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Neurodivergent Students' Perspectives of a Summer College Transition Program

Les perspectives d'étudiants neurodivergents d'un programme de transition estival

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RÉSUMÉ

Le présent document explore les perspectives des étudiants neurodivergents à la suite de leur participation à un programme estival de transition universitaire. Le programme a pour but notamment de promouvoir les études, l'autonomie sociale, l'indépendance, et le climat social de l'université chez les étudiants actuels et futurs. La première année, six étudiants ont achevé le programme, puis huit l'année suivante. Le présent document présente le programme de transition universitaire ainsi que les impressions des étudiants et les modifications avantageuses qui ont été apportées au programme pour la deuxième année. En général, les réponses au sondage révèlent des réponses positives des étudiants des deux années du programme en ce qui a trait aux activités parascolaires, aux relations avec des pairs et à l'autonomie sociale. Les répercussions du programme font l'objet d'une discussion, et des directives sont formulées afin que l'université fournisse à l'avenir aux étudiants neurodivergents une aide appropriée, tout au long de l'année.

MOTS-CLÉS

Études supérieures, neurodivergence, neurodiversité, autonomie, préparation à l'université, transition, adaptation



ABSTRACTS

This paper examines neurodivergent students' perspectives following participation in a summer college transition program. Program goals included promoting academia, self-advocacy, independent living, and the college social atmosphere for neurodivergent college-bound and college students. In year one of this transition program, six students completed the program, followed by eight students in year two. This paper will describe the college transition program, student feedback, and beneficial modifications applied to the second year of the program. Overall, survey responses indicated that students from both program years reported positive outcomes in the areas of engaging in extracurricular activities, establishing peer relationships, and self-advocacy. The implications of this program are discussed, as well as future directions to provide appropriate university support year-round for neurodivergent students.

KEYWORDS

Higher education, neurodivergent, neurodiversity, advocacy, college preparation, transition, accommodation

INTRODUCTION

Neurodivergent students often have difficulties transitioning into college (Blase *et al.*, 2009) and graduating from college (Advokat *et al.*, 2011; Cage *et al.*, 2020). This can be due to students not taking advantage of available academic support, and students lacking a peer group (Orsmond *et al.*, 2013). Also, while it is the responsibility of the institution to allocate resources for these students, colleges lack appropriate academic and non-academic resources to support this population (Anderson *et al.*, 2018). College transition programs can support neurodivergent students and increase student retention (Dwyer *et al.*, 2023). Additionally, self-determination, including self-advocacy, is a key factor in post-secondary success among neurodivergent individuals and those with disabilities (Ju *et al.*, 2017).

In 2022, an interdisciplinary group from Molloy University (then Molloy College) designed and ran a summer transition program for college-bound, neurodivergent high school students. Students, families, and staff provided feedback on the program, which was incorporated into the development of a second program that ran in the summer of 2023. The primary goals of this program included promoting academic competencies, self-advocacy, interpersonal skills, and social integration. This article conveys information about the development and implementation of this evolving program, including the integration of program assessment.

Preparation

In 2021, there was a growing, college-wide recognition of the need to support autistic students at the university. A group of faculty, staff, and administrators began meeting regularly to discuss how to provide support, not only for autistic students, but for students of varying neurotypes including but not limited to mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, and also ADHD. Initially, there was no funding for this project. An interdisciplinary committee was formed with the goal of developing a program to help these students succeed. Committee members represented all facets of the college including different academic departments (e.g., Speech-Language Pathology; Education; Music Therapy) and the university's Accommodations Office. They all shared a common interest in serving and helping this population of students. The benefits of an interdisciplinary committee included the divergent areas of expertise each member provided and the varying perspectives they all shared when creating the summer transition program. In the fall of 2021, the committee hosted a focus group for neurodivergent Molloy students and alumni to better determine their specific needs. Their recommendations led to a draft proposal for a summer program. A mailing list was developed, and prospective families and schools were contacted. Committee members spread the word about the program to guidance counselors, administrators, and educators in local school districts.

