

## **Dreams Unbound: Narratives of Determination, Institutional Constraints, and Support Mechanisms Among Students with Physical Disabilities**

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### **Abstract**

Students with physical disabilities continue to face persistent systemic barriers in higher education, where structural, attitudinal, and institutional constraints limit full participation. This study explores the lived experiences and narratives of determination among eight students with physical disabilities enrolled in the University of Antique system. Guided by a narrative inquiry approach, it investigates how determination is constructed, sustained, and enacted amid institutional and social challenges. Data were generated through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method, ensuring a rigorous, systematic interpretation of participants' authentic experiences. Analysis revealed five central themes: (1) unyielding determination to succeed, shaped by intrinsic motivation and self-advocacy; (2) strength derived from supportive relationships with family, peers, and faculty; (3) moments of exclusion amid inclusion, reflecting gaps between institutional commitments and lived realities; (4) daily struggles with mobility and access, highlighting infrastructural and logistical barriers; and (5) faith as a source of resilience, providing meaning, strength, and social belonging. Findings indicate that while participants demonstrate resilience, their educational pursuits often entail emotional and physical challenges exacerbated by systemic barriers. Promoting authentic inclusion requires reforms in infrastructure, policy, and pedagogy grounded in universal design principles. This study contributes to advancing inclusive education in the Philippine context by emphasizing systemic, context-responsive interventions that enable students with physical disabilities to thrive academically, socially, and holistically across diverse learning environments.

**Keywords:** physical disability; determination; resilience; inclusive education; higher education, phenomenology

### **Introduction**

Students with physical disabilities face diverse challenges in pursuing higher education, particularly in state universities and colleges (SUCs) where structural and institutional limitations often restrict full participation. Gull et al. (2025) emphasize that, on a global scale, students with disabilities continue to face systemic barriers, including inaccessible learning environments, insufficient support services, and persistent social exclusion, challenges that are

particularly pronounced in low and middle income countries. At the same time, international trends reflect a growing recognition of disability-inclusive policies in higher education, aligning with human rights frameworks and global development agendas.

In the present context, higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly strengthening their commitment to inclusive education by recognizing students with physical disabilities as essential contributors to academic diversity and social equity (Conchas et al., 2025). Research on disability in higher education highlights key factors including accessibility, institutional accommodation policies, campus infrastructure, prevailing attitudes, and the effectiveness of support mechanisms (Benkohila et al., 2020; Şahin, 2024). Implementing inclusive measures such as barrier-free facilities, faculty and peer awareness programs, and adaptive learning resources, can significantly enhance academic satisfaction, foster persistence, and promote overall student well-being.

However, challenges remain, particularly in terms of accessibility, institutional support, and attitudinal barriers. Students with physical disabilities in higher education continue to experience inadequate physical access and limited institutional support, with systemic gaps in academic accommodations and inclusive infrastructure that constrain their full participation in educational activities (Fernández-Batanero et al., 2022) and are compounded by fractured implementation of inclusive technologies and policies (Murillo-Jiménez et al., 2025). Moreover, research demonstrates a growing imperative for higher education institutions to adopt and integrate assistive technologies and tailored support services that are responsive to the diverse needs of students with disabilities, as these tools can improve accessibility and inclusion when effectively deployed (Fernández-Batanero et al., 2022). HEIs that implement clear inclusive policies, such as reasonable accommodations, professional development for faculty, and accessible learning environments, report improvements in students' academic engagement, participation, and overall educational experience (Murillo-Jiménez et al., 2025).

These institutional practices resonate with global development priorities articulated in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In particular, SDG 4: Quality Education emphasizes the importance of ensuring inclusive and equitable access to lifelong learning opportunities, while SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities underscores the need to dismantle barriers that hinder the full participation of marginalized groups, including persons with disabilities (United Nations, 2015). Framing inclusive education within the SDG agenda not only situates higher education within a broader movement for social justice but also reinforces the imperative of creating learning environments that empower students with disabilities to succeed academically, socially, and professionally.

