3-1-2009

Self-Advocacy Experiences of College Students with Learning Disabilities and/or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

Jennifer Cano-Smith

University of Denver

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd

Part of the Higher Education Commons

Recommended Citation

Cano-Smith, Jennifer, "Self-Advocacy Experiences of College Students with Learning Disabilities and/or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder" (2009). Electronic Theses and Dissertations. 110.

https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd/110

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Studies at Digital Commons @ DU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ DU. For more information, please contact jennifer.cox@du.edu,dig-commons@du.edu.
SELF-ADVOCACY EXPERIENCES
OF COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES
AND/OR ATTENTION-DEFICIT HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Morgridge College of Education
University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Jennifer Cano-Smith
March 2009
Advisor: Dr. Gloria Miller
ABSTRACT

Self-advocacy is identified as a factor important to the success of college students with Learning Disabilities (LD) and/or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). However, educators do not yet know enough about the experience of self-advocacy in the post-secondary learning environment to effectively guide students in the development of this complex set of skills. This study was designed to describe the experience of college students with LD and/or ADHD as they advocate for themselves in the college or university environment and to compare the students’ experiences as self-advocates to what educators believe to be true about self-advocacy based on the existing literature. The study employed a series of case studies conducted with phenomenological methodology. The data revealed that students experience self-advocacy as a means of building a working relationship with faculty, a means of declaring their character, a weapon to do battle when conflicts arise, and a means to assign the LD/ADHD a role within their learning experience. Data confirmed the importance of communication, assertiveness, knowledge of LD/ADHD, academic self-concept, self-efficacy and locus of control, and problem-solving skills. The above factors were assembled into a framework describing their functioning in concert to facilitate self-advocacy. Implications for practice and future research are discussed.
# Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction and Literature Review .......................................................... 1
  Defining Self-Advocacy .................................................................................................. 3
  Need for Self-Advocacy Skills ....................................................................................... 3
  Success for Students with LD/ADHD ............................................................................ 4
  Relevance to Postsecondary Education ........................................................................ 6
  Accessing Accommodations and Modifications ......................................................... 6
  Transitioning to College with LD/ADHD ...................................................................... 7
  Services Available in Postsecondary Education ......................................................... 8
  LD/ADHD in Adulthood ............................................................................................... 9
  Social-Emotional Influences on Adults with ADHD ................................................... 10
  Postsecondary and Vocational Outcomes and LD/ADHD ........................................... 10
  Constructs Comprising Self-Advocacy ......................................................................... 13
    Knowledge of LD ........................................................................................................ 14
    Problem-Solving ......................................................................................................... 15
    Communication Skills ............................................................................................... 15
    Self-Concept ............................................................................................................... 17
    Self-Efficacy ............................................................................................................... 18
    Assertiveness ............................................................................................................. 20
    Locus of Control ......................................................................................................... 21
  Statement of the Problem ............................................................................................ 24
  Purpose of the Study ..................................................................................................... 25
  Research Questions ....................................................................................................... 26

Chapter Two: Methods .................................................................................................... 27
  Researcher’s Background .............................................................................................. 27
  Phenomenological Approach ....................................................................................... 29
    Rationale for Choosing In-Depth Phenomenological Interviews ............................... 30
    The Interview Process ............................................................................................... 32
  Gathering Participants ................................................................................................. 34
    Screening and Informed Consent .............................................................................. 35
    Participant Selection ................................................................................................. 36
  Definition of a Successful Student .............................................................................. 39
  Pilot Study ..................................................................................................................... 40
  Collecting Data ............................................................................................................. 40
  Data Analysis ................................................................................................................ 42
    Transcription .............................................................................................................. 42
    Research Log, Analytic Memos, and Diagrams ......................................................... 43
    Profiles ....................................................................................................................... 43
    Colaizzi’s Method ....................................................................................................... 44
  Presentation of the Findings .......................................................................................... 46
  Participant Profiles ....................................................................................................... 46
    Profile: Chris ............................................................................................................... 47
    Profile: Josie ............................................................................................................... 50
Achieving Desired Outcomes ......................................................... 128
Perfectionism .............................................................................. 130
The Teaching and Learning Environment ................................. 131
Balance ..................................................................................... 134
Summary of SE and LOC ............................................................... 135
Problem Solving ........................................................................ 135
Problem Solving in the Context of a Self-Advocacy Framework ... 136
Approaches to Problem-Solving ................................................. 136
On Remaining Unemotional ...................................................... 139
On The Influence of Parents ....................................................... 140
Summary .................................................................................... 141

Chapter Four: Discussion ............................................................ 143
The Phenomenon of Self-Advocacy ............................................ 143
Establishing a Working Relationship ......................................... 144
Declaring their Character .......................................................... 145
A Weapon to do Battle ................................................................. 146
Assigning the LD a role in the Learning Experience ................ 147
Mastering the LD ....................................................................... 147
A Route to Independence and Interdependence ..................... 147
Acceptance of LD ....................................................................... 149
The Components of Self-Advocacy in a Structural Framework .... 149
Communication ......................................................................... 149
Assertiveness ............................................................................. 151
Knowledge of LD ........................................................................ 151
Academic Self-Concept .............................................................. 152
Self-Efficacy/Locus of Control .................................................. 153
Problem-Solving ........................................................................ 155
Limitations of the Study .............................................................. 156
Implications for Further Research ............................................. 157
Co-morbid Mental Health Issues and Feminism ....................... 159
Implications for Practice ............................................................. 160
Using the self-advocacy experience to teach students ............. 162
Applying the framework ............................................................ 162
Connecting high school students with LD to their college peers 163
Preparing for transitions ............................................................ 165
Conclusion ................................................................................. 166

References ................................................................................... 168

Appendices .................................................................................. 175
Appendix A: Interview Guides ................................................... 176
Appendix B: Participant Letter ................................................... 181
Appendix C: Consent Form ......................................................... 183
Appendix D: Letter to Program Directors ................................... 186
List of Tables

Table 1. Demographic Table…………………………………………………...38

List of Figures

Figure 1. A Model of Self-Advocacy in Postsecondary Education…………………93
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Parents and students alike experience excitement and apprehension as the transition to college begins. Parents worry that their children will, for the first time, make decisions and pursue interests without their counsel or watchful eye. Students enter an environment entirely different from anything they have known before, with new levels of independence, self-sufficiency, responsibility, pressure and freedom. Parents no longer know exactly what role to play in their children’s lives, in contrast to years during which the balance of power and responsibility was much clearer.

For students with learning disabilities and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, the transition experience intensifies. In my experience as a university-level academic counselor to these students, I watched anxious parents ask numerous questions to clarify infinitesimal details of daily living while their student sank deeper into a chair. Parents who have been intimately involved with their child’s educational experiences now must accept the reality of having virtually no control over their child’s choices, successes or failures. Their child may never be aware of the years of intervention in Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings, teacher-parent conferences, pleading with administrators for help, educating classroom teachers about their child’s learning needs, negotiating for alternatives, offering creative and specific ideas for how to best support that child’s learning on a daily basis. They must wonder, “How will he do for himself all that I have done?”
Newly independent students run like horses from the gate away from all the help and advice that they may feel keeps them from becoming adults. I noticed students with disabilities wishing to start a completely new life, sometimes attempting to live a life as a person without a disability. The temptation to pass as non-disabled is great. In doing so, students give up the chance to access the services, accommodations, and modifications that are designed to even the playing field and support effective learning.

The alternative is to make the sincerest and most earnest effort to succeed. For a student with learning disabilities (LD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), this means advocating for oneself in order to meet the needs imposed by the learning disability. Communication with others, knowledge of the self, knowledge of the disability, a sense of control, and perceptions of personal effectiveness are each necessary to do this effectively. Students are rarely prepared to do this, which is clear when one recalls that after a lifetime of having parents and teachers take a leadership role in securing the student’s learning, few opportunities to develop these skills have been presented.

To remedy this, many programs teach the skills that support self-advocacy. But are the skills taught within these programs sufficient to make someone a good self-advocate in real life? The extent to which the curriculum taught in self-advocacy training programs matches the experience in self-advocating is not yet known. Among the reasons for this is the fact that the truth about the experience of students with learning disabilities in post-secondary education is not yet fully understood. It is possible that only by answering that question will any efforts at teaching students to be self-advocates be truly, realistically, or meaningfully successful.
Defining Self-Advocacy

According to Brinckerhoff (1994), self-advocacy in college students with learning disabilities is defined as “…the ability to recognize and meet the needs specific to one’s learning disability without compromising the dignity of one’s self or others” (p.229). That students are able to both identify their disability and enumerate the concomitant needs is implicit in this definition. Self-advocacy is also defined in terms of the student’s knowledge base and the actions they take on their own behalf. According to Skinner (1994), students achieve self-advocacy when they, “a) demonstrate understanding of their disability, b) are aware of their legal rights, and, c) demonstrate competence in communicating rights and needs to those in a position of authority.” (p. 279.) Decision-making, disclosing the disability, and requesting appropriate accommodations are considered necessary for successful postsecondary transitions (Roffman, Herzog, & Wershba-Gershon, 1994). Self-advocacy programs often dedicate a great deal of time to the development of this group of skills. But how do the skill sets we assume are necessary compare to the personal strengths and skills drawn upon by those in a position to need to advocate for themselves? How can we know until we spend time investigating the actual, lived experience of these students?

Need for self-advocacy skills. Educational research identifies students with learning disabilities and attention deficits as particularly at risk for poor post-school outcomes. The LD population has been the subject of several longitudinal and outcome-based studies intended to establish patterns in achievement and quality of life after education in terms of satisfaction with life and career and the possible influence of learning disabilities on these domains. The supposition of this research is that it is
possible to reinforce factors contributing to resilience, and in so doing better prepare students with LD and ADHD for what follows their basic education. Self-advocacy is frequently identified as one resiliency-supporting factor key to these students’ success, although the exact nature of their experience with it both specifically and isolated from other factors is yet to be explored.

The obstacles faced by students with LD are unique in that the major differences between secondary and postsecondary education can exacerbate the specific difficulties inherent in LD (Lerner, 1997). To be successful in the college environment, students with LD must learn self-advocacy skills, including how to communicate their own strengths and weaknesses with the goal of procuring appropriate accommodations (Cummings, Maddux, & Casey, 2000).

Success for Students with LD/ADHD

A number of authors direct attention toward the isolation of those factors associated with post-secondary educational and vocational success for college and college-bound high school students with disabilities which impact learning. This body of research generally begins with a broader scope, by asking, “What contributes to the educational success of college students with learning disabilities?” Self-advocacy frequently arises as one of the important contributors to that success. Also often noted are feeling engaged in school activities and having a mentor (Vogel & Adelman, 1992). Brinckerhoff (1996) asserts that students with LD would do well to “shape their own academic destinies by learning about their disabilities, asking questions, presenting ideas, and advocating for themselves.” Other influential factors are knowledge of one’s own strengths and weaknesses, the ability to communicate the nature and impact of the
disability to others, and an awareness of what accommodations or modifications will provide assistance. These skills are frequently listed among those that comprise the quality of self-advocacy (Reis, 1997).

Students also attribute portions of their successes or failures to factors outside themselves. These may include supportive or unsupportive faculty members, having a mentor, understanding or accessible professors, university policies, and other factors outside their immediate control (Vogel & Adelman, 1992). It is expected that students will differ in the extent to which they make internal or external attributions regarding the outcomes of their self-advocacy efforts. It is this part of the story which may also reveal itself when these students are given an opportunity to tell their stories with self-advocacy specifically in mind.

The ability to advocate for oneself should contribute to the educational success for all students, with or without learning disabilities. It is safe to assume that the ability to discuss the progress of one’s own learning, identify barriers to learning and employ problem solving strategies to circumvent them, assert one’s own position to a person who can be of help, and to appropriately generate ideas that will highlight academic strengths while minimizing weaknesses should support learning for all students. However, for students with learning disabilities, these skills can be critical to success (Brinckerhoff, 1994; Vogel & Adelman, 1992). What these students may lack in study skills, organizational skills, written language, or particular areas of information processing, they must make up for by creating partnerships with professors, being creative in the demonstration of knowledge and learning, utilizing support services, enlisting the help of others, and making decisions that will allow them to capitalize on their skills.
Relevance to postsecondary education. The set of skills that collectively comprises self-advocacy may not have been necessary in the K-12 learning experience of students with LD. Educational law dictates that each student in special education with identified learning-related disabilities has a team of educators whose job it is to ensure the student’s access to learning. Once the student holds a secondary diploma, the responsibility shifts to the student (Brinckerhoff, 1994). If prior to graduation, the student has acquired the skills to self-advocate, then research assumes that the chances of further educational success is greater. If not, several great hurdles await.

Accessing accommodations and modifications. By disclosing the disability, students can then make a case for gaining access to accommodations and modifications protected by disability law. This typically requires the student to relate the accommodation or modification to his or her particular disability and experience with it. For example, a student with a language-based learning disability may have a particularly difficult time making a case for extended time on a math test, unless they are able to refer to difficulty reading word problems or visual processing difficulties that impact the reading of numbers as well as letters. This aspect of self-advocacy reveals the students particular set of strengths and weaknesses. It requires a specific combination of self-knowledge, constructive thinking, creative problem solving, and negotiation skills. What is that like for the student? How does it feel to have these discussions with people from whom they may need both help and respect? How do the components and functions of self-advocacy work together to benefit the student?
**Transitioning to College with LD/ADHD**

Given that graduation marks the change between the protection of one set of laws to another, the responsibility for securing the support provided by those laws shifts from the school staff to the student. To avoid a harsh, unpredictable, and abrupt change which will set students up for failure, IDEA further requires that schools begin preparing students for this shift early in their secondary careers. The development of self-advocacy skills is a means by which students can make this transition much easier.

Current special education law requires that students participate to the greatest extent possible in the planning of their transition from one educational setting to another, and eventually out of special education. This means that the student must make known preferences and intentions, such as living arrangements, college, and work, so that the special education team can support the student in achieving those goals. This process, from making decisions and choices to making them known and enlisting the appropriate support to accomplish them, has been the subject of much study among researchers in the field of LD and ADHD.

As a result of our knowledge about the disparate postsecondary outcomes for students with LD, educators pay increased attention to improving transition planning for the previously neglected group of students with mild disabilities. While the process of arranging accommodations and modifications is the responsibility of special education teachers during the K-12 experience, students must learn to advocate for themselves and take on this responsibility in the college setting (Roffman, Herzog, Wershba-Gershon, 1994). Blalock asserts that the existing structure of transition plans force educators to choose between serving either students with moderate LD or severe disabilities (1996).
Emphasis is therefore more commonly placed on students with extensive and complex needs (Blalock & Patton, 1996). Clear guidelines have been presented regarding the content, order, timeliness, and scope of transition planning for these students (Brinckerhoff, 1994). These recommendations consistently include the notion that it is important for students with LD transitioning to postsecondary life to develop a set of skills comprised by the constructs of self-advocacy and self-determination.

When investigating career development in students with LD, researchers discovered that students could rarely recall participating in transition activities (Hitchings, Luzzo, Ristow, & Horvath, 2001). This highlights the need to pay greater attention to preparing high school students for the employment and postsecondary educational environments. Although greater emphasis on these transition-related skill sets had traditionally been placed on groups of students with more severe needs, the comparatively poorer postsecondary outcomes observed in students with milder disabilities merited concern and action (Blalock & Patton, 1996). Although the reauthorization of IDEA (1997) made mandatory the inclusion of transition planning for all students receiving special education services, it would be unreasonable to assume that all high schools across the country have been able to adequately address and construct useful transition planning procedures in their daily practice. Self-advocacy training and support would therefore be an important component in any transition plan. If we know more about what self-advocating is really like and how its components work together in a system, we can create a better transition planning system for these students with mild disabilities like LD and ADHD.

**Services available in postsecondary education.** Students with LD in postsecondary education are not entirely on their own. Services are available to provide the support and
accommodations to which students are entitled. Some universities provide additional support services, either at the expense of the university or the student, to make success and ultimately graduation, as attainable as possible. After all, a university is only as good as the success of its students. Why would applicants risk their futures on an institution that does not appear to have their best interests at heart?

Vogel and Adelman (1992) set out to compare the educational attainment of students with LD to their peers matched on gender and ACT composite scores. They further wished to determine the usefulness of the ACT to predict college success for students with LD, compare course loads for LD and non-LD students, and discuss the impact of LD support services on success for students with LD. Even though the matched sample had better reading and writing abilities than the LD group, the students with LD experienced much less academic failure. At exit from the university, the LD group had slightly higher GPA’s than their peers with similar ACT scores. These students tended to take one additional year to graduate as a result of taking a slightly reduced course load. The authors determined that seeking and utilizing support services contributed to the success of this group. Without the self-advocacy skills that are necessary to secure this support, students with LD miss out on an important contribution to their successful learning.

LD/ADHD in Adulthood

Once students receive their high school graduation diploma, their future is in their hands. What happens next, either in the educational or vocational world, is dependent upon the motivation and effort of the student. Being an adult with LD or ADHD is therefore somewhat different from being a child or adolescent in the same situation. It
requires the mastery of the delicate balance that comprises interdependence; knowing when to ask for help and when to be independent. This developmental task is arduous for any young person, and it is infinitely more complicated for a student who has spent years immersed in the helpful, good intentions of others with the knowledge that he or she has a disability, and all the fear and self-doubt that accompanies it.

Social-emotional influences on adults with LD/ADHD. From very early in their educations, students with LD and ADHD demonstrate certain social and intrapersonal differences when compared to typically learning students their age. Vaughn and Haager (1994) found that elementary students with LD functioned much like low-achieving students without LD on several measures of social competence. However, these same students were found to function differently from average- to high-achieving students without LD on measures of social skills and behavioral problems. This suggests that young students with LD struggle in their grasp of social skills more so than typical learners do, and are more likely to demonstrate their frustration through problematic behaviors. It is these social skills that will be of the greatest benefit to them later, assisting them in compensating for their academic difficulties by enabling them to request assistance and garner support from others.

Postsecondary and vocational outcomes and LD/ADHD. Self-advocacy serves a purpose in the development of students with LD. The personality characteristics and the actions they inspire relate to perceived and actual results in professional and educational domains. Research of the last decade has consistently reported comparatively poorer vocational and educational outcomes for students with LD (Murray, Goldstein, Nourse, & Edgar, 2000: see also Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). It has been asserted that these
students aspire to occupations of lower prestige, earn less money, and are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed than their non-disabled peers (Gerber, Ginsberg, & Reiff, 1992). In educational environments, students with disabilities have been reported to get poorer grades, take longer to graduate, drop out more often, be placed on academic probation more frequently, be less likely to attend postsecondary education, and generally experience less educational success than their non-disabled peers (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). Murray et al. (2000) found that while high school graduates with LD were far less likely to attend postsecondary education in the ten years following graduation, no significant difference was noted in income level or employment status across that period of time. Rojewski (1999) found that students with LD were less likely to have achieved a high school diploma or equivalent than their non-disabled peers. After leaving high school, students with LD are more likely to be working rather than enrolled in higher education and more commonly unemployed (Rojewski, 1999).

Through the study of students with LD who have proven to be successful, it has been possible to identify several factors that contribute to positive post-secondary and vocational outcomes. Adelman and Vogel (1990) pointed out that graduates working in business indicated that their learning disabilities have an effect on their work. These graduates further identified compensatory strategies, including spending additional time to complete work, asking for help, and careful editing of own work, that they must employ in order to be successful. The individuals in this study demonstrated not only their success in the job market, but their knowledge of their individual strengths and weakness, and their knowledge of appropriate modifications, all of which contribute to positive outcomes. Additional research has confirmed that successful individuals with LD
have a good understanding of their strengths and weaknesses as well as the impact that this understanding has on their lives (Gisnberg, Gerber, & Reiff, 1994). Brinckerhoff asserts that students with LD need to be informed about themselves and understand how to appropriately self-advocate in order to experience educational and career success (1993b). Given that the dimensions of self-advocacy are linked to overall vocational and educational success for students with disabilities, it seems that the assessment and development of self-advocacy can make a significant contribution to improving the overall outcomes for students in this group. Understanding what contributes to self-advocacy and how those components work together can help us cultivate better self-advocacy skills in our graduates.

Several explanations for the above circumstances have been explored. Rojewski (1999) determined that among the factors predictive of postsecondary enrollment in all students (including higher socioeconomic status, high academic achievement, good self-esteem, and internal locus of control) high educational aspirations and completion of a college-preparatory academic program were most predictive of enrollment in higher education in students with LD. It was also hypothesized that negative outcomes were linked to poor self-advocacy, a low sense of self-efficacy, or the effects of others’ expectations (Rojewski, 1994). Additionally, the need to do well in college or university settings without the supports typically used in high school has been a common trap; students wishing to pass as non-disabled rarely find that the university or college environment allows them to escape the differences inherent in their learning. It has been theorized that the demands of postsecondary learning often exacerbate the particular weaknesses of students with LD (Brinckerhoff, 1994). The added stress, need for
personal management of academics and decreased overall structure frequently leads to an amplification of learning problems (Gerber et al., 1990). Self-advocacy skills may be necessary to handle the academic and emotional demands of higher education.

** Constructs Comprising Self-Advocacy**

Hicks-Coolick (1997) approached the problem of identifying the constructs that comprise self-advocacy by juxtaposing third-party evaluations of students’ self-advocacy skills against measures intended to quantify characteristics associated with self-advocacy as outlined by the literature. She found that 22% of the variance in self-advocacy scores was determined by students’ knowledge of their LD, communication skills, problem-solving skills, and identity development skills within and beyond their academic lives. Other dimensions originally thought to be indicative of self-advocacy failed to yield significant correlations.

Rather than make suppositions based on previous suppositions, the current study seeks to gain a more real and personal knowledge of what it is like to self-advocate. What is it like to face a strange professor with the task of convincing him to help you more or help you differently than she does other students? How does it feel to tell someone for the first time that you have a disability they can’t see? What is it like to carry around on your sleeve a list of things that you can’t do or don’t do well, and to have to reveal it all the time? What is it like to be for the first time responsible for your own success despite a glaring disadvantage that is in your way no matter where you turn? Current research on self-advocacy suggests that to do this requires 1) knowledge of the LD, 2) problem solving 3) communication skills, 4) self-efficacy, 5) positive academic self-concept 6) locus of control, and 7) assertiveness.
Knowledge of LD. The supposition of this study is that the ability to advocate for oneself, and the likelihood that one would do so, is precipitated by having particular knowledge bases and belief systems. Those most commonly cited include knowledge and understanding of the LD, an awareness of public policy or student rights under disability law, knowledge of accommodations and services available as well as an awareness of what is appropriate on an individual basis, assertiveness, positive self-esteem, effective communication skills, negotiation skills, and an internal locus of control.

Yuan (1994) described a 2-year non-degree program at Lesley College in which students are encouraged to develop an understanding of their own learning profile, skills for self-expression, and an application of this self-knowledge across the dimensions of the program in what was termed an “ecological approach”. Roffman, Herzog, and Wershba-Gershon (1994) found this program to be effective in broadening students’ knowledge of their LDs and facilitating the application of this knowledge in social environments.

In order to successfully advocate for oneself, the student must first understand the reason he or she needs support. For a student with a learning disability, that means possessing a knowledge of the type of disability that impacts the student’s learning, the way in which the individual is particularly affected, and the means by which the impact of the disability may be circumvented or compensated. With this knowledge, the student may properly describe to a person in a position to help what problems will be faced and what interventions or strategies will help. Self-advocacy training programs commonly include a component or unit that provides information about a variety of different learning disabilities and symptomatic difficulties that may be encountered.
**Problem solving.** If a student can effectively explore multiple solutions to problems in general, one can assume that the student can be creative in dealing with learning difficulties as they arise. If a student can generate several approaches to perceived impasses in learning, he or she can enlist the help of others in a position to do so, suggest alternative means of completing projects, or ask for appropriate and potentially effective accommodations. Teaching effective decision-making strategies is a main component of numerous self-advocacy curricula (Van Reusen, 1994). As mentioned above, Hicks-Coolick (1997) found it to be a strong contributor to the variance in self-advocacy scores.

**Communication skills.** If a student cannot effectively express him or herself, define learning disabilities, or request appropriate accommodations, then he or she likely cannot self-advocate, since self-advocacy is a behavior that is dependent upon effective communication. Van Reusen (1994) defines self-advocacy as “the ability to effectively communicate, convey, negotiate, or assert his or her interests, desires, needs, and rights” (p.49). Teaching communication strategies is a key component of Van Reusen’s self-advocacy training curriculum. By evaluating a student’s ability to communicate effectively, it is possible to estimate the likelihood that he or she will take the steps to advocate for him or herself. “Students must develop communication skills that allow them to discuss concerns with instructors, including requests for accommodations” (Skinner, 1998). However, many students do not disclose their disabilities (Greenbaum, et al, 1995). One study found that while nearly 90% of employed college graduates with learning disabilities conceded that their LD affected their work in some manner, only 30% had disclosed to their employer (Madaus, Foley, McGuire, & Ruban, 2002). While
it is important to know one’s strengths and needs as they relate to the LD, that knowledge has less impact if the student cannot relay this information to those in a position to be of assistance; the ability to communicate academic needs and request accommodations appropriately is a skill necessary to postsecondary educational success (Skinner, 1998). Authors suggest it is possible and beneficial to teach this skill set to secondary and post-secondary students with LD (see Durlak, Rose, & Bursuck, 1994; Roffman, Herzog, & Wershba-Gershon, 1994; Van Reusen & Bos, 1994)

Phillips (1990) has highlighted the importance of fostering the ability to express one’s needs and counts it among the most important components of self-advocacy. “The skills that are designed to enhance self-advocacy often involve assertive communication, understanding oneself as a learner, and utilizing self-monitoring techniques” (Brinckerhoff, 1994, p125).

One of the ways in which self-advocacy skills are evident is in a student’s ability to disclose the disability to others. In doing so, it is necessary for the student to identify the disability, discriminate it from among other disabilities, and describe its impact on learning (Brinckerhoff, 1994). By disclosing the disability, the student is able to explain certain needs or differences that might be evident to others, such as difficulty learning new material, the need for more time to prepare assignments, the necessity of a particular environment in which to study, or difficulty keeping social appointments. Disclosure can enlist the understanding, compassion, or support of others who are aware of the individual’s needs. This process can potentially be very meaningful to the student, for the positive or negative character of these interactions and for their impact on the likelihood that a student will engage in further disclosures. It is possible that a painful or shaming
experience in self-disclosure could at minimum discourage a student from telling anyone else about the disability, let alone seek help or support to accommodate it. Likewise a positive, encouraging, or empowering self-disclosure experience may propel the student forward as a confirmed self-advocate.

*Self-concept.* In the daily practice of schools and in the academic literature, there has often been voiced a concern for the social-emotional development of students with LD and ADHD, particularly with regard to their self-esteem and adaptive behavior. When focusing on self-advocacy, academic self-concept surfaces as being of primary importance. In a meta-analysis conducted by Bear, Minke, and Manning (2002), the clearest differences in self-concept existed specifically in the domain of academic self-esteem. College students with LD reported that their perceived academic self-competence, a construct similar to academic self-concept, was most commonly supported by a connection to campus organizations (such as the LEP at DU), while a direct connection to professors was better associated with perceptions of support among students without LD (Cosden & McNamara, 1997).

Adults with LD sometimes maintain certain personal characteristics that make learning and socializing in the college environment more difficult. Stage and Milne (1996) identify several “dispositional factors”, including attitudes and behavioral characteristics that affected the college experiences of students with LD. These include embarrassment at receiving support and reluctance to participate in activities that may reveal their LD. Students in this study also recounted their tendency to work twice as diligently as their peers in an effort to prove to themselves and others that they are equally capable. These were described as response patterns related to living with a
learning disability, and can be adaptive or maladaptive. It is the adaptive coping pattern that is of interest in the current study. If the likelihood of using adaptive methods to manage LD or ADHD, such as self-advocacy, can be measured and predicted based on certain characterological factors, then the methods used to teach and support those skills can also be optimized.

While the self-concept of college students with LD has been widely explored, for the purposes of this study, the relevant aspect of a student’s evaluation of himself is in the area of academics. Studies have asserted that students with and without LD are similar in most aspects of self-concept, differing significantly only in academic self-concept (Gans, Kenny, & Ghanny, 2003). Stone and May (2002) found that students with LD were more likely to overestimate their skills and likelihood of success on academic tasks. The authors theorized, but did not test, that this would inhibit the student’s ability to self-advocate properly because it interferes with an accurate knowledge of the LD.

**Self-efficacy.** Bandura (1977) introduces self-efficacy as a person’s perception of his or her ability to perform a task. The task or behaviors that comprise self-advocacy can then be expected to be influenced by the student’s expectation that it is possible to be successful. Therefore, when a student is considering requesting accommodations in an academic activity such as a class, test, or assignment, the likelihood that he or she will act on his or her own behalf is high as long as they believe they can handle the situation properly and effectively. “Expectations of personal efficacy determine whether coping behavior will be initiated, how much effort will be expended, how long it will be sustained in the face of obstacles and aversive personal experiences” (Bandura, 1982; p.191). Self-advocacy can be regarded as a set of coping behaviors, and to the same
extent, it is logical to suppose that an individual’s sense of self-efficacy is likely to influence that set of behaviors.

