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**Equity in the Classroom for Individuals with Disabilities at Grand Valley State University**

Abigail Boyd

Grand Valley State University

HNR 499: Honors Senior Project

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## Introduction

Grand Valley State University is known for its state-of-the-art liberal education that strongly promotes educational excellence. GVSU is rated the #3 best public university in the midwest, #16 in most innovative universities, and #22 in best undergraduate teaching (Grand Valley State,” 2020). These rankings are backed by evidence of student educational development, but also Grand Valley’s promise that their General Education Program will “teach the skills and knowledge needed to intelligently participate in public discourse” (“Student Learning Outcomes,” 2022). The institution upholds a list of Student Learning Outcomes (or SLOs) that are mastered in General Education courses. This list includes Collaboration, Critical Thinking, Ethical Reasoning, Information Literacy, Integration, Oral Communication, Problem Solving, Quantitative Literacy, and Written Communication (“Student Learning Outcomes,” 2022). The question remains of if these SLOs are attainable for all students of GVSU, including students with registered disabilities. It is much harder to achieve these SLOs when common aspects of college such as transportation, classroom format, and participation in education become a hardship for students. GVSU ensures that all SLOs are taught equally, but it is important to determine if they are equitable to all students. Not only SLOs, but opportunities to attend classrooms and labs, and to graduate also need to be equitable in order to determine if GVSU is truly one of the best public universities for all students.

Equity and equality are vastly different concepts that need to be differentiated to ensure that individuals are all given the same opportunity to pursue higher education. Equality is defined by Merriam-Webster as “a state of being equal in number, amount, quality, or degree.” Alternatively, equity is defined as “justice according to natural law or right; specifically freedom from bias or favoritism” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Educational equality is beneficial, but it does

not address the specific needs of students with various disabilities. Resources are often more abundant and accessible to students who are able-bodied, and it is up to the educational institution to contend for this lack of equity (Mintz, 2021). Educational equity ensures that all students have a right to a learning environment that gives them the same opportunities to succeed as students without disabilities (“Why Understanding Equity,” 2020).

The concept of educational equity varies from university to university, but overall, equity means that all students should be able to access resources tailored to their individual academic needs. Universally, institutions should make known their disability resources offered, employ academic advisors who are aware of student disabilities and plan for them accordingly, and collaborate with students to implement the accommodations each individual may need (“What’s the difference,” 2020). At GVSU, this would take the form of a strong Disability Support Resource department that guarantees accessibility to transportation, classrooms, and educational participation (“What’s the difference,” 2020). Equity in these areas includes but is not limited to lab accessibility for students with visual, hearing, or mobility impairments, access to transportation that not only allows but supports students with disabilities and/or service animals, and accommodations for students with learning disabilities such as grace periods for turn-in dates and longer test-taking time. Text-to-speech technology, interpreters, note-takers, classroom relocation policies, and other related accommodations are all crucial to many students’ success at Grand Valley.

At Grand Valley State University, out of the 22,406 students that attend the university this 22-23 school year, around 1700 students are currently registered with Disability Support Resources. DSR has recently seen a large increase in students requesting accommodations, obtaining 300 newly registered students this current semester. Out of these registrations, the most

common disability registered is a psychological one, and the most frequently requested accommodations are testing accommodations (S. Witcher, personal communication, August 31, 2022). Academic accommodations made for each student are determined individually by a DSR advisor and are determined in a one-on-one meeting between the student and advisor. GVSU's Disability Support Resources provide a variety of resources to students including tips for disability awareness, disability employment opportunities, and external campus resource contacts ("Disability Support," 2022). In regards to student success, however, DSR's transportation, classroom, and educational accommodations are of the utmost importance for students with disabilities.

### **Current Accommodations made through DSR**

Disability Support Resources at Grand Valley State University is located in The Blue Connection building on Allendale's campus. DSR is available to all students, but does not reach out without initiation from the individual student. Students with disabilities are typically referred to the DSR website by someone prior to or while attending GVSU to set up an appointment with a representative either on zoom or in person. Only once this meeting has taken place can a student register for DSR services and begin the process of receiving accommodations. Some accommodations offered can be found online, but most must be inquired about and determined in a one-on-one meeting. Accommodations offered are subject to change, but most changes are made as a result of frequently changing legal laws and policies rather than personal DSR reform. At this time, it was stated there are no current changes in progress for any areas of DSR accommodation options (J. Osborne, personal communication, September 26, 2022). The accommodations identified in this research are not an exhaustive list and are all derived from a personal interview with Jason Osborne from Grand Valley State University's DSR department.

As for transportation to and from campus and individual classes, DSR provides a couple of resources for students with physical disabilities. Disability Support Resources has a shuttle service that runs from Monday to Thursday, 8 AM - 8 PM, and Friday 8 AM - 6:30 PM (“Disability Support,” 2022). However, rides needed outside of these times can be registered for online on DSR’s website. Shuttle pickup locations are also provided online. This system is for any student that has any mobility, visual, or other physical limitations, both temporary or permanent, that may need help getting to class. Shuttles move all around campus, including back to the individual’s dorm, but cannot leave campus to bring a student onto or off campus. This means that if a student with disabilities commutes, or lives in off-campus housing, they would need to find transportation external to DSR (J. Osborne, personal communication, September 26, 2022). However, traditional transportation provided by GVSU such as the LakerLine or other campus buses is also open to all students regardless of disability as well and is wheelchair accessible.

