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Fostering Persistence of College Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder through Transitional Orientation Programming at GVSU

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Fostering Persistence of College Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder through Transitional
Orientation Programming at GVSU

by

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Emily

Abstract

Research has shown that students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) persist to degree completion at lower rates than neurotypical students. ASD can present unique challenges and strengths related to higher education for each student. This project discusses common experiences of students with ASD and related accommodations traditionally provided by higher education institutions. Recognizing the need for additional skill-building opportunities, this program builds upon the previously structured peer mentorship program implemented by the Disability Support Resource office at GVSU. In addition, this program provides parents and supporters with opportunities to also connect with the institution while learning best practices related to supporting their student.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Problem Statement

College students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) persist to graduation at lower rates than able-bodied students (Newman et al., 2011). In addition, the population of college students with registered disabilities has continued to increase in recent years (Francis et al., 2015). These students face a variety of unique challenges related to their disabilities, including physical challenges, difficulties in the classroom, difficulties with finances and housing challenges (Hong, 2015). Many higher education institutions have programs designed to support these students with accommodations where possible, and design educational and social programs to facilitate feelings of belonging and increase involvement among these students. However, the currently accepted means of support have not resulted in equal persistence between disabled and able-bodied students (Francis et al., 2015). Higher education institutions need to provide additional support and opportunities for students with disabilities to facilitate their persistence to degree.

Importance and Rationale of the Project

The population of college students with ASD has continued to increase in the United States, and each year approximately 16,000 students with ASD pursue post-secondary degrees (Cox et al., 2017). However, degree completion rates for these students have not increased (Bakker et al., 2023). According to the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2, only 39% of students with ASD persisted through their post-secondary education, compared to 52% of the general population (Newman, 2011). This study also found that students with ASD persist at lower rates than those students with other registered disabilities (Newman, 2011).

The transition from high school to college is a developmental process for most college students, especially those with ASD. Individuals with ASD experience a unique set of challenges and need tailored support from the institution (White et al., 2016). Student affairs professionals should also consider opportunities to highlight and utilize the unique strengths associated with ASD. During this developmentally important phase, individuals with ASD are at a higher risk for worsening social and behavioral skills (White et al., 2016). Given the increased independence and daily tasks, along with academic challenges students may face during post-secondary education, institutions need to provide additional support during this developmentally significant time.

Orientation programs designed for the entire student body often do not support the transitional needs of students with ASD (Cox et al., 2021). These students often find vital skills such as self-advocacy, collaboration, and time management to be increasingly difficult during their transition to post-secondary education (White et al., 2016). Intentional transitional programming should utilize the associated strengths and challenges that students with ASD experience to increase their capability for success and persistence.

Background of the Project

College students with ASD have historically faced additional challenges related to academic performance and social interactions compared to their neurotypical peers yet support for these students has been slow to increase across higher education institutions. Federal and state regulations provide guidelines for institutions regarding levels of support and accommodation they must provide for students with registered disabilities. These regulations are derived from the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990). This act requires institutions provide reasonable accommodations for all students with registered disabilities (American Psychiatric

Association, 2013). For students with ASD, these accommodations include additional tutoring services or time for completion of assignments, but the traditional accommodations fail to address the larger factors that may affect persistence for these students, such as sense of belonging.

Student persistence to degree is a common goal for higher education. In addition to beneficial impacts for the institution, persistence to graduation is especially beneficial for students with ASD. Studies have shown that students with ASD who persist to graduation obtain significantly better jobs post-graduation with higher income opportunities (Hendrickson et al., 2013). It is the responsibility of the institution and the student to work together towards the overall goal of persistence and future job placement or continued educational opportunities.

Statement of Purpose

This project intends to supplement pre-existing support for students with ASD from the Disability Support Resources office at Grand Valley State University (GVSU). Through intentional programming and additional learning opportunities, this program will improve the transition period for students with ASD from high school to their post-secondary education. The main purpose of this program is to provide these students with knowledge and skills that will better support their success in college, despite their disability. This program will utilize the strengths that many individuals with ASD possess, to create a supportive and inclusive transitional environment.

Parental involvement has been shown to be an important factor for success in the post-secondary education of students with ASD (LeGary, 2017). In addition to supplemental transition programming for students, this project will provide parents and supporters of students with unique programming opportunities to learn about best practices to support their student.

