

The Investigation of Self-Advocacy Skills of College Students With Disabilities

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Abstract

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2022a), 2.7 million students with disabilities enroll in college each year. Many students report feeling unprepared for the transition from high school to postsecondary education, particularly because of underdeveloped self-advocacy and college-readiness skills (Morningstar et al., 2017). This quantitative study explored the self-advocacy skills of college students with disabilities at a private Catholic university in the Midwest. Two research questions guided the study: (1) What are students' perceptions of their preparedness for the transition from high school to college? (2) What are students' perceptions of their current self-advocacy skills in college? The researcher distributed an online survey to 190 students registered with the Disability Resource Office; 19 responded (10% response rate). Results indicated that most students were not active participants in their high school Individualized Education Program (IEP) or transition planning meetings, hindering the development of self-advocacy. While many students could define self-advocacy and identify personal strengths, they also reported gaps in confidence and knowledge of their rights. The findings highlight the importance of structured transition planning, student involvement in IEP meetings, and explicit self-advocacy instruction beginning before postsecondary transition. The study's small sample size and reliance on self-reported data from students registered with the Disability Resource Office limit the extent to which the findings can be generalized. However, the study provides exploratory insights into the relationship between transition-planning experiences and the development of self-advocacy skills among college students with disabilities.

Keywords: self-advocacy; transition; students with disabilities; accommodations; higher education

The Investigation of Self-Advocacy Skills of College Students With Disabilities

From eligibility for special education services to their departure from K–12 public education, students with disabilities receive advocacy support through a dedicated special education team that develops and implements an Individualized Education Program (IEP) to meet their unique educational needs. Federal law guarantees students with disabilities a free appropriate public education (FAPE) through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which includes specialized instruction and related services at no cost to the family (IDEA, 2004). An essential aspect of the IEP is fostering self-advocacy, where students learn to articulate their needs and rights. However, previous research has demonstrated that many students with disabilities receive inadequate preparation in self-advocacy, despite the critical role that self-advocacy plays in success beyond K–12 education (Arndt et al., 2006; Morningstar et al., 2017). For example, while 87% of high school students with disabilities receive accommodations, only 18% report receiving such support in college (De Los Santos et al., 2019). Furthermore, approximately 65% of young adults with disabilities continue to postsecondary education within eight years of leaving high school. However, research indicates that many students do not disclose their disabilities to their institutions, despite the necessity of disclosure for receiving accommodations. National data suggest that only about 37% of students with disabilities inform their colleges of their disability status (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022b). Once a student leaves their K–12 public school, they no longer receive services under IDEA. Instead, they can



receive reasonable accommodations that will help them access higher education. Four legal initiatives have made a significant impact on helping students with disabilities gain access to higher education: “Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008, and the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADA-AA)” (Evans et al., 2017, p. 93). This gap suggests that the transition from high school to higher education poses significant challenges for self-advocacy, potentially contributing to a decline in students’ access to necessary accommodations in college. Consistent with the Conceptual Framework of Self-Advocacy proposed by Test et al. (2005), the development of self-knowledge, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership is an essential component of effective self-advocacy for students with disabilities. Deficits in these areas may hinder students’ ability to navigate postsecondary support systems and advocate for their accommodation needs.

Although federal legislation requires transition planning for students with disabilities, many students continue to report limited involvement in their own transition process and inadequate preparation for navigating postsecondary accommodations independently. This gap highlights the importance of understanding how students perceive their preparedness for the transition and their self-advocacy abilities in higher education settings.

This study aligns with the Whole Schooling approach, particularly its principles of including all students, empowering citizens for democracy, and partnering with families and the community. By examining the development of self-advocacy skills and transition preparedness among students with disabilities, this study supports educational practices that promote inclusion, participation, and equitable access to postsecondary opportunities.

Legal Background

IDEA

The IDEA provides legal protections for K–12 students with disabilities by requiring schools to provide a FAPE through an IEP, including specialized instruction and related services (Center for Education & Employment Law, 2016). The IEP is crucial for tailoring support to each student’s needs and ensuring academic success.

Transition planning, required by age 16 federally (or 14 in some states), prepares students for postsecondary education or employment. This process, guided by State Performance Plan Indicator 13, includes setting goals, identifying supportive services, and aligning courses with these goals. The IEP team must update the transition plan annually to meet the students’ changing needs. Students are protected under the IDEA until they exit the K–12 educational system, typically at age 18. However, students in many states may continue receiving services until age 21 (IDEA, 2004). After leaving K–12, IDEA protections end, but students can receive accommodations in higher education under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and related laws (Evans et al., 2017). Building self-advocacy skills, including managing their own IEP meetings, is essential for students’ successful transition to higher education and beyond (Yeager et al., 2022).

