

Student Voice in Creating Autism Support Initiatives in Higher Education

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Abstract

A note on language: To be inclusive to those who prefer identity-first or person-first language we choose to use both. In this poster you will see “autistic students” as well as “students with autism.”

The perspectives of autistic students should be considered when developing supports at universities. Since the literature on autistic college students’ view points remains limited, we surveyed autistic college students about their experiences in college. Students reported that universally-available supports are somewhat helpful. Challenges included lack of autism awareness on campus, poor executive functioning, sensory sensitivities, mental health and difficulty with socialization. Students identified self-advocacy, on-campus support and friends and family as factors for success.

Research Aim

In preparation for a new initiative for supporting and creating opportunities for autistic college students at the University of Delaware (UD), a survey was conducted among current autistic students in order to understand their unique experiences at our university.

Method

Online Survey & Participants

- 32-item survey that included open-ended and closed-ended questions on the experience of UD autistic students

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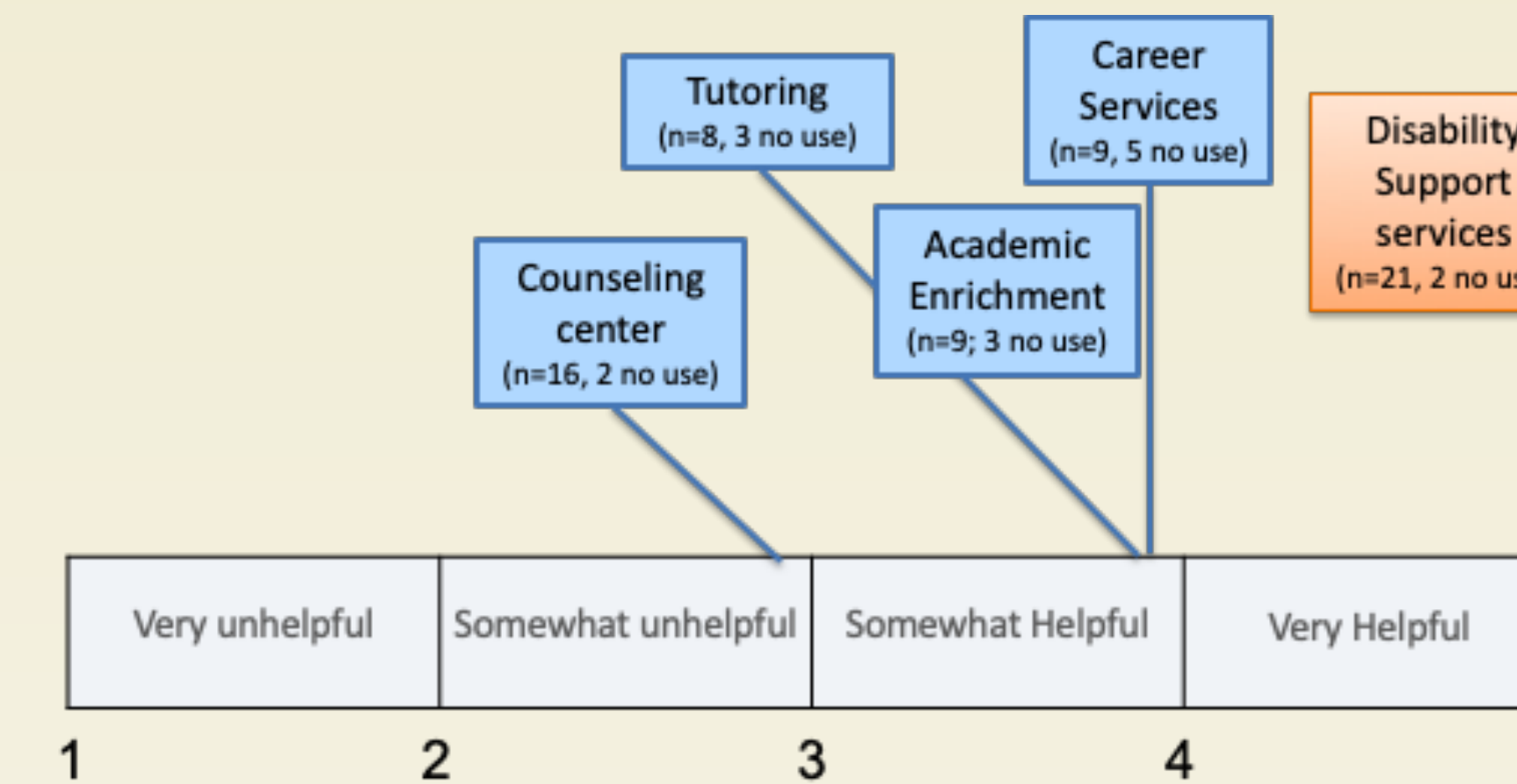
Method Continued

