Self-Determination and Students with Autism: Strategies of Faculty and Disability Resource Professionals

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Abstract

Students with autism are enrolling in college more frequently, yet graduation rates for these students remain low. One reason posited is a lack of self-determination (SD) skills, which help students communicate with faculty and staff and act on goals. This study investigated how faculty at a community college support students in developing these skills, the nature of their communication with disability resource professionals and site directors, and the experiences of faculty and disability resource professionals with accommodations. The study employed basic qualitative methods, specifically semi-structured interviews with 31 faculty, disability resource professionals, and site directors. Findings show that faculty use specific strategies to communicate with students yet struggle with helping them to regulate behaviors and giving them autonomy. Faculty, disability resource professionals, and site directors indicate that rapport and trust are important in communications between all three groups about how to help students with autism. Yet when these qualities are not present, faculty find safe spaces to access the help they need through informal supports. All groups of participants indicated that while accommodation letters are a good place to start when supporting students with autism, they provide little help in reinforcing SD skills. Thus, accommodations are supplemented by faculty being willing to work with students beyond the accommodation letter.

Keywords: autism spectrum disorder, self-determination, postsecondary education, community college, disability support

Students with autism are enrolling in college in record numbers (LeGary, 2017; Shmulsky et al., 2017). Yet reports indicate students with autism have a postsecondary education completion rate of 40% (Newman et al., 2011), which contrasts with approximately 60% completion rate for neurotypical peers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Studies cite many reasons why students with autism are not successfully completing college degrees, including not being aware of rights and support services as well as challenges with self-advocacy skills (Anderson & Butt, 2017; Cai & Richdale, 2015). Research has also identified that students may experience challenges with self-determination (SD) skills (Richman et al., 2014). SD skills include attitudes as well as actions that assist students in setting goals and taking actions to accomplish them. Studies have indicated that students with disabilities identified SD as crucial to their college success, particularly building relationships with faculty (Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Jameson, 2007). Yet, students with disabilities have also perceived faculty as having limited understanding of their disability and accommodations (Accardo et al., 2019; Getzel & Thoma, 2008); thus, SD becomes important to address as this skill assists students in advocating for themselves.

Understanding the role that faculty play in supporting students with disabilities, and more specifically students with autism, is an important part of the conversation. Accardo et al. (2019) noted in their study that students with autism voiced a desire for college services which would connect them to fac-

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ulty mentors. LeGary (2017) also found that students with autism identified faculty as a primary source of informational support, which helped students learn to navigate the college environment. Despite this desire for connections with faculty, many students have acknowledged difficulties communicating effectively with faculty (Accardo et al., 2019; Cai & Richdale, 2015), have sensed negative attitudes from faculty (Accardo et al., 2019; Sarrett, 2018), and even felt stigmatization from faculty's behavior (Cox et al., 2017). These findings may not be surprising given that college faculty believe they lack the necessary knowledge to support students with autism (McKeon et al., 2013; Tipton & Blacher, 2014). College support staff are also part of this conversation. Glennon (2016) found the majority of college personnel who participated in her survey had received multiple trainings on autism, yet they wanted more information to better help students.

Furthermore, there is little investigation focusing on two-year colleges. Anderson and Butt (2017) noted the flexibility of community colleges as a good fit for students with autism because of the low cost, ability to take classes part-time without financial aid concerns, and no on-campus housing requirements. Low tuition also means students can afford to take developmental coursework which may be required before college-level courses can be completed (White et al., 2016). While community colleges are seen as a good fit for students with autism, there are insufficient data regarding students' retention or graduation rates or how well these colleges are serving students' needs (Anderson & Butt, 2017).

Research reveals the breadth of challenges postsecondary institutions face in fully addressing the needs of students with autism. Therefore, one step in furthering this investigation is to learn how two-year college faculty are adapting their work with students to promote skills for college success, such as fostering SD skills.

Self-Determination

Researchers have argued that SD can be developed over time through interventions (Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Shogren et al., 2020), such as by creating environments that allow students with disabilities to facilitate SD skill development (Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009; Shogren et al., 2020). These environments should be collaborative in nature, with a person of authority providing freedom of choice rather than directive counsel (Richman et al., 2014). McDonald et al. (2023) argue for a paradigm shift in how higher education promotes SD skills for students with autism; they advocate for reconceptualizing challenges with SD not as a deficit in students but as a lack of contextual support within the institution for individual students' needs. In addition, McDonald et al. (2023) state that programs for developing SD that students feel compelled to join due to external factors (e.g. parents) may actually be counterproductive since SD development relies on intrinsic motivation. This is supported by Shmulsky and colleagues (2021) who state that college supports which seek to help students address challenges may in fact compel neurodiverse students to miss opportunities for growth, particularly in developing a sense of personal identity and identifying personal strengths.

