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Article abstract

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Approaches to Teaching Self-Advocacy Skills in Specialized Undergraduate Programs for Autistic College Students

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Abstract

This study examined how faculty who teach in specialized undergraduate programs for autistic college students approach self-advocacy teaching. Test et al.'s (2005) conceptual framework of self-advocacy was used as a lens to investigate this topic. Through ten semi-structured interviews, seven themes emerged to address two research questions: (a) improve students' learning skills; (b) support students' career development; (c) improve students' executive functioning skills; (d) improve students' transition skills, (e) use flexible classrooms to support students; (f) support students' skills development; and (g) develop students' self-awareness skills. The discussions highlight the challenges, approaches, and conceptual implementations of the findings, within the broader literature, on faculty approaches to students' development of self-advocacy skills.

Introduction

Autistic college students are underrepresented in colleges, because of a variety of challenges related to their diagnosis (Carabajal et al., 2017; Dunn et al., 2012; Hong, 2015; Pfeifer et al., 2020). One crucial problem that college students with autistic-spectrum disorders (ASD) face is their difficulty to self-advocate for their own needs (Hotez et al., 2018). Specialized undergraduate programs for students with ASD are limited. These programs are designed to educate autistic students. Access to such programs may sometimes be an obstacle to autistic students, because not all colleges have these programs. Considering the complications associated with diagnoses of ASD, parents usually want their children to attend programs that are close to home (Viezel et al., 2020). According to Viezel et al. (2020), nearly half of the states in the United States do not have colleges and universities that offer specialized ASD programs; further, in states that do have these technical programs, these programs are limited.

Before autistic students transition into college, parents and guardians must make significant decisions on their behalf. Without these supporters, the decisions about these learners' college experiences become the student's responsibility (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Pfeifer et al., 2020). When they arrive on campus and start learning about college life, they must adjust to academic

activities. For example, incoming college students must prioritize their time regarding the following: meeting assignment deadlines, scheduling appointments to meet with their advisors, getting involved with co-curricular activities on campus, and meeting new classmates (Hadley, 2007; Pfeifer et al., 2020). While college academic experience requires the ability to self-advocate respectfully and professionally, research about self-advocacy and how college students with ASD learn these skills is needed to understand and educate these students (Pfeifer et al., 2020; White et al., 2017; Viezel et al., 2020).

Studies of post-secondary learners with ASD acknowledge the difficulties in managing these struggles, such as self-advocacy (Elias & White, 2017). Hotez et al. (2018) investigated a two-week-summer program developed in the United States to aid autistic students as they transition into college. Two students were given leadership roles as mentors, with ten incoming students with ASD as mentees. The study revealed that transitional programs greatly benefit college students with ASD in self-advocating (Hotez et al., 2018). Moreover, parents of college students with ASD are hopeful about seeing their adult children self-advocate, as they consider opportunities to advance their education (Hotez et al., 2018). Schmidt et al. (2019) have defined self-advocacy as the ability to represent their interests when managing a disease or a disability.

Researchers have developed strategies to address self-advocacy among people with disabilities. Test et al. (2005) identified the following components where self-advocacy among disability is applied: knowledge of self and rights, communication, and leadership. Self-advocacy allows individuals to increase their ability to seek, evaluate, and use information to express themselves (Schmidt et al., 2019). Previous studies, such as those conducted by Hendrickson et al. (2017), Hotez et al. (2018), White et al. (2017), and Livingston et al. (2019), researched self-advocacy, social skills, interpersonal relations, and the use of mentors in transitional programs for college students with ASD. These studies, however, differ from the current studies about self-advocacy and specialized undergraduate programs for students with ASD, because the participants in those studies were selected from students with ASD, while the current selected participants are from college faculty. Studies have found that self-advocacy skills are critical in retaining college students with disabilities (Pfeifer et al., 2020). A survey of parents of students with ASD revealed that self-advocacy and social interaction training were in demand (Elias & White, 2017).

According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (NSCRC, n.d.), "Undergraduate enrollment grew 1.2 % in the fall of 2023" (para.1), indicating an increase since the pandemic. The number of college students attending post-secondary education remains a top priority for many Americans. For autistic students and their families, the lack of self-advocacy, interpersonal relationships, and social skills compound the challenges of their diagnoses, resulting in their inability to enroll in a regular college program (Elias & White, 2017).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore specialized undergraduate programs for autistic college students through semi-structured interviews with a thematic analysis of how faculty members, who teach autistic students, approach and promote self-advocacy among their undergraduates. Research conducted on related programs for college students has broadly focused on those with disabilities, such as ASD and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD; Hotez et al., 2018; Pfeifer et al., 2020). However, how faculty members teach self-advocacy and promote these skills in specialized undergraduate programs remains unanswered (Cox et al., 2017; Elias & White, 2017; Hotez et al., 2018; Pfeifer et al., 2020).

Methodology

This qualitative thematic study explored self-advocacy teaching in specialized undergraduate programs for autistic college students through semi-structured interviews. The research aimed to provide faculty in autism programs with approaches to self-advocacy teaching, based on faculty experiences. This study addresses two research questions: How do specialized undergraduate programs support autistic college students to self-advocate? How do faculty members approach self-advocacy teaching in specialized undergraduate programs for autistic college students?

