Using the APP Tool to Promote Student Self-Determination Skills in Higher Education (Practice Brief)

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Abstract

Greater levels of self-determination (SD) can positively impact the retention and college completion of students with disabilities (SWD). However, many SWD do not disclose and instead are likely accessing traditional campus supports. Disability/accessibility services professionals play an important role in helping all professionals working with college SWD to be knowledgeable of SD and its related components. This manuscript presents an overview of SD, and summarizes key research that highlights its importance for SWD. Next, an easily implementable tool called APP is provided that guides practitioners through a review of Activities, Programs, and Policies (APP) on their campus. Reflections regarding how institutional APP can be designed to reflect and promote SD skills in all students, including SWD, are presented.

Keywords: self-determination, college students, disabilities, postsecondary education

The concept of self-determination (SD) has a long history (Shogren et al., 2015), but was first addressed in the psychology literature by Deci and Ryan (1985), and is referred to as Self-Determination Theory (SDT). SDT differentiated between extrinsic (external) motivators and intrinsic (internal) motivators. Intrinsic motivation was found to be a more powerful source of motivation than extrinsic motivation, and was largely a result of self-determined goals to fulfill an individual's needs related to autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

SD was subsequently researched in schools with children with disabilities in the early 1990s (Gelbar et al., 2019), in large part due to a set of model federal demonstration projects sponsored by the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (Ward, 2005). This applied research led to new conceptualizations and theories concerning the SD of individuals with disabilities in the secondary transition literature. One of the most commonly accepted definitions was developed by Field et al. (1998), who stated:

> Self-determination is a combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior. An understanding of one's strengths and limitations together with a belief in oneself as capable and effective, are essential. When acting on the basis of these skills and attitudes, individuals have greater ability to take control of their lives and assume the role of successful adults. (p. 2)

The conceptualizations of SD for individuals with disabilities in secondary education were subsequently applied to college students with disabilities (SWD; Gelbar et al., 2019). Research on college students and SD has examined specific disabilities such as learning disabilities (Sarver, 2000) and Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD; Parker, 2004) and has also investigated disability as a whole in postsecondary education (Field et al., 2003; Shogren et al., 2017). A recent systematic literature review that examined publications during the years 1951 to 2015 concluded that although there is a limited amount of

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empirical research related to SD and college SWD, an increase in SD resulted in improvement in other key areas, such as knowledge of accommodation rights and responsibilities, self-advocacy skills, skills in requesting accommodations, and growth in executive functioning skills (Gelbar et al., 2019).

Although more than 19% of college students report having one or more disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2019), research on a nationally representative sample of SWD who accessed higher education noted that over half choose not to self-disclose (Newman & Madaus, 2015). More recent research (Newman et al., 2019) demonstrated the importance of college SWD accessing more traditional campus supports that are available to *all* students. As a result, SWD who have not disclosed may be receiving support from student affairs professionals with limited training and knowledge of their needs (Lalor, 2017), a point that is reflected in the minimal reporting and research on the population in the student affairs professional literature (Evans et al., 2017; Gelbar et al., 2015; Madaus et al., 2018; Peña, 2014). Literature has also reported that greater SD leads one to be more connected with the campus environment (Faye & Sharpe, 2008; Guiffrida et al., 2013; Scholl & Schmitt, 2011). Moreover, Petcu et al., (2017) reported that SWD with higher levels of SD were not only more likely to enroll in postsecondary education programs, but students with higher levels of self-realization, a component of SD, were 2.41 times more likely to complete a 4-year university program. Ideally, both student affairs and disability service professionals should foster the SD of students with and without disabilities.

Description of the Problem

As noted, although some statistics indicate that SWD represent nearly one-fifth of all college students, the majority do not self-disclose their disability. SD skills play an important role in helping students to navigate available services and supports, and the Activities, Programs, or Policies (APP) Tool (described below) can offer support to both student affairs and disability service professionals in this regard. The APP Tool, developed by Faggella-Luby et al. (2019), evaluates the effectiveness of activities, programs, and/or policies in which a student may partake. Using a backwards design planning methodology (subsequently described), the form asks professionals to identify areas of challenge for students, to denote campus activities, programs, and/or policies, and to then link these to SD components, where possible.

The APP Tool

A Practical Purpose

Initially, the APP Tool was designed to permit student affairs professionals to specifically identify the SD challenges common to college students and link them to programmatic responses (i.e., activities, programs and /or policies). However, it became clear from the research on SD that the reverse could also be helpful, that is, the SD components could support the design and implementation of institutional APPs. Therefore, the APP Tool also includes an opportunity for the professional to tie specific SD components addressed by each activity, program, and/or policy (see Figure 1 for a copy of the APP Tool). Of significance, the process is not intended solely to address programming for SWD who have self-disclosed, but rather to allow the identification of programs for *all* students that may benefit from improved SD skills. By connecting challenges, programs, and components of SD the tool becomes both a planning and evaluation instrument.

