JOURNAL OF COLLEGE ACADEMIC SUPPORT PROGRAMS

FALL 2023 | VOLUME 6 | ISSUE 1

FEATURE ARTICLES

PROMISING PRACTICES

BOOK REVIEW

JOURNAL OF COLLEGE ACADEMIC SUPPORT PROGRAMS

EDITORIAL STAFF AND REVIEW BOARD

ISSN 2577-9990 (electronic)

The *J-CASP* is managed, administered, and published through the College of Education at Texas State University (jcasp-ojs-txstate.tdl.org/jcasp/index). Design by Russell Gibson Content. Layout by Cortney Akers. Logo by On A Roll Designs (etsy.com/shop/onarolldesigns).

The *J-CASP* is an academic journal for developmental education, learning assistance, and student success. Please review our submission guidelines at journals.tdl.org/jcasp/index.php/jcasp/about/submissions. Please address any questions, comments, concerns, and suggestions to JCASP_Editor@txstate.edu.

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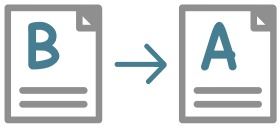

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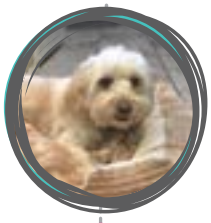

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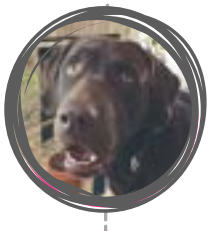

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FOREWORD

Welcome to the latest issue of the *Journal of College Academic Support Programs* (*J-CASP*). It is with great enthusiasm that we introduce this edition, which marks another significant step forward in our ongoing mission to foster excellence in the realm of postsecondary academic support. As educators, administrators, and support professionals, our collective dedication to this cause remains unwavering as our various academic support programs play a pivotal role in ensuring that students, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities, have access to the resources and guidance they need to thrive in their college journeys.

Articles in this issue convey thought-provoking research, practical guidance, and innovative solutions to inspire and inform your work, especially when working with unique student populations. In our first feature article, Rebecca Caskey and Shelley Price-Williams describe their research on the lived experiences of five community college students who were formally incarcerated. Their research focuses on the areas of academic learning, sense of belonging, and career preparedness. In our second feature article, Elizabeth Rainey and Z.W. Taylor examine the experiences of 14 students on academic probation and/or who had lost financial aid eligibility. Applying Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, their findings reveal how these students interacted with peers and professors in the complex ecosystems of higher education and COVID-19. In our third feature article, Lori Wischnewsky reviews the current literature to inform our readership of ways to decrease systemic barriers for autistic college students. With this growing population of students attending postsecondary education, she posits that it is up to colleges and universities to address the barriers these students may face by including nonacademic supports.

This issue also includes two promising practice articles highlighting innovative and effective approaches to enhance student learning. Jenna Guenther provides insights on the importance of fostering an emotionally intelligent learning assistance environment. In a second promising practice article, Amy Lawrence-Wallquist, Lucinda Ford, Mehmet Kirmizi and Cody Patterson relate their experience with collaborative Japanese lesson study in which they realized their goals of improving their own mathematics instruction and developing engaging lesson plans for undergraduate non-STEM majors. The issue concludes with a book review of *Student Writing Tutors in Their Own Words: Global Voices on Writing Centers and Beyond* by René LeBlanc.

We hope this issue inspires you.

Denise Guckert, EdD, *J-CASP* Co-Editor
Russ Hodges, EdD, *J-CASP* Co-Editor

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FEATURE ARTICLE

Serving the Underserved: Formerly Incarcerated Students and Support Services

Rebecca Caskey, *Department of Higher Education Leadership, Maryville University*
Shelley Price-Williams, *College of Education, University of Iowa*

https://doi.org/10.58997/fa1

ABSTRACT

This study centered on the lived experiences of five community college students who were formerly incarcerated. Through interviews, the students shared their expectations before entering college, resources they found to be most helpful throughout their enrollment, and what they feel could make them more successful. The research focuses on the areas of academic learning, sense of belonging, and career preparedness. Results showed formerly incarcerated students were very independent when applying for college, but some standard procedures such as, applying for in-state residency for instance, are not streamlined. Formerly incarcerated students experienced difficulty using technology and finding the equipment and a quiet space to study. Active learning, connections with faculty and peers of similar interests, and helpful, trained advisors were all credited as adding to the success of formerly incarcerated students. These findings are discussed in relation to adjustments that can be made by community college administrators.

Keywords: formerly incarcerated students, community college, academic learning, sense of belonging, career preparedness

The mission of the community college, to provide access to education for all, has remained unchanged since its inception in 1901 (American Association of Community Colleges, n.d.). Just as community colleges provided previously unseen access for women, minorities, and low socioeconomic students to enroll, the time has come again for community colleges to recognize another underserved population: the formerly incarcerated (American Association of Community Colleges, n.d.). Providing access to meaningful education for formerly incarcerated population benefits both the individual and community (Cooke, 2004; Hope, 2018; Lagemann, 2016; Sheehan, 2018).

More than 10,000 people are released from U.S. prisons each week, with 650,000 released each year (United States Department of Justice, 2020). Between 1980 and 2000, the incarceration rate in the United States increased five-fold (Austin et al., 2018). Many individuals incarcerated during those booming years are becoming eligible for parole, probation, or release. It has been well documented that formerly incarcerated people, also referred to as reentry citizens, receiving a formal education produce a multitude of community benefits, including reduced recidivism (Hope, 2018), lessened need for public health services (Cooke, 2004; Sheehan, 2018), strengthening of communal bonds (Lagemann, 2016), and general reduction in risky behavior (Sheehan, 2018). To achieve the benefits of education, administrators must be prepared to work strategically with reentry students to overcome the additional barriers associated with incarceration. Despite evidence indicating a positive impact from education, there is a dearth of literature on effectively serving formerly incarcerated students.

To achieve the benefits of education, administrators must be prepared to work strategically with reentry students to overcome the additional barriers associated with incarceration.

Upon release, reentry citizens have an increased likelihood of facing unemployment, homelessness, poverty, untreated mental health challenges, and stigmatization (Moore et al., 2016). Moore et al. (2016) found that stigmatization, regardless of eventual outcome, has damaging, permanent effects on the behavior of formerly convicted individuals.

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Moore et al. discovered, even perceived stigma, the concept of feeling devalued, "is thought to negatively affect self-esteem and self-efficacy, which ultimately affect expectations about future interactions, coping, mental health, and behavior" (p. 197). Conversely, Brown and Bloom (2018) found a supportive environment, such as an inclusive college setting, can decrease that stigma.

The purpose of this study was to identify formerly incarcerated students' expectations of community collegiate success and determine their perspective on the effectiveness of college experiences in relation to that success. The aim of this research is to assist college administrators to more effectively deliver resources to serve this population.

Relevant Literature

Congressional Research Service (2019) estimated approximately 30% of prisoners want to pursue certificate programs from colleges or trade schools upon their release, with an additional 18% seeking associate degrees, 14% seeking bachelor's degrees, 5% seeking a master's degree, 1% seeking a professional degree, and 2% seeking a doctoral degree. However, Couloute (2018) found only 10% of formerly incarcerated GED holders engage in post-secondary education, with only 1% successfully graduating. Despite their incoming education attainment level, Couloute discovered formerly incarcerated people are eight times less likely to graduate from a college program than the public. This markedly low success rate can be attributed to the various unique barriers (noted herein) faced by this population and how those barriers evolve in the years immediately following release.

Enrollment in a postsecondary institution gives reentry citizens a foothold into a community often different from the one from which they came, with access to services intended to build their social capital.

Enrollment in a postsecondary institution gives reentry citizens a foothold into a community often different from the one from which they came, with access to services intended to build their social capital. Education has been shown to increase literacy, self-discipline, and motivation (Congressional Research Service, 2019). Flatt and Jacobs (2018) found post-secondary training programs, for all students, are correlated to improvements in cognitive skills, executive functioning, and moral development. These developments are vital for engaging with the public, obtaining and retaining employment, and overcoming the obstacles associated with reentry (Couloute, 2018).

The Bureau of Justice Statistics (2021) conducted a 10-year study of people released from prison in 2008 and found 82% were arrested at least once within the 10 years post-release with 43% arrested in the first year, 29% arrested by year 5, and 22% arrested by year 10. Research of those who attend educational programs while incarcerated found those prisoners were arrested for supplemental crimes at a rate 43% lower than their counterparts who did not attend in-prison educational programs (Brown & Bloom, 2018). This provides evidence to the fact that without rehabilitation, punitive measures alone (i.e., incarceration) do not provide ongoing societal benefit. Although there is a case to be made that those who attended in-prison education were always on a trajectory to desist from recommitting crimes, the correlative benefits between education and desistance from crime cannot be overlooked. Prisons are very expensive for taxpayers, especially to release a person likely to commit another crime. The Marshall Project estimates the U.S. government spends $80 billion of taxpayer money to support prisons, but many sources estimate that amount to be much higher (Lewis & Lockwood, 2019). The RAND corporation found over a 3-year period $4–$5 was saved for every $1 spent on prison education (Davis & Linton, 2021).

Education has been considered rehabilitative for offenders since its early adoption within the prison system in 1798 (Brazzell et al., 2009). Education in prisons began as only religious teachings intended to reform convicted criminals (Brazzell et al., 2009). Prisons then adapted to offer secular communications and literature courses before eventually expanding to secondary, post-secondary, and job skills training in 1970 (Brazzell et al., 2009). Between 1970 and 1992, an increase of prisoners from 11,000 to 25,000 accessed the Pell grant, the most popular grant program for low-income students (Congressional Research Service, 2019). With prison populations increasing exponentially between 1980 and 2018, President Obama began a Second Chance Pell Experiment under the Higher Education Act of 2015 (Congressional Research Service, 2019). A snapshot of 2019 shows this limited program included 59 schools and served 6,000 students in one fiscal year for a total cost to the federal government of $22.3 million (Congressional Research Service, 2019). This program has been extended twice since its inception most recently under President Trump in 2020 by inviting an additional 67 schools to join (United

States Department of Education, 2021). Bipartisan support for the Second Chance Pell Experiment exemplifies the rehabilitative value placed on education and demonstrates the successful trajectory of the first phase of the experiment.

Aside from the Second Chance Pell Experiment, prisons began and have continued trying, through limited government funding, private and non-profit donations, and volunteer time, to redevelop education programs anticipating the increased numbers of prisoners eligible for release in the coming years. In 2005, 98% of federal prisons and 84% of state prisons offered programs in at least one of these categories: adult basic education, adult secondary education, postsecondary education, special education, vocational training, and life skills (Brazzell et al., 2009). However, disruptions in the programs due to regularly interrupted funding, unexpected lockdowns, and inconsistent academic structure led to low participation (Flatt & Jacobs, 2018). Postsecondary education, including those participating in the Second Chance Pell Experiment, also experienced difficulties with securing trained faculty, access to equipment, and maintaining the enrollment necessary to ensure financial viability (Congressional Research Service, 2019). Additionally in 2016, maximum capacity for inmates in the prisons was exceeded in 14 states and the Federal Bureau of Prisons, making sufficient classroom space difficult to find (Congressional Research Service, 2019).

However, support for advancement of the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated population is not limited to a classroom. In a study of the relationship between gainful employment and school-based training, pre-employment training, and post-employment training, post-employment training led to the highest acquisition and retainment of employment for formerly incarcerated people (Flatt & Jacobs, 2018). Surprising to some, school-based and pre-employment training proved to have little to no impact on the formerly incarcerated student's eventual employability (Flatt & Jacobs, 2018). The Congressional Research Service (2019) showed this is not generalizable to the public, asserting that typically, employment rates increase concurrently with one's educational attainment. Eighty-seven percent of adults with a bachelor's degree were working in 2017 compared to only 60% of adults with a high school diploma (Congressional Research Service, 2019). Employer unwillingness to hire formerly incarcerated people, absence of quality character and work references, and absence of on-the-job skills can all obstruct employability.

Programs and opportunities for support exist at national, state, and local levels to aid incarcerated and newly released citizens. Higher education consortiums, such as Bard Prison Initiative and Alliance for Higher Education in Prison, provide resources and support to assist institutions in providing education in prison and then connect the student to an educational program upon release. Noneducation organizations can also provide high levels of support for formerly incarcerated people. One example is the Pinellas Ex-Offender Reentry Coalition (PERC), respected as the oldest program of its kind in the State of Florida. PERC not only provides hands-on, paid skills training for individuals seeking employment, but they also expend a great deal of effort creating programs and resources for employers, spreading awareness of national support programs such as federal bonding and work opportunity tax credit. Federal bonding is a program that provides 6-month fidelity bonds to employers upon hiring "higher risk" or hard-to-place employees (The Federal Bonding Program, n.d., Employers section). Work Opportunity Tax Credit, also a federally funded program, provides financial tax benefits to employers who hire hard to place employees (United States Department of Labor, n.d.). PERC and programs like PERC also aid in obtaining food and housing, providing medical assistance, and expanding one's social network, which are all challenges that face formerly incarcerated people upon release from prison.

Despite the internal and external challenges facing the incarcerated population, more than 75% of incarcerated people without high school diplomas say they love to learn new things (Patterson, 2018). However, they are not taking advantage of the opportunities because they (7 out of 10) are having difficulty applying it to their lives (Patterson, 2018). Taking lead from the non-educational support programs available, changes must be made in how education is presented to engage formerly incarcerated students and offer them the greatest opportunity for success. Rahilly and Buckley (2016) believe academic disposition is created by the college environment. They defended the knowledge and skills of those without traditional academic preparation saying colleges traditionally operate under *deficit programming*. Deficit programming assumes the college is whole and anyone experiencing challenges has a deficit they must address before they can succeed (Rahilly & Buckley, 2016). Rahilly and Buckley (2016) adamantly maintained deficit programming is classist, fitting in only with the expectations of an affluent, traditional student, and it does not acknowledge the true skills and abilities of the student. To better recognize the unique abilities of non-traditional populations, the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment is in the process of implementing PLAR (Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition; Potter, 2016). PLAR identifies, documents, assesses, and recognizes formal and informal learning experience (Potter, 2016).

This allows formerly incarcerated students to take pride and receive credit for nonarticulated programs they completed while incarcerated and for work experience both pre- and throughout their incarceration. This system not only can equate to college credit, reducing the length and cost of the chosen degree, but it also serves to motivate and empower the student by recognizing the unique experience they bring to the college (Potter, 2016; Rahilly & Buckley, 2016). Rahilly and Buckley (2016) explained a college cannot simply offer programs; colleges need to be proactive in identifying student needs and targeting invitations to populations who would benefit the most. Training specific to the needs of students with intersecting identities, such as formerly incarcerated students, can support the efficacy of the programs and resources advertised to this population (Hope, 2018).

Research Questions

The study explored one primary and two secondary research questions to gain an understanding of the experiences of formerly incarcerated students in community colleges.

1. What services do formerly incarcerated college students find most beneficial in addressing their learning needs, employment, and community reintegration?
    a. What factors are necessary for formerly incarcerated college students to determine college support services as beneficial?
    b. Considering learning needs, employment, and community reintegration, where do formerly incarcerated students assess their greatest area of need for support?

Method

This qualitative study, conducted through a phenomenological lens, explored how formerly incarcerated students can be best served by community colleges, given their unique needs and barriers to education. Narratives, such as these from formerly incarcerated students, are essential to help inform new programs and concepts (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2018). Phenomenological studies analyze how individuals recognize and comprehend circumstances through their own subjective experiences (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2018). A qualitative method is standard for phenomenological studies because qualitative analyses allow the research participants to share individual accounts, unique to their perspective, instead of simplifying them to a number (Hammarberg et al., 2016). The researcher synthesized the information given by the participants about their experiences and perspectives to find shared experiences between participants (Hammarberg et al., 2016).

Taking lead from the non-educational support programs available, changes must be made in how education is presented to engage formerly incarcerated students and offer them the greatest opportunity for success.

Participants

Participants (or interviewees) were required to be 18 years of age or older and have been incarcerated in a state or federal prison. All participants were previously or currently pursuing a post-secondary education program at a community college in the state of Florida. Participants must have matriculated into their program for a minimum of 1 month at the time of the interview. Participants have been assigned pseudonyms to maintain their privacy. Five participants were interviewed in this study. This allowed for the study of multiple experiences but contained the scope of the study to a single community college in Florida.

Data Collection

Participants were solicited by hanging flyers in public locations such as halfway houses, Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, addiction treatment centers, and at the Salvation Army, a non-profit organization that serves much of the area's formerly incarcerated population by providing meals, clothing, and temporary shelter. Additionally, I connected with my network of former colleagues at the community college that allowed me to speak at a group meeting for a non-profit, PERC, which supports reentry citizens, and connected me with a large state-wide non-profit email distribution list.

All interviews were face-to-face and held in public, central locations, such as parks, coffee shops, and libraries. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes, depending on the interviewee and their desire to share information. The semi-structured interview script (see Appendix A) remained consistent. Field notes were taken at each interview in addition to audio recordings, later transcribed through a program called Temi. The semi-structured interview script and questions were created with the intention of maximizing opportunities for participant disclosure. Iterative questioning was used to ensure understanding from previous questions.

Data Analysis

Interviews were audio recorded by a program called Temi, an audio recording app which provides interview transcripts formed by artificial intelligence. This data was then analyzed through thematic analysis, beginning with horizontalization. Horizontalization is the process through which qualitative data is collected and initially viewed as all equally important. The lead researcher began the analysis by providing the interview transcripts to each participant to ensure accuracy, and then those pieces of data were reviewed line-by-line. Significant statements were identified and coded (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2018). Significant statements were identified as those which spoke to the interviewees' lived experiences in relation to the phenomena of attending post-secondary education post-incarceration. Interview transcripts provided a detailed account of the interview. Field notes assisted me in remembering impressions, including body language and changes in energy throughout the interview that could not be captured in an audio recording. Next, I assigned codes to significant statements and impressions. These codes were later grouped into like clusters, developed into themes, and then used to create descriptions of the interviewee experience (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2018). This method of data categorization allows for the fluidity necessary when reporting the personal experiences of multiple individuals.

Five participants were interviewed for this study. All five participants spent time in state and/or federal prisons. Table 1 outlines the demographic information and education and incarceration experiences of all five participants.