- Items on survey:
 - Quantitative:
 - Rate how helpful the following university services are to you:
 - Writing Center
 - Counseling Center
 - Career Services Center
 - Office of Academic Enrichment
 - Tutoring Services
 - Office of Disability Support Services
 - Qualitative:
 - Are there any support services or accommodations you would like that are not presently available at UD?
 - What might help improve university support services for autistic students?
 - What factors have been the most influential in helping you succeed in college?
 - What factors have been obstacles to your success in college?
- Shared through the Office of Disability Support Services to the 60 students who self-identified through that office
- 22 students responded (~36% response rate)
- Demographics collected:
 - Age: median age = 24.73; range = 19 - 40
 - Gender identity:
 - Males, n = 12
 - Females, n = 8
 - Other/non-binary, n = 1
 - Chose not to answer, n = 1

Analysis

- Quantitative: descriptive statistics in SPSS
- Qualitative: thematic analysis using deductive and inductive processes

Results



Challenges Faced by Students

Lack of awareness:

“I have to be my own ambassador and promote myself to each new teacher who has never had someone with ASD before and get them on my side enough to figure out where my daily lumps will be coming from”

Sensory sensitivities:

“The testing center can be a sensory nightmare”

Executive functioning:

“Sometimes it’s really impossible and things fall through the cracks, and I end up missing deadlines I was never aware of in the first place.”

Mental Health:

“I ended up closing myself off from everybody. I wish there had been a way to meet other students like me, but I was scared to talk to new people anyway. I became more depressed than I had ever been.”

Socialization:

“I had to learn how to actually hang out with people. I never had before I went here, and I found it pretty tough to find people who are relative strangers living with you. At the minimum it felt odd.”

Factors For Success

Advocacy:

“Letting my professors know my weaknesses and my concerns really made me feel better.”; “Learning to be more assertive and behave more authentically rather than just trying to please people.”

On-campus support:

“I’ve had very understanding and supportive professors.”

Friends:

“A good friendship group.”

Family:

“Strong support system at home”

Results Continued

What UD Can Do To Be More Inclusive

Promote Awareness & Universal Design for Learning:
“I wish there was more awareness in general about the disorder”

“It is cool when teachers are able to give choices between how to complete an assignment.”

Accommodation Policy Change & Implementation:
“Don’t require students to approach their professor to ask them to implement their accommodations.”

“Making sure that students know about possible accommodations would be good.”

“Don’t treat quiet hours as a suggestion.”

Offer Direct Supports:

“Guides for communicating with advisors, colleagues, etc. would be helpful”

“It would be great if there were courses that would

Conclusions

Student experiences were considered in the design of the new initiative (“Spectrum Scholars”), including the incorporation of awareness/appreciation training, self-advocacy skill development, and collaborations with other departments including the counseling center

The multi-tiered system of support includes training for faculty, staff and student groups (Tier 1), group-based supports and workshops for neurodiverse students (Tier 2), and individualized coaching, mentoring, and career development experiences for accepted applicants.

Supports for Spectrum Scholars

- Weekly coaching in academics, organization, social relationships, campus life and self-advocacy
- Peer mentoring
- Progressive career development experiences

Supports for Autistic Students Across Campus

- Workshops in collaboration with other depts.
- Group supports in collaboration with other depts.
- Assist with connections to campus and community resources

Supports for UD Faculty, Staff, Students, Businesses & the Community

- Trainings to work effectively with people on the autism spectrum
- Resources to support autistic students, colleagues, and community members
- Individual consultation opportunities