

Transition Experiences for Freshmen with Disabilities in a Public Research University in the United States

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Abstract

College students with disabilities continue to experience various challenges in their transition into postsecondary education. However, limited research has focused on their initial transition, despite the significance of its impact on college students with disabilities. This qualitative study examined first-semester transition experiences among freshmen with disabilities at a public research university in the Southeastern United States. Responses (i.e., post-course interviews, course reflections, online discussion boards) from thirteen students of 2018 to 2021 cohorts of the Engage 100 course (an orientation program for freshmen with disabilities) were analyzed through a qualitative analysis approach. The results indicated that college freshmen benefit in their social and academic transition through enrolling in the Engage 100 course. The results highlight the need for disability support services and for college campuses to foster transition success for college students with disabilities.

Keywords: college freshmen, disability, transition, barriers, qualitative approach

College provides an invaluable opportunity for students to increase opportunities toward employment, earnings, and social capital (Tinto, 1993), which is especially true for students with disabilities (National Council on Disability, 2003; Houtenville & Rafal, 2020). According to Houtenville and Rafal (2020), education is a pathway to independent living and self-sufficiency for individuals with disabilities. Furthermore, students who partake in postsecondary education have a better chance to nurture their own personal and professional development and prepare themselves in promoting application of their skills and knowledge for their future success (Stephenson, 1998).

Despite the significance of college education, students with disabilities are still underrepresented in higher education (Houtenville & Rafal, 2020; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015; Zehner, 2018). Individuals with disabilities in the United States are less

likely to possess a college degree than those without disabilities (Houtenville, 2007). The disparity in graduation rate between students with disabilities and students without disabilities in college has remained relatively high over the decades at around 22% to 24% (Institute of Disability 2019). Furthermore, students with disabilities who enter postsecondary education typically gain a certificate or a non-degree credential in comparison with their counterparts without disabilities (Plotner & May, 2019). The relatively low completion of college degrees and academic pursuits among students with disabilities might be attributed to academic and social challenges encountered during their college experiences (Fichten et al., 2014).

In terms of academic challenges, students with disabilities identified various difficulties such as course registration, academic rigor, faculty treatment, poor support services, and finances (Safer et al.,

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2020). A study that surveyed 63,802 students across 11 public research universities in the U.S. found that students with learning disabilities were less satisfied with their social experience, academic experience, the monetary value of the experience, and the general campus climate than their peers without learning disabilities (McGregor, 2016). College students with disabilities also encounter social challenges such as navigating the college network and transitioning to residential college living (Plotner & May, 2019). College students with disabilities also show a reluctance to seek support in fear of the stigma and discriminatory reactions due to the prevalence of Ableism, especially at the initial transition period to postsecondary education (Dong & Lucas, 2016; Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011).

One of the most notable differences in college students with disabilities' experiences in postsecondary education when compared to their secondary education is the laws that protect their rights. While secondary education is guided by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), postsecondary education is guided by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1972 (Lazzarini, 2021). IDEA provides various aids to students with disabilities, such as individualized education plans (IEP), transition plans, and summaries of practice (SOP; Lazzarini, 2021). On the other hand, ADA simply provides general guidelines on equal access to education, not generalized to the individual (Shaw & Dukes, 2013). Thus, college students with disabilities need to be self-determined to take advantage of necessary support that will lead to success (Ressa, 2022). Another issue that arises for students with disabilities in postsecondary education is the issue of accessibility. IDEA no longer requires students to have a reevaluation every three years, whereas many colleges and universities require students to provide a full psychoeducational evaluation, which can be very costly, to be granted accommodations (Shaw & Dukes, 2013).

Considering these academic and social challenges as well as changes in laws in protecting their rights, college students with disabilities tend to experience a great amount of stress and anxiety during college, especially during their first semester (Dong & Lucas, 2014; Herridge, 2017; Wessel et al., 2009). Many college students with disabilities feel lonely, as they have a difficult time making friends and establishing a safe space (Agarwal et al., 2013; Bialka et al., 2017). According to Schlossberg's transition theory (2011), college students with disabilities also need to take on new responsibilities and roles (such as self-advocate and self-determination) to meet the transition needs

of a new environment. Wessel et al. (2009) found that drop-out rates were the highest for college students with disabilities during the initial few weeks of their college life.