Bandura’s theory further outlines a number of experiences that influence self-efficacy. A person’s belief in his or her own effectiveness is the result of previous performance attainment, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and physiological arousal (1977, 1982). Performance attainment refers to previous successful experiences. If past successes outnumber failures, actions are reinforced, thus elevating one’s level of self-efficacy. The same holds true for the successes or failures observed in the experience of others, causing the generalization to one’s own set of circumstances. By observing that other students have been successful in securing accommodations, or by having oneself done so in the past, a student with LD may then believe that he or she can be equally effective. Verbal persuasion, in the form of encouragement or teaching from others, can also elevate self-efficacy. This indicates that self-advocacy training programs may support the development of beliefs that one is capable of doing so, and therefore making it more probable that a student will actually act on his or her own behalf. Conversely, physiological arousal, in the form of stress, fear, physical pain, or anxiety can reduce self-efficacy. If a student is overly nervous, or fearful of the consequences of revealing his or her disability, it is less likely that he or she will believe it is possible to successfully self-advocate.

According to Blake and Rust (2002), self-esteem bears a significant relationship to self-efficacy among college students with both physical and learning disabilities. That is to say, a student’s perception of his or her own abilities is related to the sense that his or her abilities and strengths will be effective in securing certain outcomes. Students in
this study with more visible disabilities were found to have higher Social Self-Efficacy (perceived abilities to be effective in social situations), while students with less visible disabilities, such as LD, had lower Social Self-Efficacy. The authors speculate that this is because students with LD may fear that participation in some activities may reveal their disability, discouraging participation and in turn discouraging the successful experiences that foster Social Self-Efficacy. Interacting with professors, teaching assistants, other students, and advisors in an effort to advocate for oneself is a social task, requiring a positive sense of social self-efficacy, and therefore perhaps subject to its influence. As such, the processes by which students can improve their levels of self-efficacy are important to predicting self-advocacy skills.

Self-acceptance has been explored as a possible contributor to self-advocacy (Yuan, 1994). Toward achieving that end, the author created a successful, ecological approach to teach students to understand and accept their learning disabilities and to effectively advocate for themselves. Upon implementing this program, Roffman et al. (1994) found students more willing to self-advocate and disclose their disabilities in social, academic, and work environments.

Assertiveness. The characteristic of assertiveness represents a person’s willingness to boldly state or express his or her position or interest in a given situation. This characteristic would be helpful in successfully making a persuasive case with faculty to secure access to accommodations or assistance. Assertiveness is touched upon in some self-advocacy instructional programs. “Assertiveness and self-advocacy are taught through discussion and role play and students are encouraged to be their own self-advocates (Bees, 1998).” Literature suggests that it is a lack of confidence and a
subsequent reluctance to disclose the disability that interferes with the enlistment of proper support (via self-advocacy). Hicks-Coolick recommends that assertiveness be included in further investigations designed to identify the facets of self-advocacy (1997).

The constructs of assertiveness and self-advocacy seem to be nearly synonymous. A strong relationship between these two ideas would not be surprising. Brinckerhoff (1994) specified that it is not just communication, but assertive communication, that contributes to effective self-advocacy. Logic suggests that someone who is assertive by nature is also very likely to act as one’s own advocate when circumstances call for it.

*Locus of control.* The degree to which students with LD are likely to act on their own behalf may also be related to the attributions they make about the causes of the outcomes they experience. According to Weiner (1972) people have an innate need to explain why things happen. The explanations that students generate about their successes and failures strike a balance between beliefs about their own personal qualities and the circumstances in which they find themselves. It is these within-person and environmental factors that determine causal attributions (Heider, 1958).

The general consensus among studies of locus of control in students with learning disabilities is that they tend to attribute academic outcomes to forces outside themselves, such as luck, the favor of others, or other uncontrollable factors (Kalechstein & Nowicki, 1997). This belief system, when applied consistently and with a sense of permanence (“It will always be this way”), constitutes an external locus of control. When one assumes that the power to succeed or fail at a given task lies within oneself, this constitutes an internal locus of control (Mamlin, Harris, & Case, 2001). Students who attribute both successes and failures to factors or choices over which they have at least some measure
of control, such as effective studying or effort, tend to be among the more successful (Mamlin et al., 2001). Self-advocacy may increase the factors over which the student has control.

According to Ayres, Cooley, and Dunn (1990), students with LD tended to make maladaptive attributions for academic outcomes. They found that students with LD in this study assumed that academic failures were beyond their control. Dollinger (2000) found that students with an internal locus of control tended to make better use of incidental information, which, regardless of its trivial appearance, proved relevant to academic success (professor’s office hours, the score required for an A grade, the date of the next exam). These data indicate that proactive agency in one’s education, combined with the assumption that it is possible to generate positive outcomes through incidental information, can bring about academic success. These results hold implications for the potential success of interventions focused on academics; if students feel their academic capabilities are outside their personal control, they may also presume academic interventions to be ineffective by nature (Ayers, et al., 1990). Interventions may be better directed at modifying student’s locus of control. Students with an internal locus of control are more likely to take action on their own behalf. Since the degree to which locus of control would need to be modified depends on the degree to which it exists in the individual, it makes sense to include it in a measure of a student’s propensity to act on his or her own behalf (self-advocacy).

A literature review conducted by Kalechstein, & Nowicki (1997) asserts, based on methodological factors apparent in the available research base, that it is unwise to draw conclusions about the general internal or external locus of control among students with
LD as a group. Although it may not be possible to make the generalization that students with LD hold one belief system or the other, locus of control remains an important factor in educational success for all students, and is therefore relevant to the construct of self-advocacy.

Research focused on the characterological aspects of students with LD has consistently suggested that students’ attributions about the causes of their successes and failures is a key factor distinguishing them from students without LD (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 1998; Ayres, Cooley, and Dunn, 1990); Miller, 2000; Mui & Yeung, 2000; Martinez and Sewell, 2000). Largely rooted in Rotter’s social learning theory (1954, 1975), research continues to conclude that the student’s beliefs about how and why success or failure occurs in his or her academic experience, referred to as locus of control, influence the actions they take to improve those outcomes (Mamlin, Harris, & Case, 2001). Rotter described the belief that one’s own behavior or stable personal characteristics will generally lead to certain outcomes as an internal locus of control, while the belief that factors outside the individual’s personal control determine outcomes is an external locus of control. An internal locus of control is generally regarded as the one best adapted for personal effectiveness (Mamlin, et al., 2001).

According to Paulhus (1983), locus of control is a multidimensional construct, best divided up into progressively global “spheres of control”. These include personal efficacy, which has to do with an individual’s perceived control over aspects of personal achievement, exemplified by meeting academic, physical, or other individual challenges. To the college student with LD/ADHD, grades, GPA, test scores, or improvements in coursework fall into this category. Interpersonal control refers to perceived control in
social settings. The population at hand will find that this sphere of control relates to
dating, getting needs met among friends, interacting in study or project groups,
negotiating with professors, or asking questions of teaching assistants. Finally,
sociopolitical control, or the individual’s perceived influence over larger systems or
institutions, becomes relevant to this population when questioning the fairness of
university policy, assistance program regulations, or disability law. It is notable that
Paulhus appears to use the terms “efficacy” and “control” almost interchangeably,
suggesting that these constructs might be one and the same. Smith (1989), however,
determined that self-efficacy and locus of control are in fact separate and independently
functioning constructs. The current study presupposes that a student with a high level or
perceived control in any or all of these areas is also more likely, with the help of
assertiveness, to act on his or her behalf and become a good self-advocate.

Statement of the Problem

Special education, for all its noble intentions, has inadvertently created an
additional hurdle for students with mild to moderate learning disabilities. By developing
a system that so clearly assigns responsibility for meeting the needs of students in special
education, the student’s responsibility for his or her own educational outcomes has been
neglected. This has created a sense of dependency among students who have come to rely
so heavily on caring parents, teachers, and specialists throughout their primary and
secondary educations. If special education programming, accommodations, and
modifications have been effective, the student in question has the potential to move on to
postsecondary education or employment. However, in order to succeed in such
environments, the student will have to assume ownership of those processes that have
secured necessary help and subsequent success. After transitioning to a postsecondary learning environment, these issues become more critical. This is especially true for students with “invisible” disabilities, who must learn to speak up, ask questions, and enlist support. This process of advocating for oneself is all too often entirely new and unfamiliar to postsecondary students who, by nature of their disabilities, may have trouble organizing information, communicating ideas, or identifying that which is important for them to know. Although self-advocacy is frequently identified as a contributing factor to student success, and efforts have been made to deconstruct and teach students how to do it, we do not yet know self-advocacy intimately enough to build this skill set in enough of our college bound students with LD and ADHD. We can learn more about the experience of being a self-advocate in the postsecondary educational environment and what contributes to successful self-advocacy.

Purpose of the Study

This study is designed to investigate and describe the lived experience of college students with learning disabilities (LD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) as they advocate for themselves in the academic and social arenas of postsecondary education. While the literature has previously reflected the voice of these students as they counted self-advocacy skills among the factors that have supported their learning. However, it has not yet taken the next step and asked what it is truly like to be a student faced with the task of procuring assistance, making a case for his or her need, and enlisting the support and understanding of others in an effort to be successful in the postsecondary educational environment.
Further, research has not yet juxtaposed the actual experience of these students against the skill set and activities prescribed by authors who discuss self-advocacy and transition programs. Are the recommendations of the research reflective of the actual demands of self-advocacy in the real world? Are educators’ expectations of their students too limited? Are they too demanding and unrealistic? Does the research focus on the wrong skill sets? Does it miss the point entirely? Would a student who has been to college and actually had to self-advocate look back on how he was prepared to do so and feel that what he was taught had nothing to do with what he experienced? This study is designed to let the voices and experiences of college students with LD and ADHD tell us what it is truly like to be faced with this particular set of challenges.

Research Questions

The proposed study is intended to ask and answer the following questions:

1. What is the experience of college students with LD or ADHD as they advocate for themselves in the educational environment?

2. How does this experience compare to what educators believe to be true about self-advocacy based on the existing literature?

I hope to reflect the voice of these students as they relate their experiences with self-advocacy and the feelings, fears, anxieties, and amusements that may accompany it. I further hope that they will be able to fully discuss and disclose the assumptions, frames of mind, perspectives, judgments, and thought processes that occur with engaging in the act of advocating for oneself in an educational environment.
CHAPTER 2: METHODS

Researcher’s Background

During graduate school, I partially paid my tuition by working as an academic counselor in the University of Denver’s Learning Effectiveness Program (LEP). The LEP is a fee-for-service program designed to provide support, academic advising, tutoring, advocacy, and study skills education to students on campus with LD and ADHD. I was randomly assigned a caseload of students.

Each of my students was a unique individual, and each made a lasting impression. Some wanted to hear my advice, to know my thoughts on a matter of importance, or to complain about their professors. Others had little use for a nosy know-it-all graduate student, and I therefore rarely saw them. Some would come in merely to socialize, or so it would seem. It was the student’s investment of time and resources, and if they wished to spend it on the knowledge that someone on staff cared about them and knew their name, that was fine with me. I always heard from them at registration time, for help putting together a reasonable schedule that would prevent them from becoming overwhelmed, or when something was really wrong.

I approached this job with a certain set of beliefs that I maintain in my practice as a school psychologist. I never did anything for students that they needed to do for themselves. If a call was to be made, I handed over my phone. If a student needed an extension on a project, I would proofread the email in which the request was made before
it was sent. I have always believed that the goal of any educator, including myself, is to foster the independence of students. Our job is to give students the tools they need in order to be successful. Doing so means helping students realize the difference between what they know and what they must learn, between what they have and what they need. Education from this perspective also means helping students develop a plan to meet those needs and gather that knowledge. It is the teacher’s job to communicate to students that it is safe to make a mistake so long as the opportunity for learning and growth is not lost.

I also believe that students are responsible for their own learning. Students must ask for help when they need it, acknowledge their ignorance when it surfaces, and assert their position to ensure their voice is heard. Students are entitled to make their own choices and should do so based on their strengths and abilities as well as their desires. I also understand that as much as I may feel justified in my personal beliefs about the division of responsibility in learning, I do not understand what it is truly like to struggle in education with a learning disability or other disorder.

While I feel I was helpful to many of my students, I was forever on the outside looking in. Although I had also been an undergraduate, always prepared to be dismissed and denied, I did not have a learning disability. I did not have to walk around wondering if there was something wrong with me that I could not fix. I did not have to carry around the notion that succeeding in college might be automatically and inherently harder for me than nearly everyone else. Although far from a perfect student myself, I still did not know what it was like to be in my students’ shoes.

Now, as a school psychologist, I acknowledge my role in the preparation of K-12 students. I feel partially responsible for teaching them about their learning disabilities, the
accommodations to which they are entitled, and how to get what they want out of their education. I feel it is also a part of my job to help students realize that they should in fact make demands of their educations and have expectations of their learning processes. I have made attempts to teach students in special education about how to be a successful and informed student in special education while giving acknowledgement and respect to their disabilities. I continue to wonder if I approach this task in the right direction, with the proper tools, and using appropriate assumptions. I still feel that the best way to educate myself and those in my profession is to investigate what I think I know by going to the source and asking the students themselves.

Phenomenological Approach

Phenomenology is the study of phenomena, or events and experiences. Its goal is to examine experience by obtaining comprehensive descriptions that will later lead to structural analysis that can portray the essential meaning or the phenomena itself (Moustakas, 1994). Through phenomenological methods, researchers attempt to determine the meaning of an experience for those who experience it and can offer a thorough description of it. By beginning with a descriptive approach, the phenomena can tell their own story (Giorgi, 1985; in Moustakas, 1994). Research of this nature acknowledges that the best way to understand what it is truly like to have a particular experience or be in a given situation is to ask those who have lived it. Phenomenology allows us to come one step closer to walking a mile in someone else’s shoes.

My focus here is to gain insight into the adult educational experience in the task of self-advocacy. This includes students’ perceptions of their own effectiveness, their ability to exert control over educational outcomes, their experiences in disclosing their
disability and persuading others to view their claims to accommodations and
modifications as appropriate and necessary, and their thoughts on the meaning of these
experiences. Although conducting observations gives evidence of the choices a student
makes through their behavior, it does not let us in to the process and meaning of what
they do. Therefore, to explore the experience of self-advocacy in this way, a
phenomenological approach is preferred (Moustakas, 1994).

Rationale For Choosing In-Depth Phenomenological Interviews. This study
consists of a series of case studies conducted with phenomenological methods,
specifically in-depth phenomenological interviews. This choice is driven by the research
question, which focuses on the experience of being a self-advocate in the college
environment as it is understood by the participants themselves. This particular question
eliminates certain types of qualitative methods. Phenomenological methods are best
suited to discovering and describing the nature of an experience from the perspective of
those who have had it, while ethnography, for example, is intended for the study of
culture from an observational standpoint. Therefore, methods such as ethnography cannot
be applied. Heuristic research would be an appropriate choice if my own personal
experiences more closely mirrored those of the participants, as this method requires an
autobiographical perspective. Hermeneutic approaches are designed to understand an
individual and his or her experiences through the examination of writings, creative works,
and other artifacts, while phenomenology has the benefit of access to people and their
current perspectives. I do not wish to postulate a theory to explain the experience, but
simply to understand it as it is presented to me, thus eliminating grounded theory
methods.
This process also capitalizes on my own strengths as well as those of students with LD/ADHD. Phenomenology requires skill in conversation and interviewing. As an academic counselor, it was my job to help students articulate their needs, describe their disabilities, generate solutions to perceived problems, and discuss their experiences as a student with disabilities in the college environment. As I interviewed applicants to the program and to the university, I saw the variety of ways in which students discussed their goals and interests, in addition to their disabilities.

Interviews are also preferred because, in my observation, these students often do their best work in oral discussion and presentation as opposed to written work. With respect to difficulties experienced by students with learning disabilities, interviewing avoids complications such as misunderstanding and stress that accompany the reading and writing inherent in using surveys. In fact, oral examinations and/or dictation of written work are often suggested to students with disabilities as an accommodation in place of traditional evaluation methods (Slavin, 1988). It seems only fair to again offer this accommodation for the purpose of data collection.

The interview process is a natural way to tell a personal story (Seidman, 1998). It forgives the disorganization, disjointed thinking, and distractibility of participants with particular processing disorders that may be exacerbated by writing. The flow of ideas in this environment is anticipated to be easier, more relaxed than is possible through other means. By following the lead of the participant, I was made aware of considerations and truths at which I could otherwise have only attempted to guess, given my dearth of personal experience with this phenomena. Therefore, it seems only appropriate to go
directly to the source, allowing the participants to tell me what is important, rather than trying to glean it from other sources.

The interview process. I followed Seidman’s (1998) recommendations on in-depth phenomenological interviewing for this investigation. Three interviews of a minimum of 90 minutes were planned with each of 5 participants to take place over the course of about 3-4 months. However, it was sometimes necessary to schedule longer or additional interviews to accommodate students’ schedules or to more thoroughly gather information. The lengthy process of transcribing the interviews also caused some delays.

It is important to note that the interview guides I used (see Appendix A) are merely that: guides. While these were the topics discussed, and were presented in that general manner, the nature of phenomenological interviewing requires flexibility. On a moment-to-moment basis, my next question was influenced by the answer to the previous one, which allowed the participant to influence the interview. Content of subsequent interviews, was generally dictated by Seidman (1998) and roughly outlined in the interview guides, and was also dependent on the content of the previous interview. I followed up on conversations and content brought up previously, and allowed subsequent interviews to take the direction required by the outcome of the one before it.

Seidman (1998) recommends that the first interview with each participant focus on the participant’s general personal information and individual history. This included questions about their initial diagnosis, support services in elementary and secondary school, teacher and peer relationships, their type of disability and current understanding of its impact on their learning, the role of their parents in their education, and their insights about their own personal characteristics. Also of interest was whether or not the
participant recalled being prepared in any way by his or her teachers for the task of self-advocacy. This included participation in any formal transition programming or similar workshops or seminars. Social and demographic data was taken at that time, including gender, age, type of K-12 education (public or private), number of years in special education, age at diagnosis, type of disability, accommodations or modifications used in high school, and use of educational therapy or tutoring. The task here was to get to know the participant on a more personal level and to focus subsequent interviews. Interview Guide One reveals the questions that were used to gather this information (Appendix A).

Seidman (1998) also suggests that Interview Two serve the purpose of illustrating the experiences to be studied. The second interview focused on specific recollections of their experiences in advocating for themselves in the college environment. They discussed specific and detailed stories about what occurred during these experiences, as well as their thoughts and feelings at the time and what it meant to them. I was particularly interested in what each participant believed was required of them in order to effectively self-advocate, as well as the personal characteristics that the participant thought he or she had to draw upon. Additional questions had to do with the available literature on the subject of self-advocacy as described in the literature review. Interview Guide Two (Appendix A) includes topics outlined in the literature review to be discussed, although they may not necessarily appear in this order, given that interviews have to flow and inform one another.

The third interview allowed each participant to share reflections about the experiences that were shared in Interview Two (Seidman, 1998). This third interview will consist primarily of a discussion of their understanding of their self-advocacy experiences
in light of our collective interviews. The discussion centered around their view of the task of self-advocacy after having an opportunity to reflect on it. We discussed what they learned about themselves as students and self-advocates and how their personal characteristics have influenced their efforts to advocate for themselves. This was also discussion of their future plans for employment or additional education, as well as any recommendations for the future of transition planning and self-advocacy education. Interview Guide Three shares the questions intended to organize that discussion (Appendix A).

During each interview, I was mindful of my general stance as a researcher (Wertz, 1984 in von Eckartsberg, 1998). This included personal factors that I brought to the interaction, such as my empathic presence, unhurried pace, attention to details, movement between objects and their meanings, suspended belief, and interest level. I was careful not to impose an inordinate amount of structure on the interview beyond what was necessary to clarify questions, which allowed participants to tell their stories as they occurred to them. I followed up, instead of interrupting, to clarify points or ask additional questions (Seidman, 1998).

Gathering Participants

In order to study the influence of self-advocacy skills on those students who experience resilience and success, I chose to study a resilient and successful group. For students with learning disabilities, the question of success can be defined by enrollment in higher education and attainment of post-secondary employment. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, students with learning and attention disabilities in good standing at the University of Denver served as the participants in this study.
At the University of Denver, students with disabilities have the choice of enrolling in one of two programs operating within University Disability Services. The Learning Effectiveness Program is a fee-for-service organization that provides tutoring, academic counseling, and generally organizes accommodations and modifications for students with LD and ADHD. The second option is the University Assistance Program, the free-of-charge university-funded group that organizes accommodations and modifications to students with all manner of disabilities, in an effort to comply with disability law. It does not, however, necessarily provide ongoing academic counseling, tutoring, and editing as a typical part of its services. Rather, it provides referrals and information directing students to locate those services.

Students learned about the study through their academic counselors. A description of effective self-advocacy skills was provided during an informal meeting with academic counselors prior to gathering participants. A checklist was provided for their reference (see Appendix E), summarizing the description of effective self-advocacy provided during the above-mentioned meeting. Academic counselors were the first to contact potential participants.

*Screening and informed consent.* During their regular appointments with their own students, counselors asked students to read the provided introductory participant letter (see Appendix B) and indicate their interest in participating in the study. Counselors then submitted the completed interest forms. I contacted each of the suggested participants as they requested, either by telephone or email. I met with each interested student by phone or in person and gave or emailed them a letter explaining the method of data collection (tape-recorded interviews), length of interviews, number of interviews,
content of interviews, purpose of the study, assurance of confidentiality, and dissemination of information. Potential participants were invited to ask questions and express their concerns. A brief screening interview (Appendix A) was be administered to make sure each student met criterion for participation and to gathered demographic information that allowed me to assemble a sample according to the specifications discussed below. I asked each participant to sign a statement of agreement to participate in the interview process and permission to tape-record and transcribe the sessions (Appendix C). Forms were read aloud to participants and questions about the form and its implications were answered.

Participant selection. Each potential participant was asked a series of screening questions (Appendix A) to assess their interest in the study, awareness and understanding of the topic, and demographic information that was used to ensure variety among participants. Additional efforts were made to create a group of participants that varied in profile on the basis of gender, ethnicity, type of disability, age of diagnosis, and major area of study. The group included two men and three women. No more than two students from any one major area of study were included. Learning diagnoses represented by this group includes “sequencing disorder”, dyscalculia, dyslexia, ADHD. Juniors and seniors were preferred, as they have had more time in college to assemble a personal history of self-advocacy in the university environment. I was able to include students who had not just willingness, but a genuine passion about the topic of self-advocacy.

Some students who expressed interest in the study were not included for a variety of reasons. One interested person was a graduate student rather than an undergraduate, while another was a student whose primary disabling condition was physical rather than
learning related. One student seemed to be seeking to learn about self-advocacy through her participation, rather than contributing prior experience and existing knowledge on the topic. I had a sense of this when I screened this student, but I decided we should meet anyway. Several minutes into the first interview, it became clear that her grasp of self-advocacy as a concept, as well as her overall relationship to it, was not as strong and vital as was evident in the previous participants. We stopped the interview and discussed her actual understanding of self-advocacy and its role in her life. She said that she felt she could discuss the topic if I gave her more information about it. After talking a while longer, it was clear that I would be spending more of the interview time explaining the concept of self-advocacy than learning about it from a student’s perspective. I told her what I was really looking for, and that I had no doubt that she was a bright, hardworking, and capable student. She understood that this project was not a good fit for her, and since we did not schedule any further interviews, I did not transcribe her tape. I learned to screen more carefully and be less concerned about finding a sufficient number of participants than about selecting those who were in a position to make the most meaningful contribution possible. Each student I was unable to include was fully informed of the reasons; they were kind and understanding, and expressed their pleasure in the fact that someone was examining the topic of self-advocacy.

The final cohort of five participants was uniformly Caucasian and from high SES families, as are the majority of students at DU and in the LEP and DSP programs. All attended private high school for at least a portion of their K-12 educational experiences. Two had also attended public school at some point before high school graduation. Four of the five students had attended a school specifically designed to meet the needs of students
with learning diagnoses before coming to DU. Therefore, four of the five participants had received some manner of formal guidance and instruction in the areas of the nature of learning differences, developing their sense of self with regard to their learning diagnosis, and advocating for themselves in educational environments. Of those who had attended such “LD schools”, two had attended Landmark College, a post-secondary school offering a two-year Associate of Arts degree in a curriculum specifically designed to prepare students with learning diagnoses for the transition to college and university.

Table 1: Demographic Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Chris</th>
<th>Josie</th>
<th>Jessica</th>
<th>Joe</th>
<th>Jane</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High SES</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended Landmark College</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private K-12</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public K-12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LD school prior to DU</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Advocacy instruction prior to DU</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High parent involvement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent modeled self-advocacy</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changed colleges due to lack of support prior to DU</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LD Support services a factor in first college choice</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tried to get by with no structured support at some point</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had a desire to pass as non-LD at some point</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All participants had been diagnosed with some portion their LD or ADHD during or prior to their second year of high school. This criterion existed to exclude students who were only assessed and diagnosed prior to taking the SAT for the sole purposes of receiving accommodations on that test. I recognized this phenomenon during my time as an academic counselor. I felt it was often true that students who were evaluated for the
purpose of the SAT did not have K-12 academic experience or self-advocacy knowledge equal to students who had been diagnosed earlier. In my estimation, students diagnosed earlier in their academic careers experienced greater struggles with their learning diagnosis and therefore a better-developed sense of themselves as learners and self-advocates. Students who were diagnosed just prior to their senior year often do not have an understanding of self-advocacy, and lack the experience that tells them whom they should ask for help or how to go about getting help. I have always felt that these students do not view themselves as students with disabilities and have not processed the meaning of their disability or evaluated their role in their own learning in the same way that students with longer disability histories do. Additionally, the outcomes of this study, such as the implications for preparing students with LD and/or ADHD to be self-advocates in college, are designed to benefit those students and educators with sufficient time to prepare for the transition. Therefore, it seems that transition planning and students who have not had access to or benefit of it cannot be of help to one another.

Definition of a successful student. Students selected for the study also fit a certain profile of success. Selected participants had no history of placement on academic probation and reported a current GPA of 2.0 or better. Students were also selected based on their overall progress in school. I chose to define typical progress as being no more than one academic year behind in their accumulation graduation credits. In my experience, it is not unusual for students with identified disabilities to take an additional year to complete coursework. Students with disabilities that impact learning are often advised to take a reduced or minimum course load at some point during their first year as an accommodation or as a strategy to maximize their learning as they adapt to the
university setting. Deliberately modifying their pace toward graduation in order to be more focused on fewer classes should not be characterized as a failure to succeed.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted using one student who meets all of the above criteria. Interviews were conducted with the interview guides their effectiveness in eliciting sufficient data. The participant in the pilot study was asked for specific feedback regarding questions. Only minor adjustments were made to future interviews based on his suggestions, primarily as a result of his raising my awareness of perspectives I might consider when asking my questions. Ultimately, each participant was asked for their thoughts on how the interviews went and invited to give me feedback. Each had something different that he or she would have recommended asking. These suggestions were usually reflective of a particular issue that was significant to that participant, as evidenced by their contributions during interviews. The pilot study was helpful in determining the length of time required in each interview in order to gather the depth of response appropriate to answer the interview questions. Because the pilot study participant was so similar to the other participants in terms of the process and format of the interviews, it was deemed appropriate to include his data in the overall results. He therefore became the initial participant.

Collecting Data

Before beginning to interview participants, it was necessary to reach what Husserl termed a state of *epoche*, or a freedom from the suppositions and assumptions I have made based on my experience working as an academic counselor to these students and the research I have read on the subject (Moustakas, 1994). Although a review of the
literature had primed me to expect certain things from the interviews, I put those expectations aside and tried to let the participants be my first source of real information on the subject.

Data Collection

It was most natural to recruit and conduct interviews with one participant at a time. It would have been too easy to get students’ stories and personal information confused if the interviews overlapped at all. Working with one student exclusively, conducting and transcribing all of their interviews prior to beginning with another participant, made it easier to give that person and their story all of my attention. Doing so also shortened each participant’s involvement in the study, allowing their interviews to take place closer together and ending their commitment to the study sooner. I believe this practice helped participants maintain a high interest in the study and facilitated each participant’s completion of all three interviews before needing to end their involvement due to graduation or other commitments.

I offered the participants the option of conducting the interviews in the conference room of the LEP, generously offered by the program director, or in one of the group study rooms in the library. Participants had no objection to either location, although interviews were more conveniently held in the library rooms. The content of each interview followed the structure laid out in Appendix A. Some recommendations offered by the initial participant, serving also as a pilot study participant, were integrated into the subsequent interviews. Most of the suggestions were to do with wording of particular questions for better clarification and did not significantly change the structure of the
interviews. In fact, each participant appreciated a somewhat different approach, and modifications to the order of the topics discussed followed his or her lead.

Data Analysis

Data analysis included the transcription of participant interviews and the sorting of those statements into categories that best identified their overall content. The interviews from these case studies were analyzed using phenomenological methods.