Legal Initiatives in Higher Education

Congress enacted the ADA of 1990 to protect individuals with disabilities from discrimination and ensure equal access and opportunity (Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, 1990). When students with disabilities transition from K–12 public schools to higher education, their legal protections shift from the IDEA to the ADA, allowing them to receive reasonable accommodations.

The ADA defines disability as a physical or mental impairment that significantly limits one or more major life activities, including conditions affecting bodily functions or psychological disorders (Yeager et al., 2022). Over time, Congress expanded these protections through the ADA-AA of 2009, which broadened the definition of disability and streamlined the process for students to receive accommodations in higher education (Evans et al., 2017).

Key amendments to the ADA-AA include disregarding “mitigating measures,” such as medication, when determining disability, recognizing a comprehensive list of major life activities, and ensuring that courts can assess whether accommodations are reasonable (Yeager et al., 2022). Legal frameworks such as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the ADA-AA guide institutions in developing accessibility policies. The Office for Civil Rights (OCR) investigates legal complaints under these laws, with support from the Association for Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD), which provides resources and guidance for institutions (Evans et al., 2017).

The Legal Gap

The transition from secondary to postsecondary education marks a significant shift for students with disabilities, as they move from the protections and supports provided under the IDEA to those governed by the ADA-AA. IDEA provides students with disabilities in K–12 public schools with a FAPE, including evaluation procedures and the development of an IEP designed to address their unique educational needs (Evans et al., 2017). The IEP is central to ensuring that these students can access their education in compliance with IDEA.

Upon exiting high school and entering postsecondary education, however, the structured support network provided by the school system is no longer available. The responsibility shifts to the students, who must self-advocate by presenting documentation of their disability and the support they previously received to the disability resource office at their institution. Disability resource professionals work collaboratively with students to determine reasonable accommodations necessary to ensure equal access to higher education, with these supports provided under the ADA, the ADA-AA, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Evans et al., 2017).

Transition to Higher Education

Research consistently shows that students with disabilities face significantly poorer postsecondary outcomes compared to their non-disabled peers (Wagner et al., 2019). Data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) highlights that these students lag in higher education attainment, employment, and the acquisition of functional life skills necessary for independent living (Wagner et al., 2019). Additionally, youth with disabilities exhibit higher dropout rates, further exacerbating these disparities. Research has identified transition services as a key intervention for addressing these challenges.

Over the years, various curricula have been developed and evaluated for their effectiveness in fostering self-advocacy skills through the transition planning process. Evidence suggests that when students actively participate in their IEP meetings, they acquire critical self-advocacy skills (Yeager et al., 2022), which are essential as they transition to postsecondary education, where they must independently request the accommodations needed to access higher education (Test et al., 2015).

The Council for Exceptional Children's Division on Career Development and Transition (DCDT), now known as Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals, has long championed the importance of student engagement in the transition process. Martin & Williams-Diehm (2013) emphasized that active student participation in IEP meetings, including presenting transition goals and discussing assessment results, is crucial for successful transitions.

Additionally, Burnes et al. (2018) emphasized the importance of student involvement in transition planning, reinforcing the findings of Martin & Williams-Diehm (2013) that active student participation improves postsecondary outcomes. This advocacy for student involvement has historical roots, dating back to 1983 (Will, 1983).

Findings from the NLTS2 revealed that students with disabilities experience varied postsecondary outcomes and highlighted the importance of transition services in promoting educational and employment success (Newman et al., 2011). These findings underscore the need for effective transition planning and the development of self-advocacy skills to support successful postsecondary outcomes.

Transition Programming for High School Students With Disabilities

Newman et al. (2016) examined the impact of secondary school transition programs on students with disabilities, focusing on their postsecondary accommodations and support needs. Their findings reveal that students in two-year colleges, four-year universities, and Career and Technical Colleges primarily receive two types of accommodations: disability-specific support (e.g., note-takers, extended test time) and general services like tutoring. Using data from more than 9500 students with disabilities, Newman et al. (2011) found that students pursued a variety of postsecondary pathways, including two-year colleges, career and technical programs, and four-year institutions. These findings highlight continuing trends in the educational choices made by students with disabilities.

Newman et al. (2016) also investigated the rates of self-disclosure among students with disabilities and their correlation with the receipt of accommodations. Their data indicated that only 35% of these students disclosed their disability in postsecondary settings, compared to 98% receiving accommodations in high school. This discrepancy highlights the

importance of self-advocacy and effective transition planning.

