An Academic Coaching Model Intervention for College Students on the Autism Spectrum

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Abstract

Based on the increasing numbers of students with high functioning autism spectrum disorder (ASD) entering colleges and universities, many schools are at a loss for how to support students needing services outside the typical academic assistance often required by students with disabilities. The diagnostic features and psychiatric characteristics associated with ASD (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), coupled with the transitions and stressors that come along with college life, present extraordinary challenges for these students. With the unique characteristics and support need of this population in mind, the Raiders on the Autism Spectrum Excelling (RASE) transition program was developed and implemented in 2012 to provide transitional support for students with ASD entering a midsized public university in the Midwest. First year results indicate an increase in student GPA over two semesters, a decrease in behavioral violations, and high levels of satisfaction with the program from both the students and the transition coaches.

Keywords: *Autism spectrum disorders, transition coach, peer mentor*

The number of students entering college with high-functioning autism spectrum disorders (ASD) is not only increasing but expected to surge in coming years (Pinder-Amaker, 2014). Reasons for this surge include the proportion of children diagnosed with ASD, which has increased from 1 in 150 in the year 2000 to 1 in 88 in 2008 (Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network Surveillance, [ADDMNS], 2012), heightened awareness, changes in the diagnostic specification, and most notably, improved ability to recognize and diagnose higher-functioning individuals with ASD who may have been unnoticed in the past (Pinder-Amaker, 2014). In response to the dramatic increase, many institutions of higher education are now supplementing their base level of support with additional ASD specific services either free of charge or for an additional fee (Brown, 2013). The diagnostic features and psychiatric characteristics associated with ASD were recently defined in the Diagnostic and *Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Edition 5* (DSM-5) as persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts (American Psychiatric Association, [APA], 2013). Limitations associated with ASD include difficulty engaging in reciprocal social interactions and relationship development, problems maintaining conversation in social settings, perseverative or obsessive thought patterns, fixated or restricted behaviors and interests, and difficulty interpreting nonverbal cues or the perspective of others (APA, 2013).

Depiction of the Problem

Periods of transition are particularly difficult for high school students with ASD entering a postsecondary setting. Students on the very high functioning end of the spectrum may gain admission to a university setting without ever identifying as individuals with ASD. These students go unnoticed by their professors until their sensory, social, learning styles and organizational challenges combined with fatigue cause them to fail (U.S. Autism, 2014). Despite adequate cognitive ability for academic success, many students with ASD never finish college (Adreon & Durocher, 2007; Geller & Greenburg, 2009; U.S. Autism, 2014).

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In addition to social and educational challenges, Koegel, Singh, and Koegel (2010) found that many students with ASD lack the motivation to succeed academically, in part because of the wide range of subjects covered outside of their restricted interests. Others argue that adolescents with ASD regard school as an over stimulating and stressful environment for social and sensory reasons making it difficult to achieve academic success (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). College life is less structured in nature than high school posing significant difficulties for transitioning to and performing well in higher education (Adreon & Durocher, 2007). Even those students who make wise choices may struggle in social settings, group projects, or be faced with the attitudes of peers in classes and on campus who often do not respond positively to typical ASD behavior (Geller & Greenberg, 2009; Pinder-Amaker, 2014). Thus, many students with ASD underachieve relative to their intellectual abilities, a problem that intensifies with age (Goldstein et al., 2008).

Although a growing number of colleges offer support programs for students with ASD through an office of disability services (ODS), some students may view supports as stigmatizing or unhelpful and prefer not to enroll in special programs (Vogel, Fresko, & Wertheim, 2009; Wei, Yu, Shattuck, McCracken, & Blackorby, 2013). Furthermore, many may lack the initiative or self-advocacy skills needed to seek these resources because of social deficits, anxiety, and immaturity (Anckarsäter et al., 2006; Soderstrom, Rastam, & Gillberg, 2002).

Providing appropriate support to students with ASD is essential to assisting students achieve a higher quality of life, increased productivity, positive social interactions inside and outside of the classroom, and decreased reliance on subsequent or perpetual disability services post-graduation. One such program was specifically designed to address the above mentioned concerns at a midsized public university in the Midwest, nationally recognized for its efforts to serve students with disabilities through various innovative services. Below is a description of a pilot transitional program serving students with ASD, followed by the methods used to implement the pilot program, first year findings, and implications for future research and practice.

Participant Demographics and Institutional Partners/Resources

In line with national trends indicating larger numbers of students with ASD entering four-year institutions (Wei et al., 2013), in fall 2012 the campus experienced nearly a doubling of students with ASD. Along with this influx of students came numerous questions and requests for information and guidance from faculty and various departments on campus regarding how to best accommodate students with ASD, both in the classroom and across the campus environment. The ODS provided significant guidance on a case-by-case basis; however, a more proactive, over-arching training appeared warranted. Efforts to deliver this outreach resulted in multiple face-to-face training sessions for faculty and staff, including the campus police force, staff from residence housing, and academic advisors. Topics covered in the outreach training offered a general overview of ASD and discussion of best practice strategies for working with this population. The outreach provided an opportunity to demystify the disability and open a dialogue between campus personnel to better ensure continuity of support for the students.