Transcription. I created a verbatim transcript after each interview. This provided a second opportunity to hear the interviews and clarify anything that might have been overlooked initially (Seidman, 1998). Grammar, slang, and sentence structure used by the participants were not altered in the original transcription, but some editing for clarity and cohesiveness was necessary before including the quotes in the final presentation of the data. The participant was emailed a copy of the transcript to review prior to the subsequent session, and as soon as possible following the final session, in order to advise me of any corrections or clarifications that were necessary.

I transcribed each recorded interview for the first four participants, and used an online transcription service for each interview conducted with the fifth participant. Recordings made using a digital voice recorder were uploaded using a secure server. The transcriptionist then accessed the recordings and created the transcript. Each completed transcript was emailed to me, and I subsequently forwarded them to the participant for review. The transcription service representative, who handled my account and transcribed the digital recordings, signed a confidentiality agreement assuring that the recordings and transcripts would only be used for the purposes of my project and would be destroyed following the completion of the transcription service’s participation in the
project. This participant had no objections to the use of a transcription service and readily signed a consent form allowing the use of the service.

Research log, analytic memos, and diagrams. I kept a research log (Ely, 1991), including notes about the interviews and their circumstances, perceptions and observations not evident in tape recordings, as well as thought or feelings during the transcribing and interviewing process. After transcription, analytic notes (Miles & Huberman, 1994, Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003) are useful in examining the themes that emerge during data analysis. For example, while underlining relevant passages in a transcript, a memo can be made in the research log explaining why the section was important and listing any thoughts or questions brought up by the passage (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). I made notes on the transcripts as I sifted through the data to summarize my first impressions of the significance or meaning of the passage, and to pose questions or theories about how any given statement might relate to another made by that participant or by another participant on a similar theme. Diagrams are also useful in the data coding and analysis process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I often drew diagrams to experiment with a visual representation of the data as I worked, to test ideas about the relationships between the themes and ideas that emerged.

Profiles. Profiles were formed based on an analysis of the total of the participant’s interview transcripts. The entire three-interview narrative was examined for themes describing their pre-university experiences as people with LD, their voice on the topic of self-advocacy as an overall concept, and its place in their lives as learners, advocates, and young people on the precipice of adulthood. My goal was to describe my impressions of
them as well as to impart their essential message, remaining true to their beliefs about themselves and their perspectives on the essential nature of self-advocacy.

*Colaizzi’s method.* Transcripts were analyzed with the two research questions in mind. According to Colaizzi, (in von Eckartsberg, 1998), the first goal of phenomenological data analysis is to arrive at a fundamental structure, based on the subjects descriptions of the phenomena in question. Multiple fundamental descriptions were then examined through the same process of empirical phenomenological reflection. My own personal reflection on the phenomenon of self-advocacy and was used to create a fundamental structure, or a general outline of the experience from each individual perspective. Through explication and interpretation, each interview transcript is scrutinized to reveal structure, meaning, coherence, and circumstances of occurrence (von Eckartsberg, 1986 in Moustakas, 1994). Relevant statements were highlighted, and irrelevant ones passed over, as recommended by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003). I grouped together statements that related to each selection of relevant text until a collection of repeating ideas was assembled. For example, each statement that Participant 1 made regarding his thoughts on the essential nature of self-advocacy were grouped together in the order in which he made them, along with the notes and comments I made after initially made after reading the transcript. Additional notes were included in order to preserve the context in which the comments were made, if it was not readily apparent in the statements. Statements like these from each participant were clustered together to form themes and a comprehensive fundamental structure (von Eckartsberg, 1998) of the phenomenon of self-advocacy.
I also examined the participants’ statements about self-advocacy with respect to its relevance to the components that comprise the construct. I examined each answer for its essential message and tried to summarize the main ideas with notations, questions, and key words. Some answers spoke to one idea only, others touched on several topics. Each highlighted section, chosen for its contribution to a clearer understanding of self-advocacy, was given a code associated with what it appears to represent. I kept a list of the codes as they were assigned and I used them throughout the transcript as appropriate. For example, if a statement illustrated the participant’s experiences disclosing his or her learning disability or ADHD to a professor, I gave that statement a code of COM (Communication). If the content of that communication included a description of the exact nature of the student’s individual LD, I also added a code of KLD (Knowledge of Disability). If the purpose of that disclosure was to broach the subject of support or help that might address the student’s needs, I also added a code of PS (Problem Solving). This process identified the repeating ideas in each individual transcript, and ultimately the entire participant group. The remaining statements were reduced to “clear and succinct expressions or components” (Colaizzi, in von Eckartsberg, 1998). Answers or sections of participants’ answers were copied and pasted into new documents that eventually contained all of the participants’ statements that addressed that particular theme. Those components were then arranged into a fundamental description of self-advocacy. These statements, when kept intact, illustrated the relationship among the emerging themes and helped to clarify the structure of self-advocacy as well as the experience of it. Emergent themes and categories were then compared to the template established by the preexisting literature.
Each theme then was contained in a document of related statements, with additional codes pointing out the relationship of statements illustrating that primary theme to other major or minor ones. I then re-read each of those documents, and did any re-coding that was necessary. Some passages, upon second look, were more predominantly descriptive of other topics and were moved as appropriate.

Presentation of the Findings

Profiles are presented first, in order to provide personal knowledge of the participants who provided the data. To address Research Question One, unifying themes and fundamental structures that articulate the essential of the self-advocacy experience are presented. These are compiled to present the common themes and describe what is truly like to be a student with a learning disability or ADHD trying to self-advocate in the college environment. Unique, individual perspectives on the experience demonstrate its personal nature. To address Research Question Two, a framework of the components of self-advocacy is proposed. Each component of self-advocacy is presented incorporating an analysis of the themes from participants’ collective statements. This framework suggests not only what self-advocacy is made of, from the perspective of these students, but how all the pieces work together and influence each other, ultimately working for the benefit of the student. In the discussion section, I address the implications of these results for transition planning efforts and self-advocacy training programs.

Participant Profiles

In this section, I will present a brief description of each of the five students who participated in the study. To get to know them in ways that pertain to the phenomenon of self-advocating in a university environment, I will discuss aspects of their educational
histories, experiences having LD prior to coming to college. At the time of their interviews, each of the participants was offered the opportunity to use a pseudonym on the recordings to protect their privacy. All five declined that offer and stated that they did not feel the need for anonymity. I have assigned them each a false name to protect their privacy and will use those names in the Results and Discussion sections. Some editing has helped to improve the clarity of the participants’ messages. The original content and meaning of their statements has been fully retained, but some corrections in the phrasing have been used to help the students present themselves as they intended.

Profile: Chris. My first participant possessed many qualities that made him an effective self-advocate and an excellent example of not only how to advocate for one’s self, but how to conduct one’s self in doing so. Chris was not afraid to acknowledge or learn from his mistakes, and readily offered them for others to learn from as well. He cared deeply about being regarded as someone with strong character, intelligence, hardworking, responsible, and willing to do his part to further his learning.

He presented as someone who had enjoyed luck, ease, and opportunity. It would have been easy to assume that things had always come easily to him. We all knew students like him in high school. They were the bright, attractive, promising, talented people whom we all liked, and maybe envied a bit. This poised and articulate young man sat in front of me and thanked me for the opportunity to talk about a subject that had been a significant part of his education. He was a person so passionate about the topic of self-advocacy, he wrote a manual about it intended for the students at his former high school, so that they would not have to make the same mistakes he did. He frequently referred to the manual that he wrote, a guide to living and learning at his secondary school with a
learning disability. He was adamant that students should understand their own LD and talk about it openly with anyone who was in a position to provide support. He presented himself during the interviews as confident, talkative, generous, comfortable with himself, and completely satisfied with what he had made of his university experience. Chris was a young man about to graduate early from the University of Denver’s Communication Department. During his time at DU, he has been an active member of the Learning Effectiveness Program (LEP). He chose DU in part because of this program and because his older sister had been successful with it.

Chris was first diagnosed with dyslexia and ADHD at the age of 7, due to the diligence of his experienced parents. He was the third child in his family to be diagnosed with LD and ADHD, behind two bright and high-achieving sisters. His parents are politically conservative, high-earning professionals who could afford to invest heavily in his learning. He shared that his parents, despite all they were able to do for him or on his behalf, made a concerted effort to hold him responsible for his own work ethic, outcomes, and advocacy. “They didn’t want to hold our hands the entire time,” he said. “I think that was good for them to do that, to step back and say ‘You know, you’ve got to do this kind of stuff on your own.’ Because I think that at least taught me that I’m an independent person.” His descriptions of their involvement indicated that, although they helped and supported him a great deal, it was incumbent upon him to advocate for himself to secure the help and support he needed, in addition to his own diligent study.

His family sent him to private schools in Colorado Springs until he began to attend DU. These schools were not designed for students with learning disabilities, although they had the resources necessary to maximize student achievement. While in
high school, Chris had access to an educational therapist while she was on staff at the school and after she left to move into private practice. When evaluating the extent of his self-advocacy skills, he gave her credit for her support and advising, whether he got the answer he was looking for or not. “She told me she was talking to my parents,” he said. “They knew everything, that I wasn’t talking to teachers, that I wasn’t studying for exams, that I really wasn’t putting 110% in, I was putting maybe 75.” He realized that she acted primarily to keep him accountable, and to develop in him a sense of responsibility for his own learning outcomes.

Like so many children with LD, Chris met with resistance from faculty whom he felt were not interested in working with him toward his achievement. With the support of his parents and sometimes on his own, he worked thoughtfully with the teachers and administrators at his school to gain access to instructional support, classroom accommodations, and modifications to his work that would allow him to demonstrate his learning without constant interference from the roadblocks put up by his learning disability. He did not always walk away with exactly what he felt he needed, and he learned how to chose his battles. Once chosen, however, he conducted himself well in those battles.

In college, Chris’s process of self-advocacy was like being in constant motion; he maintained a persistent cycle of meeting with his professors and instructors, disclosing and describing his dyslexia and ADHD, requesting his basic testing accommodations, meeting with his LEP counselor, going to professors’ office hours, asking questions after class, asking for help from his peers, and all the while holding himself to very high
standards. He was like a gardener, actively cultivating and attending to the relationships that would support his learning. Doing so made his self-advocacy process easier.

I think if I could diagram him, put him on a poster, pull him apart and show other students what was inside, I would say, “Just be like him. Do what he does. Follow this example and you won’t stray too far.” I wish I could take what he had and bottle it, wrap it up and put some in every special education classroom and resource room around. He made his mistakes, but he wasn’t too nearsighted to learn from them. He dealt with his fair share of frustration, but he never made a habit of quitting, getting angry, or blaming other people. I don’t know what became of his book. He often promised to send me a copy, but I never saw it. He referred to it frequently in our interviews and I am confident that he shared with me the essence of his message.

Profile: Josie. If she hadn’t told me that she was a “worrywart,” I certainly never would have known. Josie seemed to take everything in stride. She was relaxed and knew the difference between what she could “do something about” and what she couldn’t. She was creative and laid-back, and seemed to find it easy to talk about having a learning disability. Calm and confident, she often made the point that she was in control of all aspects of her education. When she was satisfied that she had done everything possible for herself, she prepared to accept whatever the outcome might be. She was used to discussing her LD in an open and matter of fact way. It was almost as though she expected that she did not have enough to add, that I had heard everything she might say already, that it would be obvious. It was an effort to convince her that I certainly had not heard it all, and that anything she could add to the story of students with LD who struggle to self-advocate in college would be a welcomed gift.
Josie had attended an expensive, private school focused on serving students with LD and ADHD. Everyone in the school had some type of learning or attention diagnosis, and she had been discussing the nuances of her disabilities with her peers and teachers for as long as she could remember. Her audience knew exactly what she was talking about, almost immediately, as they could so easily map her experiences onto their own. It was comforting for her to have that common understanding. When she came to DU, she found that this understanding wasn’t so automatic, and that she had to do some work with non-LD peers and with teachers unfamiliar with the LEP to gain their understanding or support. It wasn’t automatic anymore. She had to explain what accommodations she would get and why those things were appropriate, providing background information that had not been necessary before. While she found DU’s class sizes to be comfortable, and the LEP to be a better-structured program than some of her classmates had moved on to, she found she was suddenly in the minority as a student with LD for the first time in her educational career.

When my questions moved on to how her parents were involved in her educational life, and how they might have taught her to self-advocate, the tone of her voice and her body language shifted. She did not appear to dodge the issue, but she seemed to feel that her answers warranted an explanation. She did not want to give the impression that her parents were blithely uninvolved or had left her to fend for herself without support, but the facts of her story suggested that they did. She described her father as a busy doctor who traveled a lot, worked long hours, and provided a very comfortable lifestyle for the family. She explained that her mother and sister were very involved in equestrian endeavors, an interest that she did not share. She then described a
horrible car accident in which her mother and sister were nearly killed, severely injured and temporarily incapacitated, on their way to an equestrian event. With her mother in the hospital for months and her father always at work, Josie managed a large part of her junior year on her own, with only the help of the housekeeper. She applied to colleges, did her homework, ran her own progress meetings at school, and managed her life in their absence. The degree to which she valued self-sufficiency seems directly connected to her survival of that very lonely period of her life. Her interviews communicated her assumption that if something is going to get done, she is going to have to take care of it herself. She managed her disability with the same sense of individual, personal responsibility that she managed that painful, personal tragedy—almost to a fault.

Josie was also open about her history of depression and self-mutilation. Although she did not speak of this in detail, she said that she used to deal with stress by cutting on herself. She attributes this to her bi-polar disorder, for which she was in treatment prior to and at the time of the interviews. Overwhelming feelings and a high sense of personal responsibility may have led her to hurt herself as a way to manage. Her more relaxed attitude during the interviews appeared to be the result of good treatment and an intent to remind herself that she must give up some control.

There were moments when it was difficult to get details from her. I think she was reluctant to bore me by over-explaining things she assumed I knew by virtue of my job as a school psychologist and a researcher in the field of learning disabilities, I was purposeful in reminding her that those details and each step in her thought processes were exactly what I had come for. As she had described earlier, she was not used to giving the
detailed explanations behind her learning processes and found that process somewhat laborious.

Josie acknowledged the same self-advocacy activities that Chris did, such as disclosing to professors, talking about her learning differences with others, asking for help, and gaining access to her accommodations with the purpose of doing her best in her classes. She wasn’t as interested in discussing the minute details of those interactions in the same way that he was. Although she spoke less, she said a great deal about the things that mattered to her about being a self-advocate.

Josie described her plans to be a commercial interior designer and her plans to have a business partner whose skills would complement her own while augmenting her deficits. When considering the impact of her LD on her life, she is quick to say she wouldn’t change anything. Like Chris, she credited her LD for making her the person she has become, for her strengths, and for her personal toughness, “Like I said, it made me who I am. I like who I am at this point, so I don’t even want to think about how snobby and pretentious I would be if I’d had it easy the entire way.”

Profile: Jessica. Jessica was a 23-year-old female pre-med student enrolled in the LEP. She’s had a diagnosis of ADHD since she was 14, but only learned of her learning disability in the months prior to our interviews.

She was first diagnosed with ADHD in the ninth grade after a difficult transition to a Catholic school. Her diagnosis was poorly explained and she walked away without fully understanding what she was dealing with. After struggling to set up supports in an environment not conducive to working with students who have learning problems, she slipped into a depression that frightened her parents and friends. She missed most of a
year of high school while getting treatment, and instead of taking an opportunity to move on with her class, she opted to repeat that year. As a result, she would have finished high school a year behind her friends, aggravating self-esteem issues as her peers prepared to graduate. She ultimately decided to take the GED, amidst pressure from teachers to do otherwise, her own pre-conceived notions of what type of students took the GED, and how such a decision might impact her academic future.

She began her college education at Landmark College, a 2-year associates degree program designed to teach students with LD and ADHD about advocacy, the nature of learning problems, and how to work with their skills and challenges in the postsecondary environment. She experienced great success and felt empowered to rejoin traditional education armed with her new knowledge and skills.

She then enrolled at a private eastern college, which, while it had the standard accommodations required of postsecondary institutions, did not offer a fully developed support system designed to foster student success. She dedicated herself to creating one for herself through self-advocacy and advocacy for others, disclosing her disability to teachers and fellow students in an effort to create a community of students and faculty willing to collectively support the learning efforts of students with LD and ADHD. She felt that, with two years of Landmark college behind her, she knew her disability inside and out, and would be able to easily self-advocate her way through any school. What she found was that she spent all of her energy, expertise, and time trying to establish a system of support and communication that would help her and others manage a learning disability rather than working on her courses. Additionally, the nature of her learning difficulties had only been partially uncovered. She did not fully understand her own
challenges and found herself expending exceptional energy to advocate while continuing to struggle academically. She was frustrated by the fact that she felt as though she was drowning in her efforts to organize support for herself. She too was prepared to do battle, and did so by attempting to build what she needed from the ground up, often at great cost to herself. She was trying to re-invent the wheel. She shared that, “When I went to [my first university], there wasn’t any support, so I was just in survival mode. So I needed to just do everything I possibly can to make sure that I do okay. And so I talk to professors and everything. I really was pushed to advocate for myself.” Her battle was also against her own learning problems, and by default, herself. She battled to prove that she would not be affected by her diagnoses, that she could do anything if she just advocated properly for herself, asked for the right help, sought out the right support, arranged the right systems into place.

After struggling with the decision to leave that university, she heard of the University of Denver’s Learning Effectiveness Program, and discovered that the support structure she had struggled to create in other environments already existed at DU. She decided that she had to search for some middle ground between the LD-immersion culture of Landmark and the virtual absence of awareness for students with LD that she had been experiencing. She decided on DU, and quickly found that many of the things she struggled to put in place for herself were already in existence and easily accessible through the structured support system found in the LEP and DSP. “I guess I don’t feel as threatened here academically,” she said.

When discussing the influences of her parents, she identified her father as the parent who was primarily present and supportive during her most difficult times. Her
parents were divorced and her mother was not as available, by her own account, and she was later diagnosed with ADHD shortly after her daughter. While her father was available to her and supported her academic decisions, she was determined to take care of her own set of needs once she was in the college environment.

Jessica reiterated the expectations that a good self-advocate should be a good communicator (“I’m having a difficult time in this class and I need to communicate it to this professor. I need to be able to ask for help, and I need to be able to accept any help that is given to me.”), understand their learning diagnosis well (“That’s the most important part of self-advocacy. You have to understand yourself.”), have a strong sense of what learning strategies are personally effective, be proactive in addressing known difficulties, and avoid procrastination at all costs (“…self-advocacy for me was, you know, not letting it go to the point where I needed to call in all the forces and rescue me.”). She felt that personal ambition and desire to succeed academically were also a critical source of the motivation necessary to be an effective self-advocate (“I guess you have to want to do well. You have to want something very badly. So you have to persevere when it gets hard you have to be able to figure out, ‘Okay, what do I have to do to advocate for myself?’”). For her, it was important to fight through anxiety and feelings of intimidation, and be assertive in spite of her fears. She was declaring this set of strengths to herself in as much as she set out to communicate them to her instructors.

Profile: Joe. Joe was a 24-year-old Digital Media Studies major who received his services from the DSP after using the more structured and intensive LEP supports for his first two years. He had been diagnosed with his learning disability at about age 7, when his reading skills should have been emerging. After a very upsetting diagnostic process,
Joe’s parents placed him in an expensive private school, which, although not designed for students with learning-related disabilities, would likely provide enough individualized support to maximize his learning. While there, he received the support he needed without any legal documentation, such as an IEP, and instead found that teachers were simply committed to their students’ learning and allowed them to work from their strengths.

When he moved on to high school, his parents chose the best public high school in their area. Then their struggles began. Joe described a parade of “stupid” professionals, such as psychologists, special education teachers, and school administrators who, as he recalls, required him to prove and re-prove his learning disability. He viewed this as a necessary inconvenience, for the benefit of people who could not understand what he really needed. He describes a sequence of struggles to get simple accommodations, and some not so simple ones, throughout his high school education. Self-advocacy prior to coming to college, and indeed after he arrived, was a fight.

With his parents now divorced, his mother arranged her work life around being available to Jim and his school schedule. She was his fiercest advocate, and fought for his right to access accommodations and modifications. She helped shape the way he perceived both the special education process and his place in it. He described the way that she dismissed the assessment process as unnecessary, and something ridiculous to be endured so that they would believe he still needed help.

During that time, there were many contentious interactions, including with a psychologist whom they eventually sued due to his assertion that some of Joe’s drawings on a projective social-emotional measure lacked anatomical detail, indicating that he was “sexually confused.” Another seemed to revolve around a calculator, and going several
rounds in order to get the use of it approved. He may have developed an expectation that most aspects of his education would be a fight. However, he denied that he was a student in special education, or that the teachers serving him were special educators. Joe maintained some distance between himself and any association with special education, even though he received services in a public high school under an IEP. He had developed his own understanding of the support he had received that also allowed him to protect his ego by differentiating himself from students with more significant cognitive and learning issues.

Profile: Jane. Jane was a 22-year-old majoring in Communications and minoring in Art using the services of the LEP. Jane knew her diagnoses very well. When she described them to me, initially via email, it was as though she were reading them from a report. She may have referred to it, as she was able to report diagnostic axes and DSM codes associated with learning disability, bipolar disorder, anxiety disorder, and ADHD. She was assertive, opinionated and plain-spoken. As she told her stories, she revealed that she was not afraid of conflict and would not shy away from making efforts to arrive at ideal circumstances.

She claimed to have difficulty establishing trust with others, but she told her story so readily that such a thing was difficult to believe. She was first diagnosed with a learning disability at age 7. She and her mother learned what that meant by using Mel Levine’s books. Her parents were helpful and supportive. They got her private tutoring, therapy, and private schooling. She brought handouts, created by her mother, as a means of communicating helpful suggestions to Jane’s 6th grade teachers. She shared very personal details of her story, including a long history of treatment for bipolar disorder,
boarding school, alcohol abuse, and hospitalization. Although she had not been on academic probation, she explained that she left one previous university to better treat her bipolar disorder. At the time of our interviews, she was on a stop-out from DU while she received treatment for migraine headaches.

Like Jessica, Jane credited Landmark College with teaching her how to be a self-advocate. She shared that the first lesson she had to learn was that asking for help was not a sign of weakness. She spent time there getting to know herself and her learning problems, and learning how to discuss them in a way that made sense to others and would elicit their support.
CHAPTER 3: RESULTS

The major purpose of this study was to examine the phenomenon of being a successful college student and self-advocate with LD and/or ADHD. The presentation of the results is done in two stages. First, I answer Research Question one by presenting the participants’ thoughts, perspectives, and experiences of self-advocacy. I then answer Research Question Two by discussing each of the components of self-advocacy, which were suggested in the literature and confirmed by these participants, and propose a framework illustrating how self-advocacy occurs.

The first of my two research questions was “What is the experience of college students with LD and/or ADHD as they advocate for themselves in the college environment?” This was essentially an invitation to these students to articulate in more detail the experience of self-advocacy in the university environment. These participants shared a wealth of information about the experience of being a student with a disability and a self-advocate in the university environment. They were prepared to discuss not only their current experiences with self-advocacy, but also details of their histories as persons with disabilities and their lives with a learning diagnosis. As they shared, it was possible to see their evolution from diagnosis and academic struggle to effective management and, sometimes, the search for mastery. They discussed how they became who they were as learners, a process which, for them, was inextricable from the experience of having LD or ADHD and advocating for oneself. By relaying their stories as plainly as possible, I hope
to answer the first research question and present details and nuance about what it is really like to be a self-advocate with LD in the college environment.

The second of my two research questions asks, “How does this compare to what educators believe to be true about self-advocacy based on the existing literature?” The majority of the themes that emerged in this study directly address the hypothesized components of self-advocacy outlined in the literature. In the literature review (Chapter 1), the probable components of effective self-advocacy were outlined: knowledge of LD, problem solving, self-concept, communication skills, self-efficacy, assertiveness, locus of control, problem solving. The participant interviews provided a clear map of these domains, which allowed for the development of a proposed framework of self-advocacy that not only confirms the major suppositions of the existing self-advocacy literature, but suggests a means by which they work together and further shape the self-advocacy experience. See Figure 1 for a diagram of a self-advocacy framework.

These data suggest that self-advocacy is a communication process by which students solve their academic problems. A student’s ability to engage effectively in the self-advocacy communication process is informed first by the student’s communication skills, as well as by personal qualities of assertiveness, sense of self-efficacy, academic self-concept, and firm knowledge of LD. Conversely, the self-advocacy communication process can improve and develop each of those qualities, lead the student to be more assertive, view herself as more likely to be effective, increase her sense of her academic capabilities, and refine her understanding of her LD. The process of problem solving begs questions of the student about what aspects of her educational outcomes are subject to her own control, proactive measures, and sense of personal responsibility. Those beliefs
define how the student will address academic problems and challenges. The experience of solving academic problems informs and improves the self-advocacy process as the student learns how to provide more articulate and richer descriptions of what is needed and why it should be provided.

One caveat that becomes necessary at this point addresses the language they chose to use when they discussed their learning lives. Some students were consistent in their use of the term “learning differences” to discuss their diagnoses of dyslexia, ADHD, and similar categories that educators and mental health professionals refer to as “learning disabilities”. Participants who used this vernacular did not consider themselves to be disabled learners. They felt quite capable of learning and the demonstrating of their acquired knowledge, yet recognized that their individual profile of strengths and challenges did not always lend themselves to traditional education and assessment methods. Not all students were adamant about this point and, kindly, none took offense at the use of the term “learning disabled.” My use of the term LD in this writing refers inclusively to learning disabilities, learning differences, and ADHD.

Research Question 1: The Phenomenon of Self-Advocacy

I was amazed at what a personal topic self-advocacy turned out to be for these participants. It was hardly reasonable for me to expect that, just because the issue was important for me, not just for the purpose of completing my dissertation but because of how I believe it could contribute to success in education for everyone, that it would also be important to these generous participants. I thought I would have a difficult time pulling out their stories and convincing them that spending their precious free time talking to me about the difficulties of moving through college with a learning diagnosis
would be a worthwhile, gratifying experience. They each made it clear that the $20 they were being offered was nice, but it was certainly not the reason for their participation. These students felt it was their duty to participate, citing damage done by teachers in their past, or the ignorance of those around them, or the suffering and missed opportunities they saw in their classmates with learning problems as they struggled through their courses without sufficient resources. I often heard these students relate how helpful it would have been if someone had sat down and spoken to them the way they were speaking to me. Therefore, in as complete a manner as possible, and for the benefit of those they seemed to have in mind as they spoke, I am attempting to impart their messages.

When talking with me about what it is like to self-advocate from their position, that is, to be a student at a university with LD and/or ADHD who is seeking access to legally protected accommodations as well as additional support from instructors, the participants articulated their beliefs about what self-advocacy is and the purpose it serves in their lives. Although the explicit purpose of self-advocacy is to solve academic problems, these students experienced self-advocacy as the solution to other needs that existed beneath the surface. Self-advocacy was a tool with many uses. First, it served to assist the student in building the working relationship with an educator and set the ground rules, expectations, or rules of engagement that characterized that relationship. Second, self-advocacy allowed students to declare their character, highlighting personal qualities that they hope will inspire the educator to invest his or her time and effort in the mutual goal of that student’s success. Third, self-advocacy was sometimes experienced as a tool or weapon for doing battle. Right or wrong, students sometimes used their self-advocacy
techniques to advance what might be viewed by some as unreasonable expectations, or those that could potentially undermine the integrity of a program or the fairness of established policies. Fourth, self-advocacy assisted the student in assigning the learning diagnosis a position or role in the student’s learning experience. Enthusiasm about the process of self-advocacy ebbed and flowed: It was an additional, parallel process that must always occur alongside regular coursework, and was sometimes experienced as a burden. This burdensome quality often inspired a push-and-pull process with the disability itself. The student might push the LD and self-advocacy to the side, wanting to be free of them. However, self-advocacy was also a route to independence, allowing the student to find his or her own personal strength, discover a healthy interdependence, and, ultimately, move beyond identification as a person with LD to become someone who can define themselves in other ways. It helped them to establish a balanced relationship with the learning diagnosis and enjoy the personal rewards made possible by having been a self-advocate.

The collective statements of the five participants made it clear that self-advocacy was a communication process that served a number of different purposes. It was how they convinced others to take on the student’s educational challenges and regard those as a common enemy. They revealed themselves to their instructors, pledging their constant effort, convincing the instructor that they were good enough to receive their help.

Building the Working Relationship

The act of self-advocacy is viewed as a means by which the student can establish a relationship with a teacher, instructor, professor, or administrator. Students with LD who have been academically successful and view themselves as effective self-advocates
use the process of disclosing their LD, making their needs known, and arranging support for themselves as a pathway to connect to someone who is seemingly unapproachable. The student can communicate to the teacher something about what their future interactions might be like as well as the clear and mutual expectations for that relationship. Chris sought to strike a partnership that he described as “Meeting in the middle ground…I’ll give my 50%, you give your 50%, and let’s make 100%.” He also added, “You can count on me being in here 100% of the time.” I believe he had what teachers hope to find on the other side of an interaction in which a student is asking for personal help and support, and the energy that goes along with providing it. Despite some unreasonable expectations, Chris developed successful academic relationships, never losing sight of his collegiate goals and showing an uncanny ability to separate his emotions from his more practical needs. In creating those expectations, the student makes a pledge to the teacher about how he or she will go about getting needs met, how responsible he or she will be, and how problems and possible solutions will be brought to the surface.

