

5-2017

A Path to Academic Success: Learning Disabilities, Finding a Way

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A Path to Academic Success: Learning Disabilities, Finding a Way

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Journalism

by

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Bachelor of Arts in Communication, 2004

May 2017
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This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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Abstract

This thesis will highlight the difficulties students with learning disabilities have in the post-secondary environment. Special interest is given to how colleges and universities help these students become successful and graduate from college. Two universities are examined, the University of the Ozarks and the University of Arkansas. Each school has its own programs that provide accommodations to students with learning disabilities. The thesis will follow a student from each university, as they attend classes and social activities.

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I. Literature Review

1. Between 1995 and 1996, more than 850,000 students with disabilities attended college in the United States (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). Students with learning disabilities are the majority of this population with 29 percent (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). Kavale & Forness (1996), also reported that the number of full time first-year college students that were reported to have learning disabilities doubled from 17,000 in 1985 to 34,000 in 1991. With the rapid number of students with learning disabilities entering the postsecondary environment for the first time it is important to examine specialized programs that help students with learning disabilities succeed academically in the college environment. Since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990 and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, colleges and universities are required to provide a set of accommodations that will assist students with learning disabilities (Kavale & Forness, 1996). The acts require three categories of accommodations; first institutions must provide reasonable accommodations for students, such as tape recording of lectures, priority registration, and use of a note taker. Second is the availability of remedial services, such as pre-comp and pre-algebra classes. Third is providing special support services, such as intensive tutoring and help from a writing or math specialist (Kavale & Forness, 1996).

The Jones Learning Center (JLC) at the University of the Ozarks, established in 1971, is examined because it provides accommodations beyond the federal minimum accommodation requirements such as a full time staff coordinator that aids students with school work, full time staff specialists that provide extra help to students in reading, writing, and math, as well as other accommodations such as class notes, extended test time, computer assisted speak-to-type and audio textbooks (JLC Developmental Services, 2014).

This study builds upon past research by examining variables which predict academic success, such as self-determination, self-concepts, self-efficacy and college success. The methods used in previous research were primarily surveys of self-determination, self-concepts and self-efficacy (Fichten et al. 2013; Hadley, 2011; Hong, Haefner, & Slekar, 2011; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Shany, Wiener, & Assido, 2013; Troiano, Liefeld, & Trachtenberg, 2010). One study used qualitative, structured, in-depth interviews to investigate college success (Troiano, 2003). However, no study was found that examined the JLC and no documentary film using in-depth interviews were found. This is the first documentary examining the JLC and its performance regarding clients' academic success, self-determination, self-concepts, self-efficacy and college success using in-depth interviews.

2. The four major factors that will be examined are self-determination, self-concept, self-efficacy and college success of students with learning disabilities. A self-determined individual is a person who acts on his or her own and who regulates his or her behavior and responds to events in an empowered manor (Hong, Haefner, & Slekar, 2011). Students with learning disabilities struggle with managing their own education and living independently, so it is important to examine how schools and programs teach self-determination techniques (Hong, Haefner, & Slekar, 2011). Some of the techniques are teaching the skills of making choices, making decisions, setting goals, and adapting academic support to the individual needs of the student (Shogren, Kennedy, Dowsett, & Little 2014).

Self-concept can be defined as the extent of a person's self-worth (Shany, Wiener, & Assido, 2013). For example, children and adults with learning disabilities tend to have lower self-concept than people who do not have learning disabilities. Idan & Margalit (2012), found that young boys with learning disabilities tended to be shy and socially withdrawn due to the negative

interactions with parents and teachers. These interactions may have led the boys to have a lower self-concept. Studies show, however, that college students who receive intensive academic support tend to have the same self-concepts as their peers who do not have learning disabilities (Shany, Wiener, & Assido, 2013).

Self-efficacy is a person's perception of his or her abilities to plan and succeed at one's goals (Hen & Goroshit, 2014). Previous research has suggested that students with learning disabilities have a lower self-efficacy, compared to students that do not have a learning disability. This is due to higher levels of stress and anxiety, which are caused by having trouble with or not achieving one's goals (Hen & Goroshit, 2014). College success will be measured in grade point averages (GPA) of 2.0 or higher and graduation rates of 60% or more for the program (Troiano, Liefeld, & Trachtenberg, 2010; Murray & Wern, 2003). The study will examine how the Jones Learning Center aids students with dyslexia, attention deficit disorder, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in the key areas of self-determination, self-concept, self-efficacy and college success. Learning disabilities are defined as:

“A number of disorders which may affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding or use of verbal or nonverbal information. These disorders affect learning in individuals who otherwise demonstrate at least average abilities essential for thinking and/or reasoning. As such, learning disabilities are distinct from global intellectual deficiency” (Fichten et al. 2013, p. 176).

