

August 2023

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Recommended Citation

Faure, T., & Sasso, P. A. (2023). Collaborative Challenges Between Educational Accessibility Coordinators and Adjunct Faculty in Supporting Autism Spectrum Students. *New York Journal of Student Affairs*, 23(1). Retrieved from <https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/nyjsa/vol23/iss1/4>

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NEW YORK JOURNAL
STUDENT AFFAIRS {OF}

New York Journal of Student Affairs
Article

Volume 23, Issue 1, 2023

Collaborative Challenges Between Educational Accessibility Coordinators and Adjunct Faculty in Supporting Autism Spectrum Students

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(First published online, August 2023)

Abstract

Accessibility of educational accommodations has increased but can be frequently inconsistent for undergraduates with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The didactic relationship between educational accessibility staff with faculty, who are increasingly adjuncts, facilitates many course-learning accommodations. This descriptive phenomenological study explored the perceptions and professional experiences of educational accessibility coordinators with adjunct faculty in their implementation of learning accommodation for undergraduates with ASD. Findings from this study suggested that accessibility coordinators negotiated expectations of unprepared adjunct faculty and ASD students to address issues throughout the semester.

COLLABORATIVELY SUPPORTING AUTISM STUDENTS

Coordinators believed ASD students struggled to navigate their experiences with adjunct professors because they were not ready for college and felt adjunct professors were unlikely to cooperate and partner because of their lack of understanding and the limitations presented by their short-term employment. Implications for practice included suggestions for increased collaboration and professional development.

Keywords: Autism, autism spectrum disorders, educational accessibility, adjunct, faculty

Students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) may demonstrate an interest in continuing their education after high school (Jackson et al., 2018). ASD student enrollment increased from 0.20% to 0.45% of the overall undergraduate student population from 2010 to 2016 (Bakker et al., 2019). Most people with ASD in college do not have co-occurring intellectual disability but are less likely to enroll in college (2- or 4-year) than are people with other types of disabilities (Christensen, 2016; Wei et al., 2013). However, students considered to have a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder can have a physical, developmental, and/or cognitive disability that can affect the way data and information are processed and collected (Bakker et al., 2019). ASD is considered an invisible disability because diagnosis can be complex and it presents in different ways across individuals, particularly among high-functioning students (Gow et al., 2020). Identifiers may include underdeveloped communication or social skills, difficulty recognizing non-verbal cues, challenges maintaining interpersonal relationships, behavior compulsions, and hypersensitivity to sensory stimuli (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Students with ASD enrolling in college may have difficulties assimilating into higher education (Sanford et al., 2011).



Students with ASD may be challenged by sitting in lecture halls, interacting with students in group projects, living alone or with roommates, or communicating with professors (Cawthon & Cole, 2010). However, colleges and universities are legally bound to support their inclusion into campus learning environments (Brennan & Pena, 2016). Both federal and state laws mandate the minimum standard of educational support for disabilities such as ASD.

These support laws include the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, revised in 2008, No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA; Ganley, 2016). Autism spectrum disorder is classified as a neurological disability under both the ADA and the IDEA act of 2004 (Ganley, 2016). These legislative acts ensure that children and students from birth to age 21 with a disability have the protection and freedoms to pursue an education plan tailored to meet the student's unique needs, at no additional cost to parents (Valverde, 2017). However, one of the significant transition challenges for ASD students is that portions of these programs do not carry over into post-secondary education, such as individualized education plans (IEP; Ganley, 2016). Students with ASD navigate their educational accessibility plans with other significant barriers such as frequently shifting college environments and schedules which may make them less likely to graduate compared to students without disabilities (Sanford et al., 2011).

The classrooms and residential environments are spaces of educational accommodation for ASD students and educational accessibility offices are frequently under resourced to provide the full spectrum of supports necessary (Burgstahler & Russo-Gleicher, 2015). ASD students may require more intensive academic and social assistance (Bakker et al., 2019). Faculty are often unprepared and isolated from other student support when implementing educational



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accommodations for ASD students because they report only receiving brief consultations with any educational accessibility coordinators (Connor, 2012). This is challenging for ASD students as most of their faculty could be adjuncts or other contingent faculty who have the same responsibilities to provide educational accommodation as the instructor for their courses (Yakobowski, 2019). Current research does not identify if ASD students take more courses with full-time or with adjunct faculty and little is also known about ASD students' experiences with adjunct faculty.

