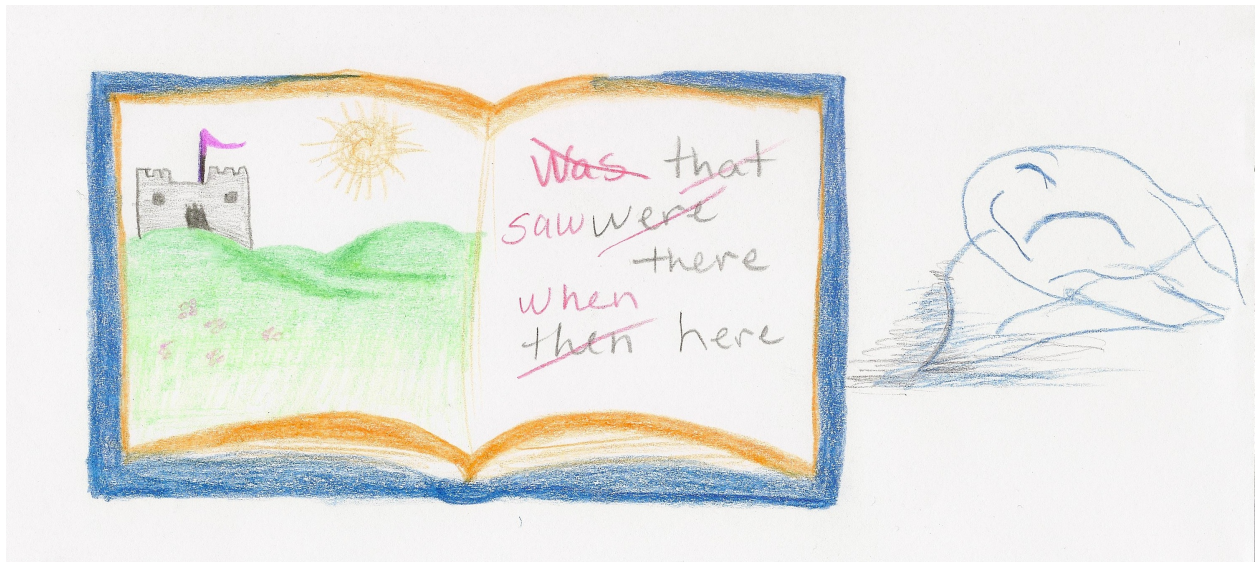
One participant said every time she complained that she could not do an assignment her mother would tell her to “not give up and find ways around it” (LySa 4, April 12, 2012). LySa 4 said that when she was younger she would get so frustrated trying to read the “castle and fantasy” books:

I would cry when I was little because I couldn’t read and I felt stupid. Sometimes my mom would get angry with me. She taught me not to allow myself to get upset and not to be a brat or ‘*chiple*<sup>16</sup>’ about my disability. (April 12, 2012)

LySa 4 describes this experience in an illustration (See Sketch 8).

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<sup>16</sup> Chiple is a Spanish slang word that means ‘whiny’, ‘spoiled’, or ‘bratty’.



Sketch 8: Building Confidence with Positive Comments

This sketch illustrates the difficulty learning-disabled students undergo. The participant drew a fantasy book to represent how she saw words and the tissues to represent her tears. Her mother would read the book with her to overcome this obstacle.

#### ***4.2.5. Helping Behaviors***

Other students said that their parents and family members were ready to help them with their homework, alleviating stress and anxiety. JeGe 11 said her mom continues to help her to this day: "My mom as a child did read to me, she goes over my papers, she helps me to spell when I am texting someone new" (April 19, 2012). CaLo 5 said that her mother helped her get centered:

She always says encouraging things to help me with my assignment and helps me out with ideas on assignments. Sometimes I have a creative block so her input helps to release ideas and we brainstorm together. (April 12, 2012)

#### **4.2.6. *Knowing Boundaries***

While mothers tended to be the more nurturing of the two parents, participants suggested that their fathers were supportive too. Participants noted that the worst thing a parent can do is undermine their intelligence by taking away their independence. Parents who set expectations for their children and then supported them helped raise more empowered children with a higher self-esteem.

Some participants were not as lucky to have supportive family members including siblings who were overly protective. These participants RoSa 2, for instance, emphasized:

My siblings out of love still treat me as a 12 year old because. They nourish a child and try to help them but do not allow them to grow in a timely manner. Some of these things have burned inside and have made me become a stronger person and have made me become more successful in my academic world and my job. (April, 5, 2012)

#### **4.2.7. *Summary***

In conclusion, supportive and affirming communication with parents and family is important for learning-disabled students. While positive comments, affirmations, validations, and pep talks from parents and family do motivate them to succeed, it is not the sole determining factor of their academic success. Students who received positive comments from parents had a greater sense of self and felt empowered to take steps to succeed. On the other hand, students who did not receive positive validations from parents and family members used it as a motivator to prove them wrong.

Storytelling and self-disclosure by parents who had similar disabilities was useful in opening up a conversational and supportive space. Parents who helped their children without much ado by reading to them, helping them in calling or texting, or in editing and polishing

papers helped them gain more confidence. Parents who provided positive affirmations and words of encouragement in times of need helped these students to flourish academically.

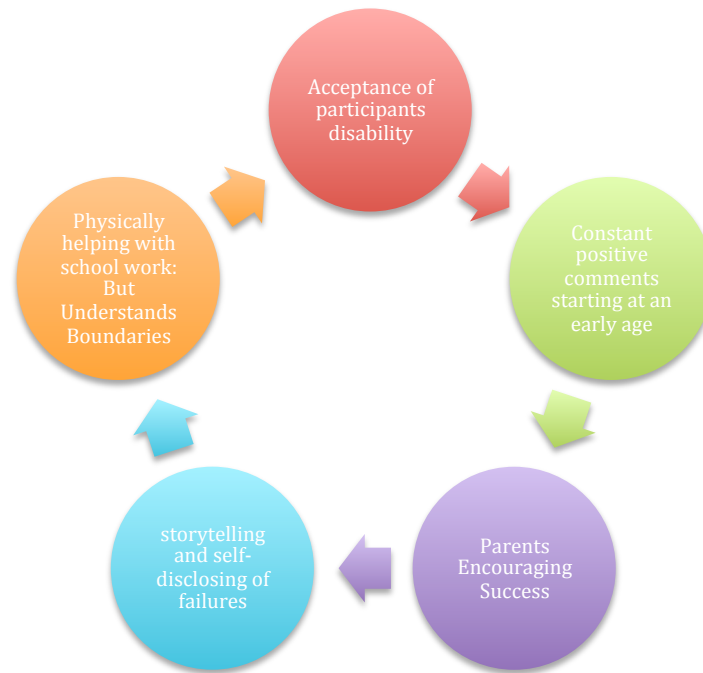


Figure 3: Communicative Practices with Parents and Family Members That Contribute to Academic Success of Learning-Disabled Students

Participants noted that five main communicative practices with their parents and families aided their academic success. Acceptance from parents leads to higher self-esteem at a young age. Constant positive comments helped participants feel a greater sense of self-worth. Parents encouraged success by not giving them an option to fail. Also, storytelling motivated participants to do better. Most importantly participants felt that parents and family who worked *with* them instead of doing tasks for them had a greater impact.