For the 2012-2013 academic year, eight transition coaches were employed to work with 12 students with ASD. The small sample size of both the students and transition coaches reflects the exploratory nature of this practice brief and the need to carefully interpret the results. One student elected to disconnect from the program after three weeks, leaving 11 students who completed the Raiders on the Autism Spectrum Excelling (RASE) program from fall through spring semesters. The majority of the students and coaches were Caucasian. The sample of students was comprised of 80% males and among the coaches 50% were male. The mean age for the RASE students was 19.

Description of the Practice

With the unique characteristics of this population in mind, the RASE transition program was developed and implemented in the fall of 2012 to provide transitional support for students with ASD entering the university. The RASE program is based on a transition approach that offers more intensive support for the first year of college, followed by less frequent intervention in subsequent years to encourage a focus on increased independence and overall growth for the students involved. The program provides structure and guidance to students via a transition coach (peer) model that aligns students of similar age and status in college (Terrion & Leonard, 2007; Vogel et al., 2009).

Additionally, the National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorders (NPDCAS) now has Peer-Mediated Instruction and Intervention on its list of evidence-based practices (NPDCAS, 2010).

Through RASE, students can create a metaphorical "toolbox" of academic and social skills that students with ASD can pull from in order to navigate the college experience. The parameters of the toolbox were set to incorporate the five key competency areas of resiliency, time management and organization, social skill development, technology use, and advocacy. Beginning summer 2012, all students with ASD admitted for the fall semester were assessed for the RASE program through a face-to-face interview process that included a needs assessment completed by the program supervisor. All 14 students assessed were recruited and 12 were accepted to the program based on level of need in one or more of the five key competency areas. Factors in the assessment process included educational background and past support services, current social skill development, level of independence, and family support. The assessment process also utilized a Likert scale of current skill level in the five key competency areas. Although motivation is important for the change process, a lower level of motivation during the initial interview, while noted, is considered a part of the transition experience that can be addressed in the coaching relationship. Consideration was also given to students with additional disabilities that may be present, such as Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or other mental health disabilities. Each student admitted to the RASE program was assigned a transition coach to work with him/her individually for up to 10 hours per week. Enrollment in the program was for one academic year. Students were evaluated after the fall semester to determine the level and frequency of support needed for the spring semester.

The first year, transition coaches were hired as student employees and funded by ODS. RASE transition coaches, recruited from campus undergraduate and graduate level programs, completed an interview and structured training process. Coaches were chosen based on effective communication skills and a demonstrated skill set in navigating the college environment successfully. As experienced undergraduate and graduate students, their role was to provide guidance to RASE students and serve as a valuable resource for questions and concerns. In order to facilitate independence and an appropriate balance of parental involvement, transition coaches were instructed to only work directly with individual students while the director provides all interactions with parents throughout the student's tenure at the university with a signed Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act consent.

To improve the efficacy of the program, coaches tailored their individual meeting schedules to accommodate their students' specific needs and availability. Typically, the coach and student met for roughly five hours per week, or about one hour per day, each weekday. If needed, coaches were also available on weekends. During these meetings, coaches worked with students on the five key competency areas to assist with development of the structure and skillset necessary to be successful in college. Structured content to be covered in meetings with students was provided to coaches by the coaching supervisor (Assistant Director of ODS) during their training to help facilitate consistency in the coaching process. However, each RASE student, being unique, needed a specific plan designed for his/her success that was developed based on strengths and areas of concern gleaned during the rapport-building phase.

Another critical component of the coaching program is the universal design for learning model, with a particular focus on kinesthetic and visual learning. Studies have shown that the hippocampus, which is responsible for sensory input and memory and learning, is neurologically immature in individuals with autism (Bauman & Kemper, 1994). Due to this fact, students with ASD may prefer the relative permanence of a visual or written explanation regarding the requirements of an assignment or policy. Coaches were encouraged to work with their students in as many modalities as possible to ensure students were receiving information in a way that was most beneficial to their learning style. For example, rather than instructing one of their students to go to the tutoring office to sign up for additional help for a class, the coach worked with the student in a role play scenario to practice the interaction. Once the student effectively navigated the situation, the coach and the student then went to the tutoring office together in order for the student to complete the tutoring request. This process of practice first and then engage was critical for the long-term self-sufficiency of the student. While each coaching session followed a standard format that consisted of overview of grades and homework assignments followed by a kinesthetic learning activity and social skill modeling, session topics varied according to student need.

