An Examination of the Impact of Organizational and Transitional Instruction on College Freshman Who Received Special Education Accommodations in High School

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Abstract

Students with developmental delays and learning disabilities are accessing higher education in greater numbers than ever before. Many of these individuals are accustomed to special education services and received transitional planning related to post-secondary studies, yet are often unprepared for the college or university environment. Current research suggests some common themes that contribute to these difficulties including, anxiety, poor time management, and a lack of advocacy skills. At the same time, services within institutions of higher education are self-initiated and typically not coordinated between departments. This study proposes a special five-week course focused on organizational and transitional skills for new students prior to the start of the fall semester. It will examine a group of approximately 75 incoming freshman undergraduate students across three campuses of a state university system.

Keywords: higher education, college, university, ADHD, autism, ASD, learning disability, SLD, AT, transition planning, special education

Introduction

Overview

The number of persons with developmental and intellectual disabilities such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), and Learning Disabilities (LD) is soaring. Increased inclusion rates at the K-12 level have led to expectations for post-secondary educational attainment. However, students do not have the same rights to accommodations in higher education that they did in high school because colleges and universities are required to follow Section 504 of the American's with disabilities Act (ADA) and not the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which applies to primary and secondary schools.

At the same time, many colleges and universities recognize that disabled individuals are often able to complete the same coursework as their non-disabled peers, however, they may need additional support in order to do so. Current research suggests that transition planning involving person-centered supports, at the end of high school and at the beginning of college, can help educate students about their disabilities and teach them how to effectively advocate for their needs.

This study proposes to measure the effectiveness of a specialized transitional course emphasizing skills in the areas of time-management and organization of academic materials in terms of continued enrollment and academic standing. This course would be offered to incoming freshman that registered with the disability office and who also received special education services in their secondary school. The students will be from different campuses within the same state university sy

stem. The course would be offered over the summer, prior to the start of the fall semester, and results will be measured at the end of the fall and spring semesters. It is hoped that this study will give new insights in how to help support the learning needs of these individuals.

Literature Review

Introduction

There are an increasing number of persons entering higher education who have been diagnosed with learning disabilities, intellectual, and developmental delays. These students face unique challenges that make it harder for them to navigate the college or university environment. Difficulties faced range from academic to social, often involving deficits in organization, time management, socialization and self-advocacy skills. This literature review will look at some characteristics that disabled students in higher education seem to share and will examine several studies on intervention and transitional strategies at both the high school and postsecondary levels.

Shared Characteristics

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), and Learning Disabilities (LD) are all different conditions but college students with these conditions have some common traits. They tend to have greater access to technology, as Eden and Heiman (2011) reported. In a study of 432 mostly female undergraduate students where nearly 16% of the participants stated having been

diagnosed with an LD in the past, all of the disabled students had a computer at home while only 40% of non-disabled students did (p. 92). However, having technology does not necessarily translate to greater access as Seale, Georgeson, Mamas, and Swain (2015) wrote. In a survey of 175 of disabled and nondisabled students from a teaching university in the UK, 13% of who reported receiving disability related benefits; participants described large deficits in the areas of assistive technology (AT) support and adaptive learning materials. Seale et al. framed the issue as a digital divide, and suggested that the missing element might be instruction in how to "identify and evaluate," (p. 126) AT in terms of access and support. In an analysis of survey responses from over a thousand university and college disability coordinators, Stodden, Roberts, Picklesimer, Jackson, and Chang (2006) found that schools tended to take a "minimalist approach" (p. 119) to AT, and that students were twice as likely to be offered adaptive furniture as they were individualized evaluations and instruction (p. 119). In a literature review on AT and transition planning, Asselin (2014) described emergent trends in the areas of universal accessibility and professional development for faculty and staff (p. 227), which hold promise of increased success rates.

Another area of common concern is disclosure of one's diagnoses and self-advocacy as less than 25% of students with disabilities receive any official support from the disability office of their IHE (Asselin, 2014, p. 226; Newman & Madaus, 2015, p.208). Disclosure to the school and the receipt of services can be difficult for several reasons. In a review of writing assessments for adults, McNair and Curry

(2013) delineated how the requirements differ between the secondary and HE environments, particularly in terms of the type of academic and intellectual testing data that must be presented (p. 6). In a guidebook produced by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, it was observed that HS transcripts do not include accommodations if the student completed the standard curriculum (Kallio & Owens, 2004, p. 24). In a secondary analysis of data from the Department of Education's National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 of 11,270 youth ages 13-16, Newman (2015), reviewed factors related to the receipt of special support in higher education and stated that completion of college prep coursework and GPA were not correlated to receiving accommodations (p. 215), but that instruction in transition planning was (p. 214).