### **4.3 Interpersonal Behaviors of Friends and Peers**

RQ3: What are the specific communication behaviors and practices that learning-disabled

Positive Deviant students engage in with their peers and friends that assist them in achieving academic success and timely graduation?

#### ***4.3.1. Acceptance and Understanding***

Those participants who disclosed their disability to their friends and peers about their disability seemed to be surrounded by love and support. LaSy 4 noted that her friends acknowledge her presence and what she is capable of:

All my friends know I have a disability, but they all think I am very smart and sometimes I help them with their homework and they help me with mine. (April 12, 2012)

Another participant echoed a similar sentiment: “My friends get who I am so they don’t see a disability, they just see me” (April 12, 2002). Participant CaWi 8 says that his extroverted personality prevents others from understanding his disability. Sometimes, when he tells his new peers they laugh because they think he is joking (April 16, 2012).

#### ***4.3.2. Similar Experiences***

Many participants noted that supportive communication from peers was highly important to their academic success. For some, it was even more than communication with friends. The peers were with them in classes and understood what they were going through. Peers in the classroom were able to help participants with course related tasks.

Some of the participants, especially those who were in special education classes throughout high school, noted that their friends were their peers, who experienced the same hardships. These students surrounded themselves with friends who had disabilities. These



students understood what participants were going through academically and motivated them to continue. Participant RoCo 10 said:

One of my good friends has dyslexia. When we are texting, we can understand each other's text messages. My friends treat me fine, they treat me just like anyone else. (April 19, 2012)

Another student expressed the same sentiment: "All my friends are dyslexic and we would write notes to each other and we could understand what each other was saying" (April 19, 2012). Anxieties associated with fear of rejection were minimized.

#### **4.3.3. *Active Helping***

Participants also counted on their partners or husbands for academic support. Partners read to participants, helped in editing papers, typed papers for them while they dictated, and often would stay up late to help participants with homework. Some participants wished that their friends were more supportive of their academic decisions. However, most of them did derive strength from their friends as one would expect.

Participants also noted how partners or husbands enacted their support. Participant JeGe 11 said that her boyfriend is her editor and proofreader. She noted:

My boyfriend is very supportive of my disability. In the beginning it was hard for him to grasp...now he understands. When I am driving and I say something my boyfriend will correct me and help me through it. (April 19, 2012)

Another participant noted:

A lot of them [friends] told me that I could do it. I thought it was so amazing. Even my husband said if he could do it then I could do it. I would tell him that I could not do it because I had dyslexia. He told me that dyslexia was just a word and that I could do it. (ReGi 7, April 12, 2012)

ReGi 7's husband checked her spellings and sometimes would write while she dictated (ReGi 7, April 12, 2012).

#### ***4.3.4. Positive Comments and Constant Communication***

Some participants noted the importance of regular communication with peers and friends. Such allowed for peers and friends to keep track of the participants academic progress and growth. Participant RiLe 3 said:

She, [my boss], is very supportive...[S]he asks me periodically how I am doing in classes and keeps encouraging me to get through tough times. She knows what I am capable of and she knows when I am determined that I will be able to overcome anything. (April 10, 2012)

Another participant said his friends are glad he about the accommodations he needs: "They seem supportive and glad that there is something to address and I am getting the help I need" (JeMa, April 20, 2012). Students also recalled friends bringing up their past accomplishments as a motivator to succeed academically. Participant ReGi 7 noted that her friends help to recall all the things she has overcome: "My friend allows me to remember all my accomplishments" (April 12, 2012).

#### 4.3.5. Summary

In conclusion, participants value communication with their friends and peers. Some participants had generous support from friends while others, who chose not to disclose their disability with their friends, did not receive as much support. Interestingly, from the perspective of academic progress, most participants valued the help of their peers more than their friends because they (their peers) were wrestling with the same material in classes. Many of the participants credited their partners or husbands as being supportive friends, who helped them with schoolwork. Also, the value of regular and open lines of communication with family and friends was emphasized so that progress could be tracked and corrective actions taken when needed.

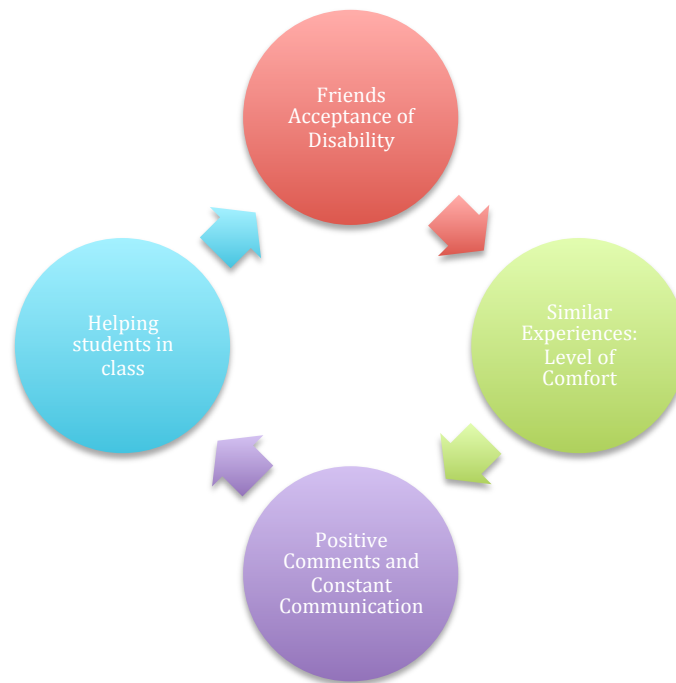


Figure 4: Communicative Practices with Friends and Peers That Contribute to Academic Success of Learning-Disabled Students

Acceptance from peers and friends contributed to disabled students' academic success. Having similar experiences in classes promoted successful behaviors from students. Positive comments did help remind students they could overcome anything.

#### **4.4 Interpersonal Behaviors of Teachers and Mentors**

RQ4: What are the specific communication behaviors and practices that learning-disabled Positive Deviant students engage in with their teachers and mentors that assist them in achieving academic success and timely graduation?

##### ***4.4.1. Seeking Out Mentors***

One of the typical reasons disabled students drop out is lack of academic integration (Hartley, 2010). Compounding this problem is the unfortunate fact that disabled students receive less academic support from faculty and staff (Hartley, 2012). Students who were in special education through high school soon realized that the transition to college was more difficult. Students who are not registered with CASS and who cannot keep up with assignments get frustrated by the experience and drop out or fail classes. The literature suggests that communication with teachers and mentors is crucial in helping disabled students succeed. Once teachers and mentors know about the students' disabilities they should make the necessary accommodations. Many participants experienced negative interactions with teachers after arriving in college, while others experienced negativity from teachers throughout their academic lives. However, almost all of them were fortunate enough to have encountered teachers who supported their success and worked with them to achieve their goals. Many of these teachers were considered as mentors. Some participants considered their supportive bosses as mentors, as well.