Helping students with disabilities make a smooth early transition is crucial for their full integration into postsecondary education and key for their college retention and future development. Tinto (1988) acknowledged the significance of the early transition experience in relation to social and academic integration, as it is during this time that college students are most susceptible and sensitive to feelings of marginality. Thus, social and academic integration into the college environment and culture is pivotal, especially during the initial stage of college. Shepler and Woosley (2012) highlighted the need to examine the early integration experiences and interventions of students with disabilities transitioning to postsecondary education.

Literature Review

Among the college transition programs, some lean toward social integration (e.g., Ashbaugh et al., 2017; Bialka et al., 2017), some toward academic integration (e.g., DuPaul et al., 2017; Kuh et al., 2005), and still others toward both academic and social integration (e.g., Agarwal et al., 2013; Patrick & Wessel, 2013; Reed et al., 2009). To the best of our knowledge, only Patrick and Wessel (2003) and Reed et al. (2009) focused on college freshmen with disabilities. Patrick and Wessel's (2013) qualitative study, heavily influenced by Tinto's theory, examined effects of having a faculty member as a mentor during the first year on academic and social transition experiences for 12 college students with disabilities. Mentors provided students advice, educated them on school resources, and helped them form relationships with other faculty members and students. The participants reported struggles of academic and social transition. All the students reported that having the support from this mentoring relationship was crucial for their transition. Additionally, they reported how important it is to connect with other college students with disabilities they can relate to. Reed et al. (2009) compared academic integration outcomes for students with learning disabilities who selected to take an academic learning success course (course-intervention), have at least one session per month with disability services (coined as high-intervention), or use services only as needed (coined as low-intervention). The course-intervention offered university success courses to social sciences and humanities students during their first academic semester. These courses were taught by teaching faculty for students in social sciences and humanities (12 weeks). The study included 27 first-

year students at a large urban university, 8 selected the course-intervention, 8 selected high-intervention, and 11 selected the low-intervention option. Results from the study showed improvements in academic self-efficacy and academic resourcefulness for the students in the course-intervention and high-intervention groups as well as higher year-end GPAs compared to the low-intervention group.

These studies have shed light on academic and social integration endeavors for college freshmen with disabilities. However, limitations exist. First, there is limited research on examining social and academic transition for college freshmen with disabilities, especially longitudinal transition programs. Second, Reed et al.'s (2009) course-intervention is not specifically tailored to the needs of the college students with disabilities. Third, most of these interventions are faculty-driven interventions without the input and initiatives of college students with disabilities. Izzo et al (2001) summarized multiple approaches to enhance quality of higher education for students with disabilities. One of the important key pieces is to help students recognize their own responsibilities to advocate for themselves. Thus, future research is warranted to examine the active involvement of students in the transition program, such as using senior students with disabilities as a mentor and/or course instructor or encouraging freshmen with disabilities to explore extracurricular activities in advancing their social and academic integration. In addition, research approaches using single timepoint data collection method may result in a subgroup of students not being included in the data analysis, especially for those who might drop out of college early on due to social and academic challenges during their first semester in postsecondary education. Research is needed to include multiple-timepoint data collection to explore the evolutionary experiences of college freshmen with disabilities.

The aim of this qualitative study is to explore first-semester transition experiences for freshmen with disabilities who participated in the "Engage 100 program," an orientation course designed specifically to help guide first-year students with disabilities in their transition to postsecondary education.

Method

Participants

Thirteen first-year college students with disabilities from a public research university in the South-eastern United States participated in this qualitative study during the years of 2018 to 2021. All participants enrolled in the Engage 100 course, which aimed to assist transition for college freshmen with disabili-

ties. Among them, six self-reported as men and seven self-reported as women. In terms of race and ethnicity, nine reported as Caucasian, four reported as racial minority groups including one Asian American, one Black, one mixed race, and one did not report their specific race group. In terms of disability types, two reported as having autism, four as having a learning disability, one as having a psychological disability, two as having ADHD, one as having dysphasia, one as having a visual disability, one as having mobility limitations, one with cancer, and one with Tourettes. All the participants were traditional college first-year students aged 18-19 during the time of the study.