Some students experience difficulties accessing the accommodations that their school is willing to give them. In a case study of 27 disabled undergraduate students, comprised of 14 males and 13 females from 111 universities and colleges in the UK, Griffin and Pollak (2009) stated that 50% of participants described some difficulty in getting instructors to give them help, and some even reported conflicts, noting that the provision of lecture notes was particularly difficult to obtain (p. 119).

Many disabled students experience difficulties beyond academic ones. Research by Gelbar, Smith and Reichow (2014) pointed to a need for non-academic as well as academic support (p. 2599). In a systematic review of 52 articles on college and university students with ASD, Gelbar et al. noted that many case studies revealed the presence of anxiety and loneliness among these students (p. 2599).

Griffin and Pollak (2009) reported that 26% of respondents described themselves as anxious or unhappy (p. 29). Another research study of 45 learning disabled students at a four-year university in Ontario analyzed data suggesting that college students with LD have anxiety levels eight standard deviations above the norm (Abreu-Ellis, 2009, p. 30). Two case studies, each with three participants, (Connor, 2012; Ness 2013) explored evidence that students who lived at home tended to have a more stable, satisfactory experience. Adreon (2007) suggested that individuals with hidden disabilities might not thrive in a dormitory environment (p. 275).

Lack of Standards for Programming

Among institutions of higher education there exists great variation between the programs and types of support that they offer. As there are no requirements or standardization, it is hard to compare offerings. Griffin and Pollak (2009) suggested colleges should explore the "central provision of assistive packages" (p. 37) and criticized the lack of coordination across the institution. A two-phase study by McEarthron, Beurhring, Maynard, and Mavis (2013) looked at 174 individual programs from public and private two- and four-year colleges and universities from the four major regions of the United States and interviewed administrators from 21 of them. The data collected was used to create a taxonomy that was then validated through the use of a survey instrument. The taxonomy identified four major domains, organizational, admissions, support, and pedagogical (p. 311). Within these domains, specific features were identified, enabling parties to create stan

dardized profiles of individual programs (p. 318).

Other research has placed these taxonomic domains in context such as help with developing a healthy social life as well as assistance with pedagogical content through the use of mentoring and transition planning. Ness (2013) implemented a peer-mentoring program in an experiment with three participants with ASD. Through the use of worksheets completed with a peer-mentor graduate student, goals were "collaboratively articulated" (p. 363), while another component of the program included direct instruction in organization, note taking, and information seeking (p. 364). Self-monitoring was also taught to "promote a cyclical pattern of planning, performance and self-reflection," (p. 364). Although this experiment concluded at the end of the semester, another study reported that 86% of disabled students have very good relationships with tutors and mentors (Griffin & Pollak, 2009, p. 33), suggesting that this is a useful form of support.

Interventions, Transitions, and Strategies

The success or failure of interventions designed to bolster key skills seems to lie within the timing for support. Ness (2013) stated that a key finding of his study was that mentoring should begin at the start of the semester (p. 374). It was also noted that, although "it is self-evident that early academic supports are critical for preventing failure," (p. 374) students must initiate, investigate and advocate for these services. Seale et al. (2015) also found that timeliness played a big issue in the success of AT with interview participants reporting that it was difficult to learn how to implement, troubleshoot, and use AT while beginning their course load for the

semester (p. 123).

Transition planning at the secondary level is important to the success of college and university students with disabilities. Asselin noted that students with a 504 plan in high school rarely received any assistance in this area, and thus often enter college lacking sufficient preparation particularly in the area of self-advocacy (p. 227). Adreon and DuRocher (2007) wrote that advocacy is a transition skill that should be generalized in high school, but could alternatively be addressed through the use of a privately paid life coach (p. 276). Newman (2015) found that students who received instruction in the area of transition planning, as opposed to those given specific plans, were more likely to receive postsecondary accommodations, regardless of type of institution attended (p. 214).

Research identifies several key areas to address and points to particular strategies such as mentoring, tutoring and AT, but little is known about the effects of these strategies on grades or continued enrollment. The field is emergent on multiple fronts and is difficult to classify. While some research highlights the lack of standardization for language to describe programming as well as a lack of institutional coordination, a review of the literature also reveals great variation on how disabilities are defined and grouped together. This variety contributes to the "fragmented state" that Gelbar et al. (2014, p. 2601) described in their systematic review of articles on the experiences and support systems for individuals with ASD who were enrolled in higher education. Gelbar et al. also reported that there were many more case studies than experimental research (Abstract). In a literature

review on the state of transition planning for students with LD, Kosine (2007) noted the lack of enquiry in this area as well and wrote that there was a need for more methodologically rigorous research (p. 102).