#### ***4.4.2. Acceptance and Understanding of Disability in Special Education***

Four participants of this study were in special education up until high school where they expressed receiving mixed treatment from teachers. Some students were treated well, while others were deprived of their individuality and independence. Participant RoSa 2 explained:

Special ed has chewed those peoples gum and tied those people shoes. People never had a change to do anything for themselves without assistance. So the minute they walk into a university they will fall on their face because it is too overwhelming. They weren't taught the tools a normal student already has...[I]f you don't have a good support system or manage your disability well enough or health, you can disappear really quick out the door of the institution. If you do not understand the routine, lets say you came out of special ed your whole life. Expectations are low, but teachers pump you up and when you go to a university it is hard. (April 6, 2012)

Participant JeGe 11 said her experience with a special education teacher in elementary was great. JeGe 11 met her mentor in special education classes because she was a teacher who ended up following her throughout high school and college. Her mentor was the one who diagnosed her so she could get accommodations. Her mentor helped her discover that a having a disability was not a bad thing:

My special-ed teacher helped [me] quite a bit. My mentor came out and she helps me now and then. She helps me to understand what I had and helps me to accept it. I graduated high school with a 4.0 GPA. (April 19, 2012)

Through her mentors tips and advice on how to overcome her disability, JeGe 11 was able to learn early on how to compensate for academic shortcomings.

#### **4.4.3. Positive Reinforcements**

Students who were rewarded for their abilities felt a sense of worth. These recognitions gave students a sense of accomplishment, allowing them to enhance their abilities in other areas. Teachers' affirmations helped them boost their confidence. One participant noted:

My fourth grade teacher was a great mentor because she was a great teacher. She worked with me and made me feel like I 'could do this' and she also accommodated me. She made awards at the end of the year and she awarded me with the 'creative' award. (ReGi 7, April 12, 2012)

JeGe 11 said that her mentor continues to give her gifts and awards for her accomplishments. She added:

My mentor from the beginning has helped me tremendously, has given me gifts, written me letters, helped motivate me and helped me with what I am going through. The teachers who understand what I am going through are supportive of me. (April 19, 2012)

All of the participants that were interviewed excelled and flourish in creative arenas. Some of the participants were artists, poets, authors, musicians, and singers. They used their creative elements to distinguish them from everyone else. These students felt that their creativity would not flourish without the affirmations from teachers and mentors.

#### **4.4.4. Increase in Availability**

Participants also emphasized that their mentors and teachers put in extra time to help them. Mentors were more accessible to students, making it more possible to talk to them and build relationships. Students felt that mentors had a vested interest in their success because they in turn were putting in the extra effort. BrHa 1 said that about his mentor:

Yvonne Carranza has been such a great help with me. She sat with me for three hours one day helping me figure out my schedule. She has helped me figure out what to do at this school and what would best fit me...[B]ecause of her I am thinking about going into law school. (April 5, 2012)

Students who are transparent with their teachers the first day of class say they have received better support from teachers. RiLe 3 said that once she told her history teacher about her disability he made it a point to meet with her biweekly to make sure she understood the material. RiLe 3 explained:

I met with him [history teacher] and explained him the situation. After I was admitted into [CASS] he wanted to meet with me on a regular basis to make sure I was understanding the material and anything I needed to do to pass the class. He would give me a head start to make sure that I could be caught up with the material. He shows me what to look for while I read materials and he takes the time to meet with me and help me succeed in this class. (April 10, 2012)

Participant RiLe 3 was transparent with her mentor and he took the time to meet with her outside of class to make sure she was keeping up with course materials.

#### ***4.4.5. Positive Reinforcement***

Participants noted their teachers motivated them by giving them words of encouragement and telling them they can do better. RiLe 3 says that her history teacher also encourages her: “Right now you have a C, but I know you can do better if you come in and work with me. I know you can get an A” (April 10, 2012). Teachers who convinced their students that they were capable of academic success made students feel confident in their abilities. Students in turn, wanted to make their teachers and mentors proud.

Positive comments from teachers and mentors helped these students establish a greater sense of self-worth. Participants said their mentors would constantly tell them, “you are smart,” “I see great things in your future,” “keep up the good work, I know you can do it.” These positive comments reinforced their self-confidence. RoSa 2 said that his former boss at the YMCA could not understand how he was able to accomplish all his tasks despite his disability. He said that his boss appreciated all the work he had done for the YMCA (April 6, 2012). CaWi 8 said that his teachers and mentors help him realize his potential. Their comments and belief in him made him realize he wanted to go to graduate school; he is currently in the process of applying (April 16, 2012). The constant, repetitive positive comments from teachers and mentors help them realize their potential.

#### **4.4.6. *Summary***

In conclusion, participants found that constant affirmations from teachers and mentors helped motivate them to do better. In addition, the types of comments made had a significant impact on academic success. Teachers and mentors helped students realize their full potential by telling them “you are smart”, “I see great things in your future”, “I see you becoming a lawyer”. These comments gave students a greater purpose and made them raise their expectations for themselves. Teachers and mentors were also acknowledged for their availability and approachability. These mentors made the extra effort to tutor students after class hours or giving them advice on how to improve their grade in the class. Students who were in special education in college mentioned that teachers were very supportive and helped them enhance their abilities rather than focus on their inabilities. Lastly, participants said teachers and mentors who recognized them for their abilities have a lasting impact on their academic success.



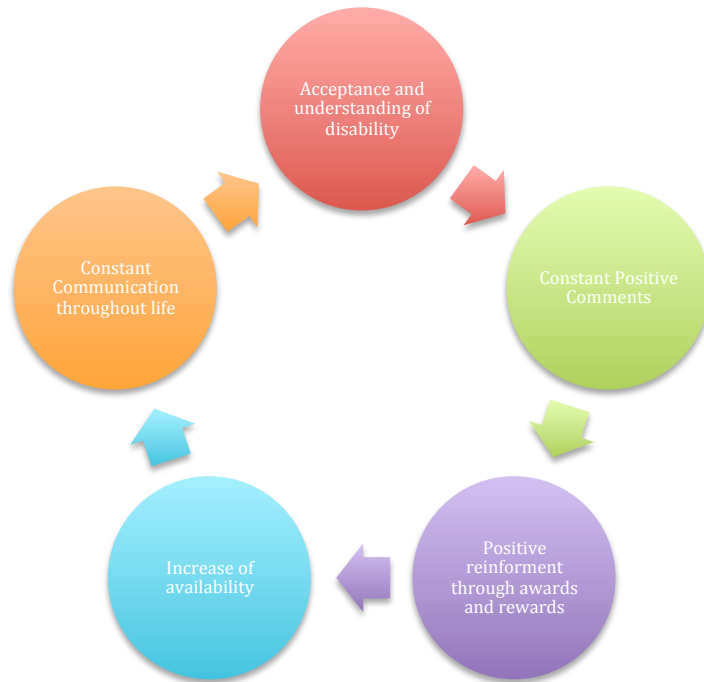


Figure 5: Communicative Practices with Teachers and Mentors That Contribute to Academic Success of Learning-Disabled Students

Understanding, awareness, and acceptance by educators and mentors helped disabled students achieve academic success. Constant positive comments from teachers and mentors increased their self-esteem and self-worth. Positive Reinforcement and rewards gave students a sense of empowerment. Availability and flexibility of teachers and mentors was a huge factor that contributed to the success of students. Communication throughout students' academic life contributed to successful behaviors from students.