Specifically, this parent and supporter orientation program will focus on the importance of developing self-advocacy skills among students with ASD. This program was designed specifically for implementation at GVSU but includes references to previously published literature and research and can be modified for other institutions.

Objectives of the Project

The objective of this project is to create transitional programming designed to support the continued development and success of students with ASD at the GVSU. Challenges and strengths of students with ASD will be addressed within a collaborative orientation program prior to the start of the academic year. The challenges faced by students with ASD are unique and need to be addressed and regularly re-evaluated by the institution. Following transitional programming, students will be able to identify resources and connections across campus, while strengthening social and academic skills that will support their continued persistence at the university.

Definition of Terms

- *Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)*: A neurodevelopmental condition that can affect an individual's social interaction and communication. (American Psychiatric Association (APA), 2013).
- *Neurotypical*: An individual not diagnosed with a neurodevelopmental condition.
- *Persistence*: Degree completion at a higher education institution.
- *Self-advocacy*: An individual's ability to acknowledge and express their needs to success.
- *Sense of Belonging*: A feeling of inclusion and acceptance within a group or environment.

- *Post-secondary education:* An academic opportunity to pursue an education after K-12 schooling.

Scope of the Project

This project will address the factors that influence the persistence of students with ASD during post-secondary education. Beginning prior to the start of the academic year, this program will address fundamental challenges students with ASD have traditionally faced in higher education settings, while providing resources to promote success and persistence. This project does not provide specific programming for students with ASD that may have intersectional identities that influence their academic success. Future programming could collaborate with other orientation programming at Grand Valley State University (GVSU) that aims to provide students with other minoritized identities with skills and resources to further promote persistence and belonging.

This project will require additional funding to be allocated to the Disability Support Resources office to facilitate the orientation programming for students with ASD, along with their parents and supporters. Funding may need to be outsourced from donations or other campaigns and could require additional time to secure. While this program is designed according to the existing resources and current needs of students with ASD, similar programs could be tailored to fit any two- or four-year institution.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter discusses current literature regarding persistence of college students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) at two- and four-year institutions. This literature review will provide necessary background information related to ASD and the unique circumstances that many of these students face while enrolled in post-secondary education. This chapter will also acknowledge literature surrounding best practices to prepare readers for the subsequent intervention strategies.

Theory/Rationale

The literature surrounding post-secondary students with ASD presents two primary theoretical perspectives. McRuer's (2006) Crip Theory and Tinto's (1993) Theory of Student Departure provide influential perspectives related to working with students with ASD. Utilizing theoretical approaches when working with students with ASD provides all professionals, especially neurotypical professionals, an opportunity to better understand the difficulties that these students face.

Crip Theory

Crip Theory is a third wave post-structural theory derived from Queer theory that challenges the fluid nature of disability (Abes & Wallace, 2020). Crip theory identifies a societal norm of compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness, which creates a culture in which disabled individuals struggle to ever feel "normal" (Abes, 2019). These ideas of compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness prioritize a status of "normalcy" that is often unobtainable to individuals with disabilities, creating situations in which they feel insufficient (Kafer, 2013). To work towards a more inclusive and accepting societal norm, supporters of Crip theory attempt

to empower individuals with disabilities to challenge societal messaging that defines “normalcy” and introduce more inclusive and empowering practices that benefit all (Abes & Darkow, 2020).

Higher education presents numerous opportunities in which Crip theory could be applied for all students with disabilities, including those students with ASD. Abes (2019) suggests that utilizing identity-first language allows individuals to emphasize the social construct that has influenced the definition of disability. Theorists also criticize the way in which higher education institutions often attempt to satisfy the needs of students with a “one size fits all” approach, which further engrains ableist norms (Kafer, 2013). For example, syllabi and graduation requirements set forth by higher education institutions are often created with ableist ideas at the center of the discussion, with accommodations for those students with disabilities as an afterthought (Abes & Wallace, 2020). Students with ASD experience a variety of strengths and challenges related to social and academic skills that are not supported by a generalized approach to education.

Tinto’s (1993) Theory of Student Departure

Vincent Tinto’s (1993) Theory of Student Departure suggests reasons students may leave an institution. Primarily, Tinto states that involvement in academic settings and in the institutional community have a direct impact on the student’s persistence (Milem & Berger, 1997). Both neurotypical and students with ASD have unique and influential opportunities for involvement and learning, but such opportunities have been identified as increasingly difficult for those students with ASD (Herbert et al., 2014). Tinto advocated for the importance of involvement in the classroom, explaining that increased learning opportunities equate to increased rates of persistence (Milem & Berger, 1997).

