

Self-Advocacy in Communication Centers

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In grades K-12, students with disabilities are protected under the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA). Upon entering college, these same students are now protected by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Under IDEA, parents or guardians advocate for students, under ADA, students must advocate for themselves. Because self-advocacy is not common before college, many new college students do not have this skill and struggle to get the accommodations they need on their own. However, self-advocacy is much easier said than done, and students with disabilities deserve to have a resource that will help them overcome fears they may have when advocating for themselves.

How Can Communication Centers Help Students?

Students with disabilities often worry about being labeled by their peers. This apprehension can cause students to be afraid to speak about their disabilities, even to professionals who work in a disability services office, and this can adversely affect their self-advocacy skills (OSWEGO, 2020). Communication centers can utilize three types of inclusion to provide a welcoming and understanding environment where students can express themselves.

Three Types of Inclusion

The three types of inclusion consultants can learn to exercise are physical integration, functional inclusion, and social inclusion.

Physical integration is when “An individual has the right to access buildings and attend recreation programs...[through] architecturally accessible” buildings (Discover Leisure Education, 2013). An example of physical integration in communication centers is ensuring that the center’s aisles and doorways are wide and clear enough to accommodate wheelchairs or other mobility aids.

Functional inclusion practices assert, “An individual should have the opportunity to be successful within a given environment...[as well as have] the same enjoyment and success as those without disabilities” (Discover Leisure Education, 2013). For example, ensuring an American Sign Language interpreter attends consultations that include a Deaf student.

Social inclusion is “One’s ability to participate in positive interactions with peers through making friendships,” (Discover Leisure Education, 2013). Consultants can facilitate social inclusion by educating themselves on microaggressions or ableist practices that could crop up in a session (as well as how to mitigate them), and actively creating an environment that is welcoming and inclusive, and in which students with disabilities feel comfortable. Through these practices, communication consultants can empower students to self-advocate.

Once a communication center has established a welcoming environment, consultants need to be trained to prepare students with disabilities for speaking about their

needs in other environments, such as the Disability Services Office. An easy way to begin is to teach consultants a few specific circumstances and provide them with scripts that they will then share with their speakers according to their needs. For example, if a student needs extended time on an exam due to having a diagnosed anxiety disorder, a communication center consultant would provide a customizable script that explains this need first in the disability services office and then to the student's professors. The consultant and speaker would then practice the script until the speaker feels comfortable. Afterward, the consultant would provide feedback on what the student did well and any areas for improvement.

Recommendations

So, how can communication centers begin to help students with disabilities self-advocate? First, it should be clear to all communication consultants that the center is an inclusive space for all students. For instance, it should be standard practice for consultants to share pronouns so that all speakers know the center is a place where they will be welcomed and treated with respect. Using pronouns makes a speaker with disabilities feel respected because it shows that the communication center is respectful of everyone's identities.

Second, the communication center's leadership should assign a graduate assistant to act as a liaison and partner with the disability services office on campus. Together, the liaison and disability services can create a series of scripts for the most common accommodations and the circumstances in which students with disabilities would need to ask for them. Once effective scripts have been written, they could be used over and

over again, so the investment in time up front will pay off in the long run. These scripts will be a guide for consultants, helping them feel confident in their role, and will provide the necessary tools for students with disabilities to self-advocate.

Finally, the partnership between the communication center and the disability services office can also be used to collaborate on a workshop that talks about what services students with disabilities qualify for under the Americans with Disabilities Act. This workshop can be given for all incoming students with disabilities so they know what they are entitled to under the law from the beginning of their college career, allowing them to reach their full potential and have a positive and successful college experience.

References

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