Table 1

Participant Demographic and Experience Information

	Race	Age	Sex	Current Post- Secondary Education Level	Years Incarcerated	Reentry Age	Time between release and college enrollment	Academic Program
Bill	W	62	M	1 year	30	50	2 years	Associate of Arts
Cody	W	31	M	3 years	2.5	28	6 months	Associate of Arts
Isabelle	W	42	F	3 years	5	41	4 months	Associate of Science: Addiction Studies
James	W	53	M	1 year of master's level coursework	5	40	12 years	Associate of Science: Addiction Studies
Victor	W	58	M	Master's Degree (pre-incarceration)	7+	56	2 months	Associate of Science: Addiction Studies

Findings

The results indicated multiple areas of challenge and opportunity facing formerly incarcerated students and community colleges. Students experienced academic learning challenges beginning with enrollment and continuing throughout their education regarding technology and study environment. The interviewees in this study suggest opportunities to create sense of belonging abound through sharing personal experience and social engagement. Enrollment in postsecondary education for these students was with the intention of graduating with a more stable, lucrative career. To that end, participants indicated seeking career-specific programmatic opportunities and more knowledgeable college advising staff.

Academic Learning and Support

Although each participant enrolled in college with different expectations of workload, academic rigor, level of support, and eventual outcome, each participant spoke about their own personal responsibility in achieving success. Four of five participants felt it was their responsibility to self-advocate.

Victor was incarcerated multiple times for 6+ years and released in 2019. He holds a postsecondary degree from his time before incarceration but was worried about going back to school as an older learner. However, he found college staff and faculty to be helpful and information to be readily available. He stated:

> And it was really easy to do. So that's nice that the process is facilitated. It's clear. It's well spelled out. So, if anybody says "I didn't know", it's just cuz you didn't take the time to learn to figure it out.

Through interviews with each participant, three sub-themes were found within academic

learning and support: a fast-track to enrollment post-incarceration, comprehensive computer assistance, and identifying and providing productive learning environments.

Create a Pipeline for College Enrollment

Cody, a younger student who was incarcerated for 3 years and released in 2019, suggested information about college should be presented to those currently incarcerated, even if those inside do not see the benefit to their life directly. He noted:

> Anybody's gonna immediately deny the value because they've heard of people that have degrees or loans, you know, but they don't hear about the success. So, like also they think they're a felon. So, you know, some of them are worried that they are not gonna be able to find a job easily, you know, but promoting like the end goal of like a career they could have along with like clear guidance steps or, or just a, a few reasonable actions to take.

Many participants talked about their time between being released from prison and enrolling in college. From his personal experience, Cody found that due to growing financial obligations and previous social communities, the longer the separation someone had between their incarceration and their enrollment in college, the more difficult it became to enroll. He and Isabelle, a newly released and enrolled student who had been incarcerated for five years, each tried to enroll in community college within a year of release from prison. In the state of Florida, to claim in-state tuition, approximately ¼ the cost of out-of-state tuition, students must provide multiple sources proving they have resided in the state for at least 12 consecutive months. Allowable documents include a signed lease or mortgage, vehicle registration, electric bills, etc. Proof of incarceration in the state of Florida is not an immediately allowable document. Cody explained his frustration by stating:

> They wouldn't let me sign up because I couldn't prove residency—even though I was a resident in a Florida state prison, having my prison release documents. So, I had to wait until spring term cause I wasn't able, they weren't able to prove my residency in the, you know, 20 days before [the semester started]. Which, that really set me off because I don't see how you can't prove I'm a resident if I'm a guy here with like a 30-page packet saying I've been in prison this whole time in Florida.

Isabelle also experienced difficulties enrolling due to Florida's restrictions on allowable documentation to prove residency. She noted:

> I was like, okay, you know, I'm trying to do the right thing. I'm trying to get back in school. Like, I've found something I'm really passionate about. And now you're telling me that you can't prove that I'm a Florida resident because I don't have a lease for the last 12 [months]. And then we're supposed to come home and become productive members of society. But then if we try to go back to school, it's like almost impossible.

This study found multiple areas of challenge and opportunity facing formerly incarcerated students and community colleges.

Comprehensive Computer Assistance

One helpful resource noted by three of the five participants was a free course, offered by the college to enrolled students, which taught basic computer skills and provided students with an electronic tablet upon completion of the class. Jimmy, a student incarcerated for 10 years in the early 2000s, found the course to be helpful. He stated:

> This is easy as, you know, easy 4.0. But if you can't navigate the computer, then you're screwed . . . . At [the college], there was no credit for this class, but, but they were giving away, you know, a free computer if you took it. So, I took it, and it was basically more about, you know, how to study in college. I think that every new student needs to take that course. And a big part of that is so they can navigate the website.

Bill, a student incarcerated for over 40 years, also took that course, but he felt much further behind the other students. He remarked:

> Well, by the time I learned how to do the computer, all the rest of the book was completed. So, I believe that they would've had any beginning, a real real beginning beginning computer course. Cause nowadays kids are telling you, they come out with a computer. But an

> older person comes to college—they should have a, well, "this is how you turn it on, how you do it".

Study Conditions of Diverse Populations

Through the interviews, each participant shared their personal living situation and its impact on their academics. When Cody was released from prison, he moved into his mom's house where he currently lives with his mom and girlfriend. Working 50 to 55 hours each week, he struggles to fit in study time. He noted:

> Like where do you do school at? Can you always come to the library? Like, I do, but then the library closes at eight. Well, I need to study until midnight. Like, I don't even sometimes start studying until late . . . . Closed on Sunday? It's like why would you close on Sunday? Like, that's the best day to study.

Bill expressed a similar desire for longer library hours, explaining that his lack of personal technology prohibited him from completing coursework when the college was closed.

It might be common for students to study late and on weekends, but Victor, a current student living in a halfway house after being released from prison in 2019, had to withdraw from his public speaking course because he was not allowed to record his speeches from where he was staying. Even if he had been able to record, the central location of the computer makes it impossible to have quiet time to focus. He noted:

> When I have time in front of the computer, there's usually a lot of guys around and I have to tell 'em "Hey! Can you guys please just hold it down a little bit?" I don't like to have to do that, but uh, it's really, really tough . . . but I have to have quiet. I have to have reflection time. I'm not brilliant. I'm a good student, and I'm a decent level of . . . but it's hard to read some of these research papers.

Deficits in Belonging

For most participants in this study, engaging with the college experience post-incarceration was a foreign culture. The students interviewed identified two aspects of their college experience that made a difference in their feelings of belonging on campus: encouragement to share personal experiences and opportunities for social engagement with peers.

Sharing Personal Experience

When every participant was asked about their academic coursework, each brought up valuing the opportunity to give their own opinions and unique personal experiences, with prison and otherwise, on the coursework. Isabelle stated, "I have a different perspective because I think that I walked in both sets of shoes. So, I can kind of see things from a different perspective than someone that hasn't actually experienced it." Jimmy concurred with the sentiment, feeling as though discussion posts were a chance for him to educate his peers.

It is not simply the opportunity to share experiences for the students, though. The students interviewed also shared that the feedback they received from professors and classmates took away feelings of exclusion, connected them with others of similar background, and affirmed their academic ability through good grades from their professors. In a speech class, Bill was encouraged privately by his professor to share his incarceration experience. He remembered the encounter fondly, saying, "I did that. And then afterwards people were a little more understanding of me. And instead of looking down on me, they were nice. And a couple people said 'Yeah, I went through the same thing.'"

Victor, though he disparaged his own academic ability throughout the interview, showed pride in the perfect scores he received on his discussion posts where he married academic research with his opinions and experiences. He shared, "And then I'll put in my own opinions and experiences and stories and stuff like that. I would say that I get a hundred on all these . . . because I put that kind of effort into it."

Social Engagement

None of the interviewees made close friends through their time in college. Through the interviews, there were a variety of factors given for this lack of connection, including COVID-19 quarantines, being a "loner," age, lack of similar interests, distance from the campus, transportation difficulties, and little available leisure time. While most interviewees expressed a desire to keep peer-to-peer relationships purely professional, they also made comments indicating the possibility of a missed connection and what prohibited it.

While Isabelle felt the college was a mixing pot of ages in which she blended, Jimmy and Victor each expressed their discomfort in feeling older than most of the students in their classes. Jimmy, in his mid-50s, commented that he felt more like a parent to the younger students than a peer. In one of Victor's online courses, his professor emailed the class about making social connections with one another. The professor discouraged classmates from sharing personal contact information and to use only the school email when necessary. Victor explained his understanding of the professor's warning. He said:

> And I think that some students could be

> new students, could be young, barely teenagers and stuff like that. And so there's, there's uh, the caution is well founded because it's, there could be some risk yeah… and you know, this is the standard. This is the protocols. You [Faculty] follow these. And as students, you should know what they are, and you should follow them as well.

However, after the interview recording was turned off, Victor continued to reflect on his professor's guidance. He said he had not thought about it before consciously, but now that he was, he realized that upon hearing the warning he thought the professor was talking about him as a formerly incarcerated man in his late-50's. He saw himself as the potential threat his professor warned the class about, and this discouraged him from contacting any of his classmates, even through their college email addresses.

Jimmy, who was clear about not wanting to foster personal relationships, conceded that his one synchronous online class was a positive experience. He said:

> It was Zoom. So we met every week. Um, and I looked forward to that. And for three weeks we didn't meet because, you know, we were ahead in all the requirements, stuff like that. But, I missed it. . . . Yeah, I missed it.

Career Preparation

All five participants interviewed indicated their reason for entering college was at least in part motivated by finding a better job or beginning a new career. Four of the five participants indicated career preparation and/or placement as their primary reason for enrolling. The participants identified two ways the college could offer better support as they prepare for their new careers: training career services staff to understand career needs specific to the formerly incarcerated population (e.g., licensure, federal bonding, etc.) and offering opportunities focused on the students' career goals.

All five participants interviewed indicated their reason for entering college was at least in part motivated by finding a better job or beginning a new career.

Career Services Staff Training

When he first enrolled in college, Cody was very driven to find a career that would allow certification for a previously incarcerated person. He was proactive in reaching out to advisors but struggled to find anyone who could help. He recounted his experience:

> In this education system, I ask everybody—advisors, career advisors, teachers, whoever. I'm like, "Hey, I have a felony. Can I get, what can I do with this felony?" And everybody's like "Mmm, I don't know. I know felons have done stuff before."

Finally, Cody was connected to an outside organization, the Pinellas Ex-Offender Reentry Coalition (PERC), who was able to help him understand and navigate the certification process. Cody encourages colleges to have at least one advisor who knows about the reentry population. He expressed that formerly incarcerated students often had similar needs to one another that could be more easily addressed with a knowledgeable advisor. He cited those needs as use of technology, career certifications/licensing restrictions, and disability resources.

Bill was former student of mine (lead researcher) when I worked as a career advisor. I assisted him with his first résumé post-release. He described how the experience made him feel and remarked, "That was uplifting. But I didn't have much to put down, but then you explained to me to use what I learned in prison and that put a different perspective on things."

However, when Cody actively sought out any college resource he thought would be helpful, he had a different experience. He was eager to start his first career and signed up for a mock interview. As Cody recounts the story, he showed up in street clothes to the interview, and the career advisor yelled at him. Cody was newly released from prison and did not own a suit or any business clothes. I asked him how that made him feel. He said:

> Broke? Yeah. A good old American. I feel like an immigrant sometimes. Like I work my way, you know, came to this country with nothing. Like, I got no rights. I have nothing. I have to like piece it all together. Like go through the extra hours. Like when other people are like, have it easy and complain, I have to suck it up and push harder. I mean that just happens... when you get outta prison with nothing.

Major Specific Career Opportunities

Just as students were more likely to connect to peers with shared interests, the students interviewed also preferred their career opportunities (e.g., job fairs, speakers, internships) to connect directly to their intended career. Isabelle explained that the

opportunities available in her career-focused program have kept her enrolled and engaged. She will be participating in an internship this fall and has attended many seminars organized by her professor featuring professionals and alumni now working in the field. Many of the faculty in her program are connected to the professional world, and she expressed how interested she is in the "real-world" stories shared and the connections she has been able to make. Victor, in the same program as Isabelle, is also motivated by all the guest lecturers and career opportunities. However, Victor lives more than an hour from the closest campus and completes his schoolwork from a shared computer in a halfway house, so it is difficult for him to attend the events in person or virtually. Even if he is unable to attend, knowing the events are taking place gives Victor confidence that the college will be there to assist him when he is graduating and looking for a job.

Bill, when enrolled, was taking only a couple of classes each semester. So, with graduation further in the distance, Bill was more concerned with finding a job while he was enrolled in school. Though he attended many job fairs, a combination of health issues, his criminal background, and his school schedule prevented him from finding a good fit. Many students who need flexible work hours while in school seek student employment working for the college. Bill says he applied for various campus jobs, but the college would not accept his criminal record. He was eligible to attend class but not to work on campus.

Discussion

This study revealed that four of five formerly incarcerated students interviewed had very low expectations of how the college would support them. Many of the current practices at this Florida community college are offering great support for these students, but there were also challenges revealed that proved difficult to overcome. Given the historically low graduation rates of formerly incarcerated students, overcoming these challenges, and fostering helpful resources is of very high importance (Flatt & Jacobs, 2018).

Participants experienced trouble with residency paperwork when enrolling in college. To combat this, colleges could have greater interaction with the prisons to motivate students to attend and eliminate barriers once they have been released. Through this interaction with colleges, students would be aware of the need for special residency approval and be able to plan to seek that approval.

Hope (2018) posited having a continuation of support from incarceration through the release process would provide necessary stability for formerly incarcerated people to better fill their basic needs. Most interview participants enrolled in college within 1-year post-release, and having a class schedule provided structure at a time they needed it most. Responsibilities for reentry citizens grew as they became further detached from prison. Enrolling in college immediately can prevent one's path from diverging so far it is hard to get back on track or from having feelings of regret for wasting time. National organizations, like the Bard Prison Initiative and the Alliance for Higher Education in Prisons, and smaller state-specific programs, like the Community Education Program (CEP) at Stetson University, are currently working in prisons to provide education and bridge the gap. Community colleges, like the one discussed in this study, should connect with these organizations to gain a better understanding of the workings of a college/prison partnership and utilize resources developed by the organization(s). The greatest academic issue faced by participants of this research was technology. The older the interviewee and longer the sentence, the more trouble in adjusting to the college's use of technology. The research in this study supports Miller et al.'s (2014) determination that the technology provided in prison, if any, is outdated, inadequate, and leaves students feeling unprepared for life post-release. Once they can overcome the technological barrier, this data suggests students are highly motivated by engaging with and receiving positive feedback from faculty and peers. This is in alignment with the research from Miller et al. (2014), which suggested that curriculum has a greater impact when it is inclusive and intent on diminishing the culture deficit and creating confidence. The participants found strength in sharing their personal experiences with career advisors, classmates, and faculty.

Sinko et al. (2020) explained that people of marginalized identities, like formerly incarcerated students, often face feelings of external and internal stigma which discourages them from identifying publicly as having been imprisoned, leading to less ability for support, fewer connections, and a disassociation with the community. Overwhelmingly, this research found otherwise. In alignment with Brown and Bloom's (2018) research, the participants in this research study disagreed with Sinko et al. (2020) and found strength and confidence in sharing their personal experiences with career advisors, classmates, and faculty.

The findings indicate a need for advisors to be trained to recognize and understand the needs of formerly incarcerated students. Formerly incarcerated students face a litany of barriers to becoming employable. From specialized rules for licensing and employment credentials to recognizing students' limitations with purchasing business clothes, formerly incarcerated students face unique complications and can waste a lot of time and money if they are not working with an informed staff member. Additionally, the findings show a need for faculty to be trained on the possible socio-cultural implications of assignments and directions given in their courses. Although many

interview participants had great faculty experiences, situations like those with Victor being warned about communication with classmates can severely impact the formerly incarcerated student's educational experience.

Implications for Practice

The results from this study present several implications for future practice. First, college administrators must examine the processes for accessing their institution. Administrative impracticality, such as residency paperwork, can slow down a student's motivation and deter them from enrolling. Considering a streamlined process for formerly incarcerated students can ensure there will be a clear path for students to have a timely matriculation. Creating collegiate consortiums which connect with the state and federal prison systems can further streamline this process. Additionally, colleges should seek to capitalize on relationships with community organizations, like the Pinellas Ex-Offender Reentry Coalition (PERC), to provide a greater depth of support.

Challenges to institutional access do not end after enrolling in classes. This study showed one of the largest problems faced by formerly incarcerated students is access to and use of technology. While many colleges offer basic computer courses, college administrators should consider expanding these programs to be ongoing and more inclusive of all learning styles and current levels of expertise. Additionally, laptop and Wi-Fi hotspot rental programs or other pathways to access the technology off campus would allow students more flexibility in their day to complete schoolwork alongside work and/or family responsibilities. It is important to note that multiple participants in the study stated that home was not conducive to completing coursework, so further consideration should be given to providing students with safe study spaces for late-night and weekend learning.

The second implication for practice is working to create active learning courses. Every participant in this study noted their preference for the courses where they were able to share personal thoughts and experiences. Active learning activities are assignments embedded into the curriculum which encourage students to engage in dialogue, discussion, applicable case studies, etc. Allsop et al. (2020) found that active learning courses not only increased student engagement, participation, and learning, but also provided the benefits of communication and interactivity, community and connectedness, satisfaction, and flexibility. Faculty with experience building an active learning curriculum can provide guidance and mentorship to unfamiliar faculty. Implementing active learning into required courses students take early in their program will encourage students to stay engaged with their faculty, classmates, and the institution. Furthermore, faculty training specific to teaching formerly incarcerated students would ensure the active learning curriculum is sensitive to student differences in willingness and ability to share and connect.

Students in the study noted that for both community belonging and career preparation, they desired to be in contact with like-minded individuals. By sharing passions with one another in active learning class activities, the formerly incarcerated student can begin to identify their network and build their social capital. Active learning can identify student needs, for instance, guest speakers or service-learning opportunities, and help the student to navigate to the most useful resources.

This study showed that the needs of reentry citizens are different depending on the length of time separated from their incarceration, but some needs, like understanding employment licensing restrictions, are pervasive to the entire population.

The final implication drawn from this study is the need for advisors to be trained on the common needs of the formerly incarcerated student. This study showed that needs of reentry citizens are different depending on the length of time separated from their incarceration, but some needs, like understanding employment licensing restrictions, are pervasive to the entire population. Inviting in a formerly incarcerated student who has graduated or a representative from a non-profit organization working with this population will provide insight to advisors on both the pervasive needs of the population and on the needs that vary depending on other factors of incarceration (e.g., length of time incarcerated, time since release, age upon release). From the data collected in this study, formerly incarcerated students are more likely to self-identify when they feel the person can actually help them. Arming advisors with the tools and understanding to provide tangible support will give students more confidence to disclose their past.