This theory proposes a three-part process that students move through as they become involved with the institutional community (Milem & Berger, 1997). This process begins with separation, in which students must begin to disconnect from the norms they adopted from their previous community, such as their high school (Milem & Berger, 1997). After successful separation, students move into transition, where they familiarize themselves with their newfound community (Milem & Berger, 1997). Finally, students will begin the incorporation phase when they embrace the norms of their new institutional community and exhibit those associated behaviors (Milem & Berger, 1997).

Research/Evaluation

Experiences of Students with Disabilities

As the number of college students with disabilities continues to increase, student affairs professionals need to intentionally work towards understanding the lived experiences of students with disabilities (Hong, 2015). College students with disabilities that persist to graduate take twice as long as their able-bodied peers to do so on average (Hong, 2015). Of those students who have graduated, eighty percent have identified a need for utilization of support services from their institution (Hong, 2015). Student support related to individual disabilities relies primarily on individual student disclosure. However, many students with disabilities identify feelings of apprehension related to disclosure (Getzel & Thoma, 2008). Some students look forward to their college career as a “new beginning” in which they can be “normal” like their able-bodied and neurotypical peers (Getzel & Thoma, 2008).

These students experience different difficulties related to the stage of their academic career that they are in. For example, first-year students are experiencing a difficult transition to the college environment, which often requires that they individually maintain their

accommodation and personal needs in addition to navigating an entirely new academic landscape (Getzel & Thoma, 2008). Emphasizing the importance of early disclosure is important for the success of students, as some choose to wait until they are struggling to work towards related accommodations (Getzel & Thoma, 2008). Many students with disabilities experience challenges related to the personal and social skills that support integration and involvement in the institution (Hong, 2015). Many students with disabilities fear being judged or not accepted by their able-bodied or neurotypical peers as a result of their accommodations or experiences related to their disability (Hong, 2015).

Academically, students with disabilities have identified a lack of understanding and support from their faculty members in many circumstances (Hong, 2015). Faculty members with experience related to supporting students with disabilities and related accommodations were identified as beneficial for student success, while the less experience or passionate faculty were seen as condescending and skeptical related to accommodations for students (Hong, 2015). Rather than being provided with less academically intense assignments, these students expressed desires for feeling welcomed and supportive in the course, while feeling that their contributions were acknowledged (Hong, 2015).

Academic Experiences for Students with ASD

Students with ASD and other disabilities typically maintain lower GPAs, and experience significantly more academic challenges than neurotypical and able-bodied peers (McLeod et al., 2019). Some of these academic challenges include increased remedial coursework requirements and experiences associated with course failures (McLeod et al., 2019). However, these students with disabilities maintain strategies and workloads for each course similar to or greater than those of their neurotypical or able-bodied peers (McLeod et al., 2019). Students with disabilities

have also been identified as having greater engagement with faculty and staff members (McLeod et al., 2019). Despite their continued academic interests and enthusiasm, students with disabilities do not experience the same measures of academic achievement as their neurotypical or able-bodied peers (McLeod et al., 2019).

Challenges. Each student with ASD is uniquely affected by their disability and will experience the higher education landscape differently as a result. The transition from high school to college is a difficult experience for many students, including those with neurotypical identities as well. Moving away from constant support and advocacy from family and supporters, educators, and friends can be a detrimental experience for some students with ASD (Hillier, et al., 2018).

Coursework can greatly differ between academic programs and institutions, with the capability to impact the success of a student with ASD. For example, courses with significant required readings can negatively impact the academic success of students with ASD (McLeod et al., 2019). Students with ASD often have varying difficulties related to reading comprehension compared to neurotypical students (McLeod et al., 2019). In addition, courses that focus on high-impact practices such as group work or internship opportunities often present unique challenges for students with ASD (McLeod et al., 2019).

Deciding to obtain a post-secondary education is an important decision for any student. Financial gain, educational curiosity, and opportunities are just some of the reasons that obtaining a degree can be appealing for students. Persistence is a key factor in a student's ability to obtain that degree and the associated benefits that they had hoped for. Persistence can be directly related to the institution's practices, but also the abilities and challenges of the student. Less than 39% of college students with ASD persist through graduation (Cox et al., 2021). This

statistic is alarmingly low, considering the 2011 U.S. Department of Education findings that at least 2% of the students surveyed disclosed a diagnosis of ASD (Colclough, 2017).