Faculty and Staff Perceptions

While the neurodiversity paradigm is becoming more commonly accepted (Armstrong, 2015), faculty often still struggle with what they perceive as challenges when working with students with autism and may feel unsure how to address students' needs. White et al. (2016) explained that faculty perceive students with autism as less successful at self-advocacy and less likely to build crucial connections with their instructors. In Gobbo and Shmulsky's (2014) focus group interviews, faculty noted that students with autism may not follow social norms, such as missing cues or not being aware of physical boundaries, which may contribute to difficulty making connections. Yet faculty also acknowledged the importance of building one-on-one relationships with students to reduce stress and anxiety for them in the classroom (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014). Faculty have also expressed concerns about helping students develop critical thinking skills since students with autism may struggle with theory of mind (Myers & DeWall, 2017), which can help them see from another's perspective. Gobbo and Shmulsky (2014) found that faculty struggled to help students with autism develop audience awareness, which made it challenging for students to develop detail in assignments or understand when to provide explanations in their work.

A related issue faculty must consider is balancing appropriate accommodations with promoting students' autonomy (Dymond et al., 2017). While students with autism may benefit from directed learning, which requires instructors to provide clear directions for tasks, faculty should balance these needs with reinforcement of self-directed behaviors when appropriate (Sayman, 2015). This kind of faculty support may go beyond the requirements of disability accommodations and requires an understanding of the individual student's needs, which can be facilitated through continued communication between instructor and student.

These challenges are complicated by reports from support staff, such as disability resource professionals, who also feel underprepared in assisting students with autism (Glennon, 2016). In Glennon's (2016) survey of 315 college personnel across the United States, almost half of the respondents revealed that, despite a variety of trainings on autism, they believed they needed more information. In addition, two-thirds responded that they struggled to identify appropriate methods for supporting students with autism. Furthermore, disability resource professionals have expressed concern about an inability to disclose information about students' experiences to parents because it would violate the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (Dymond et al., 2017).

Conceptual Framework

The framework that guided this study is Garrison-Wade and Lehmann's (2009) conceptual framework (GWL) for students with disabilities who transition to community college. Garrison-Wade and Lehmann (2009) developed their framework to make recommendations to improve the transition for students' with disabilities from secondary to postsecondary institutions, particularly two-year colleges. The researchers concluded there are several elements for a successful transition. Three recommendations that impact colleges specifically are developing students' SD skills, ongoing communication between faculty and disability resource professionals about organizational supports, and improving awareness of access and accommodations for faculty and students.

First, the GWL framework noted the importance of helping students with disabilities develop SD skills. The recommendation most applicable for this study is that postsecondary schools must create environments for students to practice skills and engage with faculty and staff to communicate needs (Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009). Oertle and Bragg (2014) further noted the importance of instruction in SD skills, rather than just providing the environment to practice them, and Fleming et al. (2017) called for support staff and faculty to model SD skills rather than simply providing accommodations. Furthermore, including students in creating their accommodations plan can help them develop SD skills as they self-advocate and specify needed resources and services (Shepler & Woosley, 2012).

Interwoven with SD instruction and support, according to the GWL framework, is the need for communication, including inter-institutional communication between faculty and disability resource professionals to address potential structural barriers and survey faculty support needs (Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009; Oertle & Bragg, 2014). Encouraging open communication is crucial because, as Shelly (2018) found in her investigation into two-year faculty's perceptions of accommodating students with disabilities, faculty may not regularly seek out support from a disability resources office because faculty believed staff were too busy, or faculty felt too overworked to be able to meet with resource professionals.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study of general education community college faculty are as follows:

1. How do faculty report fostering self-determination skills for students with autism?
2. What is the nature of the ongoing communication between faculty, disability resource professionals, and site directors in assisting students with autism?
3. What are the experiences of faculty, disability resource professionals, and site directors regarding disability support access and accommodations?

Design of the Study

Since this study was focused on (a) faculty's experiences helping students with autism develop SD skills and (b) faculty's and disability resource professionals' perceptions of communication and experiences regarding accommodations and disability support access, a basic qualitative research methodology is appropriate. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that basic qualitative research uncovers how participants make meaning of their experiences and construct knowledge, which is relevant for understanding how faculty interpret their experiences supporting students in developing SD. Qualitative research gathers first-hand data from participants about how they perceive their interactions and awareness of available institutional supports, as called for by the GWL framework. The study focused on faculty and staff at a Midwestern community college and gathered data using semi-structured interviews with general education faculty, disability resource professionals, and site directors.

Setting

The setting for this study was a regionally accredited two-year community college made up of three campuses, two education centers, and an online "campus." The college is an open-enrollment institu-

tion, and, according to the college's website, serves approximately 12,000 students (of which over 5,700 are enrolled full time and over 6,000 are part time). The average age of students across all campuses and sites, full time and part time, is 20. Each of the college's three campuses has a dedicated disability support office, though the office functions differently at each campus. On the largest campus, it is a standalone office responsible for assisting students and faculty with support services. At the other two extended campuses, it is combined with library, testing, and tutoring services. Each office at the three campuses is overseen by a separate director. The two additional sites, which will be referred to as education centers, are served by disability resource professionals housed at the largest campus, and the site directors are a centralized point of contact regarding students with disabilities. Current literature from the college suggests that over 600 students use disability services across the entire institution.