Limitations and Future Research

This study had limitations which should be noted. First, the size of this study is an obvious limitation. Though many of the sentiments aligned, five interviews do not give an expansive view of the formerly incarcerated student population. Additionally, all five students interviewed are either

currently enrolled in or previously enrolled in the same Florida community college. Moreover, there was no representation of racial or ethnic diversity. All interviews conducted for this study were with individuals whom the prison system considered White or Caucasian people natively from the United States. Given the disproportionate number of incarcerated Black men and the additional difficulty that arises from that intersectionality, a study proportionally representing the make-up of either the prison system or reentry student population would better serve to capture the experiences of formerly incarcerated students.

An unforeseen limitation of this study was COVID-19. Although all the interviews were able to be conducted in person, four of five interviewees attended the community college solely or mostly enrolled in online classes. This likely places an extra emphasis on the need for technological support and severely limits the opportunity for connecting with classmates.

Finally, all the participants suggested that this research was focusing on the wrong point in their reentry experience. The real concern heard many times over was the span of time between when a person walks out of prison and when they walk through the door of a college. The recommendation of increased communication between the colleges and prisons begins to address that concern. Further research must be done to provide the highest level of support as reentry citizens seek initial community reintegration.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to the dearth of current research about formerly incarcerated students. As colleges become increasingly diverse, it is vital college administrators pay attention to this distinct population and their specific and unique needs. This study is meant to serve as an initial evaluation of student needs in the areas of academic engagement, sense of belonging, and career readiness. The findings in this study demonstrate the independence of the formerly incarcerated student, but also where they found or needed support and community throughout their time enrolled. The understanding of specific needs of formerly incarcerated students provides campus administrators with a guide to weaving in these support systems with their existing student resources. As access to education continues to increase for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people, opportunities abound for additional research in the areas of academic engagement, belonging, and career readiness.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Demographic Questions

1. What college are you currently attending?
2. How many different colleges have you attended? Which ones?
3. What degree are you pursuing?
4. How long have you been enrolled?
5. When do you think you will graduate?

Substantive Questions

1. Tell me about your college experience so far.
2. Before you enrolled in college, what did you think it would be like?
3. Describe how it has been to go back to school and learn again.
4. Tell me about any services on campus you have used that have helped you to be successful in your classes.
5. From your perspective, how does your learning style compare to your peers?
6. Tell me about your optimal learning conditions.
7. How is the college meeting your learning needs?
8. Where do you feel you could use additional support?
9. How is the college helping to make sure you are ready for your career when you graduate?
10. Describe how your experience in college makes you feel about entering a new career.
11. Tell me about what services are provided on campus to help you prepare for your career.
12. What do you feel you need from the college to be ready to start a new career when you graduate?
13. Describe to what extent you feel like you belong on campus.
14. Tell me about your interactions with your classmates.
15. Tell me about the time you spend on campus each day.
16. Beyond attending classes, what other activities do you do on campus?
17. Do you have any friends you have met in college?
18. When and where did you meet them?

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FEATURE ARTICLE

"I feel like a bother": COVID-Era Experiences of College Students on Academic Probation and Financial Aid Warning Status

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https://doi.org/10.58997/fa2

ABSTRACT

Although there is a wealth of literature focused on how and why college students persist, less is known about a subpopulation of college students: students on academic probation and/or financial aid warning status, i.e., students who are potentially one semester away from academic suspension and/or lost financial aid eligibility. This study seeks to understand the experiences of students from this at-risk population in spring 2021 as many institutions reversed flexible COVID-19 policies, further complicating students' experiences. Through interviews, this study engages with students in an already precarious situation during the later stages of the pandemic to understand whether they exhibited behaviors to help them remain enrolled in college. Applying Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 1994) ecological systems theory, findings reveal how students interacted with peers and professors in the complex ecosystems of higher education and COVID-19. Students described COVID-19 as omnipresent despite the rollback of forgiveness policies. Students also showed avoidant behavior, often putting them more at risk to depart college. They struggled to develop social networks, though some participants described their academic and financial aid standing as a motivator to change their actions. We discuss implications to aid this student population.

Keywords: undergraduate college students, COVID-19, academic probation, financial aid warning

The COVID-19 pandemic presented considerable challenges for global society. In March 2020, higher education institutions in the United States pivoted to emergency online learning while also transitioning many student support services from in-person to virtual settings (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). Many institutions relaxed academic progression policies and converted grading scales to pass/fail (Chan, 2022). These approaches were meant to help students alleviate their anxiety and provide both students and faculty with flexibility during considerable turmoil and health threats to all (Chan, 2022). Students struggled with online teaching and learning, mental health, access to technology, and financial hardships (Johnson et al., 2020). Goldrick-Rab (2021) found that students' needs persisted well into the fall 2020 and spring 2021 semesters, with ongoing difficulties accessing food, housing, and transportation. Further, the pandemic disrupted the health and social patterns of adolescent young adults (ages 11-16), who will later enroll in college (Hussong et al., 2021), making the effects of the pandemic important to understand for years to come.

We situate our work in the gap of literature about how students persisted (or did not) during the late stages of the pandemic as policies reverted to pre-pandemic rigor.

A wealth of research has focused on how and why college students persist (Braxton et al., 1995; Milem & Berger, 1997; Russell et al., 2022; Tinto, 1998). Similarly, since the progression of the COVID-19 pandemic, research has begun to emerge that explores college student experiences during COVID-19 and how college students persisted through the pandemic (Rainey & Taylor, 2022; Russell et al., 2022; Sharma & Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2022). Other studies have examined students' meaning-making in relation to the

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pandemic as they transitioned to college (Velez et al., 2023). Yet, in the later stages of the pandemic, from early 2021 through 2022, most higher education institutions reversed course on forgiving pandemic policies, including re-instituting letter grades and tightening policies (Chan, 2022). These policies impacted college students' grades and earned credit hours, criteria critical for maintaining good academic standing, and federal financial aid eligibility. Therefore, these policy changes may harm students already at risk of departing college based on their academic standing (Rainey & Taylor, 2022).

In this study, we defined students from at-risk populations as students on academic probation (cumulative GPA < 2.0) and/or financial aid warning (cumulative GPA < 2.0 or <67% earned/attempted credit hours) or both. We used the term *at-risk* because this term is recognizable and provokes action (Smit, 2012). We applied Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 1994) ecological systems theory (EST) to explore the lived experiences of college students from at-risk populations during the later stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, analyzing their interactions with peers, faculty, and staff, as well as investigating and explaining their persistence strategies during a time of considerable flux.

As a result, this research explored how students from at-risk populations persisted through the later stages of the pandemic when academic and financial policies were re-established and students needed to adjust from emergency online learning and back to *normal*. We conducted in-depth interviews with 14 college students on academic probation or financial aid warning status or both to answer the following questions:

> RQ1: How do students from at-risk populations describe their experiences while on academic probation and/or financial aid warning status?
> RQ2: If students from at-risk populations demonstrated persistence strategies, what were students' persistence strategies?

By answering these questions, institutions will have informed ideas of how college students from at-risk populations perceive institutional resources and how institutions can intervene to support student persistence. Further, these implications will be useful for future college students as the projected learning loss during the COVID-19 pandemic will likely create ongoing challenges to communicate with and support college student success (Huck & Zhang, 2021).

Literature Review

This review of college persistence theories focuses on academic and social integration and campus and community climates because the pandemic disrupted these systems. In addition, we draw from college student persistence research during the COVID-19 era. We situate our work in the gap of literature about how students persisted (or did not) during the late stages of the pandemic as policies reverted to pre-pandemic rigor.

College Student Persistence

Tinto's (1975, 1988) early research—including his theory of student departure—into the factors affecting college student attrition suggested college students must successfully integrate themselves into a college community in two ways: academically and socially. Academic integration involved developing relationships with faculty members and engaging oneself in academic organizations, while social integration focused on developing friendships and relationships with peers and interacting positively with other college students (Tinto, 1975, 1988). Astin (1984) similarly proposed a model of student involvement that was more focused on retention and emphasized Tinto's (1975) notion of social integration and campus involvement.

Later studies challenged and added to Tinto's (1975, 1988) and Astin's (1984) work. Milem and Berger (1997) suggested college student persistence can be affected by students' early experiences on campus, the type of institution students attend, and the level of support services students receive. Braxton et al. (1995) expanded upon Tinto (1975, 1988), finding that college student persistence was positively associated with an institution meeting a student's academic and career development expectations.

Tinto (1998) later commented on his prior work, asserting college campuses must function as communities that provide students with the resources to succeed, creating a sense of belonging. This work paved the way for more psychologically focused studies of persistence, including Bean and Eaton's (2000) psychological model of college student retention. Bean and Eaton (2000) asserted many retention strategies rely on psychological processes such as coping behaviors, self-efficacy beliefs, and attribution of control, which were not integrated within earlier work (Astin, 1984; Braxton et al., 1995; Tinto, 1975, 1988).

College Student Persistence in the COVID-19 Era

Of the emerging college persistence research during the COVID-19 era, studies indicated Tinto's (1975, 1988) original work and related studies (Astin, 1984; Braxton et al., 1995; Milem & Berger, 1997) may need updating given the unique impact of the pandemic. Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021) strongly asserted students who could smoothly adjust to online learning were much more likely to persist than their peers, suggesting socioeconomic stratification between higher-income students who could afford technology

and internet access compared to lower-income peers. This finding was echoed by Rainey and Taylor (2022), who explored the online learning experiences of college students during the pandemic and found students who were comfortable communicating through online channels and made online connections to peers and faculty members were more likely to persist than peers who did not. Tangentially tied to Tinto's (1975, 1988) notion of academic integration, Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021) and Rainey and Taylor (2022) asserted college students who could re-integrate academically in online or virtual spaces may have been best prepared to persist through the pandemic.

However, some students may have weathered financial challenges better than others. Black and Taylor (2021a) examined students' self-assessed emergency needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. They found students demanded a higher level of assistance paying for internet bills than housing costs, and student needs changed throughout the pandemic. Russell et al. (2022) also explored the role of financial well-being and emergency services in college student persistence, finding students who reported a higher sense of financial well-being and engaged with emergency services were more likely to persist than their peers, controlling for social belonging and self-actualization. The researchers found as social belonging and self-actualization increased, persistence decreased, suggesting well-integrated college students may not have been ready to persist through the pandemic, even though prior research emphasized integration as a critical persistence measure (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1975, 1988).

Kinzi's (2023) study described college students' disengagement during the pandemic, emphasizing the need to create flexibility, foster student agency, address concerns, and create purposeful opportunities for relationship building. Yet, these studies do not capture the entirety of college students' experiences with persistence during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, prior studies did not examine how students from at-risk populations—students on academic probation or with financial aid eligibility issues—navigated continued enrollment in higher education.

Theoretical Framework

We applied Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 1994) ecological systems theory (EST) to describe students' individual experiences and behavior in complex settings. This theory is appropriate for college students as they navigated the complicated and evolving forces related to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. EST posits the individual possesses characteristics that guide the way they develop in relation to nested layers of environments and contexts, from the individual to their relationships with family and friends (microsystem) and the interaction between the individual and the microsystem (mesosystem). The next layer, the exosystem, is composed of indirect influences, such as policies, and was especially impactful in this study as they shifted in response to COVID-19 and reverted in spring 2021. The macrosystem, the outermost layer, includes social, cultural, and historical forces of influence. Finally, this theory accounts for time (the chronosystem) and how experiences, identities, and meaning evolve over time.

Other researchers have used EST to understand first-year students' meaning making of COVID-19 as they transitioned to college (Velez et al., 2023); to offer a developmental paradigm for successful first-generation college students (Demetriou et al., 2017); to describe nontraditional students' path to college success (Jepson & Tobolowsky, 2020); and to understand community college student persistence decisions (Ozaki et al., 2020). This theory allows for a rich examination of students' experiences in complex settings with multiple interactions between individuals, policies, and systems. Through this lens, we examined students' behaviors linked to persistence in college.

Applying EST, this study contributes to a broadened understanding of the complicated stories behind low grades and financial threats in the context of changing university policies.

Methods

Applying EST, this study contributes to a broadened understanding of the complicated stories behind low grades and financial threats in the context of changing university policies. We used a qualitative interview approach to understand students' experiences at a vulnerable moment in their college journey, accounting for complicated contexts.

Research Site

Southern Coast University (SCU), a pseudonym, is a private four-year university situated in the Gulf Coast region of the Southern United States. SCU enrolls about 3,200 undergraduate and 1,300 graduate students each year, including 66% women and 34% men, with more than 50% of students being students of color. One third of undergraduate students are the first in their families to attend college. The site location is critical for this study, as the Gulf South region of the United States experienced

a harsh series of weather-related events in fall 2020 in addition to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This confluence of factors complicated operations for the institutions and compounded teaching and learning difficulties for SCU students, faculty, and staff.

Participants

We used purposive sampling to select participants from one of six sections of a one-hour success class at SCU in spring 2021 (Hays & Singh, 2012; Saldaña & Omasta, 2022). Administrators at SCU auto-enrolled students on academic probation (cumulative GPA < 2.0) and/or financial aid warning (cumulative GPA < 2.0 or < 67% earned/attempted credit hours) in the success classes. In the success class setting, students learned they were eligible to participate in this study through an announcement from the instructor, a video introduction to the learning management system, and a section in the course syllabus (see Appendix A). Completing the consent form on Qualtrics was a graded assignment, but students' responses were unknown to their instructor. Following the interview protocol in Appendix B, interviews were first auto-transcribed by Zoom and later updated by the research team to ensure accuracy. Students were given $20 gift cards as an incentive to participate.

Guided by Stake's (1995) approach that interviews are a way to capture "multiple realities" (p. 64), the research team conducted 18 interviews with open-ended questions to get students to describe their experiences and decisions. Four students in good academic standing were dropped from this study for a total of 14 participants. Table 1 below displays demographic information for this study's participants:

We included each participant's prior academic year GPA information as a proxy of academic achievement. We include persistence outcomes based on enrollment data from the institutional research office at SCU. We coded students enrolled in a full-time class schedule (12 or more credit hours) on the last day to add a class in the fall 2021 semester as retained.

Data Analysis

We conducted two rounds of coding informed by Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 1994) ecological systems theory (EST), prior student persistence literature, and Saldaña's (2016) coding process. The codes in Appendix C helped us interpret our data to see how college students from at-risk populations experienced higher education and how they did—or did not—engage in persistence strategies to remain enrolled and pursue their degrees.

The first round of coding was part of a more extensive study about students' experiences and understanding of their financial aid and academic standing. We then reexamined our data set, emphasizing students' experiences, using a mix of deductive and inductive approaches (Saldaña, 2016). Our deductive starting codes came from extant literature, our theoretical framework (EST), and our experience with college students from at-risk populations. The major categories that emerged from our previous pilot study included relationships, communication, and fear. Our code list further evolved through inductive coding choices to capture "emergent, data-driven" codes (Saldaña, 2016, p. 75), including policy, motivation, and technology.

Consistent with Saldaña (2016), we completed

Table 1

Descriptive statistics of students participating in this study (n=14)

Pseudonym	Class year	Gender	Race	Fall 2020 GPA	Fall 2021 persistence
Angela	First year	Woman	Hispanic or Latinx	3.4	Retained
Charlotte	First year	Woman	White or Caucasian	0.0	Not retained
Christina	First year	Woman	Hispanic or Latinx	3.5	Retained
Denise	First year	Woman	Hispanic or Latinx	0.0	Retained
Felicia	First year	Woman	White or Caucasian	3.1	Retained
Genesis	First year	Woman	White or Caucasian	0.0	Not retained
Holly	First year	Woman	White or Caucasian	2.4	Not retained
Immanuel	First year	Man	African American	2.9	Retained
Katrina	First year	Woman	White or Caucasian	0.0	Not retained
Mia	Second year	Woman	African American	2.2	Not retained
Michael	First year	Man	White or Caucasian	0.0	Retained
Olivia	First year	Woman	African American	0.0	Not retained
Scarlett	First year	Woman	Hispanic or Latinx	0.0	Not retained
Vivienne	Second year	Woman	African American	1.8	Retained

Note. Students with GPAs above 2.0 were considered in good academic standing but in an at-risk population for this study because of an unsatisfactory earned/attempted hours ratio (< 67%).

a second round of coding to assess the quality of the codes we generated and eliminate less-used codes. Our codes evolved as this process entailed several iterations of review, reflection, and analysis, common practices to ensure trustworthiness (Stake, 1995). Adding sub-themes helped tease out the nuances, such as the addition of child codes for the nested systems of EST, as well as persistence strategies related to academic and social integration per prior literature (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1975, 1988). The additional codes included belonging and study strategies. We leveraged tools in Dedoose, such as the code co-occurrence chart, to look for coding density and overlap (Salmona et al., 2020).

The first researcher read and coded the transcripts based on our start code list, followed by the second researcher, who independently conducted the same analysis. We then compared results, refined the list of codes, and completed a second round of coding. The research team met weekly throughout the analysis process to discuss findings and our positionalities. The first author works in student success and previously supported students in the process of academic and financial aid appeals and support. The second author has also worked in undergraduate admissions and financial aid. The researchers' experience in student support and retention spans more than 30 years, aiding our understanding of the student experience.

Findings

After performing in-depth interviews with 14 college students from at-risk populations, this study addressed how they describe their experiences while on academic probation and/or financial aid warning status. We also described students' persistence strategies, such as social and academic integration, accessing resources, and finding communities. Our findings are organized into three themes: (a) The COVID-19 Pandemic "put a damper on everything," (b) "I feel like a bother": Students Struggled to Communicate and Avoided Support, and (c) "I owed it to myself to do better": Students Were Motivated to Change their Actions.

Theme One: The COVID-19 Pandemic "put a damper on everything."

Although our research questions focus on the student experience during the spring 2021 semester, this snapshot in time is connected to a longer, complicated student journey. Had the fall 2020 semester gone differently for the students, they may not have been in an at-risk population for spring 2021. Obstacles, including the complications that stemmed from the societal forces, policies, and stress of COVID-19, got in the way of students successfully communicating with professors and support resources at SCU. They were also operating in a complicated, evolving setting. In fall 2020, for example, students could elect pass/fail grades instead of letter grades, a policy that was not continued into spring 2021.