Strengths. While some diagnostic characteristic qualities of ASD can present students with unique challenges related to their academic and social success, other qualities can serve as beneficial traits. Most students with ASD can obtain a post-secondary education based of their primary education experience and performance (Viezel & Froner, 2022). Individuals with ASD are often associated with high levels of intellectual capability (Viezel & Froner, 2022). Approximately half of the individuals diagnosed with ASD do not experience any intellectual challenges as a result of their disability (Viezel & Froner, 2022). In addition, 44% of individuals with ASD have an IQ above 85 (Baio et al., 2018).

Academically, students with ASD often experience beneficial strengths (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014). Memorization tasks associated with various data analysis processes and assignments can often be completed with ease for many students with ASD (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014). These students can also experience strong feelings of enthusiasm towards specific academic interests, which they often feel excited and confident in sharing with their peers and faculty members (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014). The enthusiasm that students with ASD may experience related to specific academic areas and topics can also often create opportunities for them to interact and connect with their neurotypical peers (Viezel & Froner, 2022).

Social Challenges for Students with ASD

Self-advocacy has been identified as a common challenge for students with ASD throughout the literature. In the higher education setting, students are required to contact the appropriate disability support office to discuss any accommodations themselves, as opposed to

their parents or supporters advocating for their needs during their K-12 education (Hillier, et al., 2018). Self-advocacy for these students may begin with accommodations through the disability support offices but should ideally continue through regular conversations with professional staff, faculty members, and peers to recognize areas in which the student may be struggling (Hong, 2015).

Social situations in academic and conversational settings can lead to challenges for some students with ASD as well. Individuals with ASD report difficulties identifying non-verbal cues from those around them, which can lead to difficulties creating relationships with peers in higher education settings (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014). Faculty members have identified these interpersonal difficulties as situations in which students are unable to acknowledge differing mindsets of others (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014). This difficulty can make academic practices such as reading or engaging in group discussions especially difficult for these students (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014).

As a result of difficult social interactions, and sometimes a lack of involvement from parents and supporters, students with ASD identify common feelings of loneliness on campus (Shmulsky et al., 2017). Students with ASD have identified a need for opportunities to meet other students with similar interests and backgrounds to their own (Cullen, 2015). However, in order to meet with those students and create new relationships, the students also identified a need for opportunities to learn those important interpersonal skills (Cullen, 2015).

Co-morbidities such as anxiety, depression, and other cognitive difficulties are commonly associated with individuals with ASD (Cai & Richdale, 2016). As a result, these students may struggle with practices that are traditionally meant to enhance their learning and student experience of their neurotypical peers (Cai & Richdale, 2016). For example, “high impact”

practices, which commonly praise the benefits of experiential learning and collaborative opportunities, can cause additional stressors for students with ASD as a result of the required social interactions and commonly associated stressors (Cox et al., 2021). The requirement of such practices at many higher education institutions represents an ableist norm that has been deeply engrained into the field of education.

Traditional Accommodations for Students with ASD

Institutional support may vary among institutions, but each institution has a legal obligation to provide appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities (Francis et al., 2019). For institutions to provide students with ASD proper support, students need to provide proper documentation of their diagnosis, which is often facilitated through disability support offices. For some students, the decision to request accommodations is a priority before beginning their post-secondary education. However, some students may be more hesitant to disclose their disability and ask for assistance based on their acceptance and understanding of their diagnosis (Cox et al., 2021).

For students with ASD, these accommodations most commonly are provided in the form of additional academic support from student affairs professionals and faculty members, unique accommodations for housing, and additional mental health support services (Accardo et al., 2019). Within their coursework, students identified the opportunity to complete tests and assignments with additional time, receive additional notes from instructors, and record lectures to be the most effective accommodations (Accardo et al., 2019). Recent studies have found that these traditional academic accommodations are often not sufficient for students with ASD (Cox et al., 2021). Outside of the classroom, students identified tutoring, success coaching,

mentorship, transition programs, and counseling to be the most effective accommodations (Accardo et al., 2019).