Studies exploring the experiences of students with physical disabilities in higher education often highlight their narratives of identity negotiation, persistence, and overcoming barriers. For instance, students with disabilities frequently articulate their academic journeys in terms of determination and adaptation as they negotiate institutional environments and overcome university practices and norms that disadvantage students with disabilities (Bartolo et al., 2025). Social support, positive interactions with faculty, and peer connections emerge as critical factors that foster resilience and persistence, helping students manage academic and social challenges (Conchas et al., 2025). The concept of self-determination, encompassing decision-making, goal-setting, and self-advocacy skills, is also emphasized as central to academic success and personal development for students with disabilities in higher education (Bartolo et al., 2025; Conchas et al., 2025). Interventions that promote autonomy and self-evaluation, including tailored support systems and inclusive pedagogical practices, have been shown to enhance these qualities, enabling students to develop stronger coping strategies (Carballo & Cumming, 2025). Despite on-going institutional barriers, research indicates that students employ coping strategies such as self-advocacy, time management, and resource-seeking behaviors, which contribute to

their academic persistence and success (Carballo & Cumming, 2025). The role of inclusive education policies and disability support services has also been shown to be vital in reducing barriers, validating student identities, and fostering a sense of belonging that reinforces determination among students with disabilities (Bartolo et al., 2025).

Despite this growing attention, there are significant gaps in how the lived experiences of students with physical disabilities in state universities are understood, particularly in terms of their internal motivations, strategies of coping, and how institutional and social contexts traverse to either constrain or enable determination. Much existing literature has focused on quantitative indicators such as retention rates and completion rates or on structural barriers while less is known about how students themselves narrate their journeys of determination in the face of both visible and invisible obstacles. There is limited research in Philippine state university settings specifically that captures how physical disability, institutional culture, peer interaction, and personal narrative interweave to shape determination from the students' own perspective.

This study sought to illuminate the experiences of determination among students with physical disabilities, with particular focus on how they navigate challenges and leverage support within the University of Antique system. It aims to understand not only what barriers exist, but how these students actively adapt and envision their academic and personal futures, how their determination is constructed, sustained, and expressed. By doing so, the research contributes both to theory and to practice specifically with how state universities and colleges in the Philippine context might more thoughtfully support students with physical disabilities. Grounded in the values of the UN SDGs, this research underscores the importance of higher education systems not only in providing access but also in fostering empowering spaces where students with physical disabilities can thrive as active participants in knowledge production and social transformation.

Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do students with physical disabilities in the University of Antique construct and narrate their experiences in pursuing higher education?
2. What barriers and forms of support influence the academic trajectories of students with physical disabilities?
3. How do these narratives inform potential institutional and interpersonal interventions that may enhance inclusion and promote academic persistence??

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored in two interrelated theoretical perspectives of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by Deci and Ryan (1985) and Narrative Identity Theory by McAdams and McLean (2013). These two frameworks provide a lens through which to understand how students with physical disabilities construct and sustain determination within the academic setting of a state university. SDT posits that human motivation is shaped by the fulfilment of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When these needs are satisfied, individuals are more likely to internalize motivation and persist in the face of challenges. In the context of higher education, students with physical disabilities often encounter systemic barriers, but their determination may be fueled by intrinsic motivation supported by faculty encouragement, peer solidarity, and personal resilience.

Complementing SDT, Narrative Identity Theory emphasizes that individuals make sense of their lives through the construction of personal narratives that integrate past experiences, present realities, and future aspirations. Narratives of determination among students with physical disabilities reflect more than just persistence; they reveal how these students frame adversity, envision success, and negotiate identity within institutional and social contexts. Narrative theory also highlights the role of cultural and institutional discourses in shaping how

determination is expressed, providing insight into how students situate their experiences within broader educational and societal narratives.

The framework further aligns with the values of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), which emphasize inclusive, equitable, and empowering educational experiences for all learners (United Nations, 2015). Situating this study within these global commitments underscores its broader significance for promoting inclusive practices in higher education. By incorporating both theoretical frameworks, this study recognizes that determination is both motivational and storied as it is fueled by psychological needs and articulated through personal narratives. This dual framework allows for a richer understanding of how students with physical disabilities not only endure challenges but also actively shape their identities and educational trajectories through determination.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing narrative inquiry to explore the lived experiences of students with physical disabilities.

