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THE STRUGGLE IS REAL: FIRST-HAND ACCOUNTS OF

THE EXPERIENCES OF STRUGGLINGREADERS

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS

AT ARLINGTON

by

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ABSTRACT

Institutions of higher education aim to graduate critical thinkers who are able to reach their full potential and contribute to society in today's diverse world. The University of Texas at Arlington has identified student success as a top priority in its current strategic plan, which impacts all the University's programs, services, and initiatives. Students who are struggling readers, first-generation students, and those with learning disabilities enter the university with significant potential challenges to their ultimate success. While the university offers tutoring, disability accommodations, and other services to help remove barriers, many students still struggle.

This thesis investigates students' experiences with reading by using an oral history methodology. Interviews highlighted students' resiliency, patterns of frustration, perceived challenges and barriers, and suggestions to increase student success: greater awareness of support services, reading resources, useful accommodations, interactive learning environments, and improved access to diagnostic testing, especially for female students who are often diagnosed late.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Why do most people go to college? For years, the "American dream" has promoted the ideal that a college education gives one an advantage in life. For many, this dream has not been easily available. They were excluded from the opportunity to obtain a college education for multiple reasons. As the door to higher education opened over time to a larger group of learners, the diversity of student populations has added additional layers of complexity to education. We live in a multicultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-abled world. Student populations include second act adults, veterans, international students, first generation students, students with a wide range of disabilities, and more. As technology advances, barriers to learning have been removed, and increased numbers of students choose to attend higher education institutions with the dream of better jobs, and a better life. How are universities doing? Are universities helping this new wave and this greater diversity of students succeed?

1.2 Statement of the Problem and Relevance

Institutions of higher education aim to graduate critical thinkers who able to reach their full potential and contribute to society in today's diverse world. The University of Texas at Arlington has identified student success as a top priority in its current strategic plan, which impacts all the University's programs, services, and initiatives. Larger numbers

of students with disabilities are attending college. In 2015-2016, that number was 19%, or 3.4 million students (NCES, 2019). In addition, 20% of Texas students entering college are not prepared to read college-level material (REL brief, 2012). This 20% includes students with learning disabilities and low-income students, who may have poor college preparation. How can the University of Texas at Arlington better support students with reading difficulties and increase students' success?

1.3 Key Words

Learning disabilities: Several disorders which may affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding or use of verbal or nonverbal information (Learning Disabilities Association of America, 2020).

Literacy: Using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential (NSACS., 2006).

1.4 Literacy and Disability History

Literacy and disability have an interconnected history, based on individuals being denied the right to literacy because of segregation, devaluation, and marginalization. The perception of who is entitled to membership in a literate community was historically denied to individuals with intellectual disabilities and other marginalized groups, with the idea being that literacy was impossible for them to attain.

History tells the story of two such marginalized women, 120 years apart, who stood before tribunals in Boston, to prove their ability to be literate. In 1772, this tribunal was to determine, amid tremendous skepticism whether Phyllis Wheatley, a slave from Africa could possibly be the author of a series of English-language poems attributed to her by her owners, who sought to publish them as an anthology (Kliewer, et al., 165). Twelve decades

later, eleven-year-old Helen Keller, stood before administrators of the Perkins Institute of the Blind to convince them that she had been capable of "crafting original fiction," despite significant disabilities. Both a part of silenced communities, they were forced to prove their "literary competence." (Kliewer et al., 166). Two questions frame this research: who should be literate, and the extent to which higher education institutions are responsible for graduating students who are fully literate.

1.5 Current Disability Background

Statistics reveal that the number of people with disabilities pursuing higher education in colleges and universities is increasing. Nineteen percent of undergraduates in 2015 reported having a disability (NCES, 2019). Broadened legal definitions of who qualifies as having a disability have increased the numbers of students with disabilities who complete K-12 and who enter higher education, as well as the numbers of students who qualify as having a disability. This includes individuals with learning disabilities, physical disabilities, cognitive disabilities, and psychosocial disabilities, as well as those with chronic illnesses (ADAAA, 2008). Accommodations for students in educational settings correlate to these increases.