Demographic data were collected using the survey data tool, Qualtrics. Emails were sent to ten faculty who were identified as potential participants for this study. The data collected included age, gender, educational background and qualifications, along with years of experience in disability studies, including autism. The data collection occurred from the summer of 2022 until the summer of 2023. Aside from the time that each participant took to read and sign the approved consent form, each interview lasted approximately 25 minutes. The interviews were recorded. The participants were asked the same questions.

This study was conceptualized using Test et al.'s (2005) self-advocacy framework for college students with disabilities. The focus is on the communication aspect of the framework, which encompasses self-advocacy elements, including assertiveness, negotiation, articulation, body language, assistive technology, listening, persuasion, and compromise (Pfeifer et al., 2020; Test et al., 2005).

Participants

This research identified and selected faculty using the College Autism Network (CAN), a network of scholars specializing in the field. Participants were selected through a survey that was distributed among network members. Scholars have debated whether the concept of saturation should be the focus of the qualitative researcher, when deciding on a sample size (Dworkin, 2012). The study's participant selection was designed with a guiding principle for consideration: participants must know the topic well enough to respond to the issues about the teaching and learning of self-advocacy among autistic college students in a specialized academic program. The criteria targeted individuals with specific knowledge of the research topic to ensure that the selected participants could provide valuable, in-depth data to address the research questions.

Sampling

This investigation employed purposive sampling and snowball techniques. A purposive sample suggests that a group of people with special qualifications represent the interests of the topic under study (Fraenkel et al., 2019). Unlike simple random sampling, which gives the general population equal chances, purposive sampling focuses on features that each participant should have in order to participate in the selection process. In choosing participants from autistic undergraduate programs, this researcher aimed to enhance the quality of the information collected. Given this reason, from the pool of respondents, the ten selected participants had to indicate if they were part of a faculty in specialized undergraduate programs for autistic students. Selected participants received a second email about their selection for the study's second phase. Further instructions about time and Zoom interviews were provided, with data highlighting the topic's significance.

Data collection proceeded after all of the participants completed the informed consent process through the survey questionnaire, and was based on the approved Institutional Review Board (IRB) documentation. The researcher sent potential participants emails and reminders. Once these groups of respondents consented to this study, arrangements were made for the semi-structured interviews. These interviews were conducted via Zoom.

Table 1: Recruitment phases.

Phase-one	Phase-two	Phase-three
Emailed 40 potential participants	Shared recruitment documents through professional autism spectrum network	Snowballing
5 potential participants responded	15 potential participants responded	5 potential participants responded
3 completed the interview	4 completed the interview	3 completed the interview

Specialized college programs

Participants were selected from seven colleges with specialized undergraduate programs for autistic students. These academic institutions enroll up to 30 or more autistic students per cohort. Students are either housed on campus or off-campus. Learning experiences are face-to-face in a classroom, or sometimes in a dormitory, or even in an online setting. Students are taught social skills, self-advocacy skills, how to function in an academic setting, and how to interview for jobs. Academic courses in these colleges are taught by designated faculty with the requisite credentials for those purposes. Social skills and other behavioural skills are taught by faculty with the designation of support staff. Faculty teach these skills with mentors who model behaviour scenarios for students to learn from. Self-advocacy is a significant aspect of specialized undergraduate programs for autistic college students.

Instruments

The interview questions that were required to understand each approach to this type of teaching were determined by Test et al.'s (2005) conceptual framework, which includes the following self-advocacy skills: assertiveness, negotiation, articulation, persuasion, body language, compromise, assistive technology, and listening (Pfeifer et al., 2020). This current study adopted Patton's (2016) interview ideas and Test et al.'s (2005) communication elements as guides to structuring the interview protocol for the semi-structured interviews, because they provided information about self-advocacy that can be of assistance in answering the three research questions. The semi-structured interview questions included the following:

- First, tell me about the academic support program for autistic students at your college.
- To what extent did your experience influence your decision to teach in a specialized autism program for autistic students?
- Can you take me through a class session when you must teach self-advocacy? What does it look like?

- What are some of your biggest challenges when teaching students self-advocacy skills?
- How is self-advocacy defined within the context of specialized programs for autistic students at your college/university?
- In what ways do students in your program demonstrate self-advocacy?
- What steps do you follow to promote self-advocacy among your students? Can you give some examples?
- Before concluding this interview, is there something about the self-advocacy of autistic college students that you think we have not yet covered? Is there anything else you would like to share?

Further, the semi-structured interviews included background, experience, and behaviour questions, as well as opinion and open-ended questions. Participants independently reviewed the data collected.

Procedures

Data was collected using semi-structured Zoom interviews. After the pre-interview surveys were returned, the researcher developed a rapport with the participants, and then contacted potential participants after the IRB approved the application to contact this study. Emails were sent after this researcher had listed a group of potential participants found through the college's websites. This yielded few responses. Efforts were then directed toward professional autism and disability organizations, such as the College Autism Network (CAN). The researcher emailed an interest survey to the group, allowing members to share the survey with potential faculty members who might have been interested in participating in this study. The survey provided information about requirements. Based on the pool of interest from the participants, ten faculty members were selected from seven colleges with specialized ASD undergraduate programs for autistic students.