Participants

Two categories of participants took part in this study: (a) disability resource professionals and site directors of education centers and (b) general education faculty from all campuses and education sites. The first group invited to participate were disability resource professionals for each of the college's three campuses and the directors of the two education sites. This group primarily support institutional policies regarding disability services for their campus or site, and thus have insights into the resources available to faculty. The directors for the education sites were chosen since there are no dedicated disability support supervisors at these locations. Thus, the directors are a point of contact for faculty who are assisting students with disabilities and can provide insight into how faculty are supported on their sites. These participants were included because they represent the institutional support systems that the GWL framework calls for regarding coordinated communication to support students with disabilities. Of the 11 available participants based on these criteria, two education site directors and five disability resource professionals consented to participate.

The largest group of participants included full-time general education faculty from the college's three campuses and education centers. General education faculty were identified because students must take basic general education courses, such as college composition or math, to fulfill degree requirements, so these instructors interact with most students who come through the college. As a result, general education faculty are more likely to teach students with autism on a regular basis. General education faculty are also employed full-time at all campuses and education sites, as opposed to technical education faculty, for example, who do not teach on all of the campuses. Of 27 faculty members invited to participate, 23 members agreed to be interviewed: three from education sites, four from extended campuses, and sixteen from the largest campus. Faculty members represented six different general education departments (English, math, social sciences, behavioral sciences, physical sciences, and biology). Faculty participants had an average of 16 years of teaching experience, with 40 years being the greatest and six years the least.

Sampling Methods

Participant selection of faculty played an important role as instructors must have had experience teaching students with autism. Thus, both purposive sampling and snowball sampling were used to gain "information-rich data" from faculty who had experience teaching students with autism (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96). The disability resource directors identified 13 instructors for the first round of faculty interviews for the campuses, and the education site directors identified three faculty for the centers. Of these recommendations, nine consented to be interviewed.

After interviews were conducted with the initial round of recommended faculty, snowball sampling was used to identify further participants who have taught students with autism. Faculty often share experiences with each other and ask colleagues for advice when they encounter challenges in the classroom; thus, they are likely to know other colleagues they believe have assisted students with autism in the classroom with unique experiences. The initial faculty interviewed recommended 27 different faculty members total. Towards the end of interviewing, many of the same names began to be recommended, indicating saturation was being reached. Of the 27 new people recommended, 14 agreed to participate.

Data Collection Tools

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews with all participants. Prior to beginning the data collection process, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained from the institution to ensure ethical treatment of participants as well as privacy for students on whom participants are reflecting (Creswell, 2016). As data collection took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, in accordance with Centers for Disease Control (CDC; 2020) recommendations, interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom to maintain social distancing.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the data collection tool because they allow researchers to gather detailed information about participants' perceptions and experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2013). The interview process served different purposes for faculty, disability resource professionals, and site administrators. First, the interviews with resource professionals and directors were conducted to reveal what they recommend faculty do to help students develop SD skills as well as the institutional supports which the resource professionals know are available to faculty. The second reason is because resource professionals and administrators' responses could be used to triangulate data and compare perceptions of communication across the participant groups.

The same style of interviews was also applicable for faculty participants to allow them to reflect on their experiences (Seidman, 2013) regarding how they interact with students with autism to develop SD skills. SD is a relatively new concept, and not all faculty may be familiar with it. However, most are familiar with processes for helping students set goals or learn to communicate their needs, for example, which are common SD behaviors. Thus, semi-structured interviews allowed for adaptation of the questioning process to probe faculty's experiences. To facilitate this sort of reflection yet ensure that some standardized information was obtained, an interview protocol was used, as recommended by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). Faculty interview protocols consisted of 24 questions, and disability resource professionals and site director protocols included 19 questions.

Guiding the design of the interview protocols was the GWL framework; thus, questions focused not just on the way faculty interact with students to develop crucial SD skills, but also on how the participant groups communicate with each other to access institutional supports. Two additional considerations for the interview protocol included, first, ensuring faculty were reflecting on experiences working with students with autism and, second, that faculty understood what SD constitutes. With this in mind, at the start of each interview, participants were asked to reflect on their experiences with students who had self-disclosed their autism to the participant, and participants were provided with a definition of self-determination.

Data Analysis

Analysis of all interviews was conducted using the constant comparative method to develop emerging themes from the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) as supported by the GWL framework. As recommended by Seidman (2013), the primary researcher first transcribed all interviews verbatim to become highly familiar with the information. Formal analysis began with line-by-line open coding where segments of data addressing the research questions were identified (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), specifically looking for categories of information which aligned with the GWL framework regarding the facilitation of SD skills, communication across stakeholder groups, and access of institutional supports. These initial segments were reduced to categories through axial coding, where connections between initial comments were linked together. The primary researcher conducted the coding due to her role as a full-time community college instructor. The research team participated in triangulation by reading quotes and offering feedback on the wording of themes as supported by quotes from participants.