Chris learned over time and often through his own failures, that giving others more than their share of responsibility for his learning would always prove to be a mistake. This helped him in his cultivation of relationships with professors. He believed that his professors would be frustrated if more was demanded of them than he did of himself, making them less inclined to help him. He believed in coming prepared and not wasting his instructor’s time. He honored this by being succinct in his conversations and by making his point, and his request, as clearly as possible. “The biggest thing I always tell people is that when you go into a college setting, write down ten things that you want
a teacher to help you out with.” He went even further in anticipating what educators would respond to when engaged in self-advocacy communication with a student. He learned to be unemotional during self-advocacy, and stressed the importance of this several times throughout the interviews. He said, “I would just go up to the teacher and say what was on my mind. ‘[Don’t get upset] in the classroom. Not in the classroom.’ I would just repeat it in my head, and then I would go up to them and tell them who I was, and just be like, this is what I need.” He had come to believe that professors are often not equipped to deal with an overly emotional reaction from a student, which he felt would interfere with a successful outcome (i.e. the instructor might decline to work closely with him, or might feel less confident that he could follow through with an alternate assignment).

Although Chris experienced failures when self-advocating, either by not getting the grades he thought his efforts would produce or not getting all the modifications he was asking for, he maintained very high expectations of success in self-advocacy interactions. He firmly believed, as he had every reason to, that he would walk away with something very close to what he wanted in terms of accommodations, instructional support, modifications, or a more functional and beneficial working relationship with his teachers when he advocated for himself properly. Self-advocacy helped not only Chris, but the other participants, each develop a very positive sense of self-efficacy, which will be discussed later in terms of its place in a functional framework of self-advocacy communication.

He believed in handling his business personally. He was grateful for the support and availability of the LEP, but preferred, under nearly all possible circumstances, to
communicate with his teachers, explain his learning disabilities, request his accommodations, ask for his support, and iron out the differences on his own. He would seek the counsel of his LEP academic counselor, but he made a point, knowing that his professors would prefer to deal with him rather than some other representative, of speaking for himself in most cases. “They really don’t want to deal with LEP counselors, they want to deal with you,” he said. “And I always tell them, “Yes. You’ll deal with me. You won’t deal with my LEP counselor. If I screw up, you’ll hear it from myself. And that’s what they want to hear.” His explanation revealed that the personal relationships developed in the course of self-advocacy were both a part of the task and the means by which it is completed. It was the way he set expectations that distinguished him from not just his peers in the class, but from some of the other participants in the study. He was quick to point out to the teacher what efforts he was planning to make, what resources he was putting into place, how much additional work he would be doing, and how reliable a student he was going to be.

Josie added that the practice of self-advocacy required respect for others. “Respect people who are willing to help you. You just need to understand that they may know a little more than you do. Just give them the respect that they deserve and hopefully they will respect you back.” Her statement confirms an idea that Chris discussed, which was that much of self-advocacy involved the subtle art of winning over those in a position to help.

*Expectations.* Although Chris’s statements represented, in my opinion, an excellent approach to setting expectations through self-advocacy, his perspective was by no means perfect. Having the expectation that the help requested will eventually be
provided supports student engagement in the self-advocacy process. However, not everything students advocate for will be given, leading to disappointment and frustration in the self-advocacy process. Some of Chris’s statements suggested he believed that merely disclosing his disability or “doing the steps” of self-advocacy should lead to an improvement in his grade. He admitted to feeling confused when, even though he had advocated for himself properly in a course, he still did not get an ‘A’ as expected. He did not attribute this to his abilities in that subject or to his study habits, as I thought he might. He suggested that is it the professor’s job, once informed of his LD status, to remember that he will be using testing accommodations. However, he also discussed a belief, contradictory to his otherwise well-developed sense of personal responsibility, that professors should not correct his spelling. If a teacher paid too much attention to this area of difficulty or deducted points for spelling, he advocated that such errors should be ignored if spelling was not mentioned as a factor in determining grades. It seemed to me that this was his one blind spot when it came to examining his responsibilities; rather than realizing that he needed to have his work edited before turning it in, he expected it not to matter. He never did acknowledge that correct spelling is a basic expectation in all written work at this level, and held tightly to this one unreasonable expectation.

Joe had many ideas about what a good teacher should do to work effectively with students with LD/ADHD as they advocate for themselves. He had clear ideas about what made someone a “good” teacher or a “bad” one, with respect to working with students like him, and emphasized their role in his discussion of how such self-advocacy interactions and experiences could be improved. He also made statements about how students can improve their approach and communication with college professors, but his
emphasis was more heavily weighted in favor what the adjustments professors should seek to make. This was reflective of some of his unrealistic expectations. His statements suggest that it is incumbent upon the student to make requests in a way that professors can be accepting of them, rather than the other way around. This attitude speaks to the student’s locus of control, communication skills, and problem solving skills, all of which will be dealt with in greater depth in upcoming sections.

Some of Jane’s self-advocacy experiences had to do with how she expected to be supported by her academic advisor at the LEP. She felt that her first advisor, who only worked part time, was not as available as she needed, and she asked to be switched to another. Instead, she was given two counselors, who were to share her case, to avoid adding too heavily to one counselor’s caseload. Preferring the trusting relationship she could develop with one person rather that two, she objected. She battled back and forth, trying to find resolution. Finding none, she said she felt,

“Awful because I want one, like everyone else. You pay $5,000.00 a year to be part of this program. And when you have two, it's hard to cement a real relationship, and I don't – it just really bothered me. They didn't even explain why I couldn't have the other people. If they were too full, they should have told me. And I wrote back and I said, “This is ridiculous. I feel I'm being penalized for advocating for myself,” and I got really upset.

For her, trust was a difficult thing to come by. Feeling that others had her best interests at heart was something worth advocating for, as much as accommodations. She was not able to see that she asked a great deal of a counselor, and may have had unrealistic expectations of what this person’s availability to her should be. Her experience was frustrating for her, given that she felt the service providers she trusted were breaking that trust by not accommodating her needs. She thought she was doing as LD support
personnel would advise her to do, but without any benefit. She valued the cultivation of 
supportive, personal relationships and regarded them as important to her success in 
college. In this case, her need may have blurred the boundary between academic support 
and personal demands, alienating part of her support circle in the process.

Jane was unexpectedly adamant about her own personal responsibility toward 
her learning. I told her that I had spoken to some students who thought that college 
professors should overlook spelling and grammar errors in students with disabilities. She 
surprised me a bit with her answer. She thought it was absurd to expect professors to 
ignore spelling or grammatical errors in anyone’s paper, LD or no LD, and turning in 
work like that should be beneath them. Of all the things she expected of others in terms of 
support, she never expected anyone to accept substandard work.

*Declaring Personal Character*

When a student stands in front of an educator, the student wants that person to 
walk away with a sense of who the student is as a person as well as who they are as a 
learner. Are they a collection of needs and demands or are they a series of pledges, 
promises of hard work, and someone worthy of high expectations? It is important to these 
students to have their professors feel that the time and effort it will take to support their 
success is a good investment and one that won’t be squandered on a person who is not 
capable of benefiting from it. Therefore, when they begin self-advocacy communications 
with someone, they take the opportunity to make it clear that they will be consistently 
proactive throughout the process. Like the other participants, Jane believed that initial 
disclosure could make a powerful statement to her instructors. She said,
Every time I get all the new teachers, I write to them. I say, “Can I meet with you before the classes start or at first week? These are my strengths, these are my weaknesses, and this is what I want to work on.” Then I say [that] I need – I want to get testing [accommodations] – all the tests I take in this center. Do you need the written letter?

These participants revealed that they want their professors to know immediately that they are smart, tenacious, ambitious, hard-working, responsible, creative, and an excellent investment of the educator’s time and effort. Whether it is all said at once or revealed over time through the working relationship, this is how these students say they wish to be regarded. Doing so perhaps draws the educator in, and connects them to the student and paves the way for constructive collaboration. It is not only a method for accessing those legally protected accommodations to which they are entitled. A successful student and skilled self-advocate can present his or her cause in order to persuade support personnel to go above and beyond those requirements and work cooperatively toward that student’s achievement.

When Chris approached his professors and told them about his dyslexia and ADHD, he was doing several things. He wanted to reveal his strengths and his weaknesses simultaneously. He wanted to let professors know what to expect of him, both the “good”, (diligent hard work, religious attendance) and the bad (poor first attempts at written work, atrocious spelling at times, regular use of test-taking accommodations—which, he speculates, professors sometimes find annoying). “You’re telling people, ‘I’m a smart kid and I’m willing to work in this class.’ I mean, that’s what it really shows. It shows teachers that you’re willing to work.” Balancing his requests with promises proved to be not just a good strategy, but good philosophy. Professors needed to know that he wasn’t just taking their time, making excuses, or looking for a
handout, but that he fully intended to make a 100% effort and avail himself of every possible means to further his own learning. It was equally, if not more important to him to get the message across that he is not stupid, just dyslexic, and that the manifestation of his LD should not be mistaken for a marker of his intelligence. He viewed the purpose of the first “disclosure conversation” as a way of presenting himself as a student to the professor, as a way of convincing the teacher that “you are good enough for them to help you.” Chris believed that in advocating for himself, he was asking for no more than a good teacher should do for a willing student, and was prepared to regularly demonstrate the value of any teacher’s investment in him.

Chris held a conviction that students with disabilities should not set out to use those disabilities “as an excuse” to explain poor performance, to get more help than reasonable, or to be given grades not earned. When students do that, he believed that, “all you’re doing is blaming dyslexia and making everyone who has an LD go down with you to your level, and that’s not what I want. I’m a very smart kid, and I know that some people have been let off with having a learning disability, but I don’t think it should be an excuse.” He rarely made excuses for himself, but also allowed some latitude for the fact that there are certain things that are simply beyond his control, that it is impossible to be perfect, but always possible to do better. When things went wrong, his habit was to go back to his mental checklist that itemized all the things he knew he needed to do in order to advocate for himself properly. He said, “I’ll go back through every class and say you know, “I could have done that better. And I’ll think, well, what’s the next class? OK, I’m going to work on that.” He learned his lessons, took his lumps, and moved forward with a
better plan. I believe these aspects of his character came through in his self-advocacy relationships with his teachers.

Josie also believed her sense of responsibility was an important part of her character to communicate to others. She believed that outcomes hinged upon her actions, what she did and did not do, rather than luck or the results of random circumstance. “Responsibility [is important]. Because I mean, self-advocacy is one thing, to go out there and tell somebody what you need,” she said. “It’s a whole different thing to take the information that you get and use it in a responsible way.” With that, she confirms Chris’s assertion that self-advocacy needs to be a balance of requesting support from others and making effective use of the help that is provided.

A Weapon in Battle

By the time they get to the university level, every student with a learning diagnosis, including each of the five participants in this study, has a story about a contentious and highly charged battle that has been fought over access to legally protected accommodations. There are also stories to be told about battles fought to create an optimal learning environment for the student, based on the individual’s manifestation of the LD. Each battle fought has to be judged on its own merits; some are worth fighting and others should be conceded in favor of more effectively expending efforts elsewhere.

For Joe, getting his needs met in high school had been a difficult and contentious process. Joe emerged from that series of battles firm in his belief that teachers generally do not care about how they can help a student with disabilities. He was a very good source of information on all things a teacher should never do if he or she wants to be perceived as a good and helpful educator by a person with a learning disability. He
believed that he was entitled to his teacher’s best efforts, and he described instances in which he felt he got exactly that. He fondly recounted teachers in his high school career who allowed him to demonstrate his understanding of material through his own interpretations, using his artistic abilities, or other modes of expression. He also believed that it was in his best interests to do what he was good at and avoid exacerbating the areas of weakness in his learning profile. He often had his most contentious struggles at DU while trying to convince administrators to change policy to allow him to do that. He battled with department heads in his first chosen major in an attempt to get them to change their requirements for the major so that he could avoid taking classes he knew he would fail. Angry over their unwillingness to modify program requirements, he changed majors and chose something a bit closer to his interests and skills.

While he had no doubts about his ability to learn if given optimal instruction, he was very resentful of having his academic time and efforts wasted on things unimportant to him. He felt strongly that it was ridiculous to take courses outside of his specific interest area (particularly the reviled history classes), and to have correct spelling and grammar count toward his grade. As hard as he was willing to work, he also expected a great deal from his teachers, including much one-on-one instruction, and opportunities to replace assignments or papers with alternatives that may have been more difficult to grade or do not adhere to the learning objectives of the course.

My impression of Joe was that he had spent a good deal of his college career being angry. He viewed self-advocacy as a weapon in battle, and accommodations as a way to change the rules. As he told his story, he seemed to have some good reasons to be angry. Some very bad experiences with teachers, diagnosticians, and administrators in his
K-12 educational experience had led him to believe that most educators, and much of education in general, was not on his side or working toward his best interest. He felt that many teachers were not helpful enough, not flexible enough, not creative enough to permit him to demonstrate his learning from his strengths. He recounted battles over calculators, spelling, alternative final projects, and writing papers. He was of the opinion that, because of his LD, he shouldn’t be required to do those things that he did poorly, such as spelling, writing papers, learning a foreign language, and doing math without a calculator. He often advocated for alternative assignments that would allow him to demonstrate his understanding of learned material using his strengths.

He often advocated for exceptions to the rules. As an art student, he advocated to do only digital art and resented fine art requirements such as painting. When denied, he cited the probability that fine art professors simply did not understand the value of digital art. As an international business student, he advocated to be given a waiver of the foreign language requirement in the major, since it would be waived for him as a graduation requirement. When denied, as the business school administrators felt that speaking a foreign language was critical to the integrity of the international business major, he left angrily, thinking them elitist and exclusionary. He despised the history classes that he took as foreign language substitutes, stating that history professors required excessive reading and were biased against the work turned in by non-majors. He had a very difficult time taking any class that did not relate directly to his chosen profession, which was digital media and computer programming. However, he elected not to go to a technical school, where he could study only career-oriented classes, in favor of a liberal arts education. He believed that liberal arts meant a more traditional college lifestyle.
experience and a degree that would be more highly regarded by his potential employers. Although he was very frustrated at the cost of this decision, including having to take classes he had no interest in, he did not seem to connect to the solution that attending technical college would have offered.

Some students may feel compelled to engage in contentious self-advocacy even with the service delivery programs that support them, if the student feels those services are not being delivered sufficiently or as promised. Jane had excellent knowledge of helpful learning strategies and what she needed to be successful. Those circumstances, however, were very particular, and her approach to them somewhat rigid. It was difficult for her to create circumstances in which she could learn effectively. It had been difficult for her to find an LEP counselor that could meet her needs, and she had been spending a great deal of time advocating for herself with the very organization that was there to help her. It may have been a mistake to fight so hard for something that was a preference, however important to her, and not a legally protected accommodation. It is likely that she damaged her relationships in that process, making it more difficult for those in her support circle to choose to go the extra mile for her. It is possible that she learned to expect a great deal from educators and support service providers, fighting so ardently to get her needs met that educators felt under-equipped to accommodate her.

Jane viewed a teacher’s willingness to provide support from a feminist perspective, and was unique in her analysis of self-advocacy from a perspective of gender differences. She felt that female professors were more likely to share their notes, materials, and knowledge, while male professors were more likely to guard their knowledge as intellectual property, being reluctant to share their notes or outlines to help
keep an LD student organized. A portion of her conversation about self-advocacy centered on the differences she believed existed between men and women in the self-advocacy experience. She suggested that female students regard themselves differently, and may be less assertive, shier, and less likely to speak up if circumstances are unfair. “Because people don't ask her to confront the big manly teacher or the female teacher—ever. But she should.” She also lent insight to the manner in which male and female students advocate, citing gender-specific cultural differences when discussing factors such as assertiveness and communication. So for her, self-advocacy was also a battle fought on the feminist front. As Joe did, she held a perspective that, at times, placed the teacher in the role of enemy.

Jane regarded self-advocacy as important in all aspects of her life, and applied her advocacy style to many different types of social interactions. Outside of educational self-advocacy, the use of those techniques in her personal relationships, along with her reluctance to trust others, may have contributed to some of the social isolation she said she was experiencing. That social isolation may have, in turn, inhibited her ability to establish a broader social and academic support network, and making existing supportive connections, such as an LEP counselor, of greater importance than they might otherwise have been.

Jane presented herself as someone with a strong and well-defined personality who regarded getting her academic needs met as being of primary importance. She was fearless and without regret; two qualities that contributed greatly to her abilities as a self-advocate. For her, self-advocacy is “when you know what you need and you ask for it. And pretty much you're not willing to stop until you get it.” She presented herself as a
very assertive young woman, almost to a fault, and her statements about self-advocacy and advice emphasized this quality. She felt it was very important to know the laws associated with LD and ADHD, which is not surprising given that she and her family were involved in at least one lawsuit over her educational care.

Assigning the LD a Role in the Learning Experience

After a while, students begin to wonder what portion of their successes they can attribute to their self-advocacy skills, and how much is a reflection of their actual abilities. They also wonder how much of their failures should be attributed to an LD they cannot remediate and how much is related to a lapse in their otherwise excellent self-advocacy skills. Students would prefer to say that all that is required of them, to do as well as or better than their non-LD peers, is some extra hard work and skilled communication. A long relationship with LD and self-advocacy can lead a student to strike a healthy balance between independence and interdependence. Such a balance can support positive self-efficacy and a realistic sense of responsibility.

Students with LD are, at some point, tempted to see if they can meet their goals without doing the things that a student with LD or ADHD needs to do. The newness of the college environment can make it seem like the perfect place to do that. They may wonder how much of what they are achieving is because people have been giving them the help they advocate for, and how much is simply their own ability to work hard and do well, just like everybody else. They may wish to demonstrate that they have overcome or mastered their LD, rendering it less consequential by virtue of their self-advocacy skills.

Chris acknowledged that self-advocacy can feel burdensome at times, and how he sometimes wished that he could just be like everyone else in his class. “It gets very
tiresome. I’ve never stopped doing it, but I do get tired of teachers asking me, ‘Well, do you need to take your tests out of the class, blah blah blah.’ It just gets frustrating. I just don’t want to do it. I want to just be a normal kid, one that doesn’t have to take [the] tests outside of the classroom.” It was tempting to simply pass on making his standard, beginning-of-the-quarter speech to all his professors about how he was in the LEP, that he had dyslexia, what he would be doing to succeed in the class and how the professor could help him. Each participant described at least one moment in which they thought about skipping the disclosure speech usually made to the professor, not bothering with the legwork involved in arranging test accommodations, and opting out of instructors’ office hours. When they discuss the courses or quarters in which they took a break from self-advocacy, this decision is unanimously regretted. What good self-advocates know is that the process they go through every quarter, in every class, is a part of what they must to in order to do well. What they don’t seem to realize, is that if every student, LD or not, developed the working relationship with teachers that they have, and learned to avail themselves of all the resources that exist for everyone, students without LD would be achieving much higher academic rewards as well.

*Mastering the LD.* During the interviews, Jessica discussed her past and present in a way that demonstrated a need to master her circumstances, taking courses that required excellent skills in her weakest areas. The fact that she perpetually ran into the same problems in her courses led her to seek further diagnoses. The diagnostic process confirmed a learning disability in addition to her ADHD. Rather than capitalize on her strengths, she felt compelled to face her biggest challenges head-on in an effort to prove to herself that her educational and professional options would not be wholly determined
by her learning weaknesses. Her goal of becoming an osteopathic physician would be difficult to reach given her trouble learning math and science. Even so, she sometimes tested the limits of her abilities, attempting to take physics in an online class and occasionally trying to get through difficult courses without a tutor. She described herself as someone who would never take the easy way out, which may have proven to be both a help and a hindrance. She was the participant who seemed to have the most significant need to prove she could learn as she believed her non-LD peers did.

Despite her best efforts and well-developed self-advocacy skills, Jessica demonstrated a pattern of making the same mistakes repeatedly, hoping for better success and that she had mastered her learning problems. Jessica assigned her LD a role in her identity as a learner, and was still mired in the process of trying to master the LD completely, rather than accepting some realities about it and working from her strengths. She occasionally revealed gaps in her problem-solving strategies, not seeing somewhat obvious solutions to simple situations or where to look for basic information that would be of help to her. However, she was sweet and earnest and eternally open to new challenges and to new learning opportunities. As she spoke about self-advocacy, she came to new realizations more often and more powerfully than the other participants did. I watched her put the pieces of her story together very genuinely. She appeared to be truly learning about this part of herself during the interviews, and making plans and figuring out her path as we spoke. I felt honored to watch that happen.

_A route to independence and interdependence._ When students can successfully assign their LD a role in their identity as a learner, they can begin to accept the dual reality of self-advocacy: that it allows the student to be more independent than before,
and yet requires that they become comfortable with being interdependent. Before coming
to college, these students frequently had their parents as their primary advocates. A
parent would meet with teachers, determining if all methods of teaching this child were
being exhausted, brainstorming all the different ways to clear roadblocks to learning and
communication. Jane believed in cultivating a thorough knowledge of one’s own
LD/ADHD as well as taking care of her needs personally, as is essential to being a self-
advocate rather than having an advocate: “I think you have to learn about you before you
can be a self-advocate and I also think you can't have a little caretaker doing the stuff for
you.” She acknowledged that self-advocacy should be taught in developmental stages
throughout a student’s education:

But by the time you're in high school,” she said, “you should be talking to the
teacher. Maybe in middle school. They should teach you in middle school
probably – the resource teacher should teach you to talk to the teacher – [someone
else] shouldn't be talking to the teacher [on the student’s behalf].

Jane’s message about the student’s purpose as a self-advocate speaks of persistence and
self-sufficiency:

You don't give up, that's number one. That if you don't try, you don't get anything
out of it. You're just stuck, frustrated, or you're stuck depending on other people
to do your work for you…and then you can't be self-sufficient. And what
happens if that person can't always fight your battles?

She, like the other two female participants, made a point of talking about straining for
self-sufficiency, as if allowing others to do things for them was something to overcome.
It was very important to her to learn to manage her LD and its responsibilities on her
own. At the same time, she was still very connected to those relationships she had relied
upon before coming to college, such as her mother and her academic therapist/tutor.
When the student takes over the advocacy role upon entering college, as they all knew
they would have to do, the activity of self-advocacy provides a pathway via which they
can establish their independence from their parents and feel as though they can be
credited with their own achievements. It satisfies the desire to feel self-reliant,
responsible and capable.

Self-advocacy has a paradox built into it. While it is a necessary means of
becoming independent of the advocacy of parents and special educators, it is also a
process of help-seeking, which can diminish the sense of autonomy toward which they
are working. Students must be careful to avoid coming to the conclusion that all valuable
work is done alone. Self-advocacy can be characterized as an act of communication,
which, by nature, takes place between at least two people. And, the student is asking for
help or support, which necessitates the involvement of another person. Therefore, self-
advocacy is an independent means of achieving interdependence, working on one’s own
behalf to tap into the system of helpful others to establish a network of support and a
system for succeeding.

Josie stated that other people, in the form of a support circle, were necessary for
self-advocacy. However, she did not trust others easily. She had demonstrated a bias
toward self-sufficiency, preferring strongly to handle all aspects of her learning on her
own. She was ultimately able to acknowledge that she needed “support, as ironic as it
sounds. Have that good support circle, so you can say, ‘Yeah, I’m going to go out on my
own and do this, but if it doesn’t work out I still have you.’” She viewed structured
support services as a means of solving problems when she had exhausted everything she
could do on her own. The irony she refers to comes from her expressed attitude that a
good self-advocate relies primarily on herself. Although Josie was practical in her
concession that what she was advocating for was help from others, which necessitated a community of helpful people, she often made isolationist statements that seemed to come from hurtful experiences. As she explained it,

    As sad and bad as it is, 90% of the people in this world are going to stab you in the back. And so, I think that you need to be open-minded and always aware that you can’t rely on people all the time. In the end it always falls back on you. I think that you have to be your own person and just do whatever it takes. So, I think that’s really important, to not depend on somebody else.

Independence had been forced upon her early as a result of her parents’ busy lifestyle and her mother and sister’s devastating car accident. She also made reference to some social stress and ostracism in her past that went beyond feeling different because of her LD, although she never went into details about it. It is my opinion that her guarded stance with others and her dedicated independence were responses to some feelings of abandonment, and that this shaped her approach to self-advocacy. Because of this, it was difficult for her to arrive at a balance between her need to be self-sufficient and independent in the face of the necessity of interdependence to her success.

    She believed in her own agency and responsibility in the process. She expressed a much stronger bias toward going it alone than Chris did. Self-advocacy for her was, definitively, “being your own person. Not relying on other people to give you what you need.” For her, doing things on her own was a source of pride, and a matter of necessity.

    Jessica moved through school as though she had something to prove, to herself and perhaps to others. But before she could become a good self-advocate, she had to learn a major lesson:

    I have to maintain this constant communication and I have to be able to tell people that I need help. That was probably the hardest thing I did there, was asking for help and accepting help. I never did it before and I never could
honestly say, ‘God, I can’t do this myself. I need someone else to help me.’ That was the biggest thing that I had to start to accept before I could even have any advocacy skills.

This illustrates her struggle with her desire to be completely independent and self-sufficient. In her mind, it was necessary to complete a task or learn a concept completely on her own, as she envisioned non-disabled students doing, in order to feel as though the accomplishment was actually hers. What she did not realize was that she overestimated the learning efficiency and independence of her non-LD peers by believing that they did not need help to do academic work. She sometimes challenged herself by taking on impossible tasks, like enrolling in an online physics class knowing that she had significant difficulties in math. With no one to help her or answer her questions, with no avenue for self-advocacy, she floundered, as many non-LD students would have. She tested her need for self-advocacy several times throughout college. In doing so, she demonstrated what a great deal of conflict she experienced over the necessity of self-advocacy. She knew that by seeking help and using accommodations she would be more successful, but doing so meant constantly admitting that she was somehow less than whole as a student. She was not alone in this problem, as several other participants admitted to having the wish to not have LD at all, and simply be like everyone else.

Acceptance of LD. Part of the student’s struggle is to settle the question of whether or not they can believe in their own self-efficacy and still actively solicit the help and support of others. The participants who demonstrated the most peaceful relationship with their learning diagnosis and their role as a self-advocate come to the conclusion that both truths are necessary to their success.
Josie anticipated, with some resentment, being called “stupid” or “retarded”.

Much of her activity around self-advocacy went beyond getting help from teachers or requesting accommodations. For her, the process was also about getting over her fear of being judged by people who do not have learning differences. So part of her advice to other students beginning college with LD was to, “Start telling people that you have a learning difference…tell everybody and get over that fear that somebody’s going to judge you, because reality is that some people might, but most people won’t. That’s the first step. Just getting over it. Embracing it.” Self-advocacy was a part of learning to accept this aspect of herself all over again and learning to be a person in the minority due to an LD rather than in the majority of her environment. Being a self-advocate meant letting go of any embarrassment associated with having a learning disability. “I don’t have any problems talking about it with anybody,” Josie said. “But it can be a big obstacle in the way of a lot of people…just not wanting to speak out and getting embarrassed by it.” Such embarrassment would have gotten in the way of the routine discussion of her LD that is necessary in self-advocacy.

Although her K-12 school experience was in a school for students with learning differences, and everyone spoke about their diagnoses freely, the homogeneity of the population provided a great deal of shelter. It wasn’t until she arrived at DU that she had to begin the process of forming her identity as a person with LD juxtaposed against a majority of peers who were not.

And when I first got here I was major embarrassed, because I was in the minority, not the majority like in high school. I understand that, but the important thing is that you move on from that and embrace who you are. Don’t let anybody tell you that you’re stupid or retarded, or any of the other lovely words that are used for people with LD’s.
So for her, the work that she did as a self-advocate was about learning to accept herself as a person with LD in the larger world, rather than becoming an unequivocal academic success in spite of an obstacle.

Josie acknowledges that self-advocacy and its demands have changed her as a person, leading to positive trends in her development. “I think that if I hadn’t gone to the skills that I went to, I wouldn’t have the skills that I have now--because I think it definitely ingrained my confidence, of course…the way I handle myself.” She claimed to be more mature in her decision-making and more confident. Being a self-advocate made her a stronger person. “Well, I wouldn’t be who I am at all if I hadn’t spoken up about the problems I was having.” That statement speaks not to how well she did in her classes, but how well she did in forming her identity and developing as a human being. For her, the essential nature of self-advocacy lies in speaking up, in being vocal, and in standing up for herself as a student.

Chris credited self-advocacy with making him a stronger person, a more effective communicator, and even better suited to certain professional aspirations. He developed a relationship not only with his teachers and support providers, but with his dyslexia and ADHD, which, of course, began long before college. He described the prominent place LD had taken in his life, which makes sense given that attending school had been his primary occupation. He said,

I think that you should make it a positive thing in your life and you should become a great advocate. In doing that, you also learn a lot about yourself, you also learn, that you …I think I learned that I was a stronger person. Without my learning disability and without being this great advocate for myself I don’t think that I would be where I am right now.
Advocating for himself and being successful at university had helped him view himself not only as a student with dyslexia, but as a persuasive and confident communicator.