Additionally, as for potential classroom relocation due to physical disabilities, GVSU and DSR have taken strides to make classrooms more accessible to students with physical disabilities. One example of this is the reconstruction of Lake Huron Hall, which used to be inaccessible for students in wheelchairs or with other physical disabilities, but has since been updated to better accommodate these students. However, some halls on GVSU’s Allendale campus are still inaccessible to students with physical disabilities such as AuSable Hall. In cases where a student may have issues accessing a classroom, the student may call the DSR department to request a relocation of the particular class. This relocation would be for all students and the professor in the section, so that the student requesting the accommodation can

still participate in the class amongst other students and faculty (J. Osborne, personal communication, September 26, 2022).

Classroom format, whether online, in-person or hybrid, relies heavily on the professor. Therefore, accommodations that a student may need in terms of format mainly entail switching to a different section, if possible. Whether online or in person, a student is allowed to use their recording device or to record the lecture on zoom. There exists assistive technology that a student can use in class, including screen readers, text-to-speech, Blackboard Ally, and screen magnifiers. These technologies are all accessible to students on campus as part of GVSU's lab software ("Disability Support," 2022). Accessible computers with these assistive technologies installed exist in all computer labs on campus, with at least one work station in each. These are all available for classroom documents in class and online, and all documents must be ADA-compliant and accessible to all students. Along with these accommodations are personal technologies that a student can seek out, including smartpens, note-taking, and transcription technologies, but these are not provided for by DSR and are at the student's own expense (J. Osborne, personal communication, September 26, 2022). These types of accommodations are ideal for students with disabilities such as ADHD, autism, and other non-physical disabilities.

Other classroom formatting accommodations are available, including exam accommodations, lab assistants, and service animals. Students who may need longer time to complete an exam or need to be in a separate room can ask for testing accommodations to receive an equitable amount of space and time. This can be done both online and in person, as extra time can be built into Blackboard exams as well, whether through the site itself or testing software such as Respondus. As for labs, extra time may be given as well to complete assignments and lab content. Additionally, for students who may need help completing labs, lab

assistants may be assigned to the student. Lab assistants are beneficial for students who may be visually impaired or hearing impaired and need visual and/or auditory senses to complete the lab. Lastly, service animals may accompany a student anywhere on campus for classes, including classrooms and labs. Service animals must be able to wear protective gear in labs, however, including a lab coat, boots, and goggles (J. Osborne, personal communication, September 26, 2022).

Several accommodations can be made to ensure that students with disabilities have access to active participation in their education. Notetakers are available in all classes for all types of students with disabilities. In most cases, the professor will send out an announcement asking for a student in the class to send notes to the professor or to the student with the disability. If there are no volunteers, a notetaker will be assigned to the class for the student. If a student has a hearing impairment, DSR works with deaf and hard-of-hearing services to send out an interpreter without cost to the student. For students with autism that may need to move around during class, a letter will be sent to the professor from DSR asking for allowance for the student to pace or sit in the back when needed. If a student has a communication disorder and has an assignment that involves verbal communication, accommodations can be made in which one-on-one presentations with the professor or an alternative assignment can be substituted for oral presentations (J. Osborne, personal communication, September 26, 2022).

DSR facilitates a few mentoring programs to give students with disabilities extra resources. The first is the LINKS program, which is a mentoring program in which students with Autism Spectrum Disorder can have better access to social, classroom, and academic support (“Disability Support,” 2022). Additionally, while the tutoring program at GVSU remains open to all students, DSR also provides and staffs a Learning Skills Specialist that all students registered



with DSR can work with to foster time management, studying and organizational skills. Overall, Grand Valley State University's accommodations for students with disabilities seem to contribute to the high graduation rate of DSR registered students, which stands at around 85% (J. Osborne, personal communication, September 26, 2022).

### **Thesis**

The purpose of this project is to identify areas of equity and inequity for students with disabilities at Grand Valley State University (GVSU) pertaining to their ability to complete their degrees. GVSU has a history of being at the forefront of accommodations with their creation of the LINKS program for students with autism spectrum disorders and their policies on assistance and service animals in the classroom. However, it is not known whether the accommodations and policies currently in place offer the students with disabilities an equitable opportunity for academic success as GVSU students without disabilities. To obtain this information, a survey on equitable treatment including access to classrooms, helpfulness of accommodations, the flexibility of faculty, and use of Blackboard was sent anonymously to a random sample of GVSU students, targeting those who have registered with Disability Support Resources. Results will be compared in general across all students with disabilities as well as within individual disabilities in each area of interest. Results will be discussed in relation to graduation rates of students with disabilities which reflect attainment of GVSU's General Education Student Learning Outcomes as well as address potential areas of need within DSR. The null hypothesis for this study is that students are receiving equitable accommodations for their education.

### **Methodology**

In November of 2022, a Qualtrics survey was sent out by GVSU's Office of Institutional Analysis to a random sample of 3,000 current GVSU students. This survey has been IRB approved and asked participants who were registered with DSR their personal opinion on the accommodations offered by DSR and GVSU as a whole. The survey collected data on participants' access to educational equity at the institution. No personally identifiable information was collected other than which disability the student best identified with. Participants included in the study were only those who are currently registered with GVSU's Disability Support Resources and receive some form of educational accommodation.