Procedures

This study is a part of a large and longitudinal research project of the first and second authors. This research project aims to enhance transition experience through an ongoing orientation course (Engage 100), designed to meet both the challenges and interests of first-year students with disabilities, and advance diversity and program options throughout their postsecondary experience. All the first-year students with disabilities were encouraged to take the orientation course; the Office of Accessibility Services (OAS) advertised the course to students who registered with the OAS. Meeting weekly for one hour, the course served both as a time to check-in with the OAS staff, a trusted faculty member, and a student instructor regarding academic progress and experiences. The course also helped to create a space to build meaningful relationships and a support network of peers and faculty/staff champions. Each week, class meetings focused on a singular topic regarding transitioning to college and independent living in which there is short lesson followed by in-class discussions. Topics covered such areas as time management, goal setting and planning, studying and notetaking skills, testing skills, getting involved on-campus, personal wellness, campus resources, how to work effectively with faculty members, and career planning and preparation. All of these course topics were specifically tailored to the needs of college students with disabilities.

The OAS staff recruited participants through the intake process for accommodations, identifying first-year students who self-identified with OAS as a student with a disability. A "first-year" student is defined as one who has not taken classes primarily as a college student prior to their first semester at the university and does include students who completed dual-enrollment courses while completing high school. OAS disability specialists were briefed on and provided a short blurb with information about the Engage 100 course and how to register for the course to aid their

promotion of the class. Additionally, OAS utilized university database information to send targeted email promotions of the Engage 100 class registration opportunity to potential participants. Participants for this qualitative study were recruited from students who participated in the Engage 100 course from 2018 to 2021. Participants were informed of the purpose and confidential nature of the study, and potential risks/benefits of the research. Informed consents were obtained from the participants prior to participating in the research study. The OAS staff and course instructor conducted individual interviews with participants after the completion of the course. Participants' initial and final course reflections and online board discussion were also analyzed to examine transition challenges and evolutionary changes during the first-year semester into college.

Data Analysis

We analyzed the transcripts of interviews, reflection papers (one at the beginning and one at the end of the semester) as well as 3-4 discussion board responses throughout the semester by utilizing content analysis (Elo & Kyngas, 2008; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Hsieh and Shannon (2005) stated that content analysis is used to investigate a phenomenon through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns for the phenomenon. The data coding process involves applying an inductive approach in which researchers immerse in data to allow themes, patterns, and insights to emerge (Kondracki & Wellman, 2002).

We began the data coding process by reading the interview transcripts, reflection papers, and responses to online discussion boards multiple times. Reading these familiarized us with the data and assisted us in obtaining a sense of integrity of the data. In the initial stage of the data analysis, we applied a thematic approach by perusing through the data and highlighting words and phrases from the data that seemed to capture the key concepts and ideas such as barriers and facilitators in relation to transition and personal/environmental challenges and strengths and resources in coping with transition. Units of meaning include frequency of individual words and phrases in terms of their transition into college, characteristics of participants who expressed those words and phrases; the set of categories entail individuals with smooth transition experiences vs. non-smooth transition experiences. The third and fourth authors individually coded the data and then compared their results. They identified statements that had links or associations with each other and kept a record of statements that they were not sure about as well as their personal impres-

sion and reflection. When a discrepancy occurred, the research team discussed the issue and came to a consensus on the analyzing units. This audit trail was maintained throughout the coding process, which aided the process of identifying codes and themes accurately and objectively.

After the initial analysis stage, we reviewed the data and labeled codes from data that came directly from the analyzing units. This process facilitated the initial coding scheme. We further checked the initial coding, identified discrepancies between the coding, and obtained a consensus after discussion. Next, we grouped the codes based upon their connections with each other into categories and meaningful themes (Patton, 2002). After themes were identified, we explored the relations between the themes and checked if any of the themes could be categorized into a higher-level theme or identified a hierarchy within the themes to make a better sense of the data. We did not end the data analyses until it became evident that the data become saturated with no new themes that could be gleaned from the data (Berg & Lune, 2012).