Transition services, mandated by laws like the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act \(2004\)](#) and the No Child Left Behind Act, are crucial for preparing students for postsecondary success ([Test et al., 2015](#)). [Mazzotti et al. \(2021\)](#) identified 64 evidence-based transition interventions and 17 predictors of post-school success, including career awareness, community experience, and self-determination.

Knowledge Necessary to Access Accommodations

Research shows a direct link between student success and access to accommodations in higher education ([Shine & Stefanou, 2022](#); [Yeager et al., 2022](#)). Students with disabilities must understand the process of obtaining these accommodations, which involves applying to the institution's disability resource office and providing documentation of their disability. Accommodations might include note-takers, extended test time, and course modifications ([Shine & Stefanou, 2022](#); [Yeager et al., 2022](#)). However, many students lack the knowledge needed to request these supports.

Previous research has demonstrated that navigating disability accommodations often requires students to engage in self-advocacy and negotiate complex institutional processes, which may contribute to concerns regarding stigma and faculty interactions ([Bruce & Aylward, 2021](#)). Recent research ([Yeager et al., 2022](#)) highlights the crucial role of self-advocacy in academic success, emphasizing its impact on understanding and navigating disability accommodations, as well as on identifying effective strategies for securing necessary support. Students must be proactive in managing their academic challenges and requesting support. According to the Conceptual Framework of Self-Advocacy, essential components of effective self-advocacy include knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership ([Test et al., 2005](#)). These skills are critical for understanding one's disability, navigating accommodation processes, and advocating for necessary support in postsecondary settings. As such, self-advocacy represents a key factor in supporting students with disabilities as they transition to and navigate postsecondary education.

Collectively, the literature suggests that active participation in transition planning contributes to stronger self-determination and self-advocacy outcomes among students with disabilities. Students who participate in IEP meetings are more likely to develop communication skills, understand their accommodations, and independently navigate support systems in postsecondary education. These findings align closely with the Conceptual Framework of Self-Advocacy ([Test et al., 2005](#)), which identifies knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership as essential components of successful transition outcomes.

Purpose of the Present Study

The purpose of this quantitative study was to examine the self-advocacy skills of college students with disabilities, a critical area that impacts their ability to navigate higher education successfully. Self-advocacy, which involves understanding one's own needs, effectively communicating those needs, and actively seeking necessary support, is essential for academic and personal success in postsecondary education. This study sought to analyze students' perceptions of their preparedness for transitioning from high school to college, a phase often marked by challenges related to independence and access to accommodations. Furthermore, it aimed to evaluate their existing self-advocacy abilities within the college setting, providing insights into the strengths and gaps in their skill sets. By exploring these dimensions, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of the factors that influence successful transitions for students with disabilities and provides a foundation for targeted interventions to improve their outcomes in higher education.

While this study focused primarily on students' perceptions of transition preparedness and self-advocacy, the findings also suggested the need for future research to examine the relationship between participation in transition planning, accommodation-seeking behaviors, and postsecondary success outcomes among students with disabilities.

Research Questions

Given the exploratory nature of this study, the research questions focused specifically on students' perceptions of transition preparedness and self-advocacy experiences within higher education.

1. What are students with disabilities' perceptions of their preparedness for the transition from high school to college?
2. What are students with disabilities' perceptions of their self-advocacy skills in college?

Methods

Setting

This study was conducted at a small, private Catholic university located in an urban setting in the Midwest. Although rooted in Catholic tradition, the college actively embraced the diverse backgrounds of its students, faculty, and staff. The institution was committed to educating students to become ethical leaders, dedicated service providers, and lifelong seekers of truth. Central to the college's mission were its five core Dominican values: Truth, Compassion, Justice, Partnership, and Community. By promoting open, caring, and thoughtful relationships, the college aimed to create an educational environment that upholds these values. The institution prioritized an inclusive approach to instruction, learning, and scholarship, reflecting its commitment to fostering a supportive and diverse community.

In the fall semester of 2019, the campus enrolled 2038 students, including 1407 undergraduate and 631 graduate students. The college maintained a low student-to-faculty ratio of 10:1, with over 80% of classes having fewer than 20 students, and an average class size of 13. The institution offered over 60 undergraduate and 27 graduate degree programs, including several doctoral programs, across five main schools: the School of Arts and Sciences, the School of Business, the School of Education, the School of Nursing, and the School of Integrative Studies.

