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Perspectives of College Students with Disabilities Regarding Their High School Transition Experience: Notes for High School Transition Planning

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ABSTRACT

Students with disabilities face many challenges as they transition to postsecondary education. These students are often unprepared for the rigor of postsecondary academics; they often lack self-efficacy skills and have limited awareness of postsecondary supports or cannot successfully access them. This study aims to give voice to college students with disabilities to inform practices of high school personnel involved with transition and higher education professionals supporting them. Using Kohler's Transition Taxonomy 2.0 (2016), researchers sought to study the perspectives of eleven college students on their high school transition experiences in the areas of academic preparedness, self-advocacy skills, and experiences with college counseling. Each of the eleven participants took part in individual interviews designed to inquire about each of the above areas of focus. This paper confirms the study participants felt they were primarily passive participants in their Individualized Education Plan and their postsecondary transition planning process during high school. They also relied heavily on family support during the transition to postsecondary education. Participants also felt unprepared for the academic rigor of college due to the heavy modifications and support given in high school classes and their inexperience with time management. Students also desired more information from their high school transition team, IEP team, and counselors about support available for students with disabilities in college. Recommendations for high school transition practices and future opportunities for research are discussed.

Perspectives of College Students with Disabilities Regarding Their High School Transition Experiences: Notes for High School Transition Planning

CHAPTER 1: PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

Stories unspoken, stories untold, and stories unheard. These are often the experiences of students with disabilities as they attempt to navigate the transitional journey through high school and into a postsecondary educational setting. Students with disabilities endure many challenges when seeking access to postsecondary educational opportunities. These students are often unprepared for the rigor of postsecondary academics due to a lack of inclusion in general education and little encouragement to take more rigorous classes (Chandler et al., 2014; Francis et al., 2018c; Newman et al., 2011). In addition, they often lack self-efficacy skills, limiting their success as they transition into postsecondary education (Anctil et al., 2008; Garrison-Wade, 2012; Zatta & McGinnity, 2016). Finally, they have limited awareness of postsecondary supports or cannot successfully access them due to a gap in postsecondary counseling efforts at the high school level (Kurth et al., 2006; A Majority of College Students with Disabilities Do Not Inform School, New NCES Data Shows, 2022). Thus, these students may not have a happy ending to their educational stories.

High schools are charged with preparing all students for post-school life, including providing special education services to students with disabilities. Federal legislation requires transition planning for high school students with disabilities beginning at age 16 to prepare them for employment and the creation of postsecondary education goals. (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

However, these mandates do little to close the gaps in postsecondary enrollment, completion rates, and employment (Wei et al., 2015). High schools will likely be unable to meet the needs of their students and make improvements to their programs if they do not assess the experiences of their students. Therefore, this research seeks to understand college students with disabilities' perceptions of their high school transition experiences by exploring which practices and experiences were most impactful toward their preparedness for postsecondary education.

In this first chapter, we will examine the historical and current transition landscape for college students with disabilities. We will also discuss how federal initiatives that mandate accommodations for students with disabilities are implemented at postsecondary institutions. In addition, through a local and contextual lens, we will explore current trends, initiatives, and support services specific to students with disabilities. Finally, we will explore the research that examines effective transition practices that best develop student's capacity to transition into postsecondary experiences.

Background of the Problem

Transition support for students with disabilities is an expansive topic. For this study, we are interested in the perspectives of college students with disabilities at a 4-year university and a community college, specifically their perspectives regarding the transition process from high school to college. We are studying these experiences in order to further understand the perspectives of students with disabilities to inform secondary transition practices and better

prepare students with disabilities for college. The intent of this study is to obtain student perspectives to inform secondary special education and higher education professionals of methods that can be used to enhance the preparedness of students with disabilities for the demands of postsecondary education. To examine transition practices, we must first explore the historical perspectives, federal initiatives such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and local context specific to county and city funding systems.

History of Disability Education Law and Support in the United States

U.S. education has long been available to some citizens since the 1700s. It was not until the 1950s, however, that significant legislation was written to support people with disabilities in education. Even then, barriers were overwhelming and persistent. A turning point in the fight for access and equity in education occurred in 1975 with the promulgation of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. This has been slowly followed by additional legislation increasing educational access for people with disabilities. Here, we explore the history of federal involvement in education and discuss historical legislation for people with disabilities, including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1975, the Higher Education Opportunity Act, and the ADA.

The beginning of federal involvement in education can be pinpointed back to the Land Ordinance Act of 1785 and the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 (McGuinn, 2015). These legislative policies linked property line demarcations

with the creation of schools. In 1803, after the admission of Ohio into the Union, Congress required all future states to guarantee public education as a provision of state constitutions and as a condition of statehood (McGuinn, 2015). According to the U.S. Department of Education's Laws & Guidance (n.d.), specific education laws would be deferred to state and local governments and exist primarily through judicial precedent where a court decision deems the authority in deciding similar, future cases involving similar facts or legal issues.

The Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 set a precedent for grant-in-aid programs, authorized the creation of land-grant colleges, and committed the federal government to support them financially through the sale of federally owned lands (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997; McGuinn, 2015). Furthermore, the Hatch Act of 1887 established field research, academic disciplines and curricula, and further services that encouraged the citizenry to harness the necessary skills to compete in the rising need for experienced workers (Rudolph, 1990). The concept of a college education was no longer inaccessible to the common person due to the land-grant concept. Land-grant universities were created to provide study programs in the practical arts as well as classical studies (Gavazzi & Gee, 2018). Brubacher and Rudy (1997) emphasized the idea that "every American citizen is entitled to receive some form of higher education" (p. 64).

While the U.S. Office of Education (USOE) was created in 1867, it was rather compact and aimed to collect statistical data on schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2010b). It wasn't until much later that the federal government passed legislation expanding the department. From 1908 to 1975, more than 130

bills were introduced to eventually form the Department of Education (Radin & Hawley, 1988; Stallings, 2002). One of the bills, the Smith-Hughes Act, was passed in 1917, which provided the first annual federal appropriation for K-12 schooling for vocational education programs (Jones & Edwards, 2019; McGuinn, 2015).

In the 1950s, the discussion of equity was widely considered and resulted in a more prominent federal role. The first implementation of federal education reform was presented in the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958 and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) (McGuinn, 2015). While President Lyndon B. Johnson focused on the "War on Poverty," these extensive statutes would lay the groundwork for future educational reform. While not specifically including students with disabilities, the ESEA funds primary and secondary education and promotes continued professional development, parental involvement, and overall accountability (Skinner, 2022). Amendments to ESEA identified additional students who were enveloped in the existing law. These amendments provided broad terms for protecting students in the United States but did not directly address possible situations and provisions, including students with disabilities (Skinner, 2022).

Prior to federal protections, students with disabilities relied on the services provided by state and local governments (McGuinn, 2015). Historically, children with disabilities were institutionalized and not provided educational opportunities (Nielson, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2023). When education was offered, there was no collaboration or planning for these children and their

families, and schools lacked resources to provide them with quality educational experiences (Nielson, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

During the 1950s, the Federal government-initiated programming, interventions, and some services in the United States to help address special education. Early legislative initiatives, such as Public Law 86-158 and Public Law 85-926, focused on training leaders and educators to support children with intellectual disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Public Law 85-905 and Public Law 87-715 helped to provide captioned and accessible films. During the 1960s, new legislation included support for deaf students, and training for educators expanded to encompass all disability areas (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

Parents and Advocacy. Parents were key in the advocacy for laws that precluded discrimination against people with disabilities, especially in education. In various states, parents formed groups to support and guide their children's lives. Eventually, these groups merged in 1952 to form the National Association for Retarded Children. By 1964, their membership exceeded 100,000 people. Many of these parents became professional lobbyists, befriending legislators to further their cause (Nielson, 2012). In 1972, state laws, such as those in Pennsylvania and the District of Columbia, restricted access to enrollment of children with an I.Q. below 70 (McNeal, 2015). The Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children and the parents of 13 children with disabilities sought legal action against the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to combat the exclusion of children with disabilities in the educational environment (Pennsylvania

Association for Retarded Children v. Pennsylvania, 1972). In 1974, the National Association for Retarded Children changed its name to the National Association for Retarded Citizens, implying that advocacy for people with disabilities does not stop after childhood (Nielson, 2012). This impactful organization changed its name to The Arc in 1992 and still operates today (The Arc, 2023).

Education for All Handicapped Children Act

In 1975, Congress enacted the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of the United States, PL 94-142, to help states meet the individual needs of students with disabilities. As noted in Itkonen (2007), prior to the 1970s, schools had the authority to refuse to educate children with disabilities. It was through immense organization and advocacy, primarily from families of children with disabilities, that change was made. Itkonen goes on to discuss that many of the agencies leading the development of PL 94-142 started as grassroots movements led by parents and families of children with disabilities who were not educated or under-educated. In the early 70s, after many social rights laws had passed, such as the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970 and Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the time was right for change.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

In 1990, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act changed to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which provides the foundation of disability laws in education today (McGuinn, 2015). IDEA was reauthorized in 1997 and included structures around postsecondary transition goals related to post-school outcomes. The changes also require plans for

community and agency resources and identifying who on the team is responsible for the various transition activities (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). With the latest reauthorization in 2004, IDEA increased standards for special education teachers, focused on improved student outcomes, and provided for the addition of early intervention services to better prepare students for success in school. Modifications and revisions were made to ensure that IDEA complimented the No Child Left Behind Act requirements (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). IDEA fully defines essential elements that provide students with disabilities with the opportunities to prepare for postsecondary education and future careers in the workforce.

Furthermore, IDEA defines an Individualized Education Program (IEP) as the official documentation of special education services developed for students with disabilities (Hurd & Piepgrass, 2009; IDEA, 2004; McNeal, 2015). A key feature of IDEA is the concept of a free and appropriate public education. The law states that to ensure a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment, actions cannot be interpreted to limit the rights of a child with a disability (IDEA, 2021). School-age children or youth between ages three and 21 who have a disability as defined by IDEA and whose disability adversely impacts their educational performance are eligible for an IEP. This document is reviewed and revised annually and is an essential function of the IEP team (IDEA, 2004; Rosas & Winterman, 2023). The process to determine eligibility involves a comprehensive evaluation. Results from that evaluation are contained in a report that determines if the disability has any impact on student performance. Once

eligibility has been determined, one of the first and most essential components of the IEP is the present level of academic and functional performance (PLAAFP). The PLAAFP paints a picture of the student's educational needs relative to how their disability impacts their learning (IDEA, 2004; Rosas & Winterman, 2023). The development of the PLAAFP should include the evaluation results and any other data relative to strengths or areas of growth based on the student's ability to meet curriculum standards. Furthermore, the IEP documents the special education, related services, and supports provided by public schools to the students in order to help them achieve their education goals. Short-term goals are subsequently developed and documented within the IEP to determine specific growth in the areas of focus (IDEA, 2004; Rosas & Winterman, 2023).