Current practices require the individual with a disability to seek accommodations, but information is often segmented and misunderstood, especially for First-generation students. Many students begin their college education with an undiagnosed disability that often impedes success, with learning disabilities being particularly underdiagnosed, especially reading disabilities. Others do not know that their medical condition constitutes a disability or that they are entitled to accommodations.

<u>1.6 Literacy Framework</u>

Definitions of literacy have evolved over time. For this study, the National Assessment of Adult Literacy definition of literacy was used, a definition that is not simply decoding and understanding text, but also includes a range of information-processing skills needed to accomplish tasks in a complex, technical world. According to a NSACS study of college students' literacy, literacy cannot be measured as a single skill for all types of printed and written information. It is measured along three dimensions, as shown in the following table.

Table 1.1: Measurements of Adult Literacy

Prose Literacy	Document Literacy	Quantitative Literacy
The knowledge and skills needed to perform prose tasks, that is, to search, comprehend, and use information from continuous texts. Prose examples include editorials, news stories, brochures, and instructional materials.	The knowledge and skills needed to perform document tasks, that is, to search, comprehend, and use information from noncontinuous texts in various formats. Document examples include job applications, payroll forms, transportation schedules, maps, tables, and drug or food labels.	The knowledge and skills required to perform quantitative literacy tasks, that is, to identify and perform computations, either alone or sequentially, using numbers embedded in printed materials. Quantitative examples include balancing a checkbook, figuring out a tip, completing an order form, or determining the amount of interest on a loan from an advertisement

(NSACS Survey, pg. 4)

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Students with Diagnosed Disabilities

Students with diagnosed disabilities face well-documented challenges to student success in their educational pursuits. These challenges and difficulties manifest themselves in processing and comprehending information, and in emotional challenges. Issues surrounding diagnoses and seeking out resources can add further complications to these students' challenges. This field of research has consistently documented and discussed these prevalent challenges and their impact on student success.

Research has demonstrated the difficulties in processing language for those with learning disabilities (Selikowitz, 101-110). Physical and emotional challenges for students with disabilities in college are also well-documented in the literature (Denhart, 483).

Students with diagnosed disabilities are eligible to receive academic and resource accommodations to enhance their college success, although statistics show only a small percent of eligible college students access them. In 2014, The National Center for Learning Disabilities documented that only 17% of higher education students with learning disabilities pursue learning assistance resources at their institution (Eden, Best Colleges, 2020). Statistics also exist that show that students who discover they have a (learning) disability through college coursework and obtain a diagnosis and accommodations increase their GPAs and are more successful in college (UTA DS Minor highlights, 2020). However, many students remain undiagnosed, struggling with adaptations they have

discovered on their own to manage their college courses. Research shows that these undiagnosed students are less likely to seek out accommodations or assistance; further, there is a correlation between socio-demographic characteristics and diagnosed prevalence of learning disabilities, meaning that disadvantaged students are less likely to obtain a diagnosis that affords them the right to accommodations (Shifrer, et al., 2011, 246).

2.2 Inexperienced Readers and Literacy

There is much research on the literacy level of readers in college. A technical brief conducted by Regional Educational Laboratory provides statistics, background, and demographics of Texas 11th grade students tested for college-level reading readiness of entry-level textbooks from the University of Texas system of schools. According to this study, first-generation college students, and students with disabilities are among the groups of students below-college-level reading (REL brief, 2012).

A study by the National Survey of America's College Students examined United States students' literacy rates to determine levels of performance for college-level work and the world beyond. This study provided additional evidence that literacy levels in the United States are lower than desired for college-level critical reading and analysis. (NSACS, 2006**).**

In lieu of replicating qualitative methods demonstrated by the studies referenced here to measure their validity, this research proposes to gain a deeper understanding and gauge possible perceived solutions from students themselves.