The student demographics revealed that 1024 undergraduate students identified as female and 383 as male, while 440 graduate students identified as female and 191 as male. This brought the total student population to 1464 females and 574 males. The racial and ethnic composition of the undergraduate student body included 47 nonresident aliens, 47 Black or African American students, 5 American Indian or Alaskan Native students, 28 Asian students, 2 Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander students, 123 Hispanic students, 1047 White students, 50 multiracial students, and 58 students of unknown or other backgrounds. The graduate student population included 45 nonresident aliens, 40 Black or African American students, 3 American Indian or Alaskan Native students, 20 Asian students, 1 Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander student, 45 Hispanic students, 17 multiracial students, and 6 students of unknown or other backgrounds.

Participants

Participants in this study were students who received services from the Accessibility and Disability Services Center. This selection inherently limits the study, as it excludes students with disabilities who may not register for services. Research has shown that only a minority of students with disabilities disclose their status or seek accommodations in higher education ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2022b](#)). Consequently, the experiences and self-advocacy skills of these participants may not represent the broader population of students with disabilities on campus. Future research should include perspectives from both registered and non-registered students to provide a more comprehensive understanding.

In the spring semester of 2018, data showed that 127 female students, 48 male students, and 15 students of unspecified gender received services. In the fall semester of 2018, 113 female students, 34 male students, and 3 students of unspecified gender received services. The researcher sent the survey to approximately 190 students, of which 19 completed it, resulting in a response rate of 10%.

The Accessibility and Disability Services Center provided reasonable accommodations to students with documented disabilities, in compliance with the ADA and other relevant state or federal non-discrimination laws. The center offered various programs, including Accessibility and Disability Services (ADS), Cutting Edge (CE), English Language Learners/English as a Second Language (ELL/ESL), and Temporary Disability (TD) services. For this research, the survey was distributed to students who identified as having a disability and received accommodations through the Accessibility and Disability Services Center. Because participants were exclusively students registered with the Accessibility and Disability Services Center, the study may not reflect the experiences of students with disabilities who choose not to disclose their disabilities or seek accommodations in higher education settings.

The primary disability categories reported by students included physical, sensory, psychiatric, neurological, cognitive, and intellectual disabilities. Many students reported having comorbid conditions, meaning they experienced a combination of one or more of these disabilities. The most documented disabilities served by the center during the 2017–2018 academic year were Attention Deficit Disorder/Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADD/ADHD), anxiety, Asperger's syndrome/autism, depression/anxiety, and learning disabilities.

The study also did not collect detailed participant demographic information such as race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or detailed disability classifications. As a result, subgroup analyses examining intersectional experiences and differences in transitions among student populations were not possible. The primary objectives of this study were to investigate students' perspectives of transition preparedness and self-advocacy experiences within higher education. Detailed demographic information was intentionally omitted to minimize participant burden, maintain respondent anonymity given the relatively small sample size, and encourage participation by reducing the amount of personally identifiable information requested.

Measures/Protocol(s)

The measure used in this quantitative, non-experimental design study was a web-based questionnaire developed by the researcher to address the questions unique to this research. The survey consisted of ten questions. A self-report tool was developed to measure college students' preparedness for the transition from K–12 public school to higher education, as well as their existing self-advocacy skills.

Appendix 1 represents the survey questions sent to participants of this study. A total of 10 questions were asked. For this study, questions 1 through 5 were related to the research question "What are students with disabilities' perceptions of their preparedness for the transition from high school to college?" Questions 6–10 were related to answering the research question "What are students with disabilities' perceptions of their self-advocacy skills in college?" These survey questions were designed to address the research questions directly.

The validity of the survey was established through multiple steps. First, survey items were intentionally aligned with the Conceptual Framework of Self-Advocacy proposed by [Test et al. \(2005\)](#), which identifies knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership as essential components of self-advocacy. Questions were developed to capture students' perceptions of these dimensions as they related to transition preparedness and experiences in higher education. Next, expert reviewers, including faculty specializing in special education and disability services, assessed the questions for clarity and relevance. A pilot test was conducted with a small group of students to refine the wording and ensure construct validity. Following the pilot administration, participants provided feedback regarding the clarity, wording, and flow of the survey questions. Minor revisions were made to simplify question wording of questions, improve readability, and clarify response options. No substantive changes were made to the survey constructs, as pilot participants indicated that the items adequately reflected their transition and self-advocacy experiences. These steps were intended to ensure that the survey accurately measured students' perceptions of self-advocacy and transition preparedness.

Because the study included a small sample size ($n = 19$), reliability analyses such as Cronbach's alpha were not conducted, as the sample was insufficient to establish stable internal consistency estimates. This limitation should be considered when interpreting the findings.