Content in a student's IEP varies based on the student's current needs and what the IEP team determines are reasonable goals to promote academic progress in different areas. An IEP team is comprised of the student, parents or guardians, a district representative, a general education teacher, a special education teacher, an individual to interpret the instructional implications of any evaluations, and any related service providers, including but not limited to occupational therapists, speech-language pathologists, or social workers (Hurd & Piepgrass, 2009; IDEA, 2004). A central obligation of an IEP team is to develop measurable goals annually to ensure the student can make appropriate progress based on the student's current level of functioning. This stipulation, aligning with FAPE, was upheld in the 2017 Supreme Court decision *Endrew F. ex rel. Joseph F. v. Douglas County School District RE-1* (Zirkel, 2021). In this case, parents of

students with autism sued the school district for making goals that did not promote their child's progress, including using identical goals that had appeared in previous IEPs (Endrew, 2017; Fisher et al., 2020; Zirkel, 2021).

The IEP meeting is held annually or as needed to monitor the goals and student progress. The IEP process for secondary students with disabilities commences with a meeting with the student and parents to understand their needs and preferences for the student's future education. The discussion includes how the student's disability impacts their progress in the general education curriculum and how their goals will eventually be measured and reported on (Dieterich & Smith, 2015; Hurd & Piepgrass, 2009). The IEP meetings should allow every party to share their opinions and make a joint decision to serve the student's educational needs with consensus on the anticipated outcomes at the end of the IEP period.

Transition services and planning must be addressed in the first IEP when the student turns sixteen or younger if determined fitting by the team (IDEA, 2021). The transition plan will be added to the IEP during the school year in which the student turns sixteen unless otherwise stated. Transition planning is designed to be student-driven and provide structure in order to prepare an individual for an independent life after school. This plan should address goals related to training, education, employment, and, where appropriate, independent living skills. In addition, these services must assist the student in reaching their postsecondary transition goals (IDEA, 2021).

Furthermore, local and state education agencies are held accountable for providing transition services (IDEA, 2004). Services are expected to be conducted with fidelity as the schools are evaluated through data submitted by states to the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) in the Annual State Performance Plan/Annual Performance Report. Indicator 13 refers to whether each student's IEP contains relevant goals for postsecondary education that can be re-evaluated annually. In the transition plan, the necessary services must be identified to address the student's individual needs and to meet the postsecondary goals. In addition, evidence is required to show the student was invited to the transition meeting and that parental consent for the participation of outside agencies was given in advance (IDEA, 2004). Indicator 14 specifically addresses student outcomes related to transition. This indicator collects post-high school data for students with disabilities. The school district must collect data from individual students at six months and then again at one-year post-graduation and categorize that data to indicate whether the student is (a) enrolled in higher education, (b) enrolled in higher education or competitively employed, or (c) enrolled in higher education or some other postsecondary education or training program; or competitively employed or in some other employment (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services [OSERS], U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

Although transition planning is mandated by IDEA, students, and families may be unaware of the process and goals of transition practices or may not be provided with the necessary resources to support postsecondary transition goals.

The transition planning process for the IEP has increased awareness of laws and policies regarding access to postsecondary programs, leading to an increase in students with disabilities who enroll in postsecondary institutions (Halpern et al., 1995). However, the educational systems and disability laws differ significantly between K-12 and postsecondary education, and students must be prepared for that change.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973

While IDEA is designed for students through graduation from high school, federal legislation exists to protect and provide services for students who pursue a postsecondary education as well. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was enacted to provide accommodations to adults with disabilities post-high school (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). The enforcement of Section 504 was an incredible milestone to expand access to higher education for people with disabilities. It mandated that any institution receiving federal funding must adhere to the requirements of 504 and its prohibition of discrimination based on disability status. Nevertheless, the lack of specificity in the definition of disability has restricted its effectiveness with some populations within the disability community (Dieterich & Smith, 2015; Zirkel, 2012).

Americans with Disabilities Act

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) and its reauthorization in 2009 reinforced Section 504. While broadening the scope of protection beyond federally funded entities, the ADA further opened access to a larger population with disabilities. In addition, the reauthorization in 2009

broadened the interpretation of the term disability (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). The ADA and subsequent reauthorization further introduced the capacity for higher education institutions (HEI) to support students with disabilities. Since the passage of the ADA, higher education and private postsecondary institutions have been more accessible to students with disabilities. The National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) estimated in the 1995-96 school year, approximately 6% of college students were students with disabilities (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996). Twenty years later, 3,755,000 students with disabilities enrolled in postsecondary institutions, which constituted 19.4% of the total enrollment. This highlights the implications of the ADA and its progress in inclusive postsecondary education for students with disabilities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021).

The ADA defines disability as a "physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, such as caring for oneself, standing, speaking, or learning" (ADA, 1990). Title II of the ADA prohibits discrimination against qualified individuals with disabilities in all public entities' programs, activities, and services. In addition, the ADA contains disability access language regarding programs that are financed through state funding sources such as universities, community colleges, and career and technical education programs, regardless of whether they received federal financial assistance. In addition, it prohibits discrimination based on disability in the activities of places of public accommodations, which covers private colleges and vocational programs (ADA, 1990).

Higher Education Opportunity Act

The Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 (HEOA) made strides to connect IDEA to postsecondary education opportunities (Lee, 2009). The US Department of Education notes the HEOA was signed into law in August of 2008, reauthorizing the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA, 2010a). The American Council on Education outlines HEOA updates and provisions for college costs, accreditation, financial aid provisions, disclosure and compliance, international education, and teacher professional development (American Council on Education, 2008).

Among the reauthorization of HEA, HEOA provided provisions and flexibility to allow college students with intellectual disabilities (ID) to have access to federal financial aid through Pell Grants, supplemental educational opportunity grants, and work-study (Lee, 2009). Students with ID could not otherwise qualify, as some did not earn a traditional high school diploma or General Educational Development (GED) equivalency and did not successfully "meet an 'ability to benefit' test" (Lee, 2009). Furthermore, HEOA clarifies that students with disabilities who are eligible for IDEA can choose not to receive services, or parents may choose for their student to attend a private high school. And finally, HEOA set the stage for an increase in inclusive higher education. It authorized a "model demonstration program for the development and expansion of high quality, inclusive model comprehensive transition, and postsecondary education programs to meet the rising interest and demand for this type of educational experience among students with ID and their families" (Lee, 2009).

Shift in Disability Law Protections After High School

High school students with disabilities must be prepared to transition from an educational institution that determines eligibility to provide necessary accommodations to an institution where they must advocate for themselves (deBettencourt, 2002; Kelepouris, 2014). Students transitioning from a high school setting are accustomed to IDEA's accommodations, modifications, and mandates. In the transition to college from high school, students are no longer protected under IDEA; instead, they are protected under Section 504 and the ADA (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). For those students with a disability, the prospect of entry into and successful completion of postsecondary education can be seen as a significant obstacle to achieving their career goals (Hong, 2015).

The major function of Section 504 and the ADA in this context is to provide access and prevent discrimination in higher education for students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Further, students access accommodations differently than in high school. The process is much more student-initiated and student-driven. Unlike in elementary or secondary school, students must establish their disability status by providing the required documentation (e.g., an IEP, 504 Plan, or a doctor's note with diagnosis) to receive accommodation in postsecondary institutions (AHEAD, 2012). Postsecondary institutions have no obligation to seek out and identify students with disabilities (Kelepouris, 2014).

Making matters more difficult, high school students transitioning to postsecondary education can be reluctant to identify themselves to a disability

office due to the stigma associated with special education at the K-12 level (Lindsay et al., 2018; Newman & Madaus, 2015). Newman and colleagues (2011) revealed almost 37% of students with disabilities disclose their disability in college. However, of students who declare their disability, only 42% receive accommodations, and 72% report that accommodations are helpful (Newman et al., 2011). That stigma is perpetuated as they transition to the postsecondary setting, and the system of self-identification reinforces it (Trammell, 2009). The threat of possible stigma and lack of disclosure results in anxiety and low self-efficacy (Adams et al., 2010).

Another challenge for college students with disabilities is that once a student discloses a disability, federally mandated accommodations may be provided, but these may be very different from supports available in secondary educational environments (Rights and Accommodations, 2023). Student support could also expand beyond federal mandates to additional domains of success like social interactions, living independently, and skills related to executive functioning (Francis et al., 2018a, 2018b).

Postsecondary Institutional Approaches to Accommodations

Every student with disabilities has unique needs, personal characteristics, and learning experiences (Cawthon, 2007), and many times these needs go unmet due to bare minimum practices implemented by postsecondary institutions (Shallish, 2015; Williams & Ceci, 1999). As these needs go unmet, students may not receive the full benefit of this education (Weis et al., 2016). The needs of a student with physical disabilities differ from those with a mental health diagnosis.

For example, students in wheelchairs need architectural access to different buildings and residential facilities, while students with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) may need a quiet, distraction-reduced testing environment. Still, the accommodations colleges provide are limited compared to high school and do not fit the needs of every student with a disability. High school accommodations may be provided to ensure the student succeeds in classes with minimal intervention. College accommodations are granted based on the justification that an accommodation is removing a barrier related to the student's disability that is inhibiting their access to the class itself. A student with ADHD may request extended deadlines for assignments since they had this in high school. However, the student's reasoning for the accommodation may be time management-related, not disability-related. Therefore, if the request is not related to disability, the accommodation would be denied (Strimel et al., 2023).

The most common accommodations provided by disability specialists include alternative exam formats, additional exam time, designated notetakers, provided notes, and adaptive technology, such as audiobooks and texts (Raue & Lewis, 2011). However, colleges do not provide students with individualized transition/support plans. Instead, students' lack of understanding and judgment leads to accommodations that are implemented incorrectly or institutions offer accommodations that do not offer the same level of support for students compared to their experiences in high school (Mamboleo et al., 2020; Strimel et al., 2023).

Social Justice Implications

College Enrollment and Completion

Although postsecondary education is now more accessible to general and special education students, the number of students with disabilities who pursue higher education is disproportionate to those without disabilities. Newman et al. (2011) found that 60% of students with disabilities enrolled in postsecondary education compared to 67% of students without disabilities enrolled (2011). This disparity in students with disabilities who pursue higher education could include a lack of academic preparation for college, a lack of postsecondary-focused transition programs, or weak linkages between secondary and postsecondary institutions (Fairweather & Shaver, 1990). While high schools strive to prepare students for postsecondary success, colleges also provide some support to acclimate students with disabilities. Transitional services at the college level (e.g., disability offices) include services provided by professionals to help college students manage academic and personal issues, such as finance, stress, anxiety, depression, and more. Good transition practice in high school can help college students live healthier, more independent lives (Test et al., 2009).

According to Newman et al. (2011), the 4-year college completion of students with disabilities is 34%, while the 4-year college completion rate of general education students is 51%. The gap in the college completion rates between students with and without disabilities indicates that students with disabilities require comprehensive support to finish their college degrees (Parsons et al., 2023; Safer et al., 2020). It is important to close the gap between the college

completion rate between students with disabilities and their peers because a degree holder can earn a million dollars more in their lifetime compared to a high school graduate (U.S. Department of Commerce U.S. Census Bureau, 2002).

