

The Significance of Involving Nonspeaking Autistic Peer Mentors in Educational Programs

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TOO OFTEN, EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT PROGRAMS for autistic teenagers and young adults lack the involvement and leadership of autistic peer mentors. Autistic peer mentors are important because they can serve as valuable role models for autistic youth.¹ This essay presents personal narratives by three nonspeaking autistic college students who mentored 12 nonspeaking autistic teenagers and young adults in the College Bound Academy (CBA), a 4-day college transition program tailored to nonspeaking individuals. By typing and spelling to communicate, the peer mentors delivered presentations about their college experiences and mentored CBA participants over the course of the transition program. The college peer mentors—S.C., D.B., and E.C.—describe significant opportunities and experiences afforded to the CBA participants as a result of the inclusion of nonspeaking autistic peer mentors. These opportunities include learning from fellow nonspeaking autistic students about navigating personal challenges and victories in the college transition process, increasing autistic visibility and representation in higher education, and building a community of hope among autistic youth.

Learning About Navigating Challenges and Victories: S.C.

Because the presence of nonspeaking autistic students in higher education is rare, it is vital to include the voices—challenges and victories—of those who are indeed autistic college students. Upon reflecting on my own journey to higher education, I had no peers with whom to discuss my experiences. I was a pioneer. Although there are a few other nonspeaking autistic students who have obtained higher education, I did not know them or have access to them before my higher education journey. I was driven but felt alone in the process. Even though I had the support of my family and several higher education professionals, it simply was not the same as input from a peer—a true expert. What I would have done to hear and learn from a nonspeaking autistic peer about their experiences attending university.

As a CBA peer mentor, I had the opportunity this past summer to consider and share some of my greatest challenges and victories as the first nonspeaking autistic student at my university. It was awesome because I could confidently share my success in accessing higher education with my otherwise misunderstood and marginalized younger peers. As I described how my concerns surrounding accessing higher education as a nonspeaking autistic were addressed and resolved, I could almost hear a collective sigh from the CBA participants. Did I face challenges? Indeed, I faced challenges but described how I overcame them, or, more importantly, I described how I tried to circumvent them. For example, fear of the unknown is a huge reality for not only us but also for the educators and faculty we will encounter as nonspeaking autistics. Advancing my education became key to alleviate my high anxiety (huge challenge) about being taken seriously as a student as well as feeling understood about the many accommodations and supports I would need to access higher education. Thankfully, my university's disability services program was readily available to not only assist me to receive the appropriate accommodations but also to help educate my professors and others I would encounter.

One success that I shared with students in the program was engaging with my professors before my classes began. I managed to self-advocate to arrange meetings with my professors that ended up being a big anxiety reliever for both them and me. Even though it had not been done before, I understood the value of my professors meeting me and seeing me use my mode of communication in person. This was me educating them. One challenge I have experienced is related to my social connections with my peers in the classroom. That is, I am unable to answer questions quickly or throw out my ideas or jokes fast enough for most conversations in class. This is frustrating. Through the program, I was able to share with future college students strategies I use to address this challenge. Before class begins, I ask my professors whether I can share a 2–3-minute prerecorded message explaining my interests and understanding of everything. I also ask my

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professors to please include me in the class discussion by asking me my thoughts on something but coming back to me for my response. Because it takes some time to develop my answers, this strategy has been helpful although not perfect. It is not always effective because the discussion moves too quickly, the students blurt out their answers, or the professor is forgetful. Even though this is an on-again-off-again challenge, I have been mostly satisfied with my ability to be part of the life of the class and with my ability to collaborate with my professors and peers.

Approaching my higher education journey this way has been highly successful. I am not only the student but also the teacher. I believe this approach has provided many victories. My success has been dependent upon collaboration and significant self-advocacy. I firmly believe these are lessons best learned from a peer mentor. Experiencing extreme anxiety and communication challenges as well as sensory dysregulation is very difficult and unique, so hearing the value of collaboration and self-advocacy is so much more impactful coming from someone who knows what these things mean—truly mean. Although I am a straight-A student, a member of three academic honor societies, and a paid fellowship recipient, my greatest victory related to university is being a representation of success to my underrepresented nonspeaking autistic peers who dream of gaining an education—I can still hear their internal collective hooray!

Increasing Autistic Visibility and Representation: D.B.