Once all transcripts were coded, a memo of emerging themes was written (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), tracking patterns of how faculty interact with students with autism in developing SD skills; communication between faculty, disability resource professionals, and site directors to support students; as well as awareness of institutional supports. These themes were triangulated with codes which emerged from analysis of interviews with resource professionals and directors. The GWL (2009) framework was used as the lens to analyze codes and "thick, rich description" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 257) was sought regarding interactions with students and resources used to allow readers to determine if the findings are transferable to their own settings (Creswell, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Researcher Positionality

The lead author has been a general education faculty member of the institution under investigation for 16 years. Seidman (2013) cautioned that researchers must be careful not to let relationships with participants affect the interview. As a result of prior knowledge of disability resources available and existing relationships with some participants, the interview protocols were designed to reduce the effects on data collection with open-ended responses and avoidance of leading questions. Asking disability resource professionals to recommend the first round of participants was intended to reduce potential bias from the lead author choosing participants as well as increase the odds of interviewing people not encountered previously.

In addition, while no research authors for the study identify as having a disability, the team members were chosen to include scholarly practitioners with experience relevant to the study: two with experience in qualitative research design, one with spe-

cial education expertise, and one with experience in first-year student academic success. To draw on the other research authors' expertise, the lead author followed Creswell's (2016) recommendation to write theme passages for codes which incorporated thick description and specific quotations from participants to begin developing findings. The other research authors contributed expert review on theme passages to develop rich rigor, resonance, and meaningful coherence (Tracy, 2010). Since none of the research authors identify as having a disability, person-first language was chosen for use in this article in keeping with language choices used by the majority of the participants in the study, who used person-first language. However, the authors recognize the importance of the conversation regarding language and identity and respect individuals' choice of language.

Findings

How Do Faculty Report Fostering Self-Determination Skills for Students with Autism?

Regarding the methods faculty reported using to foster SD skills for students with autism, five themes emerged: communicating, balancing being direct with providing choices, building trust, supporting behavior regulation, and developing faculty's sense of confidence in teaching.

Communicating Proactively with Students

Communication was perhaps the most common theme to emerge from faculty interviews. Twenty of 23 faculty (86.9%) either shared an example of how they had proactively contacted a student with autism or acknowledged this was an important part of their role as a teacher. With this theme, faculty employed different strategies. Twenty faculty stated that when they observed a behavior they believed required intervention or noticed the student was struggling, the instructor would ask the student to stay after class or would contact the student via email. Another method faculty employed to encourage communication was building time into their lessons to move among students while they worked. At least six faculty members (26%) stated they consciously incorporated time into their lessons for students to work so the instructor could make themselves available to answer questions or assist with lesson content. One faculty member described herself as being "kind of intrusive" about peeking over students' shoulders and finding opportunities to check in or engage with them during work time.

However, ten faculty (43.4%) acknowledged that proactive communication as a strategy for developing SD has its limitations. Approaching the student seemed counter-productive to developing SD skills. Participant 14 expressed this tension: "Sometimes I have where…I am the one seeing the problem and I reach out, and that is less effective, I think...I'm doing a little of the work to make them successful sometimes."

Delineating Expectations but Providing Choices

Related to this balancing act of choosing when to communicate versus when to let students make the choice, 16 of 23 faculty members (69.5%) discussed the simultaneous need to set clear, direct expectations for classroom behavior while providing students choices about how to conduct themselves and their work. All 16 instructors discussed the importance of clearly defining expectations for the classroom, such as explaining when students should raise their hands and when not to. Some faculty did this when they introduced syllabus policies for the semester, and others would wait until they observed behaviors that required intervention. Equally as important was allowing students to make choices to practice SD skills. Participant 9 explained she hands out an agenda every class period. While she explained she did this so students would know what to plan for, she also said this was a strategy which allowed students with autism to make choices about how to participate; thus, the participant believed the schedule provided clear directives as well as choices. Other faculty members provided options for assignment topics or modes for participating in discussions.

Building Trust with Students

Fifteen of 23 faculty members (65.2%) emphasized helping students feel a sense of trust, though faculty employed different methods for doing so. Some faculty reflected on how they engaged with students during class discussions or when students expressed anxiety. Another common method that faculty discussed was sharing their personal experiences or medical diagnoses with the class to encourage students with autism to speak with them. Faculty believed sharing made them more approachable, thus encouraging students to deliver and discuss accommodation letters. Likewise, many instructors hoped students who were not registered with the disability resources office would feel comfortable approaching the teacher even if the student did not have formal accommodations through the college. One faculty member reflected on his choice to share: "I'm open about my ADHD, and I think that's helping a bit. [I tell students] you're allowed to struggle. This is not a problem. And so one of the things I'm trying to do is destigmatize."