The JLC admits students that have specific learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, attention deficit disorder (ADD), and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Jones Learning Center FAQs, 2014). The National Institute for Neurological Disorder and Stroke, or NINDS, (2014), defines dyslexia as a learning disability that specifically impairs a person's ability to read and retain the information. Some of the common characteristics of dyslexia are difficulty with

phonological processing, spelling and rapid visual-verbal responding. Lindstrom (2007), defines dyslexia as "...a condition that interrupts an individual's cognitive process and mechanics of reading..." (p. 229). Dyslexia comprises approximately 75 to 90 percent of all students that have a documented learning disability (Lindstrom, 2007). Accommodations that are provided at the postsecondary level are important in academic success for many of these students (Lindstrom, 2007). According to the NINDS (2014), ADD affects 3 to 5 percent of American children. It is a neurobehavioral disorder that interferes with an individual's ability to control age appropriate behavior and the ability to stay on task. ADD has several warning signs, including failure to listen to instructions, inability to organize oneself, and fidgeting with hands and feet. People with "...ADHD experience behavioral difficulties, which most often manifest in distractibility, inattention, impulsivity, or hyperactivity" (Schwiebert, Sealander, & Bradshaw, 1998, p. 26). It is important to understand the growing numbers of these students and the rights they have when they attend college.

Between the years 1987 and 2003, the percentage of students with disabilities enrolled in postsecondary education rose from 17 percent to 32 percent (Hong, Haefner, & Slekar, 2011). With this growth of students with disabilities there has been legislation to protect the rights of individuals with learning disabilities (Troiano, 2003). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) requires colleges and universities across the United States to provide special education programs and services for free, and education in the least restrictive environment possible (Hadley, 2011). The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (RA) and the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 (ADA) state that higher education institutions are required to provide the necessary academic adjustments to ensure that the institution does not discriminate on the basis of disability (Lindstrom, 2007). Some of the accommodations that may be provided

include audio textbooks, peer note taking, extended time on tests, and other program modifications (Troiano, Liefeld, & Trachtenberg, 2010). Some colleges provide comprehensive programs that require added tuition, while some only provide the level of accommodations required by law free to students (Troiano, Liefeld, & Trachtenberg, 2010). Studies have found that students with learning disabilities who take advantage of the accommodations and visit with academic advisors on a consistent basis are more successful in college than those who do not (Troiano, Liefeld, & Trachtenberg, 2010). For example, students who attended more than 50 percent of scheduled meetings with academic advisors had a high frequency of earning a GPA of 2.0 or higher (Troiano, Liefeld, & Trachtenberg, 2010).

One of the biggest differences between services provided in high schools and those at universities is in how the guaranteed accommodation to students with documented learning disabilities is provided. In the postsecondary environment, students must seek out the available services on their own (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). Due to the focus on long-range projects and less student interaction with teachers, it is important for colleges and universities to have outreach programs to promote services and accommodations available to students with learning disabilities (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). Colleges and universities can look for ways to implement a universal design for their classes, making them more inclusive for all students (Hadley, 2011). Hadley (2011), suggests creating a universal design of classes and curriculums on college campuses around the country to make the postsecondary environment more inclusive for students with and without learning disabilities.

Once a student with a learning disability has enrolled in the available program, the student and academic advisor focus on four aspects of adapting and succeeding in the postsecondary environment: self-determination, self-concept, self-efficacy and college success.

Hong, Haefner, & Slekar (2011), define a self-determined person as "...one who acts autonomously, who regulates his/her own behaviors, who responds to events in a psychologically empowered manner" (p. 175). For example, a self-determined student is one who self-regulates and self-directs his or her academic learning (Hong, Haefner, & Slekar, 2011). As students with learning disabilities transition to the postsecondary environment that provides less structure, a greater demand is put on the capacity of these students to organize a self-directed behavior (Parker & Boutelle, 2009). Students can struggle with this concept but with the assistance of an academic advisor, students can learn the techniques of self-determination (Hong, Haefner, & Slekar, 2011). Some of the techniques of self-determination are organizing and transforming information, self-consequating, seeking information and rehearsing, and using memory aids (Ruban, McCoach, McGuire, & Reis, 2003). Previous research has shown a link between teaching these techniques and a greater involvement in transition planning from secondary to postsecondary, and greater participation in the overall academic process (Shogren, Kennedy, Dowsett, & Little, 2014). Students with learning disabilities need to prepare to be in charge of their own learning and take responsibility for their behavior.

Self-concept is defined as "...the global appraisal of the degree to which individuals feel worthwhile" and acts as a "key predictor of child and adult social and emotional adjustment" (Shany, Wiener, & Assido, 2013, p. 444). College students with learning disabilities have been found to have lower self-concepts than students without learning disabilities (Shany, Wiener, & Assido, 2013). Hen and Goroshit (2014), found that when students with learning disabilities encounter academic challenges they experience high levels of stress and anxiety, which may lead to poor academic performance, thus leading to a lower self-concept. Students with learning disabilities have a higher mean of loneliness ($M = 2.38$) than their peers without learning

