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MORE THAN A RAMP: IS THE ACADEMY ACCESSIBLE?

Edna Zafrir (a)*, Stan Nicolae Cristian (b)
*Corresponding author

(a) Doctoral School, Babes-Bolyai University, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Department of
Special Education, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, ednazafrir1@gmail.com
b) Babes-Bolyai University, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Abstract

Higher education has an important role in determining the quality of one's life, and it has the potential of creating a significant change in many aspects, including financial and social status of students with disabilities. This paper presents the findings of a multi-stage study conducted prior to the implementation of an intervention program in a teachers college in Israel. The aim of the research was to study the attitude of the faculty members of the college on accessibility on campus and teaching accessibility. The research also examined the faculty's attitude on the chances of students with disabilities to succeed in higher education, in the teaching program, as well as in finding a job, specifically in the teaching profession. Participants were 91 faculty members. Data were collected using a questionnaire developed specifically for this research, based on previous surveys in the field. Faculty members believed that students with disabilities had a high chance of succeeding in the teaching program, and a moderate to high chance of successfully finding a job. Faculty members who were personally acquainted with a person with a disability were more willing to grant accommodations to students with disabilities. The faculty members also consider physical accessibility a priority. The findings of this study were used to develop a focused intervention program to increase college faculty's awareness of the various kinds of disabilities that exist and the rights to which students with disabilities are entitled, and to teach faculty members methods for enhancing the accessibility of their teaching

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1. Introduction

Studies have found that the number of years of education is one of the central predictors of the rehabilitation of individuals with disabilities and their integration into society and the labour market (Zakash & Shroyer, 2009). Therefore, one of the main means to promote integration and active participation of people with disabilities is to ensure their right to physical access and access to services in higher education (Feldman, 2007). It was also found that integration and inclusion were more successful in institutions of higher education whose faculty holds positive attitudes regarding the integration of students with special need (Reiter & Schalock, 2008). This paper presents findings from the first stage of a three-stage research conducted in an academic teaching college in Israel to study faculty attitudes on their expectations of students' success in academic education in general and specifically in the teaching program at the college, their beliefs of students' successful integration in employment in general and specifically in the teaching profession, and finally, faculty's beliefs on accessibility in the college.

1.1. Legislation and regulations concerning accessibility in Israel

Attitudes toward individuals with disabilities have changed significantly over the years. From independence until the 1970s, state policy and legislation mainly followed a social-benefits approach. Eligibility for a financial benefit or specific service was determined on the basis of the medical model and the circumstances of the handicap. The term "handicap" was mainly used in medical and welfare contexts, and created unequal opportunities for individuals with disabilities (Rimmerman, Avrami & Arten-Bergman, 2007). However, over the years, awareness of a need to change existing policies has grown, and by 1995 efforts were made to instil the principles of community-based integration of people with disabilities. In 1998, the Law of Equal Rights for People with Disabilities was enacted and a commission in charge of its assimilation and enforcement was established. This law is based on the Law of Equality and not only concerns the rights of individuals with disabilities, but also the duty of Israeli society to protect and promote the implementation of these rights. The law defines an individual with disabilities on the basis of a physical, sensory, mental, or cognitive impairment that significantly limits the individual's functions in one or more main areas of life. Furthermore, the law recognizes that the severity of an impairment and its impact on functioning may differ between individuals, and that impairments may be either permanent or temporary, and may be congenital or emerge at any stage in one's life as a result of an illness or accident (Bar Lev et al., 2015: Law of Equality, Amendment No. 2, 2005).

In March 2005, another amendment to this law was enacted, defining an obligation to create accessibility in every public venue and service for people with all kinds of impairments (Amendment no. 2). The concept of accessibility refers to the establishment of an environment that facilitates optimal participation and functioning. In the law it is defined as "the possibility of reaching a site, movement and orientation at that site, use and enjoyment from a service, obtaining information that is distributed or produced by the site or a services or with respect to them; use of its facilities and participation in the programs and activities that take place therein, all in an egalitarian, respectful, independent, and safe manner" (Section E1, p. 3). Access to a service is reflected in adjusting the site at which the service is rendered, and adjusting the service delivery procedures to adequately address the needs of individuals with disabilities, and match the modes of access to the specific information offered and services rendered. Such

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adjustments also include staff training that aims to develop positive staff attitudes toward this population, create greater familiarization with their needs, and methods and skills to provide a proper, respectful response to these needs (Law of Equal Rights, Ministry of Justice website, 2005).