The participants consented to their involvement in a survey using Qualtrics. After the survey questions were returned, a date was set up with them for the semi-structured interviews. Criteria for selecting participants for the study included the following: a) They must be faculty members or teach in any of the ten selected colleges' ASD programs; and b) They must know about specialized college programs for autistic students. It is important to note that these selected colleges are recognized for investing in specialized ASD programs.

Data analysis

The analysis for this study was conducted using two types of data—one from the pre-interview surveys, and the other from the semi-structured interviews. The analysis sought to draw a conclusion, explaining how faculty who teach undergraduate programs for autistic students approach self-advocacy teaching. The surveys, semi-structured interviews, and a review of specialized autism programs on the college website were used to analyze the data collected from each study phase. Thematic and content analysis were employed to analyze the interview data.

Analyzing the data started by collecting the responses from the Qualtrics survey. Subsequently, this data was uploaded into Dedoose software and linked to the uploaded interview transcripts. Linking the demographic and interview data provided easy access to both data in the analysis. Each data set was coded using the software to produce a series of codes that emerged as themes. Coding qualitative data takes different forms, depending on several factors, such as research questions or purpose. O'Connor et al. (2020) recommended how to approach qualitative

research coding, while ensuring the validity and reliability of the qualitative-analysis process. Content analysis and thematic analysis were used in analyzing data from the transcripts.

The two research questions served as the basis for the coding matrix. The rationale for having the questions guide the coding process was to group responses based on the research questions. This provided an easy way to identify and assign the codes to the correct research questions to develop themes. Out of the total codes that were created in the process, seven final themes emerged from the data analysis. The themes represent faculty members' approach to self-advocacy teaching.

Results

The Study Participants

Specialized programs are offered at four-year or two-year colleges. Ten faculty members were selected for this study from a group of voluntary participants to represent faculty and support staff who teach in these programs. Six participants (60%) were from four-year colleges, and four (40%) were from two-year colleges.

Geographically, five (50%) of the participants were from the mid-west, three (30%) were from the mid-Atlantic, and one (10%) was from the south-east. One participant (10%) was from the west coast.

Table 2: Participants' college-type and geographic location.

Characteristic	N	%
College Type		
Four-year	6	60
Two-year	4	40
Geographic Location		
Midwest	5	50
Mid-Atlantic	3	30
South-east	1	10
West	1	10

Participant demographics

Most of the participants (n = 6; 60%) have a master's degree; two participants (20%) hold a doctoral degree, and two (20%) hold a bachelor's degree. Participants in this study are all faculty from colleges across the U.S. Females (n = 8; 80%) largely dominate the faculty in this study. One participant (10%) identified as male, while one (10%) identified as non-binary. Nine participants (90%) identified as White, and one (10%) identified as African- American. Most participants (n = 5; 50%) are between the ages of 35 and 44. Three participants (30%) identify in the age range of

28-34. One participant (10%) identified as under 28 years old, while another (10%) indicated an age of 50 or older. All the participants reported being part of a college program that specialized in teaching or training college students' self-advocacy skills. Most participants (n = 9; 90%) reported holding a higher-educational degree, with English as a first language, except one (10%), who indicated that English was a second language. In addition, they all had qualifications and experience in self-advocacy of students with ASD. Four participants (40%) identified as not having any disability, three (30%) said that they had a disability, two participants (20%) were uncertain about their disability status, and one (10%) preferred not to disclose this status.

Table 3: Participants' demographics.

Characteristic	*N*	*%*
Education		
Doctoral degree	2	20
Master's degree	6	60
Bachelor's degree	2	20
Gender		
Female	8	80
Male	1	10
Non-binary	1	10
Race		
White	9	90
African American	1	10
Age		
Under 28	1	10
28-34	3	30
35-44	5	50
50 or older	1	10
English Language		
Yes	9	90
No	1	10
Disability Status		
Yes	3	30
No	4	40

Uncertain	2	20
Prefer not to disclose	1	10

Emergent Themes

The seven colleges were selected, due to the self-advocacy focus of their ASD. The following emerged as themes in the data analysis from the semi-structured interviews of the ten faculty from the chosen institutions.

This analysis is broken into two sections, so as to address both research questions. The first one sought to understand how college undergraduate programs for students with ASD support the development of self-advocacy skills. The following themes emerged: (a) improve students' learning skills, (b) improve students' executive functioning skills, (c) improve students' transition skills, and (d) support students' career development. The second one sought to understand how faculty approach self-advocacy teaching. The following themes emerged: (e) use flexible classrooms to support students, (f) support students in skills development, and (g) students' development of self-awareness skills. All seven colleges provide a degree plan that involves faculty in helping students to learn self-advocacy skills. Teachers are assigned roles that ensure students' academic progression, with individualized approaches to meet each student's learning needs.

Structure of Specialized Programs

Theme one: Improve students' learning skills

Participants were asked to explain the structure of the academic-support program for students with ASD in their colleges. While all ten faculty members mentioned that self-advocacy skills were an essential part of the schools' ASD programs, each institution had a different approach to self-advocacy. The theme of the academic-support approach refers to the structure of the ASD programs of the ten colleges. A participant, Harris, who has over eight years of experience, described how her college program is structured to support the academics of students with ASD. She associated her college's ASD program with one that is individualistic in structure, such that it addresses the self-advocacy needs of students:

> I work in our college program for students with autism. Our program is run through a medical center, and we support students at all levels of their academic careers, from first-year students to seniors. Our program is a fee-for-service program, so, our students pay a fee to participate. The main components of the program are individualized per student, so most of our students meet with their lead facilitators, [who are] graduate social-work students, who support them in various ways.