COVID-19 disrupted many traditional ways of communication, such as asking questions in person and hosting events, which are central to developing meaningful connections between peers, faculty, and support staff. Students at SCU could live on campus and participate in limited activities in fall 2020, but most campus operations, including teaching and student support, operated virtually. In this context, students struggled to advocate for their needs, not knowing when or how to reach out. No student interviewed reported having an in-person class in the fall of 2020. Christina reflected, "We were the first students to go to college in a pandemic. . . . My main experiences—good or bad—have revolved around the pandemic." Michael also noted how COVID-19 made it hard to socialize and make friends. He described a fun outdoor event with fireworks and music that was broken up when students got too close to each other, even though they were wearing masks. He said, "COVID has really put a damper on everything college was. Even the academic aspect. Everything."

COVID-19 disrupted many traditional ways of communication, such as asking questions in person and hosting events, which are central to developing meaningful connections between peers, faculty, and support staff.

Not only did students struggle to connect with their peers, but their learning experiences mostly took place on Zoom or through asynchronous modules on Canvas. Students admitted it was difficult to pay attention to Zoom classes because they often multitasked on another device or browser. Several students maintained they were not ready to take online classes. Immanuel noted the uncomfortable pauses in Zoom left him wondering if anyone was paying attention or knew the correct answer. He often kept his camera off in Zoom classes, only responding to the professor's question if he felt confident he was correct. This lack of connection among students and their professors may have caused them to struggle to reach out and engage with class material. Mia said: "I would have liked the class better in person. It's just the person I am." The complex societal forces of COVID-19 and institutional policies that followed contributed to students' struggle to interact with peers and professors.

Similarly, Denise attended classes from home for the academic year because of the ongoing pandemic, despite wanting to live independently from her family. As a result, she had additional family responsibilities on top of working more than 20 hours a week at a fast-food restaurant, forced upon her by the pandemic:

> I was so burned out from school and then work and then coming home and helping my brother with his school. Or doing stuff around here. I just wanted to sleep. I didn't want to talk to anybody. The last thing I wanted to do was think about school.

Overall, the pandemic affected students' personal, work, social, and academic lives. Their social lives were suspended, and they did not feel ready for online learning. Meanwhile, they accumulated other responsibilities as a result of the pandemic, limiting their time for school-related activities. Michael, Immanuel, and Denise returned to SCU for fall 2021 despite these challenges.

Theme Two: "I feel like a bother": Students Struggled to Communicate and Avoided Support

Many students felt SCU would view them as a distraction or burden if they sought out institutional support. Four students used the words "bother" or "burden" when describing their approach to seeking information or communicating with someone at SCU. Felicia described any form of communication with her professors as a "confrontation" and a misuse of her professors' time. Genesis also felt like a burden when reaching out, especially when she perceived administrators ignoring her requests, making her feel like a low priority. Genesis said:

> We're very timid, we're like, "Hey don't need to bother you, but I need this information." We feel like a burden to ask for help, and that's why we don't. Because it's hard to step out of our shell and be like, "Professor, I need help on this math equation." It's not just the financial aid or advisors, in general, we're timid teenagers out in the world alone.

Genesis handled administrative tasks, like paying bills and transportation to college, on her own because of her family situation, yet Genesis' words revealed how students like her viewed institutional support and whether first- and second-year college students had the confidence to advocate for themselves.

Similarly, Mia and Olivia preferred to do things themselves rather than ask for help and come across as needy or unprepared. Olivia admitted she was still getting used to relying on people other than herself, something she only accepted after receiving low grades. Similarly, Mia asserted she preferred doing things independently, such as finding information and struggling through coursework, as she did not want to be seen as unintelligent or unprepared for college. These hesitations could stem from feelings of low self-esteem or imposter syndrome. Subsequently, our retention analysis showed Genesis, Mia, and Olivia did not return to SCU the following semester.

To explore how students from at-risk populations may seek information or complete tasks to maintain enrollment, the research team asked students how they would locate policy information about their academic and financial aid standing. Christina said she would first ‹search the school's website for keywords. If she was unsuccessful, she would email her advisor. While Christina expressed she felt more comfortable with her advisor—and this person's role was to provide key information and advice—she used apologetic language when reaching out with questions. She also used the word "bother" in her communication. She stated, "I have my advisor also as my teacher, so I have a little more confidence asking her questions. If not, I'd probably be like, ‹Hi, sorry to bother you.'" Katrina also responded she would first find information on her own, avoiding institutional support if she could, later admitting she did not know how to use several elements of the SCU student portal and never thought to reach out for help. Christina returned to SCU the following fall semester, but Katrina did not.

Although students often shared their own experiences, Charlotte's observations about her roommate painted a broader picture of struggling students:

> I wish more students would know to reach out. I've been doing much better this semester, but my roommate is having a hard time. There will be times she's breaking down crying and I was like, you could reach out to so and so. She didn't realize—and I didn't last semester—there are so many resources and people willing to help you.

Charlotte noted that although in the fall 2020 semester she did not know how to or chose not to access resources, she made improvements the following semester. Despite these efforts, she did not re-enroll at SCU in fall 2021.

“I’m hiding”: Feelings of Shame, Shock, and Avoidance

In addition to feeling “like a burden” and the COVID-19 pandemic thrusting them into new and uncomfortable circumstances, students from at-risk populations also expressed disappointment

and shock when they reflected on their academic and financial standing. Some students admitted they avoided accessing support in the fall, and many students (Genesis, Charlotte, Michael, Vivienne) openly talked and wrote about mental health challenges. Their avoidance patterns may have been exacerbated by environmental factors like virtual operations, inconsistent university outreach, or limited in-person access.

Charlotte expressed that she learned a lot about institutional policies and support from the success class. She stated, "Before that, I was just going, 'they can't find me, I'm hiding.'" Charlotte disclosed having anxiety and was eligible for an emotional support animal on campus, possibly contributing to her avoidant behavior. Another upper-year student, Scarlett, withdrew in the middle of the spring semester because of her mental and physical health. She reflected, "I was not functioning, not leaving my bed." She decided to withdraw for the semester, despite how hard she worked in her classes. She admitted she was "so fearful, and the anxiety was so much." Scarlett was candid that her mental health and learning differences had been a part of her life since childhood and were not unique to the spring 2021 semester or COVID-19.

The students we interviewed did not want to begin their college career with low grades or worrying about their financial aid, often using words like 'shock' and 'regret.'

Other students, especially first-year students, were shocked to see themselves struggle academically. The students we interviewed did not want to begin their college career with low grades or worrying about their financial aid, often using words like "shock" and "regret." Inversely, Felicia and Denise expressed familiarity with academic probation from their high school experiences, so they shared frustrations but not the same degree of surprise. For instance, Denise described how she felt about being on academic probation, drawing from content in the success class:

> I kind of feel like a failure. I think it brings up a lot of imposter syndrome. And we talked about that in the success class. We talked about how imposter syndrome—for me, it's really big. I think about the beginning of the fall semester and how I was doing good. And now it's like shoot, I'm doing bad. I think maybe that wasn't me, that was an accident. Maybe this is me.

Denise also expressed regret for "not being the successful student I know I have the potential to be. And I know I am." Olivia vocalized similar remorse in her interview, as she felt disconnected from her classes because she was working 30 to 40 hours a week at a fast-food restaurant. This level of off-campus work commitments likely interrupted her successful navigation of college systems. Olivia wished she had been more critical of her actions and had caught herself before drifting from her classes and earning failing grades, expressing regret and avoiding institutional support out of a sense of shame.

Theme Three: "I owed it to myself to do better": Students Were Motivated to Change Their Actions

Despite their collective struggles, tendency to avoid institutional support, feelings of shock and shame, and the pandemic policies, several students made positive observations about their experiences in higher education. They described their academic and financial aid warning status as a motivator, awakening them to the consequences of their poor academic performance. For some students, knowing they needed to improve their grades or earn credit hours was inspiring. Michael claimed when he was notified of his poor academic standing, he was motivated to "work a little more and a little harder."

Michael also expressed gratitude for his professors, whom he thought would be stricter coming into college. Instead, he found they were lenient and understanding of his mental health challenges. He described improved communication habits, such as checking email more regularly. He also met with his success coach and read through academic probation policies together. Similarly, Christina accessed support services, including counseling and student health, at SCU. She described them as "services I didn't think I'd need, but then I did."

Students also expressed a commitment to improve their academic standing to keep financial aid so they could stay in school. Mia reflected on the letter she received about maintaining grades to keep financial aid and stated that she could not afford to lose her financial aid; she wanted to be in college. She said: "I just couldn't let myself fall off this semester. I owed it to myself to do better." For Mia and others, reading the financial aid letter about their standing served as a wake-up call that their actions had consequences. Charlotte also seemed less aware her previous decisions had penalties until she learned of her academic and financial aid status. She stated:

> I'm in college—if I get a bad grade, I guess, I get a bad grade. I had no idea what happened for anything. [Then] I got the academic probation email. I was like, "Oh shoot, consequences to my actions here.

This realization, coupled with the resources they learned through the success class, made them more attentive to their studies.

Angela was formerly a high-achieving high school student and clearly remembered the email from financial aid after fall 2021 grades were posted. She described feeling sad about the letter and confused about its meaning. Angela said: "I was never bad at school and I felt like I was doing so terrible. I felt like that email from financial aid just proved it. That was like—wow—I really messed up. It was just a shock." Low grades were new to Angela, and the letter about her financial aid status felt like proof of her failure. However, Angela leveraged this shock into personal growth, reflecting on how she felt she gained a broader perspective after her first semester in college. Angela differed from others as she described this growth, noting how she felt differently when she went home for the break. Based on our interview notes, Katrina also seemed content in her interview and overall experience in the spring. She lived off campus with her therapy dog and enjoyed a better daily routine with more in-person classes. Katrina did not, however, return to SCU the following fall; Angela did.

Discussion of Findings

As a timely study into how students from at-risk populations experienced higher education during the pandemic and persisted at their institution, much can be gleaned from this study's findings. The three themes of this study collectively articulated that the combination of students' precarious status, coupled with complex environmental forces, may have affected students' engagement with institutional support. They also struggled to build academic and social communities that could have supported their persistence in college. Although most students blamed themselves for their precarious academic or financial standing, broader societal forces influenced their experiences. As described in Theme One, COVID-19 remained very present in their daily experiences in spring 2021. Even though students were still learning (and adjusting to learning) online, SCU reverted to pre-pandemic academic and financial aid policies, with students earning letter grades that were tied to academic probation and financial aid eligibility statuses. As a response to the perception that pandemic struggles were waning, policy forces included reverting back to letter grades (from pass/fail) and more rigorous adherence to deadlines. Students from at-risk populations faced extraordinary circumstances during this period of their educational career, resulting in half of the students leaving the institution the subsequent semester.

Many of these struggles have precursors in prior literature. Foundational models of student attrition and persistence have asserted that students must integrate both academically and socially to maintain progress toward their degree and persist in higher education (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1975, 1988). These theories, coupled with EST, help explain how students 'interactions with peers made it difficult for them to integrate socially, as COVID-19 prevented many in-person student interactions. At the mesosystem level, students were unable to fully integrate into virtual learning environments. More broadly, the political and social expectations in the later stages of the pandemic also evolved, influencing the individual student journey.

Additionally, many of these students' experiences—good or bad—were connected to communication. Students struggled to communicate their needs to their instructors, often assuming such interaction was an inconvenience. As described in Theme Two, "I feel like a bother," four students used the words "burden" or "bother" when describing their communication with professors or staff at SCU. By not advocating for themselves, students from at-risk populations struggled with coursework, missed deadlines, or misunderstood expectations. Complicating matters, the COVID-19 pandemic rendered all learning to virtual modalities in fall 2020 and hybrid modalities in spring 2021. Learning through Zoom and lacking in-person connections to others made it difficult for new students to connect to SCU. It also meant interactions with instructors, financial aid counselors, and advisors often happened through email, phone, or Zoom. Students were reluctant to speak up during class for fear of appearing dumb, an issue that stems from a lack of academic and social integration (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1975, 1988) or the complexity of their environmental settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1994).

As a result, the college students from at-risk populations in this study often resisted institutional support. Many students in this study "felt like a bother" and tried "hiding" from their institution and its many resources. In these cases, SCU could have had ample support but needed to better communicate with students to accept the support. In this regard, Bean and Eaton's (2000) psychological model of college student retention may be better applied to college students from at-risk populations during the pandemic era, as their model better encompasses student self-esteem and self-efficacy, which both influenced the persistence of the students in this study.

Despite their overall struggles, some at-risk students expressed motivation to improve their grades and academic standing. Theme Three, "I owed it to myself to do better": Students Were Motivated to Change their Actions**,** encapsulates their positive experiences and descriptions of growth. Some did not understand there would be consequences to their actions but, once they did, they were inspired to change. Although individuals reported motivation to improve, they would later describe actions incongruent with this understanding, such as continuing to turn in work late or knowing of a resource but still avoiding it. Here, institutional communication of struggle—sending emails and making phone calls to alert students of their poor academic and/or financial status—was a wake-up call. For many students, this wake-up call was welcomed and served as motivation to, in Michael's words, "work a little more and a little harder."

Some students from at-risk populations persisted because even though they may have given up on themselves, the institution did not give up on them. Several students expressed gratitude for what they learned in the success class, a class they were in because of their poor fall 2020 grades or lack of credit hours. Students praised their connection to the instructor, knowing they could go to them with questions and the resources they discussed. Students realized they could learn from mistakes, a finding echoed in Collins-Warfield et al.'s (2023) study of historically excluded groups. Tinto's (1998) later work positioning the campus as a community finds value, as SCU attempted to create an online community during the pandemic through the success courses, and some at-risk students—though not all—established enough of a community to persist at the institution.

Some students from at-risk populations persisted because even though they may have given up on themselves, the institution did not give up on them.

Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

This study and other early studies into pandemic-era student persistence (Chan, 2022; Rainey & Taylor, 2022; Russell et al., 2022; Sharma & Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2022) showed the need for more research to explore the experiences of college students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Research on adolescent's experiences during COVID-19 (Hussong et al., 2021), coupled with increasing evidence of secondary school learning loss (Huck & Zhang, 2021), highlighted the ongoing need to think differently about the ways we support students as they transition to and persist through college. Aside from COVID-19, these considerations continue to be relevant in educational settings because we can anticipate other forms of disruptions in the future. There are also implications for college success overall.

Data from this study should urge researchers to dig into students' online learning experiences, a topic breached by Rainey and Taylor (2022). This inquiry is pressing for students on academic probation and/or financial aid warning status, as these students were both stuck in pandemic-era online learning but were subject to pre-pandemic policies. More research is needed in this area, possibly applying Bean and Eaton's (2000) psychological model of college student retention, paying attention to self-efficacy.

Findings from this study also suggest institutions should review pre-pandemic era policies and ensure college students from at-risk populations are not doubly minoritized by forced learning methods while being subject to strict academic or financial policies. Institutions should consider emergency academic and financial policies that temporarily suspend academic probation and financial aid eligibility criteria if they need to change instruction modalities. Flexible policies could reach beyond pandemic challenges and also encompass natural disasters, inclement weather, power outages, community violence, and other cultural phenomena that may disrupt student learning. Drafting policies with our most vulnerable students in mind could lead to more equitable, effective policies for all.

Institutions should continue exploring new communication methods to reach students from at-risk populations and encourage them to seek and integrate support services. Kustitskaya et al. (2022) recommended that institutions engage in various assessment tools for student performance, emphasizing the first half of the semester. Perhaps instructors or case managers working for higher education institutions could explore a student readiness measure or assessment that evaluates students' willingness to seek and accept support services, identifying students who do not communicate or avoid institutional support. Case management strategies encompassing mental health services, academic support, financial aid guidance, and classroom learning can yield impactful results, especially when coordination leads to cross-campus collaboration (Black & Taylor, 2021b). Institutions

may need to revise their communication strategies to deliver resources in ways that students from at-risk populations are willing to accept and embrace, including personalized, individual messages.

The students in this study were enrolled in a success class designed to teach them study strategies and build academic confidence, a model similar to the success program in Collins-Warfield et al.'s (2023) study. Kinzie (2023) also emphasized the need to embrace flexibility, to be mindful of varied academic preparedness among students, and to create opportunities for students to learn in groups. Many of these recommendations can be achieved through success classes, workshops, and specialized programs. Further, enrollment in these classes builds connections to other students and can show students they are not alone in their struggles. Classes and programs like these should be evaluated, replicated, and evolved to continue to meet students' needs, particularly if students could benefit from the intervention prior to being in an at-risk population.

Ultimately, half the students in this study left SCU the semester following this study, highlighting the urgent need to conduct more research into this area and better support students. Sadly, students who left did so because they "felt like a bother," a feeling that no student should feel. From here, practitioners and researchers should "bother" to connect with students from at-risk populations, build relationships and empower these students, and work diligently to learn more about how academic and financial aid policies may be inadvertently placing these students into at-risk populations in the first place.

Limitations and Delimitations

The study's qualitative findings make important, unique contributions to the literature, allowing researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers to draw meaningful implications to their work. We limited this study to 14 full-time undergraduate students on academic probation or financial aid warning status because we wanted an in-depth discovery about the experiences and persistence strategies of these students. We delimited our data collection to a class that auto-enrolled students on academic probation and/or financial aid warning. We used students' poor academic and financial aid standing as our definition for being in an at-risk population to depart from college because failure to improve their grades or earned hours would likely render them ineligible to return to SCU the following semester. There is a difference, however, between students who depart college for their reasons versus those who are academically suspended or who lost financial aid resources.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix A

Syllabus Statement and Canvas Announcement

The success class syllabi included the following statement:

> This course is a part of a research study that will inform the way we support students at Southern Coast University. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and will not impact your grade. You are required, however, to review and complete the consent form here. When completing this form, please select whether you consent or do not consent to participate in the study.

The last page of the syllabus was a printed copy of the consent form.

The learning management system had the following as a module called, *Help Future Students*, which included a short video explanation:

> This course will be part of research that informs the ways we support students at SCU. Therefore, you will be asked to review consent to participate in this study. If you consent, your institutional records, discussion posts, and journals may be included in future research studies. Your identity as a student will be kept confidential. If portions of your posts appear in research reports, your identifying characteristics will be changed.
>
> Participation is completely voluntary and may be withdrawn any time. Your consent will not be known to your instructor until the conclusion of the course, after grades are submitted. Consent forms will be held in the Provost's office.

Complete the consent form here: Consent Form

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Introduction

Hello! My name is [researcher name]. I am [brief background]. This meeting will be recorded and transcribed. I may reach back out to you with clarifying questions.