disabilities ($M = 2.32$), as well as a lower mean of relatedness, with students with a learning disability ($M = 5.80$) and those without ($M = 5.88$). Loneliness and lack of relatedness can have negative effects on self-concepts (Idan & Margalit, 2014). However, the relationship between a student with a learning disability and academic advisor, and the support that goes with it, is likely a critical element of success for students (Shany, Wiener, & Assido, 2013). Students with a positive relationship with their academic advisor are more successful in school are better able to reach graduation (Shany, Wiener, & Assido, 2013). Positive relationship can be defined as being trustful and honest between student and academic advisors, as well as holding the student accountable for learning from his or her experiences (Parker & Boutelle, 2009). Parker and Boutelle (2009), further define a positive relationship as a collaborative relationship in which student and academic advisors work together as equal partners to determine the goals and outcomes of the students' work. The benefits of this relationship are a better quality of life, lower stress, and more autonomy for the student, helping them achieve college success (Parker & Boutelle, 2009).

Hen & Goroshit (2014), define self-efficacy as "... people's judgments of their own capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" (p.117). Self-efficacy can greatly influence the decisions people make, the effort it takes to complete a goal, and how long a person can last during a challenge (Hen & Goroshit, 2014). When in difficult academic environments, students with learning disabilities act in several behaviors that can affect their self-efficacy. Some of these behaviors are helplessness, diminished persistence, lower academic expectations, and other negative effects. These behaviors can lead to higher levels of stress, anxiety and lower self-efficacy (Hen & Goroshit, 2014). Research has shown that through individualized support and positive reinforcement

students with learning disabilities can overcome the difficulties in obtaining their goals thus leading to a higher self-efficacy (Idan & Margalit, 2014). Costello & Stone (2012) define positive reinforcement as expressing positive emotion, of engagement and of meaning to an individual. With this support from an academic advisor students with learning disabilities will increase their self-esteem and self-efficacy, thus leading to a more productive college career (Jodrell, 2010). Previous research has suggested that students with learning disabilities in the postsecondary environment need emotional support and emotional regulation, as well as accommodations to improve academic success (Hen & Goroshit, 2014).

College success can be defined as graduation from college and higher grade point averages (Troiano, Liefeld, & Trachtenberg, 2010). The JLC is similar to a program called the Learning Resource Center (LRC) at a small, private, liberal arts college in the eastern United States. The LRC offers three levels of academic support to students, comprehensive, enhanced, and entitled, each offering varying levels of individual support and accommodation (Troiano, Liefeld, & Trachtenberg, 2010). Comprehensive support includes four hours per week of individual work with an academic advisor and work with learning and writing specialists. Enhanced support offers two hours of individual work with an academic advisor per week and work with learning and writing specialists. Entitled support makes appointments for students with a staff member on an as-needed basis (Troiano, Liefeld, & Trachtenberg, 2010). The LRC designs an individualized support plan for each student to determine which level the student needs. Also, learning and writing specialists assist students with textbook reading, note taking and test taking (Troiano, Liefeld, & Trachtenberg, 2010). The JLC works in a similar manner, but with one consistent level of assistance. Each student is assigned a program coordinator, who works closely with the student through their academic and personal progress while they are

attending the JLC. The coordinators plan an individualized assistance program for each student and then meet the student every day. The coordinators will adapt to the students' style of understanding and learning to give the students the best opportunity to succeed at the University of the Ozarks (Jones Learning Center FAQs, 2014)

Students with learning disabilities who attend academic support centers, have higher rates of graduation. Individuals who graduated from the LRC ($M = .70$) had a higher mean of attending learning support than the individuals that did not graduate ($M = -.28$) (Troiano, Liefeld, & Trachtenberg, 2010). The researchers were able to successfully predict that 74 percent of the student population who attended academic support sessions would graduate, while the students who did not attend support sessions would have a lower GPA and be less likely to graduate (Troiano, Liefeld, & Trachtenberg, 2010). The majority of students who attended more than 90 percent of their scheduled academic support sessions had a grade point average (GPA) over 3.5, while students who attended fewer than half of their scheduled appointments had a GPA of 2.5 or lower (Troiano, Liefeld, & Trachtenberg, 2010). Also, students that are highly involved or have a strong relationship with faculty, staff, and other students are more likely to have the grade point average to persist toward graduation (Troiano, Liefeld, & Trachtenberg, 2010). Academic advisors that are engaged with their students must understand the unique development issues of students with dyslexia, ADD, and ADHD (Troiano, 2003). This will allow academic advisors to better prepare students for academic success.

In this study, the Jones Learning Center (JLC) will be compared to the Learning Resource Center (LRC). Both colleges are very similar since University of the Ozarks is a small, private, liberal arts college as well. Both programs accept students that have been diagnosed with a learning disability or ADHD (Troiano, Liefeld, & Trachtenberg, 2010; What is the Jones

Learning Center? 2014). The JLC accepts students with learning disabilities that show potential for academic success and follow an academic plan that has been specifically designed for each student (What is the Jones Learning Center?, 2014). The biggest difference between the two programs is that the JLC creates an academic support plan for each student, while at LRC students must fit into one of the three support categories, comprehensive, enhanced, or entitled. Both programs offer similar levels of support and accommodation, such as math and writing specialists, textbook reading, note taking, test preparation, test taking, writing strategies, research skills, time management, and self-advocacy, giving students with learning disabilities the tools needed to be successful in the postsecondary environment (JLC Developmental Services, 2014; Troiano, Liefeld, & Trachtenberg, 2010).