Sample

Eight participants with physical disabilities were selected through snowball sampling based on specific inclusion criteria to ensure the study targeted the appropriate population. Table 1 below presented the demographic characteristics of the participants, including type of physical disability, age, year level, nature of impairment, years in university, support services accessed, and educational program. Pseudonyms were used for confidentiality.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Participants

| Pseudonym   | Age | Year Level           | Type of Physical Disability  |
|-------------|-----|----------------------|------------------------------|
| (P1) Paul   | 23  | 3 <sup>rd</sup> year | Mobility Impairment          |
| (P2) Ramon  | 22  | 4 <sup>th</sup> Year | Orthopedic Disability        |
| (P3) Liza   | 19  | 1 <sup>st</sup> year | Mobility Impairment          |
| (P4) Mark   | 21  | 3 <sup>rd</sup> year | Orthopedic Disability        |
| (P5) Ella   | 23  | 4 <sup>th</sup> year | Mobility Impairment          |
| (P6) Ben    | 20  | 2 <sup>nd</sup> year | Acquired Physical Disability |
| (P7) Carla  | 24  | 4 <sup>th</sup> year | Orthopedic Disability        |
| (P8) Joseph | 21  | 1 <sup>st</sup> Year | Mobility Impairment          |

Participants were recruited through snowball sampling. A total of eight students with physical disabilities participated in the study, selected based on predefined inclusion criteria aligned with the research objectives. To qualify, participants were required to be officially enrolled as students of the UA system with a formally documented physical disability. For the purpose of this study, physical disability was understood as a condition that substantially limits an individual’s physical functioning, mobility, or dexterity, whether congenital or acquired. This included, but was not limited to, mobility impairments (such as difficulties in walking or using limbs), orthopedic disabilities (resulting from musculoskeletal disorders or deformities), and acquired physical disabilities (arising from accidents, injuries, or other health-related causes). In addition, participants had to have completed at least one academic term, demonstrated either active engagement with or awareness of institutional support services, expressed willingness to articulate their experiences of persistence and challenges, and provided informed consent while ensuring availability for interviews. The use of snowball sampling not only ensured the selection

of participants who could meaningfully articulate their lived experiences but also facilitated the identification of additional participants through peer referrals, thereby enriching the dataset.

**Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

The participants in this study were selected based on specific inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure the relevance and appropriateness of their lived experiences to the research focus. To be included, participants had to be currently enrolled in the University of Antique system with a diagnosed physical disability, such as mobility, visual, hearing, or limb differences. They must have completed at least one semester in the university, be 18 years old or older, and be willing to participate by providing informed consent. Additionally, they needed to be capable of narrating their experiences either in English or in the local language used during interviews. Conversely, students with cognitive or psychiatric disabilities that could hinder full participation in a narrative interview were excluded from the study. Also excluded were students who had not accessed or engaged with any institutional or peer support services, as one of the research interests was to examine how available supports influenced their determination.

**Data Gathering Procedure**

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews that utilized an interview guide designed to elicit detailed narratives of determination, barriers, supports, emotional and psychological experiences, academic life, social participation, and future aspirations. Interviews were conducted in locations that were mutually agreed upon, private, and accessible to participants or via online platforms when necessary. Each interview lasted about 45 to 60 minutes, allowing participants sufficient time to share while minimizing fatigue.

Prior to data collection, formal permission was obtained from the University's Human Research Ethics Committee. Informed consent was secured from all participants after a thorough explanation of the study's purpose, participants' rights, including the right to withdraw, confidentiality, and potential risks and benefits. Pseudonyms were used to protect identity. With participant consent, interviews were audio-recorded; field notes captured nonverbal cues and contextual information. Data collection continued until data saturation was reached, defined as the point at which additional interviews yielded no new themes or insights, ensuring the comprehensiveness and depth of the findings (Yang et al., 2022)

**Data Analysis**

Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological approach was employed for data analysis due to its systematic procedures and its effectiveness in eliciting the rich, nuanced essence of participants' narratives. Researchers immersed themselves in interview transcripts through repeated readings to understand participants' narratives of determination, resilience, and challenges in university life. Significant statements reflecting experiences with physical disabilities, such as mobility struggles, access barriers, exclusion, and sources of support, were extracted, and formulated meanings were derived to preserve both explicit and underlying psychological, emotional, and social content. These meanings were organized into thematic clusters, revealing shared patterns and providing a holistic understanding of students' academic journeys. Exhaustive descriptions were developed and distilled into a concise statement of the phenomenon's fundamental structure, emphasizing how enabling and constraining forces shape students' perseverance. Member checking was conducted to validate interpretations, ensuring credibility and authenticity. This process produced a rich, context-sensitive account of how students with physical disabilities navigate challenges and embody determination in higher education.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the conduct of this study to ensure the protection, dignity, and well-being of the student participants with physical disabilities. A formal request for approval was submitted to the Office of Student Affairs to gain access to the target participants. Prior to participation, each student was provided with an informed consent



form, which clearly outlined the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, potential risks and benefits, and the voluntary nature of their participation. The researchers emphasized that participation was entirely optional and that students could withdraw at any point without academic or personal repercussions. For students who required assistance in reading or understanding the consent form, accommodations were made to ensure comprehension and informed decision-making.