The first and second authors have experience in conducting qualitative research as well as frequent practical experiences with college students with disabilities. The other authors are master's level students. All authors have interests and experiences in disabilities issues. The data coding by multiple researchers with different level of familiarity with disability issues and college students with disabilities offered a greater chance to enhance integrity and reduce biases in the qualitative data analysis process (Shenton, 2004). To reduce biases in the data analysis, we used multiple strategies, such as examining our own personal assumptions and stereotypes in relation to people with disabilities and disability issues prior to the start of data analysis. The first author also provided training to the master's level students on data coding prior to the start of the data analysis. In addition, one of the research team members has a significant disability; their personal and professional experiences and insights served as a validity check for the data analysis.

Results

Motivated and Self-Driven

Feeling motivated and self-driven is instrumental to participants' transition to being a college student. Participants noted that they felt dedicated to their academics and were prepared to implement new strategies learned in the Engage 100 course in both academic and social areas. One participant reported she utilized time management skills learned in the course "for bigger projects just for classes and now

I've taken on this project to organize a recital." The participants displayed initiative and a drive to generalize a strategy learned in courses and implement outside of the course. For example, one student stated after taking the course, "I plan to have a habit tracker made for each month, and already have my planner ready for next semester ahead of time, along with my schedule planner written out ahead of time."

Prioritizing working hard and taking initiative also emphasizes the importance of being motivated and self-driven. Through prioritizing their schoolwork and practicing persistence, the participants were able to ease their college transition. One participant with a learning disability noted, "I had to study more than the average student, really take more time out of my schedule and day to really make sure I understood something, and...be more persistent."

College Preparedness and Transition

Participants described that preparing for their transition to college helped them to adjust to a new, independent life. Pre-college extracurricular experiences prepare participants for what to expect in college, such as the academic rigor and the experiencing living alone. One participant shared that she attended a summer music program that was "a positive introduction to unstructured, independent college life... And a result I understood what I have to do to take care myself as well as what living on a college campus would intel [sic]."

Maintaining organization was also an important tool participants described as being helpful for their college transition. For example, one participant noted, "I had struggled with organization being in high school so that was one of the most important adjustments that I had to make going into college" Participants mentioned using "agendas that we had to do every week" and planning projects "backwards from a goal or deadline with the idea that you just organize projects by what steps are and then work back from that to see what you need to do 1st." These tools helped the participants stay organized and on track with assignments.

Participants also described that setting goals and finding their meaning in college provided them with something to strive for on a constant basis. In the beginning of the course, one student stated, "I feel like the next 4 years I will learn how to live independently and find out what kind of path I want to take for my future." At the end of the course, that same student reported: "I think I have grown in many areas since coming to [college] and I have become very self-dependent and learned to support myself."

Positive Self-Concept

A positive and accepting stance to their disability helps participants become more comfortable with themselves. One participant stated that after the Engage 100 course, she developed a positive concept to her disability and self. She "didn't [want to] ever talk about [her] learning disability because [she] thought people would judge." After being introduced to a supportive and understanding community, she learned that "everyone's unique in their own way." The change in her self-concept helped this student feel more at ease with her disability.

The participants noted that an enhanced self-concept is important to be self-aware of their needs to effectively self-advocate. One student reported that the Engage 100 course "forms [sic] me to examine myself and be honest and articulate my own needs." Many people may feel that they do not need to take advantage of campus resources; however, taking an "honest inspection of your own needs...will only serve to [strengthen] your awareness and understanding in your ability to self-advocate." Another participant noted that through her experiences at an on-campus job, she had to learn how to be an effective self-advocate and clearly communicate her needs through being honest and open: "I learned that being assertive and being upfront and honest about how you are as a person...just to make it clear to others about how you communicate."