Some currently common forms of accommodation for students with ASD can be detrimental towards the overall goals of integration and success for the student (Gelbar et al., 2015). For example, single rooms that emphasize quiet spaces to accommodate the anxiety or sensory challenges that students with ASD often experience may lead to increased feelings of isolation and loneliness (Gelbar et al., 2015). Such adverse effects highlight the importance of providing individualized and unique accommodations for students with ASD whenever possible related to their specific difficulties.

Various studies have analyzed the experiences of students with ASD and their ideal accommodations. One study identified the need for students to have a “transition coach” that assists them with their transition to college (Francis et al., 2019). This individual would ideally assist the student with their academic needs and facilitating proper accommodations and study skills but would also provide mentorship and advice regarding social interactions and involvement on campus (Francis et al., 2019).

Parent and Supporter Involvement

Sometimes, college students are held to an ableist norm that parent and supporter involvement must diminish after the student begins college to promote their independence during this new stage of life (Cai & Richdale, 2016). For neurotypical students, this idea may remain true, and promote increased independence among those students. But studies have shown that neurodivergent students are greatly impacted by familiar social supports, such as parents and supporters, while in college (LeGary, 2017). These social supports often help to “buffer” the stressors related to college, both academically and socially (LeGary, 2017).

Due to federal regulations, such as FERPA, and institutional policies, student affairs professionals are not permitted to speak with parents and supporters without proper documentation from the student. Even after documentation has been completed, student affairs professionals typically do not involve parents and supporters in conversations related to the student unless necessary, again because of those neurotypical norms within higher education. For many students with ASD, they have had someone to advocate for and with them their entire lives until they reach the point of college (LeGary, 2017).

As a result of the need for such support from parents and supporters, over half of the college students with ASD live at home during their academic careers (Cai & Richdale, 2016). These familial supports are then able to check in with the student regarding their academics, but also their involvement on campus, and help to make appropriate requests for accommodations and assistance when needed.

Faculty and Staff Responsibilities

Faculty and staff at higher education institutions have a responsibility to provide inclusive and equitable educational opportunities to all students. This responsibility is sometimes more difficult to accomplish because of societal norms that promote ableist ideas and expectations of students (Abes & Wallace, 2020). Students with ASD have a unique set of strengths and challenges, and thus need a unique response from student affairs professionals.

In general, students with ASD benefit from individualized approaches to student success and accommodations, as opposed to a common set of responses from the institution (Accardo et al., 2019). Accardo et al. (2019) reported that students with ASD identified a desire for regular check-in opportunities with a variety of professionals from multiple disciplines across campus. These professionals may include those from disability support offices, faculty members,

academic success coaches, etc. (Accardo et al., 2019). These consistent relationship building opportunities have been acknowledged as an opportunity for “a systematic support system for each college student with ASD” (Accardo et al., 2019).

Faculty and staff also have a responsibility to build trust and understanding with parents and supporters. Implementation of intentional orientation programming for students with ASD and their parents and supporters has been identified by students as an important opportunity (Francis et al., 2019). This orientation would provide students and their supporters with important information regarding institutional support available to them and provide early suggestions for student support (Francis et al., 2019). This orientation would allow parents and supporters to feel included and informed in the transition process that parents and supporters of neurotypical students are typically left out of.

Orientation Programming

Transitional orientation programming is a common experience among students enrolling in post-secondary education at multiple institution types. More than 96% of colleges and universities report utilizing orientation programming to assist with the transition process of new students (Mayhew et al., 2010). Students who experience a positive and “successful” transition to the institution are statistically linked to greater levels of student success and retention (Mayhew et al., 2010). Pre-semester orientation programs provide students with an important initial experience with the institution, from which they begin to analyze their “fit” at the institution (Mann, 1998).

Many orientation programs focus on the logistical aspects of ensuring that students are registered for classes during the summer prior to their first year, rather than introducing them to campus (Mann, 1998). Orientation programs also commonly share a strong focus surrounding

resource sharing, which is important as students enter this new landscape (Mann, 1998). Some institutions, such as Grand Valley State University (GVSU) have implemented specific orientation programs for students with various minoritized identities, but no orientation program for disabled or students with ASD currently exists at GVSU.

