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ACCESS, USE, AND PERCEPTION OF SERVICES FOR HIDDEN DISABILITIES IN DOCTOR OF PHYSICAL THERAPY STUDENTS AND RECENT GRADUATES

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INTRODUCTION & PURPOSE

- Limited research has been done on the **perception, use**, and **accessibility** of services for hidden disabilities in Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) students and recent graduates.
- The purpose of this study was to determine the **perception** of hidden disabilities, **knowledge** of resources available, and **access** to disability services in Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) students and recent graduates in the United States.

VARIABLES

- Hidden Disability:** Learning and psychiatric challenge not initially or overtly visible, such as a broken arm.¹

METHODS

- RESEARCH DESIGN:** Non-experimental survey
- SUBJECT SELECTION:** Non-random sample of convenience
- INCLUSION CRITERIA:** ≥18 years-old; current DPT student or recent graduate in 2021, 2022, or 2023
- INSTRUMENTS:**
 - Online survey via Qualtrics
 - Access, use**, and **perception** of services for hidden disabilities
 - 5-point Likert scales (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree)
 - NPTE** Board accommodations
 - Student **history** with accommodations
 - Campus climates** toward disability and students with disabilities
 - Consultation and feedback provided by Director of Disability Services
- PROCEDURES:**
 - Approved by IRB prior to student contact
 - Invitations delivered during the SP24 semester
 - Two reminder emails after the respective initial invitations

RESULTS – Demographic Information

Demographic Information (n = 92):

- Gender Identity:** Male 22.8%; Female 77.2%
- Age:** 25.7 ± 4.1 (24 – 44)
- School Status:** Year 1 31.5%; Year 2 29.3%; Year 3 16.3%; Graduated 22.8%
- GPA:** 3.75 ± 0.7 (3.00 – 10.00)
- Geographic Location:** Midwest 89.1%; South 5.4%; West 5.4%
- Disability Status:** Diagnosed 44.6%; Suspected disability 13.0%; No disability 42.4%
 - Diagnoses: Anxiety, Depression, ADD/ADHD, Learning Disability, Chronic Health Impairment, Traumatic Brain Injury, Neurological, Autism/Spectrum, Visual Loss/Blind, Intellectual Disability

RESULTS - Instruments

Survey Outcomes (Table 1).

DISABILITY MANAGEMENT (N=53):

- 60.4% of participants reported managing their disability well
- 34.0% of participants reported using school accommodation services
 - Separate room, extra time, more breaks, dimmed room, extended deadlines, audio recordings, preferential seating, note-taking software

HISTORY OF ACCOMMODATION USE (N=53):

- Some participants reported receiving services in K-12 (13.2%) or undergrad (17.0%)
 - Participants rated their overall satisfaction with services as 3.93/5 ± 0.83 (neutral/agree)
- 56.4% of participants *with no history of service use* reported that services in either K-12 or undergrad would have been beneficial

NPTE ACCOMMODATIONS (N=92):

- 75% of participants did not have knowledge that services for the NPTE exist
- 39.1% of participants agreed that they would benefit from services on the NPTE

ATTITUDES TOWARD DISABILITY (N=53):

- Some participants with a diagnosed or suspected disability reported feeling afraid that their professors (26.1%) and classmates (22.9%) would think differently of them if they shared their need for accommodations

CAMPUS CLIMATES (N=92):

- 46.8% of participants reported that accommodation services are conveniently accessible on their campus
- 63.1% of participants said their overall campus climate was favorable toward students with disabilities
- ≥88.0% of participants agreed that students with hidden disabilities can meet the demands of their academic program and a PT job

RESULTS – Analysis of Difference

Independent t-test:

- No significant differences between genders ($P = .980$) in willingness to seek out and use accommodative services

ANOVA:

- No significant difference between current students or recent graduates ($P = .807$) in willingness to seek out and use accommodative services
- Participants with a suspected disability were less willing to seek out disability services ($P = .046$) than those with a confirmed disability ($P = .015$) or no disability ($P = .028$)

RESULTS – Table 1

Table 1: Survey Outcomes

Category	Frequency (%)
Disability Management (N=53)	
Managing Well or Very Well	33 (60.4)
Using School Accommodation Services	18 (34.0)
History of Accommodation Use (N=53)	
Accommodations in K-12	7 (13.2)
Accommodations in Undergrad	9 (17.0)
Agree/Strongly Agree that services would have been beneficial	22 (56.4)
NPTE Accommodations (N=92)	
Disagree/Strongly Disagree with having knowledge that services existed	69 (75.0)
Agree/Strongly Agree that they would benefit from services	36 (39.1)
Attitudes Toward Disability (N=53)	
Agree/Strongly Agree that professors will think differently if told about the need for accommodations	24 (26.1)
Agree/Strongly Agree that classmates will think differently if told about the need for accommodations	21 (22.9)
Campus Climates (N=92)	
Agree/Strongly Agree that accommodation services are conveniently accessible on campus	43 (46.8)
Report that the overall climate toward students with disabilities is Somewhat Favorable/Favorable	58 (63.1)
Agree/Strongly Agree that students with hidden disabilities are capable of meeting the demands of PT school	82 (89.2)
Agree/Strongly Agree that students with hidden disabilities are capable of meeting the demands of PT job	81 (88.1)

DISCUSSION

HIDDEN DISABILITY PREVALENCE:

- No significant difference in hidden disability prevalence based on year in school or gender.
- The findings in our study are not consistent with current literature.²

USE OF ACCOMMODATION SERVICES:

- Discrepancy between prevalence of hidden disabilities and usage rate of accommodation services.
- The findings in our study are consistent with the current literature.^{3,4,5}

NEGATIVE PERCEPTION OF DISABILITY:

- Current literature suggests hidden disabilities have a negative impact on students’ mental, physical, and social health.^{6,7}
- Most participants felt their diagnosed or suspected disability negatively impacted their academic experience.
- Many students are afraid of what classmates and professors will think of their disability and need for services.

LIMITATIONS

- Potential response bias toward "neutral" due to sensitive nature of research topic
- Lack of equal geographic and gender distribution
- Limited accessibility of survey format
- Survey distribution during busy time of the semester

CONCLUSION & RELEVANCE

- DPT students and recent graduates are affected by hidden disabilities which may negatively impact their overall health and academic experience.^{6,7}
- Students and faculty should understand the toll of hidden disabilities on students and seek a permanent shift in attitudes toward disability so that all students can feel supported, seen, and heard in PT school.
- Low usage rate of accommodation services warrants further development of support services for DPT students during their education and for the NPTE.

FUTURE RESEARCH

- Compare the access, use, and perception of services for students with hidden disabilities in other professional health programs.
- Identify realistic and effective means for DPT programs to minimize the discrepancy between hidden disability prevalence and accommodation services usage.
- Address opportunities for students with disabilities to acquire new disability management skills.

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