In the winter of 2021, an administrator applied for, and secured, funding from the New York State Education Department to support students receiving accommodations at the college, a portion of which was used to implement the summer program. In the spring of 2022, two student

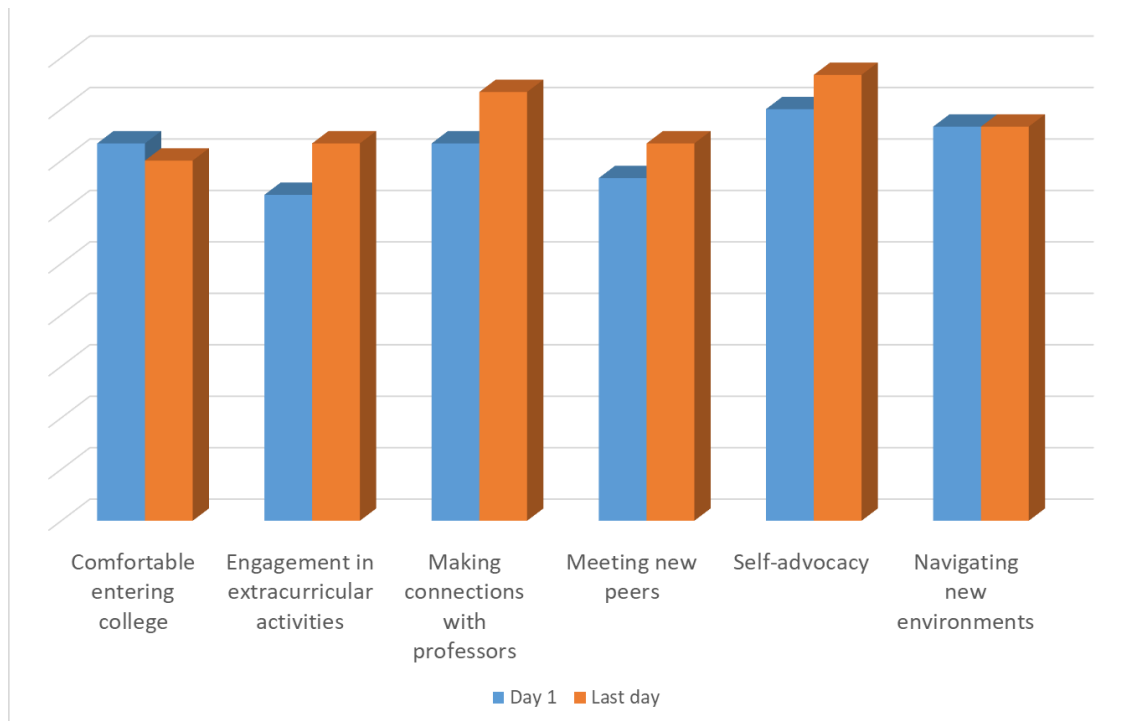
mentors, who were chosen based on their knowledge, skills, and experiences, were selected, and trained to facilitate the summer program and assist with their daily activities. Student peer mentors were considered integral to the program to help with socialization opportunities, which is consistent with findings from other transition programs (Locke *et al.*, 2023).

Summer 2022

The pilot summer college program took place over two weeks during the summer of 2022. The program length was aligned with other summer programs taking place on campus at the time. It included a one-credit college course, “Social Communication through a Neurodiversity Lens,” which was taught by a Molloy University faculty member in the Speech-Language Pathology department and facilitated by two current Molloy students who took on the role of peer mentors. The six neurodivergent students, including rising college freshman and high school seniors, who ranged in age from 16 to 20 years, received credit for the course and involvement in other college readiness activities. Those activities included using the university’s learning management system (i.e., Canvas), acquiring resources and information from the Accommodations office, and becoming familiar with various components of the campus. They participated in additional activities, including music led by Music Therapy faculty and students, yoga, opportunities to navigate the college’s campus and social atmosphere, and discussions related to mental health. The families of participants were also included in the summer program. Caregivers were given the chance to meet twice with faculty from Clinical Mental Health Counseling and Education where they were educated on various social and mental health issues related to college-age students.