Participants who spoke on creating a supportive college environment agreed that it was vital in teaching self-advocacy skills. Decoy, for example, cited flexible programs tailored to individual students as an approach her college implemented to teach self-advocacy.

Participants suggested that ASD programs must be designed around individual students. It should incorporate educational planning as a model to enhance self-advocacy skills, and train students to be leaders. Achieving this list would require creating a supportive learning environment.

Theme two: Improve students' executive functioning skills

Six out of ten participants identified executive function as a prominent theme. Participants agreed that these skills were challenging for many students with learning differences. These abilities involve planning for multiple tasks, stress management, problem-solving, time management, and organizational skills. For example, participant Decoy mentioned that having a one-on-one interaction with students was one of the approaches that her college uses to teach them how to self-advocate. "It's more[approaches], you know, okay, this student, it seems like they will want that level of support. So, then we schedule, you know, one-on-one support with them throughout the semester." Participant Kurt cited executive function as a core part of her college's ASD program.

The implication of social events is to ensure that students with ASD would learn to network with other students. Additionally, these individuals would also socialize and meet new students. Also, in responding to the question of how specialized college programs are structured to address the self-advocacy needs of autistic students, Katty, a participant whose college is in the mid-west, and has over five years of experience in spectrum studies, mentioned that a blended, structured, and unstructured approach to teaching self-advocacy skills was her college's strategy to address the needs of its ASD students. Katty explained how her college engages these students:

> We work on their independent living skills, not to where we would be going into the dorms and helping them [to] do their laundry, but making sure that they understand the processes to do that, and how to plan their time.

Six quotes from respondents support the theme of executive function. Participants' general view was that self-advocacy skills could be taught by teaching students with ASD how to build relationships, recognize self-awareness, use social events to teach students about building networks, and design ASD programs that use structured and unstructured approaches to teaching self-advocacy.

Theme three: Improve students' transition skills

Transitional support emerged as a prominent theme from the question about the academic-support program for students on the spectrum. This type of assistance is provided during students' transition from high school to the college environment. Faculty-member Musky, who has over ten years of experience in spectrum studies and support, interpreted transitional support as a type that transitions students into various career paths. This included supporting students' academics to be self-reliant. Musky's assertion of her college support program is illustrated in the following quote: "During their transition from high school to college, and college to career, learning coordinators support each student's needs to develop independence through skills [that are] critical to college and career success."

Participant Belly associated her college program with one that transitions students into college and career, while providing health classes. There was a familiar statement that educating students about their health will make them aware of how to effectively manage their well-being. While this is not a direct self-advocacy need, it is, however, an opportunity to assist students with health education. Belly explained:

> There's also a health class that students take. I don't teach that, but that's, like, the last one. It's a two-year program. Students can opt-out at any time. They do have to pay for the credits, unless they have a financial-aid package that will cover them, but these end up becoming add-on credits, so there is a cost associated with them.

There was a common sub-theme of social activities as an avenue to facilitate self-advocacy learning. For example, participant Ally described: "The college's program is structured around social activities to help students transition to the college environment." This is done using common open spaces in the school's dormitories. She further disclosed, "So, we [the ASD college program] do structured social activities for the student[s] and have a designated study-hall space here." Faculty-member Kurt asserted that college transitional support should be designed around teamwork. This participant described how her faculty engaged student mentors to encourage ASD students to self-advocate.

Twelve quotes from participants support the theme of transitional support. The general view was that self-advocacy skills can be structured around career paths, while addressing other challenges associated with the stress of learning. For example, mental health and training were suggested to reduce tense learning experiences. Another way to reduce anxiety was to provide a mandatory orientation that encompasses social activities, in order to build and learn about teamwork in a way that would improve self-advocacy skills.

Theme four: Support students' career development

As a result of the challenges that autistic students may encounter when finding employment, faculty described the role that they played in ensuring that students are ready for the workforce after graduation. Securing the right job, as an autistic student, was seen as the ability to self-advocate, although, faculty recognized the challenges that are associated with the processes involved for this endeavour. Career building emerged as one of the main themes in faculty's responses to the question about ASD college programs. Four faculty members cited workforce development as a critical element of teaching ASD students' self-advocacy. For example, participant Jossy described how students in her college's program are prepared for the workforce in the second year of the four-year program: "Second-year students take one hour a week for career readiness, and both [classes] are a year long."

Participant Belly, who has over seven years of experience working with students on the spectrum and works for a college on the west coast, described her college program with some similarity to Jossy's college, which is in the mid-Atlantic. The need identified by both Jossy and Belly is to support students in developing skills that would make them successful in writing resumés, fitting into the job market, and preparing them for interviews. Belly disclosed that her college's program collaborates with career services that plan and host workshops. She distinguished her college's workforce program from other colleges:

> [Our program] focuses on trying to help students think about [issues]. Now, let's think about who we are, who are we going to be as professionals, as people moving on to other [areas of career development], you know, to finish degrees at universities, or to move into the workforce beyond. . ... A lot of our students do, you know, hourly wage work, but, like, what do we see for ourselves beyond that?

