Brown, K. R. (In Press). Accommodations and support services for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD): A national survey of disability resource providers. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability.*

Annotated by Michael Hong, Kara Smith – 02/10/2017

ABSTRACT Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are participating in postsecondary education at an increasing rate. Yet, we know little about what types of accommodations or services disability resource providers employ to support students with ASD. The purpose of this study was to examine how postsecondary institutions are fostering the academic success of students with ASD. Using a randomly selected, nationally representative sample of postsecondary institutions (n =1,245 response rate 38.8%; return rate 41.9%), this study explored enrollment trends of students with ASD and the types of reasonable accommodations and support services offered to those students. This study used predictive modeling to isolate factors that are strong indicators of whether or not and institution provided ASD-specific programs. Findings indicate that although students with ASD are more likely to attend two-year public institutions, there are no differences in accommodations or student support services by institution type. Over 90% of institutions use academically focused accommodations (e.g., extended exam time), but only 44.7% of institutions provided sensory accommodations and 28.3% of institutions offered ASD-specific services. The existence of peer mentoring programs was the strongest predictor of whether or not an institution had ASD-specific services. Implications for practitioners working in postsecondary environments and future research are discussed.

SUMMARY

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to examine how four year public, four year private, and two year public postsecondary institutions are promoting the academic success of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

Framework

The Americans with Disabilities Act constitutes accommodations as being a means for "an individual with a disability to enjoy equal opportunities" (p. 5) through the utilization of support services. The idea of "reasonable accommodations" is specifically highlighted by the researcher so that the accommodations given are within reason and do not give

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students an advantage and so that academic values are maintained. Such examples of reasonable accommodations would be extended testing time, a testing center tailored specifically to the tester's needs, and note-taking for students who have a disability. Furthermore, the author describes reasonable accommodations as accommodations that maintain academic integrity standards.

Population and Sample

The sample used were the Directors of Disability Resources from 469 non-profit postsecondary institutions. The institutions were randomly selected and they included two-year public, four-year public, and four-year private institutions. These directors represented their institution and answered surveys sent out to them via email.

Overview of Methods

The Directors at the institutions were contacted via email in order to collect data through the use of a survey. Only 1,156 institutions out of 1,245 eligible institutions had valid emails. 483 out of these 1,156 institutions answered the recruitment email to fill out the survey, which consisted of topics regarding the academic interventions available to accommodate students with ASD. The survey had 47 questions which included demographic questions, questions about services, open ended questions asking about service-related questions, and routing questions that led to more potential questions. 14 participants did not fill out all of the information or did not provide sufficient information, leaving 469 total participants.

Variables or Broad Topics
1. **Reasonable accommodations**: services provided to offer equal opportunities for individuals with disabilities.
2. **General support service**: any free program to supply those reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities.
3. **Peer mentoring**: part of general services that offer students with ASD access to tutoring from fellow students within their institution.
4. **ASD specific service**: programs designed specifically to fulfill the needs of students with ASD.

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Findings/Results
1. 93.7% of institutions had at least one student diagnosed with ASD enrolled at their institution.
2. Most institutions assessed did maintain reasonable accommodations to promote academic success of the students with ASD.
   a. These accommodations included extended exam time, note takers, and alternative testing locations.
3. However, the data indicated that there were fewer ASD specific services, which included housing accommodations for students with ASD.
4. Overall, ASD specific services were less common than general disability services.
5. In addition, the results indicate that more students with ASD were found to be enrolled at two-year public institutions rather than four-year public or private institutions.

Implications
1. The data provided from this research indicate that due to the high attendance of students with ASD at postsecondary institutions, there is an administrative need within those institutions to provide increased ASD specific services (in addition to general services) in order to fulfill the academic and sensory needs of students with ASD.

2. The need for services to accommodate sensory needs is highlighted through this data, and perhaps a program that includes sensory needs services.

   a. An example here would be student housing to accommodate those sensory needs that can be achieved by reserving one room living areas specifically for students with ASD.

3. A final implication is to concentrate ASD services specifically to two-year institutions since the results indicated that more students with ASD attend those institutions as compared to four-year public or private institutions.

CRITIQUES & LIMITATIONS

Conceptual

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The article encapsulates several important concepts that provide relevant information in understanding which accommodations and services are offered for students with ASD. Each concept, however, includes a problem that may be important to consider.

1. **Legal precedent:** accommodations are defined and accordingly provided through the influence of legislature and case law. How, then, can individualized practices be incorporated into accommodations for students with ASD when "the American Disabilities Act (ADA) does not mandate personal services" in postsecondary institution as the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) does in K-12 education?

2. **Reasonable accommodations:** The utilization of accommodations was a strong predictor of high rates of academic success (i.e. higher grade point average). Various factors affect a student's willingness to seek accommodations; one factor included ableism from faculty members. Even when faculty members carry a positive stance toward students with disabilities, should they also be more proactive in addressing accommodations before teaching course material?

3. **Functional limitations and campus environment:** academic and sensory accommodations are explained as having varying levels of success depending on an individual's level of executive functioning. However, the broad overview on both academic and sensory accommodations limits the author from evaluating specific practices that would be beneficial to students with greater limitations.

Data

The sample was limited to each Director of Disability Resources from the campuses surveyed. Although this sample frame efficiently identifies a representative from campuses, this limits the responses from actual students with ASD, as they may be able to provide feedback that relies less on perception and more on personal testimony. This is especially pertinent if the author later intends to conduct qualitative surveys (e.g. measuring student response on how effective the offered services were).

Analysis

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The authors found that respondents were about twice more likely to report that services for students with ASD were present if the institution had sensory accommodations that if it did not. However, the response is still limited to the perception of the reporters (Director of Disability Resources from each institution) and stray away from how aware are the students with ASD who benefit from these services.

Interpretation

Neglecting to discuss symptoms of Autism Spectrum Disorder could limit the author's ability to know if these symptoms can deter students from seeking support. This could be especially problematic in institutions of higher education, as faculty members may expect students to be self-reliant and responsible for requesting accommodations on their own.

Application

This study observes the gamut of services offered to students with ASD, but does not mention which services these students actually take advantage of. To successfully provide these resources to students with ASD and in higher education institutions, there are two important perspectives that should be considered.

1. **Awareness of accommodations**: are students knowledgeable and informed of what resources are provided, and how they can be accessed?

2. **Usage of accommodations**: do students feel comfortable seeking and using accommodations for their courses?

FOLLOW-UP

Little Questions

i. Was peer mentoring defined as pairing two individuals who both had ASD together or was one student diagnosed with ASD and was paired with an individual who was not diagnosed with ASD?

ii. How would that impact the student's learning?

Big Questions

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i. Loneliness in personal relationships appears to be a symptom associated with some students with autism spectrum disorder. Does this feeling of loneliness have an impact on how likely a student is to request personal accommodations? If so, does this explain any differences in the effectiveness of laws throughout a student's education (such as the IDEA in K-12 schools and the ADA in post-secondary institutions)?

Next Steps

Policies addressing ableism and promoting the awareness of support services to students in post-secondary institutions seems to be a non-controversial suggestion, because the study identified both issues as influential factors in how likely students with ASD would access accommodations. Both policies can be feasibly implemented in classrooms; a protocol for instructors or faculty members to adopt a more accepting approach to student accommodations and a required inclusion of reasonable accommodations into course syllabi are just two examples of how these policies can promote and destigmatize the use of on-campus services.

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