#### 4.5 Significant Findings

Within the present study, several significant findings surfaced. The majority of the Positive Deviants have family members with disabilities. One participant in particular has dyslexia and did not discover her disability until her daughter was diagnosed. Another participant said that she takes classes with her daughter who also has a learning disability. They take classes

together to help each other and motivate each other to succeed. Another student said she used her father's negativity about his disability as a motivating factor to think positively.

The majority of participants failed second and third grade. Students said that failure in these grades motivated them to never settle for failure again. These participants who failed tried harder the second time. Students who failed those grades and took the class over saw a significant increase in grades and self-esteem.

In addition to interesting findings about failing grades and disabled family members, I found that one participant used code words with friends in order to improve his memory. This participant said that when he had problems with his memory, his friends would use a code word to see if he had forgotten to take his medicine. The code word was "popcorn". If they ever used the code word and the participant did not respond, they knew he had forgotten. The same participant used other interesting mechanisms to help enhance their memory. When studying for language tests he listens to instrumental music and chews cinnamon gum at the same time. When the student takes his exam he chews cinnamon gum to help him relate and recall the concepts he learned earlier.

Most of the participants came from low-socio-economic households, which prevented them access to disability related medication and specialized tutoring. However, students who were not from low-socio-economic households also did not take advantage of disability related medications and accommodations. These students felt they could achieve success without the help of medication.

Students' ages varied, ranging from early 20s to mid 50s and had similar responses in relation to communicative behaviors. While experiences varied amongst age group, participants recalled exhibiting similar communication with family, friends, and teachers. Students over 40 said they were treated very harshly in elementary school and only recently started using

accommodations. These participants felt that their age and wisdom has helped them to succeed and go back to school despite negative comments they received when they were younger.

#### **4.6 Summary**

The Positive Deviants were able to overcome tremendous hurdles and achieve academic success despite not having access to additional resources. Positive Deviants in the learning-disabled community were registered with CASS, had household responsibilities, and had jobs or were involved in extracurricular activities requiring them to be active at least ten hours a week and maintained a 3.0 GPA without the help of specialized tutors. Participants gave many responses regarding achieving academic success but one theme remained prevalent.

Participants said that acceptance of their disability had to come from four sources: themselves; parents and family; peers and friends; and teachers and mentors. Acceptance was absolutely critical for them to succeed. Participants gave many reasons that motivated them to stay in college or return to college. Students recalled that negative comments from family, friends, and teachers motivated them to continue, while others said that positive comments from others inspired them to stay in college. Regardless of the motivators to stay in college or return, students said that hands on participation from others made them do better in academically. Participants support networks helped them do better by studying *with* them, typing *with* them, and editing *with* them. Students felt like others had a vested interest in their success and they did not want to disappoint. All students said that internal motivators helped them through college and achieve academic success. Positive affirmations and self-talk gave students the courage to be transparent with others and ask for help. In addition, micro-behaviors such as color-coding, highlighting, sticky notes, and calendars all helped students stay on task and become organized with all their activities.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

“Life isn’t all about what you don’t have, but yet, what you do with what you have been given.”

-Robert M. Hensel<sup>17</sup>

A good percent of the school and college dropouts in the United States of America are students with disabilities. Their dropout rates are twice that of a general education student (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). Thurlow, Sinclair, and Johnson (2002) argue that dropping out holds economic and social implications which cannot be ignored. Graduating high school is no longer enough in our skills-based service economy and this puts additional stress and pressure on disabled students to seek higher education. While the literature review suggests that students with “hidden disabilities” have the greatest difficulty in completing college since they are hindered intellectually, the authors’ findings suggest that there are individuals present at universities that are able to overcome their difficulties (Hartley, 2010; HERI, 2011; and Gilbert, 2005).

While there are several studies found in the field of communication that highlight issues related to physically disabled students and relationships with their able-bodied peers, there seems to be a lack of research studying students with “hidden” disabilities, more specifically, learning-disabled students. One of the leaders in communication research on disabled students is Kurt Lindemann, who examines communicative performances of identity in organizational contexts, including the performance of (dis)ability in the classroom. While Lindemann contributed greatly to the field of communication in terms of disability research, there is not much in his work that focuses on struggles of learning-disabled students in higher education. However, there are several studies about risk and resilience in *the Oxford Review of Education* and in the *American Journal of Psychiatric Rehabilitation*. These studies give insight on how learning-disabled

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<sup>17</sup> See Hensel (2011).

students are resilient and are able to self-motivate in order to achieve academic success. The present study specifically addresses the communicative behaviors of Positive Deviants among learning-disabled students. Positive Deviants are those who have overcome their disability and achieved academic success against all odds. In this study, 11 learning-disabled students fit the criteria necessary to be considered Positive Deviants. These students' ages ranged from early 20s to mid 50s. This age range suggests that it is never too late to go back to school and finish your education. Participants responses suggest that acceptance of their disability was the most important character trait. Acceptance from participants, parents and family, peers and friends, and mentors and teachers led to other important micro-behaviors, which helped with academic success.

Intrapersonal behaviors exhibited by Positive Deviants included self-motivation, self-evaluation, and self-determination. Students also demonstrated micro-behaviors that increased organization, which helped them to achieve higher grades. Participants demonstrated having a higher work ethic and a more positive attitude, which lead to better grade outcomes. Participants with a positive outlook had higher self-esteem and found ways to compensate for their disability. Students compensated for their disabilities in a number of ways. They surrounded themselves with people who filled in the gaps and knew when to ask for help. The participants who were transparent of their disability with teachers, peers, and bosses received proper accommodations and consideration. Keeping an open line of communication with professors throughout the semester through office hour visits, constant emails, and staying after class allowed students to stay on task and focused. Students also said that being involved in extracurricular activities and having faith allow them to enhance their intrapersonal and interpersonal skills.

Further, in order to overcome their disability, students learned to be organized. They used calendars, phones, and planners to keep up with tasks and assignments. Students also used

highlighters, sticky notes, color-coding, and flashcards. Students felt that it was necessary to do several behaviors consistently in order to make them concrete. Behaviors such as: sitting in the front row, having perfect attendance, taking advantage of extra credit, and consistently checking Blackboard were instrumental in their academic success. Participants suggest that doing these behaviors consistently will allow for a better academic outcome.