Employment

In addition to postsecondary enrollment and completion, people with disabilities are often underemployed as compared to their non-disabled peers (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021).

According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021), people with disabilities ages 16-64 years are employed at a rate of 29.1% when compared to 70.0% of people without a disability. Before enacting Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act in 1973, discrimination against individuals with disabilities was prevalent in the workforce as few laws in place explicitly mentioned people with disabilities as a protected class (Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act: Analyzing Employment Discrimination Claims, 1984). In 1970, the labor force participation of persons with disabilities aged 18 to 44 was roughly 54% (Yelin, 1994). In 1992, after the enactment of Section 504 and the ADA, the participation of people with disabilities in the labor force increased. Interestingly, women with disabilities in the workforce grew substantially from 34% in 1970 to 51% in 1992 (Yelin, 1994). While these statistics support the idea that legislation has helped people with disabilities access employment, disparities in the workforce between people with and without disabilities still exist. Since 1990, there have been dramatic shifts in the availability of jobs for people with disabilities. The U.S. Department of Labor (2022) highlights the employment participation of youth

with disabilities (age 16 to 19 years) is approximately 33% less than that of youth without disabilities (Chambless et al., 2021). Recent data has been affected by Covid-19, but the trend remains (Kantamneni, 2020). In 2020, 17.9% of persons with a disability were employed, compared to 61.8% of persons without a disability (Department of Labor, 2022).

Educational attainment for the workforce varies between people with disabilities and people without disabilities. Individuals with disabilities who have some college or an associate's degree comprise 21.7% of the population, while those with a bachelor's degree or higher comprise 25.7%. However, individuals without disabilities with some college or associate's degree comprise 64.3% of the population, while those with a bachelor's degree or higher constitute 72.1% (Department of Labor, 2022). The level of education dramatically influences employment in terms of salary range, benefits, and quality of life (Migliore et al., 2012).

During the last decade, legislation has supported workforce development among students with disabilities, including the Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act (2014), which created funding for pre-employment transition services for high school students with disabilities. This legislation mandated collaboration among agencies, including special education, secondary career technical education (CTE), and outside agencies such as Vocational Rehabilitation. It funds services designed to improve positive postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities, such as workplace readiness training, job

exploration, and counseling on postsecondary education opportunities (WIOA, 2014).

Study Context

For this study, our research is influenced by the local and state context, as well as available resources within the St. Louis area educational system facilitated by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MO DESE). We delve deeper into these contexts to provide insight into the learning environments of the student participants and their educational experiences in those environments. We will start with a focus at the state level, subsequently funnel down to the local education agencies, and provide a brief overview of the postsecondary institutions in which the student participants are enrolled.

Missouri Data

As of the 2019-2020 school year, 10% of the school-age population (ages 5-21) is served under IDEA in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Examination of recent data for students across Missouri provides a clear picture of current trends in eligibility for special education services.

The number of Missouri school-age children served by IDEA (K5-21) has increased by nearly 7% from 2012 to 2019 (111,851 to 119,242). Data reported by Missouri School Districts for graduates and dropouts who received special education services under IDEA during the school year 2018-2019 indicates that 24.6% were enrolled in and completed at least one term of higher education (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

According to the Missouri Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development

(2022) Missouri has "13 public 4-year universities, 14 public 2-year colleges, 24 independent colleges, 11 specialized/technical colleges, 17 theological institutions, and more than 150 proprietary and private career schools." The St. Louis community and the surrounding area have almost 60 metropolitan higher education institutions. This includes a range of 2-year colleges that offer certificates and associate degrees to 4-year institutions that offer various bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees.

St. Louis Data

St. Louis, Missouri, is one of the largest cities in the Midwest, with many resources available to supplement the education of students with disabilities. St. Louis is divided into two major metropolitan areas, St. Louis City and St. Louis County, which include surrounding municipalities and suburbs.

According to the United States Census Bureau, the population of St. Louis City is 304,709 (United States Census Bureau, 2020). As of 2022, St. Louis City has one public school district, St. Louis Public School District (SLPS). SLPS serves approximately twenty thousand students from elementary to high school (MO DESE, 2022a). Each school within SLPS has its own Special Education department. The assessed value of SLPS is $4.6 billion, with a tax levy of $4.95 billion (MO DESE, 2022a). SLPS provides an education for all students, including those receiving special education services.

In 1957, the St. Louis County government established a countywide district to support the educational needs of students with disabilities. The population of St. Louis County is 1,004,125 and is divided into twenty-two separate districts based on municipality (MO DESE, 2021). Each district's funding is based on "the taxable portion of the market value of the real estate and/or personal property, such as cars or boats"(Special School District of St. Louis County (SSD), 2022a). None of the twenty-two districts within St. Louis County have a special education department. Instead, districts rely on external staff provided by SSD (Special School District of St. Louis County, 2022c). SSD provides special education faculty and staff to all twenty-two districts within St. Louis County, as well as five self-contained schools and two technical schools (SSD, 2022b). Within those twenty-two districts, SSD provides services to approximately twenty-five thousand students with disabilities, and 59% receive free/reduced-price lunches (SSD, 2022b). Since SSD provides services to students throughout St. Louis County, "SSD's countywide stats allow the District to use the total assessed valuation of the area within its boundaries in determining its tax rate" (SSD, 2022a). For the 2022 school year, the district's total operating revenue was $468 million, with expenditures of about $480 million. Additionally, 67% of the funding was provided by local tax revenue, 23% was allocated from the state government, and the federal government provided 10% (SSD, 2022a). According to MO DESE's report on school district data, SSD's assessed value was over $29 billion for the 2020-2021 school year (2022a). Furthermore, SSD partners with districts to provide resources and support such as professional

development and Extended School Year (ESY). Therefore, special educators who work in these districts, or "partner districts," are employed by SSD but are subject to the rules and regulations of SSD and the partner district in which they are placed (SSD, 2022d).

The SLPS and SSD special education programs are responsible for assisting students toward a smooth transition to postsecondary education (SLPS, 2024; SSD, 2023). At SSD, once a student with disabilities reaches the age of 16, the transition process will start. The IEP goals should be based on age-appropriate transition assessments. An action plan called Transition Plan (Form C) will be added to the student's IEP. A Transition Plan outlines the training and support that a special education student needs in preparation for the transition to adulthood and to participate in society as an adult. Students must be invited to their IEP meeting and to provide input in relation to the IEP, such as their concerns, preferences, and goals to prepare for postsecondary education. The plan may include postsecondary education goals if the student plans to go to college. Form C includes a list of resources and the accommodations needed to support the student in the achievement of their goals.

According to the Special Education in the Partner Districts Report of School Year 2020-21, 37.2% of students who received special education services were in a 2-year or 4-year postsecondary institution during the 6-month follow-up report after graduating high school (SSD Evaluation and Research Division, 2022). With a third of special education students attending post-secondary school, the need for quality transition planning and education became apparent.

University of Missouri-St. Louis

There is a rise in disability awareness and an increasing trend of inclusive postsecondary education programs, and more colleges are providing services such as college-based transition and autism-specific college support programs for students with disabilities (Institute for Community Inclusion [ICI], 2023). However, most options are outside the Midwest (ICI, 2023). Nachman et al. (2022) researched autism support programs in college, and they found that these programs are disproportionately located in Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania.

Think College (2023) notes four inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) programs in Missouri. Think College is a clearinghouse for research and resources for college access for individuals with intellectual disabilities. "Think College provides resources, technical assistance, and training related to college options for students with intellectual disability and manages the only national listing of college programs for students with intellectual disability in the United States" (2023). Think College is a clearinghouse for research and resources for college access for individuals with intellectual disabilities. "Think College provides resources, technical assistance, and training related to college options for students with intellectual disability and manages the only national listing of college programs for students with intellectual disability in the United States" (2023). One of those programs is located in St. Louis at the University of Missouri-St. Louis (UMSL) (ICI, 2023). UMSL is a 4-year public research university with over 15,000 students (UMSL, 2023). The university was founded in 1963 and has

an annual budget estimating $221 million (UMSL, 2023). Further, UMSL has 108,244 alumni and 15,192 students enrolled as of the Fall 2022 semester. The National Center for Educational Statistics (2015-2016) shows a median percentage of students with disabilities in college (undergraduate 19.4% and 11.9% post-baccalaureate) of 15.65% (Snyder et al., 2016). Thus, UMSL could have approximately 2,346 students with disabilities. In addition, at UMSL, there are several pathways for students with disabilities to access specific disability support, such as the Disability Access Services office or the Office of Inclusive Postsecondary Education (OIPE), which includes the Succeed Program, Succeed Plus, and the Link Program (UMSL, 2023).

Disability Access Services (DAS) is the disability services office that supports the

process by which students access accommodations at UMSL. Within DAS, two full-time employees are charged with supporting students in determining eligibility, navigating appropriate accommodation requests, and providing student and faculty support, including memos communicating student accommodations for student use with faculty. UMSL's DAS currently supports around 450 students through their office, encompassing students throughout all degree and non-degree pathways.

The Succeed Program is an IPSE program founded in 2013. Succeed supports approximately 43 students in a 2-year certificate program designed to support individuals with IDD. Students enrolled in Succeed participate in an application and interview process through Succeed rather than participate in the

general admissions process. Once students are admitted to the Succeed program, they begin a 4-semester journey focusing on growth and skill-building in domains such as independent living, social networking, vocational exploration, and academics. Students enroll in required credit courses for their Succeed chancellor's certificate as well as 1-2 electives from the course catalog and are assigned weekly holistic coaching and general subject tutoring each semester. As a non-degree program specifically designed for people with IDD, students can access Pell grants, supplemental education grants, and work-study. Finally, the approximate cost of the Succeed program for residential students with a meal plan is $48,020. The cost as a commuter student is approximately $23,804. Succeed Plus is an IPSE program at UMSL that provides access to students with disabilities to work toward industry-recognized credentials while taking college courses and participating in work experiences. This program is a branch of the aforementioned Succeed program, in which students receive similar support and access to curriculum but are accepted into the university as non-degree-seeking students as an alternative to the general admissions process. Students are supported in the acquisition of external industry-recognized credentials while enrolled in UMSL courses and have an opportunity to access vocational experiences while enrolled. This program, a more vocational-focused program for Succeed graduates, is similar in tuition cost for these students if they live on campus, which is $48,020. The cost as a commuter student is approximately $23,804.

The Link Program is a support model that was established by the Succeed program in 2017, and focuses on providing support services similar to those received by Succeed students, but they are intended for students who are seeking a degree at UMSL. As of 2023, the OIPE currently supports 17 UMSL students pursuing a baccalaureate degree. Of these 17 students, 10 graduated Succeed and successfully matriculated into a degree program. The remaining seven students are transfer or first-time freshmen seeking a degree at UMSL. Students supported in the Link Program have access to the Succeed non-credit curriculum and weekly holistic coaching, as well as general subject tutoring. Students also have access to support and services through the St. Louis Arc, which provides group meet-ups to all Link students. St. Louis Arc was a member of the planning team that established Succeed and has been a community partner since, supporting research-based programming, consultation, and transitional support for students. Finally, it is important to note that the OIPE has direct contact and fiduciary grant-funded contractual relationships with SSD and the St. Louis Arc. There is currently no relationship between the OIPE programs and St. Louis Public Schools.