2.3 Research Significance

The University of Texas at Arlington has identified student success as a top priority in its current strategic plan, which impacts all the University's programs, services, and

initiatives (UTA.edu/strategic plan). The UTA student population consists of a diverse population of students that includes both groups of students who struggle with reading difficulties. According to UTA's website, the institution ranks number one in Texas for serving first generation, low-income students (UTA.edu/rankings 2020). UTA is also the first campus in the South with a Disability Studies Minor (and still only one of two as of 2020); it is the only university in the country to have both a disability studies program and an adapted sports program, along with a disability history archive, a long history of pioneering leadership in serving students with disabilities, and a strong disability rights community in the metropolitan area (UTA 2018). This research attempts to identify ways to improve student success for struggling readers and students with learning disabilities at the University of Texas at Arlington, tackling the issue from the faculty, advisor, and the student side.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Oral History

This research utilizes oral history methodology. Oral history methodology involves recording interviews with individuals who have direct, first-hand experiences relevant to the research topic to preserve and interpret those memories and experiences. This type of research preserves and highlights the voices of individuals who might be overlooked using standard archival research methodologies (Charlton, 45; Perks & Thomson, xiii).

When seeking a better understanding of struggling readers' experience at the University of Texas at Arlington, oral history methodology allows the participants' stories as "threads that tie together bits of data" (Miles & Huberman, 69). Further, oral history allows for "a very unique kind of interview situation because the process of storytelling on which it is based is distinct. There are moments of realization, awareness, and, ideally, education and empowerment during the narrative process" (Hesse-Biber & Levy, 150-151).

This research utilizes these "threads" to find common themes in the students' experiences, struggles, and opportunities for better student success, and to glean further revelatory information from these interviews.

3.2 Research Design and Data Collection

The researcher solicited participants via several programs at The University of Texas at Arlington. A flyer asking for volunteers for interviews was distributed through the departments of TRiO Student Support Services, Student Access & Resource Center, Military &Veterans Services, Movin' Mavs Adapted Sports & Recreation, and the Disability Studies Minor. The flyer asked only two questions of participants: if they hate to read and if they would be willing to be interviewed about their experiences with reading in order to improve student success. The research framework for the interviews focused on three topics, which informed the interview questions: their reading experiences from childhood through high school and in college, their struggles, and their suggestions for improvement. Due to Covid, all interviews were conducted online. Pre-interviews were conducted when possible, and all participants were given interview topics before the actual interview so that they could consider the questions and their answers in advance.

During the interviews, the researcher first established a rapport with participants, then began the interview with biographical questions, including participants' names, parents' and siblings' names, schooling from elementary through high school, student's classification, major, and any military experience. After these biographical questions, the researcher asked participants to describe their reading history in reference to the topics above. Interviews lasted approximately 35-45 minutes. After interviews were complete, this researcher reviewed each interview to develop common themes and patterns.

3.3 Limitations

Limitations of the study include controlling bias by the interviewer, the time to adequately interview participants, and the reliability of participant memory (Perks & Thomson, 3).

CHAPTER 4

STRUGGLING READERS & BARRIERS TO STUDENT SUCCESS

This section details themes from the oral history interviews of students at the University of Texas at Arlington who self-identified as struggling readers. The reporting focuses on careful documentation of similarities between subject experiences, interviewees' responses, and patterns that emerged. The sections that follow, organized by those shared themes of experience, provide documentation in the form of interviewee commentary.

Interviews conducted with eleven students highlight their resiliency, patterns of frustrations, perceived challenges, and barriers to their education. This research documents the responses in the following sections: Reading & Accommodation Challenges, Resiliency & Self-Reliant Techniques, and Desire for Awareness & Communication.

4.1 Stories of Challenges, Self-Reliance, and Stress

Interviews revealed several challenges with reading and accommodations at The University of Texas at Arlington. They reported challenges with the amount and volume of reading, feelings of inadequacy about the accommodations provided, and requests for a greater variety of course materials and greater accessibility in those materials.