Procedure

In December 2019, the university's Human Participants Review Board approved this study. The survey questions were validated by professors from the doctoral program and subsequently approved by the college's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The Qualtrics survey tool was thoroughly reviewed by the doctoral program professors, the Director of the Accessibility and Disability Services Center, and the researcher's advisor.

The Qualtrics survey was distributed to students three times. The initial email, sent during the week of 13 January 2020, included a preface from the researcher. If participants chose to open the link, they were first presented with a recruitment and implied-consent message in a single letter. By clicking "I agree" to participate, they were directed to the survey. The second reminder email was sent during the week of 20 January 2020, and the third and final reminder was sent during the week of 27 January 2020, allowing participants three weeks to complete the survey. In total, 190 students received the survey. Of these 190 students, nineteen completed the survey. Data collection occurred during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. This unprecedented global event likely influenced both participant recruitment and survey completion rates. Many students experienced disruptions to their academic routines, increased stress, and changes in instructional delivery, which may have affected their willingness or ability to complete the survey promptly. To accommodate these circumstances and minimize participant burden, the survey was administered entirely online, and survey items were intentionally kept brief to facilitate participation.

The low response rate may have been influenced by several factors, including the voluntary nature of participation, survey fatigue associated with web-based questionnaires, and the optional open-ended response format. These factors may have limited the depth and breadth of participant responses. While the response rate was consistent with that of similar studies, the small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings. Future studies should employ strategies to improve response rates, such as offering incentives or utilizing mixed methods to gather qualitative insights.

Self-reported instruments have inherent limitations (Podsakoff et al., 2003). To mitigate these limitations, the survey was designed to ensure participant anonymity. Respondents were also given the option to opt out of the survey at any time. No monetary incentives were provided for participation. However, participants were provided with information on how to access the college's Accessibility and Disability Services Center. Once the data were analyzed, the study results were made available to the entire sample via an email link.

Data Analysis

The first research question explored how students with disabilities perceived their preparedness for the transition from high school to college. To analyze this, the mean and standard deviation of Likert-scale responses, as well as percentages for categorical variables, were reviewed. The first five survey questions were designed to address this research question. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize these items.

Question one focused on students' knowledge of their disability. Questions 2, 3, and 4 inquired about students' participation in IEP meetings and the transition planning process. Means were calculated to determine how many students, on average, participated in this process. Question five assessed students' self-advocacy skills and asked whether they felt their high school had prepared them for college. This question used a 5-point Likert scale, with responses coded from 1 (not prepared at all) to 5 (very prepared). A score of 1 indicated that participants did not feel prepared for college, while a score of 5 indicated they felt very prepared.

The second research question investigated students with disabilities' perceptions of their self-advocacy skills in college. Descriptive statistics were also used for these items. Questions 6, 7, 8, and 10 employed an open-ended response format, and frequency analysis was used to interpret the data. Question 9 asked participants to rate their comfort level with understanding their rights under the ADA using a 5-point Likert scale. Responses to open-ended questions were analyzed for recurring themes using frequency analysis. Open-ended responses were reviewed for recurring patterns and grouped into broad thematic categories based on similarities in participant language and meaning. Due to the limited number of responses, formal inter-coder reliability procedures were not utilized.

Results

This study was conducted at a small private Catholic university in the Midwestern United States, with a focus on better preparing students with disabilities for the transition from high school to college. It also aimed to assess students' existing self-advocacy skills. Understanding these skills helps professionals improve support for students in this critical area. This section presents the findings for each research question.

The research was grounded in the Conceptual Framework of Self-Advocacy for Students with Disabilities (Test et al., 2005). Ideally, students develop self-advocacy skills through special education services in the K–12 setting, with the IEP playing a vital role in supporting their educational needs. The IEP process not only provides specialized instruction but also encourages students to participate in their educational planning, including transition planning for life after high school.

A total of 190 students registered with the Accessibility and Disability Services Center were invited to participate in the study, and 19 completed the survey, yielding a response rate of 10%. Because participants were only students registered with the Disability Resource Office, the findings should be interpreted with caution and are not intended to be generalized to all students with disabilities. The disabilities reported included physical, sensory, psychiatric, neurological, cognitive, and intellectual, with many students having comorbid conditions. The most documented disabilities during the 2017–2018 academic year included ADD/ADHD, anxiety, autism, depression, and learning disabilities.

A web-based questionnaire was developed for this quantitative non-experimental cross-sectional study to assess students' self-advocacy skills and preparedness for the transition to higher education. The survey addressed students' perceptions of their readiness for college and their existing self-advocacy abilities.

Table 1. Participants' perceptions of preparedness for the transition from high school to college (N = 19).