Participant Kurt thought that connecting career development to her college's ASD program was significant in teaching self-advocacy. This respondent explained how the college uses one-on-one interaction with peer mentors to assist in developing skills for the labour workforce:

> We do something related to career development that can be something from a workshop on resumé building and using your strengths to build your resumé, to find[ing] a job that interests you. We talk about resumés and career development during those one-on-one meetings. If students are interested in that, if they're at the point where they're looking for on-campus jobs or starting to look for internships, that becomes a core part of those one-on-one meetings. Our office works closely with career development. Once students are ready to start looking for internships or jobs, we make sure that they feel comfortable joining in that meeting with career development, if that helps them [to] feel more comfortable. Because, as much as we can help them during one-on-one sessions, the people in career development have the tools and knowledge to find those jobs [for them].

Four quotes from respondents support the theme of career and employment. Participants' general view was that career development must lead to self-advocacy, which should position students in a space that would enable their ability to work and function.

Table 5: Themes and their features based on analysis of colleges' support approach (RQ1).

Theme/ Code	Description	Number of excerpts linked to theme	Examples
Improve Students' Learning Skills	ASD program that is structured around supporting students in academics.	39	Participant Jay: "That kind of place where we provide that individual support. So, whether it's teaching a specific skill, like a professional email to a professor, helping them draft that, helping them [to] build some independence in doing things like that."
Improve Students' Executive Functioning Skills	ASD program that is structured to support students in their executive functioning.	20	Participant Katty: "We work on their independent living skills, but not to where we would be going into the dorms and helping them [to] do their laundry, but making sure that they understand, like, the processes to do that, and how to plan their time."
Improve Students' Transition Skills	ASD program that is structured to support students in their transitioning into college.	11	Participant Musky: "During their transition from high school to college and college to career, learning coordinators support each student's needs to develop independence through skills [that

			are] critical to college and career success."
Support Students' Career Development	ASD program that is structured around supporting students in careers.	7	Participant Jossy: "Second-year students take one hour a week for career readiness, and both are a year long."

Approaches to Self-advocacy Teaching

Theme one: Using flexible classrooms to support students

As a result of the individual learning style of students with ASD, having flexible classrooms is seen as helpful in teaching students about self-advocacy skills. Participants generally associated flexible classrooms with structured and unstructured learning spaces that adjust teaching as lessons progress. Participant Ally, who has over ten years of experience in disability studies, cited the need for faculty to intentionally develop an individualized self-advocacy strategy for students, as an example of a flexible classroom. She explained that in a relaxed classroom, students are given the lead role in taking the initiative:

> So, if there are some areas where students need to improve their self-advocacy skills, we are very intentional. Yeah, so again, we are very deliberate about not doing things on behalf of the student here. We take a solid approach to that through our program.

Decoy shared feelings similar to Ally's assertion of allowing students to take the initiative by leading. Decoy interpreted her role in teaching self-advocacy as an intermediary, rather than making decisions for students, stating:

> We support with resources. We'll step in, if it is needed, again, if it is something where a professor should be providing this [support]. The student doesn't have authority over the professor. So, we try not to tell anyone about any diagnosis, symptom, or any of that, unless needed. So, it forces students to determine what they need to say to people. I find that it is something that a student navigates, because we will not, and maybe that intermediary piece, again, we won't be telling other people about it. They must determine, okay, what am I comfortable sharing? What do I think is appropriate to share? And navigate that, because they're not given the option of us telling people about it.

Musky responded to the question about her approach to teaching self-advocacy by providing a scenario of assisting her students with drafting emails and making phone calls. Her explanation touched on issues about the type of support. According to Musky, she usually supported her students, until they came out with their initiatives to address the self-advocacy challenge. She explained:

> Often, students draft an email with me, gaining support in phrasing and wording their email as needed. Sometimes, if a phone call is required, I will make bullet points with the student in what they need to make sure to state, then we will role play until they feel comfortable, and then the student will make the phone call while in my office.

Similarly, Kurt explained that students must be allowed to share challenges for other students to learn from. The participant had the following recommendations about how students should be approached:

> If the student feels comfortable bringing it [, the self-advocacy challenge,] up in the group setting, bringing it to dinner, and saying, most of you live with a roommate. I encourage students to reach out to others with similar experiences, especially students in the program. And we also, as staff, work together to help students get the skills [that] they need. So, we check in with each other constantly. We update each other about what's happening with all the students. And then, if there is a situation that one of the students brings to their mentor, and their mentor needs to learn how to go about helping them [sic] with it, it comes to our supervision meeting, and then, [to] the rest of the mentors and the office director.

Jossy cited direct prompting, as an approach that she uses in teaching self-advocacy to her students. She explained, "Yeah, so we do this [self-advocacy]. We build it into our students' first-year skills class. So, there is some direct instruction." Musky also responded to this question, by citing direct prompting as a strategy that she uses to teach her students self-advocacy skills. Musky explained, "On other occasions, students need direct prompting to self-advocate, as they transition from high school, in which [sic] teachers would reach out, to higher education, in which [sic] students must self-advocate [for] their needs."

Some other strategies that the participants applied as a way to support teaching self-advocacy include letting students take lead roles, creating a safe learning environment, using media, and providing classroom examples. Peer mentors, direct prompting, and encouraging their students were also among the approaches that the faculty used, and thought was relevant to students' self-advocacy.