Supporting Behavior Regulation for Students

Fifteen of 23 faculty members (65.2%) shared an example of how they directly regulated a students' behavior when the student appeared unable to do so on their own. One faculty member discussed doing this because she knew students with autism might need help with social norms: "When you're in a new culture where you can't read the expectations, unless they're spelled out, that can be a very real difficulty." Some instructors said they were comfortable directly but politely telling the student to stop, while others worried this would embarrass the student or spotlight the behavior in front of peers. In these cases, faculty worked with the student to come up with codes, such as hand signals, to convey that the student needed to stop a certain behavior.

Similar to the theme of communication, though, ten faculty members (43.4%) struggled with the idea of doing the regulation for the student. Faculty knew they needed to manage the class; however, moderating a student's behavior meant the student might not learn when to do it for themselves, thus defeating any development of SD skills. After recounting helping a student self-regulate so he did not dominate class discussions, one faculty member expressed regret for not thinking to tell that student how to translate this assistance in the future: "I wish I would have told him, moving forward in your life, you need to look for people to do what I'm doing for you…I don't know if he would think to do this on his own, but if I told him to, he would have that in his mind for the rest of his life."

Increasing Confidence in Teaching

Twelve of 23 participants (52.1%) reflected on the importance of feeling confident about teaching before they believed they had the capacity to help students develop SD skills. Faculty talked about how they felt less able to help students with autism at the beginning of their teaching career. Participant 1 referred to this as finding a "comfort zone" in the subject matter. Similarly, faculty discussed changes over time to their practices which they believed better supported students, such as one teacher who had specialized in developmental writing and found that methods for teaching SD skills in developmental education were also beneficial to students with autism. She stated, "I don't think my knowledge of working with students with autism has changed because I feel like I'm really deficient in that area, but I do think I've changed as a teacher. And I think some of the things that I do are those things that are going to be good for students of all needs." Others discussed how their subject area helped them teach SD, such as psychology teachers who developed lessons on learning self-determination.

What is the Nature of the Ongoing Communication Between Faculty, Disability Resource Professionals, and Site Directors in Assisting Students with Autism?

Faculty Perceptions

Faculty members' perceptions of the nature of communication with the disability resources office generated three themes: sense of safety, need for transparency, and feelings of inadequacy.

Safe Spaces for Finding Help. Seventeen of 23 faculty members (73.9%) reported needing to feel safe before they can ask for help when supporting students with autism. Faculty who already had a pre-established relationship with a disability resource professional said they would turn to that person for help when they needed it. Many described knowing the disability resource professionals for years and having a friendly relationship with them. On the other hand, 13 faculty (56.5%) reported that they either learned from or asked for help from someone outside of the disability resources office. Examples included friends or family members who had children with autism or other faculty members with whom they had a strong relationship. Participant 3 referred to this as developing a "culture of safety" and how she and her fellow instructors sometimes felt exposed:

> The culture around here is that if I ask for help, I must not be good at my job. It's not a culture of safety amongst the instructors for us to be able to learn and grow without looking delinquent at our own jobs.

Participant 9 spoke passionately about the need to trust who she collaborated with:

> I am hesitant to have these conversations with people I don't know very well because it is too easy to just say, well, this is what I do, and then smack, smack, smack [imitates being slapped on the hand]. Those are not hallway conversations. They are lunch conversations with very, very select, trusted colleagues, inner circle, who I know have the same respect and value for students.

Desire for Transparency and Openness. The need for a personal relationship is echoed in faculty's communication preferences when they do contact a disability resource professional. Eleven of 23 faculty members (47.8%) stated they preferred to talk in person, either by calling the disability resource professional or stopping by their office. They believed speaking to a resource professional in person al-

lowed both people to express themselves openly or with more details and examples. Thus, the instructors believed they learned more about individual students and how to best help that person. Three faculty members explained that talking in person also relieved worry about how the resource professionals might interpret intentions. For example, Participant 4 explained needing to trust who she was communicating with because she did not want the resource professionals to believe she was idly curious about a student's disability or asking them to break privacy restrictions. She stated:

> I need you to know I really do have the student's best interests at heart. This is not because, I'm just like, oh, what's going on with this student? I want you to see my face, hear my tone, and know why I'm here.

Feelings of Inadequacy. Ten of 23 faculty participants (43.4%) expressed feelings related to inadequacy, such as guilt, shame, or being overwhelmed regarding their ability to communicate with the disability resources office, which may explain why faculty felt a desire for safe spaces to communicate. While this theme had the fewest participants expressing it, those who did spoke strongly about their feelings. Participant 5 felt guilt for not being able to find the right person to help when a student who was not registered with disability resources office became overstimulated on field trips. He stated, "Nobody knew who was on first with this situation. It just showed a gaping hole in my knowledge and also, like, kind of the disconnect between instructors and [the disability resources office]." Two faculty members worried they had dominated a resource professional's time by asking for too much help, and eight faculty felt overwhelmed because they did not have enough time or felt more pressure to help students with other immediate needs, such as food insecurity. At least three of seven disability resource professionals or site administrators (42.8%) reinforced this theme by explaining they worried that faculty are not reaching out because they are too busy managing large classes, do not have time to learn new strategies, or even may feel like they "should just know" what to do, as noted by Participant 27.