3. This qualitative study builds upon previous research examining students with learning disabilities in the postsecondary environment. Previous research has been conducted on self-determination, self-concepts, self-efficacy and college success using surveys and in-depth interviews. This study examines one specific program in depth, the Jones Learning Center at the University of the Ozarks, and how the Center aids students in self-determination, self-concepts, self-efficacy and success in college, using in-depth interviews in a documentary film. The main hypotheses questions for this study are:

HQ1: Students with learning disabilities that receive teaching and implementation of self-determination techniques by the Jones Learning Center staff will have a smoother transition into the college environment than those who do not receive self-determination teaching.

HQ2: Students with learning disabilities will have a better overall self-concept when they have a productive relationship with a Jones Learning Center coordinator than those students who do not have a productive relationship with the coordinator.

HQ3: Students with learning disabilities will have higher levels of self-efficacy when they receive regular positive reinforcement from program coordinators at the JLC to reach the students' goals than those students who do not receive regular positive reinforcement

HQ4: Students with learning disabilities who attend academic support centers like the Jones Learning Center will have a significantly higher grade point average than those who do not attend academic support centers.

The most important aspect of this study is to examine the effectiveness of the programs and staff of the JLC in taking students with learning disabilities and making them successful students as well as graduate from the UofO.

4. This research project is a case study using the qualitative interpretive paradigm research method. Since this project culminates in the creation of a film documentary, the majority of the research will be conducted using intensive one-on-one interviews. An unstructured interview format will allow the interviewer the freedom to ask a variety of questions to obtain the required information (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011; see Appendix A for examples of questions). The study will begin on August 26, 2015 at the start of the fall semester and last until the end of the Spring semester, May 13, 2017 graduation day.

The four categories of subjects to be interviewed are JLC administrators, JLC Staff, JLC Students and experts on disabilities from the University of Arkansas. Subcategories for JLC staff are coordinators and specialists (e.g. reading, writing, and math). Students will be divided by

class (e.g. freshman, sophomore, junior, senior) and by learning disability (e.g. dyslexia, ADD, ADHD, and other). The experts are an associate professor in rehabilitation education and the director for the Center of Educational Access, a similar program to the JLC. This case study will research the organization of the Jones Learning Center and how they manage the success of their students. Case studies have four important characteristics: the particularistic, descriptive, heuristic and inductive. The particularistic form of a case study focuses on an environment, phenomena or program. The case study for this research will focus specifically on the program at the JLC. The descriptive form of a case study is to have a detailed description of the topic in the final project. This project will culminate in an in-depth documentary of the JLC program and services. The heuristic segment of a case study helps readers/viewers understand what is being studied. This documentary will study an established center for students with learning disabilities and provide an in-depth view in search of an understanding of how the programs of the JLC help students become successful in college. Lastly, in the inductive step, this study will attempt to prove the relationship between academic success and the use of academic advisors (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011).

The research of this project are conducted in field in the format of a film documentary using interviewees to drive most of the story. Design and layout of the film will evolve as new information is discovered. One-on-one interviews will be conducted with administrators, staff, and students. Administrators will show strategies of the JLC, the effective programs that aid students in academic success. Staff will answer questions about the implementation of the strategies to aid students with self-determination. Students at the JLC will be asked questions about how the center aids students in self-determination, self-concept and college success. Once the interviews are completed a script will be written to give the interviews structure and flow.

The setting of this research is the Jones Learning Center at the University of the Ozarks in Clarksville, Arkansas. This is a program that aids students with learning disabilities in graduating from a four-year liberal arts college. When students are admitted to this program they still attend the same classes as the rest of the student population, but the JLC provides an individualized level of support for participating students. Events will be captured as they flow with little control exerted by the researcher (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011).

In this process of creating a documentary, the researcher/filmmaker must decide what visuals will be used to tell the story of the film. The first visuals are the interviews of the JLC administration, staff, and students. These three groups will provide most of the information used in the film. The administration will provide an overview of the programs and goals of the JLC. Cover footage filmed with the administrators working with staff and students will be used to show how the JLC advances its goals. Staff interviews will focus on how the plans of the administration are put into practice with students and cover footage will show coordinators and specialist working with students. The footage will show students and coordinators working on school assessments but also show the personal touch a coordinator can provide, filming students and coordinators outside of the school environment at an event or just chatting in an office about life at college. The student interviews focus on how they think the program is helping them to achieve college success. Cover footage shows students in classroom, at the JLC working on homework with and without support, as well as out of the academic environment, for example, filming the students while they are participating in a student club or extracurricular activity. Once the internal perspective has been shown the project will turn to other organizations for more information on learning disabilities.