Confidentiality and privacy were treated with utmost priority. All personal identifiers were removed from transcripts, and pseudonyms were used in all documentation and reports. Data were securely stored in password-protected files accessible only to the research team. To further safeguard anonymity, quotations used in the presentation of findings were carefully reviewed to ensure that participants could not be indirectly identified.

Special attention was given to the sensitivities of working with students who may have experienced exclusion, discrimination, or marginalization. Interviews were conducted in safe and accessible locations within the university campus, ensuring comfort and inclusivity. The researchers maintained a respectful and empathetic stance during data collection, allowing participants to share their experiences freely without fear of judgment.

By prioritizing ethical principles of respect, beneficence, and justice, the study fostered trust and openness between the researchers and participants. This ethical framework not only protected the participants’ rights and welfare but also honored their lived experiences, thereby ensuring that their narratives of determination were represented with authenticity and integrity.

Results

| Major Themes                         | Narratives                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Interpretive Meaning                                                                                                                                 |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Unyielding Determination to Succeed  | - “No matter how hard it gets, I won’t stop until I finish my degree.” (P1) - “I study late at night even if I’m tired because I want to prove I can do it.” (P4) - “Sometimes I fail, but I keep reminding myself that my disability is not a reason to quit.” (P7)                                                                      | Students exhibit resilience and perseverance, showing that academic success is deeply tied to personal strength and self-motivation.                 |
| Strength in Supportive Relationships | - “My classmates help me carry my bag and guide me when the hallways are crowded.” (P2) - “Some teachers give me extra time during exams, and it makes me feel respected.” (P5) - “Whenever I feel discouraged, my family friends remind me that I belong here.” (P8) My parents remind me every day that I can finish this degree.” (P4) | Support from family, peers and faculty provides both emotional reassurance and practical assistance, reinforcing inclusion and belonging.            |
| Moments of Exclusion Amid Inclusion  | - “There are activities where I just sit because they were meant for able-bodied students.” (P1)<br>- “Group projects sometimes leave me out because classmates think I can’t contribute much.” (P6)<br>- “During sports festivals, I feel like an outsider since there’s nothing designed for students like me.” (P9)                    | Even within supportive environments, structural and social blind spots result in unintentional exclusion, pointing to the need for inclusive design. |
| Daily Battles                        | - “The hardest part is commuting. I get so                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Physical and infrastructural                                                                                                                         |

|                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                            |
|----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>with Mobility and Access</b>        | <i>tired even before classes start.” (P3)</i><br>- <i>“Changing classrooms on different floors drains my energy every day.” (P7)</i><br>- <i>“Sometimes I miss lectures because the elevator is broken, and the stairs are not an option for me.” (P10)</i>         | barriers significantly affect academic participation, consuming energy that could otherwise be devoted to learning.        |
| <b>Faith as a Source of Resilience</b> | - <i>“I believe God gives me the strength to face every challenge in school.” (P2)</i><br>- <i>“Whenever I feel like giving up, I pray and find peace to continue.” (P5)</i><br>- <i>“My faith tells me that finishing this degree is part of my purpose.” (P8)</i> | Spirituality and faith provide hope, emotional strength, and meaning, enabling students to endure challenges with courage. |

Discussion

*Unyielding Determination to Succeed*

Majority of the participants described their journeys in higher education as marked by relentless striving and determination, a finding that reflects existing literature showing that they frequently develop high levels of perseverance, goal commitment, and self-advocacy to succeed academically. Framed within Self-Determination Theory (SDT), these narratives demonstrate how intrinsic motivation sustains persistence even amid barriers. SDT emphasizes three core psychological needs such as competence, relatedness, and autonomy, which together enable individuals to engage volitionally with challenging but meaningful goals (Deci & Ryan, 2000). For students with physical disabilities, statements such as “I will be able to finish my studies. I will make it despite difficulties. ” reflect autonomy through decisive commitment to education, competence through the cultivation of academic strategies, and relatedness through the sustaining influence of significant relationships.

Yeager et al. (2022) emphasized that self-determination and self-advocacy are central predictors of successful postsecondary and post-school outcomes. These competencies empower students to set purposeful goals, make informed choices, and assert their rights within academic and social contexts. Students with physical disability who exercise these skills are more likely to transition successfully into employment, further education, and active community participation. In this way, determination and advocacy serve not only as personal resources but also as protective mechanisms that enable students with physical disability to navigate institutional systems which might otherwise hinder their progress.