Survey item	Response	n	%
Participation in IEP meetings	All meetings	6	33.3
	Some meetings	2	11.1
	A couple of meetings	2	11.1
	None	8	44.4
Participation in transition planning	Yes	6	33.3
	No	12	66.7
Knowledge of requesting accommodations	Yes	9	50.0
	No	8	44.4
Preparedness for college (5-point Likert scale)	1 (Not prepared at all)	1	5.6
	2	2	11.1
	3	8	44.4
	4	5	27.8
	5 (Very prepared)	2	11.1

Note. Percentages may not total 100 because of rounding. Item-level sample sizes vary due to missing responses. Counts and percentages are calculated based on the available responses for each item.

Table 2. Participants' perceptions of self-advocacy skills in college (N = 19).

ADA comfort rating	n	%
1	2	11.1
2	5	27.8
3	3	16.7
4	5	27.8
5	3	16.7

Note. Ratings were based on a 5-point Likert scale. ADA, Americans with Disabilities Act.

Research Question One

What are students with disabilities' perceptions of their preparedness for the transition from high school to college?

Survey results revealed varied experiences among participants:

Table 1 summarizes participants' perceptions of their transition preparedness. Most participants (66.7%) reported that they did not participate in transition planning during high school, and nearly half (44.4%) indicated that they never attended an IEP meeting. Half of the participants (50.0%) reported knowing how to request accommodations upon entering college. Participants generally perceived themselves as moderately prepared for the transition to college, with the largest proportion selecting a rating of 3 on the five-point preparedness scale (44.4%).

These findings suggest that many participants experienced limited involvement in transition planning and IEP participation during high school, which may have contributed to uncertainty regarding accommodations and self-advocacy within college settings.

Research Question Two

What are students with disabilities' perceptions of their self-advocacy skills in college?

Participants provided diverse insights into their self-advocacy skills:

Table 2 summarizes participants' comfort with understanding their rights under the ADA. Responses varied across the scale, although ratings of 2 and 4 were the most frequently selected (27.8% each), suggesting considerable variability in participants' confidence regarding their legal rights and accommodations.

Although many students demonstrated an understanding of self-advocacy concepts, several participants reported bar-

riers related to confidence, fear of judgment, and uncertainty regarding their rights and accommodation needs.

Several survey items, particularly those requiring open-ended responses, had relatively high non-response rates. These findings may reflect the sensitive nature of questions related to disability and self-advocacy, the additional time and effort required to complete open-ended survey items, or item nonresponse bias, in which participants choose to skip individual questions rather than complete them. Consequently, the findings from these items should be interpreted with appropriate caution.

Conclusions and Implications

This section synthesizes the key findings from the research and draws conclusions grounded in the data collected throughout the study. The analysis reveals that transition planning and self-advocacy skills are pivotal for students with disabilities, aligning with prior research underscoring their importance in facilitating successful postsecondary outcomes. For instance, previous studies have highlighted that comprehensive transition planning significantly enhances students' ability to navigate educational and vocational settings, thus improving their overall quality of life ([Shine & Stefanou, 2022](#); [Yeager et al., 2022](#)).

Summary of the Study

The transition from K–12 education to higher education represents a crucial phase for students with disabilities. Federal special education laws require that students with disabilities who have an IEP be involved in their IEP meetings starting at age 16. This requirement ensures that they play a vital role in planning their transition to postsecondary education or employment ([Center for Education & Employment Law, 2016](#), p. 1). This study sought to explore students with disabilities' perceptions of their preparedness for this significant transition and to evaluate their self-advocacy skills upon entering higher education. The research aimed to answer the following questions:

Key Findings

Participants indicated that their transition experiences varied widely, with many reporting minimal involvement in IEP or transition planning meetings. A significant limitation of this study is the small sample size and the potential selection bias introduced by focusing only on students registered with the Accessibility and Disability Services Center. This limitation suggests that the findings may not represent the broader population of students with disabilities, particularly those who do not seek accommodations.

One of the study's critical insights is the strong link between early involvement in the IEP process and the development of self-advocacy skills. Students who were more engaged in their transition planning reported being better equipped to request accommodations and support services in college. In contrast, those with less involvement often struggled with self-advocacy, leading to difficulties securing the resources necessary for their academic success. This observation aligns with recent research indicating that comprehensive transition planning and self-advocacy training are vital for enhancing students' preparedness and success in postsecondary education ([Yeager et al., 2022](#)).