St. Louis Community College

St. Louis Community College (STLCC), founded in 1962, spans St. Louis County, with four major campuses-Florissant Valley, Forest Park, Meramec, and Wildwood. (STLCCe, 2022). Students also have the ability to take classes exclusively online, known as the online school, and at smaller campuses such as South County. The college has expanded its degree programs since its founding

but has remained a consistent source for students who pursue general education credits before transferring to a 4-year university. Other pathways include 2-year associate degrees, accelerated job training, or certificate programs (STLCC, 2023a).

According to retention reports provided by STLCC, from fall 2021 to fall 2022, the college had a 52% retention rate. This constituted the highest retention rate since 2018. However, throughout all STLCC campuses, the headcount is trending downwards. From fall 2021 to fall 2022, student enrollment dropped by 4% throughout the college (STLCC, 2023c). Meramec, the largest campus, boasted the highest number of students in fall 2021 at 4,707. Unfortunately, the following fall, Meramec's enrollment dropped by 22%, making the online school the largest, with 4,243 students (STLCC, 2023c). While the data suggests that STLCC is losing students overall, the number of recent high school graduates who choose STLCC is rising.

More first-time college students, including dual credit and dual enrollment, are choosing to attend STLCC than before the pandemic. In fall 2018, students under the age of 21 were 6,761, which included 704 dual credit and 574 dual enrolled students (STLCC, 2023c). In 2022, the number of students under 21 was 6,777 and growing (STLCC, 2023c). Dual credit and dual enrollment students have increased to 1,117 and 867, respectively (STLCC, 2023c). After the amendments to the ADA, STLCC started an initiative to instate an office on each campus to accommodate students with disabilities (STLCC, 2020). Each main campus, Florissant Valley, Forest Park, Meramec, and Wildwood, has an Access

Office (AO). Every office has a manager and up to 3 specialists who meet directly with students to assess disability-related needs. Other campuses, such as South County or the online school, utilize the Access Office that is convenient for them. The offices are now connected and collectively supervised by a Director of Access Services (St. Louis Community College, 2018).

Per the Access Office Student Handbook (2018), students' confidential information, such as disability documentation and record of accommodations, is disposed of after five years if a student is not enrolled. Current student data analyzed for the purpose of this study consists of spring, summer, and fall semesters from 2018-2022. Data were collected using interviews with the four managers of each campus Access Office concerning the demographics of their student population.

Students who are attending a postsecondary education institution for the first time, as well as those still in high school, are utilizing accommodations at a higher rate. On average, the districtwide AO registers 960 students in the fall and spring semesters (A. Hasman, personal communication, 2023). However, the AO numbers are increasing beyond pre-pandemic numbers, expanding to 1,103 in the fall of 2022 (A. Hasman, personal communication, 2023). Since spring 2018, the Meramec campus AO has seen the most students, an average of 44.42% of those registered with disability services, including online students (A. Hasman, personal communication, 2023).

The most commonly disclosed primary disabilities throughout STLCC included Learning Disabilities (21.11%), Psychiatric Disabilities (21.5%), Autism

Spectrum Disorder (ASD; 11.41%), and ADHD (21.91%) (A. Hasman, personal communication, 2023). These invisible disabilities, or not immediately apparent, constitute more than 75% of students registered with the AO (A. Hasman, personal communication, 2023). Like UMSL, STLCC cooperates heavily with other St. Louis agencies such as SSD, SLPS, St. Louis Arc, Paraquad, and the Starkloff Disability Institute (Interview, 2023). New strategic plans throughout the college articulate the need to expand community outreach, including advocating for students with disabilities. Furthermore, UMSL directly supports students at St. Louis Community College through the Core 42 program, in which general education credits transfer to any public higher education institution in Missouri (St. Louis Community College, 2023b).

Candidate's Perspective

As a dissertation team, each member has a different professional perspective of the K-16 experience. We each see a need for better transition services at the K-12 level to prepare students for postsecondary education. Hartzler currently serves as the Assistant Director of Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS). Pre-ETS provides high school students with disabilities instruction in self-advocacy and postsecondary counseling in preparation for the changes between high school and college. Hartzler places high importance on agency collaboration with high schools as a result of the missions of this office and observes the benefits that students receive from those collaborations.

Dong currently serves as a Board-Certified Behavior Analyst in special education, developing treatment plans for special education students and training

teachers and paraprofessionals. She has observed the need for knowledge of special education teachers regarding the postsecondary education transition process and the need for self-advocacy skills of special education students to participate in their transition plan meaningfully. Dong believes that the school curriculum should equip special education students with the skills that enhance their transition to postsecondary education.

Kliethermes serves as the OIPE Assistant Director overseeing The Succeed Program, Succeed +, and The Link Program. Within Succeed, Kliethermes has worked as the Vocational Coordinator, developed the Transition Coordinator role, and finally worked as Assistant Director to provide oversight of the student support specialists for all programming. Kliethermes also has experience working within the community agency St. Louis Arc, providing employment support to people with disabilities. At St. Louis Arc, Kliethermes was also able to advise a school-to-work program supporting students within the Special School District. He supported training for students in various positions within a hospital setting during their last year of high school. This program was a collaboration between the Vocational Skills Employment Training program (V-SET), St. Louis Arc, the Special School District, Vocational Rehabilitation, the Department of Mental Health, and a local hospital.

Sandheinrich comes from the perspective of a Disability Support Specialist at St. Louis Community College. Sandheinrich meets with students with disabilities currently enrolled at STLCC to determine appropriate accommodations to access the classroom and campus. Key aspects of the job

require reviewing documentation such as IEPs, 504 Plans, or evaluations of disabilities. Prior to working at STLCC, Sandheinrich was employed by SSD and taught within a partner school district. She facilitated IEP meetings and managed a transition-age caseload. Sandheinrich cooperated with outside agencies such as Pre-ETS and Missouri Vocational Rehabilitation. Sandheinrich also had experience working as a general education high school teacher within SLPS.

Wheatley's experience as a special education teacher and administrator in Missouri has allowed him to see the transition plan unfold for various students. He has observed how the all-too-common low expectations for students with disabilities negatively impact outcomes for these students as they leave secondary education. Wheatley witnessed low expectations from educators, parents and families, the community, and even the students. In contrast, and certainly with less frequency, Wheatley has had the opportunity to observe firsthand some promising examples of effective postsecondary transition planning. On those rare occasions, students were empowered to participate in their educational experiences and planning. With the support and collaboration between family, education, and community members, those students left secondary education with the opportunity and knowledge necessary to live a productive and enjoyable life into adulthood. Wheatley currently works as an assistant commissioner with the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, serving as the state director of special education. Through this perspective, Wheatley has observed how school districts across the state attempt to address transition outcomes and has witnessed the challenges that those districts face in compliance

with the state performance plan, particularly regarding indicators 13 and 14 of the State Performance Plan. These indicators relate to postsecondary transition goals and what students do after they leave high school, either as graduates or dropouts (National Technical Assistance Center on Transition, n.d.).

Specific Problem of Practice

As transition education is focused on the student, educators must be able to adequately recognize and determine which essential skills and competencies apply directly to educating students with disabilities. As students transition from high school to postsecondary education, they must possess a certain level of self-advocacy and knowledge of available support to achieve their academic potential. This study will focus on those three areas of students' perceptions of their transition. This research is couched within Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0 (TTP 2.0) (Kohler et al., 2016). The TPP 2.0 includes five key categories of practice associated with postsecondary transition planning and expands on each to provide additional sub-practices that expand on those five major categories, as seen in Figure 1.

The practice of Student-Focused Planning can be described as the planning where all members of the team identify the student as the primary "who" the plan is about. Within this section, the team identifies the interests and preferences of the student. The planning should be a direct offshoot of the student's identified desires to realize those anticipated goals. Within this category, the team would rely on results from appropriate transition assessments and conversations with the student to develop and plan the specific IEP postsecondary

transition goals. Within this category, the team should also consider how and when to engage the support of outside agencies toward obtaining those goals (Kohler et al., 2016).

Kohler et al. (2016) define Student Development as the skill-development category. Within this component, the team looks at how to best help the student develop those essential skills necessary for their transition to adulthood. The types of skills to be developed are individual, based on the student's needs. Academic skills such as test-taking strategies or organizational skills may be of significant focus, however other social skills such as self-determination or independent living skills will likely be included as well.

Interagency Collaboration is fundamental to developing an all-encompassing system of support around the student. In this section, the team works not only to identify which agencies, service providers, or other relevant stakeholders are but also to ensure the roles for each are clearly defined and established to meet the goals of the individual student. In this category, teams would likely call on the support of Vocational Rehabilitation counselors, employers, related service providers, etc., to develop services designed to accomplish the goals (Kohler et al., 2016).

Family Engagement is the category where Kohler et al. (2016) suggest the family use their knowledge of the students to support and identify the needs to inform the IEP. Families can assist with development and decision-making regarding the postsecondary transition plan by providing a rich understanding of the student. The family unit can support and advocate for the student and help

directly with increasing the opportunities for continuous skill development in the home setting.

The Program Structure looks at how the entire educational system of the student works to support the transition for each student. Kohler et al. (2016) indicate this category goes beyond curriculum development and into the larger school setting around policies and missions of the schools around things such as high expectations for all students, support for graduation, system-wide planning that provides rich opportunities for all students, regardless of path or disability, etc. In this category, schools develop multi-tiered systems of support to ensure success for each and all of its students.

Figure 1

Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0

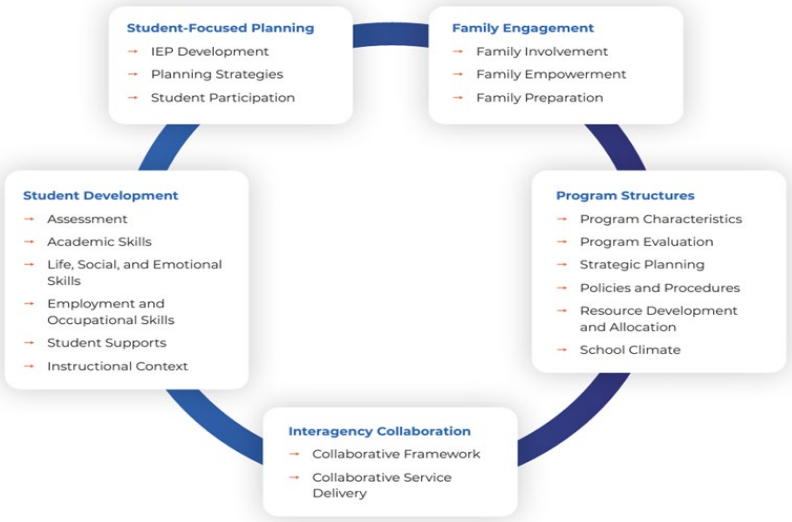

Figure 1. The Overview of Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0. Adapted from "Taxonomy for transition programming 2.0: A model for planning, organizing, and evaluating transition education, services, and programs," by P.D. Kohler, J.E. Gothberg, C. Fowler, and J. Coyle, 2016, Western Michigan University. DOI:10.1007/978-94-6351-134-6_11.