Moreover, there is a lack of understanding about the nuanced ways in which educational accessibility coordinators support instruction and accommodations for assisting adjunct faculty who teach the ASD students. Adjunct faculty comprise the largest proportion of the college instructor population who provide instruction to undergraduate students (Bolitzer, 2019). To address this gap in the research, the purpose of this descriptive phenomenological qualitative study was to explore the ways in which educational accessibility coordinators perceived their interactions and professional experiences with adjunct faculty who instruct ASD spectrum students when facilitating educational accommodations. This study was guided by the following research questions: (1) How do educational accessibility coordinators perceive their interactions with adjunct faculty who instruct students with autism spectrum disorder? (2) What are the professional experiences of educational accessibility coordinators in interacting with adjunct faculty who have instructed students with autism spectrum disorder?



Literature Review

This brief literature review explores the barriers of ASD students as well as issues of stigmatization and lack of resources provided to educational accessibility offices. These barriers provide additional challenges in the shifting composition of faculty to contingent roles.

Experiences of Autism Spectrum Undergraduate Students

ASD students, like other students with a disability, must self-disclose as they transition into college to receive educational accommodations or additional supports. ASD students may refuse services because they believe they do not need support or express less motivation for inclusion which increases the difficulty for faculty members and advisors to realize their need for additional support (Fleischer, 2012). Additionally, the spectrum of autism presents different abilities and traits, such as the inability to use or understand non-verbal communication and facial expressions are usually common among those with cognitive disabilities, which makes it difficult for ASD students to recognize they may need support (Ribu, 2018).

ASD students might be accustomed to a regimented schedule in K-12 where routines are provided to them, but the college transition and changes across semesters can be overwhelming for them (Weiss & Rohland, 2014; Yager, 2016). They face challenges with not only academics, but with social interaction, independent living problems, self-advocacy, and time management which may cause issues of mental health including anxiety or adjustment disorder (Gelbar et al., 2014; Yager, 2016). However, ASD students prefer patterns or routines, so they excel in majors such as geology, biology, and computer science and minor changes in data can be identified quickly by someone accustomed to a rigid, regimented pattern (Weiss & Rohland, 2014).



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Older (non-traditional) students with ASD have identified difficulties as well, even in an online course environment (Meyers & Bagnall, 2015). These difficulties were described as the inability to determine direction and context. Contextual and directional issues continue to present problems for students with autism spectrum disorder in both distance and face-to-face learning (Meyers & Bagnall, 2015).

The Role of Educational Accessibility

ASD students generally hold a favorable view of available campus support services. ASD students have noted that when support services are readily available, self-efficacy and persistence is improved (Cai & Richdale, 2016; Oslund, 2014). These supports are typically for in-person learning, but online learning poses different challenges.

The role of the educational accessibility office plays a key factor in assisting a student with registered disabilities. Undergraduate students are frequently guided to the accessibility services office by a faculty member, college advisor, or intentionally by their parents (Deuchert et al., 2017). However, some faculty or staff are reluctant to direct a student to the accessibility office due to the stigma surrounding their office and many students with disabilities often choose to forego assistance for this very same reason (Deuchert et al., 2017).

Educational accessibility offices are under resourced and challenged to follow up with faculty, staff, or parent referrals which can make even foundational collaboration difficult (Sanchez-Rodriguez & LoGiudice, 2018). There is scant research detailing the challenges of beginning a collaborative approach between accessibility services and faculty. Behling and Linder (2017) found that lack of time and logistics was the most common answer given by educational accessibility staff as a reason for not having a collaboration with faculty and their



respective counterparts. A lack of understanding of the accessibility service office by the faculty was another cited challenge (Behling & Linder, 2017).

Adjunct Faculty in Higher Education

Adjunct faculty are typically part-time, non-tenure track employees (Bolitzer, 2019). Adjuncts often work on a contractual basis per semester. These adjuncts often have no formal teaching training, and often come from outside academia (Kirk & Spector, 2009). While they can have extensive knowledge in their respective field, they often possess little to no formal training on teaching or classroom instruction and 75% of educators today teaching in higher education are non-tenure track or adjunct (Bolitzer, 2019; Felber 2020). Escalating costs, limited resources, and competition for students continues to contribute to this overreliance on adjunct faculty members (Smith, 2019).