Summary/ Conclusion

Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder face a unique set of challenges as they navigate their post-secondary education. While some of these challenges can be supported through traditional accommodations by the institution, many students need unique and tailored success plans in order to persist through graduation (Cox et al., 2021). Academically, students with ASD struggle to participate in practices designed to further the education of neurotypical students, while lacking proper support from their faculty members (Cox et al., 2021). Socially, these students often face difficulties connecting with their peers, and making important connections across campus to facilitate involvement opportunities. Higher education institutions and student affairs professionals have a responsibility to work towards reducing the ableist norms that have commonly infiltrated the institutions they work at (Abes, 2019).

This chapter has provided an in-depth introduction into the literature and theoretical background of the strengths and challenges that students with ASD face, and their associated impacts on persistence to graduation. Chapter three will provide suggestions for solutions to these challenges, based on the literature discussed.

Chapter Three: Project Description

Introduction

Higher education institutions are not effectively promoting integration of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014). Proper integration of students leads to improved degree completion, or persistence (Cox et al., 2021). Most first-year students can participate in a generalized orientation program, intended to provide resources and connection-building opportunities. However, these programs typically fail to cater to the specific needs of students with ASD and can be an overwhelming space for these students due to the associated academic and social challenges (Cai & Richdale, 2016). Students with ASD have identified the continued relationship with parents and supporters as beneficial as to navigating college (LeGary, 2017).

Based on the findings from literature provided in chapter two, a multifaceted student and academic affairs program is proposed. This program seeks to better integrate students with ASD to Grand Valley State University (GVSU) through the implementation of a specific orientation program for students with ASD, paired with an additional informational opportunity for parents and supporters of all students with disabilities.

In order to better understand the implementation of this project, it is important to understand the current supportive measures offered to students with ASD at GVSU. The Disability Support Resources (DSR) office supports students with disabilities through accommodations and resource sharing. DSR currently organizes “Campus Links,” a peer mentorship program for residential and commuter students with ASD (GVSU, 2021). Each student with ASD is paired with another student at GVSU who has been trained to serve as a mentor for that student (GVSU, 2021). Within the residential program, students and mentors live

in on-campus housing together (GVSU 2021). This program also requires student to participate in a welcome activity at the start of the semester and continued monthly meetings throughout the semester (GVSU, 2021).

The peer mentorship program currently offered by DSR is beneficial for those students involved thus far but lacks the capability to integrate students with ASD to campus prior to the start of the academic year. In addition, this program fails to incorporate parents and supporters whenever possible, lacking acknowledgment of their important role in the self-advocacy of students with ASD.

Project Components

Background

Transitioning to college can be challenging for all students, but students with ASD experience a variety of unique challenges associated with the transition, and the availability of supplemental resources and opportunities. Such unique challenges discussed in the previous chapter include difficulties with self-advocacy, social interactions, and co-morbid mental health concerns. Students with ASD persist to degree at lower rates (Cox et al., 2021) and commonly describe lacking support from the institution and feeling less integrated into the community than their neurotypical peers (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014). It is essential that GVSU provide students with ASD with additional opportunities to support their initial transition and continued persistence at the institution.

ASD Student Orientation

An ASD student orientation would allow student affairs professionals to begin conversations surrounding the importance of self-advocacy and familiarize students with available resources. This orientation would be optional, but strongly recommended, for all first-

year or transfer students with ASD. The program would begin two weeks prior to the start of classes and would require first-year students to move into their housing accommodations early. In addition to the activities and learning outcomes described below, this program will include a parent/supporter orientation. Students will also be introduced to their Campus Links mentor during this program and will continue to meet with them for the entirety of their first year on campus. This mentor will act as a near-peer connection for students to learn from, while also practicing vital social and academic skills.

This orientation program would act as a small-scale summer bridge program, which has been shown to assist students from various minoritized student populations with acclimating to college (Nachman, 2020). By living on and interacting with campus prior to the start of the semester, these students will be able to explore this new campus during a time that is less crowded and stimulating. The difficulties related to over-stimulating situations that some individuals with ASD experience can negatively impact the individual's interest in future events and integration opportunities.

After allowing students to settle into their new housing accommodations for the first day, students will be required to attend daily activities. Over the course of this bridge program, students will be required to attend a daily first-year seminar style session. Wenzel and Rowley (2010) describe the possible benefits of a first-year seminar for students with ASD, noting the associated outcomes of improved social and academic skills. This seminar will be taught by a staff member within the disability support office, with multiple guest lecturers and speakers from across campus.