The Qualtrics survey was created through the synthesis of three past surveys done at different institutions that targeted attitudes towards their Disability Services department, and also included questions particular to Grand Valley State University (Blackwell, 2018; "Disabled Students," 2020; Purdy, 2014). The survey asks 26 questions and covers 6 domains: demographics, access to education, personal opinions, DSR accommodations, faculty accommodations, and accessibility. The total number of students who agreed to participate by December 1st, 2023 created a sample size of 32 DSR registered students. Data was analyzed using Qualtrics.

## Results

**Table 1: Demographics**

Q1 - Select the disability that best describes you (select all that apply)

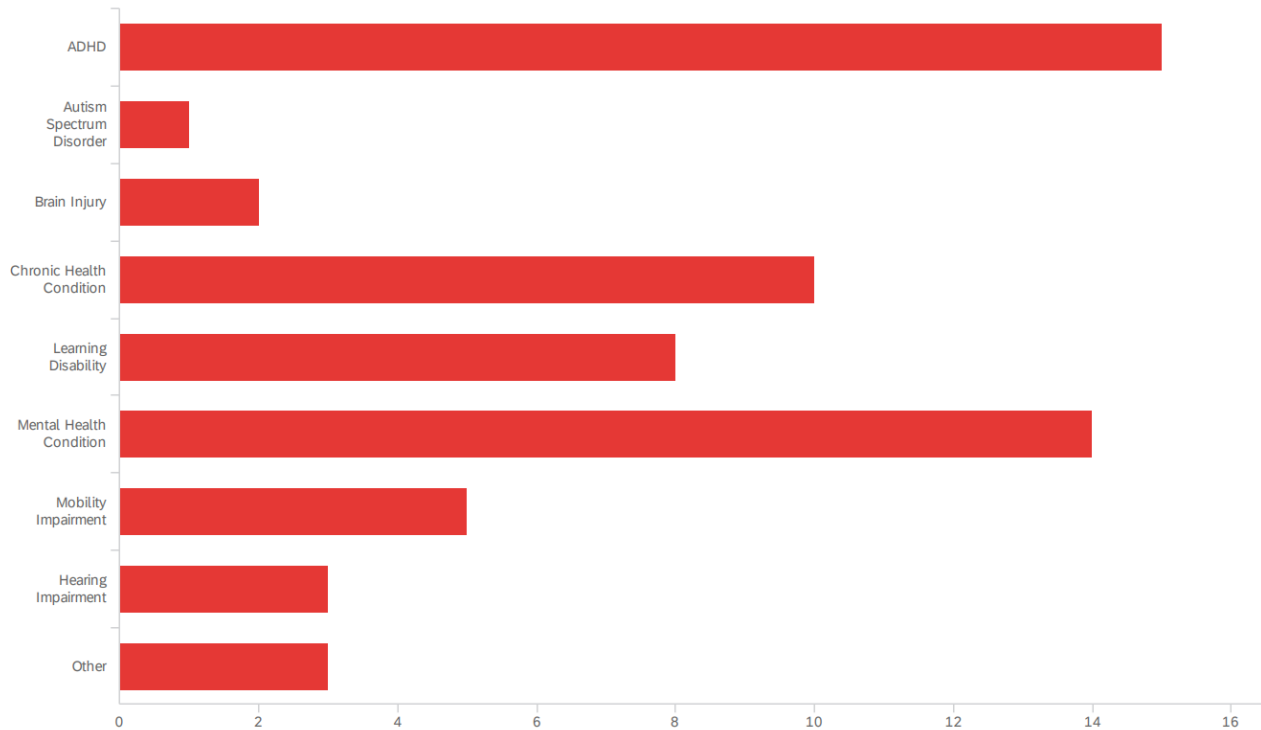


Table 1 shows that 24.59% (15) of the participants have ADHD, 22.95% (14) have a mental health condition, 16.39% (10) have a chronic health condition, 13.11% (8) have a learning disability, 8.20% (5) have a mobility impairment, 4.92% (3) have a hearing impairment, 4.92% (3) have a disability listed under other, 3.28% (2) have a brain injury, and 1.64% (1) have ASD.

**Table 2: Identity Factors**

Q2 - Which factor of your identity most impacts your university experience?