In 2007, Israel signed a UN Charter on the Rights of People with Disabilities. The Charter sets an international standard for equality for people with disabilities and is designed to remove the barriers that they face. In Israel, the Equal Rights Commission for People with Disabilities in the Ministry of Justice is responsible for implementing the Charter, monitoring its implementation, and collecting statistical data on people with disabilities over time (Bar Lev et al., 2015; Uziel-Karl, Tene-Rinda & Yalon-Haimovitz, 2016).

Nonetheless, although the recent period is rife with declarations of the importance of equality, implementation of this policy in society has encountered many delays and obstacles, and efforts must be sustained to ensure that people with disabilities receive all their rights (Rimmerman, Avrami & Aren-Bergman, 2007).

1.2. Students with disabilities in higher education

Education is a key to employment for everyone, but this is especially true for people with disabilities who have fewer options for inclusion in the workforce because of their impairment. Many young people with disabilities apply to higher education with the aim of improving their chances to find employment and to maintain their employed status over time, obtain higher salaries, and create a life of greater quality and independence (Wilson, Getzel & Brown, 2000).

In the report published by the Equal Rights Commission for People with Disabilities (Bar-Lev et al., 2015), 1.6 million people with disabilities lived in Israel in 2015 (20% of the population), and 25% of the adult population (age 25 and over) have a disability, only 18% of all people with disabilities have an academic degree, compared with 32% among the non-disabled population. In other words, the level of education of people with disabilities is generally lower than that of people without disabilities, and this gap is greater for people with a severe disability (Bar-Lev et al., 2015). Nonetheless, the number of students with disabilities who attend higher education in Israel has increased in the last two decades, a recent survey conducted by the National Insurance Institute shows that 60% of the National Insurance benefits paid to people with disabilities were for tuition, including tutors and support services (Greenberger & Leyser, 2010; Inbar, 2008).

The education system is a key junction for the integration of people with disabilities and promoting them toward greater equality in the workplace and in society (Bar-Lev et al., 2015). The role of educational institutions as essential agents of social development, promoting significant personal growth toward social and employment integration, and key in helping people with disabilities realize their full potential regardless of their disability (Bar-Lev et al., 2015) underlines the significance and implications of accessibility of higher education institutions, which is the main challenge that people with disabilities face in their aim for inclusion in all areas of life, and especially in gaining an education.

In 2016, the Equal Rights for People with Disabilities Regulations were approved, defining the accessibility adjustments required in public places including the physical access to institutions of higher education and the accessibility of the services that these institutions offer. The Regulations also promote

accessibility and equal rights in admission procedures in higher education (Ministry of Justice website, March 2016).

A decision was also made to establish a support centre for people with disabilities in every institution of higher education, which would offer personal support and professional counselling to students with disabilities, and several such support centres have been set up, based on the understanding that such support will prevent attrition among students with disabilities and enhance their chances of successfully integrating into society and into the labor market (Leyser & Greenberger, 2008). However, many institutions have not yet made practical steps toward embracing the special needs of students with disabilities, and they lack a supportive institutional climate or services and programs that can promote a free choice, independence, and social participation that contribute to the academic success of students with disabilities (Heimen & Precel, 2003). Among the issues that predict successful integration of students in higher education are the attitudes of the academic and administrative faculty.

1.3. Attitudes and attitude change

Fox (2007), an expert in organizational and social psychology, defines attitudes as an assessment, positive or negative response of a person to any area in his environment and that is manifest in different degrees. The intensity of an attitude is measured according to its significance, the person's extent knowledge about the components of the attitude, the degree of the person's confidence in the attitude, whether the attitude is extreme, and the connection between the attitude and other significant values that the individual holds and that compose his/her self-identity. An attitude has three components (a) Cognitive components – the beliefs and opinions on the attitude object; (b) Affective components – the person's negative or positive feelings and emotions about the attitude object; and (c) Behavioural components – the person's actual behaviour or behavioural intentions about the attitude that are not necessarily put into practice (for example, due to external environmental factors that prevent him from doing so) (Triandis, Adamopoulos, & Brinberg. 1984). Attitudes fill multiple functions for the individual: Attitudes are important as they serve an adaptive function (Fox, 2007; Triandis et al., 1984), allowing the individual to obtain positive benefits by assuming a positive attitude toward objects related to the satisfaction of his needs and negative attitudes towards factors related to punishment or loss. Another function of attitudes is to protect the individual's ego from an unpleasant reality from within and/or from the environment. Attitudes also serve as indications of a person's value system and a means of representing himself: By adopting certain attitudes, the individual also assimilates the values of the group with which he or she identifies and makes a declaration of belonging to the group. Finally, attitudes are also important in helping the individual organize and simplify knowledge.