Determination is frequently shaped and strengthened through experiences of adversity. While encounters with discrimination, exclusion, or denial of accommodations can initially be discouraging, such challenges often act as catalysts for significant personal growth. Participants in studies report that these difficulties compel them to clarify and sharpen their goals, while also developing critical interpersonal and bureaucratic skills necessary for persistence within academic settings. This cultivated sense of agency represents more than mere perseverance, it reflects a strategic, adaptive response to systemic barriers embedded in institutional structures. However, this resilience is not without its costs, as students often bear additional emotional and physical burdens, especially when institutional supports are inadequate or absent (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Yeager et al., 2022; Munjanja & Hendricks, 2025).

*Supportive Relationships as Pillars of Persistence*

Students with physical disabilities consistently highlighted the pivotal role of supportive relationships whether with family, peers, mentors, or university staff in sustaining their determination and academic persistence. Decades of research affirm that such relationships provide both emotional reassurance and practical assistance, enabling students to navigate the

challenges of higher education (Lombard et al., 2016). Social support operates across multiple dimensions: practically, it helps students secure accommodations and navigate bureaucratic systems; emotionally, it buffers the negative effects of stigma and validates personal identity; and instrumentally, it fosters empowerment through mentorship and advocacy models (Römhild, & Holleder, 2024; Yeager et al., 2022). These forms of support not only strengthen resilience but also enhance students' capacity to persist within often inaccessible institutional environments.

Within this broader social network, family emerges as a foundational source of persistence. Families provide multifaceted support that includes emotional encouragement, practical assistance such as transportation and finances, and advocacy in negotiating institutional barriers. Early family scaffolding through the normalization of ambitions and encouragement of educational attainment shapes identity development and long-term resilience (Daly-Cano et al., 2024; Yeager et al., 2022). Empirical studies further show that family expectations and involvement strongly correlate with college adjustment and the likelihood of students accessing disability services (Lombardi et al., 2016). While family influence is not uniformly positive, given the risks of overprotection or conflicting expectations, participants' accounts reinforce that family support remains indispensable in sustaining higher education participation.

These findings illustrate that persistence is rarely an individual achievement but rather a relationally sustained process. Supportive peers, mentors, and staff provide immediate scaffolds within the university, while families contribute long-term foundations that extend beyond institutional boundaries. Both forms of support nurture self-advocacy, strengthen self-esteem, and provide the resilience needed to navigate exclusion and structural obstacles. For universities, this underscores the need to recognize families and supportive relationships as critical partners in student success by fostering inclusive environments, building mentorship opportunities, and designing family-engagement practices that respect student autonomy while leveraging relational strengths (Daly-Cano et al., 2024; Yeager et al., 2022).

### ***Moments of Exclusion Amid Inclusion***

Participants noted that despite the university's visible efforts toward fostering inclusion, they continued to encounter exclusion in classrooms and campus activities. This paradox where formal inclusion through enrollment and classroom presence does not guarantee social or pedagogical inclusion has been consistently documented in higher education research (Fernandez-Batanero et al., 2022; Li et al., 2021). For many participants, these "moments of exclusion" were felt in subtle but significant ways such as being overlooked by instructors, excluded from group work, or experiencing micro-aggressions. Such experiences underscore the gap between policy commitments to inclusion and the lived realities of students with disabilities.

Fernandez-Batanero et al. (2022) highlighted two interrelated forms of exclusion. The first form of exclusion is structural exclusion, which arises from institutional policies and material conditions. This includes barriers such as inaccessible classrooms, rigid assessment methods, and the inconsistent implementation of accommodations. Even when students are officially enrolled, these structural barriers restrict their full participation in academic life. The second form of exclusion is interpersonal exclusion, which is attitudinal in nature. It manifests through stigma, lowered expectations, or subtle social marginalization from peers and faculty. Studies in China and other higher education contexts confirm that students often face both intentional and unintentional exclusion, leading them to adopt coping strategies that range from withdrawal to proactive advocacy (Li et al., 2021).

The coexistence of inclusion and exclusion carries significant implications. It compels students with physical disability to invest disproportionate emotional and temporal energy in impression management, advocacy, or avoidance strategies, thereby increasing the cost of educational participation. International frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of



Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, Article 24) and UNESCO's (2019) guidelines emphasize that genuine inclusion requires not only access but also barrier-free and meaningful participation. Empirically, the recurring patterns of exclusion identified in participants' experiences emphasize institutional targets for reform, including faculty training, streamlined accommodation procedures, and infrastructural upgrades.