Communication with parents and family influenced academic success. Participants had mixed parental and family support systems and did not receive the same positive motivators from family members. Some participants were discouraged from continuing their education, but used negative comments as a motivator to achieve greatness. Most importantly, students recall communication with parents and family as an important part of self-worth and self-esteem. Participants who received positive comments and pep talks from family members had a desire to succeed. Students used stories from their parents as motivators to set high academic goals. Parents who helped participants in times of frustration were able to alleviate stress and anxiety. While students appreciated help from parents, they also wanted parents to understand boundaries in which they could have their independence. Giving words of encouragement in times of need or giving useful advice allowed these students to flourish academically.

Communication with peers and friends helped to increase participants' self-esteem in a social context. Students, who had more interaction with peers in classes, saw more interactive communication occur between both parties. Students felt that transparency with peers and friends allowed interactive helping behaviors to occur. Interactive communication between peers and participants led to an increase in understanding class material. Students said they also benefited from friendships with partners and husbands. Students said their partners helped them to succeed academically because they helped them with schoolwork.

Communication with teachers and mentors throughout their life was found to be highly important for participants. Students feel that good teachers and mentors are responsible for an increase in self-esteem and self-worth. Conversely, negative feedback from other teachers affected them adversely. Constant and repetitive comments from teachers and mentors reinforced a sense of accomplishment for students. Teachers who told participants “you are smart,” “I see great things in your future,” and “I see you accomplishing great things” helped inspire them to succeed. Students wanted to succeed because they felt teachers and mentors had a vested interest in their success. Teachers who made themselves more available to students saw an increase in student expectations. In addition, teachers who followed participants through stages of their academic life were able to make sure students stayed on track. Teachers also showed caring behaviors by rewarding participants rather than punishing them. Since students were rewarded for their abilities they gained more confidence in their abilities.

## **5.1 Implications**

This study unveiled communicative behaviors and practices of Positive Deviant learning-disabled students, their family members, friends, peers, teachers, and mentors that helped promote their academic success and timely graduation. These behaviors and practices hold implications for the academic success of other learning-disabled individuals. Replicable communicative behaviors presented by participants’ point to the consideration and adoption of the following strategies for learning-disabled students and their support systems:

1. The importance of disability acceptance and positive self-talk. Students should constantly say positive affirmations like, “I can do it,” “I have overcome this, I can do it again,” and “just keep going, you can do it”. Saying these repetitively and constantly will help with academic success.

2. Transparency with teachers and peers at the beginning to establish good rapport. Students talked to their professors and peers about their disability at the beginning of class, allowing others to know what they could expect.
3. Setting high expectations for self and reaching expectations through tracking academic success. Students who set high expectations for themselves by striving to get an A in each class did so by tracking their success and talking to teachers.
4. Learning-disabled students should practice micro-behaviors constantly throughout their academic life. Micro-behaviors include highlighting; color-coding; being organized with calendars, phones, syllabus, and Outlook; sitting at the front of class; not missing class; using sticky notes; giving professors letters about their disabilities the first day of class; practice ongoing communication throughout the year through emails, phone calls, and office visits; taking advantage of student resources like The Technology Support Services Center and Writing Center; and asking for help on assignments.
5. Consistent positive messages from parents, friends, peers, teachers, and mentors should start early on. Messages like “you are smart,” “I see great things in your future,” “Don’t use your disability as a crutch, find ways around it,” “I am so proud of you,” and “I see you accomplishing great things” will increase self-esteem and allow students to set high expectations.
6. Parents should help students with schoolwork while understanding boundaries. Parents need to be aware of students’ independence but still be able to alleviate stress. Students with learning disabilities get frustrated with assignments easily, help them by reading *with* them, writing *with* them, and studying *with* them. This will help them increase their confidence in school assignments and reading.



7. Teachers and mentors should make themselves more available to learning-disabled students. Ask learning-disabled students questions. Ask them how they learn and also make sure to set expectations early on. Most importantly work *with* them, it is a process. Meeting with them weekly or biweekly is key to make sure they understand the class.
8. Teachers and mentors need to focus on positive reinforcements. Praise and reward students for their strong points rather than focus on what they cannot do.
9. Extracurricular activities and jobs are crucial for helping students to increase social skills and interpersonal communication skills. Being involved gives students a sense of accomplishment and a sense of empowerment.
10. Religion, spirituality, and faith help in addressing and reversing shame of having a disability. Even students who were not religious used spirituality to cope with stress and shame. Daily meditation exercises help to alleviate stress and anxiety.

The results of the study hold important implications for incoming students with learning disabilities. Results from this study will be shared with CASS. Both the participants and myself will disseminate solutions by creating interventions that allow all stakeholders (learning-disabled students, parents, friends, and mentors) to act their way into these PD behaviors. In addition, I plan on submitting results of my thesis for publication in Communication Journals.

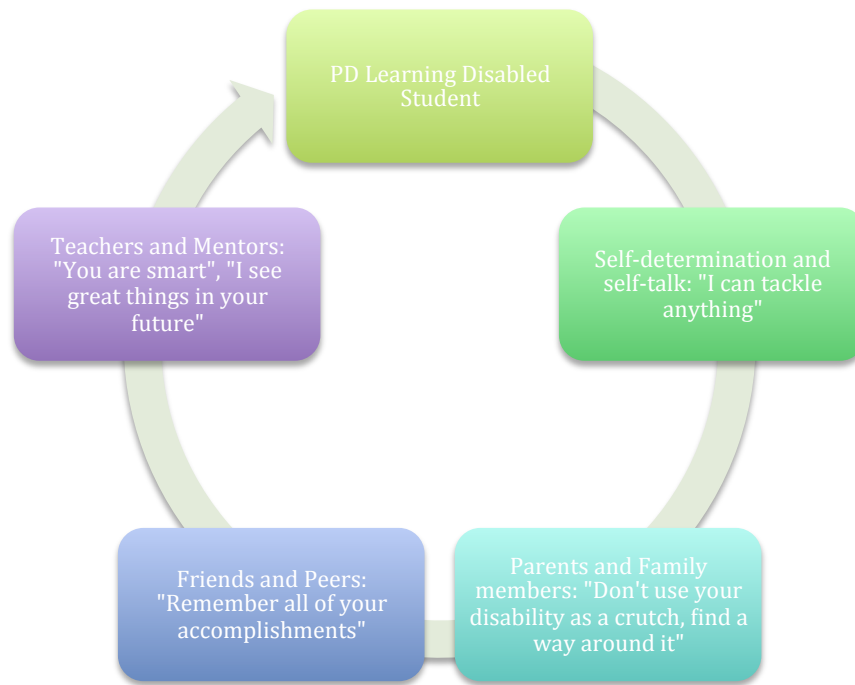


Figure 6: Key PD Messages

The above figure notes the key PD messages that surfaced in explaining academic success among participants. These include messages that played a key role in self-talk and were reinforced by parents, family, friends, peers, mentors, and teachers.