Following the spring semester, students and their families met with ODS staff to determine overall progress and the next step in the support process. Based on level of progression evidenced by Likert scale improvements in skill development from the initial assessment to the end of the fall and spring semesters, students moved to a less structured series of meetings with the ODS staff as needed. ODS also offered a bi-weekly

support group for students with ASD that addressed problem solving, social skills, self-advocacy, and any additional support resources for students as they transitioned to greater independence during their sophomore year in college. If the necessary skills to progress to the next phase of independence were not developed, a meeting was held with the student and his/her family to determine appropriate next steps to ensure the best environment for the student going forward. This process involved adult disability services agencies and other community resources to help the student gain the skills necessary to eventually re-enter the university environment or transition directly to the work force.

Evaluation of Observed Outcomes

As the program is a direct admit support program for incoming freshman, students do not have an established GPA prior to enrollment in the program. However, for RASE students, the average GPA of students following one semester within the program was 2.58 which improved to 2.71 by the end of spring semester. The retention rate was eight out of 11 or 72.7% which is higher than the overall university's first year retention rate of 61.5% for the same period (Wright State University Institutional Research, 2014). Of the eight RASE participants who continued with the university after the first year, seven past participants or 87.5% were then retained into the third year. In addition to academic and retention outcomes, the program impacted student success in terms of a significant decrease in behavioral incidences in students with ASD when comparing pre- and post-implementation groups of the RASE program. Improvement is supported by the decrease from two serious student conduct behavior concerns resulting in expulsion the year prior to no student expulsions for students the first year of the program, a decrease in student faculty concerns as evidenced by a drop in phone calls and inquiries to ODS regarding student issues specific to the ASD population in class from eleven to four in the fall term and just two in the spring term, and an increase in a positive climate towards students with ASD from police and faculty on campus evidenced by an increase in consultation with ODS from no contact to four consultations in year one regarding best practices and proactive measures to assist students with ASD. This was facilitated through a combination of transition coaching outreach for individual students and the Assistant Director's outreach to university faculty, student affairs, residential services, and other campus resources.

Implications and Portability

The first year of the RASE program focused on academic skills and assisting students with the transition to college life, which indirectly impacted the behavioral issues that had been present the terms prior to implementation. As a result of the frequent and open contact between coaches and their students, the relationship bond that was formed over time created a comfortable and safe environment for the students with ASD to express concerns and ask questions as demonstrated in survey data. When possible, at least 50% coaches were retained from year to year creating a seasoned layer of support for new coaches. In addition to the student success, the first year provided invaluable information on programmatic features, working with students with ASD in this type of program, and areas that could be improved for heightened effectiveness.

Lessons learned from survey data completed by the coaches and students included the need for coaches to connect with RASE students prior to the semester through email, phone calls, and, in some instances, showing up to a classroom the first week of the semester. Coaches also were encouraged to work with students on the development of a daily "script," which outlined the schedule or sequence of events beginning the moment the student awakened until their bedtime routine with an alternate script in the event that life intervened and the student needed to redirect themselves to a plan B scenario.

An unexpected positive result was a marked pattern of growth in the coaches in the areas of leadership and resiliency. The passage of time, coupled with input and advice from the coach supervisor and coach peers, provided opportunities for daily individual successes that facilitated a gradual, growing sense of confidence in the coaches. In coaches that encountered barriers to rapport, the issue stemmed from the fact that some students with ASD may wish to remain as independent as possible or overlook the value and need for transition support at the postsecondary level. The coaches who demonstrated the strongest interpersonal skills and patience found the rapport-building phase to go fairly smoothly and as they had expected it would proceed. Individual coach maturity and independence levels greatly impacted the degree of confidence and persistence demonstrated by coaches when they hit a stumbling block. In order to use difficult instances as a learning opportunity for struggling coaches to build an improved sense of confidence, the coach supervisor scheduled a meeting with the coach and student involved to model the desired type of interaction. The personality profile that was found to be most benefi-

cial for the coaching role was an individual with clear boundaries and strong interpersonal skills, as well as a patient and consistent personality style. Additionally, the connection between the coaches and their supervisor was found to be the cornerstone by which all of the ensuing relationships in the program were based.

Initial retention data gathered on the RASE program, although small in scale, has sparked interest by other colleges and universities who would like to model a program on their campuses after the RASE program. Based on its foundation as a peer mentoring model, detailed hiring and supervision practices, established data collection measures and guidelines and the positive impact that has been demonstrated with relatively few contact hours per week, the RASE program has portability within various postsecondary settings. As this program is not a required accommodation and provides additional support, disability service offices could institute a fee for service program to offset staffing costs within 6-8 months of initiating a plan. A few areas of future research include: the role of gender for coaches and RASE participants; the differences found between students who commute versus residential students; and how comorbid disabilities impact the effectiveness of the RASE program.

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