The seminar will meet for a fifty-minute session in the morning, and an additional fifty-minute session in the evening Monday through Friday. The morning session will introduce

specific topics and resources, while the afternoon will provide the students with opportunities to utilize and explore the topics discussed. During the evenings and weekends, students will be provided with a variety of programming opportunities. To accommodate the variety of needs and manifestations of ASD for each student, there will be two program opportunities each day with differing academic and social requirements. Examples of weekend activities will include trips to the local beach, movie marathons, video game tournaments, and volunteer opportunities in the local community. Evening activities will include events such as trips to the recreation center, cooking tutorials, dinners at campus dining locations, and game nights. These activities will aim to acclimate students to the social activities and involvement opportunities that college will offer, and work towards future integration of the students after orientation.

Orientation Week One

The first week of orientation programming will focus on providing students with important background information related to student success in higher education. This information will include conversations surrounding various academic and social skills. During this week, there will be additional opportunities for the students to interact with one another and their peer mentors compared to week two.

The first session will begin with an in-depth overview of the services and opportunities available through the Disability Support Resources (DSR) office. These services include opportunities to connect with staff members on a regular basis, Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), learning and study skills workshops, and additional events throughout the semester (VanBergeijk et al., 2008). During the afternoon session, students will explore the DSR website and create a plan for future utilization of services. Then, they will travel to the DSR office for an

open house event and will have the opportunity to meet the staff and familiarize themselves with the space.

The following seminar will focus on introducing the idea of self-advocacy and portraying its importance to students. Many students with ASD lack the self-advocacy skills to find and utilize campus resources and opportunities on their own, which is an important skill to support integration into campus life (Nachman, 2020). Self-advocacy skills should continue to be developed throughout an individual's life and will require continued support. During the morning session, staff from DSR will present students with common circumstances in which they should advocate for themselves. Then, the afternoon session will encourage students to draft emails and conversative responses to advocacy situations.

The third seminar morning session will be taught by two experienced faculty members who have expressed interest in working with students with ASD. These faculty members will provide an overview of academic expectations in college in comparison to high school. The faculty will also encourage students to utilize the strengths commonly associated with ASD during their academic career, such as attention to detail and passion (Hillier, et al., 2021). The afternoon session will conclude with an activity in which students will work together to read example syllabi and practice time management strategies to plan their assignments for the semester. Students will practice using an academic planner to make note of important due dates and scheduling intentional and specific time to work on assignments and upcoming assessments. This group activity will also allow the students to familiarize themselves with collaborative opportunities in higher education and receive feedback regarding their interactions with faculty and staff. Students with ASD commonly have difficulties working in groups and acknowledging viewpoints that may differ from their own (Gobbo and Shmulsky, 2014).

Orientation Week Two

The second week of orientation programming will provide students with more specific resources across campus that they should continue to utilize during their academic career. These services were intentionally presented during the second week, as students will ideally feel less overwhelmed by their introduction to campus and have a greater capacity to retain the information and connections provided.

It is important to acknowledge note that students with ASD hold other identities as well, which may create especially unique circumstances for each student (Nachman, 2020). To best support students with these differences and identities, one session will include presentations for the Office of Multicultural Affairs, LGBTQ+ Resource Center, and the Center for Women and Gender Equity. These presentations will not only provide opportunities for those students with intersectional identities to feel better supported but will also continue to familiarize the students with the variety of backgrounds and identities that they will likely interact with during their college career. Subsequent seminar sessions will cover a variety of topics, including presentations from the Student Academic Success Center, Tutoring and Reading Center, Career Center, which serve as beneficial resources towards continued student success.

At the completion of the second week of orientation programming, students will participate in a collaborative programming effort between the various other orientation programs on campus, such as Laker Familia and the Black Excellence orientation. This opportunity will allow those students with intersecting identities to still participate and connect with other individuals and resources related to their additional minoritized identity.

Parent/Supporter Orientation

Parents and supporters have been identified as important stakeholders in the lives of students with ASD (Hillier, et al., 2021). Because parents and supporters have often assisted with their students' needs and advocacy opportunities throughout their lives, many students will continue to depend on them to seek accommodations and opportunities for support in college (Hillier, et al., 2021). While some parents and supporters may be familiar with higher education, others may not, and could benefit from an opportunity to learn how best to support their student. I propose a parent/ supporter orientation program to occur during the first day of the ASD student orientation program. Because many parents and supporters will already be on campus if their student is living residentially, this is an ideal opportunity to meet with faculty and staff members.