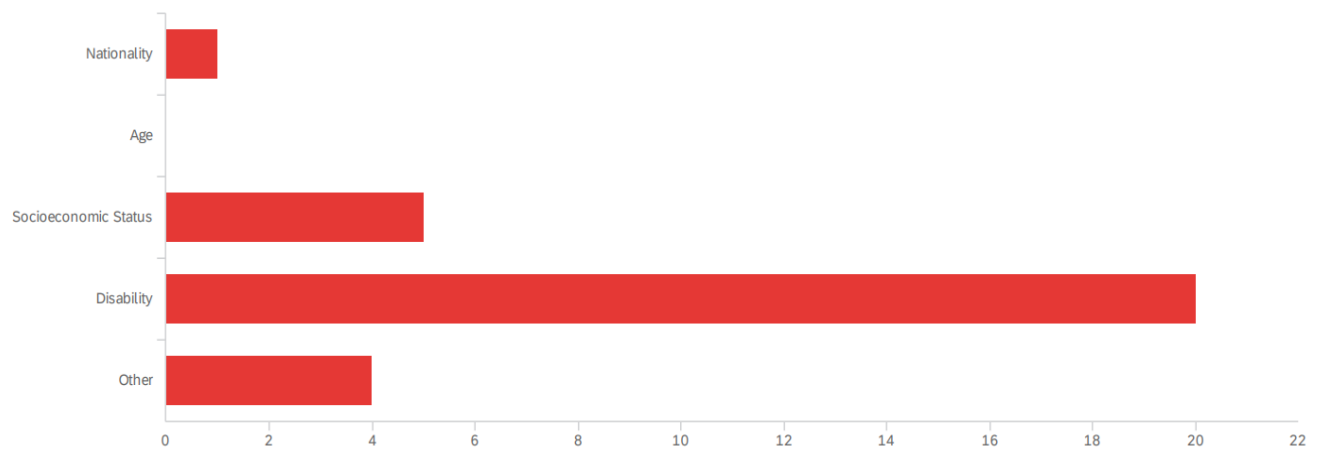


Table 2 reveals that 66.67% (20) of respondents found their disability to be the most impactful factor of their identity, 16.67% (5) their socioeconomic status, 13.33% (4) other, and 3.33% (1) their nationality.

**Table 3: Time Allotment**

Q9 - On which academic task did you spend the most time?

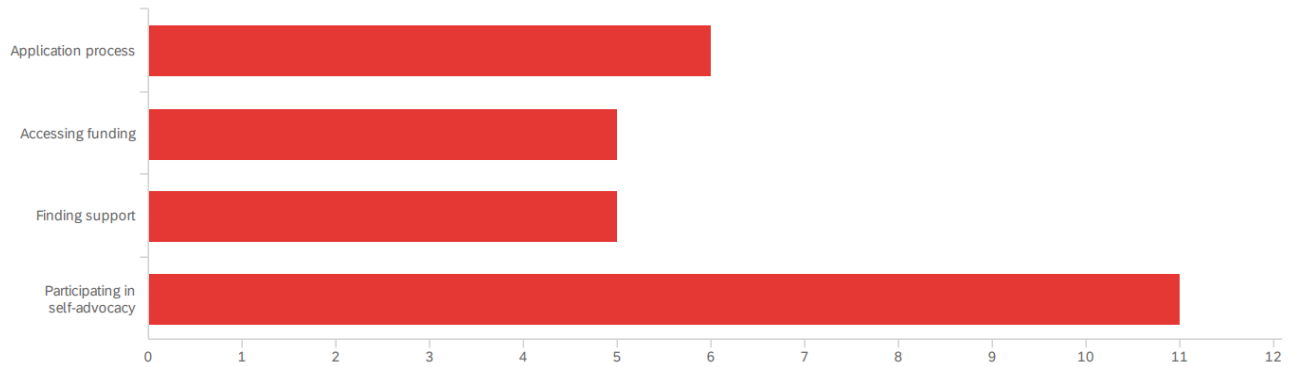


Table 3 reveals that 40.74% (11) of the respondents spent the most time participating in self-advocacy, 22.22% (6) spent the most time on the application process, 18.52% (5) spent the most time accessing funding, and 18.52% (5) spent the most time finding support.

**Table 4: Student Learning Outcomes**

**Q10 - To what extent do you feel you have equitable access to achieve these GVSU student learning outcomes in your general education classes?**