Disability Resource Professionals' and Site Directors' Perceptions

Paralleling faculty's perceptions were disability resource professionals' and site administrators' beliefs that they must balance the need for open communication with faculty with the need to support students and maintain confidentiality. This is demonstrated across three themes, including a desire for rapport with faculty, balanced with student autonomy, and awareness of restrictions on what they can communicate to faculty.

Rapport with Faculty. Five of seven disability resource professionals and administrators (71.4%) identified the importance of relationships with faculty and being approachable. Participant 26 stated, "You're more apt to come to me if we have a little bit of rapport…I don't want anyone to be intimidated." To create this connection, some used social events, such as campus picnics, to engage with faculty, others described volunteer opportunities which allowed them to work alongside instructors, and some chose to stay after regular work hours to meet with evening instructors. Participant 25 described resource professionals' roles as being advocates for faculty, "Students are not served at all if I have an antagonistic relationship with my faculty…I think it would benefit faculty to have someone they felt was their advocate because sometimes I think they don't feel like they have their advocate."

Encouraging Student Autonomy. While recognizing the importance of building relationships with faculty so instructors feel like they can communicate with them, five of seven disability resource professionals or site administrators (71.4%) also discussed the need to allow students to independently communicate with faculty. Doing this encourages autonomy and self-determination. Participant 26 expressed this clearly: "In the past, we used to send a combination of letters to faculty and sometimes that would initiate, but that takes away the autonomy from the students." However, this participant went on to express conflicting feelings regarding giving students space: "It's frustrating sometimes because you know that you can help, but you know, they've got to come to you."

Restricted in Communication with Faculty. Another challenge identified by four of seven disability resource professionals and site administrators (57.1%) were restrictions on what they can disclose to faculty. One described finding subtle ways to prompt an instructor to think about a student's behavior in the classroom or other observed signs to figure out how to help the student without directly stating diagnosis or disability. One other explained how they even rely on faculty to help point students to them and how they worry that faculty feel restricted by HIPAA or FERPA regulations. Restrictions on what disability resource professionals can disclose to faculty and the difficulties this can create was illustrated by Participant 4, a faculty member, who described a conversation with a resource professional that felt unhelpful:

> I just felt like we were only going to talk in vague terms. I'm like, I need this conversation to be real because it's not helpful to me to talk in vague terms…I get student privacy, and that's important….[but] sometimes being locked out of that conversation because of privacy is frustrating. I feel like it ties my hands behind my back.

What Are the Experiences of Faculty, Disability Resource Professionals, and Site Directors Regarding Disability Support Access and Accommodations?

All 23 faculty interviewed identified the disability resources office as an asset for supporting students with autism, so there is clear awareness of the resources office. However, faculty's experiences with accommodations reflect the challenges they face while determining the best way to teach students with autism. The interviews revealed four themes: developing creative accommodations, believing accommodation letters are not adequate, needing to supplement with other college resources, and differentiating between accommodating and teaching. These themes are supported by faculty, disability resource professionals, and site administrators' perceptions.

Development of Creative Accommodations

Nineteen of 23 faculty (82.6%) discussed experiences which taught them to adapt or supplement accommodations to help students. This was likely to occur when students did not have a formal accommodation letter but shared their autism diagnosis with faculty. However, even when students had a formal letter, faculty conveyed a readiness to help students when they identified helpful strategies that were not in their letter. Twelve faculty (52.1%) expressed they were willing to meet with students extensively during office hours, two (.8%) described students who brought toys to class to fidget with, and three (1.3%) shared whole class methods for allowing students with autism to release anxiety when feeling overwhelmed. At least five of seven disability resource professionals and site administrators (71.4%) reinforced this need to be flexible. Participant 25 referred to this as getting "creative" and helping faculty feel "ownership" about accommodation plans.

Accommodation Letters Are Not Enough

While each disability resource professional stated the accommodation letter was the primary tool triggering faculty to access the disability resources office, 16 of 23 faculty (69.5%) stated the letter did not help them enough. Furthermore, three of the seven disability resource professionals and site administrators (42.8%) also acknowledged the letter had limitations. Faculty recognized the letter was clear about required accommodations. However, when asked how knowledgeable they felt about accommodations for students with autism, 11 faculty (47.8%) stated they did not feel confident, even if they previously stated they were confident about accommodations for students with disabilities in general. This sentiment came from the knowledge that students with autism may benefit from varying types of supports. Furthermore, four faculty (1.7%) saw the letters as always providing the same accommodations with no insight into students' particular needs. Participant 9 summed this belief up when reflecting on the letter: "It's not a bad document. I just don't feel like it's enough for a whole semester of working with a student and individualizing a plan of action." Yet another faculty member stated, "I feel much less comfortable with the letters from [the disability resources office], and that's not anything against [the office]. It's just I don't think that the accommodations for one student are equivalent to accommodations for another student, even though they both have autism."