## 5.2 Limitations, Reflective Insights, and Next Steps

While the present study did find several communicative behaviors that help learning-disabled students achieve academic success, there were limitations. As a researcher and a member of the learning-disabled community, I learned to be patient and adapt to the obstacles that were presented throughout the study. The disabled student population makes up for over ten percent of the university population, but only a handful are registered with the Center for Accommodations and Support Services (CASS). Every semester the amount of students who register with the office fluctuates making it impossible to find the same students registered every semester. There are over 420 students currently registered with CASS and only a portion of them

are students with learning disabilities. The learning-disabled population registered is significantly smaller than students with physical disabilities, hence it was much more difficult to identify these students.

After I got IRB approval I assumed it would be much easier to identify learning-disabled students, especially since I am a member of the community. As I got further into the study I realized just how difficult it was for these students to step forward and talk about their disability. I assumed that since I was an advocate for disabilities and I enjoyed using my story to help others succeed, the same would be true for other learning-disabled students. I found that this was not the case. I created a flyer, which was dispersed by CASS to all learning-disabled students who had a GPA of a 3.1 or above. Only four students contacted me from the flyer. I implemented other ways of reaching out to the population: Facebook, phone calls from volunteers, and face-to-face communication. Towards the end of the semester I realized I had to apply a new method of reaching out to participants. By including my success story on the flyer I started receiving more phone calls from participants who were eager to share. At the end of my study, I had 12 students who wanted to participate in the study. After going through the screening criteria with all participants, I realized only 11 students met all the necessary criteria for the study.

What I learned from Positive Deviance is that you always have to be flexible and willing to adapt your criteria. Since I had such a small subject pool I had to be very flexible. I had originally set the GPA criteria at 3.5 and realized that there were not enough participants in that category. I altered the GPA criteria to 3.1. After interviewing one participant who had a 3.0 GPA, but he met all my other criteria, I knew I would have to change it to 3.0. Originally, hailing from a low-socio-economic household was part of the selection criteria, however not enough students fit under that category. Hence it was removed. These are just some examples of the alterations I made to the screening criteria and to my study.

In addition, I discovered that the organization of my interview questions was crucial to understand the participants experience with education and academic success. I had set up semi-structured interview questions that guided me through my participants' experiences. What I realized is that many of my participants revealed many communicative behaviors in each question. Many times I would skip questions altogether because some participants did not discover their disability until recently. In order to establish trust and build rapport, I would begin the interview by telling the participant about my own disability and the obstacles I faced and continue to face. Also, the participatory sketching exercise was fun for all participants' since it allowed their creativity to flourish.

In order to improve this study many other things can be taken into consideration. It would be beneficial to be stricter on criteria for the (against all odds) aspect of Positive Deviance to stand out. However, with limited time and limited resources it made it difficult to seek out and identify students in this category. In addition, future studies should distinguish students by disability severity. Only students with severe learning disabilities should be accepted for the study. Another interesting aspect of the study was finding participants who had disabled family members. It would be a great possibility of further exploring learning-disabled students by only focusing on those students who have family members with similar disabilities. This will give greater insight on how these family members influence academic success. Future studies should aim at raising the GPA criteria to 3.5 to see examples of extreme academic success.

Future studies would also benefit by comparing the micro-behaviors of learning-disabled students with high and low GPAs. Comparing the two groups of learning-disabled students will give insight on what behaviors truly deviate from the norm. In addition, it would be beneficial to compare non-disabled students with high GPAs and learning-disabled students with high GPAs. Comparing non-disabled and learning-disabled students with high GPAs will help distinguish

what behaviors and practices are truly deviant. It would also be beneficial to perhaps conduct PD inquiries or indepth interviews with Positive Deviant family members, friends, and teachers. By interviewing students' external support systems, there will be greater insight on what support systems do specifically to contribute to students' success.

Participants' reflections hold implications for the said university, CASS, and professors. These suggestions will help learning-disabled students be successful in higher education. Based on the students' responses, this university, CASS, and professors can make the transition from high school to college easier for students if certain measures are taken. Next steps for this university, CASS, and professors include:

- 1) Having a diagnostician on staff
- 2) Having specialized counselors and tutors on staff
- 3) Adoption of "transition programs" on campus
- 4) Having more training and informational sessions on "hidden" disabilities for faculty and staff
- 5) Professors and Staff can make themselves more available to learning-disabled students, providing them with more resources to succeed
- 6) Having more literature on learning disabilities available for faculty and staff
- 7) Faculty and Staff can also ask questions to learning disabled students on how they learn

In addition to other research possibilities, these findings have the potential to be used as an educational tool to teach incoming freshman at new student orientations about how to help their learning-disabled peers achieve academic success. Findings should be shared with university administration, faculty, and staff on how to better accommodate and treat students

who are differently abled. Having the knowledge to change is the first step, now members of the community must step up and spread knowledge to their entire community in order to make change happen. Together we must build a bridge to reach out to others and educate them about learning-disabled students:

I think of myself as trying to be malleable. Before I was not flexible and I try to think of it as building a bridge, a bridge that is rigid and is going to break. It [the bridge] cannot handle the movement around it and the only way to stay grounded is to have change on both sides. For me the way to do that is to educate myself and to educate others. (BrHa, April 5, 2012)

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<sup>18</sup> This report is influenced by two studies conducted in the U.S. Southwest looking at Positive Deviance and teenage pregnancy and Positive Deviance and high school dropouts. These studies are completely different but share similar methods and structures with the current study. Alejandra Diaz, 2010, *A Positive Deviance Inquiry of communication behaviors that influence the prevention of Hispanic teenage pregnancy* and Patricia Ayala, 2011, *Communicative practices that lead to timely high school graduation against all odds: A Positive Deviance inquiry in a predominantly Hispanic school*.

APPENDIX A  
INFORMED CONSENT

**University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) Institutional Review Board**

**Informed Consent Form for Research Involving Human Subjects**

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**Protocol Title:** Life Without Boundaries: A Positive Deviance Inquiry of Communication Behaviors in the Learning-Disabled Student Community that Influence their Academic Success

**Principal Investigator:** Davi Kallman

**UTEP *[Communication]*: Graduate Program**

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**1. Introduction**

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You are being asked to voluntarily take part in the research project described below. Please take your time making a decision and feel free to discuss it with your friends and family. Before agreeing to take part in this research study, it is important that you read the consent form that describes the study. Please ask the study researcher or the study staff to explain any words or information that you do not clearly understand.