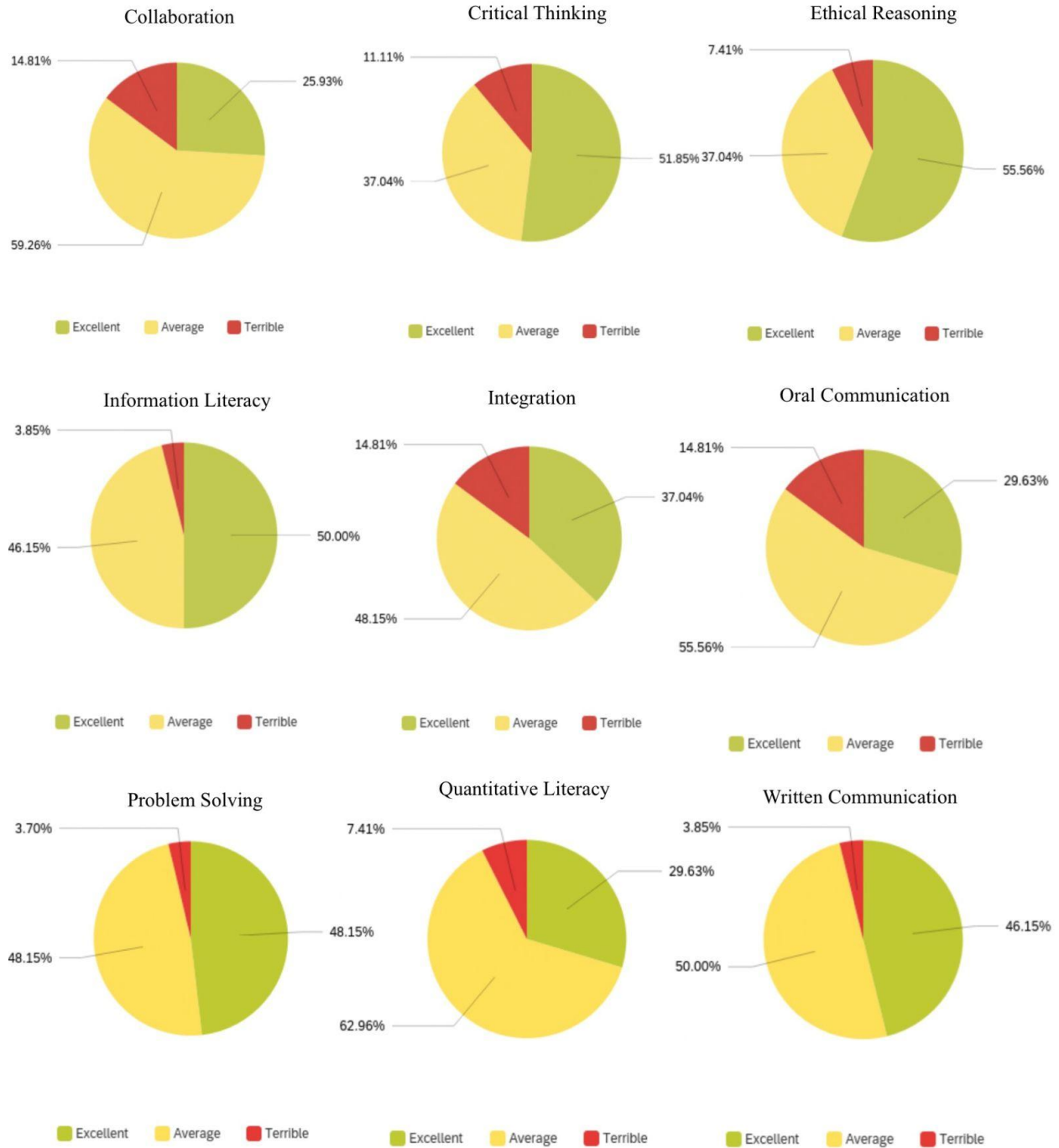


Table 4 depicts participants' attitudes toward their ability to equitably achieve GVSU's student learning outcomes. As a whole, 4 out of 9 of the student learning outcomes received majorities in the excellent category, and 5 out of 9 of the student learning outcomes received majorities in the average category. On a more individual level, the respondents rated the student learning outcomes collaboration, integration, and oral communication worse than other SLOs, on average. Statistics are based on data in which participants did not choose terrible across the board, but instead chose unique categories for each SLO. Additionally, respondents rated the student learning outcomes information literacy, problem-solving, and written communication higher, on average.

**Table 5: Overall Campus Accessibility**

Q14 - How would you rate the accessibility within these areas of GVSU's campuses?

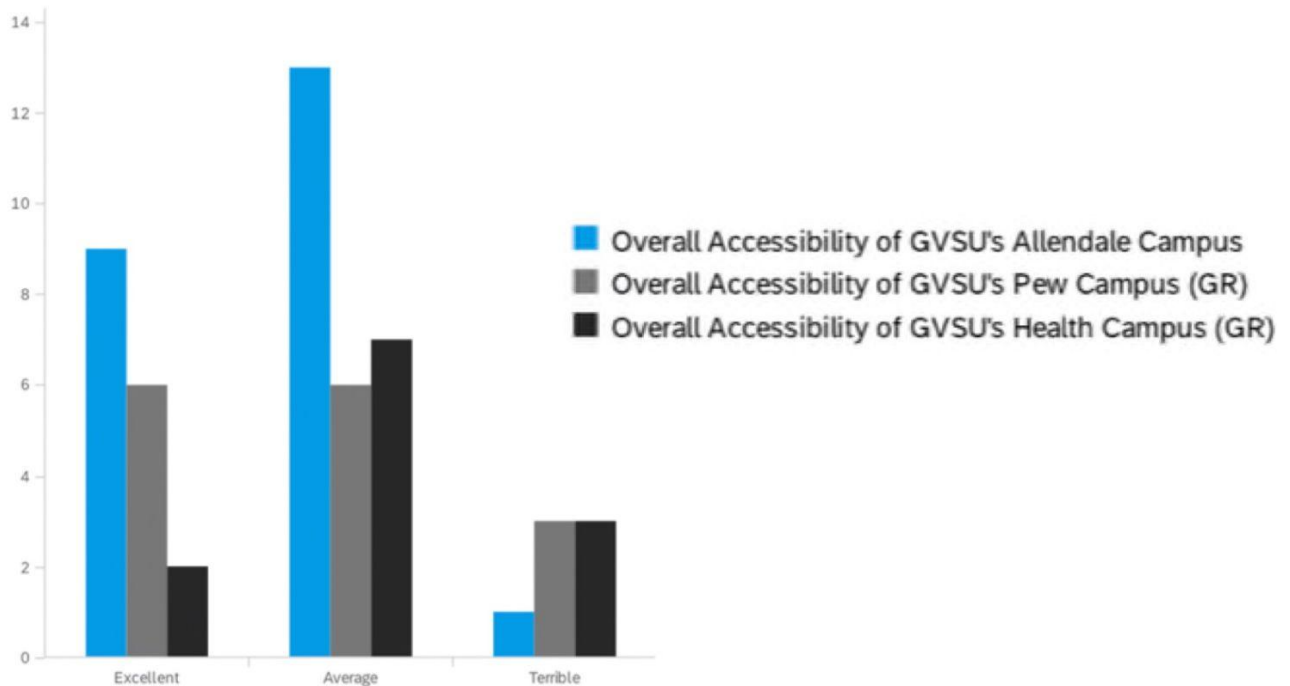


Table 5 demonstrates the respondents’ attitudes toward GVSU’s various campuses’ accessibility. On GVSU’s Allendale campus, 33.33% (9) of the respondents find the accessibility to be excellent, 48.15 (13) find it average, and 3.7% (1) find it terrible. On GVSU’s Pew campus, 23.08% (6) of respondents find the accessibility to be excellent, 28.08% (6) find it average, and 11.54% (3) find it terrible. On GVSU’s health campus, 7.69% (2) of the respondents find the accessibility to be excellent, 26.92% (7) find it average, and 11.54% (3) find it terrible. Respondents were given the option of N/A if they did not travel to one or more of the campuses.