Theme two: Supporting students in skills development

Partly because of the lack of self-advocacy skills, and often due to the challenges that students with autism may face, providing them with the ability to self-advocate becomes an integral part of faculty's teaching. Developing these proficiencies was associated with flexible and unstructured teaching that may lead to students' success. Decoy, who is in the mid-Atlantic, and has over five years of experience in supporting and teaching self-advocacy skills to students, shared her thoughts:

> [Students ask,] "I need more flexibility here, and so, what can we talk about, particularly in that case, because that's not necessarily something I might need to have been on?" Maybe it's something that [sic] [with regard to] another life event [that] is happening. It's not related to their disability; it's that they need to be able to communicate with their professor[s]. So, it wouldn't necessarily be my role to step in and say, "You need to provide this, because it's outside the realm of accommodation." So, then, we sit down with the student; we talk about what's going on, why they need this, what they've done about it, and then, we strategize from there, right? So, okay, here are your options. You can email your professor[s]; you can talk to them after class[es].

Faculty-member Jay suggested that self-advocacy must be taught from the beginning of ASD programs, because it is essential for students with ASD. Jay, whose college is in the mid-west, explained that students who enroll in her program may lack self-advocacy skills in some

areas, but may have strengths in others. Based on these differences among her students, she was of the view that an individualized approach may be the best way to teach self-advocacy skills among students with ASD. She explained:

> So, when they were interviewing and learning more about the program, we talked a little about self-advocacy, so that's when we introduce it. Just get a feel for: Do they know what it is? What does it mean to them? Are they able to advocate on their behalf, and in what areas? Which might vary [among different students and situations]. They may feel perfectly comfortable [with the] supporting [staff members], [who,] on their behalf, [help them] with [things like] housing, but not in a different place, [such as off-campus].

Three themes from the participants support the idea of the faculty's teaching approach. Participants thought that self-advocacy skills should lead to the development of self-awareness and daily-life skills, while also providing guidance to students.

Theme three: Students' development of self-awareness skills

Three main themes emerged from the analysis related to teaching self-advocacy skills, including using flexible classrooms to support students, supporting students in skill development, and developing self-awareness skills. When participants approached self-advocacy teaching, there was a strong premise of participants ensuring that students leave the classroom in order to develop their self-awareness (identified explicitly by three participants). Self-awareness is a student's ability to know who they are in their community and society. Skill development is when students are taught to use their disability to overcome the challenges that confront them as persons with autism. Running flexible classrooms is the unstructured nature of schooling for students with ASD. This leaves the faculty the discretion to adjust while teaching.

Participant Katty, who has over five years of experience in working with autistic students, associated her approach to teaching self-advocacy with an emphasis on helping students identify themselves in society. She felt that when students grasp the concept of self-identity, it empowers them to self-advocate. She explained her approach in the following way:

> So, if they [students] do not want to say [that] they're autistic, we try to help them learn how to speak about their strengths and success[es] in a particular environment. "These are the supports that I need," [for example,] or again, what accommodations they might need without having to necessarily reflect on what their disability is.

Tenny's responses to her approach to teaching self-advocacy were centred on assisting students in building character around self-confidence. She first talked about the length of the program. To achieve the goal of her approach, this faculty member, with over ten years of experience in disability studies, believed that the focus of her classes was also to ensure that strengths and weaknesses are identified, and addressed, as her students' progress through the semester. Tenny explained:

> It's a 10-week program where students are built [sic] on various topics. So, they're building their self-awareness around themselves, and learning about their strengths, weaknesses, and challenges. Learning about all of their, you know, difficulties with specific sensory inputs, and reviewing just [things like] emotion regulation and that self-control.

Jay, who has over eight years of experience, interpreted her approach as focusing on cooperative skills. She explained: "I focus on communication, and we cover topics such as compromise negotiation." Kurt shared a different approach, although hers also centred on developing self-awareness. She believed that developing self-advocacy must be handled in the following way: "We have recreational and mindfulness activities that either take place in the student recreational center, so in the gym, or in the lounge, [which is] in the same building as the gym, or in our century room that the disabilities office facilitates."

Table 6: Participants support approach (RQ2).

Theme/Code	Description	Number of excerpts linked to theme	Examples
Using Flexible Classrooms to Support Students	A teaching approach that is open to adjusting lessons based on students' emotional behaviour.	34	Participant Ally: "So, if there are some areas where students need to improve their self-advocacy skills, we are very intentional. Yeah, so again, we are very deliberate that we're not doing things on behalf of the student here."
Supporting students in skill development	Teaching approach that focuses on developing a set of skills that students would need to self-advocate.	15	Participant Decoy: "I give guidance and direction, you know if needed. Still, we [the faculty] will only step in, if it's our role."
Students' development of self-awareness skills	Teaching that focuses on developing students' self-awareness.	7	Participant Tenny: "It's a 10-week program where students are built [sic] on various topics. So, they're building their self-awareness around themselves, and learning about their strengths, weaknesses, and challenges."

Discussions

Implications and interpretations: ASD college support programs

Overall, ASD college programs are structured around four approaches: improve students' learning skills, improve students' executive functioning skills, improve students' transition skills, and support students' career development. Individual instructors revealed that faculty approach

self-advocacy teaching in three ways: using flexible classrooms to support students, supporting students in skill development, and developing self-awareness skills.