Supplementing with Other Campus Resources

While all faculty were aware of the disability resources office's existence and purpose, 12 of the 23 faculty participants (52.1%) described relying on other campus resources for help, such as tutoring services. Likewise, six of seven disability resource professionals and site administrators (85.7%) acknowledged these resources as tools for faculty to help students with autism. In particular, faculty at extension sites with no dedicated disability resource professional discussed using any available resources. One such instructor, Participant 12, described working with a student who would get overwhelmed and leave the classroom crying each class period: "I really didn't know what to do then…I didn't really have anyone to turn to…rather than me having a conversation in the hallway with her." This participant's campus eventually gained a mental health counselor to whom the instructor could refer students. Other examples of resources included the college's writing or speech and communication centers, an early alert form to notify administration about students struggling in class, and campus librarians.

Differentiating Between Accommodations and Teaching

Reactions to the helpfulness of the letter stemmed from faculty members' differentiation between accommodations (such as extended time on exams) versus teaching and learning strategies (like help-

ing students process abstract concepts when writing academic arguments). Eleven of 22 faculty (50%) expressed this concern, and three of seven disability resource professionals or site administrators (42.8%) echoed it. While only half of the participants reflected this theme, those who did discuss this differentiation spoke fervently about their concerns. For example, Participant 9, a faculty member, recounted a professional development session she attended about learning to identify potential behaviors which may indicate autism. The instructor described the session as "frustrating" because learning to identify behaviors did not help with developing teaching strategies.

Discussion

Findings from this study reinforce results from earlier studies. Regarding how faculty help students with autism foster SD skills, communication was the most common theme that emerged. Faculty found proactive ways to open lines of communication with students, including sharing their own stories. Faculty believed being open with students about personal challenges served the dual purpose of opening lines of communication and building trust. This method encouraged students to approach faculty, whether the students had formal accommodations or not. This aligns with Shepler and Woosley's (2012) findings that including students in their accommodations planning may encourage SD skills because it requires them to self-advocate. Furthermore, faculty are modeling SD behaviors for students (Fleming et al., 2017), de-stigmatizing perceptions of disabilities (Cai & Richdale, 2015), and helping establish crucial relationships (Fleming et al., 2017; LeGary, 2017; White et al., 2016). The challenge, of course, is that students must be willing to approach faculty, and certain factors may discourage them from doing so, such as having previously felt the need to mask neurodivergence (Shmulsky et al., 2021) or believing they no longer need accommodations after graduating high school (Alverson, Lindstrom, & Hirano, 2019).

Another strategy faculty employed is balancing directness with providing options for students to activate SD skills, which aligns with earlier studies (Dymond et al., 2017; Garrison-Wade, 2012; Sayman, 2015). Directly stating expectations has been found to help students with autism (McKeon et al., 2013), but providing choices is what Richman et al. (2014) argued is the catalyst for developing SD skills when coaching students. Furthermore, this aligns with the call by McDonald et al. (2023) for using intrinsic motivation to support SD skill development rather than external motivation, such as rewards and punishments. Oertle and Bragg (2014) also noted the importance of developing SD skills by modeling and reinforcement. They explained that training faculty and staff may be a vital part of faculty incorporating this into their classrooms, as opposed to just providing an environment where students could do it on their own.

Faculty in the current study also observed they needed safe spaces to share their experiences and get feedback on strategies they employed. This reflects the importance of communication between faculty and disability resource professionals to assist students in a post-secondary setting (Garrison-Wade & Lehman, 2009; Oertle & Bragg, 2014). However, the theme of needing safe spaces also illustrated a breakdown in the lines of communication because faculty did not always turn towards the disability resources office. This theme extends findings from Shelly (2018), who observed that faculty do not regularly seek out services from disability resources offices. Instead, in this study, many faculty reported their communication was directed at peers or friends who had experience with autism. Seeking out alternate support systems may be due to faculty feeling inadequate in their knowledge or the belief that they or disability resource professionals are too busy to help, which was also noted by Shelly (2018). While faculty are turning to their disability resources office for assistance, those who prefer to turn to friends, family, or peers, reveal a vulnerability in their ability to openly communicate with the office.

Disability resource professionals and site administrators in this study also noted the importance of their communication with faculty. They relied on rapport with faculty to open lines of communication but balanced this with encouraging student autonomy and privacy. Glennon (2016) had related findings, though disability resource professionals in Glennon's study reported concerns about what they could share with parents rather than faculty. Taken together, the findings of this current study plus Glennon's (2016) reveal a challenge in Garrison-Wade and Lehmann's (2009) argument for faculty and disability resource professionals to work together on accommodations to "avoid misunderstandings" (p. 420).