**Table 6: Classroom Accessibility**

Q17 - How would you rate the accessibility of these areas of the classroom for you at GVSU?

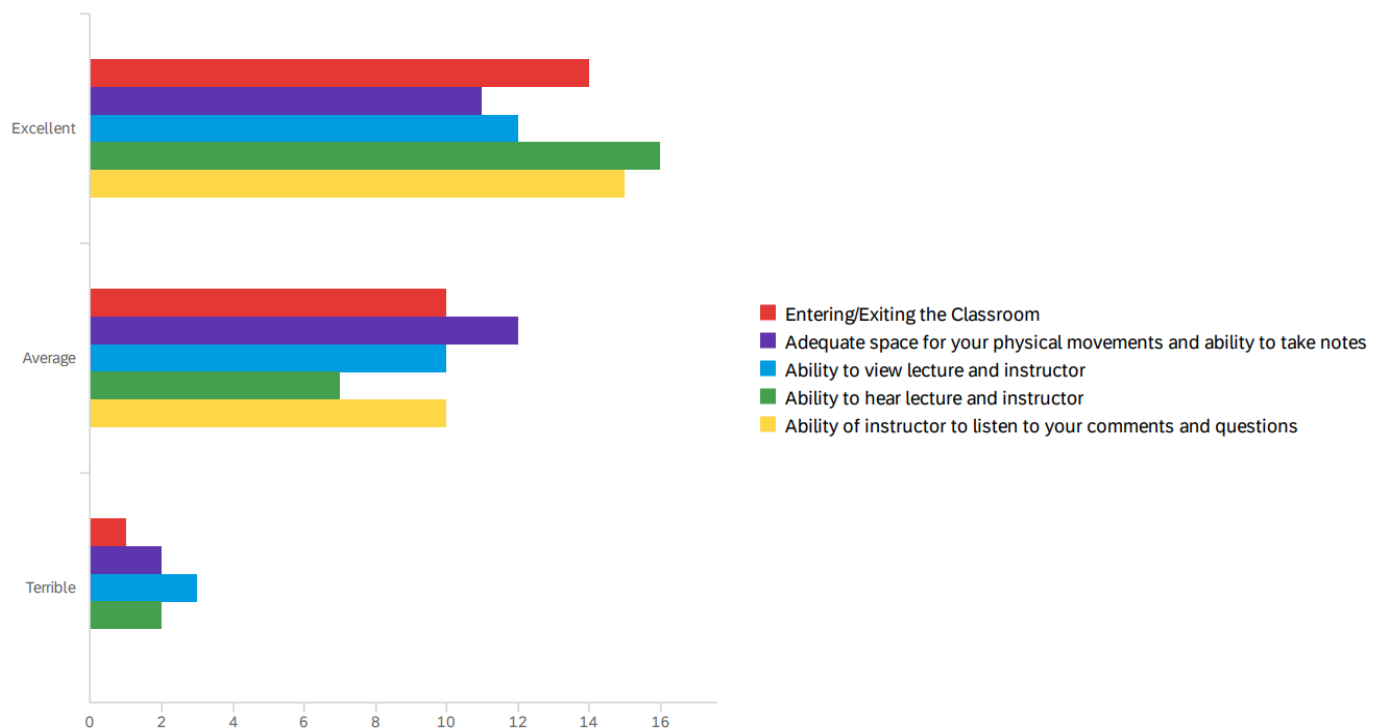




Table 6 depicts respondents’ attitudes towards accessibility within aspects of the classroom at GVSU. The respondents’ most frequent concern (12% of respondents) was their ability to view their professor and lecture adequately, while none of the respondents were concerned over their ability to feel heard by their professor.

**Table 7: Accessibility of types of classwork**

Q19 - How accessible are these types of classwork for you?