Adjunct faculty are hired on a semester-to-semester basis, may have no office or dedicated office hours, and are not required to attend faculty or governance meetings (Thirolf & Wolf, 2017). They also typically teach at one or more universities and receive minimal compensation or support (Schibik & Harrington, 2001; Yakobowski, 2019). Adjuncts are often left alone to teach with little supervision and other successful adjuncts suggest that reaching out to other faculty was the most proactive approach to connect about their courses because they have infrequent collegial connections (Barbera et al., 2017).

There is little communication or professional development for their courses, particularly for first-year or general education courses. Many adjuncts often are disillusioned after their first year of teaching due to this academic isolation (Anthony et al., 2020). Most college first-year students have their courses taught by adjunct faculty (Schibik & Harrington, 2001; Thirolf &



COLLABORATIVELY SUPPORTING AUTISM STUDENTS

Wolf, 2017). These issues have implications for student persistence as there is a negative correlation of retention rates of students who were exposed to adjunct faculty in their first semester of their undergraduate experience (Thirolf & Wolf, 2017).

This lack of professional development and academic isolation of adjunct faculty poses challenges to collaboration to already under supported educational accessibility offices which may leave already vulnerable ASD students to negotiate their own educational accommodations. To gain a deeper understanding, this descriptive phenomenological qualitative study further explored the potential ways into which educational accessibility coordinators experience and perceive adjunct faculty as they implement educational accommodations for ASD spectrum students at several institutions in the northeast United States.

Method

Research Design

This descriptive phenomenological qualitative study explored educational accessibility coordinators' perceptions and professional experiences with adjunct faculty members when facilitating educational accommodations for their ASD students. Descriptive phenomenology was selected because it centers participant experiences and voice, which allowed the researchers to understand how these perceptions and experiences relate to the phenomenon studied (Giorgi, 2009). Similar qualitative approaches have been used to develop a nuanced understanding of distinct types of educational accessibility patterns for students with learning accommodations (Cawthon & Cole, 2010).

Descriptive phenomenology is described as



the understanding of lived experiences is linked to the idea of the intentionality of consciousness, or how meaning is experienced . . . which means that when we experience something, the ‘thing’ is experienced as ‘something’ that has meaning for us. (Sundler et al., 2019, p. 734)

Giorgi (2009) suggested that descriptive phenomenology is distinct from other forms of interpretive phenomenological research because of its use of openness, questioning pre-understanding, and adopting a reflective attitude to bracket or question researcher subjectivities against the meaning-making of participant realities (Giorgi, 2009). This approach places emphasis on the words expressed by the participants and not the own interpretations of the researchers.

In this study, the findings were conceptualized through the interpretive relativist ontology paradigm in which epistemology assumes that the researcher(s) cannot separate themselves from what they know and is an instrument to mirror participant experiences (Giorgi, 2009; Levers, 2013). This study was guided by the following research questions: (1) How do educational accessibility coordinators perceive their interactions with adjunct faculty who instruct students with autism spectrum disorder? (2) What are the professional experiences of educational accessibility coordinators in interacting with adjunct faculty who have instructed students with autism spectrum disorder?

Positionality

Esposito and Evans-Winters (2021) suggested a process of reflexivity when engaging in qualitative research followed by the researchers to consider their positionalities in relation to the participants in this study to avoid complicity, deficit narratives, and reinforcing ableism. We



COLLABORATIVELY SUPPORTING AUTISM STUDENTS

consider different intersecting identities of race, gender, ability, and social class. We also acknowledge the privilege and power we hold due to our dominant identities and the responsibility that comes with those identities to advocate for ability reform in supporting ASD students.

We are respectively one cisgender heterosexual woman and a heterosexual male. One is mixed-heritage Latino and another White. The primary author has three children, two of which are neurotypical, and the third child was diagnosed with non-verbal autism spectrum disorder, sensory processing disorder, and apraxia. The second author has previously taught ASD students as a college professor. Therefore, these positionalities may limit perspectives and require us continually deconstruct internalized oppression to disrupt systems of ableism in higher education. We acknowledged these a priori experiences and positionalities required us to limit our perspectives and to consistently review and analyze data points to promote impartiality and ensure that bias was not introduced into this research.