Support and Resources

Having a strong support system makes the transition process easier. The Engage100 gave participants a positive and supportive environment that allowed them to feel accepted. One participant stated, "I would recommend Engage 100 to other students because you'll get people that are on the same boat as you...I felt like I had a support system." This support system allowed students to feel more comfortable and connected in college. Having a good relationship with faculty is an important resource forging the necessary support and help. One student stated, "I am very fortunate that all of my professors that I had so far in college have been so supportive and understanding of how I am as a student and how I learn." Having support from faculty makes it easier to use accommodations. One student noted, "I felt very comfortable with the staff, and they were very accepting and understanding of me discussing my accommodations." Peers' support is also instrumental. Another participant stated that in addition to care from the instructors "everyone (from the Engage 100 class) really cared about your success."

The Engage 100 course taught students what resources were available to them through the University. After completing the course and reflecting on it, one student reported, “I now know of more tools available to me than I originally thought.” Others shared that they learned “about different resources that we can utilize that can help me accomplish my goals for the future and help me strive in college.”

Connections and Building Disability Community

Participants stated that they made meaningful connections and building disability community through getting involved in various on-campus disability groups. One participant reported that participating in the Engage 100 course allowed him to “get (to know) people that are in the same boat as you.” Another participant stated that the engagement to the University of Choose at her university “gave me the opportunity to engage with [my college’s] broader disability community.” Upon reflecting on the semester, one student stated, “I need community to support me in my endeavors.” The participant learned the benefit of having support and planned to seek out activities to build her community and support system. Another participant indicated that he learned to effectively interact with others because “for new people that’s a big part of college just having to meet new people and sort of, I guess, following a script to get to know people in the beginning.”

Participants also emphasized benefits of building the disability community such as enhancing confidence and making new connections through moving outside of their comfort zone. For example, one participant described that after completing the Engage 100 course, he felt more comfortable approaching strangers on campus to try to build his community and “make their day a little brighter.” Some participants highlighted additional benefits such as knowing their own needs, and feeling more comfortable asking for help, and sharing experiences. For example, one participant stated that she “feels more comfortable receiving that help from other people” because she knows that they can “help as well.”

Stereotyping and Bias

Stereotyping and biases about the disability community is not uncommon and are typically due to individuals holding assumptions or making uninformed judgements, as well as possible misunderstandings and miscommunication. Participants noted that “peers don’t always understand me” because of their differences. Another student identified how assumptions and miscommunications led to a work conflict when a participant’s boss mistook their disability as being

“ditzy” and “slow,” as opposed to getting a better understanding of what they are experiencing. Another student identified feeling violated as part of his transition because of a moment in which other students were talking about their disability in which another student “kind of outed me for no reason.”

Lack of Supports

Lack of supports and resources were reported as challenges and barriers to their college transition. Participants noted the lack of resources and amenities on campus as a barrier, including limited counseling because the counselors on campus “have to see so many people.” Other students identified professors as a barrier in that “some have no experience and an incorrect assumption about those who are dyslexic what that means about their ability to learn,” thus making the transition more difficult. Another shared that “the instructor of my in-person class just acknowledging that she got the email and that I could do whatever it said on there/I could do whatever I needed to do, which to me felt kinda distant and not as caring.” This type of experience indicates that not all faculty are as warm and willing to work with students with disabilities, which can create a transition barrier.

Identity Confusion

One of the challenges of transitioning to college is identity confusion. One participant noted that “autism is considered an invisible disability.” People do not understand her behaviors or realize those behaviors are characteristics of her disability. Being continuously misunderstood and invalidated leads to identity confusion. One participant stated that when she was diagnosed, she was not connected to other students like her and was not “in special ed classes or any of those things.” One participant stated that she did not “think anyone would understand why I different and my different learning strategies.” Feeling misunderstood and not having a community can lead students to feel isolated and confused in their identity.

Feelings of Anxiety due to the Unknown

Because transitioning to college is a new experience, participants noted feelings of anxiety due to the unknown. One participant was diagnosed with autism and she reported that her diagnosis caused challenges in handling an unknown and unstructured environment. “College is just so different from high school and grade school,” and it required additional resources and support to combat the transitional barriers. Many college students may feel anxious as they have doubts of their ability to live independently because they lose the constant supportive presence

of their families. One participant explained that their main concern with going to college was “if I would be able to live on my own and take care of myself.”