Involving autistic peer mentors in college transition programs is not just about giving opportunity and voice to autistic individuals, although that is a very important outcome. It is also about increasing visibility for individuals who generally are talked about but not often talked to. This benefits neurotypical people and autistic people through demonstrating the humanity and value that autistic people have by increasing autistic visibility in important educational roles. Increasing visibility demonstrates to autistic students that there is a place for them in higher education wherein their specific experiences have value. They do not have to settle for substandard treatment or lost opportunities, and their disabilities are being turned into advantages. My participation in the classroom makes concrete the idea that capable autistic minds deserve and belong in college settings.

As an autistic individual in higher education, I followed the example of others who took this difficult journey before me. Aside from the advice and guidance I received from other autistic individuals who had achieved my goals, I took great comfort in knowing I was not going into this journey alone. Others had gone before me. I was fortunate to have mentors like that. Other autistic students might not have such a privilege. That is a strong reason that including autistic peer mentors on transition teams should be a high priority. Just the presence of autistic individuals in the higher education system lets students know that autism is respected, and that their value as human beings is institutionally recognized. This can go so far to ease anxiety for incoming students on the autism spectrum and creating an atmosphere of welcome. Easing anxiety can help autistic students reach their full potential in a new setting. This is the effect provided by the mere presence of a valued autistic peer mentor, let alone the important advice and guidance we can provide to fellow

students. As a transitioning student, being mentored by an autistic peer provides hope that they will be listened to by someone who has experienced their challenges firsthand and knows how to navigate the choppy waters of getting into college. Visibility and representation matter, and this is as true for autistic individuals as it is for any group in our diverse society.

Building a Community of Hope: E.C.

Witnessing nonspeaking autistic people go to college is the start of an incredible movement. I believe that hope in our futures as autistic nonspeakers is something that has been severely lacking until recently. One reason for this is that we have not had a sense of community and the support and hope that comes from that community. The time spent together at the CBA transition program brings a sense of community with a dream to be a part of a bigger included world, first, on the college campus and then in the workforce. Often, as autistic students we have not had the experience of knowing someone with our challenges who went to college and succeeded. Therefore, being in the community of other typing autistic people who have been successful students at college can bring hope that college success is possible and a viable future for other nonspeaking autistic typers. The community connections that began at CBA extended beyond the 4-day program. There are now meetings of groups of typers that met at CBA and have stayed in touch with each other. Social groups for nonspeaking typers have formed that now meet monthly to strengthen friendships and encourage each other's passions. I have personally stayed in touch with my coauthors, S.C. and D.B., even though we live far apart. We support and celebrate each other's college achievements. I think hope is the key that will push us forward: hope for inclusion, hope for respect, and hope for greater independence through a good college education.

My time as a peer mentor gave value to my college achievements like no other honor could. I was able to share my ongoing journey by doing a presentation to the group and also to have the time over the 4 days to enjoy my peers. We shared our lives and hopes and dreams. As we learned together, ate together, laughed, and shared, we were no longer alone but part of something much bigger and so essential. We came to realize we would no longer be silent, and together we will add our brilliant minds to really lift this world up. Nonspeaking autistic people have a great deal to share, we just never knew until now that others would make room for us. My experience with professors and fellow students is that their hearts and minds are open to welcome a person with differences into the college environment. They will truly open doors in every way to be a part of the college experience. We all need heroes and mentors to go before us and pave the way—to say, “I did it, you can too.” With these college-bound transition program experiences, we see we are indeed a community that is growing strong. That we will support each other as we dream together of a world where we are not that unusual. To have peer mentors included is key to building this sense of hope and identity of being college bound.

Conclusion

Although CBA is one example of an educational support program that incorporates autistic peer mentors, the insights

from the three self-advocates have broader implications. The personal narratives demonstrate the potential benefits and value of including autistic role models and mentors in a variety of educational programming for transition-age youth. These benefits include learning from fellow nonspeaking autistic students about navigating personal challenges and victories in the college transition process, increasing autistic visibility and representation in higher education, and building community of hope among autistic youth. In addition to providing support to autistic students, autistic peer mentors can and should provide input to frame and implement program goals, curriculum, and activities. We urge program directors and educators to keep this in mind and strive for the creation of inclusive and socially just education programs for nonspeaking autistic youth.

Authors' Contributions

S.C., D.B., and E.C. each wrote one of three sections on perspectives of being a peer mentor in a college transition program. Drs. Peña and Kocur wrote the introduction and concluding sections. All authors gave feedback on each other's sections. All coauthors have reviewed and approved the article before submission.

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