Participants

To avoid facilitating the study as extraction research, historically marginalized and underrepresented people were sampled using a snowball method (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021). To address a skewed sample, two initial participants were recruited by email and text message, and then current participants were recommended based on inclusion criteria. These included (1) educational accessibility coordinator position, (2) engagement with registered educational accommodations for ASD students, and (3) experience with contingent faculty. All individuals disclosed their social identities to the researchers and chose a pseudonym to maintain anonymity (see Table 1). All participants were from universities and colleges located within the



northeast regions of the United States (see Table 1). There were no participants who were employed at the same university or college. Participants were not previously acquainted with the researcher conducting the interviews.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym/ Participant	Identity	Ethnicity	Years of Experience	Institution	Region
1	Female	White	6 years	Regional College	Northeast
2	Female	White	25+ years	Regional College	Northeast
3	Female	White	5 years	Flagship University	Northeast
4	Male	White	11 years	Flagship University	Northeast
5	Female	White	3 years	Regional College	Northeast
6	Female	White	13 years	Regional College	Northeast
7	Female	White	9 years	Comprehensive University	Northeast
8	Female	White	24 years	Regional College	Northeast
9	Female	White	6 years	Regional College	Northeast

Data Collection

In congruence with phenomenology, researcher assumptions are bracketed by participant meaning and purposefully kept broad, which was reflected in the semi-structured interview guide. Previous studies on the identification and experiences of ASD students informed the other issues examined in the interview guide (Cawthon & Cole, 2010; Meyers & Bagnall, 2015). This included questions such as “do you feel that anything could have been done differently to



COLLABORATIVELY SUPPORTING AUTISM STUDENTS

prepare for teaching students with autism spectrum disorder” and “has your institution offered any assistance in mentoring/teaching ASD students?” Probing questions differed slightly between participants based on their level of familiarity and rapport.

Using a semi-structured interview guide, in-depth interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes each. The end of data gathering was defined by "sampling to the point of redundancy" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 202) after saturation was reached. Given the assumptions indicated in the literature regarding the ASD community, the researcher endeavored to employ the sensitive data collection approaches outlined by and to avoid extraction research or trauma (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021). Participants were interviewed online and provided with a standard informed consent form and assigned a pseudonym to protect confidentiality. This research was conducted by a singular researcher and was not single or double-blind. All interview transcripts were transcribed by a professional in preparation for data analysis.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

The interpretive relativist ontology paradigm was used for data analysis in congruence with phenomenology. This paradigm posits that reality cannot be separated from previous knowledge and that researchers’ positionalities are present across all phases of the research process (Angen, 2000). Relativist ontology holds that reality is subjectively constructed through socially and experientially developed understandings (Angen, 2000). Interpretive approaches rely on interviewing in which data are negotiated through the dialogue of the interview process (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021).

The researchers followed Moustakas’ (1994) guidelines for conducting phenomenological research. The first phase is epoche (Moustakas, 1994) in which the



researchers bracketed their previous assumptions. These assumptions were acknowledged through reflexive journaling in which they described their own experiences with the study phenomenon to remain open to new ways of perceiving the study phenomenon and themes were generated through multiple phases of coding. To explore the experiences of educational accessibility coordinators supporting adjunct faculty teaching autism spectrum students, elemental coding methods were selected for data analysis in this phenomenological study (Saldana, 2021) which Moustakas (1999) referred to as “horizons of experience” (p. 121). Saldana (2021) found that coding shapes an analytic frame in which to build an analysis. This method was selected because of the ability to describe specific settings or occurrences. First and second cycle coding methods were used which included descriptive for open coding and selective, and process coding was used to generate focused codes (Saldana, 2021). Final codes were collapsed into themes using code mapping (Saldana, 2021). This is what Moustakas (1994) described as “thematizing the invariant constituents” (p. 121). The researchers continuously reflected on their subjectivities to remain aware of how they influence data analysis.

This study followed Esposito and Evans-Winters (2021) trustworthiness strategies which included: (1) an external auditor with a priori experience and knowledge in that area; (2) a subject matter expert who assisted in reviewing and questioning the main themes and questions to clarify researcher bias; and (3) member checking using the interview transcript data.