Participants noted increased anxiety regarding socially transitioning in college. One student stated, “I was really worried about coming here and being so far away from my home, as I really did not know anyone here.” Having a disability that affects social interactions is an additional barrier to the social transition. One student explained, “my disability could get in the way of engaging in college activities...I don’t always know how to verbalize things in my head, or who to tell them to because they tend to overwhelm people.” Having a disability increases anxiety over how peers will respond. One participant noted, “when I first came to [college], I was a bit intimidated. I was worried about being potentially bullied or isolated for my disability.” Some students with disabilities feel overwhelmed by the transition to college. One student shared their observation of great difference between her college and high school environment “coming from that to a large public university its huge it’s a lot of people, I mean my high school graduating class must have only been 300-400 people.”

Going to college during a pandemic added an extra level of barrier and anxiety. One student stated, “I believe that the coronavirus, accompanied by my disability, have impaired my integration within the campus community.” Attending class through Zoom can be an anxious experience for students with disabilities. One participant reported, “My dyslexia is one of the reasons why Zoom learning is so hard for me.” Some students did not have the opportunity to take online classes prior to college, thus they felt feelings of anxiety that acted as a transitional barrier. One participant stated, “I was nervous because I’ve never done online classes before...it did make me a little nervous because I’ve never done it before, and I like to warm up to things and I didn’t really get a chance to warm up to doing online classes.”

Discussion

This qualitative study explored the transition experiences for first-year college students with disabilities who participated in a semester-long intervention aiming to foster academic and social integration on a college campus. Several impeding and facilitative themes in relation to college transition have been identified. The findings of this study emphasize that students enter their first semester of college with high motivation. Participants’ responses suggested that feeling motivated and self-driven were instrumental to their success while they transitioned to being a col-

lege student. Students noted that when they arrived at the beginning of the semester, they wanted to implement time management skills and prioritize working hard. At the end of their first semester, they were able to identify challenges with their academic and social communities. They applied skills learned through Engage 100 to become more structured and to assist with an easier transition. The results support previous literature, which suggests that students who are motivated to identify their strengths and limitations tend to have a successful transition and tend to more easily develop the ability to self-manage, including managing their school schedule and assignments (Fleming et al., 2018; Getzel & Thoma, 2008) and requesting academic accommodations (Mamboleo, Dong, Anderson et al., 2020; Mamboleo, Dong, & Fais, 2020). Additionally, these results support previous research that finds self-determination to be a major determinant of success for students with disabilities in post-secondary education (Ressa, 2022).

Participants who had the resources to prepare for college experienced a less dramatic transition. They prepared for living independently, being away from home, and sought out activities and meaningful friendships. For those who did not have those resources, the Engage 100 course provided tools for a successful transition. The course taught students about time management, organizational strategies, and the importance of getting involved. Participants reported these tools aided their social and academic transition. The findings suggest that providing students with resources before and in the first semester of college will better equip them to overcome barriers. The results support previous literature stating that academic and social integration is integral for college success (DaDeppo, 2009).

The findings of this study revealed that students developed a positive self-concept of themselves and their disability during their first semester. The Engage 100 course provided students with a supportive community in which students felt encouraged to feel comfortable with their disabilities. Students noted that when they arrived on campus at the beginning of their first semester, it was difficult to share their disability with others in a new environment. However, at the end of the semester students identified that by developing a positive self-concept they were able to become more self-aware and advocate for themselves. These results support previous literature that finds being enrolled in a support program during the first semester of college increases self-advocacy, which can then lead to an increase of students’ knowledge of accommodations and an increased ability to ask peers for help (Brinckerhoff, 1994; Lombardi et al., 2016).