Summary. To Answer Research Question One, each participant’s experience of self-advocacy was analyzed. Four major themes were revealed. Above all, self-advocacy is a communication tool that allows the student to develop better relationships with educators, with their learning diagnoses, and with themselves. It is a part of the learning process that has shaped who they are. 1) Students may self-advocate as a way to lay the groundwork and set expectations for a collaborative working relationship with a teacher. 2) Self-advocacy also helps the student make declarations about their character and strengths, which persuasively renders them worthy of the investment of time and effort they are asking the professor to make. 3) Self-advocacy might sometimes be used as a weapon in battle, in response to the anger and frustration that result from allowing emotions to infiltrate the communication process. 4) Self-advocacy can help a student assign their LD a role in their life as a learner, allowing them to make some attributions to the LD and others to their hard work and ability. Students sometimes use self-advocacy as a means to master the disability, perhaps to test their ability to function as they imagine everyone else does. Self-advocacy can also work to pave a route to independence and interdependence, forwarding a necessary developmental task of young adulthood. Through self-advocacy, students also come to accept their LD rather than rebel against it. They may even see it as a gift that has formed them into who they are. It is also a communication process that forwards the student’s personal development, causing him or her to regard himself or herself as capable, responsible, intelligent, and, ultimately, no longer defined by their LD.
Research Question Two: A Framework of Self-Advocacy

Research Question Two asked, “How does this experience compare to what educators believe to be true about self-advocacy based on the existing literature?” The literature review revealed significant themes surrounding self-advocacy, with particular emphasis placed on components that comprise self-advocacy. The current study set out to investigate several of those, including knowledge of LD, problem solving, communication, self-efficacy, assertiveness, and locus of control.

Based on the descriptions of self-advocacy experiences from the participants’ interviews, a framework of self-advocacy was developed to illustrate the commonalities among their experiences. I realized that, as they each spoke of their methods and reasons for advocating for themselves as they did, their choices both served a goal-directed purpose and defined the relationship among the qualities that the students themselves possessed. Arranging their experiences in terms of a framework of self-advocacy illustrates not only what self-advocates do or what self-advocacy is made of, but how self-advocacy works. The discussion of self-advocacy is arranged to follow this framework, describing each component of self-advocacy and how it contributes to the overall purpose of self-advocacy. See Figure 1, page 92 for the proposed framework.

Each of the participants in the study spoke similarly about self-advocacy as a communication process, as well as about the array of components that inform it. It is a system for making requests, explaining oneself, getting information, persuading others, and navigating a very individual path to learning. Through the process of self-advocacy, students work to communicate who they are as learners and what they will need in order to learn effectively. The manner in which the students go about this communication task
is supported by four components, including a) the ability to speak up for themselves and present their needs to a professor (assertiveness), b) a complete knowledge of how they learn and what accommodations or modifications will result in success (knowledge of LD), c) a belief that they are a capable student on whom such support will not be wasted (academic self-concept), and d) an understanding of what aspects of their outcomes are their own responsibility combined with a belief that they will be successful when they act to meet those responsibilities (locus of control, self-efficacy).

Self-advocacy communication exists to solve a social problem caused by the poor fit between the learner and the learning environment. Therefore, self-advocacy communication is essential to problem-solve with others in order to improve that fit. When a teaching and learning environment works for most students in a classroom, but does not work for one, self-advocacy is the process by which that discrepancy is amended.

The framework of self-advocacy presented here asserts that self-advocacy is entirely a communication function that exists to resolve the discrepancy that exists between the learning needs of LD students and the learning environment at the collegiate level. These students discuss intelligent, nuanced, and sensitive communication in ways that are not currently evident in self-advocacy training programs. The content and style of that communication is influenced by the students’ assertiveness, sense of self-efficacy, academic self-concept, and knowledge of the learning difference with which they are dealing.

Self-advocacy communication is a very complex process. The process begins with initial disclosure and, despite the fact that having an LD makes this activity inherently
more difficult, these students work hard at being rehearsed and prepared to engage in self-advocacy communication with their professors. They must be perceptive and responsive to those they are communicating with if they want to be successful. The struggle they engage in to remain composed is impressive, as they work to counter the emotional load of disclosing a learning disability, discussing all their most prevalent inadequacies, and asking for help.

Assertiveness is a big piece of what makes self-advocacy possible. Self-advocacy communication can easily be described as an act of assertiveness. Without the ability or inclination to simply speak-up, be noticed, participate actively, and take and defend a position, it would not be possible to negotiate with professors, request accommodations, disclose a disability, get learning needs met, or problem-solve as self-advocacy communication demands. The process of self-advocacy also in turn increases assertiveness, confidence, and is linked to the students feelings of academic self-concept. It must be done with an understanding of skillful communication.

A knowledge of one’s own learning disability (KLD) consists of an awareness of the specific challenges presented by their particular LD or ADHD, including strengths and weaknesses, helpful learning practices, unhelpful learning practices, and a meta-cognitive understanding of their learning processes. Students come to acquire this knowledge in a variety of ways. This knowledge leads students to understand what type of accommodations or support they will need in order to be successful, which was viewed by all participants as an essential component of self-advocacy and a first step in the process.
Successful self-advocating, over time, seems to serve the function of restoring the students’ healthy perspective of themselves and their abilities. In this way, a student’s academic self-concept informs some of the content that he or she communicates during the self-advocacy process, and is also improved by the success experiences that effective self-advocacy provides.

Students with disabilities are charged with the additional task of deciding how they will incorporate their learning diagnoses and self-advocacy skills into the attributions they make about their successes and failures. They must sort out which factors contributing to their academic outcomes are within their personal sphere of influence, and which are not. While the presence or absence of LD is uncontrollable, self-advocacy reins in some aspects of the learning process to a controllable. They can control how well the professor knows them, whether they disclose their LD, how often they ask questions in class or office hours, whether or not they ask for accommodations, modifications, or support. Having a balanced perspective on one’s personal agency and responsibility can improve the practice of self-advocacy communication. The successful practice of self-advocacy can help improve a student’s sense of self-efficacy. At the same time, clarify their sense of what is under one’s control can help make self-advocacy more productive.

Problem-solving is the objective of self-advocacy communication. Problem-solving serves to help close the gap between how a student learns, given his or her LD, and how he or she is expected to perform academically in order to demonstrate learning. Students use self-advocacy communication skills to problem-solve with others to find ways to close this gap. Students must be able to clearly state the ways in which their
learning needs do not fit the environment or expectations and propose solutions to others.

Problem-solving in a self-advocacy context has the purpose of bridging a gap between what students feel capable of doing and what they are being asked to do, or between the way they learn and the way they are being taught.
Fig. 1
A Diagram of Self-Advocacy in Postsecondary Education
Self-Advocacy as a Communication Process

Self-advocacy is a communication process by which the student can arrive at a level of understanding, with a professor, tutor, counselor, peer, or other service provider, about the kind of support that is necessary for successful learning. The goals of an interaction may be well-defined, such as making arrangements to take a test in an alternate environment, or more amorphous, as when disclosing a learning-related disability for the first time. The effectiveness of communication for the purpose of self-advocacy is subject to the perspective of the audience, emotional load of the student, and even factors directly related to the disability itself. All of these considerations influence the manner in which the student views and approaches a self-advocacy interaction.

The data obtained in this study indicate that good communication skills are critical to successful self-advocacy. In fact, self-advocacy appears to be an important type of communication essential to the academic success of college students with LD/ADHD. Disclosure is a significant step in the process that gives the student the opportunity to establish a relationship with a professor. Some communication problems inherent to having an LD may influence the students’ ability to engage in effective self-advocacy. Therefore, rehearsal and preparation are important. Good self-advocates understand the value of being perceptive and responsive to others’ needs during self-advocacy communication. Being experienced at effective self-advocacy also helps the student develop the personal awareness necessary to manage the significant emotional load of self-advocacy communication. Whatever the student communicates has the purpose of addressing academic challenges by engaging in a problem solving process (see Figure 1).
In this section, I will provide evidence of the participants' experience of self-advocacy as communication and as a critical factor and central concept in the framework of self-advocacy.

All of the participants in the study agree that good communication skills are of critical importance to effective self-advocacy. The data reveals that self-advocacy can only exist as a type of communication. No matter how well a student understands his or her own learning needs, or how right they are in feeling entitled to their request, if the student cannot effectively explain the essence of their message, or persuade the person standing opposite them of their point, they may walk away unsatisfied. As Chris stated, “You have to be a good communicator. Communication is key. If you can’t communicate, you get really flustered, so I think that’s just number one. I think that’s pretty much the only one that you need. You have to be a good communicator.” Chris spotlights the fact that without good communication skills, self-advocacy does not occur.

The data also reveal that self-advocacy communication was a first step to problem solving. For example, speaking up when feeling stuck, disclosing the LD to someone in a position to help, or establishing a relationship with a supportive, can put the problem solving process into place. Josie was very clear on this point when she said, “You're not going to get anywhere if you keep it to yourself and brood about it. You've got to talk to the people who can help you get your problem solved. If you can't, then you're on your own. You have to tell somebody.” Although it may be possible to survive a course or a semester without communication regarding one’s learning needs, these students view effective self-advocacy as impossible without it.
Disclosure. The first communication of self-advocacy is generally the disclosure that the student has LD or ADHD to an instructor. This usually takes the form of an introduction, not just to the student, but also to the nature and extent of the student’s learning needs. Regarding the content if his initial disclosures, Chris shared,

I really give the quick summary to a professor: I have trouble with reading, I write phonetically, I read a little bit slower. I skim a lot of things. And they say ‘Ok, thanks for telling me.’ Most of them don’t even ask. But I mean, you make it how you want it to be. I open it up to them to come and talk to me if they want to talk.

The statement above also illustrates the function of disclosure and the beginning of a learning relationship with a professor. Disclosure can be used to open a dialogue about LD in general, in his case, dyslexia, although he may overestimate others’ interest in discussing it.

The content of what is disclosed also generally includes some specific information about how the LD or ADHD impacts the learning process and what accommodations the student might be using in that instructor’s course:

Usually I just make a point of going up to them on the first day of class, and saying, “This is what I have, I’m in LEP, problems are in this area.” I’d tell them I have ADHD, and tell them a little bit about [it]. I just tell them that I have dyslexia and sequencing disorder, depending on the class, I don’t really tell them more than they need to know-- what I need and if I’m approved for it, and LEP will send them the paperwork for it. I always tell them I need extended time testing, depending on the class I might need a note-taker or recorded text books. That’s about it, unless there’s something really specific.

Josie provided a good example of what disclosure sounds like, including what she needs to know in order to help her receive her protected accommodations, as well as her justification for receiving them. Later on, professor will not be surprised by her requests to take the test at the LEP or unfamiliar with processes to come, such as sending exams to
the testing coordinator in the LEP. Such an exchange is simple, partly because she only seeks the instructor’s awareness, which Josie offers as a courtesy. Such disclosure also functions as a means of opening the conversation to the possibility of further support.

Students expect another outcome of their disclosure of LD or ADHD to a professor. During this communication, the student is looking for some indication that the professor has the intention of follow through. Students walk away satisfied if they feel the professor is open to the accommodations being requested, willing to consider making modifications, or interested in providing more individualized support throughout the course. Because of that, it is equally important for the student to know that their message has been heard. As Chris explained it,

I’m looking for mirroring. I mean mirroring is pretty much the key. I want to hear that they understand where I’m coming from, that they understand what I’ve been doing. You know, like, that I’m not—that I’ve been doing this for most of my life, that I’m not…most teachers know. They’re like, “Wow, you really know your stuff…that was really quick. That was really informative. You really know what your needs and your wants are.” They said they’ve had students that talk to them for 30 minutes and they never really told them what they want, what they need. Professors are like, “All you have to do is say this is what I want, this is what I need, you know, if you have any questions, talk to me later.

Clearly, then, what works for both student and teacher is direct, unambiguous, efficient communication in disclosure and discussion of LD.

*Impact of LD on communication.* Communication in the context of self-advocacy and of learning disabilities is not without a certain degree of irony. It seems almost unfair that communication, either verbal or written, should be so critical to self-advocacy and therefore to the academic survival of those who, for lack of their learning diagnoses, would not have such a great need for it. Their process of self-advocacy is not without stumbling blocks, particularly where communication is concerned:
Communicating what I mean or what I’m trying to say, and I get really frustrated if someone isn’t getting what I’m saying. It just seems like what is in my head is really hard to get out into words. And I realize that everyone—everyone’s perceptions, they’re all different. So maybe I automatically have that in mind and that already stops good communication from the beginning, because I know it’s going to be a difficult encounter. It’s going to be really difficult for me to explain myself. And I realize that I already have that mentality often with teachers, where I think they’re not going to understand me, they’re not going to understand what I have to say and I just get really frustrated because sometimes I don’t know how to explain what the difficulty is. I can’t find the words for it. So, yeah I think I do have problems communicating what I’m thinking. Especially when I’m really stressed out and when I’m having a lot of difficulties, and my head is so full, I just don’t know how to get the words out. (Jessica)

The above statement articulates, with touching honesty, how Jessica’s emotions and expectations of her own effectiveness can interfere with this critical phase of communication within self-advocacy. She is not alone in this experience, and others were ready to point out that facility in communication for the purpose of self-advocacy is a prize not easily won:

On the spot I’ll have to think of a different way to phrase it. Sometimes you can see it on them, sometimes they’ll say, “I’m not understanding what you’re asking of me. Sometimes they get it right off the bat. And I have that sigh of “Crap, what am I going to do now? And think of another way to say it and. And if they don’t get it then, you try until they understand it. Draw a picture! Try anything. Do whatever you can! (Joe)

Like any sophisticated skill, learning how to communicate effectively with instructors requires time and effort. Even good self-advocates like Josie acknowledge this continuous learning process:

That was big for me to learn, that it’s a process. It’s not like you can cram. It takes a lot of thought and deliberation to understand what you’re talking about and, you know, to verbalize it, write it on paper, and to explain it in an understandable way. So, I’m still struggling with that.

Although Josie is accustomed to discussing her disability on a daily basis with both peers and professors, she concedes that she is not yet done with developing her communication
skills. Responsive to any challenge, these are students who are accustomed to learning from their mistakes.

*Rehearsal and preparation.* Communication for the purpose of self-advocacy is a source of lessons learned. The participants described their progress and learning in this area, whether connected directly to communication itself or in the larger context of effectively managing their disability through self-advocacy. Jessica learned that the process of self-advocacy has improved her communication skills. “Now I really know what I need and I tell my professors, because I understand how I learn, what doesn’t work for me, and I can tell them,” she said. “I’m not as angry about school anymore, at the system. I’m just a better communicator of my needs.” Jessica had spent two years at Landmark College, studying her ADHD and LD very closely while learning to be a self-advocate. In fact, she later shared that the difference in the environments between Landmark and DU created another noticeable change in her communication skills:

> Because I have a tutor, it makes it so that I don’t need the professor as much. Since I’ve come here and it’s been a while since I’ve been at Landmark, I’m not as good at communicating with professors as I used to be…when it does come down to it and I really need to speak with a professor, it is kind of hard because I haven’t done it in a while. I’m kind of out of practice.

It seems that the use of a tutor has put some distance between herself and her professors, making direct communication somewhat more rare and foreign. She describes communication in self-advocacy as a skill set that can wax and wane with environmental demand.

*On being perceptive and responsive.* These participants suggested that being perceptive and responsive to others in their self-advocacy communication can facilitate the process. As highlighted previously, Chris explained that he looks for professors to
mirror of his ideas so he knows he has gotten his point across. Students feel they have a responsibility to make sure they get their questions answered, and that they need to actively contribute to clear communication with professors. Participants describe errors in communication, both in explanation and perception. These errors have reformulated their approach to communication with professors and others. Keeping in mind that one goal of self-advocacy with professors can be getting clarification, Joe offered this advice: “When I ask questions through email, I ask very direct questions, that really you can’t have [ambiguous] answers from. I try to target the questions I have very specifically. Short and to the point. Asking direct questions. Because I need direct answers.” He highlights the student’s responsibility in achieving clear communication by suggesting that students begin with focused and direct questions. When trying to get clarification, permission, or answers, these students also advised reducing the emotional load for both parties. Chris explained, “I think that’s a big thing, like you said, not to push them because then they get defensive and put up their walls and they’re less likely to help you out. That’s not what you want to happen.” Here he applies a very simple communication strategy involving word-choice. By moving from “You” statements to “I” statements, and shifts his message from blame to responsibility. Taking responsibility for voice and tone during a self-advocacy interaction speaks to his attitude and values regarding taking personal responsibility for his learning in general. Chris further explained how to take an otherwise emotion-laden experience and render it more neutral, “You have to leave your emotions in a different room when you’re talking to the professor or the teacher…because you don’t want them to feel sorry for you, you want them to understand where you’re coming from.” The goal of the interaction is not to like or be liked by the
professor, but rather to come to a mutual understanding that ultimately meets the students’ needs for support and success in the course.

The emotional load. Communicating with professors about an LD can be a highly emotional task. Chris, in his profile, stated how hard he has had to work to be unemotional during these interactions. Not only is a lifetime of frustration and hurt just beneath the surface, but the idea of giving a respected person a list of one’s short-comings and struggles would be emotional for anyone. When a student discloses something like dyslexia, he or she is revealing something personal that has likely come with a painful struggle as the student strives to continue to regard him or herself as intelligent and capable of university-level work. In revealing such a thing, the student may also struggle with the possibility that the person in front of him might view him differently.

When I was a freshman in high school, just starting to advocate for myself, it was hard to negotiate with teachers. It was hard to say, ‘This is what I need to do well in school.’ Now I can go up to any teacher and say, “I’m dyslexic.” It’s not the end of the world. A lot of students at DU have the tendency to say in a general way, “Well, I’m dyslexic, you have to help me all the time,” and that’s not what teachers want. (Chris)

In this case, the Chris expresses his desire not to be thought of as helpless or overly dependent. When making decisions about disclosure, regardless of how open the student has been about sharing LD-related information in the past, disclosing in a new environment to new people may still cause students to consider how others might render judgment. Josie explained,

I’ve lived with it for so long I’ve learned it’s something you talked about. Nobody held it against you. We had conversations about our learning differences all the time. So it was nothing that anybody looked down on you for it or anything like that. And then when I got here it was like major shock. I’m like, “Ok now I have
to actually go to LEP and get help and ask for help, and tell all my professors that I’m learning different,” whereas before, they would just know what to do to help me.

There is some weariness in her voice as she explains how she must begin again, starting over at the process of explaining herself, how she can be helped, what efforts might be useful to her. The communication of this aspect of the student’s identity, not only what they need but who they are, is cause for careful thought. I was constantly impressed by the composure these students are able to gather when discussing what must feel like their every failure, every struggle, every piece taken out of their self-esteem. The fact that the student is not merely communicating a grocery list of desires, but personal and deeply-felt aspects of his or her own life story, will be taken up again in this discussion in relationship to self-concept.

Summary. The framework of self-advocacy presented here asserts that self-advocacy is a communication function that exists to resolve the discrepancy between the learning needs of LD students and the learning environment at the collegiate level. Themes included the significance of initial disclosure, factors that influence the student’s ability to communicate, and the heavy emotional load of self-advocacy communication. These students also discuss intelligent, nuanced, and sensitive communication in ways that are not currently evident in self-advocacy training programs. The content and style of that communication is influenced by the students’ assertiveness, sense of self-efficacy, academic self-concept, and knowledge of the learning difference for which they are advocating. Each of those topics will be covered individually, in upcoming sections.
Assertiveness

The participants in this study describe assertiveness as essential to self-advocacy. Being assertive is absolutely necessary in order to engage in self-advocacy communication with professors and other educators. It is necessary to use assertiveness to voice a difference of opinion, address unfair policies, request accommodations not received, point out grading errors, or articulate a grievance of any kind. To feel confident taking up a college professor’s time with one’s own personal needs is certainly an act of assertiveness. Assertiveness can be cultivated and developed as an increasingly stable personal quality through engaging in the activities that require it, such as active class participation and self-advocacy. In the same way that assertiveness facilitates self-advocacy, engaging in self-advocacy serves to develop the quality of assertiveness in those who use it.

Each of the five participants agreed that the quality of assertiveness is essential to the act of self-advocacy. It was repeatedly stated that shyness, being unsure of one’s self, feeling intimidated, being overly concerned with what others might think, or reluctance to speak up for one’s self in any way would immediately render self-advocacy impossible. Four of the five participants discussed actively cultivating this aspect of themselves during their university years, and all participants stated that self-advocating made them either more assertive or more skillfully so. It was very important to each of the participants to avoid being passive in their educations. In the context of a self-advocacy interaction, assertiveness is a quality that shapes the communication of one’s needs. Communicating in this way contributes to the extent to which the advocate regards himself or herself as an assertive person. Assertiveness influences how self-advocacy is
accomplished and, at the same time, contributes to the advocate’s positive self-perception.

**Assertiveness as critical to self-advocacy.** On the topic of the significance of assertiveness to self-advocacy, Jessica stated, “If you don’t have it [assertiveness], you can’t [self-advocate], really. You have to stand your ground. You have to say what you need to say. So if you’re really timid and you can’t really express yourself, then it’s really easy for people to walk all over you if you don’t say, ‘This is what I need.’” As she explains it, timidity and effective communication of one’s own needs cannot coexist—a lesson she learned from her own timidity. To her, it sometimes is a perceived, opposing interest held by the professor that makes it especially necessary to be assertive:

…because they’re so intimidating, I guess it’s even more important for you to be assertive and stand your ground, even if they’re not listening--demanding their attention. “This is really important to me and I’m really need you to hear me out and hear what I’m saying,” and get their focus, or get their attention. It’s vital to be assertive if you want to advocate for yourself.

She regards the professor as someone who is trying to intimidate her and interfere with her personal power and agency that needs to be combated. “I think that’s sort of the biggest thing, is confidence, because if you are confident in yourself, then there is really nothing else you need to achieve it,” Joe said. “I try not to overpower people, but being assertive is what you need to be, because if you’re not, then no one is going to care about you.” For him, being assertive is how he persuades others to view his needs as important, and this is the foundation of his self-advocacy as well as his academic survival.

**How assertiveness is used.** Assertiveness was collectively regarded as necessary in many of the tasks included in self-advocacy. Voicing a difference of opinion, addressing unfair policies, requesting accommodations not received, pointing out grading
errors, or articulating a grievance of some kind all require the combination of confidence and persuasiveness that exist in assertiveness. “I’ll call the person out on it, or I’ll call the teacher out on it. I’ll say I don’t think that’s fair,” said Chris. “I’m really adamant that if professors are going to mark points off for one person they’ve got to do it for everyone.” The event in question made Chris unpopular, because it resulted in others receiving lower grades, but he was brave to take that risk in the interest of fairness. Settling the terms of fair practice in grading was a common theme in participants’ discussion of assertiveness in self-advocacy. As Josie also shared, “I just figure out what I think is unfair and figure out what I want to go do about it, if I [want to] talk to the professor, have a conversation about it. I’d go up to them after class some day and say, ‘Can I talk to you for a minute?’ Or email.” In each case, the student risks alienating a relationship, whether with other students or an instructor, but does so skillfully and with the goal of establishing fairer classroom practices that benefit not only themselves, but other students with LD.

**Assertiveness vs. aggressiveness.** Five out of five participants made a point of discerning the difference between being assertive and being aggressive or argumentative. This lesson was not as easily learned by all participants. Jane shared, “I think you're a stronger self-advocate, if you're just this sort of person, who won't give up because you're shot down once. You have to keep going. In the beginning, [I was] more aggressive. Why can't people just take you seriously when you're nice?” As Joe explained it, “What you need to realize is that people are going to be willing to work with you if you can be polite, cordial, and ask for it in a mature way. But they’re not going to work with you just because you say ‘I have this [disability], so I deserve this help’. That's the wrong kind of assertiveness.” Three of the five participants acknowledged that part of what they are
doing when they advocate for themselves is persuading others to provide help and support that go beyond legally protected accommodations. Learning the difference between what the student is entitled to and what is given out of the instructor’s generosity, and then acting accordingly, is imperative to effective, and appropriately assertive, self-advocacy. The awareness and use of these social subtleties are directly related to communication skills.

*Developing assertiveness.* Asking questions and speaking up in class is a form of self-advocacy that requires assertiveness. Each of the participants in this study said that they had more to consider, specifically factors related to having an LD, when participating in class. They cited difficulties communicating their thoughts and anxiety at being perceived as less intelligent than other students as factors requiring additional assertiveness to overcome.

Students reported that the practice of asserting themselves in the self-advocacy process, and in learning in general, helped increase their confidence and ability to engage more deliberately with the material. Joe added that:

I learned that, by speaking up, I learned what I wanted to. I learned that because of the fact that I was then starting to mentally process it myself more, when I was speaking, and I was saying something and I'm rethinking my thought as I'm saying it. I'm thinking about what the teacher said, which made me engage the material more.

Assertiveness, then, works as both an impetus for better communication about one’s learning needs and as a means to get closer to the coursework. Developing the use of personal initiative in this context takes time, and does not come as easily to all students. As Jessica explained it,
Now, I have no problem saying what I think, which is quite an improvement because when I first went to college I would raise my hand and I would start to talk, I wouldn’t know how to say what I was thinking and I would stop and say ‘never mind’. And I did it for so long and it was so embarrassing, but I felt like me even raising my hand and even trying to say something was working towards something even better.

With assertiveness sometimes functioning as an antidote to embarrassment, students can participate actively, ask questions, clarify misunderstandings, and ultimately, self-advocate more effectively.

The process of self-advocacy, because of its demands, improves assertiveness in those who did not feel they had it. All five of the participants reported noticing a change in this aspect of themselves, or experienced others noticing this change in them. Upon being described by a friend as an assertive person, Jessica recalls,

> It kind of made me think because I reflected back on how I used to be before, how I’ve grown from where I was five or six years ago. I thought, “Whoa, this is so weird. I am assertive”, because I never used to be. I never used to assert my feelings. I just thought it was cool that someone else noticed and it put things in perspective for me. I really am making progress.

Jane explained a similar change in herself. She said, “Definitely--it’s made me more confident, more outspoken in all aspects of my life.” These improvements in assertiveness and associated self-perceptions, such as confidence, link this component closely to academic self-concept. It also transcends the academic aspects of self-concepts and is reflected in what appears to be a more global sense of positive self-concept. They begin to regard themselves as stronger and more capable in general, not only in academic contexts. The section on academic self-concept further illustrates this point.

Assertiveness in a framework of self-advocacy. Assertiveness makes self-advocacy possible. Self-advocacy communication can easily be described as an act of
assertiveness. Without the ability or inclination to simply speak-up, be noticed, participate actively, or take and defend a position, it would not be possible to negotiate with professors, request accommodations, disclose a disability, get learning needs met, or problem-solve as self-advocacy communication demands. The infusion of assertiveness into self-advocacy must be done with an understanding of skillful communication. In as much as assertiveness augments and facilitates self-advocacy, the process of self-advocacy likewise increases assertiveness, confidence, and is linked to the students feelings of academic self-concept.

Knowledge of Learning Disability/ADHD

In the context of the proposed framework of self-advocacy experiences, KLD heavily informs the content of self-advocacy communication. Having an intimate understanding of how the LD works and realizing that no two LD experiences are alike is regarded as critical to explaining what can be done to help. Students acquire knowledge of their individual learning disabilities in a variety of ways. A large part of what students communicate as they advocate includes what they know about their particular profile of strengths and weaknesses. This group of participants consistently demonstrated a well-developed ability to articulate their individual experience of having a disability, including its specific effects on their learning processes and what they know will help them address the problems created. The ability to do that is exemplary of their ability to have these same conversations with their professors, and therefore indicative of their self-advocacy skills. Additionally, they are able to apply their personal process of learning about their LD and their current experience of having and managing their LD to self-advocacy and to their presentation of the problem to be solved.
On the importance of understanding the LD. Each participant made comments regarding the importance of knowing the nature of their disability and understanding how it affects them on a daily basis. One participant said that, among all the components of self-advocacy, “the student needs to know what's wrong, how they learn, and their learning style. I don't even think everyone knows what a learning style is.” In using the term ‘learning style,’ she speaks from the perspective that most students learn differently from one another, and that a learning disability is just another permutation of that variety. She also asserts that understanding one’s own learning style is the student’s responsibility. Doing so is recommended in the early stages of becoming a self-advocate.

As Chris explained:

Part of self-advocacy is knowing what you need, and you have to really understand what you need in order to tell someone that you need it. So I think it would probably be the most important thing to understand…That is the first step in self-advocacy.

He also makes the point that understanding one’s LD/ADHD requires identifying learning needs and functional solutions to learning problems. According to Josie, that knowledge must lead to action taken by the student, as that is its purpose;

I think you can’t be a self-advocate unless you know what you need. So I think the first step of it is deliberating within yourself: this is what I want to do, how am I going to get there? Who do I need to talk to? What are the steps I’m going to take?

Jessica reinforced the idea that the value in knowledge of one’s LD lies in addressing problems:

Once you know where problems are coming from, it’s easier to fix them. And not even with medication either, it's just learning how to deal with them. You know, when I look at this, this is what I see. And this is how I change it to what I should be seeing. And so, it’s just a learned thing.
Here, she refers to the learning process that accompanies having a learning disability. It was an opinion shared among all five participants that getting to understand an LD or ADHD is an ongoing part of the student’s life experience. Its manifestation is subject to topics of study, personal interaction, environment, and other factors that commonly influence learning. Joe said, “I think it gives you an advantage when you're trying to figure out what you need to do to get stuff done. If you don't understand why you're not learning it, then you're going to have a hard time trying to find ways to work around it.” The participants emphasized the direct relationship between understanding one’s own LD or ADHD and addressing the task of getting needs met from a problem-solving perspective. The purpose of understanding LD/ADHD lies in addressing the problem and arriving at a solution.

