



# Constructing the information ground of the campus disability center



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## ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions are required to provide academic accommodations to students who need them. These services are typically available at campus disability centers, where disability counselors work with students to facilitate accommodations. Interviews were conducted to examine the health information behaviors of 17 disability counselors at two university disability centers by applying Fisher, Durrance, and Hinton's (2004) information grounds theory. Analysis of the interviews was performed to: 1) explore the information ground of the disability center, 2) better understand the ways in which health information is sought and used, and 3) consider the alternate ways in which health information is used by disability counselors. The perspectives of disability counselors' health information-seeking also point to ways in which information grounds theory can be applied to university staff who play a similar role in the lives of students at higher education institutions.

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## 1. Introduction

A need for universities to provide disability accommodations to students has steadily increased in prevalence and complexity over the past few decades. This need was driven initially by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (29 U.S.C. § 701) and later the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (42 U.S.C. § 12101). Subsequently, enrollment in institutions of higher education has increased among students with disabilities (Madaus, Banerjee, & Merchant, 2011). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2016), 12.9%, 11% of college undergraduates use disability services. Regulations defined by the Rehabilitation Act and Americans with Disabilities Act require higher education institutions to offer disability services. University campuses typically have a disability center, which provides academic accommodation services to qualified students. Disability counselors are professionals who coordinate these accommodations. Currently, the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) suggests professional practices for disability counselors in higher education institutions. Disability centers on university campuses provide an important service to a substantial proportion of students by facilitating access to academic accommodations.

## 2. Problem statement

Prior research on the information-seeking of professionals demonstrates a need to consider the unique perspective of disability counselors and their information behaviors (Leckie, Pettigrew, & Sylvain, 1996; Turner, Petrochilos, Nelson, Allen, & Liddy, 2009). Research on

disability in higher education reveals a need to explore the services provided to students with disabilities and how those services are implemented (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Madaus, 2011). Continual increases in providing accommodations services to university students reveal an opportunity to examine how disability counselors seek and use health information.

An examination of the perspectives of disability counselors' health information-seeking in the context of information grounds theory takes a novel approach to filling a gap in the literature in two instrumental ways. First, what is the health information-seeking behavior of disability counselors, who act as service providers amidst a variety of social actors? The position of disability counselor requires a broad range of expertise and an ability to work with an array of social actors, including students, healthcare professionals, and instructors, who may or may not be familiar with or receptive to academic accommodations processes. Second, how does Fisher, Durrance, and Hinton's (2004) information grounds theory apply to the unique, unexplored context of the disability center? Understanding how the disability center acts as an information ground and how information is used by various actors within the disability center applies information grounds theory in an unexplored context and for a group of professionals not previously addressed in health information-seeking research.

## 3. Literature review

### 3.1. Information behavior research

Library and information studies has a rich history of considering the information-seeking behaviors of individuals by occupation (Case, 2012). Recently, attention has been given to the information-seeking behavior among workers in a variety of contexts, with particular

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attention centered on scientists, social scientists, engineers, scholars, healthcare professionals, and other workers (Dawes & Sampson, 2003; Ellis, Cox, & Hall, 1993; Gorman & Helfand, 1995; Hertzum & Pejtersen, 2000; Leckie et al., 1996). These studies focused both on how workers acquire and share information as well as how accessible and useful it is within the context of that specific occupation.

Health information-seeking, as a widely studied vein in information-seeking behavior research, helps lay the groundwork for the current study (Brashers, Goldsmith, & Hsieh, 2002; Lambert & Loisel, 2007; Rooks, Wiltshire, Elder, BeLue, & Gary, 2012). For example, many studies have focused on the health information-seeking behavior of specific groups, such as Hispanic populations, mothers, women, adolescents, and others (Ankem, 2007; Bernhardt & Felter, 2004; Gray, Klein, Noyce, Sesselberg, & Cantrill, 2005; Peña-Purcell, 2008). Other research has explored online health information or compared health information-seeking in online and offline settings (Cotten & Gupta, 2004; Sillence, Briggs, Harris, & Fishwick, 2007). Many studies are also concerned with particular factors that impact health information-seeking, for instance how patients with a cancer diagnosis look for and manage health information, or what role the library has during that information search (Kwon & Kim, 2009; McCaughan & McKenna, 2007).