The findings of this study demonstrate the positive effect of having a strong support system on the social and academic integration of postsecondary students with disabilities. The Engage 100 course provided students with peers and faculty who understood and supported them. The findings suggest that having support from faculty helps students succeed academically. Additionally, supportive faculty make students feel comfortable to advocate for themselves and communicate their needs. The Engage 100 course provided information to students on university resources, which made using those resources easier for students. The results support existing literature that having support from faculty is “crucial in their transition due to the individual support and help they provided” (Patrick & Wessel, 2013, p. 114). The findings of this study suggest that building a support system and meaningful relationships with peers and faculty in the disability community eased the college transition for students with disabilities. The Engage 100 course encouraged students to engage with a broader disability community on-campus, through joining clubs and other activities. The findings suggest that students feel more comfortable seeking out connections in the community, as well as more comfortable sharing their own experiences and asking for help. The results of this study align with previous literature that finds that social integration helps students feel able to make more meaningful relationships and be better able to engage in social activities (Ashbaugh et al., 2017; Bialka et al., 2017).

Despite the above-mentioned positive experiences, participants often felt misunderstood and stereotyped throughout their transition process, which is similar to other studies that found that students feel socially isolated prior to their college intervention (Bialka et al., 2017). Findings from the present study suggest that university students with disabilities may feel misunderstood because of their differences due to others’ assumptions and biases. These findings emphasize the significance of social integration to college transition considering the prevalence of social barriers and the impact they have on this student population.

The present study also identified how a lack of support and resources for students with disabilities served as a barrier for the college transition. Similarly, Plotner and May (2019) found that students with disabilities experiences greater difficulty in seeking support. Additionally, faculty members who were unsupportive and unaccommodating were a barrier for having a successful academic transition, which suggests that there are many overlapping barriers regarding help seeking, receiving help, and the stigma

regarding help. Additional research should identify how the stigma can be removed, how to make support more available, and how to get students with disabilities to utilize campus resources to their benefit.

The present study suggests that transitioning to college for students with disabilities can increase feelings of anxiety due to various factors, such as the environment of the university, independent living, and socially integrating. The pandemic was also found to be a factor. These results are consistent with past research, which found that other students were nervous about coming to college due to their disability (Bialka et al., 2017). Participants in the current study noted a fear of how they would be perceived by others, particularly in a social context, that may have kept them from building relationships with others. Ashbaugh et al. (2017) also found that students with disabilities engage in social participation less than typical students, which makes establishing relationships difficult. Our research, along with previous research, suggests that the transition to college for students with disabilities presents several unknown experiences, which can increase a student’s anxiety.

Practical implications

Transition professionals in secondary education need to prepare students with disabilities to live independently and adjust to the learning environment in postsecondary education. For example, a school assembly for students with disabilities that teaches students about transitional barriers and how to overcome them is crucial. Students will have the opportunity to get into small groups during the assembly and have an open discussion about their concerns regarding transitioning to college, and what they are doing to prepare. This will give students the opportunity to connect with others, and realize they are not alone in their fear. This will also provide them with the opportunity to learn from one another about how to prepare for college. Alumni from the college may be invited back to their secondary schools to share their experiences and advice. Postsecondary learning environments and expectations are much different than secondary education and having the skills to live independently before going to college will ease this transition. Summer programs for gaining independent living skills prior to the start of formal enrollment could be a good way of preparing for transition, especially for students who may require personal care services.

Postsecondary education institutions may also take proactive measures to assist students with disabilities in having a smooth transition through building a supportive and inclusive postsecondary environment. A longer student orientation, including

staying the night in a dorm, would give students more time to adjust to the college environment, learn about the campus, and prepare for the transition. This student orientation should include workshops that educate students on campus resources, an accessible tour of the campus, peer mentors that can aid students in living independently, and learning about social/recreational options. These peer mentors may teach students how to use the laundry machines, about eating in the dining hall, how to get around campus, which advisors to use, how to choose the best professor for a particular course and provide them with general advice on being successful in college. Student orientation should also educate students with disabilities on how to go about getting the accommodations they need. Many individuals may be unaware of the differences in laws governing secondary and postsecondary institutions, and the orientation would be a great opportunity to educate them so that they have ample time to prepare before classes begin. In addition, these students' success relies heavily on self-determination in postsecondary institutions. Thus, the orientation would be a valuable time to educate and advertise the Engage 100 course to students. Many students may be unaware of the resources that the institution offers, and these orientations would ensure that all students are knowledgeable about the course and related resources, and then they have the option to take hold of the opportunity if they so desire. Additionally, the workshops on accessibility issues will provide an opportunity for students to meet their peers and begin making connections and building their community. All these efforts will ease the anxiety of the unknown when the students move to college because they will already have a natural support system in place.