The purpose of this study is to learn more about the experiences of students on academic probation and financial aid warning. This research project aims to improve the ways we support students at SCU. As part of the module called, "helping future students" in your success course this spring, you completed a consent form for this project. SCU' Institutional Review Board approved this project for study, which means it complies with privacy expectations and support for research. This interview will take approximately 1 hour and you will be sent a $20 gift card on Amazon by email within one week. Do you have questions?

There are risks and resources associated with this project. Talking about academic struggles may be hard or upsetting. Remember SCU students have access to have access to resources in counseling, student life, and student success services. I can provide more information to you at the end of this conversation. I also acknowledge that this interview may come at a difficult time and that you may share information for which I have resources. Know that I will acknowledge your voice and will offer you resources at the end of the interview if appropriate.

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

This interview will contain several open-ended questions and follow up questions. Please feel free to share anything you'd like.

This study is about students during academic probation and financial aid warning. The first set of questions are about academic probation, then about financial aid, and finally about your overall experiences.

Academic Probation

1. Thinking back to the fall [or the semester prior to probation], what did you understand about the policies or expectations of academic probation?
2. Are you on academic probation this semester?
3. How did you know about academic policies?
   a. How did you find this information?
4. How did you first come to understand you were on academic probation?
   a. What was your reaction?
   b. Whom, if anyone, did you tell?
5. How would you describe your academic status to a peer or family member?
6. How did you feel about being on academic probation?

Financial Aid

7. Was financial aid a concern for you while you were on academic probation?
8. Do you know the status of your financial aid? (e.g., warning, probation, eligible, not eligible). What is it?
9. Thinking back to the fall [or the semester prior to probation], what did you understand about the policies or expectations of financial aid?
10. How did you first come to understand your financial aid standing?
    a. What was your reaction?
    b. Whom, if anyone, did you tell?
11. How do you know about financial aid policies?
12. How did you find this information?
13. Do you understand what you need to do to keep your scholarship/financial aid?
    a. How did you know?
14. How do you describe your financial aid status?
15. How would you describe your financial aid status to a peer or family member?
16. How do you feel about being in financial aid warning?

Experiences

17. Did your academic or financial aid status change your mindset coming into the spring semester?
    a. In what ways?
18. What support, if any, did you seek at SCU University to improve your grades?
19. How did you know what support was available to you? Tell me more about your experience this spring…
    a. Study habits?
    b. Approach to classes?
    c. Approach to professors?
    d. Friends?
    e. Family?
    f. Work?
    g. Other commitments?
20. What was your experience in the success class?
21. How did you navigate the transition to online learning during COVID?
    a. Did you face challenges?
    b. Were there benefits?

Closing

Thank you for spending this time with me to help future students. I really appreciate your willingness to open up to be and to be part of a project to help future students.

Appendix C

Code Book

CODE	Description
Belong	Sense of belonging; feeling part of community; not alone.
Communication	Emails, not reading emails, flyers, talking to professors, friends, family.
COVID-19	Related to pandemic
Criteria	What students understand about financial aid or academic criteria.
Criteria-correct	Accurate description or reference to criteria related to financial aid.
Criteria-semi-correct	
Criteria-unknown	Did not know the criteria to keep financial aid.
Expectations	Expectations student has for themselves; expectations of faculty; expectations of family; perfectionism
Fear	Imposture syndrome; Fear of failure; fear of speaking up; fear of being alone; fear of going home; fear to ask for help; fear of missing out; fear of sounding dumb; fear of being judged; lack of confidence; insecure
Great quote	
Health	Self care, mental health, Mental well-being; access to medication and treatment; anxiety; depression; physical health; stress; exercise; mediation; accessing resources; spirituality; faith; sleep; happiness; music; art; creativity; reflection; diet; food
Motivation	the desire to be in college; the desire to be at the institution; the willingness to do work that is less interesting or seems unimportant
Pay for school	
Policy	What they understand about financial aid or other policies
Policy-correct	Accurate description of policy
Policy-unknown	
Relationships	Family; role of student's family in their academic and personal journey; death in family; friends; role of student's friends (or lack thereof) in their academic and personal journey
Relationship-Faculty	
Relationship-Family	
Resource	
Retention	Indication they stopped out or will stop out of college. Or allude to something pertaining to retention
Status	How students described their financial aid status
Status-correct	Student description of their status is correct.
Status-unknown	
Study strategies	Effective strategies and approaches to academic skills, such as writing a research paper, studying for a test, or prioritizing tasks; preparation from high school; organization; paying attention; note-taking
Technology	Role of technology as a necessity in college, learning management system, Blackboard, Canvas, emailing instructors, using Zoom; role of technology as a means to connect with others; role of technology as a distraction; multitasking in technology; online classes; cell phones; text messages; video games
Work	Jobs, employment

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FEATURE ARTICLE

Empowering Autistic College Students: Recommendations Based on a Review of the Literature and Existing Support Programs

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https://doi.org/10.58997/fa3

ABSTRACT

A review of 29 juried journal articles from 2009–2022, among other sources, found that autistic students face numerous systemic barriers to success in postsecondary settings. Despite autistic students being academically prepared, many are not persisting and completing a postsecondary program. Major findings from the literature include the benefits of additional support for autistic students in the areas of executive functioning skills, self-regulation, mental health, social, and communication skills. Additionally, the research indicates that by offering additional support services, colleges and universities can decrease the systemic barriers to success that autistic students face. The author also discusses the available autism-specific support programs that provide additional services amongst this growing population of students.

Keywords: autism, student success, postsecondary, autism-specific programs, academic supports

According to the Center for Disease Control (2022), one in 44 children have a diagnosis of autism, and since the year 2000, the number of school-age autistic children has increased from 90,000 to over 650,000 (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). The increase in diagnosis is attributed to several factors, but primarily to an increase in awareness of autism and recognition of milder forms of autism (Barnhill, 2016; Longtin, 2014; Van Hees et al., 2015).

The medical model defines autism as a neurodevelopmental disability that affects social and communication skills and sensory processing, and can include repetitive behaviors and limited interests (Barnhill, 2016; Widman & Lopez-Reyna, 2020), whereas the social model views autism as a naturally occurring variant of human development that does not need to be cured or fixed (Kapp et al., 2012). The neurodiversity movement, which embraces the social model of disability, contends that it is the environment that needs to change to accommodate normal variations in human development with a focus on quality of life instead of normalization (Garcia, 2021).

As the number of autistic college students increases, so does the need for postsecondary support programs to provide nonacademic accommodations for them.

Throughout this paper, I use identity-first language (i.e., autistic person) to describe autistic students. I recognize that this is a controversial topic, and, in some circles, person-first language is preferred (i.e., person with autism). I have chosen to use identity-first language based on the preferences of the autistic community (Botha et al., 2021; Bury et al., 2020; Kapp et al., 2013; Kenny et al., 2016; Vivanti, 2020). This article is informed by neurodivergent authors and researchers and has been reviewed and edited by autistic and neurodivergent colleagues.

As the number of autistic college students increases, so does the need for postsecondary support programs to provide nonacademic accommodations for them. In the 2017–2018 school year, 72% of autistic students graduated with a general high school diploma, making them eligible to attend a postsecondary institution (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Widman and Lopez-Reyna (2020) reported that 78% of 4-year public institutions and 70% of 2-year public institutions served autistic students. However, the graduation rate for autistic students is lower than for their neurotypical peers. Only 38.8% of autistic students completed a postsecondary program as compared to 60% of neurotypical students (Kuder & Accardo, 2018).

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Autistic students are entitled to appropriate accommodations in postsecondary settings; however, the available supports do not address the nonacademic barriers to succeeding and receiving support. Postsecondary institutions that admit autistic students should be prepared to meet their needs through programs that target areas in which autistic students may need additional support. By working with autistic students to identify the barriers to their success, colleges and universities can improve outcomes for autistic students.

Academic Preparedness and Supports

Autistic students are noted as being academically prepared for their coursework and often have average to above-average intelligence. Their academic strengths include an intense focus on interests, dedication to the truth, and following rules (Dymond et al., 2017). Autistic students are known for having an excellent memory and a detail-oriented focus (Hillier et al., 2020). Van Hees et al. (2015) listed "strong memory, focus precision, dedication, analytic skills, remarkable powers of observation, sincerity, impartiality, and willingness to listen to others" (p. 1677) as the greatest strengths for autistic students. Autistic students may demonstrate strong logical and systematic cognitive processing skills that align well with the skills needed to excel in STEM subjects (Robertson & Ne'eman, 2008). As self-advocates, autistic students have raised awareness of autism and neurodiversity on their college campuses and in their communities (Robertson & Ne'eman, 2008). They have utilized social media and the internet to raise awareness about autism, to confront stereotypes, and to create vast support networks around the world. These strengths benefit them in their academic and personal pursuits. Even though autistic students are typically academically prepared for college and bring many strengths to the classroom, they face barriers to completing postsecondary programs.

Even though autistic students are typically academically prepared for college and bring many strengths to the classroom, they face barriers to completing postsecondary programs.

The discrepancy regarding completion rates is attributed to a lack of appropriate institutional support services to address areas of need for autistic students (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014). According to Gobbo and Shmulsky (2014), 47% of autistic students enroll in higher education within six years of graduating high school but only 35% of those students earn a degree within a similar time frame. Comparatively, 40% of all 18–24-year-olds enrolled in higher education within 6 years of graduating high school, and 64% of those students graduated with a degree or certificate within 6 years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). It should be noted that the discrepancies in completion rates do not account for higher education being designed for neurotypical students, which causes autistic students to be penalized—often through grades—when they exhibit neurodivergent behaviors. Therefore, these lower graduation rates do not paint an accurate picture of the abilities and strengths that autistic students bring to the classroom.

Institution-Oriented Barriers to Success

Colleges and universities are designed to serve the needs of neurotypical students. The academic expectations and social norms are based on the abilities, behaviors, and social mores of the neurotypical community. These expectations do not naturally accommodate for neurodivergent responses, behaviors, and abilities. This inflexible social structure alienates and stigmatizes autistic students and results in a number of institutional barriers to success.

Legal Accommodations and Barriers to Access

College students with disabilities, including autism, are protected under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, the American with Disabilities Amendments Act (ADAA) of 2008, and 504C of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (504C). Under these laws, autistic students are guaranteed equal access to education, programs, services, facilities, and activities. In K–12 environments, students with disabilities are protected under 504C and IDEA, the Individuals with Disabilities Educational Act (1997). IDEA guarantees students with disabilities a free and appropriate education and access to accommodations which promote success in the classroom. The significant differences between K–12 and postsecondary protections are that ADA provides equitable access to education while IDEA promotes success in the classroom (Brown & Coomes, 2016). In K–12, educators can alter the criteria and curriculum for autistic students whereas, in postsecondary environments, accommodations do not allow for altering the curriculum or course requirements.

According to xMinds, common accommodations for autistic students under IDEA include task analysis (i.e., breaking big tasks into smaller tasks),

modified lessons, providing notes and outlines for lessons, reduced distraction testing environments, social skills training, decreased workloads, sensory breaks, and peer mentoring (xMinds, n.d.). In higher education, typical accommodations include extended time on tests, note-takers, recorded lectures, early access to PowerPoints, preferential seating, reduced courseload, and frequent breaks (Brown & Coomes, 2016). The academic accommodations are similar across K–12 and higher education; however, college students lose supports in the areas of executive functioning, self-regulation, social skills, emotional regulation, and sensory processing.

In postsecondary settings, students must self-advocate, though few have been taught to do so during their K–12 experiences (Barnhill, 2016; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014; McMorris et al., 2019; Petcu et al., 2021). Neurotypical students frequently have key communication and help-seeking skills to make the process of self-advocating and utilizing campus resources smoother. Whereas autistic students may have difficulty communicating their needs, asking for help, and managing multiple tasks such as seeking services through campus resources (Barnhill, 2016; McMorris et al., 2019; Petcu et al., 2021). These difficulties result in unintended barriers to access for the services to which they are entitled under ADA.

The process to acquire accommodations can be lengthy and involve multiple steps. Autistic students—as well as any student with a qualifying disability—are responsible for requesting accommodations through disability services, providing the needed documentation, and then communicating their accommodations to faculty and staff (Dymond et al., 2017). Parents and guardians cannot provide the same level of support as in K–12 settings without the student signing a release under the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) of 1974. Without the appropriate support, autistic students are less likely to communicate accommodations and disclose their disability due to the stigma related to having a disability and past negative experiences with self-disclosure (Petcu et al., 2021). Though autistic students are entitled to appropriate accommodations in the postsecondary environment, there are many systemic barriers to accessing and utilizing the services.

Executive Functioning and Self-Regulation

Under IDEA, autistic students can receive supports for executive functioning and self-regulation. These types of accommodations do not extend to higher education under ADA or 504C. Executive functioning skills are a key determinant of success in college and allow a student to navigate complex tasks like requesting and accessing accommodations (Stark & Lindo, 2022). Executive functioning skills include using working memory, having cognitive flexibility and inhibitory control, and employing time management, organization, and planning (Dijkhuis et al., 2017; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014; Hillier et al., 2020; Kuder & Accardo, 2018; Longtin, 2014). One of the most important skills associated with executive function is self-regulation, which is used to evaluate, control, and respond to one's thoughts, actions, and emotions (Kennedy, 2017). Autistic students who exhibit decreased executive functioning and self-regulatory skills may miss class, not turn in assignments on time, procrastinate on major assignments, and struggle with time and task management (Hillier et al., 2020). Instructors can provide support for autistic students by clearly stating their expectations in their syllabus, including a statement about behavioral expectations, building in steps to complete large assignments, reminding students about upcoming due dates, and having a consistent course structure.

Social and Communication Skills

Postsecondary institutions rely on neurotypical standards for academic and social engagement, which presents a major barrier to college success for autistic students who may struggle with interpreting verbal and nonverbal communication, making eye contact, maintaining personal space, and conforming to social norms (Brown & Coomes, 2016). In their study of faculty experiences of students with autism, Gobbo and Shmulsky (2014) found that faculty perceived autistic students as having a decreased ability to recognize social cues, sarcasm, and changes in subject during a discussion. Misinterpreted social cues can lead to uncomfortable interactions with neurotypical peers, which adds stress to social situations and can increase an autistic student's fear of rejection (Brown & Coomes, 2016). In the classroom setting, this often impacts students' ability to work effectively with groups, build reciprocal relationships with peers, and communicate with faculty and staff.

Additionally, autistic students also face potential academic consequences due to these differences in behavioral expectations. Under IDEA, which directs K–12 policies, students cannot be expelled for behaviors related to their disability; however, ADA and 504C do not provide such protections for postsecondary students (Brown & Volkmar, 2016). Students with disabilities can face expulsion from the college or university for violations of the student code of conduct. For example, some autistic students may not understand the social and behavioral expectations of a new and unfamiliar environment, which can result in atypical student and faculty responses leading to disciplinary actions. To address these areas, faculty and staff can include a disability statement in their syllabus, use multiple modalities to engage students, assign students to groups, and set clear expectations

for social behaviors. Instructors should focus on clear, direct communication and avoid sarcasm and ambiguity (Brown & Coomes, 2016). Instructors can provide multiple modalities for communication such as discussion boards, emails, and social apps such as GroupMe. Instructors should encourage students to communicate clearly and directly on the discussion boards as there is potential for miscommunication in this format as well.

Mental Health

Autistic students are twice as likely to have a mental health diagnosis than their peers (Hillier et al., 2020). Additionally, 65% of autistic students meet the criteria for depression and/or anxiety disorders (Hillier et al., 2020) and have a greater risk of suicide than their non-autistic peers, which is exacerbated by a lack of appropriate screening tools (Dwyer et al., 2022). To mitigate this, improved mental health supports are needed for them at their institutions. Recommendations include allowing students a suitable number of counseling appointments with a preferred counselor who has training in working with neurodivergent clients. Autistic students have also requested counseling support groups and less formal social support groups that focus on skill-building and social experiences.

To support the growing number of autistic students, colleges and universities will need to improve the available services. Postsecondary institutions can support autistic students by making sensory-friendly spaces available on campus, creating an environment that allows students to stim or use fidgets and take breaks during class when overwhelmed. Institutions should provide training on neurodiversity and mental health for faculty, staff, and students.

Stigma

Faculty, staff, and fellow students often lack the training and education needed to understand and support autistic students (Barnhill, 2016; Dymond et al., 2017). In fact, Widman and Lopez-Reyna (2020) found that students did not disclose their disability due to "negative experiences with faculty, identity issues, desire to avoid stigma, and insufficient knowledge" (p. 3167). Faculty may see autistic students as being disruptive or difficult when the students are merely engaging in the course in neurodivergent ways. Likewise, neurotypical students may not understand an autistic student's neuroatypical social and communication skills and avoid interactions with them. As a coping mechanism, autistic students often deploy strategies such as camouflaging, masking, and compensating to hide their autistic traits to appear more neurotypical (Hull et al., 2017). These coping strategies can be harmful to autistic students and lead to increased anxiety due to a fear of others discovering their autistic traits. Hull et al. found that while camouflaging and masking can help autistic people adapt to social situations in the short-term, the long-term consequences have a negative impact on quality of life.

Faculty may see autistic students as being disruptive or difficult when the students are merely engaging in the course in neurodivergent ways.

Additional Barriers

Other barriers to support include the wait time for services, the complexity of obtaining services, and lack of access to diagnostic resources for students who were not diagnosed in childhood. Within the population of autistic people, research estimated that 50–60% are not formally diagnosed (Lewis, 2017). Oftentimes, to establish accommodations with the university or college, a student must present documentation of a formal diagnosis. Many students are unable to complete the diagnostic process due to cost, lack of access to specialists, fear, and inability to communicate their symptoms. Students who do not have a formal diagnosis or who do not disclose their disability may be unable to utilize the available supports or receive accommodations (Petcu et al., 2021).

Supports for Autistic Students

Although academic supports are guaranteed, only 30% of autistic students who disclosed their disability received an academic support or accommodation at 4-year universities (Widman & Lopez-Reyna, 2020). Of those receiving support or accommodations, 56% reported the received services to be beneficial. The generalized nature of academic supports does not meet the distinct needs of autistic students, who often require a more individualized approach to address the barriers they face (Davis et al., 2021). For example, only 36.6% of the institutions studied provided sensory accommodations for autistic students with sensory processing issues (Brown & Coomes, 2016). Autistic students have many of the same needs as other students with disabilities; however, the typical accommodations provided by A.D.A. do not meet their need for support in areas such as social and communication skills, mental health, executive functioning, and self-regulation.