*Acquiring knowledge of LD/ADHD.* The understanding of LD and ADHD demonstrated is not the sort that can be exclusively gleaned from a book on the topic. Scores of resources are available to educators and students to explain in very clinical terms what processes are influenced by various learning diagnoses. The explanations these students are able to give are the results of concentrated personal observation, experience, and an intimate meta-cognitive understanding of minute processes that typically learning students may take for granted. The students came to view their learning processes the way they do by learning from their failures as well as their successes.

How is a knowledge of one’s own LD or ADHD developed? Each participant shared examples from their personal history that resonates for them as significant to how they learned what their LD was for them. The sources of this discovery process include parents, relationships with trusted educators, their own process of trial-and-error and
personal research and reading. Despite the difficulty that reading often presents, several participants mentioned the significance of books they had read shortly after their diagnosis:

Yeah, mostly for my book I read a lot about it. [My educational therapist] also gave me books on kids with dyslexia, just kind of understanding where they’re coming from and just understanding that I’m not the only person that has it. (Chris)

Here, Chris refers a manual that he wrote to advise and support other students in his high school about self-advocacy. The degree of comfort offered by books is somewhat surprising:

I was seven. And – what did I feel like? I felt okay ’cause my mom got me this Mel Levine book and it was called All Kinds of Minds, and it was for kids that were little. ’Cause he makes books for all across the way so I'm telling you, if there's a kid that just gets diagnosed get them a book by Mel Levine and he'll make you feel at home. (Jane)

The statements above also bring to light the importance of the people who are in their lives at the time of their diagnosis and as they struggle to understand how they will approach their educations. Typically, someone important in their lives gave them a book that helped shape their perspective on themselves as a person with a learning diagnosis. The importance of this relationship is not to be underestimated. Parents and educators alike would do well to remember that a learning diagnosis is life changing, and the positive or negative impact of it is often subject to the guidance given by adults. This topic will be taken up again in sections dedicated to the influence of parents and of teachers.

Some students responded well to direct teaching on the subject from an organized curriculum, such as the instruction available at schools they attended prior to DU that
were focused on developing knowledge of student LD and ADHD. For one participant, due to the fact that she had been educated in a K-12 private school specifically designed for students with LD, the process of understanding her LD was very natural. “Of course with me,” Josie said, “I’ve been immersed in learning differences my whole life.” Others came to focus on this aspect of the learning process later, and more directly:

Well, basically, when I was at Landmark, we just read a lot about learning styles and then you figure it out. Yeah. You could probably even do it on line – read about learning style and just figure it out. I'm sure there's ways to figure it out and pretty much, you should know. (Jessica)

Landmark College, a two-year program awarding an Associate’s Degree, was credited more than once for contributing to a participant’s clearer understanding of his or her LD:

I probably wouldn’t be here right now at DU doing so well if I didn’t go to Landmark College. Because that’s where I really learned to deal with all of this. And learned about my disability and all of that… And that’s like, a very big thing, and it takes a lot of work, and the tutor kind of keeps you on track and guides you through it. Otherwise, I would have been completely lost. Because they really kind of kept me going because it was really difficult. And when I got there, I often thought, ‘Well, what am I doing here? What am I doing? This is so hard!’ and she just kind of kept me going and taught me a lot about whatever I needed. We figured out what I needed. (Jessica)

Jessica again brought up the subject of the “significant other” in the context of the self-advocacy relationship. Several participants made mention of the people in their lives who supported or guided them through their development and acquisition of their knowledge of their LD or ADHD, as well as their approach to self-advocacy in general.

**Individual experience of LD.** Each of the participants was able to speak articulately and in detail about the nature and influence of their LD or ADHD on their university learning experience. They demonstrated a well-developed understanding of their own strengths and areas of challenge, as well as step-by-step analysis of the
problematic aspects of their learning processes. The need to pay focused attention to one’s own experience lies in the fact that no two learning diagnoses are ever alike. Josie said:

I think that just because you have dyslexia, doesn’t mean you’re going to be like somebody else who had dyslexia. So everybody, I think, is different in the way they are affected by their learning difference. You know, level, how bad it is, things like that. I think it’s weird, because you say it gets better, but if you have a learning difference it never really gets better. You just learn to cope with it.

For her, the interaction of stress, ADHD, and her dyslexia presents a somewhat different learning profile than what might be expected. Without this understanding, and without the ability to articulate it the way she does, she would not be able to request accommodations or develop compensatory strategies specific to her needs. The cycle of learning and assessment in college courses often highlights, or creates, deficits that are part of the profile of an LD student:

Not just route memorization. And test taking--no multiple choice. I know the right answer, but for some reason I always pick the wrong because I’m not reading the letters right. I get the letters mixed up… I accidentally cross out the right answer when I’m trying to eliminate the wrong answers. I just never do well with multiple choice… I have kind of a hard time taking notes. I can’t seem to listen and get all the notes down at the same time. I mean if it’s possible to check my notes to the professor’s notes to be sure I’ve got all the information that would be great… And it hurts with algebra, because if I can’t do arithmetic, obviously I can’t do algebra. It’s like a foreign language to me. (Jessica)

Test-taking is a particularly contentious topic with students with LD/ADHD. Across the participants, there was very little agreement about what would be the ideal test, that would allow the student to demonstrate their knowledge and learning in the best possible light. There was also no such thing as the perfect course or course plan:

I just wanted to do physics because I like how things react. You heard me say I like science, but there was so much math in physics. It wasn't that I didn't understand the concepts; I certainly am good at learning how forces react to other
things, but it was the math part. I just couldn't get the equations. I just…my head would burn before I could understand it. after I dropped out of Spanish II I tried sign language. I thought 'Well, it still counts as a language, I think I'll try this…It's a hand thing, I figured it's not learning a language, it's learning with my hands. And I still could not get it. I could never remember which one coordinated to which… multiple-choice, with my memorization, especially with names and whatnot, I tend to have a really hard time with that. (Joe)

KLD should not only lead students to appropriate accommodation requests. It should also lead them to make optimal choices in terms of course selection, study strategies, and self-accommodations that will help minimize the interference of the LD or ADHD on their learning outcomes. The ability to communicate KLD begins the problem solving process that is the primary function of self-advocacy.

The careful study of their LD or ADHD, the daily living with it that these students must do, and the length of time over which their relationship with their learning diagnosis has developed, leads to a certain intimacy. The lines between knowledge of one’s own LD or ADHD and knowledge of oneself as a person were, occasionally, blurred by the language used by the participants. Jessica explained,

Well, you can be an advocate and ask for what you need concerning your – this is for high school – your IEP, if you don't know yourself, fine, that's definitely possible. Or I can be an advocate and I could ask for extended time, you know, alternate format texts, whatever, if I don't know myself. But to ask help of a teacher it would be hard if I didn't know what I needed. It would be okay if I just had a question on the homework. But if I don't know my learning style, or how best to receive help then it's hard to ask.

When talking about her learning needs, this student describes knowing the impact and nuance of her disability as equivalent to knowing herself. In doing so, she reveals that she connects her disability very closely with who she is as a person and her concept of herself. This intimate connection between the learning diagnosis and the self will be explored further in a later section.
Applying knowledge of LD/ADHD. The usefulness of this knowledge lies in the student’s ability to make a connection to the support and services that will be necessary for the student to learn;

…a lot of the problems with me was I was so focused on getting the spelling right when I was writing notes down that I really wasn’t focusing on what she was saying. But she’d also give me her notes so I could look over her notes and she wouldn’t let me keep them but I could copy them, off of her, so you know, that was always really nice to have. She’d also give me the books ahead of time that we had to read so I could go and if I wanted to I could go get them on tape, you know, something along those lines. (Jessica)

As explained above, a thorough understanding of one’s own LD serves the purpose of facilitating communication with others, such as professors or peers. This helps meet the communication goals of educating others about their needs or being more effective in asking for the right support, particularly where a convincing argument is necessary to encourage supportive alliances.

Summary of knowledge of LD. Each of the students in the study proved to have a detailed and intimate understanding of their own learning diagnoses. They reported having come to that understanding by living with their LD or ADHD on a daily basis, and making note of what occurred as they moved through their educational experiences. Their relationships with parents and educators helped them develop that knowledge as well as a system for communicating their experience of having LD or ADHD to supportive people.

Academic Self-Concept

Self-advocacy communication serves to explain to another person--most advantageously someone in a position to help--a bit about what gaps in their abilities they must work to overcome, but, more importantly, what strengths they have at their disposal to address them. As mentioned in the literature review, students with LD are vulnerable
to having a negative academic self-concept, a lack of belief in their personal ability to learn and function effectively in academic environments, as a result of the input they receive from their own perception of their peers’ abilities or from the messages teachers give them. They fight against regarding themselves as less capable or intelligent by comparison to their non-LD peers, and are frequently on guard against being thought of in this way by their teachers. Self-advocacy can make students feel especially vulnerable to poor academic self-concept, since it requires them to confront the realities of their individual LD head on. “Why can’t I just do this?” Joe reported asking himself. “Why can’t I just understand this like everybody else?” However, self-advocacy also actively counteracts this vulnerability, since it requires that they work to highlight their strengths to others. It ultimately serves as a way for students to develop a more positive opinion of their natural abilities, acknowledge the unexpected gifts self-advocacy contributes, and eventually credit their LD for making them who they are.

Vulnerability to low academic self-concept. Feeling intellectually or academically inadequate is a big pitfall for students with LD. Each participant reported that they often made comparisons between themselves and others with regard to academic ability or performance. Those comparisons were not always realistic or fair, but they were always painful for the student with LD. “I had friends that didn’t really have to study for exams and get A’s on ’em and I had to study my ass off and get a C,” said Chris. Explaining why she received accommodations required Jessica to confront her LD head on: “One girl said, ‘I don’t understand why some people need extra time on the SAT’s. It's so unfair.’ And I just wanted to say--and this was the valedictorian, ‘Gee Miss Valedictorian, if everyone had no difficulty studying and retaining knowledge, they
wouldn't need extended time.’” Comparing oneself to typically achieving siblings is another source of negative information. “My sister just graduated from Harvard Law School,” said Jane. “I'm the underachiever (Laughter). Well, here they think I'm smart. But if I went to Princeton like my dad or my sister, for undergraduate, they wouldn't think I was smart. I know that. Because my papers there would be a C and here they could be an A.” In addition to her sister’s high achievement, she cites the inferiority of her school as confirmation of her comparatively low ability. Each of the five participants described a similar process by which they determined that their peers’ abilities outshone their own.

The participants describe various ways in which they protect their self-concepts from the notion that they could be viewed as less capable or intelligent than their non-LD peers, such as bringing up examples of geniuses or other highly accomplished people with LD. “Einstein didn't learn to read until he was eight,” said Jane, “and his teachers thought he was an idiot. He had a learning disability, and look what he did. So you can't just give up on things, because if you do, think about it…there would be no bomb [Laughing].” She takes comfort in the possibility of untapped genius, creativity, and the power of tenacity. Other participants asserted that many people with LD have very desirable qualities that are a virtue of having LD. Chris shared, “there is a difference between people with dyslexia and other people, I think we’re more creative.” Four of the five participants made a point of providing examples of the gifts possessed by people with LD, among them non-linear thinking, imagination, superior visual and interpersonal skills, persuasive communication, and high IQ.
Comparison to peers. Students report that feelings of intellectual inadequacy originate with their perception of the culture around them. Josie was of the opinion that being one among many with LD helped to maintain a positive self-concept. She said,

I think because it depends on the place where you come from, you know? If you come from a society or a community where nobody knows about [LD], then you feel like the weird kid, I would think. For instance where I grew up, it was normal, and my whole family has it, so it’s not really a big deal so I don’t really mind if people know.

Sometimes the feedback that students get has to do with the competitive nature of student grouping. Jessica recalled, “That was always what was really hard about high school. I was in class with these kids. I wasn't top 10, I was maybe about 100…down pretty low…these kids weren't any smarter than me, but somehow these numbers always meant so much to them… I wish the numbers weren't even there.” Being compared to other students based on quantitative systems that do not highlight their strengths was a frustration cited by all five participants. Fortunately, the struggles in the classroom and finding a place of dignity among peers usually find resolution. Joe began, as most do, by questioning his intelligence: “Well, you know, is this really how I am or am I just not getting this because I’m stupid?” he said to himself. “And then hopefully you get over that and you go on realizing that, no, you’re not stupid, that you’re a smart kid and you can find these answers, you just have to work for it.” The fact that the perceived gap between one’s own abilities and someone else’s is closed by effort, is a consistently reassuring thing. As Jane concurred;

A lot of these kids feel stupid and a lot of them have been told they were stupid because of [LD], or they just feel that way. It depends, some of it's internal. There's outside influence on that, so you kind of have to explain to them, do you know how many kids with learning disabilities have higher I.Q.s than people
without? You don't feel lucky, obviously, because it takes you a hell of a lot longer to do anything. And it just means that you have to put more effort into it. She seems to describe a cognitive pathway that begins with negative messages, moves toward selecting positive facts, and leads to resolution with self-advocacy.

*Messages from teachers.* Teachers have a significant influence on the self-concept of students with LD which they bring with them to college and the self-advocacy experience. “That teacher told me that I was stupid and that I wasn’t going anywhere,” Chris shared. Moving from hurt, anger, and defensiveness is a process that takes time and maturity. “As you get older, you can see the teachers that aren’t actually against you,” Joe said. “They’re struggling to deal with you, but they’re still on your side. You don’t really see that. It was the grades that made me think he didn’t like me. It still kind of feels like that in college, when the teacher keeps grading you really tough.” Clearly grades are taken very personally. To a degree, students with LD feel that their effort, sincerity, and intelligence are being graded. The impact of the teacher-student relationship is significant in the academic self-concept formation of students with LD, and should be handled with the utmost care.

Self-advocating also appears to help address the desire to be normal and become more comfortable with that part of one’s identity. Chris said, “I felt like [having LD] was a curse. I would just get so emotional, ‘cause it is, it’s just so emotionally draining…and I just wanted it to be over. Not like my life to be over, I just wanted dyslexia to be gone.” But to stay in that place, feeling emotional and upset, is not productive. So eventually, successful students learn that something must be done to bridge the gap between being learning differently, and simply learning:
You don’t want to be the different one that needs help, more help than anyone else. As much as you can say, “I don’t care what other people think about me”, you do. You want to be just like everybody else. It’s not so much that I’m embarrassed that I have it or people knowing about it, it’s just that I wish it wasn’t such a pain in the butt. I wish I could just get it done and not have to go through all these steps, and have it be ten times harder. You’re not obliged to walk up and go “What’s up! I’m dyslexic!”, you know? “I’m different!” But you need to. You should. (Josie)

Students described self-advocacy as one of the key factors in restoring positive self-concept, including academic self-concept. Chris said, “I think that everything that’s happened has made me a better advocate for myself, as well as in general. I don’t think I would want to change anything. I think it’s been great.” The experience of being a self-advocate successfully helps the student reach a level of acceptance with having an LD, and eventually pride in the person he or she has become:

Well, I wouldn’t be who I am at all if I hadn’t spoken up about the problems I was having. I think that if I hadn’t used the skills that I did, I wouldn’t have the skills that I have now. Because I think it definitely ingrained my confidence, of course. Like, the way I handle myself. I’m not afraid to tell people now that I do have these problems and I’m going to need to do this or this, how to help me deal with it. But I also have learned to cope with it myself, so I pretty much can handle it. If I need something, I can get it. I don’t always have to rely on other people to provide it for me. (Josie)

Her explanation suggests that she firmly believes in the positive, formative influence of her LD and the approach she took to managing it.

The gifts of self-advocacy. Self-advocacy is credited with bringing new skills and attributes to the one who uses it. Confidence was one of the most frequently recognized gifts. As Joe put it, “It makes you who you are. Because it all revolves together. Like I said, with self-advocacy comes confidence, with confidence comes a lot of things. Josie echoed this sentiment; “like I said, it made me who I am. I like who I am at this point, so I don’t even want to think about how snobby and pretentious I would be if I’d had it easy
the entire way. I think that’s how I am different from other people. I’m confident in who I am, but I also realize that it could all be gone in a day, and that other people don’t have that confidence. Maybe I can help them, speak for them.” She feels self-advocacy has done so much for her that she needs to share it with others. Each participant revealed that having been a good self-advocate has given them a sense of confidence, of being capable, of merely needing to work harder than others to get the same, if not better, academic results. “Just believing in myself that I can do things and I push myself to go that extra mile to talk to that teacher,” said Chris. “But really I just think it’s made me a stronger person in the end…and become a person that doesn’t need to tell everyone, ‘You know, I’m dyslexic and I need all this help.’” What was especially rewarding to him was the idea that he is capable of reducing the impact of a seemingly uncontrollable phenomenon (having LD) with his effort and self-advocacy skills.

The feeling of being capable enabled the participants to see beyond their identity as a person with LD and recognize how it has changed them for the better. “Now I’m more confident, but in a good way. Not cocky. You know, those are two words that are interchanged often. I think there are a lot of people who had it easy the entire time” said Josie. “And that’s good, to be confident like that. But they don’t have the sympathy for other people, and they aren’t open to other people. I think I am definitely more sympathetic towards people. Especially toward people who have a hard time getting out what they want to say.” Chris described specific skill sets and attributes he has developed as the result of self-advocating:

I really think that because of all the advocating that I’ve done, I could be the best sales person ever. I could probably sell you a shoe that I found off the street. Because of what I’ve had to do in so many different situations, it’s made me
become such a good talker and just a person that can make you feel that you want it. I think it’s given me good communication skills. I really feel like if it’s anything, in so many different situations with so many different professors. If anything the advocacy part, the initial getting up and talking, just kind of getting over that hump, has made me more of a powerful person in that aspect. Politics…that would be the main thing. That’s what you have to do when you…when you’re advocating for yourself. You’re telling the teacher that you’re good enough for them to actually help you.

These statements describe what he had learned from self-advocacy, his vision of who he might be aside from his LD, and what he is therefore capable of doing.

Some participants explained that being a good self-advocate has helped them distance themselves from the need to define themselves as a person with LD, and has made the LD or ADHD less of a central part of who they view themselves to be. “I don’t think I will tell everyone [at work],” shared Chris. “I think as I become older, it becomes less of who I am. It’s not “Chris: Learning Disability”, it’s “Chris,” and little ‘learning disability’ at the bottom. I don’t think that everyone needs to know.” That shift may have something to do with his increasing belief in his persistence, work ethic, and innate abilities. Joe added,

Then as you get older, you get less and less of that, ‘Well, maybe it’s me’ stuff. A lot more of the “Well, I can do this, I’m just going to have to work for it” thing. Now I’m at the point where my personal motto is “there’s nothing that I cannot do, it’s just how much am I willing to put into it to get it to happen.

These two participants attribute the weakening connection between their identities and their learning disabilities to age, and presumably to the maturity that accompanies it. However, I would assert that this separation between self-identity and LD would not have occurred had they not spent those years acting as self-advocates.

*Summary of academic self-concept.* One of the most heartbreaking potential effects of going to school with a learning diagnosis is the damage that can be done to a
student’s belief in his or her ability to learn and function in the academic environment. College students with LD have spent their academic lives being compared to more traditionally successful students, and often being viewed as less capable by their teachers. Good self-advocacy, while it forces students to confront and reveal their deficits in their most fragile domain of self-concept, also helps reveal to the students strengths and gifts that they might not have otherwise known about, and may never have otherwise needed. They become aware of their abilities, rather than disabilities, through the process of self-advocating.

*Self-Efficacy and Locus of Control*

It has been suggested in the literature that college students with LD would do well to hold an internal locus of control and a positive sense of self-efficacy. These data revealed how self-efficacy and locus of control support the process of self-advocacy communication. When a student experiences him or herself as a successful self-advocate, as measured by the student’s estimation that self-advocacy has resulted in higher grades, the student’s beliefs in his or her own self-efficacy and internal locus of control is also affirmed. In this group of students with LD, who have demonstrated academic success in college and regard themselves as good self-advocates, self-efficacy and locus of control manifest in a strong sense of personal responsibility for their academic outcomes and an ardent belief that their self-advocacy efforts will lead them to the grades they seek. The participants shared their frustration at those times when despite all their hard work, conscientiousness, and responsibility they did not earn the high grades they thought they should. This led to a discussion of the influence of other students, their teachers, and the learning environment on their grades and learning, reminding us that there are some
aspects of the learning and grading process that might simply be out of the individual student’s hands. They must be wary of going to extremes in their internal locus of control by protecting against perfectionism on one end of the spectrum, and unproductive blame on the other, and seem to function at their best by striking a healthy balance between the two.

How self-efficacy and locus of control support self-advocacy. In order to begin a process as arduous, time-consuming, and personal as self-advocacy communication, students must believe that their efforts will be effective. They must believe that when standing in front of an instructor, asking for access to accommodations or modifications, they will walk away with what they came for. It is also necessary for these students to believe that once they utilize the support they are offered, that their success will be reflected in higher grades. This set of beliefs is their sense of self-efficacy.

The student’s locus of control is reflected in what he or she asks for during those interactions. Students’ beliefs about the origin of a learning problem, and who is chiefly responsible for solving the challenges it presents, will be communicated as they advocate for themselves. This information is found in what kind of support, accommodations, or modifications the student asks for. A student might request help that will assist them in better accessing and learning the material, which would indicate that the student regards the majority of the work to be done as their own. He or she might ask for exceptions and a reduction in work, which might communicate to a professor that the student feels it is someone else’s responsibility to make changes. In the earlier description of Joe’s experience, and his high levels of frustration with educational systems, it was evident that he regarded a significant number of factors contributing to his grades to be the
responsibility of others and therefore someone else’s job to make changes or accommodations for him. He wanted administrators to change departmental policy, teachers to change the ways they graded or the requirements on the syllabus to accommodate his particular profile of strengths and needs. In the end, he was disappointed and had to make alternate choices rather than change the environment around him.

Messages that communicate a belief that someone else is responsible for the student’s learning outcomes may evoke a response in the person with whom the student is advocating whether that is a professor, department administrator, teaching assistant, and might influence how successful the student is in having requests filled. Students who are aware of these subtleties in self-advocacy communication share how it influences their effectiveness.

Responsibility and internal locus of control. One of the most urgent messages in the literature about self-advocacy is that students must make the shift from relying on teams of professionals charged with overseeing their learning to taking on responsibility for meeting their own needs. This message has not been lost on those who have made themselves into successful students and self-advocates. Beyond a de-facto responsibility created by the fact that there is no longer a team of professionals and parents looking out for the student’s best interest, a sense of ownership of both the problem and its solution keeps the student engaged in self-advocacy and in learning. This group of participants was unified in their belief that they are primarily responsible for their learning and achievement in college. They cite their hard work as the reason why they do or do not do well in their classes: “I don't really believe in luck when it comes to school,” Josie said.
“You get out what you put in.” Chris believed in his potential to do well on the basis of his efforts. He rejected the idea that high grades have as much to do with pure ability as others might believe:

I must be brilliant…because, I work harder than you do and if you worked as hard as I do, you could get the same grade. But some of them, they just don’t like to try. I think trying is a big part of it. Showing the teacher that you actually are concerned and you’re willing to do well. It shows the teacher that you actually care.

The way that he applies himself to his work, and to his self-advocacy, gets the credit for his successes. This effort and advocacy also appear to be the tools he uses to show his teachers what kind of a person he is.

As was discussed in the section addressing Research Question One, these students share a desire to conquer the learning disability to some degree, to move past it, to be more confident in their own self-efficacy and their control over outcomes, and to be defined by something within themselves other than the LD. Doing so allows them take full credit for their successes. As Chris explained,

Now I kind of look back [at when I used to tell everyone I was dyslexic] and feel like I was making an excuse. If I was being a little bit slower, or if I wasn’t paying attention, that’s what it was. Now it’s like, if I’m not paying attention it’s not because I’m dyslexic, it’s because I’m bored out of my mind and I don’t want to be in class.

Rather than give up responsibility for, and therefore ownership of, his learning or his grades, Chris’s explanations for failing to meet his own academic expectations have to do with his own ability to control his focus and effort. As he became more confident, his need to discuss his shortcomings in terms of the impact of dyslexia diminished. He then began making attributions to his desire, time, and effort. In doing so, he claimed ownership, control and responsibility for academic outcomes. He advised making a shift
from blaming poor outcomes on internal things that the student cannot change, such as
the learning disability itself, and moving toward making attributions based on what the
student is responsible for and capable of changing.

*Self-advocacy's contribution to self-efficacy and LOC.* The participants each
described a feeling of control that resulted from their self-advocacy skills. Their
knowledge of techniques that they found to be effective helped them feel capable, rather
than defined by their LD or ADHD. Discussions of locus of control often included
statements about a mental checklist of the steps involved in self advocacy, such as
making a proper disclosure, securing accommodations, asking for help, or accessing
office hours, as a way for the student to evaluate him or herself on the use of appropriate
strategies and resources available.

I’ll go back through every class and say, “I could have done that better. And I’ll
think, “Well, what’s the next class? OK, I’m going to work on that.” When I go
through the checklist, I’ll be like “Did I do that?” Well, I could have tried better.
(Chris)

Knowing that a bad grade was the result of lapses in effort rather than an inescapable lack
of ability is also a comfort and a source of motivation. Josie, in particular, had a balanced
perspective on what she had control over (effort, pro-activity, preparedness), and what
she did not (what a professor would do with her work once turned in). That perspective
seemed the result of a great deal of work on her part, and gave her an ability to relax that
was more evident in her than in the other participants.

The participants experience frustration and frequently compare themselves to
others in their classes. They held the assumption that everyone else got A’s while the
student with LD did not. This assumption gave the impression of a negative mindset, and
revealed their concept of themselves as the only one with LD, the only one who had so much trouble, while everyone else enjoyed photographic memories, speed reading, and instant understanding. Some failures could not be attributed to their efforts. I often heard their frustration when their hard work and advocacy did not produce the grades they sought.

[I can control] how prepared I am when I go see the tutor, handing in my assignments, micromanaging for tests, starting out earlier than 2 nights before. Just keeping up with everything, reading the chapter before a class and going over the notes after class. I don’t know, sometimes I think it will just happen, I mean, like I can start studying two days before and get an A on the test, and I can’t. I’m not like any other student. I have to watch what I’m doing, keeping up with the reading and studying for the test. And reading the notes after class because I know I’ll remember it better. Planning ahead, thinking ahead. Those are the things that I can do that I have control over to make the A’s to make the grades. Those are the things that I’m still working on. (Jessica)

Participants were assured by having done everything possible with the assets available to them, that they advocated for themselves, and set about actively trying to prevent and solve their own learning problems. This idea was their armor, as they faced challenges so closely related to their sense of self-worth and basic capability. Self-advocacy was a way to gain control over the uncontrollable nature of LD or ADHD.

*Achieving desired outcomes.* Students with LD, who develop very effective self-advocacy skills and combine them with a positive sense of self-efficacy, often come to believe that these two things can result in the grades they are looking for:

I thought I did really well, and I didn’t. That’s what I didn’t have control over… I guess I felt like I was doing something wrong, I was studying wrong, maybe I didn’t really know how to study…I did really poorly on some classes. One of them I worked really hard, I copied all the notes all the time, I saw the professor a lot and I got a C in the class. That was really frustrating. That’s when I started thinking, maybe your grades aren’t a reflection of how hard you work. I don’t really know what to do in those cases.
When the hard work, fueled by self-efficacy, and self-advocacy efforts that the student so firmly believes in do not result in higher grades, searching for the cause can be frustrating:

I worked my butt off this quarter and I got the same grade. There was this one particular class I got a B in, and I don’t understand how all those other kids get an A and I [did] not get an A. So I’m still trying to figure out how, what else you have to do to get the good grade. (Jessica)

For any student, grades are a validation of ability, effort, and potential. Lower-than-expected grades can be devastating to any student who has just directed all their personal resources toward that particular goal. For the student with LD or ADHD, getting the same grade that they think their non-LD peers can get carries with it an additional layer of meaning. It tells them that they are becoming equivalent to, or even better than, “typical” students with regard to intelligence, capacity for achievement, and potential for later success. The lifelong struggle with having a disability has caused them to doubt themselves on these counts. The notion that all they have to do is work a little harder and they can do anything anyone else can do has been the missing piece to their personal puzzle, and the theory they are always trying to prove.

When the student perceives that the academic outcome (grade) might be outside their reach, like anyone else, they are prone to indulge in rationalizations. For example, when a student does not have a sense of self-efficacy about a particular endeavor, or it seems that all the tools they use to bring the outcome under their control have failed, it sometimes feels better to describe the shortfall as a decision made to conserve effort or energy.

I could probably push and get that really good grade in the class, but is it gonna make me feel better? No. Because I’ve done well so far and I don’t need…who
am I proving…then it goes to ‘Who am I proving this to? Am I proving it to myself, or am I proving it to the professor that I actually know my stuff?’ Well, I know that I know the stuff, so I don’t care that the professor thinks that I don’t know the stuff. (Chris)

It may sound like giving up and surrendering one’s own motivation to the favor of a professor. This is a reality that students with LD face in any educational environment, including even the most ardent and skilled self-advocate, and it is something to protect against.