APP Tool Components and Suggested Procedures

The APP Tool is intended for use by professionals to flexibly fit any planning or evaluative effort to address student SD outcomes using the following six steps.

Step 1. Individual reflection. Professionals begin by reflecting on the common challenges facing new students upon arrival at their institution. We first introduce the notion of "new" students to allow for a broader conversation beyond the typical first-year student, for example, consideration of transfer students. To ensure diversity of response, we recommend professionals first conduct this three- to five-minute brainstorm of student challenges individually recorded on the lines available in the Common Challenges section (though more can be listed on the back as necessary). After an initial period of reflection, professionals are asked to refine or add to their list any considerations for special or historically marginalized groups (e.g., commuter students, first feneration, SWDs, minority, LGBTQIA+, economically challenged, sorority or fraternity affiliated, student athletes, etc.).

Step 2. Small group sharing and validation. Professionals are then encouraged to partner or form small groups to discuss the challenges noted. This is an important opportunity for cross-program collaboration and may surface common challenges across academic and student affairs professionals to more clearly understand and support the diverse array of matriculating students. This is a non-evaluative step

with open discourse and opportunity to provide general as well as specific examples to explain why a particular challenge is of concern.

Step 3. Prioritizing and recording common challenges. Noted challenges are synthesized in the small group by prioritizing and recording five to seven common challenges in the space provided in the column on the left-hand side of the APP form. Selected common challenges may be universal, something that the entire student body may experience, or particular to a smaller population of marginalized students (e.g., SWD). The common challenges noted are not meant to be exhaustive, but rather emphasize a priority list that is manageable to consider in the current academic year, for example. Alternative suggestions not included on the list may be helpful for future planning and, thus, might be subsequently addressed.

Step 4. Listing current activities, programs, policies. University activities, programs and/or policies are ubiquitous. In this step and in the second column (labeled Activities, Programs, Policies) professionals list five to ten of what they consider to be popular, favorite, or effective APPs. There is no requirement that the APPs recorded in this column align directly with the common challenges noted adjacently, but some professionals will find alignment instructive (discussed more below in Step 6). This step may be completed in small groups or via a return to the individual brainstorming method before sharing.

Step 5. Aligning SD outcomes. When using the APP Tool, the first four steps rely heavily on prior knowledge of the students and university context specific to professionals. However, this step requires familiarity with the SD components noted in Table 1. Sufficient time should be provided to ensure that all professionals understand the definitions of each term before proceeding. Once terminology clarity has been addressed, professionals code each of the existing APPs using the SD components corresponding number (e.g., 1 = choice-making skills) in the Self-Determination Outcomes column along the right-hand side of the form and aligning to each of the specific Activities, Programs, and/or Policies. Many APPs may reflect more than one SD outcome and therefore multiple SD codes (see Figure 2), while some may not align with any SD components. Lack of alignment is common during the initial stages of this activity as most higher education practitioners may not be familiar with the construct or components.

Step 6. Gap analysis and next steps planning. The final step when using the APP Tool is to triangulate data recorded on the form. Ideally, the form will reflect that Common Challenges are addressed in a variety of APPs aligned to multiple Self-Determination Outcomes. However, triangulation of data can be helpful in three important ways when alignment is incomplete or inconsistent. First, if the noted APPs do not address one or more of the Common Challenges, it is clear that a new activity, program, or policy is warranted to address this gap. Second, if an APP has few Self-Determination Outcomes or does not align to a Common Challenge it can be reevaluated, as it may not be serving a relevant purpose (i.e., is a dis-function). This kind of program evaluation is helpful when a glut of programming exists and professionals may feel spread too thin. Third, if Self-Determination Outcomes are not included in the existing APPs and this is desired, planning for new APPs is likely something that should be explored. See Figure 2 for an example of an in-progress APP Tool.

Implications and Portability for Higher Education Practice

The APP Tool was presented to three groups of higher education professionals who represented a range of offices and roles on college campuses. The participants completed the tool and then provided feedback about its potential use. A variety of options were presented for its use in higher education, including directly with students, but also at the program, departmental, or division level. For example, the participants noted that the APP Tool could be used:

- For assessment and evaluation of what current activities, programs, and policies lead to desired student outcomes, and which have gaps in achieving intended outcomes.
- For evaluation of the cost effectiveness of existing activities, programs, and policies in meeting desired student outcomes. In times of fiscal belt-tightening, consideration regarding whether campus APPs are affecting improved student outcomes and their associated cost become especially important.
- At a variety of times throughout the year. For example, at the beginning of the academic year to determine what activities, programs, and policies are fostering desired outcomes, and then again at the culmination of the year to identify successes and gaps.
- During ongoing data gathering processes to determine activity, program, or policy effectiveness.
- During professional development days or other professional development activities (including, but not limited to professional conferences, workshops, online learning op-

portunities, campus brown bag gatherings) to learn more about SD and its alignment with current campus APPs.