4.1.1 Student Challenges with Reading and Accommodations

Of the eleven interviewees, ninety percent of the students say that they are negatively affected by the volume of reading. One UTA junior expressed challenges with the reading load and her preparedness saying, "I learned my teachers didn't really prepare me...I didn't

know that my reading level was going to be this much. I didn't know that I would have to manage all these different projects while also reading all these books." A senior student also reported challenges with the amount of reading, noting, "I get overwhelmed whenever I try and count how many pages I have to read before I go to sleep."

Eighty percent say that they spend a significant amount of time reading and processing; therefore, accommodations of extended time on testing are not enough to balance the amount of extra time that they spend doing their work. One anonymous student reported, "The majority of my classes have very dense material and require a lot of outside study time in conjunction with the normal lecture time, so it can be a little overwhelming at times because it takes twice as much time to get through reading material as it would the average student so it can be a little frustrating, a little tedious in that you're not making as much progress as you would like to in a day, it definitely makes the days a lot longer and can be a little overwhelming or discouraging at times."

Fifty-four percent of students desire to have more diverse course materials from which they can learn. A sophomore student, stated, "I rely heavily on visual and verbal help to have a greater understanding of what is needed to be done by me as a student." Another said, "I have a 3.57 GPA right now, but I couldn't have done it without having a teacher in front of me to explain it in terms that are different from what I read in the textbook." This student continued, "It's hard to retain the information when you have to read so much."

Forty-five percent of these students express a need for course materials to be available in an electronic format that allows the text to be read aloud to them through a text-speech application. A junior informed the interviewer, "At the end of high school,

that's when I really struggled because..., 'I have no idea what I am reading'... I would read it, and then it just didn't make sense in my head. And then once I moved on to college, it was the same thing. So, I have to have a computer read it to me in order for me to understand."

These responses reflect and support that these students' experience challenges with reading volume, the efficacy of accommodations, and the desire for variety and accessibility in course materials.

4.1.2 Resiliency & Self-Reliance

While the interviews revealed patterns of challenges with the course load, reading volume, and accommodation, they also revealed patterns of resiliency and self-reliance. Several students commented on how they have been able to navigate college thus far by adapting strategies to accomplish readings by using text-speech digital applications and by using the Internet and other resources to reinforce learning. Interviewees sought out certain faculty whose teaching approach was more compatible to their learning styles. One student has been successful by locating assistive technologies such as the Kindle app, Google programs instead of Microsoft, and dyslexia-friendly fonts for reading that allow him to successfully complete his coursework.

4.1.3 Stress and Anxiety Due to Reading Struggles

Many students interviewed emphasized the stress and anxiety that their struggles with reading have caused. In some cases, it impacted their choice of major and impacted their well-being.

One interviewee recounted, "I had a lot of trouble in math with story problems because I couldn't get through the reading fast enough to figure out what the story was

asking. I am surprised that nobody really picked up on that. I had a fifth-grade math teacher who allowed me to take my test in the back of the room not facing anybody, because he noticed that I would get very anxious. I aced it. Part of it was the pressure of being around other people and not understanding and letting that be okay that I didn't understand. [He] let me work through it myself. It's not that I can't understand it, it's that I need more time to understand it if it's going be written."

Another student said shame prevented her from seeking some academic opportunities, saying, "I always wanted to go back to school but you know...the difficulties, or whatever, of feelings of shame because, you know, having the trouble reading and it's still today."

Another noted how her anxiety has increased with being isolated: "I have found it very difficult when experiencing anxiety during this time. What are the outlets that can be used when you are alone in your home during this online format?"

4.2 The Desire for Awareness & Communication

All students express a need for more meaningful faculty and departmental interactions for better communication of accommodations necessary for students who struggle. When the researcher asked an interviewee if she identified as having a disability, she asked, "Where would I find resources about disabilities and testing, because I know everyone always tells me that [they are available] but I have no idea where [to find them]."