_Perfectionism._ There is a common assumption among struggling students with LD that everyone else learns new material instantly and without the assistance from others. This reflects a highly internal locus of control, yet a potentially dysfunctional attitude, which isolates students from valid and useful resources and damages their feelings of self-efficacy. It is an imbalance in that sense of responsibility and in their understanding of what they are able to control, characterized either by thinking that all things are one’s own fault or responsibility, bring about feelings of stress and sometimes crisis. Jessica shared, “I have always had this tendency…where [I think that] if I start over again, then I’ll do it better, or then I’ll do it perfectly… Yeah, cause I was perfectionist, and I still am.” She went on to describe her feelings of optimism and belief in her own potential, as well as her significant disappointment and regret when she realized that she had taken on educational challenges without realistically considering her profile of strengths and weaknesses.

It’s kind of the same mentality that I’ve had for as long as I can remember, that I have to prove it to myself whether I can or I can’t. And that kind of thing is still the same. I don’t know if it’s exclusive to people with learning disabilities, but I think they feel like they have to prove themselves a lot more than people that don’t have learning disabilities…they’re not as good at something, so obviously they feel like they have to prove themselves more. (Jessica)
Jessica, and I am sure many other students with LD who are similar to her, sometimes sought this proof of her ability and control over her learning outcomes by taking on challenges far beyond her reach. She discussed that, although she had a significant math disability (dyscalculia) that made it extremely difficult for her to do basic arithmetic, she chose to try to take physics in an online class in order to graduate early. Facing her most challenging subject without the support of a professor or teaching assistant of whom she could ask questions led to disappointment and forced her to confront her limitations. The results of experiments such as these can have a significant impact, positive or negative, on the student’s academic self-concept.

Julia also described herself as a perfectionist and felt that the work she turned in was a personal reflection of herself. She did not understand and had little patience for students who turned in work with errors in it of any kind. “Okay, so if you can't [edit and correct your own work], then how could you even turn in a paper with your name on it? That's like disrespecting yourself. That's like a sin…it's a respect issue. I feel like my teacher should respect me.” Clearly she holds herself, and others, to such very standards of personal responsibility. Unfortunately, it leaves little room for basic, forgivable human error, and may have caused her a great deal of stress at times.

*The teaching and learning environment.* It would be unhealthy, and perhaps even self-punishing, for students with LD to believe that they are singularly in control of every aspect of their educational outcomes. The teaching and learning environment functions like any other type of environment; it is subject to a variety of influences, many of which cannot be controlled. Instructors, other students, and administrators all have presence in
the learning environment that can shape a student’s experience. Those influences must be acknowledged and assigned their fair share of either blame or credit when the student looks back and asks him or herself, “What went wrong? What went right?”

Each student suggested that teachers have a role in how well students with LD perform, how much they will learn, or the grades they receive. Collectively, the group made reference to the negative influence of instructors who are unwilling to provide help or exceptions, project a dislike for students not majoring in the instructor’s subject, display a perceived lack of caring, or have a philosophical disagreement with (or ignorance of) the idea of providing students with LD special support, inconsistent or unpredictable grading policies, or limited teaching abilities. “Mainly the only reason my GPA is where it is now is because of a couple of bad teachers who were real hard-asses in a couple of classes that I didn't want to be taking.” Said Joe. “That was my one problem with liberal arts and taking a lot of classes that I didn't want to be taking.” Although Joe acknowledges that he did not want to be taking these classes, he was not aware that the things he was advocating for (assignment substitutions, rather than support getting them done) were not always appropriate and entirely at the teacher’s discretion to allow or not. While it is tempting to assign all blame for a poor outcome to someone else, doing so can obscure the real lesson to be learned. The consensus was that, although students are responsible for being prepared to learn, self-advocating, and for using effective strategies and study habits, teachers and administrators remain a factor over which they have little influence beyond what they know how to do as self-advocates.

A perceived lack of objectivity on the part of the teacher, either toward a student personally or in grading policies, was frequently cited as an external factor influencing
grades. If a student feels that the teacher does not like him or her, even the most
dedicated self-advocate can be tempted to give up. As Julia observed,

They should just compare you to the other kids. If they can't write and you can
write, you get an A. I don't know. Or they get an F and you get whatever. That's
the way it should be, but I've read other kids papers that are awful, and they get a
B… it should be just the teacher grading. And the people that are bad [writers]
get a bad grade. And what's good gets a good grade. Really, it should just be like
that. [But instead] they compare each person to themselves. If this kid's a crappy
writer, well then their best crapiness is a B. And I could try, and spend a lot of
time, when they don't, and get an A. Was it worth it, when I could have just done
minimal effort and gotten a B? Cause maybe that kid tried. Or maybe he didn't.
So it makes my energy just – it kind of makes me less motivated.

Less motivation in the class means that the student is less inclined to believe that there is
anything he or she can do to change the outcome (i.e. grade, policy), and makes the self-
advocacy process harder to maintain. Even Chris would sometimes admit defeat if he felt
he could not win over a professor:

So I think for me it's kind of an ego thing. I think, “Do I like the professor, does
the professor like me?” If the professor likes me then, I'll probably do better
because I probably would work harder. Then I’ll do better. [I need a professor to]
have respect for me as a person; think that I’m a smart kid. Just like anyone, if a
professor thinks that you’re smart, or thinks that you’ve got a great attitude,
you’re probably going to do better in that class, just because you have more of a
will to actually please the professor. That’s just kind of how I think. [If that
doesn’t happen], I won’t try as hard…and I won’t care as much. I don’t like you,
you don’t like me, I just want to get out of this class.

Even when he admits to letting the professor’s like or dislike of him influence is grade,
he makes a direct connection to how his own desire and motivation are lessened; he
knows, or is very close to knowing, that it is his own choice to let that happen.

Working in a group format proved to be difficult for each of the participants. On
that topic, Jane expressed the sentiments of the entire group of participants:

I don't like what they do, usually. I take on leader role, I need the leadership role
and I delegate the work, or if I don't like their work, I'll change it and turn it in
because I just don't like it. I don't mind group work like, but not group grades. I don't mind, “Split up in groups and answer these questions.” That's easy, fine and interesting, actually. Oh, I don't like studying that way, but I can. It goes against my learning style. If I know the material very well, then I'll do it. If it's in class, and it doesn't do anything to my grade, I don't care. Groups are fine, but if it's like a big project worth 30 percent of my grade, I hate it.

The participants described needing to work in a particular way in order to meet their expectations of being successful. The circumstances include too many variables beyond their immediate control to tolerate group work, such as the underperformance of their partners, their own tendency to work harder than others, and a very personal and particular set of learning styles that are not easily accommodated in a group-work format.

With regard to grades, good self-advocates with LD believe in their ability to get the grade they need, but are unwilling to relinquish control of the process that they have worked so hard to develop.

Balance. These students’ statements reveal that they must come to a point at which a balance is struck, and move from being hard on themselves for every failure to acknowledging that perfect performance is impossible. “For me,” said Chris, “it’s just understanding that you can’t be good at everything. That’s been hard for me, but it’s something that I’ve learned.” Maintaining the belief that all aspects of college learning are one’s fault, responsibility, or otherwise under one’s singular control proves to be exhausting for these students. “What I’ve learned lately is that you’re not in control and the only thing you can do is your best, and hopefully your teacher agrees that it’s your best, so, just plain effort,” Josie said. “That’s the only thing you can do. I used to think, ‘Oh no! I will handle it. Don’t even worry. I am charged.’ But this year, and especially this quarter, I’ve just learned that in every aspect, you just have to relinquish some
control, you know?” These statements reveal an effort to preserve a balance between expecting results from hard work (self-efficacy) and taking 100% responsibility for all grades, scores, and other outcomes. Josie also advised that, “Of course, in school you have to stay on top of things. What I’m saying about not controlling things is people are telling you what you need to do, and so do that, and then let it go. After it’s in, there’s nothing you can do about it. The grade you get is the grade you get. She gives students permission to simply do their best work, be as prepared as possible, and then rest. She describes her efforts to strike a balance between being in charge of her proactive contributions (effort and preparation) and acknowledging that there comes a point at which she can do no more on her own behalf, and moving forward without regrets. Establishing this balance was discussed as an important part of remaining emotionally healthy in the process of using self-advocacy strategies to manage LD in higher education.

Summary of self-efficacy and locus of control. The participants’ discussion on the topics of self-efficacy and locus of control leaves us with some important points to take away. The process of self-advocacy contributes to students’ feelings of self-efficacy and increases the sense that significant portions of their outcomes are indeed under their personal control. A positive sense of self-efficacy and a healthy, balanced locus of control, when coupled together, keep the student motivated and engaged in the self-advocacy process and in learning.

Problem Solving

This group of participants described a variety of approaches to problem-solving. These included an assortment of biases toward being either entirely autonomous, tapping
into the resources in all available people, or seeking to change the rules of the system. The participants advised staying unemotional during problem-solving processes. Parents were frequently cited as influential in forming approaches to problem-solving and as a resource in navigating current conflicts.

Problem-solving in the context of a self-advocacy framework. Problem-solving is an outcome of self-advocacy. Problem-solving serves to help close the gap between how students learn, given their LD, and how they are expected to perform academically in order to demonstrate their learning. Students use self-advocacy communication skills to problem-solve with others to find ways to close this gap. Students must be able to clearly state the ways in which their learning needs do not fit the environment or expectations and propose solutions to others in a position to help. Joe explained it this way:

What we have in terms of traditional education is a problem. That's always been sort of a problem, that we don't really do it right. So, we have to figure out our own problems to get around the things that bind us by traditional education. So yeah, problem-solving skills are really important. That's what happens when you hit the wall. You have to find a way to get over it, around it, or through it. That's a problem.

Problem-solving in the context of self-advocacy has the purpose of bridging a gap between what they feel capable of and what they are being asked to do, or between the way they learn and the way they are being taught.

Approaches to problem solving. Consulting with others before engaging a professor, instructor, or administrator in self-advocacy communication was a strategy used by nearly all (4 out of 5) participants. It was just as often acknowledged that doing so forced them to address whether or not they sacrificed a measure of autonomy or otherwise made them less of an adult. Given that individuating from their parents is a
natural and necessary task of young adult development, it is not surprising that students who may have had their parents as their most fierce advocates to date would hesitate to relinquish some of their new-found personal growth and power. Here, the participants discussed their path of problem-solving, beginning with their own internal process and the degree to which they involve others in their decision making.

For Jessica, the collaborative nature of problem-solving in the context of self advocacy sometimes works against her desire to be autonomous, independent and self-sufficient. She wanted to work on a problem by herself first, and then consult others when she felt stuck.

I like to be self-sufficient first and foremost. I like to know that I don’t need to run to my dad or to my step-mom every time I have a problem. I guess it is a really good skill to work with other people to problem solve, and I’m willing to once I haven’t been able to come up with anything on my own, so it’s not as if I’m completely stubborn and won’t ever ask anyone else’s advice, but often when I am talking it out with other people I end up figuring it out for myself. I just need to talk it out first. (Jessica)

It was important to her to first exhaust her own personal resources before calling on the problem-solving skills of others. This tactic can also have a negative impact. Jessica reported that she frequently waited until the last minute, struggling on her own, before either advocating for help or enlisting others to help her problem-solve. This resulted in failure experiences that undermined her academic self-concept.

Others advised embracing collaborative problem solving and suggests using communication skills to enlist the help of anyone available.

I'd say that if you have great problem-solving skills then you're set. It's really going to be easy for you to work around those things that bind you, and if you don't, it comes back to the asking for help thing--finding out who does [have good problem-solving skills]. Like a parent. Parents are great. They want you to succeed so much that they're going to help you find work-arounds. Deal with
anyone you have to deal with that can help you get that problem solved if you can't figure it out. (Joe)

Chris agreed that it is better to consult others when a first attempt at self-advocacy has not been productive:

If I’ve gone through all the steps of advocating for myself and I feel that I can’t do everything on my own, I’ll go to my LEP counselor, and ask her. I’ll sit down and talk to her, ask her what she thinks I should do, and if I don’t feel comfortable talking to the teacher, I’ll have her talk to the teacher, but that’s very rarely the case. I’ll usually go to the teacher, because I also feel that they need to put a name with the face. And you know, a face with the problem.

Ultimately, the job of finding a solution is shared by himself and his instructor.

One particular approach to self-advocacy is to look for ways bend the rules a bit. In that case, the student’s objectives may include getting requirements adjusted to highlight their abilities and allow them to avoid doing work that will force them to confront the areas of challenge related to their disability. Although some other students would work themselves to exhaustion trying to learn what they needed to learn in order to get the grade they wanted, Joe was constantly trying to argue that elements of the work professors or administrators wanted should not be required at all. The term “work-arounds” was a way for Joe to describe the means by which he could side-step an obstacle. These are the things for which he was frequently advocating.

With problems if you can come up with creative solutions, I think that it's great that teachers were willing to take graphic substitutes. That's a lot. Not many teachers are willing to do that, and when you meet the teachers who do, obviously they're not going to let you do it every time, but if you can, on the hardest paper, use this project as a substitute. It may not be worth as many points, but it's still a solution. It's still a grade rather than nothing, or getting a really bad grade versus an ok grade. (Joe)

This problem-solving approach sometimes created an adversarial dynamic that probably got in his way more than he realized.
I have some problems with math. So just forcing yourself to learn those things to me just doesn't make sense. But for some people, they would rather master it so they don't have to rely on other people and that's good for them. It depends on who you are and the learning difference you have and the style in which you learn. I've always thought that working around it was better, and that's what I've tried to do at college since then. That's why I'm not a business major anymore, because they wouldn't work with me at working around them. So I left. They said you have to take stat, business stat, calc and business calc. And I'm like, no. And they were like, “Well we're not going to substitute it with anything and you have to take it to get the major.” And I said, “Well I'm not going to be in your major anymore.” And I left.

Joe’s belief that the rules should be bent around his LD goes hand in hand with his belief that the problem that exists in education is the system’s failure to support a wider variety of learning styles. His objective was to advocate for change in the system rather than for the support that would help him to work within it. Such an approach flirts with being in opposition to Brinckerhoff’s (1994) assertion that the integrity of the educational program should not be compromised by one’s self-advocacy efforts. Students may have a problem maintaining an awareness of the extent to which their alternatives, solutions or requests may compromise the integrity of the course or degree program. Having a disability does not give the student the right to alter the learning objectives in such a way that their completion of the course or program does not hold the same meaning as that of others who did the required work.

On remaining unemotional. An emotional or overly personalized perspective on self-advocacy was regarded as unhelpful most of the time. Participants advised against allowing emotions to infiltrate the self-advocacy process. Jane described an impulsive and sometimes reactive problem-solving style, that was evident if her descriptions of many of her self-advocacy interactions. She believed in dealing with school-based problems immediately and without hesitation:
Head on, but, it depends on what the problem is. Do I put it in the corner? No. I’ve got to do it right away. And if it's something scholastic, again, right away. But if it's something like, maybe emotional, then I'm, like, wait on it. Okay, in terms of academic, how do I handle it? Like when I got that email, I wrote back right away. And then I talked to my mom, and she said; you should talk to your academic advisor…I don't usually go to my mother about advocacy, but when it's something that makes me angry, I do.

While all of the students reported feeling angry about unfair practices or difficult self-advocacy interactions, they also reported feeling more successful if they were able to put those emotions aside while self-advocating with others. This student’s emotional approach, even to academic problems, often resulted in her personalizing her self-advocacy interactions to a degree that led her to feel isolated from those in a position to provide support to her.

*On the influence of parents.* Participants cite parents as a source of problem-solving modeling. Students describe using the examples set by their parents, particularly if that parent was the student’s primary advocate during their K-12 experience. The modeling parents provide appears to lead the student to extract the motion of how to treat others, what negotiation tactics to use, and their ideas about the likelihood of their success, which is discussed in the section dedicated to self-efficacy and locus of control. Because of this, parents are often used as a touchstone during problem solving that requires self-advocacy. “You've got to talk to the people who can help you get your problem solved,” advised Joe. “If you can't, then you're on your own. You have to tell somebody. Usually that would be my mother, as you can tell she is very central in all of this.” Staying connected to that original example of advocacy, and deriving support form the family was a common theme. Josie shared that, “I usually talk to my mom. My mom and I talk a lot. She asks me for advice and I ask her for advice. She is usually the first
person I call when I have to make a tough one.” Jessica, however, resisted going to her parents, and felt that using them as a problem-solving resource was a mark of weakness, undermining her status as an independent adult. Jane, on the other hand, shared that she often consulted her mother as a way of coping with her emotional and reactive nature as she tried to think clearly enough to solve her problems. Chris stated earlier that his parents would give him help up to a point, but most often expected that he would come to his own conclusions about what to do with situations that challenged him.

Summary. A variety of approaches and perspectives on problem-solving were discussed, ranging from the adamantly autonomous, to involving all available supports, to working around the system. The participants advised staying unemotional in order to facilitate problem-solving in the form of self-advocacy. Parents were cited as both an influence and tool in the course of problem-solving.
CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

This study was conducted with two purposes: to gain a more intimate picture of the experiences of college students with LD and/or ADHD as they advocate for themselves, and to assess the agreement between the research on self-advocacy and how students these experienced it. I wanted to learn more about how successful students, with strong academic records and a positive perception of their own competence as self-advocates, experienced this complex task. Toward that end, three phenomenological interviews were conducted with each of five college-aged participants with LD and/or ADHD who self-referred to the study. Two male and three female students from one of the two disability support services programs at the University of Denver were interviewed. These interviews were analyzed using Colaizzi’s (1978) method of phenomenological data analysis.

In order to answer Research Question One, What is the experience of students with LD/ADHD as they advocate for themselves in the college environment?, the data were presented first as a description of the fundamental structure of the experience of self-advocating at a university. The findings revealed the students’ perspectives on self-advocacy in general as well as their thoughts about six domains found in the literature that most closely relate to self-advocacy. I attempted to view the students’ perspectives on self-advocacy’s meaning for them, their beliefs about self-advocacy, and their thought processes as they do that work. I also wanted to take from the academic literature ideas
about what self-advocates must do, and how self-advocates must be, in order to use the self-advocacy process toward their continued success as students.

With these findings, I was also able to construct a framework of self-advocacy that, based on this set of data, best illustrates how these domains work together to shape the student’s experience of being a self-advocate. As I sifted through the data, it was clear that the components comprising self-advocacy as suggested by the literature were not only confirmed, but worked together in a way that greatly facilitated student success. A framework meets Colaizzi’s challenge that investigators arrive at a fundamental structure to the phenomenon.

This chapter is divided into two sections, the first of which deals with the essential nature and fundamental structure of the phenomenon of being a student self-advocate with LD and/or ADHD in a university setting. This includes their thoughts on how it feels to engage in self-advocacy, the meaning it has for the students and the contributions it makes to their learning. The second section describes the framework of self-advocacy and how each of its domains function in concert to make self-advocacy happen as well as how the self-advocacy “whole”, as well as its parts, benefit the student.

The Phenomenon of Self-Advocacy

When talking with me about what it is like to self-advocate from their position, that is, to be a student at a university with LD and/or ADHD who is seeking access legally protected accommodations as well as additional support from instructors, the participants articulated their beliefs about what self-advocacy is and the purpose it serves in their lives.
The collective statements of the five participants make it clear that self-advocacy is a communication process that serves a number of different purposes. It is how they convince others to take on the student’s educational challenges and regard those as a common enemy. It is not only a method for accessing those legally protected accommodations to which they are entitled, but a successful student and skilled self-advocate can present his or her cause in order to persuade faculty to go above and beyond those requirements and work cooperatively toward that student’s achievement. They reveal themselves to their instructors, pledging their constant effort, convincing the instructor that the student is good enough to receive their help.

The students regarded this as an integral part of the work to be done. It is “doing what I know I need to do”, and “getting my stuff done.” They discuss self-advocacy as essential to their survival in the university environment. Experiments to do without it and the support it yields often resulted in failures. It is a part of the learning process that has shaped who they are. The self-advocacy communication process also serves the additional purposes of protecting self-esteem, inspiring self-confidence, and promoting self-sufficiency. It causes the student to regard him or herself as capable, responsible, intelligent, and ultimately, no longer defined by his or her LD, even in educational arenas. Self-advocacy provides a sense of power over otherwise uncontrollable circumstances.

Establishing a Working Relationship

The act of self-advocacy is viewed as a means by which the student can establish a relationship with a teacher, instructor, professor, or administrator. Students with LD who have been academically successful and view themselves as effective self-advocates
use the process of disclosing their LD, making their needs known, and arranging support for themselves as a pathway to connect to someone who is seemingly unapproachable. The student can communicate to the teacher something about what their future interactions might be like as well as the mutual expectations for that relationship. In creating those expectations, the student also makes a pledge to the teacher about how he or she will go about getting his or her own needs met, how responsible he or she will be, and how problems and possible solutions will be brought to the surface. The student is revealing to the professor a bit about who he or she is as a student. Are they a collection of needs and demands or are they a series of pledges, promises of hard work, and someone worthy of high expectations?

A few participants revealed a skewed perspective on what should be expected of their university-level educators. There was evidence of unrealistic expectations with regard to what teachers would or should do in response to a student’s disclosure of a disability. Some students expected extraordinary effort and input from a teacher, or thought that disclosure would lead to an automatic sequence of events resulting in a teacher offering accommodations rather than a student requesting them.

Declaring Their Character

When a student stands in front of an educator, he or she wants that person to walk away with a sense of who the student is as a person as well as who he or she is as a learner. These participants revealed that they want their professors to know that they are smart, tenacious, ambitious, hard-working, responsible, creative, and an excellent investment of the educator’s time and effort. Whether it is all said at once or revealed over time through the working relationship, this is how these students say they wish to be
regarded. Doing so perhaps draws the educator in, and connects them to the student and paves the way for constructive collaboration.

A Weapon to do Battle

By the time a students with LD arrive at college, many have a story to tell about a significant battle they had to fight in order to get the accommodations, modifications, or differentiated instruction they felt was warranted by their learning diagnosis. They may have met teachers who did not want to put in the extra time or bend the rules for a single student. An administrator may not have wanted to allow an exception that could not be offered to the rest of the students. The student’s LD may have been met with insensitivity or the diagnostic process may have been mishandled. The student and his or her family might have felt that the best interests of the student were being sacrificed for convenience. An appropriate learning environment might not have been made available. Whatever the finer points might have been, the student who wanted to succeed and feel capable is likely to have been pitted against educators who, rightly or wrongly, believed they were protecting the integrity of a program, personal boundaries, or maintaining fairness in the classroom. Students often walk away from those battles feeling that educators do not care about them, and view those teachers as an enemy. They may take the perspective that all of the modifications that they fought for and which helped them in K-12 will occur in college, and should be fought for in that environment as well. There is also a tendency, among students with contentious, rather than persuasive, approaches to getting accommodations and modifications to come to the conclusion that the teacher is an uncaring enemy.
Assigning LD a Role in the Learning Experience

If I don’t do my usual self-advocacy steps, and I get an A anyway, do I still have a learning disability? Or can I just be a regular student? Students with LD are, at some point, tempted to see if they can meet their goals without doing the things that a student with LD or ADHD needs to do. They wonder how much of what they are achieving is because of the accommodations they have advocated for and how much is simply their own ability to work hard and do well, just like everybody else. When they discuss the courses or quarters in which they took a break from self-advocacy, this decision is unanimously regretted. What good self-advocates know is that the process they go through every quarter, in every class, is a part of what they must to in order to do well. What they don’t seem to realize, is that if every student, LD or not, developed the working relationship with teachers that they have, and learned to avail themselves of all the resources that exist for everyone, students without LD would be achieving much higher academic rewards as well.

Mastering the LD. Self-advocacy is also experienced as a tool by which students can bridge the gaps in their abilities. Although their LD or ADHD may interfere with some of their basic learning processes, one process in which they excel is self-advocacy. They are highly skilled at asking for help, getting clarification, convincing others to work individually with them, knowing when office hours are and attending them, making good use of the services and accommodations available to them, and customizing their learning environment to suit their needs. Poor grades or other undesirable outcomes are attributed to a failure to self-advocate properly rather than an inability to learn. This is because they
know that if they use this well-developed set of skills and strategies, they are able to equalize the playing field and do as well as, if not better than, their non-LD classmates.

_A route to independence and interdependence._ Before coming to college, these students frequently had their parents as their primary advocates. A parent would meet with teachers, determining if all methods of teaching this child were being exhausted, brainstorming all the different ways to clear roadblocks to learning and communication. When the student takes on this role at college, as they all knew they would have to do, self-advocacy provides a pathway via which they can establish their independence from their parents and feel as though they can be credited with their own achievements. It satisfies the desire to feel self-reliant, responsible and capable.

Self-advocacy has a paradox built into it. Although it is a necessary means of becoming independent of the parents and special educators, it is also a process of help-seeking, which can diminish the sense of autonomy toward which they are working. Students must be careful to avoid coming to the conclusion that all valuable work is done alone. Self-advocacy is an act of communication which, by nature, takes place between at least two people. Therefore, self-advocacy is an independent means of achieving interdependence, working on one’s own behalf to tap into the system of helpful others to establish a network of support and a system for succeeding. Part of the student’s struggle is to settle the question of whether or not he or she can believe in his or her own self-efficacy and still actively solicit the help and support of others. The participants who demonstrated the most peaceful relationship with their learning diagnosis and their role as a self-advocate came to the conclusion that both truths are necessary to their success.
Acceptance. The regular practice of self-advocacy in the college setting helps students arrive at the conclusion that their learning diagnosis is a part of their lives and of who they are. This communication process enables students to shed the embarrassment they might have experienced in their K-12 or even at the beginning of their college careers. The act of working so hard on their own behalf allows students to develop a positive academic self-concept as well as a sense of self-efficacy and control over those factors that contribute to their success. They develop a feeling of pride in what they have accomplished and in fact, become grateful for the opportunity for personal development that having LD and becoming a self-advocate has provided. Successful students and successful advocates ultimately credit these circumstances for making them who they are.

The Components of Self-Advocacy in a Structural Framework

These data confirmed that the components of self-advocacy postulated by the literature play a significant part in the self-advocacy experience of the successful college student with LD/ADHD. What I did not expect was the opportunity to observe how these seemingly separate domains actually function together, lending support to one another to facilitate self-advocacy and the overall development of the student.

Communication. As suggested by the existing literature (Cummings et al., 2000; Ries, 1997; Skinner, 1994), the ability to communicate effectively was regarded by the participants to be critical to engaging effectively in self-advocacy. While I originally expected the participants to confirm the importance of having and using good communication skills, I was surprised that the data would indicate that the self-advocacy is entirely a communication process. It should not have been a surprise, because self-advocacy is nothing if not a conversation between two people, establishing a common
purpose. Successful self-advocacy is contingent upon the ability to express one’s needs and convince an educator of the student’s potential. The student’s ability to execute this communication is dependent upon their willingness to assert themselves, how well informed and familiar they are with the particular workings of their learning disability, their beliefs about their personal responsibility to get their needs met balanced against the responsibilities of others. Good self-advocacy also requires a sensitive ear and the ability to “read” the person with whom they are advocating in order to make use of his or her verbal and non-verbal feedback. It is how the student learns to work with that person and adjusts, revising their expectations of what that teacher is willing to do for him or her or finding a new way to present his or her case. This aspect of communication was not discussed in the existing literature, perhaps because it is difficult to measure, and tricky to teach.

Disclosing the exact nature of the student’s individual experience with his or her own learning diagnosis, and the ability to clearly connect that to ways in which the educator can provide support, is a major part of self-advocacy communication. In a very short interaction, a good self-advocate can identify him or herself as a student with a learning diagnosis, describe how it typically impacts him or her, speculate on the challenges the current course presents, specify his or her plan for accessing legally protected accommodations, and suggest ways in which the educator can be of additional help. This moves the conversation swiftly from the identification of the problem to the generation of solutions, and creates a partnership with an educator who is now, hopefully, invested in this student’s success.
**Assertiveness.** Being assertive contributes significantly to the likelihood that the student will feel confident enough to engage an instructor or other supportive person in self-advocacy communication, as suggested by several authors (Bees, 1998; Hicks-Coolick, 1997; Brinckerhoff, 1994). The participants shared that it is easy to be dissuaded from self-advocating because professors, administrators and other university personnel can be perceived as intimidating. Students confess to sometimes feeling small by comparison. These participants were emphatic about the importance of speaking up, challenging the status quo, and even disagreeing with instructors in order to act effectively on their own behalf. The act and habit of being a self-advocate has led several of these participants to become aware of the increase in their personal assertiveness that has occurred throughout their postsecondary education. Hicks-Coolick’s (1997) recommendation that assertiveness be taught in self-advocacy preparation programs is well-advised.

**Knowledge of LD.** A large part of what is communicated when a student self-advocates has to do with of the learning disability as they experience it. If the student can articulate exactly how their LD or ADHD affects them, they can be clearer about how the person opposite them can be of help. A fine-tuned understanding of exactly what occurs for the student with LD during classes, reading, writing, mathematics, or other analytical activities, for example, help the student begin the process of solving problems, bridging gaps, and developing compensatory strategies. It is how the student becomes aware of what he or she must advocate for, what accommodations or modifications will help, and how to go about securing them. This group of participants was adamant that self-
advocacy is not possible without a firm and thorough understanding of all aspects of
one’s individual learning disability.