These experts include, but are not limited to, Brent Thomas Williams, associate professor of rehabilitation education at the University of Arkansas (UofA) and Katy Washington, director of the Center for Educational Access (CEA) at the UofA. The CEA provides resources for students with disabilities to obtain the necessary accommodations for equal access to classrooms and support (Center for Educational Access, 2014). Both of these experts' interviews cover the basic information of learning disabilities and will also focus on some specifics. Mr. Thomas can provide specific insights on the rights of the learning disabled and how accommodations can assist students with academic success. Cover footage for Mr. Thomas's interview may be him teaching class or working with a student in his office. Ms. Washington's interview can offer insights on the services the UofA provides to students with learning disabilities. This interview can also be used for a comparison between programs at the UofA and the UofO. Cover footage for Ms. Washington may include working in her office with students and coworkers as well as speaking to faculty about how to aid students in receiving the necessary accommodations. Other visuals in the documentary are exteriors of buildings and students at both campuses, graduation at UofO, JLC social events, and footage from the campuses' respective towns.

The instrument will be the researcher him/herself. It will be up to researcher to decide the most important pieces of information to include in the film. The researcher decides how the information is organized and how it will be presented to the audience. Measurements are determined by the types of documents the JLC can provide. Some of the documents can be admission rates, graduation rates, overall GPAs of students, the types of learning disabilities in the program, number of students, lists of programs, and professional level of staff. This information will need to be triangulated to make sure it compares with other programs and research. Landmark College in Vermont has a similar program to the JLC. Landmark was the

first institution of higher education devoted to students with learning disabilities. They strive for their students to become confident, self-empowered and independent learners (Why Landmark?, 2014). The college has similar goals and provides many similar programs to the JLC, making Landmark College a good example to compare to the JLC. The information provided by the JLC will be compared to the same information and documents of Landmark College, as well as previous research done on college students with learning disabilities in specialized programs.

The theory of this research project is that students who receive personalized attention from the JLC staff will have better self-determination allowing them to act on their own when challenges arise, have higher self-concepts through the personal relationships with their coordinators, achieve their goals through higher levels of self-efficacy and will have better GPAs and graduation rates than students with learning disabilities who are not enrolled at the JLC. The evolution of the theory could change as respondents answer the interview questions. For instance, if the JLC doesn't teach self-determination techniques, the research would have to follow a new path, whether they teach something similar to self-determination or completely different. Another reason the theory could evolve is if most students don't have high GPAs or the JLC has a low graduation rate, the research may have to turn to look at how the JLC is changing its programming to better assist students and achieve higher GPAs and graduation rates.

II. Production Narrative

1. I, the filmmaker, have a very personal stake in this film. I have dyslexia, so I wanted to create film that somewhat mirrored my experience in college. This was an opportunity to create a film to advance the understanding of what a learning disability is, to provide a format that is easy to understand, and to put a human face to a subject that is sometimes not well understood. The primary goal of this film was to examine college students that have learning disabilities,

specifically looking at how they coped in the college academic environment. Also, it was important to examine how the college programs assisted the students with their academics. To achieve this goal, I chose two students to follow during a semester of their academic career. The institutions of the University of Arkansas, a land grant public state college, and University of the Ozarks, a liberal arts private college, were chosen to act as a comparison of schools and programs that assist students with learning disabilities. The film looks at the accommodation programs at each school, the Jones Learning Center at the UofO and the Center for Educational Access at the UofA. I wanted to tell the story of each college through the narrative of each student. This would allow the film to show the struggles these students have to deal with on a daily basis in the post-secondary environment, specially how the accommodation programs assisted each student in the school's own way. This leads to the main theme of the film, Finding a Way. This is to show individuals with learning disabilities that a college degree is achievable and that there are programs that can assist them in breaking down barriers to achieving academic success.

2. Even though I have personal experience dealing with a learning disability in the academic setting, it was still important to conduct research on the forms of learning disabilities. I read numerous scholarly and scientific articles about learning disabilities to gain an understanding of their definitions and the impact they have on students in the college environment. Through this research process I was able to identify the importance of examining such a topic and some of the themes that I wanted to look at in my film. As I did my research I realized I should not use two private colleges to compare in my film since that would not be an accurate representation of students that attend public colleges. I needed to have a more balanced view of the students and the programs they used. The Center for Educational Access was chosen to compare this free

public school program to the Jones Learning Center, a fee-based private school program. This would allow for a more compelling story and serve as a juxtaposition to give the story more substance. I did have to procure some graduation footage from the University of Arkansas. I had to contact the Office of University Relations to gain permission and access to the footage.