**2. Why is this study being done?**

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You have been asked to take part in a research study of communicative behaviors that assist learning-disabled students in achieving academic success and graduating in a timely manner. Approximately 20 to 30 learning-disabled students will be enrolling in this study at UTEP. You are being asked to be in this study because you have a learning disability, are registered with the Center for Accommodations and Support Services (CASS), have household responsibilities, have a job or are involved in extra curricular activities requiring you to be involved at least 10 hours a week, have a GPA of 3.1 or greater, come from an economically challenged household, and are expected to graduate from college in 5 years or less without additional resources. Because there are a large number of disabled students registered with the Disabled Student Services Office (DSSO) recently changed to the Center for Accommodations and Support Services (CASS), CASS has helped us to identify you and other students like yourself.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be given a screening survey, and if chosen to participate in an interview, your involvement will last about one to two hours. Your part in the study is confidential and none of the information will identify you by name. Interviews will be recorded with voice recorders and audiotapes of the recordings will be transcribed.

### **3. What is involved in the study?**

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If you agree to take part in this study a screening survey will be given to you to see if you fulfill the criteria. If chosen, the research team will interview you and ask you to answer some questions about the relationship with your parents, peers, and mentors. The research team will also ask you to describe difficult situations in which your disability affected you academically through different periods of life and how you overcame those situations. This interview was designed to be approximately one to two hours in length. However, please feel free to expand on the topic or define related issues that might relate. If you do not feel comfortable answering a question, please tell us and we will stop the interview or move on to the next question, whichever you prefer. Who will have access to the recordings? No one besides the principal researcher and her advisor will have access to the recordings.

### **4. What are the risks and discomforts of the study?**

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Due to the sensitivity of the issue, some participants might be at risk of psychological or emotional distress. The researcher will be asking you to recall memories that could be potentially painful and there might be some unpleasantness for the participant, although the risk is minimal. If further assistance is needed you can contact:

University Counseling Center  
Summer hours:  
Monday - Thursday  
7:30 am - 5:00 pm  
Friday 8:00- 12:00 pm  
Phone Numbers:  
(915) 747-5302  
Fax: (915) 747-5393  
Email: [ucc@utep.edu](mailto:ucc@utep.edu)  
Location:  
UTEP 500 W. University  
202 Union West El Paso, Tx 79968

### **5. What will happen if I am injured in this study?**

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The University of Texas at El Paso and its affiliates do not offer to pay for or cover the cost of medical treatment for research related illness or injury. No funds have been set aside to pay or reimburse you in the event of such injury or illness. You will not give up any of your legal rights by signing this consent form. You should report any such injury to Davi Kallman, 915-873-6326 and to the UTEP Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (915-747-8841) or [irb.orsp@utep.edu](mailto:irb.orsp@utep.edu).

#### **6. Are there benefits to taking part in this study?**

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There will be no direct benefits to you for taking part in this study. This research may help us to understand how positive communicative behaviors can motivate learning-disabled students to achieve academic success and graduate from college in a timely manner.

#### **7. What other options are there?**

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You have the option not to take part in this study. There will be no penalties involved if you choose not to take part in this study.

#### **8. What are my costs?**

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There are no direct costs. You will be responsible for travel to and from the research site and any other incidental expenses.

#### **9. Will I be paid to participate in this study?**

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You will not be paid for taking part in this research study.

#### **10. What if I want to withdraw, or I am asked to withdraw from this study?**

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Taking part in this study is voluntary. You have the right to choose not to take part in this study. If you do not take part in the study, there will be no penalty.

If you choose to take part, you have the right to stop at any time. However, we encourage you to talk to a member of the research group so that they know why you are leaving the study. If there are any new findings during the study that may affect whether you want to continue to take part, you will be told about them.

The researcher may decide to stop your participation without your permission if he or she thinks that being in the study may cause you harm.

### **11. Who do I call if I have questions or problems?**

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You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may call Davi Kallman at (915-873-6326), [Dikallman@miners.utep.edu](mailto:Dikallman@miners.utep.edu).

If you have questions or concerns about your participation as a research subject, please contact the UTEP Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (915-747-8841) or [irb.orsp@utep.edu](mailto:irb.orsp@utep.edu).

### **12. What about confidentiality?**

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Your part in this study is confidential. None of the information will identify you by name. All records will be stored in a secure location at UTEP in Cotton Memorial and heard only for research purposes by the researcher and her advisor. Audiotapes of the interviews will be coded so you will not be personally identified.

Audiotapes will be retained for possible future analysis. We may wish to present some of the tapes from this study at conferences or as demonstrations in classrooms.

Please sign below if you give permission for the audiotape made for this research study to also be used for educational purposes.

---

Signature

---

Date

### **13. Authorization Statement**

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I have read each page of this paper about the study (or it was read to me). I know that being in this study is voluntary and I choose to be in this study. I know I can stop being in this study without penalty. I will get a copy of this consent form now and can get information on results of the study later if I wish.



I Agree to be contacted for an interview if I am chosen

I DO NOT agree to be contacted for an interview if chosen



\*\* I understand that if I am chosen to take part in an interview, the interview will be recorded and transcribed.

Participant Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number (\_\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Consent form explained/witnessed by:

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature

Printed name:      Davi Kallman  
\_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Time: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX B SCREENING CRITERIA

### Questionnaire

NUMBER: \_\_\_\_\_

Please answer the following questions:

1. Are you at least a freshman in your second semester of college?  
Yes/No
2. Do you have a GPA of 3.1 or higher?  
Yes/No
3. Is your family's annual income less than \$25,000?  
Yes/No
4. Do you take disability related medication?  
Yes/No
5. Do you have specialized tutoring that is specific to your disability?  
Yes/No
6. Have you ever been in any Individualized Education Programs?  
Yes/No
7. Do you currently work or are involved in extra curricular activities that require you to be active at least ten hours a week?  
Yes/No
8. Do you have any household responsibilities?  
Yes/No
9. Are you on track to graduate from college in five years or less?  
Yes/No

## APPENDIX C INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### Interview Questions

Today is \_\_\_\_\_. My name is Davi Kallman, I am here with participant number \_\_\_\_\_ to conduct an interview for the project: An Exploration of Positive Deviance: Communicative behaviors assist disabled student achieve academic success and graduate in a timely manner.

1. Talk about your self-identification and how you define your disability. How has your disability affected you academically?
2. Discuss your skills and values. How have your skills helped you succeed academically?
3. Discuss how your disability affected you in middle school. Please describe a situation in which your disability affected you academically and how you overcame that situation.
4. Discuss how your disability affected you in high school. Please describe a situation in which your disability affected you academically and how you overcame that situation.
5. Discuss how your disability has affected you during your attendance at a university. Please describe a situation in which your disability affected you academically and how you overcame that situation.
6. Talk about the relationship you have with your family. How does your family encourage your academic success? What do your family members do specifically to motivate you to succeed?
7. Talk about the relationship you have with your friends and peers. How do they treat your disability? How and what do your friends do to encourage your academic success?
8. Talk about the relationship with your teachers and mentors. What do they do specifically to encourage you to succeed? How has engagement with professors helped you academically?
9. Talk about the role that religion or spirituality play in your self-esteem and self-motivation.
10. Talk about how your involvement in extra-curricular activities helps you succeed academically.
11. What have you done to maintain such a high GPA throughout different stages in your life?



