Introduction

The rate of diagnosis of ASD in children in the United States has risen dramatically in recent years (Baio et al., 2018). In turn, more students with ASD can realistically consider pursuing postsecondary education as they transition into adulthood. Yet enrollment, retention, and completion rates for students with ASD have not increased to the same degree as matriculation rates and lag behind the rates of students with other disabilities, including other intellectual disabilities (Shattuck et al., 2012; Wolf & Brown, 2014).

Disability resource offices and other faculty and staff at some institutions have sought to offer more than legally mandated minimum services. A popular approach that has emerged is the comprehensive transition and support program, where students receive additional supports not available to them otherwise.

Literature

There are considerable gaps within extant literature in the higher education field on supporting students with disabilities, let alone college students with ASD. The paucity of research on these students limits the information available to inform the development of programs and supports (Gelbar et al., 2014; Peña, 2014). Research examining or incorporating the perspectives of students with ASD on their transitions and experiences of degree-seeking students with ASD are particularly lacking (Gelbar et al., 2014).

Regarding the program-based approach to supporting students with ASD, on the whole programs for students (ignoring whether a credential is sought) may still be more inclusive in name than in fact (Papay & Bambara, 2011; Thompson). More recently research has begun to emerge that focuses on degree-seeking students with ASD and their use of accommodations and supports (Barnhill, 2014; Schindler, Caijga, Aaronson, & Salas, 2015).

Promisingly, there is a growing number of articles that focus on examining students’ lived experiences and incorporating the perspectives of students themselves in the process. Some of the articles place sole emphasis on student perceptions and responses (Cox et al., 2017; Drake, 2015; Van Hees, Mooy, & Roeyers, 2014), while others include both students and other constituencies (Can & Richdale, 2016; Camarena & Sarigiani, 2009; Taylor, 2005).

Research Question

How does the use of supports that a university provides to a bachelor’s degree-seeking students with ASD through targeted supplementary transition and support programs related to the student’s perception of the helpfulness of support received?

This research will examine whether or not students with ASD find supports to be helpful through examination of the relationships among the following variables:

- Students’ use of academic and social supports provided by their transition and support programs
- Students’ perception of the helpfulness of those supports (in terms of college experience and personal development)
- Students’ overall adaptation to college

Academic and Social Supports in Programs for College Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Theoretical Background and Conceptual Framework

Transition Theory

- Transition: Students begin to move away from previous norms and behavioral patterns but have yet to adopt new norms and patterns found in college (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Tinto, 1993); students undergo a psycho-emotional process in response to change in environment and adaptation as the behavior response to establish good fit or sense of belonging in college (Eaton & Bean, 1995).
- Adaptation: Students adopt the new norms and patterns they find, demonstrating developed skills and processing events with a more refined perspective.
- Transition theory, like other established student development theories, was not crafted with the realities posed by the diversity of student populations in mind (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Tinto, 1993).

Disability Theory

- Disability is not abnormal and not a defect needing correction in order to allow a person to have a full, rich life, but is rather part of the spectrum of human experience that is simplified into an imposed social construct in mainstream society (Gru, 2011; Siebers, 2008).
- Remediation can be helpful for some individuals in some respects, but no one needs to be “cured” or “fixed.”
- Changes must be made to societal systems and structures inclusive.

Methodology

This was a two-stage quantitative study, consisting of an information collection stage and an online survey of students participating at programs willing to support the research project. The investigator began with a pool of 64 programs that was whittled down to 37 programs offered at universities offering graduate programs (as opposed to liberal arts colleges and two-year schools). In the first stage the investigator obtained information from program websites and from materials available on program sites to determine which of the academic and social supports under investigation each program offers. Through this the investigator narrowed the pool of potential programs down to 27 programs that offered at least three of the five categories of academic and social supports from the conceptual framework to its students for at least four years. After contacting program directors or coordinators via email to confirm their willingness to support this endeavor the survey invitation for students was sent to the aforementioned program leaders to forward to students participating in their programs. The survey was administered in this manner to avoid collecting contact information and, in turn, to protect the privacy of students participating in ASD-specific transition and support programs.

The online survey was a quantitative instrument that sought to examine students’ perceptions regarding their use of supports, their perceptions of the helpfulness of the overall support they receive from their programs, and their overall adaptation to college. The investigator sought students’ perceptions of the helpfulness of supports by asking them about how helpful they found categories of academic and social supports to be and how they felt their program supported their development in areas of transition need. The survey also included a few open-ended questions regarding students’ experiences in programs. The research question will ultimately be answered by the analyses of students’ use of academic and social supports provided by their transition and support programs, students’ perception of the helpfulness of those supports, and students’ overall adaptation to college, as measured by student responses to corresponding survey questions.

References (excluding Literature)


Survey results pending

The survey collection period only closed at the beginning of June, so analysis of the survey data is ongoing. 20 students from up to eight of 27 programs contacted to participate responded to the survey invitation, and 75% of the submissions were complete (i.e., the student went through the whole survey). There were additional submissions from a ninth program that had to be removed from the study due unforeseen circumstances.

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Preliminary Discussion

Reasons to offer individual categories or combinations of categories of academic supports

- Resource constraints
- How categories of supports fit together and can be used toward addressing areas of transition need

Logical interdependence of supports (e.g., peer mentoring and program-supported events)

Preliminary Findings on Programs

Frequency of categories of supports in programs

- Educational coaching (35% or 94.6%) of programs
- Group sessions on life skills in 30 (or 81.1%) of programs
- Peer mentoring in 29 (or 78.4%) of programs
- Program-sponsored events in 23 (or 62.3%) of programs
- Supervised study sessions in 15 (or 40.5%) of programs

Combinations of categories of supports in programs

- 22 programs (59.5%) offer at least four categories of academic and social supports
- 6 programs (16.2%) offer all five categories of academic and social supports

- The mode program offers educational coaching, peer mentoring, group sessions on life skills, and program-sponsored events (9 programs offer this combination of categories of academic and social supports).

- The pair of educational coaching and peer mentoring and the pair of educational coaching and group sessions appear most often within programs (in 28 of 37 programs in pair [75.7%], while the pair of supervised study sessions and program-supported events appears least often (in only 9 of 37 programs [24.3%]).

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