Prior to the student's arrival on campus, they will be required to complete a FERPA form related to any parents or supporters that they would like to participate in this orientation activity. If students would prefer not to, or do not have the capacity to include a parent or supporter during their orientation, they will have the opportunity to still participate in this portion of the programming with their Campus Links mentor.

This orientation will occur the day after the students with ASD move into their on-campus housing accommodations. Parents and supporters will be expected to find lodging accommodations on their own, but GVSU will suggest local options. The day-long event will begin with light refreshments and an opportunity for parents and supporters to meet one another in a casual setting. Then, parents and supporters will be led through an in-depth campus tour by student tour guides. This tour will include opportunities to enter the offices of various resources on campus, such as the disability support office and tutoring center. This familiarity with

important resources will allow these parents and supporters to describe the space to their students, and hopefully ease some anxieties they may have prior to utilizing a campus resource.

Then, parents and supporters will hear presentations from various partners across campus. A staff member from the disability support office will begin with a conversation surrounding self-advocacy, and the importance of empowering students with ASD to practice these skills. For many students with ASD, their parents and supporters will continue to be an important voice in their decision-making process (Hillier, et al., 2021). To positively influence their students to utilize resources and integrate themselves into college, it is important they are familiar with the numerous resources and opportunities available. Presentations will follow from multiple offices across campus, including financial aid, career center, tutoring and reading center, and student academic success center.

Following the presentations, parents and supporters will reunite with their students for a closing celebration with provided lunch. During this time, families will have the opportunity to meet one-on-one with a member of the disability support office to discuss the student's unique needs, questions, and concerns. This individual opportunity will allow the student, and their parents and supporters to begin to build their relationship with the disability support office, which will remain important for their continued academic and social success throughout the entirety of their college career.

Project Evaluation

Evaluation of these programs would take place through quantitative and qualitative assessment. Following completion of the two-week orientation program, the students will be asked to complete a qualitative instrument detailing their experiences. This survey will ask targeted questions relating to learning outcomes of the program and provide the student with

opportunities for suggestions and feedback. For example, students will be asked to identify three resources that they plan to utilize during their first semester of college. This question will analyze the learning goal that states that students will be able to identify at least three on-campus resources. In addition, students will be asked to name five peers that they interacted with during the program, achieving the goal of fostering opportunities for social interaction for the students.

Parents and supporters will receive a similar questionnaire, detailing their experience and the ways in which they will utilize their experience to help their students. This questionnaire will ask individuals to identify where the disability support office is located on campus. This will aim to analyze the overall goal of ensuring that parents and supporters will be able to help their students find physical locations in a space that may be initially overwhelming for them. Finally, the survey will ask individuals to identify any concerns that they have related to their student's attendance at the institution.

Project Conclusions

Students with ASD are impacted by unique strengths and challenges associated with their diagnosis. As a result, it is important to provide these students with tailored learning opportunities to better promote integration and success throughout their post-secondary education. Intentional orientation programming allows for student affairs professionals to share specific resources and opportunities with these students, while beginning the acclimation process to an entirely new campus and landscape. Utilization of resources can only occur when students have developed self-advocacy skills and are familiar with ways in which they can find the resources. Academic and social success of students with ASD are vital in the persistence of these students to graduation, and eventual career decisions.

Parents and supporters have traditionally been the main advocates for students with ASD, until their enrollment in post-secondary education. While they may continue to advocate for their students, it is important that these supporters are also familiar with the resources available at the institution, while promoting growth in self-advocacy skills among their students. The parent and supporter orientation will also serve as a transition resource for these individuals, as they prepare to let their students be more independent than ever before. It is important that these stakeholders also feel comfortable and confident in the abilities of the institution to support their student.

Plans for Implementation

This program was intended to be implemented at Grand Valley State University but could be adapted to serve students at any four-year institution with needs for improved transitional programming for students with ASD. Additional funding will likely need to be allocated to the Disability Support Resources department in order to fund these programmatic suggestions. Awareness of these supportive transitional opportunities should be shared with all prospective students at the institution in order to spread awareness and encourage participation. Information regarding these opportunities could also be shared with high school counselors, to familiarize students and their families with the support services offered at the institution prior to their enrollment.

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