The students completed pre- and post-surveys as part of an IRB-approved Quality Assessment and Quality Improvement (QAQI) program. During the post-survey, students reported positive outcomes in engaging in extracurricular activities, interacting with professors, meeting, and establishing relationships with peers, and advocating for their needs (see Figure 1). They also reported that they enjoyed meeting new peers. Students made recommendations for future summer programs to include art and additional class topics. One question on the survey (“I feel comfortable about entering college”) saw a slight decrease. Committee members believed that the younger age of the participants, along with the rigorous academic demands of the course, were possible explanations for this finding. Several months after the conclusion of the summer program, committee members organized a reunion for the students, during which they were reacquainted with one another.

Figure 1. Student Perspectives Pre- and Post-Program 2022.



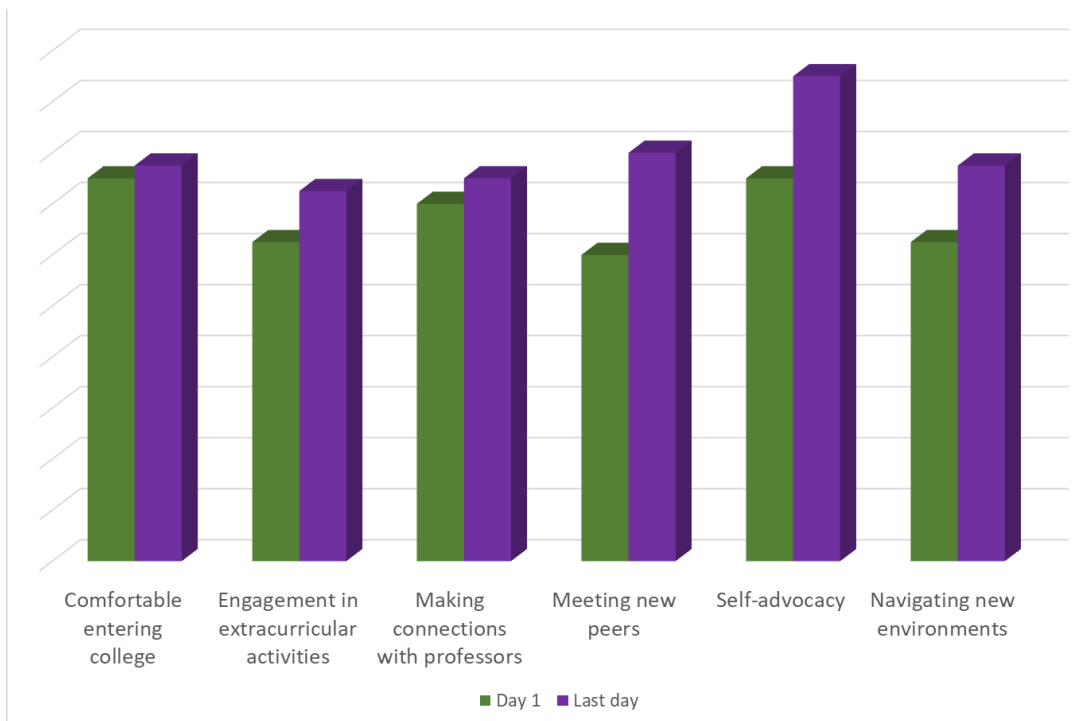
Summer 2023

Based on the survey results from the pilot group and from anecdotal data from the instructor and peer mentors, the committee made changes to the summer program in 2023, one of which included altering the format and structure of the course. The second group was comprised of eight students, who ranged in age from 17 to 20 years, and who were rising college freshman or already enrolled in college to give current university students additional supports. The 1-credit summer course utilized a hybrid delivery format and was more dynamic and engaging than the course offered the previous summer. Program staff believed that exposing the students to asynchronous and in-person work would let them experience both formats and allow them to judge how those different formats accommodated their varying needs. The course, “Communication and Self-Expression through Multi-Modal Experiences,” included the modalities of music, drama, art, writing, and mindfulness. This course’s goals were to give students opportunities to explore their own identities and develop plans to meet personal goals through a student-centered, strengths-based approach. The purpose of this course format was to give students the tools to explore their future identities as college students and advocate for themselves in the higher education setting using different modalities of expression. This course was taught by an instructor in the Speech-Language Pathology department and three current or former Molloy students who served as mentors from various disciplines. One mentor previously attended the summer transition program in 2022 as a participant. This had multiple benefits