Findings

Educational accessibility coordinators shared their experiences and observations in which they described how they felt about adjunct faculty, students with a developmental disability, and the extent of cooperation between adjunct faculty and educational accessibility offices.



COLLABORATIVELY SUPPORTING AUTISM STUDENTS

Accessibility coordinators made their best efforts towards supporting students in collaborating with adjuncts, despite being overwhelmed with their other responsibilities.

Barriers of Nomadic Adjuncts

Educational accessibility coordinators as participants alluded to the belief that adjunct faculty are underprepared for their positions. A consensus among the participants was that “a lot of these folks are just experts in their field, they have no teaching experience.” Participants referred to most adjunct faculty as “content experts.” Several participants also stated that adjuncts “come and go” and they considered them academic nomads. Participant 1 made a point to call adjuncts “slippery fish.” They added that, “you can’t get ahold of them, and when you do, they slip away and don’t work here anymore.” Participant 2 added that, “they are running all over the place and are exhausted.” Participants felt that adjunct faculty have full-time jobs while performing their duties as a part-time employee. They recognized that other adjunct faculty work at multiple institutions as well and highlighted that many of the classes taught at their institutions were instructed by adjunct faculty. As coordinators, they felt that it is challenging to work with adjuncts because they, “come in here, teach, and leave,” according to Participant 2 who also noted that, “it becomes difficult for an institution to retain these instructors.”

Participants felt that adjunct course instructors complicated their capacity to administer educational accommodations for ASD students because it was a turnstile of temporary faculty. They were concerned that adjuncts teach most of the classes on a campus yet were concerned that they rarely hold office hours or even have an office or presence on campus. They suggested their ASD students were often frustrated with adjuncts because they have no office hours, especially for students with ASD who are inevitably going to need extra support.



A few of the participants mentioned the adage, “if you’ve met one person with autism, you’ve met one person with autism,” alluding to the fact of how different autism spectrum disorder can be from person-to-person. They expressed that faculty often lack even a superficial understanding of how to support students with ASD, often ignore the students with course participation, or meet the minimum compliance for their educational accommodation. The coordinators felt that ASD students were receiving less student engagement and were perceived as a hinderance to already taxed and overburdened adjuncts.

Unlikely Partners

Educational accessibility coordinators reiterated consistently that adjuncts were inconsistent with their communication about educational accommodations for ASD students. Adjuncts were often unclear about how to engage ASD students or how to effectively communicate with them. All participants expressed that training or professional development would allow for increased partnership and rapport building. Often, participants shared that ASD students were timid or intimidated to communicate with their professors about their educational accommodations.

Participants suggested that these nomadic adjuncts do not have the time, nor are they required to attend formal training. They felt adjuncts do not have the availability to learn how to properly support or instruct students with ASD. Participant 7 noted, that “every adjunct is so different and has a different makeup, so I don’t know what they would be willing to spend their time to do.” Furthermore, adjunct faculty in this study were not compensated for any training or professional development.



COLLABORATIVELY SUPPORTING AUTISM STUDENTS

The participants acknowledged that adjuncts were only contracted employees; they were paid only to teach their classes and not to support educational accommodations. They also felt that contracting adjuncts only to teach and not to attend any continuing education puts them at a disadvantage when they instruct students with ASD. Educational accessibility coordinators felt that adjunct faculty could benefit from regular training to discuss strategies on how to better instruct ASD students.

They shared a greater need for training adjunct faculty to increase their preparedness for instructing students with a developmental disability such as autism. Participants felt frustrated in working with adjunct faculty due to their lack of a presence on campus and were equally frustrated with their inability to attend required professional development courses or any continuing education about ASD students. They felt they could engage and train adjunct faculty more if given the time. The participants all agreed that they could help adjunct faculty better understand students with autism if they were given the time.

Coordinators disclosed they spent more time supporting ASD students in response to adjunct inattentiveness or lack of response. However, coordinators also noted their offices were often merely operating on a compliance model because they did not have enough staff. Therefore, they wished that adjuncts had required or mandatory trainings which believed might reduce issues ASD students experience with adjuncts. They still felt that adjuncts simply did not have enough motivation or were limited by the constraints of their contract. Participants noted that, “adjunct faculty are not paid well enough to attend mandatory staff meetings” or “many adjuncts are doing it for the money.” Participant 8 felt that they were “hesitant to mandate training, as I believe for fear of losing the adjuncts by piling on more responsibilities on them.”