Approach 1: Improve students' learning skills

Supporting academic learning skills in undergraduate autism-specific programs is significant to the overall success of autistic students. The implications of faculty support are complicated, and can significantly impact the educational experience of students with autism. Researchers recognize that self-advocacy skills are a significant part of academic success for autistic students (Fleming et al., 2017; Holzberg et al., 2019; Kinney & Eakman, 2017; Lombardi et al., 2011; Pfeifer et al., 2020). Based on the analysis of the findings of this current study, the structures of ASD programs can be interpreted as recognizing and finding solutions to the unique learning styles, strengths, and challenges of each student with autism.

Mazzotti et al. (2013) and Test et al. (2009) suggested that educators encourage students' self-advocacy skills by implementing programs in a classroom, and arranging a suitable and conducive environment for student learning by modeling self-advocacy skills. The implication is that learning is personalized to accommodate and cater to the specific needs of autistic students, encouraging a more inclusive and accessible learning environment in specialized autism programs.

Approach 2: Improve students' executive functioning skills

Providing executive functioning skills means understanding that autistic individuals may struggle with organization, time management, and planning skills. Executive functioning skills encompass cognitive processes that allow autistic students to manage thoughts, actions, and emotions (Paradiz et al., 2018). Given the challenges of these abilities, ASD college-support programs should be tailored to assist students in the college setting (Viezel et al., 2020; White et al., 2017). The interpretation of how these programs are designed suggests that interventions are purposely individualized, considering the unique needs and strengths of each student with ASD. Examples of approaches include all-inclusive support focusing on academic tasks and other daily living skills [that are] needed for college life.

Promoting the growth of executive functioning skills among autistic college students is vital in supporting their academic, social, and overall success. The approach implies a focus on long-term skill development, rather than short-term fixes. Continuous support throughout a student's college journey can contribute to lasting improvements in executive functioning skills (Viezel et al., 2020).

Approach 3: Improve students' transition skills

Analysis of this study suggests that teaching transitional skills aims to enhance various self-advocacy skills, including academic, social, and, in some cases, vocational skills, in order to assist students with ASD to succeed in college and beyond. Teaching these skills has focused on developing adaptive proficiencies for daily living, emphasizing the development of social competencies, so as to facilitate integration into college life. Participant responses recognize that transitional programs have created opportunities for peer-mentor interactions and social activities that enhance socialization and community involvement. Beyond the college environment, faculty alluded that transitional programs would prepare autistic students with the skills necessary for future employment.

Conclusions drawn from this analysis are demonstrated in the literature review. For example, researchers have underscored the need for transitional programs for people with ASD to focus on motivations that drive the decisions around intervention (Iemmi et al., 2017; Leadbitter et al., 2021; Milton, 2014). Additionally, study participants' responses supported Accardo et al.'s (2019) conclusion that university disability service centres, counseling services, and faculty need to work together to develop systematic support systems for college students with ASD.

Approach 4: Support students' career development

Supporting career development in undergraduate programs for students with ASD involves creating inclusive learning environments that address the unique needs and strengths of autistic students. Interpreting and understanding the implications of such support can lead to positive outcomes for both the students and faculty. Findings and analysis suggest that faculty must develop an inclusive learning environment to support career development. This finding means curricula should accommodate sensory sensitivities, provide clear communication, and encourage a culture of acceptance. Faculty have stated that career development for students with ASD should build connections with industry partners to enhance career opportunities. Kumazaki et al. (2021) suggested that self-advocacy training should extend the length of intervention to one year, in order to significantly impact the employment outcomes of participants, providing opportunities for participants to mentor their peers in self-advocacy training situations.

Implications and Interpretations: Approaches to Self-Advocacy Teaching

Approach 1: Using flexible classrooms to support students

Flexible classroom environments consider the sensory needs that autistic individuals may encounter in a college setting. Faculty, in adopting this approach, acknowledge that sensory sensitivities and preferences may affect how students with ASD engage within the academic milieu. This approach implies a friendlier classroom situation that inculcates physical breaks, and offers alternative options for sensory input, so as to enhance the comfort and focus of students with autism. Flexible classroom settings require additional support from other faculty members.

Findings also suggest that teaching self-advocacy skills acknowledges the significance of preparing autistic students for post-academic life, including employment and independent living, inculcating transition planning and life-skills development into the curriculum, providing guidance on job readiness, and encouraging independence and self-advocacy. Supporting self-advocacy skills in undergraduate, autism-specific, support programs involves recognizing the diverse needs of autistic students and implementing a range of strategies and accommodations to create an inclusive, accessible, and supportive learning environment. These approaches enhance academic success and contribute to the overall personal and social development of students with autism.

Approach 2: Supporting students in skill development

Social-skills development is as significant as the other approaches to teaching self-advocacy. Participants recognize the social challenges that autistic students often face, impacting their classroom interactions. Developing these abilities requires integrating social-skills training into, for example, the college-program curriculum (Widman et al., 2020). This provision creates opportunities for social interactions, and encourages a supportive learning space that promotes

positive social development. In supporting the competencies of students with ASD, the faculty's role is viewed as follows: "I give guidance and direction, you know, if needed. Still, we [the faculty] will only step in, if it is our role."