For the purposes of this research, we examine three specific transition factors: 1) self-determination and advocacy, 2) academic skills, and 3) counseling services provided for college readiness. These factors directly relate to the student-focused transition planning and preparation and student development practice categories from the TPP. In student-focused planning, we will explore the intersection between self-determination and advocacy and the transition process through student participation in the IEP meeting and IEP development process, student interests and preferences, and personal wants and needs. In student development, we will delve into academic skills and counseling in college readiness. Academic skills are defined as support to improve academic performance. Counseling in college readiness focuses on both knowledge of disability and available supports as well as the skills to advocate for those supports at the postsecondary level. These specific areas of TPP 2.0 were chosen due to their relationship with college readiness and the ability of students to give voice to the lived experience. There is also ample research that indicates these areas as indicators of postsecondary success (Kohler et al., 2016; Mazzotti et al., 2021; Rowe et al., 2021). Other areas of the taxonomy are focused on school programming and processes rather than student experience. The focus of this study was on the students' lived experiences.

Self-determination & Advocacy

Self-determination is "a dispositional characteristic manifested as action as the causal agent in one's life. Self-determined people (i.e., causal agents) act in service to freely chosen goals" (Shogren et al., 2018). Research has accomplished

much to examine the benefits and the obstacles that directly and indirectly impact student participation and self-determination. Furthermore, there are research-based, beneficial practices supporting the increase in self-determination and independence throughout the IEP and educational process (Wehmeyer et al., 2000). Ultimately, these practices can be used to improve student outcomes by utilizing strategies designed to improve students' self-determination and autonomy. Educators are responsible for helping students take charge of learning and their lives. In fact, students benefit most when they are not only involved in educational decision-making but also directly responsible for their learning journey. One way students with disabilities can improve their self-determination and advocacy skills is through the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI). This model helps support secondary students' ability to proactively identify and find solutions to common obstacles. This skill increases the likelihood of student attainment of their lifelong learning goals (Wehmeyer et al., 2000). The SDLMI process is student-centered but still requires scaffolding and support from educators who are prepared to assist students in the attainment of the necessary problem-solving skills. While it's not a curriculum, the model does provide educators with various learning activities tailored to meet the needs of each individual student and in the context of the student's natural environment. The process helps the student to use their metacognition to take stock of their current knowledge and address how they can navigate potential obstacles on the way to higher levels of skill acquisition.

A key aspect of preparing students for college attendance includes the ability to self-advocate for support. Kohler et al. (2016) identify self-determination skills development as essential for positive transitions. Self-advocacy is an important skill for students with disabilities within the classroom to ensure that they can ask for the clarification or support needed to master the content. However, students lack the ability to communicate and advocate for themselves on how their disability impacts learning (Marshak et al., 2010). The inability of students with disabilities to explain academic barriers can result in barriers to full access in the classroom and, therefore, academic success (Hasman & Matlock, 2021; Marshak et al., 2010).

Despite the proven benefits and power of student self-determination, some obstacles exist regarding student leadership and participation in the IEP process. Participation can vary based on the disability category (Davenport et al., 2021). Typically, students with complex cognitive disabilities and those with multiple disabilities participated less than those with intellectual disabilities (Davenport et al., 2021). Davenport and colleagues indicate that while these differences exist relative to category, consideration should be given to other IEP participants' biases based on the disability category. This practice may, in turn, dictate the experiences afforded to students as it relates to their varying levels of participation (Davenport et al., 2021). In addition, a study of Deaf-blind students illustrates how disproportionate the data are on student participation (Zatta & McGinnity, 2016). The outcome was lower levels of postsecondary success and fulfillment. The study, however, supported evidence that when the IEP team takes

a person-centered approach to plan, this method enhances the student's ability to come up with essential plans for life that consider their interests and desires. This approach produced the best outcomes relative to postsecondary experiences for the student (Zatta & McGinnity, 2017).

Even more alarming than the disparities associated with different disability categories is that further marginalized groups of students are even more susceptible to a lack of engagement in IEP and transition planning (Kucharczyk et al., 2022). One of the most impacted groups identified by multiple studies was English Language Learners who correspondingly qualify for special education services as a student with a disability. Not only do these students often lack access to quality schools in communities with high poverty, but the odds stack up against these students due to bias and low expectations (Kucharczyk et al., 2022).

Academic Skills

Students with disabilities are matriculating to higher education institutions at an increasing rate (Brand et al., 2013; Newman et al., 2011). As these numbers increase, many students with disabilities are not completing their programs due to a lack of academic preparation (Mitchell & Gansemer-Topf, 2016). Despite these barriers, higher education institutions continue to implement high academic expectations (Walker, 2016). Additionally, first-generation college students with disabilities have lower GPAs than their continuing-generation counterparts (Walker, 2016). Marshak et al. (2010) examined barriers to student success that included deficits in areas such as insufficient knowledge of supports provided by their institution, perceived practicality of student services, as well as negative

interactions with university faculty. Students were reluctant to identify as students with a disability, which is necessary to get academic accommodations.

Expectations of high school and college are vastly different. A student's independence in academic and social life will be unfamiliar and will require a different set of skills. There may be detrimental consequences if these skills are not learned before or during their first year of college. As part of Kohler's TPP 2.0, during the time that a student prepares to enter college, they should have developed academic skills and strategies to be successful. These skills include but are not limited to comprehension, computation, study skills, test-taking skills, participation, organization, going to class, and doing homework (Kohler et al., 2016). Upon exiting secondary school, students transition from having support in these areas to primarily relying on themselves (Marshak et al., 2010). Students with disabilities who transition to higher education have an increased risk of being ill-prepared for college and have a larger gap in academic readiness (Hasman & Matlock, 2021; Mitchel & Gansemer-Topf, 2016; Parker & Boutelle, 2009; Wolf, 2001).

Murray et al. (2011) identified a key aspect of academic success as the willingness and knowledge of faculty to assist students with disabilities. Faculty who reported insufficient knowledge of disability requested further training to address the deficit. Sometimes, instructors refuse to believe that a student may experience barriers and do not implement the accommodations approved for the student (Marshak et al., 2010). Low academic achievement in college classes may

result from a lack of support in the classroom compared to high school and the lack of faculty preparation to serve students with disabilities.

Another consideration must be made for academic support provided to college students at various institutions. Campuses that offer scholastic support to students, regardless of disability, are in the minority (Walker, 2016). However, students who attend academic support services would have higher academic achievement than those who attend infrequently or not at all (Troiano, 2010). This implies that some students with disabilities may need to supplement instruction using college resources to mimic the support they were given in secondary school.

In the area of academic readiness, Francis et al. (2018c) surveyed college students with disabilities to find their level of preparedness for college. Students who reported being prepared identified multiple academic practices that were most beneficial to their transition to college. Those students reported writing skills, academically rigorous courses, and being assigned a college-level amount of work as beneficial to their preparation for the academic rigor of college. In contrast, students who indicated they felt unprepared or very unprepared reported high schools could do a better job of helping them understand their disability and become more aware of accommodations that may be beneficial and available to them at the postsecondary level. Similarly, Garrison-Wade (2012) found that students felt their high school left them unprepared for college by not allowing them to take academically rigorous courses. Many students had not taken advanced math or English classes, putting them at a disadvantage. Participants in that study reported their high school classes to be too "easy" or "watered-down."

Students were then resigned to taking remedial classes, which can prolong the coursework for degree completion (Garrison-Wade, 2012).

By age 14, students with disabilities need to learn the courses and academic components that will aid in their preparation for higher education (Kohler et al., 2016). Multiple studies have found students with disabilities are not taking classes to prepare them (Francis et al., 2018c; Garrison-Wade, 2012). This could mean that students were either not allowed to enroll in advanced classes or discouraged from doing so. Davis (2016) found that students with disabilities reported access to college-level classes as being very important to their success at the college level. It is unclear from the report why students are being denied access to rigorous courses. However, one theory could be that teachers and counselors are unwilling to let students experience failure. Recent movements in disability services have emphasized the need for increased practices that consider the dignity of risk, which allows individuals with disabilities the freedom to make choices and take risks that may lead to failure as part of the full development of an individual, with or without disabilities (Bumble et al., 2022).

Many students with disabilities are going to college unprepared academically for the rigor of college courses even though there has been much research conducted on the benefits of including students with disabilities in the high school general education setting (Baer et al., 2011; Mazzotti et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2015). Inclusion in general education is similar to that of a postsecondary institution, as their accommodations and needs must be met in a regular classroom setting. Baer et al. (2011) found that students who receive

instruction in a general education setting for at least 80% of the time were significantly more likely to enroll in postsecondary education. Further, inclusion in general education predicted the enrollment of students with disabilities in postsecondary education 90% of the time (Baer et al., 2011). The more often students can practice using their accommodations in a regular classroom, the more prepared they will be to perform at the postsecondary level.

Adjusting to college can be difficult because of the lack of executive functioning skills such as time management, planning, and organization (Langberg et al., 2013). Maitland & Quinn (2011) proposed that academic, organizational, and daily living skills are critical areas to prepare a student for higher education. To be successful in college, students should have academic skills (e.g., managing assignments, taking notes, or writing papers), organization skills and time management (e.g., completing assignments on time), and daily living skills (e.g., getting enough sleep or preparing meals). Compared to their typical peers, students with ADHD scored lower in all three of these areas and required more help to be successful in college (Canu et al., 2021). Toplak et al. (2006) suggested that students with ADHD have a high chance of demonstrating behaviors that reflect poor self-control or a maladaptive daily routine due to their lack of executive skills related to planning and organization or their inability to judge the passage of time accurately. Maitland & Quinn (2011) also suggested that most successful students with ADHD in high school received intensive assistance from parents and teachers and benefited from a rigid schedule and environment in the high school setting. These may limit the opportunities for

students with disabilities to learn the essential organizational skills required in the less supervised environment at college.

> Several variables contribute to the success of students in higher education. Adams et al. (2010) compiled sources that had been cited to predict college adaptation and success, including ACT scores and intellectual ability, problem-solving skills and coping styles, emotional stability, self-esteem, assertiveness, attributional style and locus of control, optimism, sense of mastery, personality variables, motivational orientations, learning approaches, the number of hours spent online, stressful events and social support, and perceived distance from home to college. (Adams et al., 2010, p.167)

Students with disabilities not only have to conquer these variables but also adapt to college life and the barriers of inaccessibility. After receiving accommodations, predictors of students successfully adapting to college include "problem-solving skills, stressful events, perceived social support, resource use, satisfaction with the disability resource office, attachment to parents and peers, extra-curricular involvement, and perceiving the need for academic and counseling support" (Adams et al., 2010, p. 168). The ineffectiveness of secondary transition planning directly inhibits the ability of students with disabilities to address these variables.