"For an attitude change to occur, persuasive messages must be directed at the needs that the attitude seeks to satisfy" (Fox, 2007, p. 169). McGuire (1985, cited in Fox, 2007) argues that attitudes are constructed through information processing, and any attitude change must go through the several stages of this process: exposure to communication, attention, comprehension, processing, and thought. One of the main obstacles to attitude change is the selective exposure mechanism, which is the process in which the individual is attentive mainly to messages that are related to and support his own attitudes, and is not open to opposing messages that counter his own attitudes. As a result, individuals remain in the first and second

stages of information reception and fail to progress to the more advanced steps toward attitude change. There are several important factors that explain the persuasiveness of sources of messages: To be persuasive, a message source must be considered credible and fair and not acting out of their self-interest, and the source must be powerful, influential, and an expert in the field. Similarities in the background or ideology of sources and recipients can also facilitate attitude change, as the individual perceives the source of change as similar to himself (Fox, 2007).

1.4. Attitudes toward students with disabilities in institutions of higher education

Despite legislative changes and the increasing number of students with disabilities in higher education institutions in Israel, students with disabilities still encounter physical obstacles as well as misguided beliefs and negative attitudes toward them on part of the faculty. The negative attitudes are based on prejudices and stigma about the incapability of people with disabilities. Furthermore, studies have shown that faculty members have limited knowledge of the legislation and recognition of disabilities, and they maintain limited contact with the support system for these students. They have limited experience teaching students with disabilities, mainly limited to students with learning disabilities or ADHD and less experience in teaching students with physical or sensory disabilities. All these factors affect their attitudes toward students with disabilities (Leyser, 2011; Reiter & Schalock, 2008): Where faculty attitudes toward the integration of students with disabilities are more positive, integration was more successful. (Sharoni & Gal, 1998). When faculty have little faith in the integration of students with disabilities, these students face greater difficulties and sense of failure and even caused students to avoid exposing their disability in order to obtain the accommodations to which they are entitled (Reiter & Schalock, 2008).

The findings of this study will serve as the foundation for a focused intervention program designed to increase faculty' knowledge of various disabilities, their awareness of these students' needs and rights, and to provide faculty with tools for enhancing the accessibility of their teaching. Faculty will complete an attitude survey developed specifically for this research before and after participating in the intervention program, allowing the investigator to identify changes in their attitudes.

2. Problem Statement

Although the recent period is rife with declarations of the importance of equality, implementation of this policy in society has encountered many delays and obstacles, and efforts must be sustained to ensure that people with disabilities receive all their rights (Rimmerman, Avrami & Aren-Bergman, 2007).

3. Research Questions

What are the attitudes, believes and expectations of faculty about the chances of students with disabilities to succeed in academic studies?

What are the attitudes, believes and expectations of faculty about the chances of students with disabilities to succeed in the teaching program at the college?

What are the attitudes, believes and expectations of faculty about the chances of students with disabilities to work in the teaching profession

What are the attitudes, believes and expectations of faculty about the chances of students with disabilities to find a job in general.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examined faculty attitudes and beliefs on the chances of students with disabilities to succeed in academic studies at the college and successful find employment, we also examine the attitudes of academic faculty members on accessibility of teaching and physical accessibility at the college A secondary aim of this study is to identify the needs of faculty training at the college to promote accessible teaching and equal opportunities for students with disabilities