Research to prepare for filming was a little different. This research was primarily done in the field. I conducted pre-interviews with the directors of the CEA and the JLC. I first spoke in person with Julia Frost, whom I had known when I went to the UofO and attended the JLC. In the pre-interview, we discussed permission to film, the topics to be covered in the film, identifying appropriate characters, and allaying any concerns Ms. Frost may have about filming in the center. At the JLC I was primarily looking for a male subject, that was later in his academic career, preferably ready to graduate. Julia suggested that I talk to Kyle Eberhardt and Nick Conrad, both seniors ready to graduate. Pre-interviews were conducted with both individuals. These interviews were in-person without the camera present. I wanted to talk with them about their learning disabilities and have them tell me their stories on how they got to the UofO and how the JLC helps them with their academics. The other goal with these pre-interviews was for the potential subjects to become comfortable with me before we even started filming. Kyle Eberhardt was ultimately chosen due to his compelling stories as a kid in elementary, middle and high school. He was also prompt in responding to emails and phone calls. He also had good stories to tell about staff at the JLC and the professors that mentored him. Picking Kyle as a main character in my film fundamentally changed its narrative. Now that I knew his personal story I would tailor the film to fit to his story and build elements around him.

A similar process of pre-interview research was done at the CEA. I first spoke to Katy Washington, the director of the CEA. Primarily, we talked about gaining permission from the

UofA to film at the Center and to be sensitive to the student's identities, since privacy laws protect the students that use the CEA services. The interview also included the topics of information covered in the film, identifying appropriate characters, and answering questions about the concerns Ms. Washington had about filming at the CEA. Since I did not have a previous rapport with Ms. Washington, this process was more difficult and time consuming than dealing with the JLC. I had to get permission from the IRB research board to approve human subjects in my film. Once that was done I was able to search for volunteers to be a part of my film. For the UofA section of the film I was looking for a female subject that used the CEA services, in the early stages of her academic career, preferably a freshman or sophomore. With the help of Ms. Washington, the CEA sent out several rounds of emails to prospective male and female students. Out of the students who responded I chose to have pre-interviews with four potential characters. Out of these four I chose Bryn Smernoff, a sophomore from the suburbs of Dallas. Similar to Kyle's interview, I wanted Bryn to be comfortable with me before bringing the camera to film, also for me to gather important information about her back story and how she uses the CEA services. One advantage to Bryn was that she was active in extracurricular activities around campus, which provided compelling visuals for the film. Picking Bryn to be the other main character changed the film as well. Now I had to find a way to combine both individual stories and build the rest of the information around them since they are the primary subjects of the film.

3. The film was structured in two major parts, the UofA story and the UofO story, with Bryn and Kyle being the two main characters. Each part had subsections. First we get to know the student, then we learn their struggle with their learning disability, and finally we learn about the help they got at their respective institutions. Using this story format, I was able to identify

who to interview and a direction on what questions to ask. For Kyle and Bryn, I asked questions about their childhood and how they and their family coped with the learning disability. Questions were also asked about what kind of services they receive from the college, what they like to do outside of class, how they personally cope with the stress of the academic environment, and about any personal connections they might have with the staff. In the academic help sections of the film, I interviewed each director of the JLC and CEA as well as other staff members. To the directors I asked questions about how the centers worked for students, how much the assistance costs, and how many students they serve. At the CEA, Bryn did not have much interaction with the staff, so I picked Chinwendu Okoronkwo, Accommodation Coordinator, and Heidi Scher, Assistant CEA Director, to answer general questions about how they help students at the CEA. At the JLC I interviewed Debbie Carlton, Kyle's Academic Support Coordinator. Kyle worked with her every day in his academic career, so Debbie was a natural choice. I asked her questions about what kind of academic services she provided to Kyle, her role at the JLC, what kind of student Kyle is. These questions provided great examples on how the JLC helps its students on a one-to-one basis. Finally, Kyle had made a strong connection with a political science professor, Stewart Dipple. I asked him about what kind of student Kyle was, what he was like in class, how Kyle has improved over the years, and about Dr. Dipple's thoughts on the JLC. All of the characters filled out the necessary parts of my film, showing the circles of support at each institution. I had thought about interviewing the parents of my primary subjects, but I wanted the students to tell their own story without the parents' input in the film. Also, there were travel distances to consider. Bryn's parents lived in north Dallas, Texas, which would be an easy car ride. However, Kyle's parents live in the suburbs of Boston, Mass. Due to this I chose not to include the parents. The overriding theme of the story is the title of the film "Finding a Way".

Each student found a way to get to college and be successful, through the help of parents, school, or their own determination. Each part of the film shows how the students found a way to overcome the challenges with their learning disability. Bryn's parts show how her mom and the CEA accommodations helped her find a way to be successful on a six-week study abroad trip to London. Kyle's story shows his determination to get to college and how the help from Debbie at the JLC and his mentorship from Dr. Dipple help him find a way to graduate with honors from the University of the Ozarks.