In 2016, thirty-one postsecondary programs offered targeted supports outside of academic accommodations for autistic students (Barnhill, 2016). Stark and Lindo (2022) identified ten studies of college programs that addressed executive functioning skills in autistic college students. Of the studies, eight addressed organization and time management, five addressed self-regulatory skills, and seven articles did not specify the areas of executive functioning that were addressed. In a review of 21 studies, the most frequent types of support were social skills, communication skills, life skills, emotional learning, vocational training, academic supports, and transitional support (Widman & Lopez-Reyna, 2020). These topics have also been identified by other researchers as areas where autistic students need increased support to promote success in postsecondary settings (Barnhill, 2016; Hillier et al., 2021; Kuder & Acardo, 2018). The research was unclear on whether the strategies and techniques encourage masking or if the programs teach autistic students to utilize their strengths to improve academic and social success.

The available social supports may not appropriately address the need for mental health supports for comorbid diagnoses of anxiety and depression (Davis et al., 2021). A 2019 study of postsecondary autistic students confirmed the need for support groups and increased mental health services (McMorris et al., 2019). Study authors suggested having a care coordinator to assist with navigating the support services system and the stress of transitioning to college. There is also a need for transition programs, support groups, and social groups (Hillier et al., 2021).

Peer mentoring is a powerful tool to build social success and a sense of belonging. Existing peer mentorship programs focus on making students college ready (i.e., focusing on transitioning to college) instead of advocating for colleges to be student ready (i.e., advocating for autistic students; Duerksen et al., 2021). Autistic students expressed the desire for there to be a greater awareness of autism on campus and to use mentoring relationships to create advocacy opportunities. Overall, nonacademic supports were identified as more important for autistic students than academic supports in postsecondary environments (Barnhill, 2016; Brown & Coomes, 2016; Davis et al., 2021; Dymond et al., 2017; Hillier et al., 2020; Kuder & Accardo, 2018; Longtin, 2014; Nachman et al., 2022; Petcu et al., 2021; Stark & Lindo, 2022; Van Hees et al., 2015; Widman & Lopez-Reyna, 2020).

Autism-Specific Support Programs

The research presented throughout this paper demonstrates the need for additional supports for autistic college students. Colleges and universities in the U.S. are responding to the call with the creation of autism-specific support programs (ASPs). ASPs are designed to meet the nonacademic needs of degree-seeking autistic students with lower support needs at 2- and 4-year postsecondary institutions. As colleges and universities look for innovative ways to meet the needs of their autistic students, existing ASPs can provide valuable insight into the supports and interventions that may improve outcomes for autistic students.

Existing Support Programs

There are currently over 100 autism-specific support programs in the United States, and the number is increasing every year. A 2017–2018 search identified 55 ASPs at 4-year institutions (Viezel et al., 2020), whereas a 2018–2019 search found 74 ASPs at 2- and 4-year institutions in the United States (Nachman et al., 2022). Building from the work of Viezel et al. (2020) and Nachman et al. (2022), I cross checked the autism-specific programs they found and added additional programs by conducting internet searches. In total, I identified 102 programs at 2- and 4-year colleges and universities in the United States, an increase of 28 programs from Nachman et al.'s search in 2018–2019. By adding these additional programs, my findings concluded that about 3% of colleges and universities had ASPs, a slight increase from the 2.2% calculated by Nachman et al.'s (2022) 2018–2019 search. The rapid increase in programs demonstrates the escalating need for more support for this growing student population.

Though the number of programs is increasing, there is a disparity within where these programs exist. Currently, there are 10 programs available at 2-year colleges with eight at public 2-year institutions and two at private 2-year institutions. At 4-year universities, 31 private universities and 61 public universities offer an ASP. There are 15 states that do not offer an ASP at 2- or 4-year postsecondary institutions. This creates an issue for many autistic students since 91% of students with disabilities attend in-state colleges or universities (Widman & Lopez-Reyna, 2020). For the students in the 15 states that do not offer an ASP, it is unlikely they will be able to move to a different state and attend a school with an ASP. While there is a greater number of autistic students attending community colleges, 2-year colleges have the fewest ASPs. This is likely due to funding and a low number of autistic students at individual institutions (Brown & Coomes, 2016; Nachman et al., 2022).

Financial Accessibility

Many programs are limited by a lack of funding and others require students to pay for the additional services (Barnhill, 2016; Kuder & Accardo, 2018; Nachman et al., 2022; Viezel et al.,

2020). I found that there are 56 fee-based programs with costs that range from $75 to over $9000 a semester. Seventeen programs stated there are no additional fees for services, and 29 did not list whether or not there is a cost for the program. The average cost of participation in an ASP was $3,338.44 per semester, with a range from $0–$9550.00 per semester (Viezel et al., 2020). For the programs with fees, most recommended students contact the vocational rehabilitation program within their state for funding assistance. Other programs stated the services may be covered through financial aid while very few programs offered scholarships or scholarship information.

ASPs provide a plethora of services. Those with the highest fees offered more intensive services than ones with mid-range fees ($3000–$5000 per semester). Viezel et al. (2020) did not find a significant correlation between the cost of the program and the services offered. The main areas addressed by the programs included executive functioning skills, social skills, communication, career readiness, counseling, and academic skills. In general, participants received weekly support through peer mentoring, academic coaches, one-to-one meetings, and group meetings. Most programs offered social support through group events such as sharing meals at a set time, game nights, community outings, and campus involvement. Fifty programs offer transition support to assist with the transition to college and from college to career. Twenty-three do not offer a transition program within their program and 29 had no information about transition services listed.

The need for autism-specific programs is increasing rapidly, but there are barriers to access, including the cost, location, and knowledge of the programs.

Additional ASP Characteristics

The available programs also had wide-ranging results in the areas of parental involvement, where the program is housed, and on-campus partnerships. Forty-four programs do not offer options for parental involvement, and 30 programs do not mention parent involvement or support. Of the 28 programs that do mention parent involvement, the level of interaction ranged from a website with resources to regularly scheduled parent support groups. Other supports included an orientation for parents, regular updates from program coordinators, and end-of-year reviews. Some programs offered limited communication under FERPA and communicated with parents only with written permission from the student and/or with the student present. Other programs cited the need for increased autonomy and stated they would encourage students to communicate with their families but would not communicate directly with the family and that the role of family in supporting autistic students should be informed by the student.

The ASPs are housed under many different departments. For example, ASPs are housed in disability or accessibility services, departments of health and human professions, education, speech, language and hearing, as well as student affairs and centers for autism research. Fifty-six programs listed their on-campus partnerships on their website. Programs frequently partnered with residential life, accessibility or disability services, the career center, academic support services, admissions, and academic departments. On-campus partnerships and where the programs are housed are likely to influence what services are offered and how the services are implemented, as well as what lens the staff view their students through. For example, an ASP housed in a department of health and human professions may see autistic students through a medical model lens, which can affect the way they engage with students enrolled in their ASP.

In a review of the websites of the current 102 programs, only five listed the outcomes for participants in their program. Westminster College, a private 2-year college in Fulton, Missouri, reported a 73% retention and graduation rate with 26 students graduating between 2011 and 2021 (Westminister College, n.d.). At St. Joseph's University, 86% of Aspire graduates found a job or enrolled in a graduate program within 6 months (Kinney Center for Autism Education and Support, n.d.). They have an 82% success rate compared to the national average of 70%. Students in their ASP are four times more likely to find employment within 6 months of graduation than other autistic adults. Adelphi University boasted a 96% retention rate for 2019–2020, and participants had a GPA of 3.25 or higher (Bridges to Adelphi, n.d.). At Pace University, program participants had a GPA of 3.0 or higher (Pace University, n.d.), and at the University of Idaho, participants had retention and graduation rates of 81.25% (Center for Disability Access and Resources, n.d.). These programs demonstrate improved outcomes for participants; however, additional research is needed to see the impact of programs in the United States.

The need for autism-specific programs is increasing rapidly, but there are barriers to access, including the cost, location, and knowledge of the

programs. For additional information, students, parents, and faculty can find a database of current programs at: https://collegeautismspectrum.com/collegeprograms/.

Recommendations for Programs

As colleges and universities strive to create a space for autistic students, there are a number of recommendations for improving current services and creating new ones. Many of the recommendations include offering a variety of interventions that can be customized for each student, building necessary skills in high school, and educating faculty and staff about autism.

Individualized Accommodations

One of the issues autistic students may face is accessing available support programs within an institution. To streamline the process, programs can offer a care coordinator for autistic students (Cox et al., 2022; McMorris et al., 2019). The care coordinator would provide a single point of contact to assist students with managing needed services such as establishing accommodations through disability services, obtaining mental health services through the counseling center, and communicating with faculty. To build inclusive environments for autistic students, colleges and universities should offer sensory-friendly spaces such as a specific hall in the dorm and quiet areas in academic buildings (Dymond et al., 2017). Task-oriented support groups can help autistic students learn new skills and strategies to cope with the stress of college. Creating individualized supports should include the voices, needs, and recommendations of the autistic students that the institution plans to serve. Interventions should be strengths-based with a focus on existing in neurotypical spaces instead of camouflaging or masking to present as neurotypical.

Transitional Programs

Transition programs that assist students from high school to college and from college to the workforce are essential to improving outcomes for autistic students (Brown & Coomes, 2016; Cox et al., 2022). The road to college should start well before high school graduation. High schools should address executive functioning skills, self-advocacy, and social skills as early as possible (Dymond et al., 2017; Stark & Lindo, 2022; Viezel et al., 2020). Parents and the students should be involved in the planning process, and students should be explicitly taught how to identify and advocate for their educational needs. Summer bridge programs can play an essential role in lowering stress and improving academic outcomes for autistic students. High school to college transition programs give autistic students opportunities to acclimate to the college environment before the stress of coursework is added.

Autistic students face high unemployment rates, with only 37.2% of autistic young adults employed 8 years after graduating high school (Briel & Getzel, 2014; Lee & Carter, 2012). To confront the barriers to employment, autistic students often require explicit training and education on employment skills and expectations. Workshops on interviewing, social skills, managing stress, and problem solving were listed as topics needed by autistic study participants (Briel & Getzel, 2014). Students with higher levels of education are more likely to be employed; however, only 68% of the programs offered vocational support for career transitions (Viezel et al., 2020; Widman & Lopez-Reyna, 2020). Autistic students also benefit from internships and work experiences prior to graduating (Cox et al., 2022).

Training and Education

An emphasis on training and education for students, faculty, and staff appeared frequently in the literature (Barnhill, 2016; Brown & Coomes, 2016; Davis et al., 2021; Dymond et al., 2017; Hillier et al., 2020; Kuder & Accardo, 2018; Longtin, 2014; Nachman et al., 2022; Petcu et al., 2021; Stark & Lindo, 2022; Van Hees et al., 2015; Widman & Lopez-Reyna, 2020). Many autistic students cited stigma and misunderstandings about autism as a barrier to college success (Dymond et al., 2017). Providing online training for faculty, staff, and neurotypical students can raise awareness of autism and how to support autistic students and peers (Hillier et al., 2020).

A powerful tool in supporting autistic students and all students with disabilities is Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL promotes the use of multiple modalities to decrease barriers to access for all students. Along with UDL, faculty, staff, and students should use clear, direct communication with autistic students and avoid sarcasm, innuendos, and ambiguous language (Brown & Coomes, 2016). Faculty and staff can help autistic students navigate social interactions by preselecting groups for projects and facilitating group discussions. Most importantly though, faculty and staff should embrace and celebrate neurodiversity.

Additionally, autistic students benefit from explicit trainings on the implicit rules, hidden curriculum, and expectations of school and work environments. Research has shown autistic students are more successful when they receive training, education, and support in areas such as social and communication skills, life skills, employment skills, and executive functioning (Briel & Getzel, 2014; Dwyer et al., 2022; Dymond et al., 2017; Nachman et al., 2022).

Future Research

Future research focusing on postsecondary autistic students should address outcome measures for academic and nonacademic interventions and helping support services identify students who might benefit from interventions (Kuder & Accardo, 2018). Researchers should also explore how student experiences align with available services and where gaps in support exist. When examining the programs, researchers should focus on the curriculum and training of support people such as mentors and coaches. Researchers should examine whether the curriculum teaches participants to mask their autism in order to behave in more neurotypical ways or if it teaches students coping skills and ways to adapt to neurotypical environments. Available research should be published in top-tier higher education journals to increase awareness of issues related to autistic students in postsecondary environments (Cox et al., 2020). Continued research on ASPs should include how and why programs were started, how they are funded, where they are housed, how many students they serve, and participant outcomes. Research on autistic students should focus on the perspectives and experiences of the students to give voice to their needs and experiences.

Conclusion

The number of autistic students arriving on college campuses is increasing every year, but many are not persisting and leave before earning a degree. Academic supports and accommodations are not enough to meet the unique needs of this population. The ADA and 504C do not provide for these types of accommodations; therefore, it is up to colleges and universities to address the barriers autistic students may face by creating programs that provide nonacademic supports. All programs should include the voices, ideas, and feedback of autistic students and focus on helping students transition to college life by utilizing their strengths instead of teaching students to mask their autistic traits.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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https://doi.org/10.58997/pp1

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Disclosure Statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Learning is inescapably an emotional process. Regardless of the content, emotions are omnipresent and impact the effectiveness of a learning experience. Some students and educators believe they can remove emotion from learning, creating an anecdotal dichotomy of the head (thinking and learning) versus the heart (feeling and emotion). However, this separation is an illusion because the brain is the foundation of both thinking and feeling, and they are naturally interconnected.

Sousa (2017) explained that the brain consists of many structures that interact to allow the body to function physically, mentally, emotionally, etc. Specifically, the frontal lobes and prefrontal cortex are responsible for logical thinking and problem solving, whereas the limbic system is responsible for emotions and meaning creation. Sousa (2017) further offered that though these systems may appear to be independent of each other, human functioning relies on their interplay, in which the systems can be in varying levels of harmony and conflict. Since the limbic system involves more impulse and intuition, emotion can often overpower the rational system. Thus, our emotions act like a gatekeeper to learning because with productively regulated emotions, we can focus on target knowledge and skills, but unregulated emotions can hinder the brain's rational functions and our ability to focus on learning.

Acknowledging the interconnectedness of emotional and rational processing is an imperative first step in appreciating the act of learning, but truly grasping the complexity of emotions requires more depth. Emotional intelligence (EI) is not an incredibly new idea as Salovey and Mayer originally coined the term in 1990 to describe the skills influencing how people assess, convey, regulate, and act on the emotions of themselves and others. In the last 30 years, psychologist Daniel Goleman, among others, has expanded the literature surrounding EI, pioneering that a high level of EI is more important to achieving success than traditional intelligence (Goleman, 1995, 1998; Goleman & Boyatzis, 2017; Goleman et al., 2013). Goleman has adapted his EI framework over time, though the foundation has remained steady. Most recently, Goleman and Boyatzis (2017) described a competency-based model of EI consisting of four overarching skill domains—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management—within which fall twelve core competencies: emotional self-awareness, emotional self-control, adaptability, achievement orientation, positive outlook, empathy, organizational awareness, influence, coach and mentor, conflict management, teamwork, and inspirational leadership. To be highly emotionally intelligent, and thus be better suited for success, according to Goleman and Boyatzis (2017), one must possess a strong balance across all four domains. While certain competencies may come more naturally to some, EI is not fixed, so aptitude in the competencies can be developed over time to achieve greater balance.

The Importance of Emotional Intelligence in Higher Education and Learning Assistance

Students enrolled in higher education are often navigating a unique chapter of life where they experience a plethora of emotions triggered by academics, extracurricular involvement, relationships, work, and family obligations, among others. Thus, it is crucial that students and those who interact with them have the emotional awareness and management skills to optimize their learning and overall success in higher education. Further, several studies found that college students with higher levels of EI attained higher academic performance in terms of GPA, test scores, learning outcome achievement, and/or satisfaction with the higher education experience (MacCann et al., 2020; Thomas et al., 2017; Zhoc et al., 2020).

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Also, with recent emphasis on mental wellness on college campuses, EI is of utmost importance for students to employ productive coping mechanisms that support their academic learning. Student anxiety, such as test and math anxiety, are common challenges among college students that often impede learning. For instance, Thomas et al. (2017) indicated that students with test anxiety who lacked adequate emotion management and self-regulation strategies saw a decrease in their GPA throughout their college careers, and Haase et al. (2019) explained that the negative emotions students associate with math anxiety disrupt their processing skills, hinder working memory, reduce accuracy, and distract the learner's attention.

EI is beneficial to all stakeholders in higher education, but especially to those in learning support and assistance. Students seeking assistance may feel negative emotions toward their efficacy in a subject, or they may lack skills to productively cope with those emotions. Enhancing their EI could help them overcome their academic obstacles (Goleman, 1995, 1998; Goleman & Boyatzis, 2017; Goleman et al., 2013). High levels of EI are just as important for those who work with students seeking learning support, including peer educators and faculty/staff. People in these support positions need to understand the role emotions can play in their interactions with students so they can create a productive and supportive learning environment. For example, Devis-Rozental and Farquharson (2020) found that learning environments serving individuals and small groups that focused on fostering a safe and supportive atmosphere ultimately helped students both develop their EI and achieve academic goals. Similarly, Driscoll and Wells (2020) indicated a need in a university tutoring center environment for EI in both the tutor and the tutee for optimal learning to occur. They suggested incorporating EI into tutor training, integrating metacognition into tutoring interactions, and practicing mindfulness with tutors and tutees as potential practices to improve the EI of all parties. Thus, those in higher education learning assistance roles have a unique two-fold responsibility and opportunity to enhance their own EI to better serve students and to support the EI development of those students to foster a truly emotionally intelligent learning environment.

Students enrolled in higher education are often navigating a unique chapter of life where they experience a plethora of emotions triggered by academics, extracurricular involvement, relationships, work, and family obligations, among others.

Efforts to Cultivate an Emotionally Intelligent Learning Assistance Environment

Following the lead of Driscoll and Wells (2020), I have made intentional efforts to integrate EI into my drop-in STEM peer tutoring program, focusing on tutor training and professional development procedures with the goal of advancing the EI of our tutoring staff. By enhancing their EI, they should be able to facilitate more effective learning interactions for students as well as help those students improve their EI. The following are specific practices aligned with five of Goleman's and Boyatzis' (2017) competencies I have employed to contribute to that goal. Efforts associated with the self-awareness and self-management domains of the framework fall under intrapersonal practices, whereas efforts corresponding to the social awareness and relationship management domains fall under interpersonal practices.