Summary

As disabled students access higher education in greater numbers than ever before, and as colleges and universities seek to accommodate them, there will be many opportunities to develop universally accessible materials, non-academic support systems, and create a more inclusive environment. It is worthwhile to invest in scientific queries to develop appropriate strategies and programs to meet the needs of these students.

Purpose and Rationale

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact that instruction in the area of time management and organization has on freshman undergraduate students who received special education accommodations through an individualized educational plan (IEP) in their senior year of high school. The rationale for this study is to benefit the burgeoning population of individuals with atypical learning needs, as well as the schools who seek to accommodate them.

Method

Participants

The participants will be a purposive sample of approximately 75 incoming freshman from three campuses within the University System of New Hampshire. The campuses represent a range of academic degrees in two- and four-year programs an

d learning environments that range from small residential colleges, including satellite campuses, to large university settings. The sample will include an equal number of full-time and part-time students who are pursuing either a two- or four-year degree. While the total numbers will be based on the number of students interested in participating, a maximum number of 25 students per campus will be enrolled in the study.

The participants will have had an IEP in High School and a diagnosis of ASD, ADHD, Specific Learning Disability, or other neurodevelopmental disorder which impacts learning. These individuals will have self-disclosed their disability to the school because they are interested in having formalized help from the university as they proceed through their college career.

Data Collection Instruments

Multiple data collection instruments will be employed. These include a systematic review of academic and special education records from both high school as well as the first semester, surveys and focus group interviews.

Two surveys will be given, once before and once at the last session of the course. These will include specific items such as checklists and itemized rating scales to measure what interventions and supports the students have used in the past as well as their current study habits. Open-ended questions will be used as well, and these will measure student's perceptions and attitudes towards themselves, their disability, and their learning style.

Focus group interviews will also be used weekly throughout the course.

These will consist of two groups made up from five to seven participants at each

location. The plan is to include each participant in at least one focus group.

Procedure

Permission

Participants will be recruited from the university disability office at each campus. In addition to coordination with the disability office, it will be necessary to obtain approval from the Institutional Review Board, as well as the Dean of Libraries as much of the instruction will take place in the Learning Commons. It will also be necessary for the participants to provide a copy of their High School IEP, transcript, and final special education progress report in order to enroll in the study.

Since a federal law protects the privacy of educational records, it will be necessary to properly anonymize the data and keep personally identifiable information separate from research data. It will also be necessary for the participants to sign a release form so that their personal educational data may be analyzed.

Instrument Development, Distribution, and Collection

Initial data will be from the participants' special education and academic records, including IEPs, as well as a questionnaire that the participants will be required to fill out if they wish to be in the study. This preliminary data collection is important for establishing baselines and codes.

The first questionnaire will be written using knowledge gleaned from a r

eview of the literature. This review revealed several persistent themes and

survey items are to be developed along these lines. Participants will need to complete this by the end of the spring semester in order to prepare for the start of the study in mid-July and this will be mailed to them at the same time as their enrollment packet.

The focus group interviews will use information from the transitional course curriculum to gauge student's opinions of its effectiveness and identify areas of weakness. The interviews will take place in class at the end of each week that the course runs, with the exception of the last week when a survey will be distributed instead. Data content analysis will be conducted on information collected in the focus groups. This will be used to monitor participants' perceptions of program effectiveness and adjustments to the experiment will be made if necessary.

The second survey will be developed using data from the IEPs, the first questionnaire, and the focus groups. It will be distributed to students during the last session of the course. A quantitative analysis of success as measured by GPA and enrollment status will be conducted at midterms and again the end of the semester.

The chosen instruments could lead to some problems with low internal validity. The use of focus groups will influence which areas of the experimental curriculum will be emphasized, which introduces the threat of multiple mode interferences. However, it is not ethical to ignore identified weaknesses in the treatment. Selection bias is also a factor as the participants are self-disclosing individuals who are familiar with receiving extra help and are motivated to do well.

There are several threats to external validity that are introduced through the

use of focus group interviews and multiple surveys. These include historical events between measurements, maturation within subjects, statistical regression to the mean and experimental mortality as it is expected that some students will leave before the end of the semester. Changes in the assessment tool are an issue, as the surveys will be different from one another and distributed in two different fashions. Another factor is the different environments of the three campuses, so differences in place should be considered.

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