4. During the production of the film, the biggest challenge was scheduling time to film. To film at the UofO I had to plan weeks ahead of time since it required me to take off of work to spend a day in Clarksville with Kyle at the JLC and in class. It is an hour and a half drive to Clarksville, so those were long days. Keeping up the drive and momentum to film those days was a challenging aspect as well. It was easy to film at the UofA, other than having to schedule time off from work to film with Bryn and at the CEA. Beyond that, once the schedules were set and the permission to film was granted filming of the project went smoothly. There were only a few times where it was a challenge; since I filmed most of the footage on my own, I did have to learn quickly how to be a one-man band. I just had to plan to take a few more minutes in each place and on each shot to make sure I was getting what I wanted out of the footage. The "look" I was trying to achieve was one of realism. I wanted to show the environments of the colleges and programs as they are, as well as the subject. This is one of the most important parts of my film. I wanted to show my subjects as real people struggling with a common condition. This is important because this film needs to put a face to learning disabilities and encourage students to seek help if they need it. I wanted to show that a learning disability is not the limitation many believe it to be. My film did not change much during the shooting phase. I had a clear idea on

how I wanted to the film to look and have the students drive most of the story. The main challenge was making sure they told their story in the interviews and that I had enough visuals/b-roll to cover the story.

5. Writing the script was a real struggle for me. It was the thing I most dreaded about this process. I eventually had to pay someone to transcribe my interviews since it was taking me so long to do it. It was extremely hard to get started on writing the script so eventually I had to see some help with the script writing process. First, I spoke to Larry Foley about ways to organize the script and general advice about script writing. The primary advice was to let the interviews tell most of the story. Armed with this knowledge, I fashioned a script on what I thought I wanted in the film, composed of the interviews I wanted to appear. As I was reading it over, I was not very happy with the direction of the script, so I enlisted additional help from Tiffany King. Through meeting with her I was able to put together a script that had all the elements I wanted in this film. Once that was done I realized that there were a few holes in the script and that some narration would be necessary to explain certain aspects of learning disabilities more concisely than my interviews did. Transitions between segments needed narration as well. While writing the script, the film became even more student focused. Not only do we get to see what services they use, we also get to know them on a personal level and understand their struggle better. Writing a script this long was new thing for me, I learned that for each student it is good to set the scene. It is important for the audience to understand where they are in the world. I also learned how to write in a more conversational tone, to help the story flow more smoothly. It is also very important to build in breaks with Nat sounds as well as transition points. One final thing I learned about script writing is it really makes you think about how you would like to see

your film. In this process I was able to visualize the pieces I had and was able to make decisions on where I wanted those pieces to go.

6. The editing process for me was relatively easy, since most of the editorial decisions had been made during the script writing process. I placed music during the narration points to help move along the pace of the film and add some emotion to the narrator's voice. At first I did not have a good plan with the music, just laid it in where I thought it would go well. After a discussion with my advisor Dale Carpenter, he told me I needed to have a better plan with music. So, I went back and cut the music from the interviews and used it primarily under the narrator, and at the beginning and ending of my film. The editing style was straightforward, showing images, movies and photos of what the narrator and subjects were talking about. I wanted to make sure I had plenty of Nat sound breaks in the film. This allows the film to breathe and allows the audience to experience the environment of our subjects. I really wanted to transport the audience to the UofA or the UofO in this film. The film did not change much from the script version, since most of the decisions were already made. But, during editing some small things did change. If there was a line that looked good in the transcription, it was no guarantee that it would sound good in the video, and I did have to change several lines due to this. There were other occasions when I did not like the line that was said very much and went and found a new line. These minor changes were common during the editing phase of the project. The thing I learned the most from the editing process was to give the film some air, especially in the narration. The film became better when I allowed even more breaks from the interviews and narration. The narration parts were strung together and did not fit the format of the film. Once the narration was separated and allowed to breathe, it better matched the tone of the film and created a better project. The newest skill I had to learn was making the letters of the Charles

Dickens graphic spread apart individually. I had to figure out how to make each letter an independent element then key frame the distance between the elements, making them appear to move apart from one another. Otherwise I drew on my editing skills honed in 10 years of working in the professional film and video industry.

7. As I reflect on the process of the film I feel confident that I successfully told a student-centric story about the struggles and success of having a learning disability, as well as highlighted the services that colleges provide. I feel that I have created a film that will benefit individuals with learning disabilities as well as the institutions and programs highlighted. I wanted to create a film that will inspire people with learning disabilities to seek out a higher education degree and be armed with the knowledge that there will be people around them to help find a way to the degree. I think the student interviews work very well in this film, the audience gets an unprecedented look into what it is like to have a learning disability. I feel that the narration could be better; in some places it was not read in a conversational tone. I feel the script is strong but the writing can always be improved. I would go back and get more shots of my environments, especially the b-roll in the classrooms, tutoring sessions, and study sessions. I shot most of that stuff in a medium frame and from the tripod most of the time. I would go back and film wider and close up frames, as well as from a variety of heights as well. That would improve my shot selection and the overall edit of the film. Overall this process was very educational and it was fun. I am glad I was able to make this film to help people with learning disabilities find a way.