Postsecondary institutions should also consider developing a transition course focusing on interpersonal relationship enhancement, through curriculum involving educational material and activities on the topic, as well as extracurricular activities. Additionally, providing a reunion for Engage 100 students and alumni may help students continue building and connecting with a supportive community for post-university life. By engaging in a reunion for Engage 100 alumni, this would allow them to keep in contact and connect with peers they may have first felt comfortable sharing transitional barriers with. This would also allow students to feel supported and engage again with an inclusive and supportive community and help to maintain life-long friendships.

University faculty and teaching assistants need to promote and use universal curriculum to facilitate student learning, especially during COVID-19. The university faculty will need to better promote accom-

modations, particularly during critical periods where there has been emphasis on virtual learning. Students indicated that adjusting to virtual learning was difficult during the pandemic as students are expected to learn and understand technology independently. Thus, accessible features, such as written captions for images and braille options should be integrated to make courses accessible to all students.

This study emphasized the importance of students developing self-advocacy and self-identity during their first-semester transition to college. Participants in the current study indicated that they felt more comfortable seeking assistance and disclosing their disabilities when needed over the semester. However, it would be useful to promote strategies to assist students to form a stronger sense of being and identity which could be instrumental in integrating academically and socially. Such strategies could include inviting students to connect with professors in-person or through email or engaging in social gatherings throughout the academic year with their peers and faculty. This would also enable students to better understand when and how to appropriately disclose their disabilities, as well as when to seek services, accommodations, or help when necessary. By being able to better seek necessary help, students will have a better chance to integrate both socially and academically in postsecondary education.

Research Implications

Future research should examine long-term impact of intervention programs on assisting college students with disabilities throughout their college experience, and beyond their graduation through longitudinal approaches. For example, it would be useful to follow-up with previous participants on the Engage 100 course. Utilizing five-year follow-ups would showcase how the course may impact a participant throughout their time as an undergraduate student, while a 10-year follow-up would allow for participants to share how they were able to transition to a new phase of life change (e.g., work and graduate school). Furthermore, future research may also examine the impact of transition interventions through experimental design using control group and experimental groups. All these efforts would offer more insights on how an intervention, such as Engage 100, could impact an individual in the long-term.

Considering the relatively low numbers of racial minority students participating in the study, future research should consider using more creative approaches to recruit and retain minority first-year students with disabilities. For example, alumni of the Engage 100 may be invited to attend student orientation or

make a video clip to explain on how the Engage 100 course assists them in their transition process and college success. Incentives for participation in the study should be provided, which may include gift cards or certificates of completion of the program. Future research may also consider collaborating with various minority student organizations to promote and advertise the intervention programs and its positive effect on college success.

As college students with disabilities enter later phases of postsecondary education, they may have new challenges such as building interpersonal relationships, intersectionality of disability identity and professional identity, and future career and education pursuits. Thus, universities need to establish programs and/or workshops tailored to their evolving needs.

Limitations

Several limitations exist for this study beyond that noted above. First, the sample of this study consisted primarily of Caucasian first-year students who were recruited from one large public research university in the southeastern United States. The sample may not be representative of the target population. Second, the results of the study might be subject to accuracy and objectivity of the participants' responses considering the self-reported nature of this qualitative study. Furthermore, the results of the study may potentially be influenced by the unrecognized biases and subjective assumptions of the research team members although we have used various validity checks (e.g., triangulation, self-reflection, and audit) in the content analysis process. The results should be interpreted with precaution.

Conclusion

Students with disabilities still experience challenges during their transition into postsecondary education, especially during their initial transition process. The findings of the current study reveal that university freshmen with disabilities benefit socially and academically in their initial transition despite continuing barriers and difficulties. Disability transition services and college campuses need to foster transition success for college students with disabilities through consistent collaboration and endeavors.

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