12. How do you track your academic success? What do you do specifically to keep track of classes and extra curricular activities? What intrapersonal communication skills do you engage in to help you succeed?
13. How have you utilized CASS or DSSO at UTEP? How have they helped you? How has engagement with the office helped you succeed?
14. How do you think other disabled students (despite all obstacles) are able to succeed in college?
15. How do you self motivate? What do you tell yourself? What do your family members, friends, and teachers tell you specifically?

APPENDIX D  
STUDY FLYER

# Learning-Disability Study



## Make a Difference in Your Community Today!

My name is Davi Kallman I am a Masters student in the Department of Communication. I was diagnosed with Dyslexia in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade and went from failing grades to graduating Summa Cum Laude (4.0 GPA) in 2010. As a Masters student I knew I wanted to study something that was near and dear to my heart and that was to identify Learning-Disabled students who like me have been able to defy the odds and achieve academic success despite their disability. My thesis focuses on the intrapersonal and interpersonal communication behaviors that learning-disabled students implement in order to achieve academic success. I am coming to you because I need your help with my Thesis. Please see if you fit the following criteria:

- **3.1 GPA or above**
- **Students with learning disabilities: attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), Dyslexia, attention deficit disorder (ADD), Traumatic Brain Disability, Brain Tumor, Dyscalculia (mathematical disability), Dysgraphia (writing disability), Auditory and Visual Processing Disorders, Nonverbal Learning Disabilities, etc.**

**I will be giving students a chance to win two \$30 gift cards to Starbucks and all participants will receive a gift from Airline International Luggage just for participating. Below are the study details:**

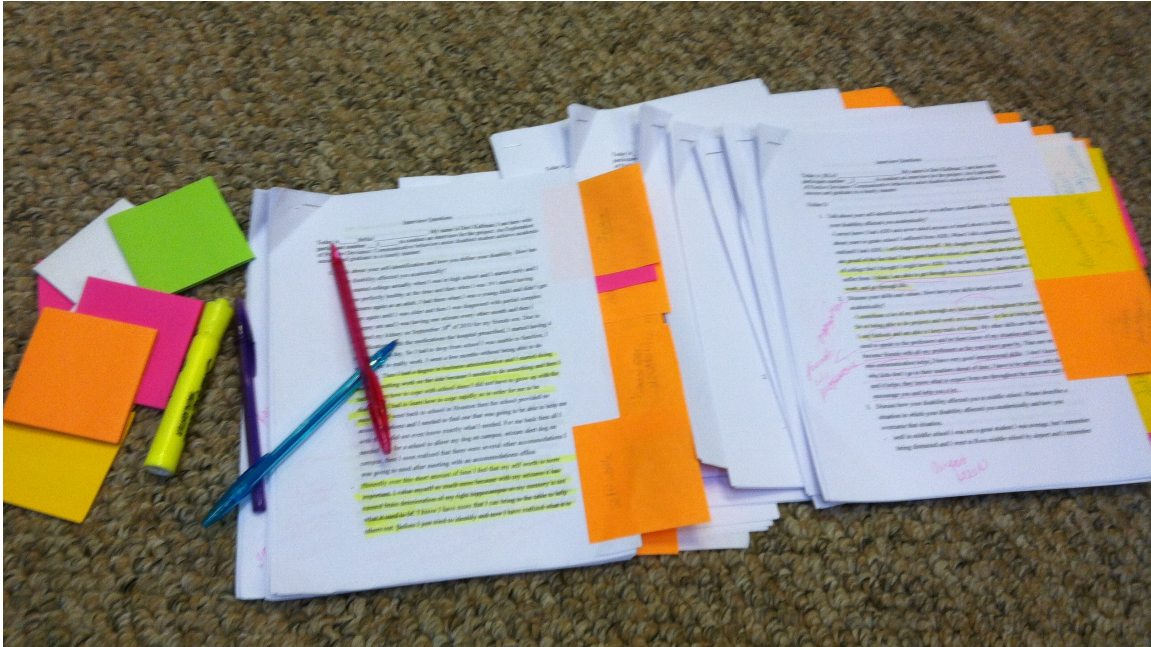
- Study is completely confidential and participants will be given a code in which they will be referred to
- Audio recordings will be stored in a locked file cabinet that is only accessible to the researcher
- All students will be given a screening criteria survey and an informed consent, if selected for study, students will be interviewed

Davi Kallman  
Dikallman@miners.utep.edu

(915)873-6326

## APPENDIX E

### EXAMPLE OF ORGANIZATION



This image is an example of organization among learning-disabled students. This picture was taken at my house and was taken when I was preparing for my thesis. In the study we discussed how color-coding and sticky notes was one of the best methods of organizing. The study also suggested that different students associated different highlighters with schoolwork. While one student in the study preferred to use green and purple in her studies, I tend to use yellow. On top of highlighting, I also write next to the highlighted portion in order to ensure I have grasped the concept. Different colored sticky notes were used to represent different themes in the interviews. Orange represented intrapersonal communication behaviors, white represented communication behaviors with family, green represented the communication behaviors with friends, pink represented communication behaviors with teachers and mentors, and yellow represented unusual findings. This picture is meant to demonstrate how learning-disabled students exhibit similar behaviors in organization.

## CURRICULUM VITA

Davi Kallman is a graduate student at the University of Texas in El Paso (UTEP) and is pursuing her master's degree in Communication Theory. She earned her Bachelor of Arts in Corporate and Organizational Communication, maintained a perfect 4.0 grade point average while at UTEP. Named one of the University's Top Ten Seniors and the University Banner Bearer, she is also a recipient of UTEP's ChangeMaker Award for her advocacy of disability rights. Kallman, who is herself dyslexic, does not hesitate to challenge the status quo. She established the Disabled Student Services Task Force through the Student Government Association at UTEP to increase awareness of the needs of students with both obvious and "hidden" disabilities, and was the driving force behind the creation of the Appreciation of Diverse Dispositions (ADD), a student driven disability advocacy organization. Two summers ago she used her UTEP Study Abroad scholarship to travel to Indonesia to work on environmental campaigns as part of a team working to preserve that country's rainforests. Due to the efforts of her team and her faculty advisor, UTEP received a one million dollar grant to continue their efforts in Indonesian environmental conservation efforts. Honored as the Department of Communication's Outstanding Student of the Year and the recipient of numerous other awards for academic excellence and service to her community, this past summer she continued her education in Washington D.C. as an Archer Graduate Fellow and as an intern for Congressman Silvestre Reyes to compliment her love of politics. She is currently a public speaking teacher at UTEP where she implements liberating structures in the classroom. Davi was just awarded the UTEP Award for Outstanding Teaching by a Graduate Student for her dedication to her students and innovative and creative teaching

methods. She was honored this year as the Department of Communications Outstanding Graduate. Davi was accepted into the Teach for America Program as a 2012 Corp Member and was accepted into Washington State University's PhD program in Communication. She plans to move to Pullman Washington this summer to start the PhD program in Communication, fall of 2012.

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