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IV. Appendix A: Examples of Interview Questions

Questions for the JLC and CEA Administrators:

1. What kind of students do you admit to the JLC?
2. What are the admission requirements?
3. How do you determine the level/type of learning disabilities?
4. What kind of programs do you have that help students succeed?
5. How does the JLC manage the one-on-one relationship with student and coordinator?
6. Does the individualized attention students receive at the JLC make them successful students compared to other students with learning disabilities that are not enrolled in the JLC?
7. How does the JLC define (a) self-determination, (b) self-concept, (c) self-efficacy, and (d) college success?
8. Why are these factors important to the JLC?
9. How does the JLC teach self-determination techniques to its students?
10. How does the JLC respond to students that have low self-concepts? Why or why not?
11. What are some of the ways the JLC can turn a student's negative self-concept to a positive self-concept?
12. What are some of the ways the JLC improves self-efficacy among its students?
13. How does the JLC measure academic success? Graduation rate? GPA?
14. What is the faculty's role in aiding a student with an LD?

Questions for JLC and CEA Staff:

1. How do you implement programs to help students succeed?
2. What is it like working with the students?

3. How successful is the student when they have one-on-one attention from the coordinator?
4. Does your personalized attention to your students make them more successful than other students with learning disabilities that are not enrolled in the JLC?
5. How you define (a) self-determination, (b) self-concept, (c) self-efficacy, and (d) college success?
6. Why are these factors important to you and your students?
7. Do you teach self-determination techniques in your personalized academic plans for your students? Why or why not?
8. How well do students respond to self-determination teaching?
9. What are some of the techniques you use to teach self-determination?
10. How do you respond to a student that has a low self-concept?
11. How do you define a positive relationship with your student(s)?
12. Does your relationship with your student(s) increase his or her self-concept?
13. What are some of your strategies for improving self-concepts?
14. How do you improve self-efficacy in your students?
15. How do you measure the academic success of the students? GPA? Graduation?
16. What is the faculty's role in aiding a student with an LD?
17. What are some of your outreach programs? Why are they important?
18. How does the JLC recruit high school students?

Questions for the Students:

1. If you are comfortable sharing, what is your learning disability?
2. How does the learning center aid you in your academic studies?

3. Do you feel that the programs are effective for you? If yes, how and why?
4. Do you think that your one-on-one relationship with your coordinator has helped you with your college success?
5. Does the individualized attention and academic plan help you be successful in your academics? If yes, how? Why?
6. Does your coordinator teach you self-determination techniques? Such as making choices and decisions and setting goals. Why or why not?
7. Do you use any self-determination techniques currently in your studies? If yes which ones do you use and why do you use them?
8. What is your overall wellbeing here at the JLC?
9. How did the JLC and your coordinator help you with improving your self-concept?
10. Does your relationship with your coordinator improve your self-concept?
11. How does the JLC improve your self-efficacy?
12. Do the JLC programs give you the tools you need to be successful in college and graduate? Why or Why not?
13. How do you measure your academic success? Graduation? You're GPA?
14. How does your professor help with your LD accommodations?

Questions for expert on disabilities the JLC and CEA

1. What is a learning disability? Dyslexia? ADD? ADHD?
2. Where does LD come from?
3. How long does a LD last in a person?
4. How does the LD hinder the process of learning in students?
5. What rights do LD students have in the postsecondary environment?

6. How do the rights of students with LD change between the secondary and the postsecondary environment?
7. What are some of the ways students can overcome their LD
8. What are some of the most common accommodations LD students receive in the postsecondary environment?
9. How do the factors of self-determination, self-concept, self-efficacy, and college successes affect college students with LD?
10. How can self-determination techniques improve student's chances for college success?
11. How can improving a student's self-concept improve students' chances for college success?
12. Can positive relationships improve overall self-concept of a student?
13. Can positive reinforcement of obtaining goals improve the self-efficacy of a student?
14. How would you define college success? GPA? Graduation?
15. What is the faculty's role in aiding a student with LD?

Questions for expert at the CEA

1. What is the CEA?
2. What kind of LD or disabilities students do you serve?
3. How do students initially receive accommodations from the CEA?
4. What programs do you offer students with LD?
5. What types of accommodations provide to your students?
6. Why is it important to provide services to LD students?
7. What is the faculty's role in aiding a student with LD?

8. How does the CEA compare to the JLC? What are some of the differences?
9. Can the JLC be used as a model for large institutions like the UofA?
10. Does the CEA provide any individualized attention or academic plan for students?
11. What types of outreach programs do you have? Why do you need an outreach program?

V. **Appendix B: IRB Approval Letter**



UNIVERSITY OF
ARKANSAS

Office of Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board

September 4, 2015

MEMORANDUM

TO: John Cooper
Dale Carpenter

FROM: Ro Windwalker
IRB Coordinator

RE: New Protocol Submission

IRB Protocol #: 15-08-081

Protocol Title: *"A Path to Academic Success: Learning Disabilities" - a Documentary Film*

In reference to the request for IRB approval of your project titled *"A Path to Academic Success: Learning Disabilities" - a Documentary Film*, the IRB is not authorized to oversee and approve this protocol. This documentary project is not intended to produce generalizable knowledge, and therefore does not meet the Federal regulatory definition of research. (See the citation below.) You are free to conduct your protocol without IRB approval.

45 CFR 46.102 (d)

(d) Research means a systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge.

If you have any questions do not hesitate to contact this office.

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