Interpretation of Findings

The findings underscore the importance of early and active student involvement in their IEP meetings. While federal law requires that students be invited to these meetings, the level of their participation varies widely. This research suggested that merely inviting students is not sufficient; they must be encouraged to take an active role in the planning process. Doing so can help them develop the self-advocacy skills essential for navigating the complexities of higher education, where they must independently seek out accommodations and support.

The results of this study are consistent with prior transition research, indicating that many students with disabilities remain passive participants in the IEP and transition planning process despite federal expectations for student involvement ([Test et al., 2015](#); [Yeager et al., 2022](#)). Previous studies have demonstrated that students who actively participate in IEP meetings are more likely to develop self-determination and self-advocacy skills necessary for postsecondary success. The current findings further support concerns that limited participation in transition planning may contribute to reduced confidence and preparedness when students enter higher education settings.

The findings related to accommodation knowledge align with existing literature, indicating that many students with disabilities enter postsecondary education without fully understanding the accommodation process or their legal rights under the ADA and Section 504 (Yeager et al., 2022). Previous research has shown that inadequate transition preparation may contribute to lower rates of disability disclosure and accommodation use in higher education. The current study supports these findings, as several participants reported uncertainty regarding how to request accommodations upon entering college.

Participants' reports of fear of judgment, limited confidence, and uncertainty regarding self-advocacy mirror findings in recent literature emphasizing the emotional and psychological barriers students with disabilities often experience in postsecondary environments (Yeager et al., 2022). Prior studies have suggested that students may avoid requesting accommodations due to stigma, concerns regarding peer perceptions, or uncertainty about institutional processes. The results further emphasize the importance of developing supportive environments that normalize self-advocacy and the use of accommodations within higher education.

The present study also supports the Conceptual Framework of Self-Advocacy proposed by Test et al. (2005), particularly the importance of self-knowledge, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership. Participants who demonstrated stronger awareness of their accommodations and communication needs appeared more confident navigating college support systems. Conversely, students who reported limited involvement in transition often demonstrated uncertainty about their rights and accommodation processes, suggesting underdeveloped core components of self-advocacy.

Collectively, the results suggest that transition preparedness and the development of self-advocacy are closely interconnected. Students who were more involved in transition planning appeared better prepared to navigate accommodation systems and advocate for their needs in higher education settings. These findings reinforce existing transition literature emphasizing that self-advocacy is not developed in isolation, but rather through repeated opportunities for participation, communication, and supported decision-making during the secondary transition process.

Although the findings of this study are generally consistent with previous research on transition planning and self-advocacy, this study provides additional exploratory insight into how college students retrospectively perceive their transition experiences after entering higher education. By examining students' reflections on their preparedness, participation in IEP meetings, and self-advocacy skills, the findings extend the existing literature by highlighting specific areas in which students continue to experience challenges after leaving the K–12 system. While the small sample size limits generalizability, these findings offer practical insights that may inform future research and improvements in transition planning practices.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The implications of this study are far-reaching, particularly for educators, students, and policymakers. Schools should implement structured self-advocacy instruction beginning in middle school and continuing throughout high school transition planning. Effective practices may include:

- student-led IEP meetings,
- role-play activities for requesting accommodations,
- explicit instruction regarding disability rights and ADA protections,
- goal-setting and reflection activities,
- communication skill development,
- and opportunities for students to independently explain their accommodations and support needs.

Postsecondary institutions should also consider implementing first-year transition seminars, peer mentoring programs, disability resource workshops, and proactive outreach initiatives to support students with disabilities as they transition to college.

For students, the findings highlight the importance of taking an active role in transition planning and educational decision-making processes. Students who understand their disabilities, accommodation needs, and legal rights are better positioned to successfully navigate postsecondary environments. Encouraging students to actively participate in IEP meet-

ings, practice communication and self-advocacy skills, ask questions, and express their preferences may strengthen their confidence and independence as they transition into higher education settings.

For policymakers, the findings support the need for earlier and more consistent transition planning for students with disabilities. Given evidence supporting the benefits of earlier transition planning and skill development, policymakers should consider initiating comprehensive transition planning before the current federal requirement of age 16. Beginning transition planning at age 14, as already required in some states, may provide students with additional opportunities to develop self-advocacy, communication, and transition readiness skills before graduation (Mazzotti et al., 2021; Test et al., 2015). Policymakers should also consider implementing clearer accountability measures to ensure that schools consistently provide comprehensive transition services, opportunities for student involvement, and individualized preparation for postsecondary education across districts.