including sharing their perspective of what it was like to participate in the program and further increasing their self-advocacy and self-determination by taking on a leadership role.

Prior to participating in the month-long course, students attended a face-to-face orientation meeting where they had the opportunity to meet one another, socialize, and exchange contact information. After the initial face-to-face orientation meeting, the first three weeks of instruction and coursework took place online, asynchronously. Students remotely engaged in readings, weekly discussion posts, and writing activities. Following the three asynchronous weeks, students participated in face-to-face classes for one week, which utilized art, music, drama, writing, and mindfulness activities. As with the pilot summer program, students completed pre- and post-surveys as part of an IRB-approved QAQI program. After the program ended, students reported positive outcomes in engaging in extracurricular activities, meeting, and establishing relationships with new peers, and advocating for their needs (see Figure 2). Students reported that a favorite part of the program was being with friends, which was confirmed anecdotally by program staff and mentors. Just as with the pilot summer program, committee members organized a reunion for these students several months after the summer program ended, allowing them to reconnect once more.

Figure 2. *Student Perspectives Pre- and Post-Program 2023.*



One of the changes implemented based on student feedback from the pilot summer program was the addition of art activities. During the second summer program, students created masks (see Figure 3) and a vision board with goals of exploring aspects of their identity that are visible and invisible, and identifying the various goals they have for themselves as college students.

Figure 3. Masks completed by students.



Based on survey results, the students recommended offering fine arts courses, as well as courses on a variety of different subjects (e.g., computer science, web design, game studies) in the future. Students from both summer programs reported being satisfied with the student mentorship, which is consistent with other studies highlighting the crucial role of mentors in students' post-secondary success (Locke *et al.*, 2023).

Although not mentioned by student surveys, staff involved in the program during the 2022 program noticed that students enjoyed their down time at the end of each day. They would spend that time in a room that had their personal fidget toys, board games, and computers. Often, neurodivergent students benefit from having a sensory space to support self-regulation and decompress if they get overstimulated or just have a space where they feel safe to be themselves (Kim & Crowley, 2021; Kinnaer *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, a sensory room was created for the summer 2023 program. Prior to designing the sensory room, staff gained information about supportive seating and toured sensory rooms in other local college facilities. In collaboration with the university's Student Affairs Department, program staff created a sensory room for students to use that included flexible seating, a hurricane tube, adjustable lighting, a sound machine, fidget devices, blankets, pillows, wall tiles of varied textures and weights, headphones, and eye masks. Students in the summer program spent most of their unstructured time in the sensory room, playing games, talking with one another, or taking a moment to relax. Even after the summer program ended, the room is frequently used by all students throughout the school year.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The two consecutive summer programs provided a positive experience for neurodivergent students in a college environment, with students reporting skills learned that could facilitate the transition to college life, including building skills in self-advocacy and forming friendships.



Future program directions will focus on expanding services based on data and anecdotal evidence. Additionally, longitudinal data will be collected to assess the program's efficacy over time. The purpose of this evolving program is to facilitate student retention, positively impact academic performance, and support neurodivergent students' engagement in their college community. One of the most important takeaways from both summer programs was that students reported meeting new peers and establishing relationships with them. The development of positive social support is associated with increased self-advocacy and academic functioning (Lombardi *et al.*, 2016).

Another future direction with this program is expanding to a year-round program. This will include opportunities to socialize in small groups with their peers in the program, academic coaching, having a unique advisor within the program, and the creation of a 1-credit class to further support the college transition process for neurodivergent students.

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