Despite recognizing their limitations, coordinators believe that adjunct faculty performed a substantial portion of the teaching work and are an integral part of the institution. They also believed that training should be mandated regardless of whether the faculty member is an adjunct or full-time employee. Participant 4 stated that “all employees must take a sexual harassment course, so why could the institution not mandate a special needs or disability training.”

Participant 8, “hoped that HR would eventually mandate that everyone go through training on how to interact with students with autism spectrum disorder.” However, participants were not hopeful about mandated training about ASD students or working with adjunct faculty.

The educational accessibility coordinators who participated in this study held mixed opinions about their institution having the appropriate resources in place to assist adjunct faculty members who had questions or issues with students that have autism. Participant 4 stated while she believed that the institution had appropriate resources for adjunct faculty regarding assistance with students that have an autism diagnosis, what was missing was “the bridge that connects the adjunct to the resource.”

Almost all the participants agreed that adjunct faculty are not often prepared for a career in academia, as they are rarely educators with a degree in education or have any formal training or experience in instruction or teaching. When the participants were asked if there is a difference between adjunct faculty and full-time professors pertaining to the level of preparedness to instruct a student with a disability, almost all participants answered that the full-time faculty member was often more prepared. The reasoning given was due to the additional training and having a formal educational background, thus it prepared full-time instructors to instruct students



COLLABORATIVELY SUPPORTING AUTISM STUDENTS

with a disability. Many of the participants agreed that full-time faculty enjoy access to better resources, such as training seminars and other items that assist in their continuing education.

Participant 5 also believed that resources, such as online training or individual consultations, are available to help adjuncts but, “what is lacking is the motivation to access these resources.” These participants felt that there is a type of stigma that is associated with adjunct faculty, that they really do not want to get involved in activities on campus and would not like being forced to attend any professional development courses or learning modules regarding interactions with students with autism. It was noted that professional development courses are offered at many of the participants’ institutions, yet poor attendance is a common theme. Several participants gave answers as to why they believed this was the case. Participant 6 said “most adjuncts have a day gig” or Participant 1’s view was that “their priorities are in another place.” Participant 3 even went as far as to expand on this topic even further:

I wish I could have a day with them to be honest, but they are not paid for that. They do not have the time for that. They’re certainly open to it in my experience, but it is just not considered normal as a part of their training.

The coordinators all believe that adjunct faculty were underpaid, view their appointments as a part-time job, and would not attend training due to fiscal or time constraints. They also believed that adjunct faculty would benefit from training in interacting with a student with autism. Yet, they often felt they do not really understand ASD students which often places the burden on them as coordinators to engage in outreach and advocacy in locating nomadic adjuncts.



ASD Students Struggle With Adjuncts

Educational accessibility coordinators noted that ASD students often returned to their offices expressing frustration in their courses with adjunct faculty. According to the educational accessibility coordinators who participated in this study, ASD students often felt misunderstood, stigmatized, or invisible in courses with adjuncts. These were the most common complaints from students with ASD, which frustrated the accessibility coordinators in this study. ASD students often struggled to navigate distinctive styles of faculty, their lack of structure, and inconsistencies.

Participant 7 highlighted the inequality between various adjunct faculty members by adding, “some are willing to do whatever, while some may be more old school.” Thus, Participant 8 thought it would be good to identify for students who is adjunct faculty and who are full-time faculty so that ASD students “could understand the limitations of why the professor does not answer them in five minutes as every student would like.” They felt by teaching a student with autism the difference between full-time and part-time faculty could help set the expectation of what communication would look like between both parties.

The participants felt that students with autism and their families were used to having an IEP with their goals and classes laid out for them. When meeting with parents or students, coordinators added there is an expectation that they are allowed to take unlimited time on tests or take an exam home or online, when they may only get another hour or take a test in another room. Participants expressed frustration that this expectation versus reality gap perpetuates the cycle of both the adjunct and student with autism both having to reactively seek out support or



COLLABORATIVELY SUPPORTING AUTISM STUDENTS

get clarification as to what is allowed and what is not. Such an exercise for some participants as coordinators suggests to them that students with autism are not adequately prepared for college.