5. Research Methods

This research used a questionnaire developed specifically for this study, based on several items adapted to the aims of this research. The first section of the research instrument is adapted from a questionnaire developed by Hess, Mark-Zigdon and Gilat of Levinsky College in Israel in 2014. Another section of the questionnaire was taken from a questionnaire developed by Baker, Boland and Nowik (2012). The first section of the questionnaire includes questions on faculty attitudes – beliefs as to the capabilities of students with disabilities to succeed in academic studies and in the teaching program at the college. Respondents mark their agreement with each item on a Likert-type scale from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 6 (very strongly agree). The second section addresses faculty' beliefs in the chances of students with disabilities to successfully find employment in general and specifically find employment in the teaching profession. The third section contains 11 items, in which faculty rated their willingness to grant various accommodations in teaching methods and in exams. Examples of accommodations include an opportunity to improve their grade by handing in an extra assignment, allowing the use of a dictionary or calculator, reducing the scope of material for an exam. The fourth section contains 11 items, in which faculty rated their agreement with statements related to the state of accessibility at the college. Finally, the questionnaire contained a single open-ended question, and a section on demographic

To test the reliability of the questionnaire, a Cronbach's alpha was calculated for each section of the questionnaire.

Table 01. Questionnaire /Cronbach's alpha

Attitudes and beliefs	Cronbach's alpha
Chances of academic success	0.88
Chances of success in the teaching program	0.86
Chances of finding employment in general	0.92
Chances of findings employment in the teaching profession	0.87
Accessibility of teaching (willingness to accommodate)	0.75
State of accessibility at the college	0.82

According to Table 01, all sections of the questionnaire have a high reliability coefficient. Therefore, general measures were calculated as the mean responses to all statements in each topic.

Participants are 91 members of the teaching faculty at an academic college in the south of Israel (30 male's and 61 women). Their average age is 49.2 (SD = 11.4, range 25-77), average teaching experience is 11.4 years (SD = 11.6, range 1-44). Seventy six faculty members (84% of the participants) have personal acquaintance with a person with a disability; 41 faculty members (46% of the participants) had been exposed to some information campaign on accessibility in the college.

Table 02. Participants by position in the college

Position	N	%
College faculty	41	45.1%
College faculty + pedagogical counselors	12	13.2%
College faculty + administrative position	6	6.6%
College faculty + pedagogical counselors + administrative position	2	2.2%
Adjunct faculty	19	20.9%
Pedagogical counselors only	5	5.5%
Teaching assistants	5	5.5%
Administrative position only	1	1.1%
Total	**91**	**100%**

Table 03. Participants by Program and Track in the college

	N	3 %
English	4	4.7
Education, Literature, Language, History	17	20
Science education	4	4.7
Pre-school education	6	7.1
Bedouin education	7	8.2
Special needs education	16	18.8
Mathematics	3	3.5
Environmental sciences	1	1.2
Psychology	15	17.6
Multi-disciplinary track	3	3.5
Graduate programs and business	9	10.6
Total	85	100.0

6.   Findings

The majority of respondents (84%) had prior familiarity with the issue of disabilities, and 46% reported previous exposure to this topic either in the college or outside the college.

6.1.   Faculty beliefs about academic success of students with disabilities

Two types of statistical analyses were performed on the first research question: faculty' attitudes toward students with disabilities: descriptive statistics (means and SD for each variable) and links between variables. All the analyses were performed using SPSS software Version 21

Table 04. Faculty' beliefs regarding the potential success of students with disabilities in academic studies in general and in education studies in particular (descriptive statistics).

	Success in academic studies		**Success in the teaching program**	
	M	SD	M	SD
Learning disability	4.76	.970	4.86	.914
ADHD	4.81	.953	4.89	.960
Physical (non-sensory) disability	5.21	.888	5.08	.846
Autism spectrum disorder	4.02	1.291	3.32	1.349
Mental disability	4.21	1.234	3.71	1.432
Chronic illness	4.98	1.033	4.80	1.157
Hearing impairment	4.78	1.153	4.48	1.168
Visual impairment	4.64	1.207	4.30	1.269
Developmental cognitive impairment	2.53	1.328	2.38	1.340
Total average	4.44	0.88	4.20	0.78