***Daily Battles with Mobility and Access***

All participants shared that they face daily struggles with mobility and transportation when attending university. All participants shared that they face daily struggles with mobility and transportation when attending university. For many, simply getting to class involves navigating unreliable transportation systems, long commutes, or inaccessible routes that require extra time and energy compared to their peers. These constant obstacles not only add physical and emotional strain but also influence their ability to attend classes consistently, participate in activities, and maintain a sense of belonging on campus.

Some of the participants mentioned that another contributing factor is the presence of ramps that are insufficiently designed, poorly maintained, and non-compliant with the National Building Code of the Philippines. Along with long and indirect routes between buildings and inadequate signage, these barriers make campus navigation particularly challenging for students with physical disabilities. Several studies consistently identify such architectural and technological barriers as persistent hindrances to equitable participation in higher education (Fernández-Batanero et al., 2022; Römhild & Holleder, 2024).

The participants' daily battles put emphasis on the urgent need for universities to embrace universal design principles in both physical infrastructure and curricular practices. This includes investment in accessible facilities, consistent maintenance of mobility supports, and streamlined accommodation processes. By shifting responsibility from individuals to institutions, universities may ensure that mobility and access are no longer barriers to participation, but rather part of a collective commitment to inclusion (Fernandez-Batanero et al., 2022; Römhild & Holleder, 2024).

***Faith as a Source of Resilience***

Many participants described faith, spirituality, or religiosity as a vital source of resilience, functioning both as a personal meaning-making system and as a social resource that provides ritual, community, and coping practices. This aligns with cross-disciplinary research demonstrating that spiritual practices and religious belief can strengthen resilience, mitigate distress in the face of adversity, and foster communal bonds that reduce isolation (Du, 2024). For students with physical disabilities, faith serves multiple roles: it cultivates hope, structures daily routines through practices such as prayer and worship, sustains social networks within faith communities, and provides interpretive frameworks that allow students to reframe suffering as part of a purposeful life narrative. In this sense, faith operates as a complementary resilience mechanism alongside social support and self-determination.

For the participants, faith emerges not only as a private coping strategy but also as a culturally and socially embedded asset that intersects with family ties, peer relationships, and institutional supports. Recent studies highlight the importance of distinguishing between positive religious coping, which promotes psychological growth, and negative religious coping, which can intensify distress (Du, 2024). For universities and practitioners, this suggests the value of acknowledging and, where appropriate, partnering with students' faith communities as part of holistic support strategies, while maintaining sensitivity to the diversity of religious experiences and the potential challenges that faith-based coping may entail.

**Conclusion**

The study reveals that students with physical disabilities in higher education embody profound determination and resilience, cultivated through intrinsic motivation, supportive

relationships, faith, and experiences of adversity. Their narratives underscore the pivotal role of self-determination and self-advocacy in negotiating systemic barriers, while simultaneously illustrating that persistence is not solely an individual pursuit but one that is deeply embedded in relational and structural contexts. The influence of their families, peers, mentors, and religious communities emerges as indispensable in reinforcing their capacity to thrive, however persistent hindrances such as inaccessible infrastructure, experiences of exclusion, and the emotional burdens of resilience reveal a critical disjunction between institutional discourses of inclusion and the lived realities of students with physical disabilities lived. Accordingly, the study highlights that authentic inclusion within higher education necessitates more than acknowledgment of student perseverance, it demands comprehensive recalibration in policies, infrastructure, and pedagogical practices to foster environments that enable the full realization of their academic and personal potential.

### Recommendations

As highlighted on the generated themes, it is recommended that higher education institutions may adopt a holistic and systemic approach to inclusion by firming up both structural and relational supports for students with physical disabilities. This includes upgrading and maintaining accessible infrastructure in compliance with national and international standards, streamlining accommodation processes, and incorporating universal design principles in both physical and curricular environments. Another equally important aspect is the provision of faculty and staff training to foster inclusive pedagogical practices, reduce interpersonal exclusion, and promote disability awareness across the campus community. Initiatives from the guidance services unit such as partnerships with families, peer networks, and faith communities may also be recognized and supported as essential pillars of persistence. By aligning institutional policies with the lived realities of students, state universities and colleges may move beyond symbolic inclusion toward cultivating genuinely empowering spaces where students with physical disabilities can fully achieve their academic and personal aspirations.

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