Implications for Practice

As the focus groups revealed, use of the APP Tool need not be restricted to disability service professionals alone. In fact, professionals from a range of student affairs roles reported finding the tool useful, and it is likely that the most effective implementation of the APP Tool requires broad and flexible use of the tool across multiple stakeholders within the university community. For example, student affairs colleagues might use the tool to revise and build programs aligned to SD outcomes or move away from programs that are not effective. In collaboration with disability service personnel, use of the tool may help surface a more comprehensive understanding of the common challenges facing students, with subsequent action planning. Moreover, partnerships might be forged with university faculty whereby the APP Tool could infuse components of SD in instructional activities. By triangulating planning across professionals in disability services, student affairs, and faculty, it is far more likely to achieve desired outcomes for all students, not just SWD or students considered historically marginalized and/or under-served (e.g., first-generation college students). Finally, use of the tool by multiple stakeholders promotes a common language at the institution focusing on building a culture of self-determined students and is very likely central to the mission of institutions of higher learning.

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Table 1

Components and Explanations of Self-Determination

Self-Determination Component	Brief Explanation
Choice-making skills	The ability to identify and select a preferred activity or item from several options without coercion.
Decision-making skills	The use of a process to determine a preferred solution based on a list of relevant action alternatives and with consideration of overall risk.
Problem-solving skills	A process of identifying a solution to resolve a quandary in which response alternatives are identified, selected and verified often through self-instruction.
Goal-setting and attainment skills	Developing a plan to accomplish a targeted behavior or outcome (distal or proximal) through self-regulated behaviors and with regard to consequences of actions and contingencies of an environment.
Independence, risk-taking, and safety skills	Recognition of the individual, acting within an environment of consequences mitigated by assurances or boundaries.
Self-observation, Self-awareness, or Self-monitoring skills	Involves the individual observing his or her own behavior toward identifying an inconsistency between what occurs and a target behavior. (A prerequisite to self-regulation.)
Self–evaluation skills	The specific identification of an inconsistency between what occurs and a target behavior.
Self-reinforcement skills	Rewarding oneself for matching an observed behavior to a target behavior.
Self-instruction skills	Vocalized performance guidance by oneself to direct action toward a targeted behavior; Viewed as a critical step in problem solving.
Self-regulation skills	The ability of the individual to carry out the vocalized performance guidance to direct action toward a targeted behavior.
Self-advocacy and leadership skills	An individual's ability to effectively communicate or assert a desired outcome, often related to achieving specific goals.
Positive attributions of efficacy and outcome expectancy skills	Noting that an outcome or problem may be adequately addressed by response alternatives directed by the individual.

Figure 1

Model APP Form

The APP Tool		
Common Challenges	Activities, Programs, Policies	SD Outcomes
Self-Determination Components		

1. Choice-making skills	7. Self-evaluation skills
2. Decision-making skills	8. Self-reinforcement skills
3. Problem-solving skills	9. Self-instruction skills
4. Goal-setting & attainment skills	10. Self-regulation skills
5. Independence, risk-taking, and safety skills	11. Self- advocacy & leadership skills
6. Self-observation, self-awareness or self-monitoring skills	12. Positive attributions of efficacy and outcome expectancy skills

Note. Adapted from: Weiss, M. P. & Faggella-Luby, M. (2020). © Mills, Faggella-Luby, Gelbar, Madaus & Dukes, 2019

Figure 2

Sample APP Tool in Progress

The APP Tool		
Common Challenges	Activities, Programs, Policies	SD Outcomes
Time management	New student orientation, first year seminars, residence hall, academic probation (e.g., time on task)	1, 2 ,8, 10, 11
Finding and using resources	Activities fair, online reminders, training academic advisors and faculty, new student orientation	3, 8, 9
Developing a sense of belonging–making social connections	Student organizations fair, residential programs, fraternity/sorority recruitment, intentional conversations, traditional programs (e.g., homecoming)	1, 5, 6, 10
Confronted by other cultures/ideas	Policy statement supporting DEI initiatives, intentional conversations, campus speakers, campus concerts, art shows, study abroad	3, 5, 6, 10
Academic achievement	First year seminars, early warning system, new student orientation, "nudges" through technology, upper-class student mentors	1, 2, 3, 12
Learning to share space–roommate adjustments	Residential programs (e.g. roommate games), roommate contracts, periodic check-ins by faculty/staff, counseling center	3, 6, 8, 10
Assuming responsibility	Student organization advising, financial literacy seminars, Code of Conduct (e.g., disciplinary conversations), checking class attendance	4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11
Staying healthy - wellness	Intramurals, on-line wellness tips, healthy meals on campus, alcohol/drug programs, technology applications	1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10
Self-Determintation Components		
1. Choice-making skills 2. Decision-making skills 3. Problem-solving skills 4. Goal-setting & attainment skills 5. Independence, risk-taking, and safety skills 6. Self-observation, self-awareness or self-monitoring skills	7. Self-evaluation skills 8. Self-reinforcement skills 9. Self-instruction skills 10. Self-regulation skills 11. Self- advocacy & leadership skills 12. Positive attributions of efficacy and outcome expectancy skills	

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