As Table 04 indicates, faculty' average rating of the chances of success of students with disabilities in academic studies is 4.43 (on a scale from 1 to 6), which reflects relatively strong beliefs in the success of students with disabilities. Note that these beliefs vary by the type of disability, from an average of 2.38 for students with a developmental cognitive disability to 5.08 for students with a physical disability. Faculty believed that students with disabilities in general have a smaller chance of succeeding in the teaching program at the college (and earning a teaching certificate) than in academic studies in general (4.20 versus 4.44). With respect to the chances of success in the teaching program, faculty beliefs also varied by disability. Both beliefs were highest for students with a physical disability (5.08 and 5.21 for success in academic studies and success in the teaching program, respectively) and students with Autism spectrum disorder (4.21 and 3.71), and lowest for students with developmental cognitive impairments. Students with learning disabilities and ADHD were attributed lower chances of success than students with physical impairments.

In general, faculty believed that students with all types of disabilities had a greater probability of success in academic studies than their probability to succeed in the teaching program.

6.2. Faculty beliefs on success, in finding employment in general and employment in teaching

Table 05. Faculty beliefs in success, in finding employment in general and employment in teaching descriptive statistics

Type of disability	**Success in finding employment in general**		**Success in finding employment in the teaching profession**	
	M	SD	M	SD
Learning disability	5.02	.982	4.95	.914
ADHD	4.97	1.033	4.90	.960
Physical (non-sensory) disability	4.60	1.080	4.64	.846

Autism spectrum disorder	3.47	1.278	2.79	1.349
Mental disability	3.78	1.383	3.27	1.432
Chronic illness	4.43	1.257	4.43	1.157
Hearing impairment	4.24	1.460	3.85	1.168
Visual impairment	4.02	1.513	3.77	1.269
Developmental cognitive impairment	2.82	1.276	2.16	1.340
Total average	4.15	0.94	3.86	0.89

Findings in Table 5 indicate that faculty have a strong beliefs in students' ability to successfully find employment in general (4.15) and low beliefs in students' ability to successfully find employment in the teaching profession (3.86). Students with a learning disability were attributed a higher probability of success than students with Autism spectrum disorder or students with a mental disability. Students with a developmental cognitive disability were attributed the lowest probability of success

6.3. Faculty' attitudes on teaching accessibility

This section addressed the behavioral components of faculty's attitudes (their behavioral intentions to grant accommodations to students with disabilities). In this section, faculty stated the extent of their willingness to make accommodations in their teaching in favor of students with disability, on a scale from 1 (*not willing at all*) to 6 (*strongly willing*). Findings are presented in Table 6.

Table 06. Teaching accessibility - willingness to make accommodations to students with disabilities – Descriptive statistics

	M	SD
Allow students with disabilities to use a recording device in class	5.85	.493
Grant accommodations in exams to students with disabilities	5.60	.773
Allow students with disabilities to exchange a required course with an elective	5.49	.874
Send students with disabilities presentation summaries of the lesson in advance	5.42	.932
Write a recommendation letter for work	5.14	1.050
Devote additional time beyond my regular hours to help students with disabilities prepare for exams	4.93	1.209
Give students with disabilities a chance to improve their grade by completing another assignment	4.80	1.360
Allow students with disabilities to use a computer or dictionary even if other students are not permitted to use them	4.79	1.354
Send summaries or transcripts of lessons to students with disabilities	4.65	1.516
Help students with disabilities integrate socially	4.65	1.353
Reduce the quantity of material for the exam	3.91	1.824

Findings in table 6 indicate that faculty are willing to grant accommodations in four areas: allow the use of a recording device in the classroom, accommodations in exams, allow students to exchange a

required course for an elective course, and send presentations of lessons to students in advance. The average scores on these items ranged between 5.14 and 5.85.

Faculties were also willing to grant the following accommodations, yet to a lesser extent than the first group of accommodations: dedicate time to help prepare for exams, give another assignment to improve grades, allow students to use a dictionary or calculator, and help students' social integration. The average scores on these items ranged from 4.65 to 4.96.

Faculty were only moderately willing to reduce the scope of the material for exams for students with disabilities (average score 3.91). Findings indicate that faculty was more willing to grant accommodations that entailed no modification to the exams themselves, than accommodations that required modifications of the exam itself and that they are aware of the needs of these students. However, they admitted that the extent of their cooperation with other members of faculty to promote inclusion is not high, and that they are not very familiar with accessibility regulations and support services available at the college. Most faculty members are not involved in promoting the admission of students with disabilities. Findings indicate that faculty was more willing to grant accommodations that entailed no modification to the exams themselves, than accommodations that required modifications of the exam itself.