The study outcomes further highlight the need for targeted interventions designed to better prepare students with disabilities for the academic, social, and procedural demands of higher education. Postsecondary professionals may use these findings to develop structured self-advocacy workshops, first-year transition seminars, peer mentoring programs, and collaborative partnerships with K–12 educators to bridge gaps in transition planning and accommodation awareness. Such initiatives may contribute to improved access to accommodations, academic persistence, and retention among students with disabilities.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size of 19 respondents limits the generalizability of the findings, particularly given the low response rate (10%). Additionally, participants were exclusively students registered with the Accessibility and Disability Services Center, which may introduce selection bias. Students who do not seek accommodations may face distinct challenges and have different self-advocacy experiences. Furthermore, because the study relied exclusively on self-reported survey responses, participant perceptions may have been influenced by recall bias or social desirability bias. Future studies should include a broader sample and explore the experiences of non-registered students to provide a more comprehensive understanding.

Second, the absence of detailed participant demographic information further limited the ability to examine how disability type, race/ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic status may have influenced transition experiences and self-advocacy development. Including such data in future research could lead to more targeted recommendations for different student populations.

Third, the study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have contributed to the low response rate and influenced participants' perceptions of transition preparedness and self-advocacy. The disruption of traditional educational experiences, reduced access to support services, and increased reliance on virtual learning environments may have altered students' opportunities to engage in transition planning and develop self-advocacy skills. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted within the context of these unprecedented circumstances.

Future studies should utilize larger and more diverse samples across institutional types and geographic regions. Additional research examining the relationship between transition planning participation, self-advocacy development, accommodation use, retention, persistence, and academic outcomes would further strengthen understanding of successful postsecondary transition experiences for students with disabilities. Longitudinal and mixed-methods studies may also provide deeper insight into how self-advocacy skills develop over time and how institutional supports influence long-term student success.

Suggestions for Future Research

The findings of this study suggest several directions for future research. First, replicating the study in different geographic locations and educational settings would help determine if the findings are consistent across various contexts. Additionally, comparing states with different transition ages could provide insights into the impact of earlier transition planning on student outcomes.

Further research should also explore the specific barriers that students with disabilities face in higher education and how these challenges can be mitigated through effective transition planning. Investigating the role of parents, teachers,

and support staff in the transition process could also provide valuable insights into best practices for preparing students for college.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study underscores the pivotal role that self-advocacy skills and early involvement in the IEP process play in the successful transition of students with disabilities from K–12 education to higher education. The findings reveal that many students feel only moderately prepared for the transition to postsecondary education, with limited engagement in their IEP meetings and underdeveloped self-advocacy skills that may contribute to challenges encountered in higher education (Martin & Williams-Diehm, 2013; Morningstar et al., 2017; Test et al., 2005). These findings are consistent with previous literature emphasizing the importance of active participation in transition planning and the development of self-advocacy skills in promoting successful postsecondary experiences for students with disabilities (Yeager et al., 2022).

Educators, students, and policymakers must prioritize comprehensive transition planning to ensure students are equipped with the skills needed to navigate the demands of higher education. By implementing the recommendations provided and addressing the limitations identified in this study, future research and practice can enhance support mechanisms for students with disabilities. Such improvements will foster better preparation, empower students to advocate for themselves, and contribute to more successful transitions and academic achievements in college.

This study reinforces the importance of intentionally preparing students with disabilities to navigate postsecondary environments independently. Strengthening transition planning, increasing student participation in the IEP process, and explicitly teaching self-advocacy skills may improve students' access to accommodations, confidence, persistence, and long-term educational outcomes.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, HW and OMT; methodology, HW; validation, HW, OMT, and BE; formal analysis, HW; investigation, HW; resources, HW; data curation, HW; writing—original draft preparation, HW and OMT; writing—review and editing, OMT and BE; visualization, HW; supervision, OMT; project administration, OMT. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Availability of Data and Materials

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Edgewood University (Approval No. 1495716-1). All participants provided informed consent before participation.

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Appendix

See Appendix 1.

Survey Instrument

1. When did you learn about your disability?

2. Did you attend your Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings during high school?

- ☐ All of them
- ☐ Some of them
- ☐ A couple of them
- ☐ None of them

3. Did you participate in the transition planning process during high school?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

4. When transitioning to college, did you know how to request accommodations upon your arrival?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

5. On a scale of 1 to 5, how well did your high school teachers prepare you for college?

- ☐ 1 = Not at all prepared
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5 = Very well prepared

6. In your own words, what is your definition of self-advocacy?

7. What are your strengths in the area of self-advocacy?

8. What are your weaknesses in the area of self-advocacy?

9. On a scale of 1 to 5, how comfortable are you with understanding your rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)?

- ☐ 1 = Not at all comfortable
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5 = Very comfortable

10. Is there anything your college could do to help promote your self-advocacy skills?

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