Counseling for College Readiness

While the ADA and the HEOA have made postsecondary education a more realistic and accessible option for people with disabilities, studies have found that students are not receiving the support that they need to articulate

college as a postsecondary goal. Hitchings et al. (2001) interviewed 100 college students with disabilities, in which around 20% of students communicated that they were discouraged from considering college attendance by their counselors or teachers. While transition and IEP practices for college transition are improving, access to college counseling in high school may be limited. The view of a high school counselor who provides college counseling for students with disabilities is a fairly new concept. Skinner and Schenck (1992) note that college counseling for students with disabilities was once an added responsibility above and beyond job expectations. In a national study by Milsom and Hartley (2005), less than 70% of counselors support or participate in transition planning for students with disabilities. From the student perspective, only around 8% of students in the Hitchings et al. (2001) study reported meeting with a counselor to discuss college. The National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 (NLTS2) highlights that while over 75% of students with disabilities have college goals, only 9% attend a 4-year university, and only 19% attend a 2-year university (Newman et al., 2011). These numbers are in contrast to the initiatives set by "(a) the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, (b) the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (2018), and (c) the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA; 2004) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973" (Lombardi et al., 2022). Lombardi et al. (2022) note there is minimal empirical research examining school counseling and providing college and career readiness to students with disabilities. This study also reveals that students with disabilities (especially students of color with disabilities) are less

likely than their non-disabled peers to (a) receive support filling out college applications, (b) identify courses to take to prepare them for college, (c) receive support in understanding standardized test results, and (d) prepare for and go on college visits.

Programming and suggested practices for college counseling for students with disabilities are needed to address the gap in research (White et al., 2017). Milsom and Hartley (2005) note that some of the desired skills and practices that high school counselors should be addressing with students with disabilities include awareness and knowledge of disability, an awareness of the support and services in a postsecondary educational environment, awareness of disability legislation, and skills and strategies to self-advocate. Quigney (2017) goes further to note that social skills, "practice of self-determination" and "perseverance, as well as involvement in setting goals and working with a strong support network," are desired college and career readiness practices school counselors should be approaching with students.

Purpose Statement

While the implementation of accommodations in higher education is improving, there is little change in transition practices in high schools to prepare students with disabilities for college transition and expectations. As college graduation rates are discouragingly lower for students with disabilities than students without disabilities, it is imperative that secondary educational institutions close the college preparedness gap between students with disabilities and those without. This study aims to contribute to the growing research that

reflects the perspectives of students with disabilities and their experiences in self-determination and advocacy, academic skills, and college counseling. To do so, this study examines high school transition practices and the perspectives of students with disabilities and includes recommendations for improvement and innovation.

Research Questions

This study seeks to understand the following research question: What are the perspectives of college students with disabilities regarding their high school special education transition practices that prepared them for college relating to:

1) self-determination and advocacy,

2) academic skills, and

3) counseling for college readiness?

Significance

This study explores transition practices offered by secondary educational institutions and how they were perceived by the students whom they were designed to support. Analyzing those perceptions can inform transition planning and programming at the secondary level to better prepare students to succeed in a postsecondary education setting.

The examination of current literature and perceptions of college students could provide data that secondary education institutions may be able to use to enhance services to meet the needs of a diverse student body. Furthermore, this study may give rise to future programs to bridge the transition gap between secondary and higher education institutions for students with disabilities.

Review of the Literature

In the following section, we investigate and summarize published research literature and online resources relevant to special education students and the transition to postsecondary education. The literature is organized in chronological and thematic order. We examine the work of Kohler et al. (2016) to understand the development of the TPP 2.0 that is crucial to this study. In addition, we will explore the research regarding the specific portions of the framework that contribute to our study.

After the ADA was signed in 1990, continual concerns remained around a lack of post-school success for students with disabilities. These concerns prompted three initiatives to address the ongoing issues: 1) federal special education and disability legislation, 2) federal, state, and local investment in transition services development, and 3) effective transition practices research (Kohler & Field, 2003). At this time, there began a shift in transition planning in which it was viewed as an essential underpinning of education programming for students with disabilities rather than just a stand-alone isolated component. Additionally, the demand for evidence-based practices increased as compliance requirements expanded at the federal and state levels (Rowe et al., 2021). In an effort to identify evidence-based practices, OSEP and the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) developed the National Technical Assistance Center for Transition: The Collaborative (NTACT: C) (NTACT, n.d.). The organization is tasked with identifying evidence-based practices and indicators for postsecondary success. NTACT: C provides training, evidence, research-based practices, and

systematic reviews to various stakeholders involved with transition-aged youth. Using guidelines provided by NTACT: C, multiple literature reviews have consistently identified predictors of postsecondary success related to postsecondary education enrollment and other areas of transition (Mazzotti et al., 2021; Rowe et al., 2021). As these indicators are identified and adopted among transition professionals, researchers seek to develop tools using effective practices that can be implemented by practitioners in the transition field (Kohler et al., 2016; Mustian et al., 2013).

Past efforts such as Will's Bridge Model, Halpern's Revised Transition Model, and Wehman's Three-Stage Vocational Transition Model were initially developed to connect theoretical models to practice (Kohler, 1996). These early efforts helped to shift the focus from policy to action. However, each focused heavily on employment and the support of students during their transition from secondary education. Wehman's work expanded upon these ideas to begin planning in advance for a student who transitioned from secondary education. Kohler developed the Taxonomy for Transition Programming (TTP). This work was the first of its kind to combine theory and practice, including transition to postsecondary education (Kohler, 1996). With support from NTACT: C, Kohler & Field (2003) developed a framework of effective transition practices known as the TTP. This model defines five categories of practice: 1) student-focused planning, 2) student development, 3) interagency and interdisciplinary collaboration, 4) family involvement, and 5) program structure and attributes.

Each of these is further defined by specific components that impact each essential category.

As a result of continual study and transition-focused education, researchers revised their previous work and developed the TTP 2.0 (Kohler et al., 2016). This revised framework changed the category of family involvement to family engagement and added additional practices aimed at student development. The family engagement and the new student development components emphasize empowerment for both stakeholders (Ellis, 2017). This widely accepted model will be the guiding framework for the current study.

Shortly after the development of the SDLMI, educational research took a deep dive into self-determination for students with disabilities. One of the most systematic efforts to evaluate and report on strategies that the education enterprise can use to effectively support student self-determination was realized in 2001 with the introduction of the Self-Determination Synthesis Project (SDSP). This project combined a review of the literature. It examined multiple studies, including case studies of exemplar sites in different school districts across the United States, all in an attempt to create a final amalgamation of self-determination-related information (Wood & Test, 2001). The authors of this document wrote it to inform the work of educators and other adults who support students with disabilities (Wood & Test, 2001).

Driven by the desire to learn about self-determination, research has been undertaken to understand why this attribute is worthy of extensive study, specifically in education, and why self-determination is taught to students with

disabilities. One could conclude from the SDPS that those reasons for an emphasis on SD relate not only to the positive impacts on life and general outcomes for future endeavors but also that it is ultimately a right to which all are entitled, chiefly those students with disabilities (Wood & Test, 2001). In addition, other skills are enhanced, including self-advocacy, self-esteem, and a sense of empowerment for the students (Wood & Test, 2001).

Research on student participation in the IEP process and meetings suggests the importance of this practice in an effective student-centered undertaking (Wood et al., 2004). Lipscomb et al. (2017) found that only 32% of students with intellectual disabilities significantly contributed to the development of their IEP. That number decreased to 29% when investigating students with autism and 23% for students with multiple disabilities. As the significant benefits of self-determination have been identified, much of the research focuses on how students can acquire these skills, particularly highlighting students who take an active role in their IEP and transition planning process (Agran et al., 2008). The researchers from the study further suggest that IEP goals must consist of verbiage explicitly related to self-determination using the student's voice (Wood et al., 2004). A less direct approach may capture student voice through various SD student transition assessments (Raley et al., 2022). Educators can understand students' perceptions through multiple tools based on their responses to these assessments and integrate those ideas into the IEP and transition plans (Raley et al., 2022). This practice allows students to voice preferences, desires, and wishes

in a way that they perceive as less threatening than the typical IEP meeting (Raley et al., 2022).

Transition planning is critical to discern the wants and needs of the individual student. Cavendish and Connor (2018) suggest a student-led or facilitated IEP meeting in which the student is not merely the topic of conversation and planning but an essential team member. In addition, they stress the importance of ensuring the meeting utilizes a conversational approach rather than the typical agenda-led IEP meeting, particularly regarding transition planning. This focus parallels the work of multiple researchers on the value and necessity associated with TTP 2.0 and other frameworks related to student-focused planning (Hamblet, 2014; Kohler et al., 2016).

One related study by Matthew et al. (2019) looked at the transition process and how it might be different for males and females. In many studies related to the transition process, the subjects are primarily male. However, research on female students uncovered similar themes related to student participation in the IEP process (Matthews et al., 2019). The same disconnect existed between female students' wants and needs and their involvement in transition planning. The four participants indicated the process was emotional and included their future dreams. However, the authors stated an overall need for more student participation in the process (Matthews et al., 2019). One participant always attended the meetings but rarely participated. Another described the IEP meetings as a time when the IEP team asked her the same personal questions about where she would live and work. She also indicated that as a 19-year-old, she wasn't old enough to add anything of

value. Another described the focus on her progress in the vocational program and that they had yet to discuss what she would do after graduation (Matthews et al., 2019).

The work of Trainor et al. (2016) also paralleled the work of Kohler et al. (2016). Using the TPP 2.0 as a framework for examining the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS2), they discovered that students with high incidence disabilities, including learning disabilities, emotional disabilities, and attention deficit disorders, had high rates of transition planning and programming and stakeholder involvement during the planning process. However, these results were largely reported by the teachers who provide the services, with no account for student input. While the NLTS2 has given researchers a vast amount of data that depicts postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities, it does little to capture the experience of the students involved.

The literature also highlights specific disabilities that are impacted by the transition process. Students with learning disabilities and ADHD, regardless of gender, find the extreme change to a traditional 4-year university setting particularly challenging (Hamblet, 2014). These students often move into the postsecondary setting to find much of their grade based on just a few assignments or assessments during the semester, which requires a much more daunting level of reading and note-taking than previously experienced in high school. Without a strong command of these skills, students often struggle to begin an assignment or prepare for a test (Hamblet, 2014).

Reports of students' perceptions of their levels of participation and involvement in planning the IEP team painted a similarly grim picture (Cavendish & Conner, 2018). Only six of 16 students reported that they attended their last IEP meetings; only two indicated that they felt their opinions had been considered in the discussions. The remaining respondents either didn't attend the meeting or indicated the meeting "wasn't really about me" (Cavendish & Conner, 2018). Students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) demonstrate an even lower level of participation as compared to students from all defined disability groups. Nearly one quarter (23%) of students with ASD never attended their IEP meetings as compared to students with an intellectual disability (11%) or learning disability (4%) (Ruble et al., 2018). There exists a clear need to support student participation in the IEP. Students must be able to recognize and speak to their strengths and areas for growth. Once they are admitted into college and approach the disability services offices for assistance, they must be able to ask for accommodations that are necessary to support their needs (Hamblet, 2014). If students lead their IEP meetings with supporters present, they are acting to better understand and articulate their skills and deficits. Throughout this process, students are implementing strategies to better advocate for themselves (Hamblet, 2014; Kohler et al., 2016).