6.4. Faculty attitudes on accessibility at the college

In this section, faculty stated their beliefs relating to accessibility at the college in general (G) and their own personal practices of accessibility (P). Findings are presented in the next table.

Table 07. Findings

		M	SD
G	It is important for the college to be accessible and support the integration of students with disabilities	5.79	.548
P	Helping students with disabilities give you a sense of satisfaction	5.31	.865
G	The college should include students with disabilities	5.33	.844
P	I am aware of the different needs of students with cognitive disabilities	4.95	1.047
G	It is important for faculty to be involved in promoting accessibility at the college	5.13	1.077
G	It is important to conduct training sessions on accessibility for the faculty	4.96	1.125
G	Integrating people with disabilities will add to the college's prestige	4.62	1.298
P	I cooperate with members of the academic faculty about responding to integration needs	4.23	1.862
P	I am familiar with the accessibility regulations and their implications for students with disabilities	3.78	1.526
P	I am familiar with the support options that the college offers to students with disabilities	3.65	1.594
P	I am involved in promoting the admission of students with disabilities to the college's programs	2.53	1.797

The findings indicate that from a general perspective on accessibility at the college, faculty attributed great importance to the physical accessibility of the college campus. They also agreed that the college should include students with disabilities, and that such inclusion will positively affect the college's status and prestige. Faculty also believed that they should be involved in promoting accessibility, and that it is important for the college to conduct training on accessibility. On their own role in promoting accessibility at the college, faculty agreed that helping students with disabilities gives them a sense of satisfaction, and that they are aware of the needs of these students. However, they admitted that the extent of their cooperation with other members of faculty to promote inclusion is not high, and that they are not very familiar with accessibility regulations and support services available at the college. Most faculty members are not involved in promoting the admission of students with disabilities.

6.5. Acquaintance with a person with a disability

A t test was performed to compare faculty who stated that they are personally acquainted with a person who has a disability, to other respondents, on each section of the questionnaire.

Table 08. Faculty attitudes, by personal acquaintance with a person with a disability (means and standard deviations)

	Acquaintance	N	Mean	SD	t
Success in academic studies	Yes	76	4.4985	.79287	1.64
	No	15	4.1259	.84606	
Success in the teaching program that includes a teaching certificate	Yes	76	4.2354	.76529	0.89
	No	15	4.0370	.90137	
Success in finding employment	Yes	76	4.2383	.96263	2.00*
	No	15	3.7111	.73918	
Success in finding employment as a teacher	Yes	76	3.9561	.85531	2.31**
	No	15	3.3852	.95661	
Willingness to grant accommodations	Yes	76	5.0359	.65825	0.45
	No	15	4.9515	.63345	

Differences on three attitudinal components were found between the two groups of faculty. Faculty who had personal acquaintance with a person with a disability attributed a higher chance of success to students with disabilities in employment in general and in the teaching profession specifically and had a stronger sense of awareness of the various needs of students with disabilities, and were more willing to grant accommodations, compared with faculty who were not personally acquainted with a person with a disability.

7. Conclusion

The current study has implications for the development of an intervention program in the college where this study was conducted and for intervention programs in teacher training institutions in Israel in general. Such an Intervention program should include strategies and procedures for improving attitudes and expectations towards students with disabilities. The intervention program should supply information on

legislation, on disabilities, and on accessible teaching, according to the principles of universal design. Information should be conveyed in lectures and printed material, but mainly through hands-on experiences, including simulations and role-playing of the situations that students with disabilities face at the college. Information should also include the topic of physical accessibility based on the continuum concept, which posits that creating access to the parking lot has little value if the paths to the classrooms are inaccessible. Finally, the intervention program should address the different categories of disabilities and their specific needs.

One of the limitations of this study is its reliance on self-report measures, which may cause findings to be biased as a result of social desirability. Such biases were not examined in this study. The study was also conducted in a single college in Israel and therefore may not be representative of the attitudes of faculty in other colleges in Israel. Nonetheless, the findings of this study may be helpful to other colleges in developing an intervention programs for their faculty based on the principles of universal design.

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