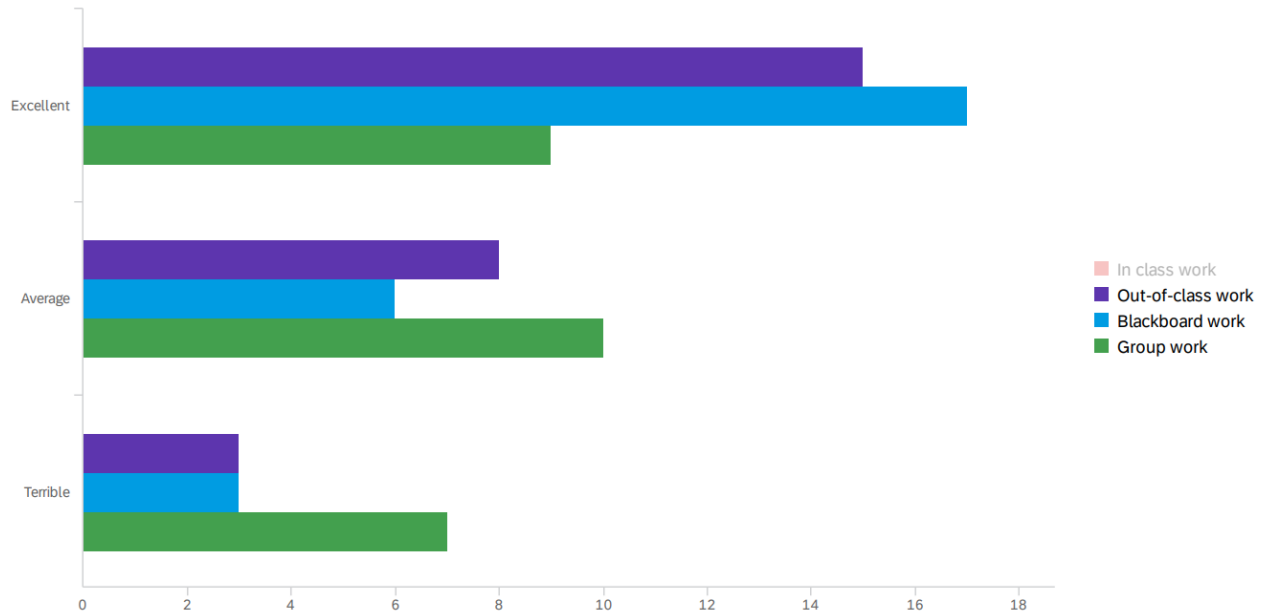


Table 7 reveals respondents’ attitudes towards accessibility within types of classwork assigned at GVSU, including out-of-class assignments, group work, and Blackboard work- GVSU’s online educational platform. Overall, 57.69% (15) of the respondents rated the accessibility of out-of-class work excellent, 30.77% (8) rated it average, and 11.54% (3) rated it terrible. 65.38% (17) of the respondents rated the accessibility of Blackboard work as excellent,

23.08% (6) rated it as average, and 11.54% (3) rated it as terrible. 34.62% (9) of the respondents rated the accessibility of group work excellent, 38.46% (10) rated it average, and 26.92% (7) rated it terrible.

**Table 8: Attitudes Toward DSR**

Q20 - Do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

#	Field	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Total
1	If I have requested help in developing appropriate learning strategies or study skills, DSR has provided me with valuable assistance	53.85% 14	30.77% 8	15.38% 4	26
2	The Office of Disability Services provides quality accommodations and services for all students with disabilities	69.23% 18	19.23% 5	11.54% 3	26
3	I am confident that I have been informed of all accommodations that DSR can perform for me	26.92% 7	42.31% 11	30.77% 8	26
4	DSR has assisted me in developing my self-advocacy skills	26.92% 7	57.69% 15	15.38% 4	26

Table 8 indicates the respondents' attitudes toward GVSU's Disability Support Resources department and its assistance towards registered members. 69.23% (18) of the respondents agree that DSR provides quality accommodations and services, 19.23% (5) neither agree nor disagree, and 11.54% (3) disagree. More students disagree with the statement that they have been informed of all accommodations that DSR offers than agree, with 26.92% (7) of the respondents agreeing, and 30.77 (8) disagreeing.

### Discussion

This pilot study measured students' attitudes toward their access to educational equity at Grand Valley State University. The study shows the effectiveness of the survey to gauge these opinions and its ability to be replicated on a larger scale or at a different university. Overall, the results indicated a greater level of satisfaction with respondents' degree of educational equity, though there is still much room for improvement, especially within the DSR department.

Table 1 depicts the demographics of the respondents in regard to their personal disability/disabilities. There was no significant correlation between disability and overall satisfaction with their current state of educational equity, though there was a small increase in negative responses when the respondent's disability was a hearing, visual, or mobility impairment. As seen in Table 2, many of the participants (67.74%) responded that their identity was the biggest factor in their college experience, and this majority held across all disabilities. When asked the question "do you feel sufficiently accommodated at GVSU," 45.16% of respondents said no. There was a much higher percentage of respondents who said no in the hearing impairment and ADHD categories, with 66.67% of participants with a hearing impairment responding no, and 60.0% of participants with ADHD responding no. This is a significantly higher proportion than expected, especially considering that only 17.86% of respondents reported that they would not recommend GVSU to other individuals with disabilities.

In regards to graduation rates, 90.32% of respondents reported that they are on track to graduate from GVSU, and 86.21% are scheduled to graduate in 4 years or less. As for the 9.68% of students that are not on track, 55.56% attribute the setback to being unable to keep up with coursework, and 22.22% attribute it to bad experiences at GVSU. In terms of accessibility of

types of classwork as seen in Table 7, Blackboard work and out-of-class work were more often seen as accessible by respondents, but group work was seen as inaccessible by 29.63% of all participants. Those who responded stating that group work was inaccessible to them were mostly listed under the disability categories ADHD, mental health condition, and learning disability.