For many students with disabilities, parent involvement plays a vital role in the student's transition success. For example, in a study that questioned the experiences of young people with Asperger's syndrome and high-functioning autism, many responses indicated the increased importance of parental support

(Mitchell & Beresford, 2014). This included the role of parents to not only support and participate in IEP meetings but also to support and coordinate meetings and college visits that the participants felt they would not be able to execute alone. In addition, this study showed that parents who provided emotional support were critical to the participants. Respondents indicated that their parents understood them best and knew their individual needs best to help support their transition planning.

The most alarming finding of the research demonstrates an apparent lack of consistency with which transition planning and support directly translate into positive transitions. In a study conducted by Sigmund (2006), the author sought to evaluate postsecondary outcomes for students who were in special education programs and identified as having Severe Emotional Disturbances (SED) or Emotional Behavioral Disorder (EBD). Of the participants in the survey, only 40% indicated that they were still enrolled in school within two years following secondary schooling. Some participants completed training; however, those same students' earnings outcomes were similar to those of their peers who simply sought employment immediately following high school (Sigmond, 2006).

While much research has been done regarding postsecondary education enrollment rates for specific disability categories, enrollment numbers across all disability categories continue to wane. Newman et al. (2011), in The National Longitudinal Transition Study – 2 (NLTS2), detailed the postsecondary education experiences of 4,800 people with various disabilities. In this study, 60% of students with disabilities continued their education after high school.

Comparatively, VanBergeijk et al. (2008) shared that approximately 50,000 young adults with ASD graduate high school annually across the United States. Yet only 15,000 enroll in college (around 30%), and only 3,000 graduate (2008). Furthermore, graduation rates are astonishingly lower for people with disabilities (49%) when compared to their non-disabled peers (60%; Newman et al., 2011). Following the disclosure of disability, Roux et al. (2015) found that only one-third of students with autism identified as having a disability when enrolled in a postsecondary institution. Additionally, only about 42% of those who disclosed their disability received accommodations or other support. Interestingly, 72% of students who received accommodations find them helpful (Newman et al., 2011). The prominence of individuals with disabilities in higher education highlights the need to evaluate current practices in student support to create an accommodating and inclusive environment for diverse learners.

Roux et al. (2015) show in the National Autism Indicators Report that of those disclosing autism spectrum disorder (ASD) as a diagnosis, the top five accommodations in college are: a) testing accommodations, b) human aids, c) assignment accommodations, d) materials/technical adaptations, and e) physical adaptations. When discussing accommodations, it is vital to note that less than half of students who disclosed a disability received accommodations (Roux et al., 2015). Rando et al. (2016) report there is a presence of ASD-specific support in higher education, though the number of published outcomes is minimal. Brown (2017) notes in a study involving 469 total participants from 2- and 4-year higher education institutions, more than 90% report "academically focused

accommodations," only "28.3% of institutions offered ASD-specific services" (2017, p. 1). Brown's study further implies a need for additional support beyond "general services" to better support students with ASD (Brown, 2017).

Disabilities are typically accommodated in the classroom through the use of strategies such as in-class note-takers, interpreters, or extended examination time. Postsecondary institutions rarely had accommodation plans in clinical practice settings, which is not standard (Vos et al., 2019). Research showed that clinicians tended to use the one-size-fits-all approach in accommodation recommendations (Weis et al., 2016). At times, clinicians did not take into account historical student information, ignoring laws pertaining to disabilities and accommodations within higher education institutions. As a result, the usefulness or appropriateness of accommodations would be disputable (Weis et al., 2016).

One significant barrier to adequate accommodations is the accommodation selection process and the lack of access to disability support in college (Kurth, 2006). Kurth's study collected data from three states, including 15 schools, 16 administrators of disability support, and 108 students with ASD. The findings stated that students with ASD find accommodations "specific to a certain disability are not necessarily as effective as accommodations to their personal-individual needs" (2006, p. 3). Current literature on ASD and disability support in higher education indicates a need to evaluate accessible support outside disability services. The research literature implies that support for students with disabilities is needed beyond an access office, and the lack of these accommodations and considerations is a significant concern for students and families (Sarrett, 2018).

Research has identified indicators for postsecondary success and effective practices (Mazzotti et al., 2021; Rowe et al., 2021), but those practices are often not communicated to teachers or special education directors. This lack of dissemination is detrimental to the effectiveness of transition planning at the secondary level (Mustian et al., 2013). Additionally, as students progress through educational journeys in higher education, the burden of being ill-prepared to advocate for their own needs, self-disclose, and navigate an unsupported educational experience has detrimental effects on successful postsecondary education outcomes (Hong, 2015).

CHAPTER 2: METHODS AND DESIGN FOR RESEARCH

To achieve positive postsecondary outcomes, students with disabilities should come to college prepared academically and have a working knowledge of postsecondary support. This research seeks to understand students with disabilities' perspectives regarding whether or not they felt prepared to be successful in college based on their experiences and preparation in high school. In order to gather more insight into the phenomenon of their high school experience, researchers chose a qualitative phenomenological research approach (Creswell, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Using Kohler's TTP 2.0 (Kohler et al., 2016), we examined specific areas of transition, such as self-determination and advocacy, academic skills, and counseling in college readiness. These factors are regarded as predictors of a positive transition from high school to postsecondary education (Kohler et al., 2016). In this study, researchers set out to determine if students with disabilities received instruction and support in these specific areas

of transition and whether or not they were beneficial in their transition into higher education. Exploring students' experiences can help high school transition programming better prepare their students for academic success and independence in college. In addition to informing secondary educators about beneficial services and experiences, this study can assist higher education institutions in helping students with disabilities gain new skills to succeed academically. Postsecondary institutions can better serve their students with disabilities if they understand where students' skills are lacking and have better programming to assist students with obtaining necessary services and accommodations to help them succeed (Adams et al., 2010).

Research Design & Research Questions

According to Brantlinger et al. (2005), qualitative research is a "systematic approach to understanding qualities, or the essential nature, of a phenomenon within a particular context" (p. 195). Phenomenological research design is recommended to provide an opportunity for researchers and the community to gain a new understanding of the meaning of the phenomena through lived experiences (Bliss, 2016). More narrowly, phenomenology seeks to understand the basic structures and meaning of a lived experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). We found this approach appropriate, as we sought to understand the essence and basic structure of the high school transition experiences of college students with disabilities. To guide our research, we posed the following research question: What are the perspectives of college students with disabilities on high school

special education transition practices that prepared them for college relating to 1) self-advocacy, 2) academic skills, and 3) college counseling?

Exploring students' transition experiences first-hand is an important piece of this study. While there has been extensive and readily available research that quantifies the effectiveness of transition programs (Mazzotti et al., 2021; McConnell et al., 2021; Scruggs et al., 2021; Test et al., 2009), little research has been conducted to examine effective transition practices from the student's perspective. This study explores the potential gap in support and enhances the growing trend to include students with disabilities' voices in education policy and decisions (Holquist, 2019; Mitra & Gross, 2009). Employing a qualitative approach allows people with disabilities to have a voice where they have been historically silenced by sharing the meaning of their experiences (Brantlinger et al., 2005). Including student voices in our research allowed for a deeper understanding of the experiences of former high school students and synthesized those experiences into meaningful data to be shared with both secondary and postsecondary disability support professionals. Examining this data and including the voices of individuals with disabilities may influence similar research to include people with disabilities in the study. This will also enhance professionals' understanding of students' college preparedness, thus improving student support and allowing transition planning and services to transform into a valuable tool for preparing students for postsecondary success (Francis et al., 2018c).

Participants

This study utilized convenience sampling for demographic and geographical reasons (Robinson, 2014). This included a sample of college students enrolled at a midwestern, urban, public, 4-year university and students enrolled in a similarly situated, nearby public community college. All participants were connected in some way to disability support services at their respective institutions. The university students' enrollment status included first-year students, students who have matriculated into a degree program after completing a 2-year inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) program for people with disabilities, and students who have transferred from another higher education institution. All participants were degree-seeking students enrolled in college-level courses.

The proposed sample size was a maximum of 18 students, with a comparable number of subjects from each institution. Phenomenological methodologists have thus far offered ambiguous guidance regarding the suggested sample size for qualitative research (Bartholomew et al., 2021; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). However, Bartholomew et al. (2021) implied that a smaller sample size would lead to a better quality study. That study also found a sample size that reaches saturation in responses has reached a sufficient sample size. Several related studies have also found saturation to be an appropriate means of determining sample size (Guest et al., 2006; Sim et al., 2018). Guest et al. (2006) determined that 12 was sufficient to reach data saturation. For this study, we found 11 to be the number of participants needed to fully understand the

experiences of students. We monitored our data for informational redundancy to determine if saturation had been achieved or if additional participants were needed. The research team determined that after 11 interviews, saturation had been achieved. All study activities were approved by the university's and the community college's Institutional Review Boards.

Inclusion / Exclusion Criterion

The inclusion criteria for this study consisted of the following: (1) The participant was a student enrolled at either St. Louis Community College-Meramec or the University of Missouri-St. Louis, (2) the student participated in some form of disability support services at their respective institution, and (3) the student must have previously received special education services at the secondary level, as prescribed by an IEP. Students were screened to ensure they met the inclusion criteria, using records reviewed by disability support professionals at their institution. The first two inclusion categories allowed researchers to obtain a convenience sample of students, as two team members work in disability support services at each institution. The third inclusion criterion was necessary to select a sample of students who received transition-specific services at the high school level. To examine the transition experience and perceptions, it was necessary to limit our participant pool to those students who received mandated transition services as outlined by IDEA.

Exclusion criteria for this study included (1) students beyond their third-year, post-high school graduation, excluding college students over the age of 24, and (2) students with a legal guardian responsible for making decisions regarding

education and participating in research. To better understand the students' transition experience, it was necessary for the experience to be recent and relatively easy to recall. Excluding students who had been removed from the experience by more than three years allowed researchers to get a more vibrant picture of their experiences. The second exclusion criterion was necessary because of the need for student voices and perceptions to be the focus of our research. Students who have a guardian to help them make decisions would require an extra layer of parental involvement that may have taken away from the purpose of the study, which was to get the unadulterated student perspective. While students with a guardian would be able to participate independently in interviews with guardian consent, it was important for researchers to hear the experiences of students who had to navigate college with formal independence.

Recruitment Process

Participants in the study were recruited using a convenience sample of students at the University of Missouri-St. Louis (UMSL) and St. Louis Community College (STLCC). Researchers began the recruitment process by publicizing the study and recruiting participants using a flier at the Office of Inclusive Postsecondary Education's Link Program at UMSL and the St. Louis Community College Access Office.