Educational accessibility coordinators who participated in this study also indicated the need for earlier transition support from high school to college. They felt this might alleviate issues that may arise when a student with autism enters their institution, particularly with navigating faculty issues. Participant 1 shared:

Students with autism that come directly from high school to college are the ones that really struggled the most. They have been provided one-on-one support, and when they come to our college, we do not have the one-on-one support that they are used to when they are in K-12.

Participants suggested that many ASD students understand their accommodations from secondary education and hold the expectation that their college experience will be laid out in the same fashion in higher education. ASD students do not realize that individualized education plans (IEP) or 504's do not exist in higher education, which can confuse them. Adjunct faculty also rarely understand how the educational accommodation system functions as well. Thus, participants shared that all students, even those with a diagnosis of autism must self-disclose their disability to the university to access learning accommodations. Participant 1 believed that "having a point person to go to in order to assist a student with autism in gaining accommodations and setting their schedule is super helpful." However, resources are thin and unavailable according to participants for coordinators to implement such a customer service approach.



Coordinators felt that students with autism and the adjuncts who teach them have unrealistic expectations that there should be an easier way to gather assistance. However, they also suggested that shifting to using new accessibility technologies and supporting ASD students and adjunct faculty using them, might be a better way to provide support. Participants highlighted that a universal design could help to improve the learning accommodations for the students with autism.

Technology also plays an important part in not only making this transition easier for the student, but it also unburdens the adjunct as well. Adaptive devices, technology, and virtual platforms have made transitioning much easier; it also helps to bridge the communication gap between teacher and student. Participant 5 said, “I think now that we have been forced to utilize technology a lot more over the last year, it has really opened a lot more doors.” Technology can also help with the expectation that the adjunct, who may have other duties and responsibilities outside academia, can be just as accessible as a full-time faculty member to a student with autism who may be used to getting immediate answers or have greater access to their instructors.

Discussion

This study explored the perceptions and professional experiences educational accessibility coordinators in their collaboration with adjuncts to support learning accommodations for ASD students. There are three key findings that were contextualized within this study. First, educational accessibility coordinators felt that ASD students were not ready for college and often struggled to navigate their experiences with adjunct professors. ASD students and their parents often held assumptions from their secondary education experiences that projected into higher education and did not fully understand the differences.



COLLABORATIVELY SUPPORTING AUTISM STUDENTS

Second, educational accessibility coordinators felt that adjunct professors were unlikely to cooperate and partner because of their lack of understanding and limitations of their contract responsibilities. Participants suggested that professional development and increased accessibility technologies may improve partnerships between adjuncts and students with ASD.

Finally, there was an unrealistic expectation of adjunct faculty and ASD students to address issues that arise throughout the semester which may stem from both parties being underprepared for every semester. These findings address the research questions of this study and are complementary to existing research.

The first research question explored the perceptions of educational accessibility coordinators interaction with adjunct faculty who teach ASD students. Educational accessibility coordinators felt helpless, as they found the transient or nomadic nature of adjunct faculty and the lack of preparedness of ASD students adversely affected their ability to help both parties. They believed that many adjuncts were not fully prepared to instruct classes to students who require extra support, especially when the autism spectrum is so wide and requires many different approaches. The second research question asked educational accessibility coordinators to describe their interactions with adjunct faculty who are instructing students with ASD. They felt adjuncts were hesitant to become more involved as their position did not allow time or a location to provide additional support and had little to no knowledge of the autism spectrum. It was unclear if coordinators were unwilling to work with adjuncts, but that adjuncts were lacking the time needed. They preferred to work with full-time faculty over adjuncts because of their familiarity with accessibility policies and availability.



The perspectives of the participants are consistent with research that suggests that ASD students are underprepared in their transition from K-12 into higher education (Cai & Richdale, 2015). Additional research also showed that educational accessibility coordinators can play an important role in helping both adjunct faculty and students with autism prepare for higher education (Behling & Linder, 2017). Although the participants felt taxed and overburdened, their impact can make a difference in the undergraduate persistence of a student with autism (Ribu, 2018). Educational accessibility coordinators tried to provide additional services, but often students refused to disclose their disability because they do not believe they need additional support or adjunct faculty were inconsistent (Fleischer, 2012).