Intrapersonal Practices

In order for my staff to appropriately understand and respond to the emotions of students in tutoring interactions, they need to possess sufficient awareness and management skills of their own emotions. To support my tutors in strengthening the *emotional self-awareness* competency, I begin each tutor training workshop with a reflection exercise to give active practice in identifying their recent emotions and the roots of those emotions. I review the importance of EI to their role, and then tutors and coordinators take a few quiet minutes to reflect on an emotional "check-in" question. The questions appear silly on the surface, but their lightheartedness is intentional to create an inviting space for emotion identification. Some example questions are: What color/pattern describes how you have been feeling lately and why? What ice cream flavor/product best captures your emotional state recently and why? What is the weather report of how you have felt this week and why? Occasionally, I provide images and ask participants to reflect on which image resonates most with their emotions in that moment and why. To further bolster self-awareness, after our formal evaluation periods each semester, I have individual meetings with the tutors I supervise, and the first question I ask is how they have been feeling lately. Many tutors seem to be constantly on the go, so for the sake of EI, this basic question can be imperative to them slowing down to think about their emotions.

The drop-in STEM tutoring environment can often host periods of high stress and unpredictability, so the self-management competency of *emotional self-control* is crucial for tutors to facilitate a productive and supportive learning environment for students. In training workshops, I help the tutors grow in this competency by

designing activities in which they brainstorm strategies they can use to cope with emotions they may feel in certain tutoring situations, share and discuss concrete tips for working with students exhibiting various emotions, and reflect on past experiences where they recognize they could have responded differently.

While many of my tutors are seasoned goal setters and achievers in daily life, I strive to also support their *achievement orientation* competency specifically within the learning center. This begins with having clear expectations for tutoring excellence that are the foundation of the tutor training curriculum and evaluation protocol. This gives the tutors well-defined standards to meet and aspire toward as well as tools to help them get there. Other concrete practices to help tutors develop their achievement orientation are providing them with specific and actionable feedback in post-evaluation meetings, monitoring their growth across semesters, having them identify their strengths and weaknesses during training activities, and supporting them in setting goals for their tutoring and creating action plans.

Interpersonal Practices

Any tutoring environment is inherently social, so fostering an emotionally intelligent tutoring space requires keen social awareness and relationship management by the tutors. The *empathy* competency is arguably my primary EI focus in tutor training because recognizing and understanding the emotions of others, especially in a tutoring interaction, is complex but also vital to the efficacy of the interaction. One way I support the tutors' empathy development is through the emotional "check-in" question tasks described previously that I use to start training workshops. After internal reflection, participants share in small groups. This allows the tutors to consider the emotions of their peers, to acknowledge varying interpretations of emotions and associations, and to openly discuss emotions in a non-threatening way. The types of instructional activities I implement in training workshops are also geared toward exposing the tutors to perspectives outside of their own and putting themselves in others' shoes. For example, every workshop involves small group reflective discussion or think-pair-share, and I often incorporate role plays and simulations where the tutors experience a scenario from multiple perspectives and then discuss how each role made them feel, why, and how it connects to their interactions with students. In addition to the intentionality behind the structure of training activities, I select training topics that directly relate to empathy skills. For instance, empathy is reliant on effective communication skills, which is why I dedicate entire training sessions to active listening, nonverbal cues, communication styles and patterns, and constructive feedback. I also devote training sessions to topics like diversity and bias to broaden the tutors' lenses of the world so they might better understand the experiences and backgrounds of students they interact with in tutoring.

The learning assistance environment is full of relationships including student-tutor, tutor-tutor, and coordinator-tutor, illustrating the importance of the relationship management domain. Specifically, to support tutors in developing the *coach and mentor* competency, I dedicate activities in training workshops to discuss the various interpretations of a tutor, one of which is a tutor as a coach. In these activities, we brainstorm and share strategies, behaviors, and ideas for working effectively with students, motivating them, and guiding them. As coordinators, we also support tutors' development in this competency by prioritizing our mentorship with them to model the necessary skills. For example, we provide ongoing feedback on their performance, treat them as whole people, and support them on the path to their goals so they can also experience the mentee side of this relationship.

Observations and Outcomes

Emotional intelligence does not develop overnight, and it evolves with new experiences. After implementing these practices to support the tutors' EI development, such intelligence has become more evident in our learning assistance environment. For example, in the emotional "check-in" questions, with each workshop, I have observed deeper responses that demonstrate authentic reflection on their emotions, and in their discussions, the tutors now instinctively probe each other with follow-up questions that dig deeper into understanding the feelings of their peers. Another observation has been on non-training days when I overhear genuine conversations between tutors recycling "check-in" questions. Though this may seem minor, it suggests progression in both the self-awareness and social awareness domains of EI.

Beyond interactions between tutors, EI has become more apparent between the tutors and the students they assist since employing these efforts. I have witnessed more tutors implementing emotional self-control strategies during interactions, both for themselves and for tutees. For example, I recently observed an interaction involving an overwhelmed student, and the tutor made a supportive suggestion that the student take a quick walk before continuing. A few tutors have also progressed in the achievement orientation competency by seeking out their coordinators for feedback to improve their performance outside of formal evaluation meetings!

In addition, the extensive efforts to support tutors' empathy skills seem fruitful. Both in and out of formal evaluations, I have observed several tutors effectively integrating strategies like active listening, paraphrasing, probing the student to explain their thoughts more, and responding appropriately to various nonverbal cues in their interactions with students,

which were all discussed in communication-focused training activities. Students who utilize our services have provided feedback that they feel supported and productive when working with the tutors. Hence, the tutors are intentional about seeking out and understanding students' perspectives which facilitates learning and personifies empathy and social awareness.

Conclusion and Future Implications

Emotions are an organic facet of learning that cannot be overlooked, minimized, or removed. For students seeking learning assistance, emotions can open the brain for learning just as easily as they can shut it down. Thus, to fully support students, stakeholders across learning assistance and higher education must acknowledge this fact and make efforts to help students recognize and manage their emotions in learning experiences. Rising to this challenge first requires commitment to strengthening our own EI.

The aforementioned efforts and strategies were rooted in the domain-competency EI model of Goleman and Boyatzis (2017) and focused on enhancing the EI of tutors in a drop-in STEM tutoring environment. The hope is that implementing concrete practices to improve the EI of the tutors leads to a chain reaction in which the tutors can support EI improvement in the students they work with. EI has a place in any learning assistance environment, but different programs will find value in different competencies of the framework. My suggestion to those committed to fostering an emotionally intelligent environment is to identify which competencies are most crucial to your work and brainstorm concrete practices for supporting those areas.

Emotionally intelligent students will hopefully be able to transfer these skills to being emotionally intelligent humans. Therefore, EI does not have to wait to be addressed until students enroll in higher education. Goleman's and Boyatzis' (2017) model overlaps substantially with the framework of social and emotional learning (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, n.d.), which is becoming increasingly popular across education. This gives me hope that students of all ages and backgrounds will one day have the resources and guidance to build their EI throughout their educational journeys. Until then, the learning assistance field must play our part by integrating EI into our daily work. Additional formal research is also imperative to the dissemination of the importance of EI in higher education and learning assistance environments and the development of evidence-based strategies that support EI in such settings.

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PROMISING PRACTICE

Developing Our Teaching Praxis Using a Japanese Lesson Study Model Applied to Corequisite Mathematics

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https://doi.org/10.58997/pp2

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Disclosure Statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

In 2003, the Texas State Legislature enacted the Texas Success Initiative (TSI). The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) coordinates the implementation of this mandate at both universities and community colleges across the state. Upon entering a postsecondary institution, non-exempt students are tested using the TSI Assessment (TSIA2), a 2021 revision of the initial TSI Assessment. A student's scores are used to assist Texas public institutions of higher education in determining if students are prepared for introductory college coursework in the areas of English Language Arts and Reading (ELAR) and mathematics. Students can be exempted from the TSIA2 if they meet college readiness standards on the SAT, ACT, or end-of-course examinations in math and language arts or successfully complete a Texas high school college preparatory course, which is available to all students enrolled in a public Texas high school.

Since 2017, students who are deemed not college-ready on the TSIA2 in either of the two areas are enrolled in a corequisite sequence (e.g., co-enrolled in a non-credit developmental education class and an entry-level credit-bearing course in the same subject within the same semester). Ideally, the developmental course provides support that is "aligned directly with the learning outcomes, instruction, and assessment of the entry-level credit course, and makes necessary adjustments as needed to advance students' success in the entry-level course" (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, n.d., para. 3). This is sometimes referred to as just-in-time support.

At many Texas universities, including Texas State University (TXST), students are placed in either a stand-alone for-credit college mathematics class or in a college corequisite sequence based on their TSIA or exempt status. For example, College Algebra (MATH 1315) is paired with Intermediate Algebra (MATH 1311), or Survey of Contemporary Mathematics (MATH 1316) is paired with Elementary Algebra (MATH 1300). Over the last several semesters, Texas State University has enrolled more and more students in the corequisite mathematics class. This increasing influx of students has led to both new lecturers and additional graduate students being assigned to teach these classes.

Developing a Teaching Praxis

Often, graduate students and new instructors are given their teaching assignments within a

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week or two before a semester begins. This very short preparation time led to the development of this project. As new instructors for the MATH 1316/1300 course at Texas State University, while wading through the available material for the class, the collaborative nature of our department led us to seek out each other during the planning. This article describes the implementation of the Japanese lesson study model by three doctoral teaching assistants at TXST with the dual goals of improving our own teaching practices and creating more engaging and relevant lessons for a non-STEM mathematics co-requisite class.

A Practice with Long Traditions

The century-old Japanese practice of "jugyou kenkyuu," in which jugyou means instruction and kenkyuu means research, was not seen in the English-speaking world until the 1990s (Lewis, 2009). The English translation, lesson study, serves as an umbrella term for the collaborative cycle of teachers researching instructional material, planning classroom teaching and activities, and the discussion, reflections, and revisions that follow implementation. After the revisions, the process continues. Participation in the process is typically voluntary with the goal of continual improvement of both the lesson plan and the teaching practice of the contributing instructor-researchers. The iteration of the lesson study cycle and the sharing of the lessons with others leads to tested lessons that better meet the learning needs of the students while also helping instructors improve their teaching practice.

This article describes the implementation of the Japanese lesson study model by three doctoral teaching assistants at TXST with the dual goals of improving our own teaching practices and creating more engaging and relevant lessons for a non-STEM mathematics co-requisite class.

Moss et al. (2015) recognize the traditional four-stage model of lesson study used by Lewis et al. (2009) and Lewis (2016), which includes goal setting for the study, research and planning of the targeted lesson, implementation of the researched lesson, and finally debriefing and reflection. However, they include four additional stages to the traditional model, which adds engagement with the mathematics, clinical interviews about the targeted lesson, the design and implementation of exploratory lessons, and the creation of resources for other educators. Because our lesson study was designed to be brief, we were unable to incorporate all eight stages described by Moss et al., but we did add two of the four additional stages: (a) as instructors, we engaged with the mathematics, and (b) we created resources for other educators. In fact, the creation of sharable resources was one primary goal at the beginning of the project. Improving our own teaching practice was the other.

Project Birth as Professional Development

After being assigned two sections each of MATH 1316 Survey of Contemporary Mathematics, we decided to collaborate on this lesson study project with two main objectives. First, being new to teaching this course, we each wanted to improve our own practices; second, after looking through the publisher's materials, we wanted to create some lesson materials that were more engaging for the students that could eventually be shared with other graduate students and new instructors of this course.

Our lesson study began with an investigation. We surveyed past and present instructors of the course at TXST to get their help in determining the lessons that would be good targets for the lesson study. We decided to include lessons on combining probabilities, savings plans, and the normal distribution. The consensus was that these lessons were the most difficult for students and needed thoughtful revisions. These lessons were also spaced throughout the semester in a way that allowed us to create a lesson, implement, observe, discuss, and reflect, and then start the process of creating the next lesson while we revised the first one.

We met weekly to collaboratively create each lesson, with each of us taking the lead on one lesson. Our primary objective was to create lessons that foster students' participation with active learning in class in ways that are relevant and interesting. We structured our lessons on a practice often used in mathematics classes that is sometimes called "I do, we do, you do." In this format that supports the gradual release of responsibility and the transition to self-directed learning (Fisher & Frey, 2021), the instructor works an example for the class; next, the instructor works an example with the class, providing answers to prompts that complete the problem; finally, the students are tasked with working an example in pairs or small groups. The combining probabilities lesson was the first to be implemented and observed.

Lesson Implementation and Review

We each implemented the lessons in our classes and observed each other's teaching. When teaching, we committed to teaching the lesson as created, and

we tried to limit any extemporaneous additions or improvisations. When observing each other, we focused on answering two primary questions:

- Does the lesson lead to quality student interactions and engagement?
- Do the examples and the problems in the lesson seem to be relevant to the students?

We collected exit tickets from each student at the end of each lesson designed to help us learn where the students still had gaps; we used the exit tickets to make decisions about how to revise and improve lessons and help us know what areas to review further during the current semester. We also tried to gauge how relevant the students considered the lesson's topic.

After teaching and observing the first lesson on probability, we learned two things. First, few of our students had a frame of reference for playing cards. We thought the standard 52-card deck was ideal for illustrating combined probability, so our first lesson was peppered with examples based on cards. The students knew little about the organization of playing cards in terms of ranking, colors, and suits. If we wanted to use cards for examples, we would need to build a frame of reference first or choose more relevant examples. Second, during the "you do" sections of the lesson, many students just stared at their papers, waiting to be told the answer instead of engaging with the mathematics. Many had been exposed to this teaching strategy before and understood they could wait out the example and eventually be shown the answer. We needed a way to address this problem. After reflecting and discussing the lessons and reading through the exit tickets collected from students, we also concluded that we needed to find relevant examples that were more closely tied to the students' lived experiences. We incorporated both of these into the redesign of the first lesson and the initial designs of the second and third lessons. An important goal of the lesson study approach is continual improvement and increased knowledge for the instructor (Dick et al., 2022; Mohammed & Sakyi, 2022), but also improvement of the lesson being studied (Berk & Hiebert, 2009).

Adapting the lessons to include more scaffolding in the group work problems was fairly easy to accomplish. Clearly, there is a tension between not providing enough and providing too much. We planned to be very cognizant of this when observing future lessons so that we could strike a balance in further redesigns. For the second lesson on savings plans, we included scaffolding questions for all the examples worked in the lessons so that when students were completing the "you do" example, they would understand how to answer the scaffolding questions and be better guided to complete the problem (see Appendix A). We modeled answering the scaffolding problems in the "I do" and "we do" examples. After working through the examples with the added questions, students seemed better able to work through "you do" example with the added scaffolding. We also revised the probability lesson to include the creation of a decision tree during the lesson that students could use when working on problems that would help them choose the correct type of probability formula to use and solve the problem correctly. In this instance, we helped the students create their own scaffolding that they would be able to use in probability problems.

The Connection Between Relevance and Engagement

During the revision process, we also began researching strategies for creating relevant and engaging problems. We found a problem-posing framework by Stylianides and Stylianides (2014) that we began using. These researchers proposed design and implementation features for problem solving that dovetailed with our study goals of creating engaging lessons. They suggested that "(1) the problem should have a memorable characteristic (e.g., name, context); (2) the problem should initially seem unsolvable; (3) the problem includes few clearly identifiable mathematical referents (numbers and formulas) that by themselves offer insufficient information for its solution; and (4) the solution to problem should be within the students capability after perseverance (and support from peers or limited instructor scaffolding)" (Stylianides & Stylianides, 2014, p. 11).

This problem-posing framework caused us to rethink the examples we created in the probability section. We jettisoned most of the cards and dice problems that we originally formed the lesson around and instead created a series of examples we called "The Tootsie Pop Problem" (see Appendix B). This example illustrates how we used the problem-posing framework of Stylianides & Stylianides (2014) to create examples. We used the "Tootsie Pop Problem" to work through creating the decision tree that students could use as scaffolding and support while learning to do combined probability problems. When observing during the second cycle of teaching the probability lesson, we noticed that the students were immediately interested in the bag of Tootsie Pops, as compared to when we used examples with cards.

We are in the process of revising another set of combined probability group work problems that revolve around jury selection. The students we teach are over 18 years of age, so the possibility of being selected for a jury is something they are becoming familiar with. We are also tying issues of race and ethnicity in the jury make-up, which can lead to

discussion of how a jury may or may not seem to be a jury of peers of the person on trial. One objective of this example is to highlight the connection between what we learn in math and the things they are learning in other classes, such as history, political science, or sociology.

In the savings plan lesson, many of our examples included saving for a house. When teaching and observing this lesson, we realized that homeownership was outside of the experience of many of our students. Additionally, they did not expect to ever buy a house, so these examples felt irrelevant. During our reflection, we noted the need to consider the experiences of our students while creating examples more carefully. For this lesson, we revised the lesson to include examples about saving for the down payment on a car, saving for a vacation, and saving for retirement after getting a job after college. To further increase relevance, we had students look up the possible salaries for jobs they might apply for after graduation and estimate a salary for that to use to budget and save. We also planted seeds about retirement savings by including examples that demonstrated how small amounts of money could grow to large amounts over time with compounded interest and a structured savings plan. The students were much more engaged with problems that asked them to save for something they could see themselves buying, such as a vacation or a car. One student remarked, "It's real-world math that can be applied one day. To me, this is math . . . " and from another, "This . . . has helped me learn to better understand aspects of the real world." For our final lesson on the normal distribution, we focused the examples on things we know students have experience with, such as standardized test scores, grades, and height. At one MATH 1316/1300 teaching forum meeting, someone asked if we could create an example to show what "curving grades" really means. We are still revising this example, but the students seemed to develop better understanding of *z-scores* when the example dealt with grades.

To further increase relevance, we had students look up the possible salaries for jobs they might apply for after graduation and estimate a salary for that to use to budget and save.