As well as reporting high graduation rates, respondents also reported a high degree of educational access to GVSU's Student Learning Outcomes that are promised to each student. Only 8.8% of respondents rated their equitable access to achieve one or more SLO as terrible. 50.8% of responses for the SLOs fell into the average equity category, and 40.4% fell into the excellent equity category. Table 4 lists the degree to which each SLO ranked in terms of equitable access, and it shows that information literacy, problem-solving, and written communication were rated the best, with low percentages of terrible ratings and high percentages of excellent ratings by respondents. Critical thinking and ethical reasoning, however, received the highest percentage of excellent scores, rating 51.85% and 55.56%, respectively. Integration, Oral Communication, and Collaboration received the most "terrible" responses, making up 14.81% of the respondents in each category. This suggests that individual educational goals were easier to achieve for DSR-registered students, but more group-related, interactive goals may not be equitable for all subgroups of GVSU students.

In regards to overall accessibility at Grand Valley State University, the institution's Allendale campus was found to be the most accessible, with only 3.57% of respondents rating the campus' accessibility as terrible. In Table 5, it reveals that both the health campus and Pew campus in Grand Rapids was rated inaccessible by 11.11% of participants. When asked what aspects of campus were accessible, 78.57% of respondents found physical classroom accessibility to be present. Specific aspects of classroom accessibility are laid out in Table 6, in

which entering/exiting the classroom and the ability to hear the professor were ranked the highest. However, only 70% of respondents experienced times when GVSU faculty properly addressed their accessibility concerns, if the respondent had any. 92.6% of respondents found transportation to and from campus to be accessible as well, 55.56% of which noted it to be “average.” While the degree to which participants answered more negative answers such as terrible was small, the extent of students’ perception of GVSU’s accessibility as average or below should be taken into account when allocating budget funds for GVSU expenditures other than accessibility improvements.

DSR satisfaction tends to be higher on the surface level, but lower when multiple factors are considered. On the one hand, 82.14% of respondents view GVSU’s DSR department to have been helpful to them, and 71.43% feel as though DSR has been able to tailor accommodations to their individual needs. More in-depth questions like the ones seen in Table 8, however, brought more varied results. Only 51.85% of respondents agree that DSR helps assist students with study or learning strategies, and only 66.67% agree that DSR provides quality assistance for all students with disabilities. While opinions of satisfaction differ from opinions on educational equity, attitudes towards the quality of accommodations are crucial when considering the overall educational experience that GVSU offers to its students with disabilities. The most alarming out of this data is that 74.07% of students are not confident that they have been informed of all the accommodations that can be implemented for them. DSR is not known for reaching out to students who may need accommodations; instead, it is on the student to seek out potential resources, which may lead to an information gap between GVSU students and DSR faculty.

Related to the degree of confidence in feeling informed on potential DSR accommodations is the levels of self-advocacy that students with disabilities at GVSU participate

in. Table 3 reveals that 39.29% of all respondents ranked participating in self-advocacy as their most time-consuming academic task over the application process, finding support, and accessing funding. Self-advocacy was the top response in each disability category, showing that all students with disabilities have trouble speaking up for themselves. Many students with disabilities struggle with self-advocacy because they are unaware of the resources available to them and where the resources can be accessed. Additionally, Only 25.93% of respondents believe that DSR has assisted them in developing self-advocacy skills. The ability to advocate for oneself is an important skill for any student, and it is one that DSR should strive to embody and teach to its students.

Very few respondents chose to leave comments on how GVSU can improve its DSR department or how it can better accommodate its students with disabilities. Common themes among comments that respondents opted to disclose included not knowing the full extent of services that DSR offered for them, and trouble communicating with professors about DSR accommodations. Students who chose to respond to the short answer questions had no qualms about the degree of equity they receive from Grand Valley State University as a whole and instead offered up recommendations of how to improve DSR to make things easier for students with disabilities as they navigate through their college experience. Overall, the results of the survey suggest that a majority of DSR registered students are content with the level of educational equity that they receive at GVSU. In this case, however, the minority should not be overlooked, but instead should be utilized to build upon the current resources and accommodations that GVSU offers.

### **Limitations**

The methodological limitations of this study may decrease the magnitude and applicability of the survey results and must be considered. First, the number of participants that made up the sample size from the general population was a small group compared to the overall number of GVSU students that are registered with DSR. There was a short span of time between when the survey became available to students and when the window closed to analyze data, which may have restricted the number of participants received. Since the sample population was so small, statistical significance is found more easily and can be considered more meaningful than obtaining the same results with a larger sample size. Second, the survey excluded any students registered with DSR who may have just recently graduated, or no longer attend GVSU. Although these limitations must be acknowledged and taken into consideration when interpreting the results, general themes in comments and opinions gathered in the survey help support the validity of the results.

### **Future Research**

Numerous recommendations for future research have emerged from this study. Conducting this research by sending it through a DSR platform was not feasible at this time, but in the future, if the survey is sent to all students registered with DSR, the sample size and statistical significance would drastically improve. Additionally, follow-up studies should be conducted to determine which accommodations may need to be amended or created to resolve remaining student difficulties. Respondents in this study have mentioned potential solutions to their problems, including disclosures about how much physical movement will be in a course and the option of taking online exams instead of handwritten exams. Seeking out recommendations such as these may aid findings in how to increase accessibility at GVSU.

Within GVSU, the results suggest that measures should be taken to make knowledge of DSR services more easily and readily accessible to promote confidence in students with accommodations. A second recommendation would be to make efforts to foster self-advocacy within the DSR department and its registered students. Lastly, future research should include the replication of this study at different institutions. A fight for accessibility and equity in education is underway all over the world, and additional research in this area will help expose areas of inequality one institution at a time.



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