Educational accessibility coordinators also highlighted their struggles and discontent in working with adjunct faculty. They felt that adjunct faculty were unprepared to teach ASD students and did not recognize their own needs for professional development which is counter to Washington (2012) who indicated that many adjunct faculty members realize the need for additional training and professional development. There is also the communication gap between faculty and students that plays a role in a markedly unsatisfactory experience when compared to expectations. Dymond et al. (2017) found that many times these students are brilliant, with above average intelligence, however, have trouble interacting with their instructors and peers. Findings from this study also highlighted the need for greater training and opportunity for professional development pertaining to adjunct faculty. This is a challenge as some institutions have approximately 75% of all instructors on a college campus to be considered part-time or adjunct faculty (Bolitzer, 2019).



COLLABORATIVELY SUPPORTING AUTISM STUDENTS

Limitations

There are several limitations for this study. This study featured a heterogeneous sample drawn only from only the northeast regions of the country which may limit the transferability of the findings. The researcher of this study has a priori experience about ASD which may have influenced the responses of the participants. Also, some participants may have selectively disclosed because of bias and assumptions about working with adjunct faculty. Given these considerations, the findings are not necessarily transferable across all institutional types. Future research should address the limitations of this research study and explore the perspectives of adjuncts or other full-time faculty in working with educational accessibility coordinators who support ASD students.

Implications for Practice

Educational accessibility coordinators felt that any partnership between the accessibility office and adjunct professors could increase the knowledge of students with ASD. They felt there was a lack of foundational understanding about ASD students to most adjunct faculty. Partnerships should begin with the required training about educational accessibility and common accommodations for the populations of students on their respective campuses. Some institutions may serve more ASD students than others and it should be a focus if there is increased representation.

The participants of the study also believe that additional transition supports would be beneficial prior to a student with autism entering an institution of higher education. ASD students face greater mental health stressors in their first years in college which may cause disruptive outbursts and anger (Yager, 2016). Thus, institutions should take the time to properly



train their faculty, advisors, and residence hall coordinators to recognize signs of depression or anxiety and advise their staff where to send these students for additional support (Yager, 2016). However, support services beyond learning accommodations for ASD students often feature additional challenges. However, teaching assistants who usually are tasked to assist students with ASD inadvertently help to reduce the stigmatization of these students (Kukoff, 2013). This is complicated as well in that by accompanying a student to class or intervening on behalf of a student, aides and teaching assistants can unintentionally draw more attention to a student with ASD (Kukoff, 2013).

While resources and human capital are limited, the findings from this study suggest that more outreach is necessary. Coordinators suggested that if there were time available, they would facilitate training and assist adjunct faculty in determining the correct path to request accommodations for their students with ASD and for students working with adjunct faculty. This additional support should include additional targeted orientation sessions with ASD and their parents. The content of these sessions should include how to navigate diverse kinds of faculty and other scheduling concerns. Sanchez-Rodriguez and LoGiudice (2018) suggested that diversity and inclusion lessons helped change the attitude of library faculty towards students with educational accommodation.

Coordinators in this study struggled to communicate with adjuncts to implement educational accommodations for ASD students. Additional larger campus conversations need to occur between middle and senior academic affairs administrators and the role of adjunct faculty in student success. Clearer expectations need to be established in communicating with external student support services, such as educational accessibility. The turnstile and inconsistency of



COLLABORATIVELY SUPPORTING AUTISM STUDENTS

staffing adjunct instructors was found to be a barrier for many coordinators (Schibik & Harrington, 2001). This may allow coordinators to better determine regular, more consistent adjunct faculty to better develop relationships. Adjuncts, unlike full-time faculty, have little to no financial incentive to continue their education or to take professional development courses that may facilitate increased understanding or empathy of ASD students, which Oslund (2014) suggested should be compensated in the same ways as their full-time counterparts.

Conclusion

This study investigated the experiences of educational accessibility coordinators and their interactions with adjunct faculty who were teaching ASD students. Greater access to adjunct training, faculty professional development, and earlier transitional support for a student with autism were grounded in the findings of this study. Extant research suggests that these topics have not been fully investigated, and the findings of this study add to existing literature that indicates adjunctification inhibits student success, particularly for ASD students with educational accommodations. Understandably, the nature of the part-time position of adjunct faculty makes it difficult to mandate additional support and instruction and this causes additional work for coordinators. Additional research should examine how to better prepare educational accessibility advisors to partner with adjunct faculty on ways to instruct students with autism.



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