A further complication of resource professionals' ability to communicate with faculty is the perception of the role accommodation letters play. Faculty acknowledged that individualizing plans to support students with autism is important, and thus believed the letter did not help them do this. This extends findings which indicated students present with a variety of needs and require different levels of support (Dymond et al., 2017). It also furthers findings that

faculty should make decisions about how to support students with autism beyond the accommodation letter (Cox et al., 2017; Glennon, 2016). This finding is important to note since it addresses students' concerns about faculty flexibility and understanding of individual needs (Accardo et al., 2019).

Coupled with the need to individualize plans were faculty's differentiations between accommodations versus teaching and learning. Gobbo and Shmulsky (2014) likewise found that faculty struggled to teach students with autism conceptual content, such as audience awareness, and Chou et al. (2017) noted that designing methods to help students develop SD skills may be challenging due to students' individual needs. Curriculum development may thus be a particular challenge for faculty. Ashbaugh and colleagues (2017) observed that colleges may not offer the full range of supports students may require for success, yet faculty in the current study indicated college supports, such as tutors and counseling services, were a boon to them. This also aligns with results by Dymond et al. (2017), which revealed that students with autism may need different types of college resources depending on personal support systems.

Limitations and Future Research

Due to the participant selection and setting of this study, it is limited in its scope in ways that may impact generalizability. First, because participation was restricted to full-time general education faculty, further research is needed to identify perceptions of full-time faculty in other disciplines, such as sciences and technical education. Faculty in these disciplines may perceive different challenges, such as with accommodations, since requirements for these disciplines will differ from general education requirements. In addition, this study included only full-time faculty members as participants; adjunct faculty may have differing experiences due to the nature of their work for colleges. In addition, the setting for this study limited its scope since it was conducted at a two-year community college. Therefore, future research will need to include perceptions of full-time and adjunct faculty and disability resource professionals at four-year institutions. Furthermore, though faculty were asked to reflect on their experiences with students who had disclosed being autistic, some participants admitted their memories may not always be accurate.

The results also highlight areas for future research, including perceptions of other faculty populations in addition to developing teaching and learning methods. In particular, the theme of differentiation between accommodations and teaching and learning warrants further investigation. While this theme emerged from fewer participants than many of the other themes, participants spoke insistently about their need to learn strategies for teaching conceptual content. Participants' perceptions may have developed due to the nature of general education, which more frequently requires conceptual thinking, including writing for varying audiences or evaluating quality of written works, as opposed to disciplines which require more concrete studies, such as technical education. Further complicating this is the fact that not all general education courses require the same level of conceptual thinking, such as classes which may involve hands-on lab work. General education classes which are more likely to teach abstract concepts may include English or other communication fields. Thus, to learn more about teaching and learning strategies to support students with autism, targeted research of these disciplines is warranted.

Implications for Practice

This study's findings have implications for practice for two college populations: faculty and disability resource professionals. First, as students with autism more frequently enroll in higher education, faculty will need more methods to assist them in developing SD skills since students will present with a variety of learning needs. Per the GWL framework (Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009), faculty should find opportunities to build trust, perhaps by sharing any personal diagnoses or academic challenges, to encourage students to approach their teachers and activate SD skills. However, faculty should also be willing to proactively communicate when they observe a student struggling, rather than waiting for the student to approach them. Faculty should also establish clear expectations for classroom behaviors from the outset and employ methods suitable for individual students to help them regulate inappropriate classroom behaviors.

Before faculty can employ these methods, disability resource professionals also need to collaborate with faculty, per the GWL framework (Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009). First, disability resources offices would benefit from helping faculty develop confidence in their skills. For example, when possible, disability resource professionals should consider advising students with disabilities to register for classes with more experienced faculty to give new faculty time to become confident with their content area and lesson planning. Furthermore, disability resources offices should provide training for faculty to recognize signs of autism and to develop classroom management strategies. This recommendation aligns with a

call from Accardo et al. (2019) for more professional development for faculty to support students with autism in college success. However, simply training faculty to recognize signs is not enough for them to feel confident. Results from this study indicated faculty also need help developing teaching and learning strategies, focusing on conceptual content.

Since findings revealed faculty are turning towards peers, friends, and family more than disability resource professionals, there is also a need to rebuild trust with faculty so disability resource professionals are a primary source of support for them. This is especially true since faculty reported gaining important information about individual students when communicating in person with resource professionals. The challenge is that faculty may feel guilt or embarrassment for needing assistance, thus leading them to not reach out or perhaps feel threatened in their positions as content experts. Creating buy-in and trust with faculty is essential, though, due to a lack of resources available at many institutions of higher education to support students with disabilities. This recommendation reinforces a call by Accardo et al. (2019) for faculty and disability resource professionals to collaborate on supports and services for college students with autism. Collaboration between faculty and disability resource professionals is one potential solution to resource restrictions. Disability resource professionals who participated discussed their methods for doing this, including volunteering at institutional events alongside faculty, hosting social events, and open-door policies. Ultimately, whatever method was chosen, the goal is to create rapport and build trust between faculty and resource specialists in service of enhanced student success.

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