An interviewee reported that she was diagnosed with dyslexia in junior college prior to attending The University of Texas at Arlington. In addition to sharing her challenges, she expressed a desire for better representation when she said, "I really appreciate this research because I feel very underrepresented in education. I feel like the

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accommodations for people with learning disabilities-that they are very limited. Even though they're there, it needs improvement." She also expressed hope that administrators will work towards more accessibility, especially online. She stated, "I know that a lot of people have learning disabilities. Obviously, it is not all the same. But I really hope that the people in charge of learning and education at UTA would really take time and effort in making more accommodations online for students with disabilities."

A student who requested to be interviewed anonymously, was also diagnosed with multiple disabilities in between her sophomore and junior years of high school. She was on the Dean's List in high school after accommodations helped her reach her potential, but she has faced academic setbacks in receiving her accommodations at The University at Arlington, reporting, "One of the largest struggles is my major allowing me to receive my accommodations. One of my accommodations is that I am allowed to test in a quiet area and allowed to read the questions out loud [sic]. Due to rules and regulations, [my department] does not allow for that so these accommodations have been taken away [from me]. This anonymous student continued on to say, "I understand the lengths that they go to prevent any type of collusion or academic dishonesty, but at the end of the day, to what extent do I have to compromise my learning experience?"

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Through these oral histories, this researcher sought to ask the question: Do struggling readers at The University of Texas at Arlington have appropriate access to services and technology in order to be successful? According to participants in this oral history research, the answer is no. More than half of the students feel that their accommodations are inadequate and that their reading difficulties create a great deal of stress in college. They would like a stronger support system and for their voices to be heard. This desire to be heard is confirmed by both the number of participants and their eagerness to speak in detail about their experiences. Hoping to get four interviews, I interviewed eleven participants. For multiple reasons, this research infers that, institutionally, The University of Texas at Arlington lacks awareness and understanding about the difficulties that struggling readers face to complete their coursework and to learn. Therefore, they are not effectively serving students with reading difficulties. Results indicate that some students feel they might be undiagnosed, and students with diagnosed disabilities still greatly struggle in college, especially without the right accommodations.

This study raises questions of how to bridge the literacy gap that students at University of Texas at Arlington experience so that they may graduate as critical thinkers. The question this research did not answer is whether The University of Texas at Arlington is currently working on improved programming now.

Future research could be done to determine methods to create low-cost or no-cost diagnostic testing for students at The University of Texas at Arlington, provide faculty with training on how to understand the signs of struggling readers, continued and expanded education for faculty about alternate format course materials for student learning, and convey to faculty the importance of having electronic course materials for students to use with assistive technologies.

Participants suggested increased reading workshops, expanded information on University websites about reading strategies for college, increased online information about assistive technologies available on campus for struggling readers, and more publicity about the Student Access and Resource Center and student support services. Although some of these support services exist, students are unaware of them and report that they are difficult to access.

In conclusion, this study raises awareness about students' struggles to complete a college education as critical thinkers. This study confirms the strong desires of students to succeed. It also reflects the resiliency and motivation of students to be successful at the University of Texas at Arlington and provides the university a unique opportunity to be responsive to these students and others by enhancing programs related to student success. Change cannot begin without awareness. The goal of this research is to provide a starting place for the institution. One anonymous student stressed about the challenges of disabilities, "It's not something that we openly said, 'Oh, [a disability] is something that we want to live with. This is something that we have to deal with, so, because of that, why should we be punished? After years and years of, you know, advancements that it's taken to even make accommodations possible to begin with. We shouldn't have to backtrack and

lose the progress that we've made." An interviewee highlighted the opportunity presented by this research saying, *"Thank you for asking because nobody ever asked anything like that."*

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Kelle McVey Plummer is a native Texan, mother, wife, passionate advocate for learning, and a community servant. Her research interests are multicultural literature, creative writing, and disability studies. She is particularly inspired by literacy and learning disabilities after her experience helping her two children navigate them throughout their educational lives.