A Lesson Study Example Timeline

In late July of 2022 at Texas State University, doctoral teaching assistants in the Department of Mathematics were assigned courses to teach. Several doctoral students were assigned as instructors of record for the co-requisite course MATH 1316/MATH 1300. One of our authors emailed all of the instructors and asked if any would be interested in working on a lesson study project over the course of the semester. Two authors agreed, and the project was born. We recruited a professor in the math department as a project advisor; then, we began our collaboration. Our first step was to develop a consensus around what lessons to include. We surveyed experienced instructors to obtain input. After reviewing the responses and coordinating our course calendars, we decided on the three lessons for the project. The first of these lessons was to be taught in week 5 of the semester. Prior to this, we met weekly to collaboratively plan the lesson and communicated often outside of our weekly meetings. During weeks 1–4, we engaged with the mathematics (stage 1 of Moss et al., 2015), set goals for our area of investigation (stage 2 of Moss et al., 2015), and planned the research lesson (stage 5 of Moss et al., 2015). In week 5, we each taught the lesson in our own classes. We also each observed at least one teaching session of another team member. Our project advisor also observed lessons. This corresponds to stage 6 of Moss et al. (2015). We completed observation notes about each other's teaching and self-reflections on our teaching. The following week, we met to discuss and debrief the lesson and reflect on what went well and what aspects needed improvement (stage 7 of Moss et al., 2015). Over the next 3 weeks, we worked together to create the second lesson and revise the first lesson. The teach, discuss and reflect, revise cycle was repeated for lessons two and three. Each lesson was spaced approximately four weeks apart so that we had time to reflect on the previous lesson while also creating the second lesson. Over the winter break, we continued to revise the three lessons with the plan to teach the amended lessons in the spring semester. Two of us were assigned to teach the course the following semester. We implemented the revised lessons with one author only serving as an observer. At the end of the spring semester, we had completed the second cycle of the process: teaching, reflecting/discussing, and revising. At this point, we have three revised lessons available to share with our teaching forum, and we are sharing our process and results with a wider audience, corresponding to stage 8 of the Moss et al. model.

Future Directions

Two of us continue to teach MATH 1316 at TXST,

and we continue to revise and improve these lessons. The lessons are available to instructors of MATH 1316/MATH 1300 at TXST. Although we see these lessons as works in progress with the goal of continual improvement, we are happy to share them with anyone who is interested. We have encouraged other instructors who teach MATH 1300/1316 at TXST to collaborate on creating and revamping lessons using the lesson study model and then share with our course forum. Additionally, we agree that lesson study is an interesting and valuable undertaking for graduate teaching assistants. We are continuing to explore how lesson study can be used for professional development. The project made all of us better instructors. In our observations, we each noted how the others had gained confidence with the lesson topics; we all reflected on our increased teaching efficacy and improved content knowledge that we gained from observing each other teach the lesson. We learned from collaboration, observation, and reflection in ways that we would have missed had we worked alone. A second avenue for further study is how to make examples more relevant to students. This can be especially important for non-STEM majors who do not always see a direct connection between mathematics and their future. Every math teacher has heard, "How will I use this in real life?" or "When will I ever use this?" Creating lessons that answer these questions before they are asked or are interesting enough to forestall the question entirely makes both teaching math and learning math better for everyone. We are on a journey to both develop ourselves professionally and create more meaningful lessons for our students through the collaborative lesson study process. We invite you to find a friend or colleague and come along.

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Appendix A

"I do" Example with Scaffolding Questions

Example: IRA and CD (Individual Retirement Account -Certifies Deposit)
Suppose you want to invest $300 for every month for 5 years.

Different banks offer different rates. Here are three banks that offer different APR:

a. Discover offers 3.50% for 5 years. (I do)
b. Synchrony Bank offers 3.81% for 5 years. (We do)
c. Alliant Credit Union offers 3.65% for 5 years. (You do)

Let's figure out how much we can expect to make after 5 years depositing $300 each month with the different APRs.

a. Discover offers 3.50% for 5 years. (I do).

Step 1: Let's use the question to figure out what we have. Find this in the initial problem.

A = what we are looking for
PMT = $300
APR = 3.5% or .035
n = 12 (each month)
Y = 5

Step 2: What formula do we need?

$$A = PMT\ \frac{\left[\left(1+\frac{APR}{n}\right)^{(nY)}-1\right]}{\left(\frac{APR}{n}\right)}$$

Step 3: Plug in what we know into the formula.

$$A = 300\ \times\frac{\left[\left(1+\frac{.035}{12}\right)^{(12)(5)}-1\right]}{\left(\frac{.035}{12}\right)}$$

Step 4: Simplify. Use your calculator. Be sure to include all the needed parentheses. (Have students practice this with their calculators).

$$A = 300\ \times\frac{\left[(1+\ .002916667)^{(60)}-1\right]}{(.002916667)}$$

$$A = 300\ \times\frac{\left[(1.002916667)^{(60)}-1\right]}{(.002916667)}$$

$$A = 300\ \times\frac{[(1.190942829-1]}{(.002916667)}$$

$$A = 300\ \times\frac{(.190942829)}{(.002916667)}$$

$$A = \$19{,}639.83$$

Interpret what we found. *What is A?*

Accumulated balance or the amount of money in the account after 5 years. This included monthly payments and interest.

How much was deposited over the 5 years?

Amount deposited without interest: $300 a month for 5 years = 300(12)(5) = $18,000.

How much interest was earned?

Interest earned = Accumulated balance – the amount deposited each month over the time period
$19,639.83-18,000 = $1639.83 in interest.

Appendix B

A Relatable Problem

(Based on the Framework of Stylianides & Stylianides, 2014.)

Opening Problem/Exploration-The Tootsie Pop Problem (interesting name)

Review-Connect to Prior Learning (context and mathematical referents)

In this bag of 40 Tootsie Pops there are:

- 13 cherry
- 11 raspberry
- 7 grape
- 5 chocolate
- 4 orange

To find the probability of A, choosing a chocolate tootsie pop, is found by:

$$P(A) = \frac{number\ of\ ways\ A\ can\ occur}{total\ number\ of\ outcomes}$$

$$P(A) = \frac{5}{40} = \frac{1}{8} = .125\ or\ 12.5\%$$

Combined probabilities happens when more than one thing is happening, and we need to find multiple probabilities.

Example

What is the probability of randomly picking a raspberry and a then grape, one after the other (without replacement)?

General discussion about how we might figure this out **(seems unsolvable)**.

Example
Suppose we chose raspberry and orange. How might we figure out the probability of choosing both of these flavors one after the other? Ideas?

Try to elicit the idea of dependence here. This leads into the lesson and we eventually solve the problem.

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BOOK REVIEW

Student Writing Tutors in Their Own Words: Global Voices on Writing Centers and Beyond

Reviewed by René LeBlanc

https://doi.org/10.58997/br1

ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND BOOK

René LeBlanc *is the writing services coordinator, LSAC prelaw advisor, and online writing lab manager at Texas State University's Student Learning Assistance Center. Holding an MFA in fiction, René has published many short stories, and one collection. Currently, she is working on her PhD in developmental education, literacy, from Texas State University and beginning her publication journey in this field.*

Book Information
Orsini, M., & Kleinman, L. (Eds.) (2022). *Student writing tutors in their own words: Global voices on writing centers and beyond*. Routledge.

Disclosure Statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

In *Student Writing: Tutors in Their Own Words: Global Voices on Writing Centers and Beyond* (2022), editors Max Orsini and Loren Kleinman provide a metaphoric forecast for their book with poet and scholar Helen Sword's "Foreword: A Play in Three Acts." Sword's composition parallels the structure of the book and echoes its content. It provides a forum for "discursive vulnerability" (2022, p. 2) for writing tutors and those in similar work—graduate and undergraduate, professional and student—to share their experiences and voices as writing tutors before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

But Orsini and Kleinman do more than provide space and compile: they provide a critical frame for what writing tutors, writing centers, and all tutors and learning centers do as constructed from pivotal earlier scholarship. In their introduction, they explicate North (1984) and Harris' (1995) understandings of what makes tutoring effective. First, they reference North's essay, "The Idea of a Writing Center" (1984). Here, North shares his belief that writing centers are a "hosting-space" for writers at every stage of the academic growth cycle, a space safe that encourages tutees and tutors to grow and change as writers, not an "academic fix it shop" focused on mending grammar in particular papers, as tutor contributor Sleiman termed it (Orsini & Kleinman, 2022, p. 85) when describing her own earlier beliefs about tutoring. As the authors share, North (1984) posits that this change comes about through dialogue with other writers, here tutors, in communal spaces over writing in progress, whether at the stage of invention or of rhetorical framing and structures. Far from the construct of tutoring as editing, the focus of the change is not the tutees' written work but their growth as writers. Referencing another critical piece of writing center scholarship, Harris' 1995 essay, "Talking in the Middle: Why Writers Need Writing Tutors," Orsini and Kleinman share Harris' (1995) belief that the main purpose of writing centers is to provide "tutorial interaction . . . where writers gain kinds of knowledge about their writing and themselves that are not possible in other institutionalized settings" (p. 2). But Orsini and Kleinman expand upon this idea by stressing the importance of tutors' growth as well. The authors suggest that tutors as well as tutees learn through the "vessel" of tutorial interaction—here accessing "their own burgeoning writerly and human identities as global tutors and . . . citizens" (p. 2) to create and grow, amongst other things, "their own crafts, ideas, voices, visions" (p. 2).

The book's introduction locates the editors' initial impetus in their own work in extant and emergent writing centers, but especially through the "Graduate Writing Meetups" at Drew University, where Orsini and Kleinman were professional staff (p. 3). In particular, the authors identify their own and other writers' creation of writing communities, here represented as global—in terms of tutors, their centers, and tutees—and located temporally in the pre-COVID and Pandemic Era. From this point, the focus of the book expands somewhat linearly in

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three parts focused by shared topics amongst their writers: tutors' conceptions of what they do and for whom ("How We Help"); how tutors' own writing and thinking (their voice) has been affected by their work and identities ("A Voice of One's Own"); and, last, how writing centers, and learning centers by extension, become community ("How Writing Communities Are Made"). Each section includes experiences of tutors before and during COVID and specifically addresses challenges to interaction, including the mandatory use of virtual platforms and the weirdly concurrent closeness created by seeing a person in their personal space as well as the sense of loss and separation resulting from the pandemic's strictures on physical proximity.

Sections in the collection are preceded by short editorial essays situating the lives, identities, and communities of the tutor writers within them, and are followed by grouped questions for discussion, two per contributor essay. For example, part one is preceded by an essay describing the work of two of its tutor contributors, one an undergraduate at University of California, Davis, Dominque Duque, and the other a former tutor and current PhD and faculty member in graduate studies at Drew University, Liana Piehler. Piehler reflects on the different communities a writing center serves but also upon commonalities for all of them: tutors as receptive yet active listeners to the student writers and tutors' reflection upon how the student writers' personal reflections can be entangled *and* embodied in their writing. Writing from the Pandemic years, Piehler meets most of her clients on Zoom and notes the personal atmosphere produced by sharing from one living space to another and how more tutees seem willing or need to share personal details of their lives and emotions. Piehler also stresses the possibilities this sharing presents to tutors to become mentors, focused and present to those with whom they work. At the other end of the spectrum of appreciation for the pandemic's online spaces, MA graduate student and tutor at Georgia State University, Dylan Maroney, shares their concern for how the online writing center has negatively affected older graduate students, many of whom were part of Georgia State's GSU 62 program, meant to give adults 62 and over access to education at a reduced cost. Maroney notes that many of their former GSU 62 clients have as much difficulty navigating technology as writing papers and, as such, are disabled by the online environment, even a synchronous, visually and auditorily supportive one. Maroney supports their contention by addressing the gradual disappearance of a GSU 62 tutee, "Bob," with whom Maroney had worked frequently before the isolation caused by the pandemic. Maroney argues that the core of the tutor/tutee relationship has been adversely affected by distance, both physical, technological, and emotional, created by COVID. Though Mahoney's point of view proves the exception to the rule here (for the most part), it is important for its recognition of how writing spaces can be unintentionally exclusive.

While other contributors also cite negative experiences in writing center work, most do so as they recount their vulnerability as beginning and even advanced writers getting writing feedback as perhaps the most vulnerable member of the tutoring exchange, the tutee whose work is under scrutiny. In part one, international students Chen and Ti discuss their transformation from writers being tutored—Chen after a disastrous first session with a tutor who led him to feel he couldn't write in English and Ti after being tutored by Orsini at Drew—to tutors and mentors for others.

Here the editors precede the essays by pointing to how writing centers can build confidence, self-efficacy, and authority in the student writers they help and hire.

Part two focuses on tutors' growth in understanding and as writers, as heralded by the section's title, "A Voice of One's Own," referencing Woolf's (1929) famous text of a similar name. Here the editors precede the essays by pointing to how writing centers can build confidence, self-efficacy, and authority in the student writers they help and hire. The emphasis on identity here importantly includes the intersectional nature of many students' experiences by emphasizing how race, place of origin, age, and academic status can affect the lives of tutees and tutors. A notable exception to the editors' efforts at inclusion and diversity is the lack of representation of disabled and nonnormatively gendered students. In the face of growing awareness of how students' identities have an overwhelming effect on their learning and life, people from both groups warrant inclusion.

Despite this omission, the editors include other voices from persons whose identities place them on the margins of education and society. One of the most notable of these contributors is Rios, who writes about how his own life was changed by being a tutor and writer in a correctional facility.

Rios stresses the inequity of a society where persons of color and from minoritized populations make up the majority of those represented in the penal system, sharing how he was funneled there in part because of being raised in a Mexican American community where gangs and violence were an almost unavoidable consequence of maturation. Rios points to how he and others not in the power majority are negatively positioned by society. He discusses how "the slaughter of mass incarceration" (p. 58) led to the usurpation of his identity by the imposed identity of an "inmate, [a] murderer"—until he became a writing tutor in the institution's college program and himself an influential, now-published writer (p. 58). Another contributor, Natasha Cooper, references DuBois in her essay, "The Effect of Double Consciousness on a Black Writer in White Academia." From the point of view of a black woman in a predominately white institution (PWI), she shows how bias can affect both those getting tutored and those tutoring, describing how being tutored by a respectful supportive tutor who was white aided Cooper in finding and using her voice. From this experience, Cooper shows how tutors have the power to positively change their tutees' perceptions of themselves, especially by encouraging the use of story as a tool. Cooper makes the important point, especially post-affirmative action, that cultural competence and deliberate learning about minoritized populations need to be part of every tutors' training as they can aid in the creation of a space of healing and growth. Another writer and tutor, Clare Wongwai, focuses even more on the affective elements of tutoring, describing how a training focusing on gratitude and tutoring affected her recognition of the importance of valuing the tutor/tutee interaction. She shares that even not knowing the results of one's tutoring can bring a "lasting smile" if one tutors with deliberate good intention (p. 72). She includes her thankfulness for "the dual nature" of tutoring and how persons can be vulnerable both as tutees and tutors (p. 74). Wongwai shows how tutors can be affected by their efforts to create positive, powerful social interactions, saying that interacting with others and growing relationships with them "allows us to bring meaning to ourselves" (p. 75). Wongwai emphasizes how tutors and others are positively affected by gratitude, benefiting from its practice socially and psychologically. This is an especially salient point during the latter part of her essay, which focuses more on tutoring during the pandemic.

Considering contributors' reflection on the importance of social interaction to writers, the editors did well to focus on "How Writing Communities Are Made" in the third part of this collection. This section consolidates what earlier contributors such as Elizabeth Myers observe about the necessity of involving others in one's writing—for Myers, her dissertation—no matter how much writing is cast as a solitary endeavor. What's more, this last section makes this point with stories pulled mostly from the isolated and isolating spaces of academia during the Pandemic era. One tutor contributor, Timóteo Pereira Neves, addresses the need for connection to a community when describing his years tutoring at a university in Lebanon before and during the pandemic. Here he shows how both before and during the pandemic, his confidence and dedication was built by his work tutoring members of the Haigazian University community, and how he learned to make the uncertain and distancing space of the virtual world work for him as a tutor by employing inductive questioning and silence. This is especially remarkable given how silence was sometimes more difficult to use in the face-to-face juxtaposition of virtual space. However, like Neves, many if not most contributors focused on the positive qualities of tutoring during the pandemic, pointing to how seeing *tutors* in their personal spaces seemed to make some tutees more comfortable confiding fears and asking questions. Cassidy Rempel acknowledges how sharing her own anxieties about an online academic system with tutees affected such a shift in her role, leading student writers from seeing her as a near-teacher tutor in the physical arena of the writing center before COVID to viewing her as a peer during virtual consultations. At the same time, she observes the limitations of the virtual platform when it comes to sharing work and how she feels the difficulties of transferring control of a paper on virtual platforms led to tutors having more power than the tutee, tilting the session from peer-to-peer, back to peer-to-authority. Finally, most of the contributors moved from lament to energetic determination when faced with the changes wrought by the pandemic. In the final essay of the collection,

As I prepare for another learning center training involving tutors across multiple disciplines, I can see the relevance of this collection to my work in a learning center and to tutors of multiple disciplines.

Zachary Smith reconciles his reminiscing and feeling depressed after losing his ability to interact with others in a writing center's physical space by ending his narrative with a determined belief that writing centers are "embodied in those that maintain them" and realized in "their love of writing and the joy it brings" (p. 113).

In a recent interview, Orsini and Kleinman (2023) explained their inclusion of discussion questions addressing contributor's essay after each of the book's three parts—and of a broad list of questions for discussion at book's end. Along with providing helpful directions and perspectives, the questions serve to further the editors' goals that this text be used by a variety of persons involved with writing, tutoring, mentoring, and teaching. Orsini and Kleinman use the questions not just to focus their collection but to highlight areas of current and vital concern in writing and learning center scholarship as well as other newer areas. The sections of questions allow the editors to address their audiences,' whether comprised of tutors, writing center administrators, or faculty scholars, as well as their contributors' enthusiasm and qualms about technology and tutoring. The questions following the book's sections include less predictable areas of focus for training, incorporating affective concerns such as gratitude and humility along with providing insight into some of the most marginalized students, such as those caught up by the prison pipeline, those from non-Western cultures, and those whose linguistic backgrounds are not rooted in English. Necessarily, this the involves issue of lack of access to services many nonmajority groups experience. The "holistic" (p. 117) questions at the book's conclusion are meant to elicit interaction between writing and, ostensibly, learning center personnel as well as between tutors and students.

As I prepare for another learning center training involving tutors across multiple disciplines, I can see the relevance of this collection to my work in a learning center and to tutors of multiple disciplines. Particularly resonant now are Orsini and Kleinman's revisiting North and his determination that the tutee should be the focus of the tutoring interaction. As the editors include story after story of tutors learning the importance of questioning as a tool for tutoring and of the concomitant need for silence and peace with it, I can't help but think of upcoming trainings and tutors. Though I will continue to advocate for the inclusion of some notably absent voices amongst those I encounter here, including those of disabled and nonnormatively gendered people amongst both tutors and tutees, I see that Orsini and Kleinman have put together a valuable resource for writing and other discipline-specific tutors, tutor trainers, writers, teachers, and administrators. Most important, however, especially as we rebuild and restructure our learning centers post-pandemic, Orsini and Kleinman have captured the importance of people's working together, with gratitude and humility, to foster diversity, inclusion, and a plurality of voices, especially those most marginalized, and upon embracing those we work with as part of our own communities.

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