### 3.2. Research on disability accommodations in higher education

Much of the recent discussion on disability in higher education centers on students' experiences at the university, as well as engaging with and finding ways to increase opportunities for learning (Anderson, Madill, Warren, & Vargo, 1996; Bernert, Ding, & Hoban, 2012; Boyle, 2012; Burke, 2004; Cardillo, 2004; Cook, Hayden, Wilczenski, & Poynton, 2015; Davis, 2005; Fichten, 1995). Fewer studies have examined the documentation process of higher education institutions by considering invisible disabilities and the documentation required to demonstrate a need for accommodations (Gormley, Hughes, Block, & Lendmann, 2005; McGuire, Madaus, Litt, & Ramirez, 1996; Harrison, Nichols, & Larochette, 2008). Additional investigations in literary and critical studies explore disability in the context of larger cultural and political contexts, focusing on the history of disability, its social constructions, and how society talks about and understands disability (Siebers, 2008; Wendell, 2001).

## 4. Information grounds

Fisher, Durrance et al.'s (2004) information grounds theory provides a basis for examining the dynamics of health information-seeking and use by disability counselors at two university campuses. Fisher, Durrance et al. (2004) build on Pettigrew's (1998, 1999) studies which introduced information grounds. According to Pettigrew (1999), information grounds are "environments temporarily created when people come together for a singular purpose but from whose behavior emerges a social atmosphere that fosters the spontaneous and serendipitous sharing of information" (p. 811). The information ground is a place designed for one specific, singular purpose that then through informal social interaction results in a temporary site where use and sharing of information not directly related to the original purpose of that space occurs. Information grounds are context rich, temporally situated, characterized by an instrumental purpose other than what occurs in the information ground, composed of different kinds of people who interact in various social ways, and are places where information flows formally and informally, and information is used in alternative ways.

The information ground is a grand context that is comprised of several sub-contexts. In these sub-contexts, both formal and informal information use occur (Fisher, Durrance et al., 2004). Williamson's (1998) definitions for purposeful and incidental information are used as a way to supplement Fisher, Marcoux et al.'s (2004) discussion of formal and informal information sharing.

As described in a study of college students' information grounds, information encountering and sharing can happen via conversation, reading online postings, or through other means (Fisher, Landry, & Naumer, 2007). "Purposeful information-seeking" refers to information sought as a result of imposed or required tasks that lead to a specified outcome or meet an information need. Purposeful information behavior is considered *formal information behavior*, an activity which may include seeking, using, and sharing information for specific tasks. Purposeful information-seeking involves a deliberate decision to seek out information (Williamson, 1998). "Incidental information acquisition" occurs as individuals monitor their worlds and acquire information that they are not necessarily seeking out. This incidental information behavior is considered *informal information behavior* and refers to the activity in which information is incidentally acquired, or sought out of curiosity (Williamson, 1998). Williamson defines incidental information acquisition as an activity in which "people find information unexpectedly as they engage in other activities" and as information people "did not know they needed until they heard or read it" (p. 24). While the information-seeking activity is distinct from the information source, Williamson also points out that sources of information can provide incidental information. Williamson (1998) further differentiates purposeful and incidental information acquisition by describing it as a difference between "information-seeking" and "being informed" (p. 35).

Central to an information ground is context. Pettigrew (1999) describes the term "context" via four different categories: the physical environment, the activities that occur in the environment, the central area for knowledge/expertise, and the circumstances and/or experiences of the individual receiving services. These four contexts intersect at the information ground and form its grand context. Sub-contexts represent the variability inherent in the grand context of an information ground, and may include any combination of the four major categories that comprise Fisher's definition of context. These sub-contexts are based on different physical environments (e.g., offices, classrooms, healthcare centers), as well as the perspectives of people seeking information in these situations. These sub-contexts have various locales of knowledge and expertise, and the circumstances and experiences of the individual receiving services in each of these situations is different based on the sub-context in which information-seeking activities occur.

Examining the health information behavior of disability counselors by applying the information grounds approach relies on three main assumptions. First, the disability service center acts as an information ground. This information ground is constructed by the sub-contexts of the disability counselors, students, and "outsiders" such as healthcare professionals, instructors, and others. Second, health information is acquired and shared in formal and informal ways among disability counselors. Finally, health information is used in ways other than the express purpose of providing accommodations services to students with disabilities.

## 5. Methods

### 5.1. Background: Disability accommodations in higher education

Disability counselors play a unique role in the life of a student on the university campus. Students pursuing study have the option to request academic accommodations services through the campus disability center at any time during their educational career. In the disability center, disability counselors review applications for accommodations requests, meet with students and determine whether students qualify for services. If a student qualifies for services, a disability services professional then works with the student to determine which accommodations are needed and reasonable.

The Association on Higher Education and Disability (2012) provides guidelines designed to streamline the accommodations process for disability counselors providing services to students (2013). AHEAD describes the role of disability documentation as facilitating the

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