Approach 3: Supporting self-awareness skills

Teaching self-awareness skills to students with ASD in a college program requires understanding their unique needs and employing practical teaching approaches. Faculty stated that one way to improve students' self-advocacy skills was to have programs designed around the "strengths, weaknesses, and challenges." Students may be taught self-advocacy skills in structured environments with clear routines. Results of this study suggest establishing a predictable schedule, and providing visual support to help students navigate their daily activities. By utilizing these approaches, students may experience anxiety reduction and encourage a sense of security in the classroom.

Participants also acknowledged that understanding social cues may be a challenge for some autistic students. However, incorporating social-skills training into the curriculum can assist in improving students' self-advocacy skills. Approaches to teaching in this area may include explicit instruction on social cues and communication skills (Widman et al., 2020). Beyond classroom learning, results indicate the need for collaboration and support from services, such as counselors, therapists, and disability services. Widman et al. (2020) stated that team effort in teaching self-advocacy aims to provide a multidisciplinary approach to address the social, emotional, and academic challenges confronting students with ASD.

Limitations

This study's design served as a guide in understanding how faculty in specialized undergraduate ASD programs approach self-advocacy teaching. Methods of teaching these skills were identified by using semi-structured interviews. These findings significantly increased the understanding of how faculty use various instructional tactics to teach self-advocacy skills. At the beginning of this study, information about how self-advocacy is taught to students with ASD in undergraduate programs was limited. In the Petri et al. (2020) study, the researchers noted that self-advocacy among the disability population, which includes students with ASD, was under-researched. This current investigation provides the basis for future research to examine each approach from the findings and analysis.

Research with small sample sizes can be valuable in specific contexts. However, several limitations must be considered. This current study may need to represent the larger population from which participants are drawn adequately. This lack of representation can have significant consequences, as findings from this study may not apply to broader populations. Seven colleges are on the low end, in terms of size and representation.

Recruiting participants for a study involving a topic such as autism, faculty, and self-advocacy can be challenging. For these reasons, partnering with autism advocacy organizations can be instrumental in recruiting participants. Professional organizations often have established networks and relationships within the community and can assist in connecting with potential participants.

A larger participant base would more likely produce additional approaches by faculty in self-advocacy teaching. For example, in explaining how faculty teach self-advocacy skills, some faculty acknowledged that using mentors as a support system for students who are struggling

with specific aspects of learning, show them how to self-advocate for their needs. Another faculty member described the approach to self-advocacy teaching as using group-study sessions with each student, focusing on areas where more support is needed. The remaining faculty had different responses about the structural design of their college programs. Notwithstanding the differences, other practitioner responses had similarities. This finding underscores the significant variation that additional participants may have generated in content and themes in this current study.

Recommendations For Future Research

A qualitative research design was an effective method to answer the research questions. The approaches identified in this study could be significant for future studies, including an increase in the number of participants across ASD programs in the United States. Further, more participants would introduce a broader pattern of methodologies, allowing readers to appreciate preferential tactics in self-advocacy teaching among faculty. The faculty's perspectives, that were examined in this study, concentrated on how participants approach self-advocacy teaching. It is evident from the findings and analysis that these methods differ from each other across all seven colleges and the ten participants. However, as found in the literature review, self-advocacy is one aspect of broader ASD college curricula. Future research would benefit a focus on a whole curriculum, rather than just on how self-advocacy skills are taught in undergraduate programs for students with ASD. This study examined faculty's approaches to self-advocacy teaching, through the lens of the communication element of Test et al. (2005). Future studies could explore styles that use the whole conceptual framework of Test et al. (2005).

Offering incentives or compensation for participation can motivate individuals to participate in the study. Future researchers should ensure that incentives are appropriately made available for study participants. Other areas to consider for future research are identifying and connecting with more specialized college programs and faculty. This study's participants were faculty. Future studies can consider the perspective of autistic college students, by interviewing these students in addition to faculty. Sustaining ongoing engagement with the autism community beyond the recruitment phase can help sustain participation and foster collaboration and partnership between researchers and participants. By combining these strategies and approaches, researchers can enhance recruitment and effectively engage autistic college students, faculty, and other stakeholders.

Conclusion

The approach to teaching self-advocacy differs from all seven colleges; all ten participants have a preferred style. These applications are either structured or unstructured. To teach self-advocacy skills, participants use several strategies that assist students in learning how to build relationships, develop self-awareness, and learn self-regulation. In discussing each theme, participant's experiences, collected from the survey and semi-structured interviews, are documented through illustration and description from quotations from the interview transcripts and survey responses. These techniques allow readers to appreciate faculty experiences and challenges when teaching self-advocacy.

This study found that undergraduate college programs for autistic students are structured to support the self-advocacy needs of students using four main approaches: improve students' learning skills, improve students' executive functioning skills, improve students' transition skills,

and support students' career development. Further, this study revealed that faculty approach self-advocacy teaching in three main ways: using flexible classrooms to support students, supporting students in skill development, and developing self-awareness skills. These findings align with some critical communication elements of Test et al.'s (2005) conceptual framework. Faculty members described strategies to teaching self-advocacy skills, by demonstrating students' learning so as to be assertive, negotiate, articulate, use body language, use assistive technology, listen, persuade, and compromise.

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