The participants’ statements confirmed assertions found in the academic literature
that suggest that having a knowledge of one’s learning disability or diagnosis contributes
to the ability to advocate effectively (Roffman et al, 1994; Brinckerhoff, 1994).
Specifically, it allows the student to effectively state the problem that he or she wishes to
solve collaboratively with the instructor. The clear communication of this information is
critical to the problem solving process and must occur early in the sequence of self-
advocacy communication interactions.

An interesting contribution made by the participants in this study relates was how
these successful students and self-advocates developed their personal philosophies and
attitudes regarding self-advocacy and who contributed to their understanding of this
aspect of themselves. Aside from being introspective and insightful people, these students
cite their parents, written resources, counselors, special education teachers, and described
how these individuals pushed them in the right direction. This study suggests that
encouraging independent practice, allowing and reflecting on failure, and holding
students to high standards of personal responsibility contribute greatly to the
development of the factors that comprise effective self-advocacy.

*Academic self-concept.* The students’ beliefs about their capabilities as learners
led them to feel that they are a good academic risk, worth the extra effort a professor
would have to put in to facilitate success. The act of self-advocating, over time, develops
in students more confidence in their academic strengths. This group of students stated
repeatedly a firm belief in their ability to learn and produce quality work, though not
always under the circumstances necessitated by the course syllabus. They are confident in their overall intelligence, their work ethic, and their status as a capable learner. It is that belief, coupled with an awareness of how they can best demonstrate their skills (knowledge of LD) that points them in the direction of self-advocacy communication for the purpose of arriving at an agreeable solution.

Whether these students’ beliefs about their actual academic competencies are accurate in the manner that concerned Stone and May (2002), who investigated the accuracy of students’ academic self-assessments, is not clear. At times, their descriptions of their capacities seemed inflated, in a way that might have been protective or motivating. At other moments, participants described feelings frustrated or overwhelmed by the compensatory work that they must do. Cosden and McNamara’s (1997) assertion that it is help from campus organizations, rather than from individual instructors as more commonly claimed by non-LD students, that is associated with self-concept and perceived social support among students with LD was supported. I would assert that students without LD have less need for such organizations as a source of support or positive academic self-concept. It does seem clear that academic self-concept remains an important variable to observe in students with LD (Gans et al, 2003; Bear et al, 2002). As Ayres, Cooley, and Dunn (1990) suggested, self-concept related to academic achievement is important to students’ motivation, persistence, and willingness to do the work of self-advocacy.

*Self-efficacy/locus of control.* At the beginning of this project, I regarded self-efficacy and locus of control as separate entities, and expected them to be distinguishable from one another in the participants’ discussion. However, their stories revealed self-
efficacy and locus of control to be closely linked and almost dependent on each other. In Paulhus’s (1983) discussion on spheres of control seemed to use the terms “control” and “efficacy” interchangeably. The two ideas were very closely linked in participants’ discussion of their responsibilities as self-advocates and students. Successful students who are good self-advocates enter into self-advocacy communication expecting that their efforts will be effective. They believe in their ability to get the support they need and their ability to be communicative and persuasive. They also believe strongly in their ability to benefit from the accommodations, modifications, and support that they use. They know that they are capable of learning and getting excellent grades if they get the support for which they are advocating. In this way, the participants’ own reflections provide an excellent example of Bandura’s (1982) notion that expectations of effectiveness often determine whether or not coping behaviors, in this case self-advocacy, will be used.

The students’ locus of control, or sense of responsibility, helps them sort out exactly what aspects of their academic outcomes are under their own control and which are under the control of others. This helps them identify what they need to advocate for from others. Ayers et al (1990) compared LD to non-LD students in terms of the tendency to make external versus internal attributions about their successes and failures, finding that the LD group was more prone to external attributions, which rendered their success more vulnerable. Evidence in the current study suggests that successful students with LD know the value of attributing their outcomes to factors under their own control. Without the mindset that the variables influencing their success are 1) under their personal control and responsibility as well as 2) factors they are likely to be effective in
controlling, it would be extremely difficult to stay motivated and engaged in the essential task of self-advocacy. The students identified self-advocacy, and the skill with which it done, as one of the factors over which they had control.

Previous research has sought to compare LD and non-LD students with regard to the causal attributions they make, finding that LD students are more likely to attribute their educational outcomes to external factors (Ayers et al, 1990), which would make them less likely to engage in coping or self-help behaviors, according to Bandura’s theory. The current study suggests that successful students and good self-advocates, even those with LD and/or ADHD, attribute the majority of educational outcomes to factors within their sphere of influence. What they also revealed, but did not always recognize, was that they experienced friction and resistance in their self-advocacy relationships when they begin blaming poor grades, learning, and other outcomes on others.

*Problem-solving.* Existing research on students with LD and ADHD with regard to problem solving suggested that problem-solving strategies need to be developed within this population and should be included in self-advocacy training programs (Brinckerhoff, 1994; Vogel and Adelman, 1992). The ultimate purpose of self-advocacy communication is to solve the problem created by the distance between their learning difference and the expectations of the learning environment. Participants’ statements in this study reflect their understanding of the importance of using all available resources, including tutoring, study groups, academic counselors, writing support services, friends, parents, and self-advocacy to address the challenges presented by managing LD and ADHD in the university environment.
The collaborative and interdependent nature of problem-solving through self-advocacy sometimes works against the desire of students to prove themselves as self-sufficient learners, proving wrong all previous assumptions made about them. While the need to solve problems autonomously reflects a highly internal locus of control and sense of self-efficacy, their ability to move past that and embrace help from those around them reveals their creativity, assertiveness, thorough knowledge of their LD and the needs associated with it, and good interpersonal communication. It seems that it is not merely problem-solving that needs to be infused into efforts to turn students into self-advocates, but problem solving that reflects all the major aspects of self-advocacy.

Limitations of the Study

The fact that this study only reflects the perspectives of five students who describe themselves as good self-advocates is a limitation. That number of participants gives us a limited range of thoughts on the topic. It is possible that as many different opinions and experiences exist as there are students with LD. In such a small group of individuals, there are likely to be significant differences in attitudes and beliefs about self-advocacy, as well as a limited number of perspectives from which to draw information. The inclusion of more participants in an investigation has the potential to create a more complete picture of the self-advocacy experience.

This group of participants is homogeneous with regard to ethnicity and socio-economic status. Although they may be representative of the majority of students at DU, the ideas of students of color or economically disadvantaged students are not included here. The inclusion of a more ethnically and socio-economically diverse group of students, perhaps from a variety of college and university settings, could potentially
reveal an additional set of processes and experiences that further describes the self-advocacy experience.

These students each brought their own personality, history, set of values, and individual experiences to the interviews. It was not my objective to look for the ideal self-advocate or to compare them to one another. However, it was impossible to pretend I didn’t have opinions about what they told me about how they conduct themselves throughout the process of self-advocacy. I could only guess that some students were less effective than they could have been had they taken a more persuasive and less angry approach to self-advocacy, or that others still struggled, much to their disadvantage, with the task of accepting their LD. While I was not looking for a single student to exemplify excellent self-advocacy skills, it was difficult not to compare subsequent participants to my first interviewee, Chris, who seemed to have a balanced, respectful, clear-eyed approach to self-advocacy and the subtleties of doing the job well.

Implications for Further Research

This framework of self-advocacy experiences is one possible permutation, constructed from what fits this set of data best. With additional descriptions from a wider variety of students, the structure of the framework may require change. However, this framework suggests a structure for thinking about how students experience self-advocacy in college. It also outlines the components that contribute to self-advocacy and the functions that self-advocacy serves. It does not, however, prioritize those factors, discuss how they differ in their significance to self-advocacy. Although these data revealed some variations in students’ perspectives on their self-advocacy experiences, it has not been able to measure the differences in self-advocacy skills among students. Future studies
may wish to quantify self-advocacy skills incorporating the components described here, as well as determining if there are additional influences in the variability of students’ self-advocacy skills, attitudes, or styles.

Additional studies could investigate potential discrepancies between students’ perceptions of their own effectiveness as self-advocates and faculty feedback about those same self-advocacy interactions. Would they be surprised by what they hear from professors about the impact and impression their self-advocacy practices have made on others? How do university instructors react to students’ self-advocacy communication styles? Do educators hear and integrate the messages communicated during self-advocacy interactions in the way that students hope they do? Can students learn from that feedback and adjust their approach to improve their relationships with their instructors? Examining self-advocacy in this way can help students improve their efforts to self-advocate and enable them to collaborate more effectively with faculty. These are questions that can be pursued in further inquiry, perhaps through the lens of human communication analysis.

Although these students were academically successful and regarded themselves as effective self-advocates, they came to that conclusion using a wide variety of personal assets, techniques, and methods. Even if it were agreed upon that a student was an effective self-advocate, it may not be true that faculty would agree that the student’s self-advocacy efforts were as effective as possible at all times. It is likely that, with honest feedback from others about how their self-advocacy style impacts others (persuasive, combative, etc.), students could potentially improve the way they go about self-advocating and get better results. Sometimes, students are successful students and effective self-advocates in spite of some personal tendencies that emerge when
advocating. They may get the grades, accommodations, and modifications they seek, but they may not necessarily be regarded by others with the affection or respect they hope for. They may be successful students and self-advocates in spite of, as well as because of, some of their practices.

Co-Morbid Mental Health Issues and Gender

I found it significant and interesting that three out of the five participants in the study reported suffering from a mental health crisis prior to coming to college. I heard stories of hospitalization, bi-polar disorder, depression and self-injurious behavior. Each of those stories came from women who had a learning disability and a co-morbid diagnosis of ADHD. Neither of the men reported any similar symptoms. They may have had a very different experience: the men, in fact, were the two participants to hold somewhat unrealistic expectations of teachers’ obligations. Two of these women had especially strong feelings about becoming independent and autonomous, and took extraordinary pride in not needing the support of others. They spoke of having trouble learning to accept help from others and resolving themselves to the notion that their LD remained real and that their self-advocacy efforts remained necessary. While listening to their stories, I wondered if the experience of integrating a learning disability or other learning diagnosis into one’s self and identity is different for men and women. I still wonder if the pressure on modern young women to avoid being regarded as “helpless” or “weak” leads them to punish themselves in ways that their male peers would not consider. Further investigation into the experience of LD and/or ADHD in college-aged women, and possible mental health consequences, would be a worthy project.
Implications for Practice

Curricula for teaching self-advocacy certainly do exist. Fiedler and Danneker (2007) addressed the question of how to best support special education teams in incorporating self-advocacy into their practice in the face of district, state, and federal mandates which seem to leave little room for addressing such needs. These authors identify several curricula that can be applied in the classroom setting and vary in their objectives, target populations, and components included in their lesson plans. The data collected here suggests that selecting a curriculum for college-bound students with LD/ADHD, or developing a new one, would benefit from consideration of the experience of being a self-advocate as well as the components that facilitate effective self-advocacy for that population.

Self-advocating in higher education, as it turns out, is an incredibly complex process. When it comes to teaching college-bound students what they need to know in order to survive in the world when we cannot be with them, we do not do them any service by oversimplifying a task as complicated, nuanced, and subjective as self-advocacy. Self-advocacy instruction should certainly include lessons on a number of teachable skills, but we cannot limit instruction to a series of simple behavioral steps and end instruction there. Instead, that is the place to begin. The biggest lesson the participants in the current study have given us is also a simple one; they need to learn to be self-advocates by being self-advocates. They need to be pushed gently into this experience and allowed to fail so that they can learn from their mistakes and generate their own ideas about what to do differently. For a university student with LD, becoming an effective self-advocate may require a lifetime of explicit instruction, teaching by
example, and an effective use of teachable moments. A number of things need to be nurtured in them over the course of their entire educations, including assertiveness, an intimate understanding of their particular LD, a positive academic self-concept, a sense of self-efficacy coupled with a healthy, balanced locus of control, joined by excellent communication skills focused on problem solving.

Special education teams need to consider that the development of all the personal characteristics and attitudes that contribute to self-advocacy take time and care to develop. We need to ask ourselves if we are providing sufficient personal challenges to the students that we work with. While we focus on addressing academic problems with academic solutions, by looking at test scores and homework production, we would be negligent in not addressing this aspect of students’ emotional and identity development. If our concern for our K-12 students in special education genuinely extends to their postsecondary educational success, then we should be applying some focus to the development of the components that contribute to self-advocacy. Doing so does not necessarily mean shopping for a curriculum that can teach self-advocacy in a series of simple exercises. We, as educators, have to begin by assessing our own attitudes, philosophies, and belief systems when it comes to our daily interactions with students. The goal must be the formation of the kind of supportive relationships we expect them to seek out and form when they move into higher education.

We must ask ourselves how we interact with our students every day. Does this student believe that I trust them? Does this student anticipate punishment from me, or constructive problem solving advice? Do I encourage dependency by stepping in and solving problems for my students, or do I hold them accountable for approaching teachers
and working with them to find alternatives and solutions? Do I appropriately challenge my students, allowing them to learn from their mistakes and guiding them through the process of generating their own alternatives? What am I doing to help this student become more assertive? Knowledgeable about his or her learning diagnosis? A better communicator? Someone with a sense of personal responsibility? A person who believes he or she can get the results he or she seeks? A solver of problems? Someone with a positive academic self-concept? By using the framework in this study, educators can develop or select a system by which they can assess their students’ development of the various components of self advocacy. We can examine the extent to which our special education interventions offer opportunities for students to increase competence in each of self-advocacy’s domains.

Using the experience of self-advocacy to teach students. The answer to Research Question 1 outlined at least some of the key features in the experience of self-advocacy. Making students aware of these points can help them see the larger purpose in self-advocacy, the objectives that lie within the actions to be taken, and how the process can benefit them on the long term. It may help solidify for students the reasons why learning how to self-advocate is a good use of time. This information can also be used to identify for students potential missteps that might interfere with the objectives of self-advocacy.

Applying the framework. The framework of self-advocacy described in the answer to Research Question 2 can be used to create or select a series of activities, checklists, and rubrics to provide structure to self-advocacy instruction. Teachers already using a method of self-advocacy instruction might find in the framework an aspect of self-advocacy not yet included in the materials they currently use. Each component in the
framework could be addressed with instruction on its meaning and its importance to self-advocacy, exercises to develop students’ understanding of it, reflection and self-examination of the students’ current use or need for development of that component, and role-playing opportunities for students to practice its use. Instructors can move through the components of self-advocacy one at a time, making use of students’ real needs when offering them a forum in which to apply their self-advocacy skills.

Instruction could begin with discussions of assertiveness, which can describe the difference between assertiveness and aggressiveness, as well as the distinction between being persuasive and combative. Students can be guided through practice on how to make a strong case for the use of specific accommodations, how to ask for help and clarification, and how to approach teachers. Lessons on knowledge of LD might include reading the students’ own IEP documents and other descriptions of various learning diagnoses. A system for giving constructive feedback on student demonstrations of skills within the domains of self-advocacy illustrated in the diagram, perhaps through the use of a rubric, can help teachers and students capitalize on learning opportunities as they present themselves. Spending time addressing each component of self-advocacy in this way can develop students’ basic understanding of the concepts they will need to have in order to become effective self-advocates. Brinckerhoff (1993, 1994, 1996) offers sound advice on preparing college-bound students to self-advocate, with attention paid to the tasks to be addressed at each grade level.

*Connecting high school students with LD to their college peers.* I have learned more about self-advocacy from my conversations with these students than I have from any journal article. It is logical that a student on my caseload would also learn more from
a discussion with a student with experience being a good self-advocate and a successful student than he or she would learn from a conversation with me or from reading a book I could recommend. We can do more to connect our high school students to college students who are getting the most out of their educations while managing a learning diagnosis. Inviting college students with LD to meet with groups of high school juniors and seniors, as was a regular practice at Josie’s school, can provide an authentic perspective to which students can relate. College tours that include discussion with disability service providers or other support services including university health care, counseling, tutoring, writing and paper editing assistance, and faculty who can give students advice on how to approach and work closely with their instructors around getting support for their learning diagnoses are all viable options that only require planning and coordination between the two agencies.

These students shared a great deal of insight in the role that parents and teacher have in forming the student’s self-concept with regard to self-advocacy, having a learning diagnosis, and being a university student. I have only been able to touch on these ideas briefly in comparison to the degree with which students wanted to share their thoughts on what makes a teacher a positive or a negative influence on their self-advocacy experience and how parents help form their attitudes and approach to this process. Although academic self-concept in students with LD and or ADHD has been quantified, further inquiries in that area might elaborate on the contribution of these two factors to their set of beliefs and attitudes about being self-advocates with LD in the university setting. Teachers and parents still have a great deal to learn about the degree to which they may be helping or hindering their students’ paths to developing healthy assertiveness,
academic self-concept, intimate knowledge of their LD, balanced locus of control and self-efficacy so that they can communicate, advocate, and address their learning problems.

*Preparing for transitions.* These findings support the existing research that implores special educators and transition teams to include self-advocacy training in their efforts to prepare students for post-secondary educational environments. Although college-bound students with LD often do not present the direst or most clear-cut needs when compared to their classmates with more significant learning-related diagnoses, they are entitled by law to have the same careful attention paid to their transition needs as any other student. We can begin by expecting students to begin using self-advocacy skills in middle and high school, and guiding them through that process with a clear understanding of the experience of self-advocacy for the student and the framework of components that contribute to self-advocacy. These data depict what can be learned from inviting effective self-advocates to share the lessons they have learned, including what self-advocacy feels like, looks like, sounds like, what it can achieve for the student, how it might be done well, and ingredients are needed to make it happen.

When special education teams meet to discuss the students’ progress toward their annual goals in the IEP, it is incumbent upon them to also address progress toward a smooth transition into the next learning environment. Writing transition goals that address the components included in the framework of self-advocacy is a simple way of ensuring that these obligations are met.
Conclusion

This study offered an opportunity to examine self-advocacy through a series of case studies conducted with phenomenological methodologies. It revealed much about the experience of self-advocacy, including students’ reflections on what occurs during self-advocacy with college faculty and how the experience of self-advocacy impacts their relationship with their LD or ADHD. Participant statements clarified some of the purposes of self-advocacy, including how it helps students build a working relationship with faculty and provides an opportunity to make statements about students’ individual character and how that will influence the problem solving that is accomplished. They discussed their experiences using self-advocacy in contentious circumstances, much like a weapon in battle. Participants also illustrated the manner in which self-advocacy has helped them to assign the LD or ADHD a role in their learning experience, including how it helps them approach their motivation to master the LD, forge a route to independence and interdependence, and how it leads to acceptance of the LD. The data collected in the interviews facilitated the construction of a framework of self-advocacy, including the content of six major components and how they work together to enable students to work to secure accommodations and assistance in the college environment.

Because becoming a self-advocate has been a journey for each of the participants, the discussion of their relationship with their LD/ADHD prior to coming to university was an essential part of the conversation. The years of struggle, diagnosis, and management between kindergarten and high school graduation did a great deal to form their perspectives and attitudes on having a learning related disability, managing it in the college environment, and advocating for their learning needs. Even in the present, they
carry with them a series of stories to tell about teachers that they felt did not care, about the struggles their parents went through to teach them to read or tell time, the battles fought at IEP meetings, and the lengths their teachers sometimes went to so that they could understand a concept or demonstrate their knowledge on a topic. The kind of relationships maintained in those years with others in positions to provide support and assistance continue to inform how they construct and utilize the supportive others around them as they navigate, negotiate, and advocate their way through college.
References


Blalock, G. (1996). Community transition teams as the foundation for transition


Gerber, P.A., Schnieders, C.A., Paradise, L.V., Reiff, H.B., Ginsberg, R.J., Popp,


Reis, S., Neu, T., & McGuire, J. (1997). Case studies of high ability students with learning disabilities who have achieved. Exceptional Children, 63(4), 463-79.


Brief Screening Interview

1. Current age______________________

2. At what age was your learning disability diagnosed?

3. Did you receive any support services prior to attending DU?

4. What type of learning disability do you have?

5. Have you ever been on academic probation?

6. What is your current GPA? Major area of study?

7. What is your understanding of self-advocacy? Define this term in your own words.

8. Do you feel you are an effective self-advocate?

9. Are you interested in discussing your disability, self-advocacy experiences, academic successes and failures, and advice for educators with me?

10. How many credits are you taking this quarter?

11. What days/times are best for you to do an interview, bearing in mind that a two-hour window of time is likely necessary to complete an interview?
Interview Guide #1

1. Pseudonym______________________

2. Age, major, year in school,

3. Student’s memories about the initial diagnosis of learning disability.

4. Perception of parents’ roles in your k-12 education, childhood interests, school experiences, relationship with teachers.

5. Description of how disability was manages in high school, including support system and strategies.

6. Student’s recollections about anticipating college, how student was prepared for transition, perceptions about college prior to attending, beliefs about how the disability would be managed prior to arriving at college. Fears, anticipations, etc.

7. Further thoughts about the definition of self-advocacy.

8. Student’s recollections of a time when he or she had to advocate for himself or herself.

9. Personal qualities necessary to be a good self-advocate.

10. Student’s perceptions of how well prepared he or she was to be a good self-advocate.
**Interview Guide 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Discussion Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-Advocacy</td>
<td>• Student’s recall of one or more instances in which he or she had to self-advocate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of LD</td>
<td>• Student’s knowledge of own LD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• How LD affects him/her (academically, socially)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Understanding of own learning style (what strategies are effective not effective)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• How own learning differs from others, specific learning challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Solving</td>
<td>• Student’s approach to difficult situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• How particular problems have been handled in the past</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Decision-making processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>• How he/she describes the disability to others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Perception of own communication style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Philosophy of disclosure of LD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• How student gets clarification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Expresses needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Frequency of check-in with support personnel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Beliefs that others usually “get the point” when student communicates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Efficacy</td>
<td>• Does the student feel like he/she can make things happen, get help, secure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>accommodations, influence professors to provide support, get the grades he/she</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>wants?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Student’s beliefs that he/she will be effective as a learner, self-advocate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertiveness</td>
<td>• Students tendencies to speak up if problems arise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Does student ask questions when needed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Willingness to challenge unfair policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Does the student prefer not to be noticed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Willingness to be noticed by others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locus of Control</td>
<td>• Beliefs about origins of outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Beliefs about own responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Influence of others on learning?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Beliefs about outcome of hard work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Attitudes about influence of luck, whim of others, timing, opportunity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Interview Guide #3**

The final interview will be specifically tailored to each participant, following up on the responses they gave in the previous two interviews. I will ask questions designed to get clarification on previous information as necessary. The goal of this interview is to allow the participants to summarize lessons learned, changes in perspective, and offer their own interpretations of the topics we have discussed.

1. Student’s perceptions of how self-advocacy has changed student on a personal level.
2. Life lessons learned from being a self-advocate.
3. Recommendations for preparing high school students to self-advocate, including suggestions for lessons, curriculum, or general approaches to teaching.
4. Any changes the student would make in his or her management of the disability in high school or college.
APPENDIX B:

PARTICIPANT LETTER
Participant Letter for In-Depth Phenomenological Interviews

Dear University of Denver Student,

My name is Jennifer Cano-Smith, and I am a graduate student in Education at the University of Denver and a school psychologist with Denver Public Schools. I am currently in the process of collecting data for my doctoral dissertation and I am asking for your help and participation. I hope that the information gained by this study will help educators at the high school and college levels better prepare college students with learning disabilities for the challenges of higher education.

This letter invites you to participate in a study designed to examine the experience that college students with learning-related disabilities have as they advocate for themselves in higher educational environments. This study will use interviews as the main method of data collection. Participants will be interviewed three times and compensated with gift certificates following each interview. This study was approved by the University of Denver's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research on March 11, 2008.

Students selected to participate will meet the following criteria: diagnosis of LD/and or ADHD during or prior to high school, participation in some form of support services prior to college (such as special education, resource, consultation, or other academic support), no history of academic probation during college, cumulative GPA of 2.0 or better, and a willingness to discuss personal experiences regarding disability and self-advocacy.

Yes, please contact me so I can get more information about possibly participating in the study.

Name___________________________________________

**please indicate whether phone #'s are home, work, or cell.

Phone Number____________________________________

Alternate Number_________________________________

Email address_____________________________________

Academic Counselor who contacted you about the study____________________
Consent Form to Participate in Research Study

Purpose
You are invited to participate in a research project studying the self-advocacy experiences of college students with learning disabilities and/or ADHD. You have been selected because of your interest in discussing this topic and you meet the research criteria discussed in the initial interview. Your participation in this study is important because self-advocacy skills contribute to the academic success of students with these disabilities. Education professionals need to know more about what it is like to be a self-advocate so that future students can be better prepared for college. This research is being conducted for a doctoral dissertation by myself, Jennifer Cano Smith, a Child, Family, and School Psychology student at the University of Denver and a licensed School Psychologist. This study and this consent was approved by the University of Denver's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research on March 11, 2008.

Participant Requirements
You will be asked to participate in at least three interviews that should last about 90 minutes each, at least two weeks apart, at your convenience. The interviews will focus on your personal experiences in special education, transitioning to college, and in advocating for your accommodations as a student with a disability. These interviews will be tape-recorded and you will be given the chance to read through the written record of each interview to make changes and comments. The tapes, transcripts, and other materials will be kept confidential. Your name and personal information will be changed on all transcripts and written copies to protect your privacy. No one will be personally identified in the results. Only summarized, anonymous results of this study and the interviews will be available to my dissertation committee and to participants in the study.

Incentive for Participation
You will be offered $20 cash in exchange for your participation in each interview.

Benefits and Risks
Benefits to participation in this study include the above-mentioned incentives and the opportunity to discuss your experiences as a self-advocate with a supportive person. Taking part in this research is not expected to involve any significant risks to you. However, you will be talking about your personal experiences, which may result in some uncomfortable feelings. I respect your right not to answer any question or to end your participation in this study at any time.

Participant Rights
Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate, there will be no penalty. If you are unable or unwilling to address an interview topic, you are not obligated to do so.
Consent
I understand that there are two exceptions to the promise of confidentiality. If information is revealed concerning suicide, homicide, or child abuse and neglect, it is required by law that this be reported to the proper authorities. In addition, should any information contained in this study be subject to a court order or lawful subpoena, the University of Denver might not be able to avoid compliance with the order or subpoena.

I have read the above paragraphs and understand the conditions of participation in this study. I understand that it is not possible to identify all possible risks in a research study, and I believe that reasonable care has been taken to minimize both the known and unknown risk in this study. I have asked for and received a satisfactory description of any language I did not understand. I understand that I may withdraw at any time with no penalty. I have received a copy of this consent form.

(Please circle)

Yes               No            I agree to participate in this study.
Yes               No            I agree to be audio taped.

Participant’s signature  Date

Primary Researcher                  Date

Contact Information
This project is being completed by Jennifer Cano-Smith, Ed.S. (720-855-7662) as part of the requirements for the doctoral degree at the University of Denver under the supervision of Dr. Gloria Miller (303) 871-3340 and Dr. Nicholas Cutforth (303) 871-2477. Please feel free to call with questions about the project. If you have any concerns or complaints about how you were treated during the research sessions, please contact Dr. Susan Sadler, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, at (303) 871-3454, College of Education, University of Denver, Denver, CO 80208 or Sylk Sotto-Santiago at the Office of Sponsored Programs, at (303) 871-4052, University of Denver, Mary Reed Building 222, Denver, CO 80208.
Letter to University Assistance Program Directors

To: Ted May and Michelle McCandless
From: Jennifer Cano-Smith, Ed.S.
Re: Proposed Study of Self-Advocacy

As we have discussed, I am finally preparing to collect data for my doctoral dissertation. I am conducting a phenomenological study of the experience college students with LD have as self-advocates. I would like to schedule a time at the beginning of the semester to briefly present my research proposal to the LEP/DSP staff members. I will be explaining the purpose and method of the study and asking the staff to help me identify possible research participants from among the students enrolled in your programs.

This could be as simple as 15 minutes during your staff meeting or at any other time that is mutually convenient for the staff. Please call me at (720) 855-7662 or email me at jcano@du.edu to schedule a time for me to come in.

Thanks again for your time and endless support!

Jen Cano-Smith
What is a Good Self-Advocate?

A good self-advocate…

• *Knows when s/he needs help.* This student is likely to keep regular appointments with you and uses that time wisely.

• *Asks questions.* This student gets clarification when necessary rather than struggling with confusion. Resourcefulness may be demonstrated in calling fellow students, following up with instructors, or going to you for assistance.

• *Communicates with professors.* This student takes advantage of teachers’ office hours and is willing to discuss the impact of his or her disability on classroom learning.

• *Understands his/her disability.* This student knows exactly how the disability affects him or her. This student understands what needs to be done in order to accommodate the disability and makes the necessary adjustments.

• *Demonstrates problem-solving skills.* When in a difficult situation, this student can generate ideas that can lead to possible solutions.

• *Is willing to be assertive.* This student is willing to ask for appropriate accommodations, can negotiate when s/he feels situations are unfair, and can do so without alienating the people who are inclined to be helpful.