From there, interested students reached out to the research team via email, phone, or an in-person visit. Researchers read a screening script they developed to ensure consistency in information and protocols each participant received prior to consent (see Appendix A). The script described the research study questions, the

research study process, the interview themes to anticipate, and the participants' right not to participate, as well as any risks involved with participation. Information was also given on the inclusion and exclusion criteria during the conversation (Appendix B). This gave the potential participants enough information about the study and its procedures to make an informed decision about whether or not to participate and informed the research team if the candidate met the needed criteria.

Consent

After the recruitment and screening process, researchers gave interested participants a printed copy of the letter of consent describing the study (Appendix C). This letter prompted interested candidates to review information about the study and answer demographic questions. Participants were then prompted to respond if they wanted to participate in the research study and consent to a recorded interview via Zoom. Participants were reminded throughout the process, specifically before the Zoom recording began, that they could opt out of the study at any time.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

Setting

All interviews were conducted using Zoom. The research team members that conducted interviews consisted of one researcher familiar with the participant and two who were unfamiliar with the participant in an effort to make sure participants were free from coercion. One research team member initiated the Zoom meeting and allowed participants to join from the waiting room. Once the

meeting started, the researcher familiar with the study participant introduced the members of the research team that were conducting the interviews. Participants were reminded they could opt out of the interview at any time. They were also reminded that the Zoom meeting was recorded for data analysis.

Interviews took place synchronously online and were audio and video recorded. The researchers completed interviews in a private space to ensure confidentiality. During the interview, one research team member asked scripted questions, while a second researcher took notes on responses and nonverbal behaviors and interactions, such as changes in voice volume and tone or signs of anxiety. Interviews lasted an average of 44 minutes and 43 seconds (with a range from 19.21 minutes to 44.42 minutes), and researchers continued to follow up with participants on their comfort levels. As recommended by Beail and Williams (2014), the interviewers used simple, concrete, and plain language to be accessible to students with various diagnoses.

Interview Protocols

The interview process was semi-structured and guided by a list of questions about participants' transition experiences (Appendix D). This format allows for the diversity of experiences among participants and the flexibility to respond to new information that emerges throughout the interview process (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Marshak et al., 2010; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Questions were open-ended to allow students to reflect on their experiences and offer information that may not have been provided with yes/no questions. Interviewers also used their discretion to ask probing questions for clarification

and rephrased questions as needed. This design allowed the researchers to develop a broader knowledge base of the participants and create meaningful follow-up questions that got to the specific lived experiences of the participants.

At the conclusion of the interview, researchers reminded participants of the purpose of the study and communicated the option of later reviewing the data from their interview findings during the coding stage of the data analysis. When interviews were completed and participants excused, recordings were saved in a password-protected folder for transcription by team members. Afterward, transcripts were sent directly to team members in a password-protected folder for analysis.

Instrument

Interview questions were developed to collect qualitative data on participants' perceptions of the transition experience relating to self-advocacy, academic preparedness, and college readiness counseling. Students were asked general questions at the beginning of the interview to help them grow more comfortable with the process. Merriam & Tisdell (2016) suggest asking open-ended questions to get more descriptive information. The interview questions were tested among the research team to assess their value and determine if the questions allowed the respondent to give rich, robust responses.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations of this study were placed to narrow the scope of the study and to focus on students with disabilities' perceptions of transition into college. This study focused on an urban area of one Midwest state within the United States

of America. While this results in a comprehensive study for one area across the state, because the occurrence of disability varies by state, this restricts interpretation at a nationwide level (CDC, 2021). Further delimitations from this study restrict examination to only a 4-year university and a community college.

In addition, because the study had 11 participants, the small sample size may not reflect the complexity or variability of the experience of postsecondary education transition. The research recruited participants from two higher education institutes, and among the participants, nine out of 12 declared that they were white males. The research conclusion may not be generalizable to the experience of other genders or ethnic groups.

Next, perspectives of students attending each institution may vary, as well as the number of study participants. This study did not account for the existence of an inclusive postsecondary educational (IPSE) transition program on a college campus. It is possible that the establishment of IPSEs on a college campus will heighten campus awareness, enhance campus training on disability, and improve campus accessibility.

This study also aimed to include perspectives of students with disabilities who have and have not disclosed a disability diagnosis to their university. Disclosure on a college campus is a major barrier to accessing disability support. It is important to note that several researchers work directly with college students with disabilities and were key in the recruitment of participants in the study. Careful consideration and delegation occurred to ensure qualitative data collected

during interviews was not compromised due to student relationships with researchers.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, there is a prescribed method for data analysis that dictates continual analysis throughout the entire period of data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This process allows for a thorough and thoughtful review of the participant's responses as the research unfolds. The primary purpose of continual analysis is dictated by the sheer volume of data collected in a qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Thematic analysis was utilized, representing a well-respected method for thoroughly examining the data in a qualitative study (Kiger & Varipio, 2020). Data were collected from each study participant's interviews and recorded via Zoom. The recording was used to transcribe the entire interview. To ensure the accuracy of the transcript, at least two researchers would repeat the process of listening and viewing each interview multiple times to validate the accuracy of the participant's responses concerning the perceptions of their transition experiences.

Once accuracy was determined, the entire research team completed an individual initial read of three transcripts. During this step, each team member highlighted potential units of text that may be identified as noteworthy relative to potential codes and wrote researcher memos and comments regarding the sample portion of the text. Researchers repeated this process to determine if the selected text aligned with the theoretical framework focusing on self-determination and advocacy, academic skills, and counseling for college readiness.

As initial codes were determined from the first three interviews, an inductive approach was employed to analyze the interview responses for patterns, themes, and assigned codes (Roberts et al., 2019). This process provided for the development of initial codes, which were then used to develop a codebook where the raw data could be further analyzed. Researchers then split into three sub-groups for the remaining eight interviews. Teams were made of two to three researchers. Each team analyzed one interview at a time and came to 100% agreement on each code through discussion as it was entered into the codebook. This process was repeated until all interviews were coded and all codes were entered into the code book. As recommended by Bhandari (2023), researchers used these procedures to ensure participants' perceptions were noted without bias to achieve investigator triangulation. As additional categories were identified, other themes developed using both inductive and deductive processes, outlined by Merriam & Tisdell (2016), to explore concepts as they naturally arose in the responses from the study participants perceptions. Care was given to ensure attention was focused on recurring codes in the initial data for further synthesis of information. It is important to note that this process was utilized with each participant's response and between participant responses to arrive at a more comprehensive reconstruction of all data from the entire study. It involved all researchers and led to the creation of inferential theories that surfaced around those earlier observations. Those inferences and theories were once again compared among researchers using researcher triangulation, where multiple researchers made inferences individually and then collectively to arrive at a more

synthesized and accurate analysis and to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings. However, more than just this process was required to ensure reliability and validity in the study. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) point out, processes should be established throughout the data collection, analysis, and synthesis to ensure trustworthiness. Ultimately, the inferences and theories began to answer the research question posed in this study. It is important to stress that this form of continual and simultaneous analysis occurred throughout data collection. To wait until all data were collected would have been overwhelming for the research team, as they would have had to make real sense of such a vast amount of information (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

At the point of analysis, when all researchers had accepted and agreed upon the codebook, the themes became evident. Once the themes had been determined for each codebook, it was added to the larger batch of data collected from the other participants in the study. At the time, researchers completed coding all interviews, and the codebook had 126 codes. Then, the team went through each code and identified which codes should be reorganized and placed into another location within the codebook in order to speak to the three separate research focuses from our taxonomy-self advocacy, academic skills, and college counseling. After reorganizing the 126 codes, the research team broke into subgroups again to reduce codes and agreed upon 28 codes. In addition, research participants were provided with a copy of their codebook to have the option to further validate the essence of their responses in the data through the method known as member checking (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). When the participant

elected to review their data, this process added a higher level of reliability, otherwise unachievable in qualitative research. Then, the researchers again sought to determine whether or not the codable data fit within the code system or whether other codes needed to be added to complement the literature and framework (Roberts et al., 2019).

CHAPTER 3: DATA ANALYSIS

The aim of this study was to explore the transition experiences of college students with disabilities and document their perspectives related to their high school special education transition journey. We specifically wanted to know if their high school experience prepared them for college in relation to the aspects of self-advocacy, academic skills, and college counseling. This chapter presents the participants' results and qualitative findings of the study.

Participant Overview

Eleven individual interview participants were recruited from The University of Missouri- St. Louis and St. Louis Community College (see Table 1). These participants shared information regarding several demographic data points, including race, ethnicity, gender, current GPA, diagnosis, financial aid status, and disability access office status (Table 2). It is important to note that this data highlighted some crucial limitations of this study. For example, the pool of participants included only one person who identified as someone other than White/Caucasian, only one was female, and one was nonbinary (see Table 3). Among the 11 participants, six different diagnoses were disclosed, and 45% of the participants disclosed more than one diagnosis (see Table 4). Regarding disability access office status, 45% of participants did not disclose their disability status. In contrast, 45% of participants noted that they registered and received support, and 9% noted that they were registered but did not use support (see Table 5).

Table 1

Participants by Higher Education Institution (HEI)

HEI	Percentage (n=11)	n
UMSL	36%	4
STLCC	63%	7

Note. STLCC = St. Louis Community College, UMSL = The University of Missouri-St. Louis. Blank spaces

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Student pseudonym *	Race *	Ethnicity *	Gender *	GPA *	Diagnosis *	Financial Aid Status	Disability access office status	Higher Education Institution
Deadlock	White	White	Male	3.2	Autism	Yes	-	STLCC
Kelce	White	-	Male	3.4	Autism	Yes	Registered & receiving	STLCC
Mushroom	White	-	Male	-	ADHD	-	-	STLCC
Epsilon	Caucasian	American	Male	2.88	ADHD, Autism	Yes	Registered & receiving	STLCC
Fire	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	STLCC
Mugsy	White	American	Female	3.33	Language Process, ADHD, Anxiety, Autism, Depression	Yes	Registered & receiving	STLCC
Fish	White	White	Nonbinary	-	Autism, ADHD	-	-	STLCC
Michael	White	-	Male	2.9	ADHD, Learning Disability	Yes	Registered & Not Receiving Services	UMSL
Justin	Mexican	-	Male	-	ADHD	No	-	UMSL
The Toppler	White	White	Male	-	Autism	No	Registered & receiving	UMSL
Touchdown	White	Caucasian	Male	2.1	ADHD, Dyslexia	-	Registered & receiving	UMSL

Note. STLCC = St. Louis Community College, UMSL = The University of Missouri-St. Louis. (–) = data was not reported by participant, * = demographic data point was not predetermined, and was fill-in-the-blank.

Table 3

Participants by Disclosed Gender

Gender	Percentage (*n*=11)	n
Female	9%	1
Nonbinary	9%	1
Male	81%	9

Table 4

Participants by Disclosed Disability Diagnosis

Disability	Percentage (*n* = 11)	n
Autism	45%	5
ADHD	55%	6
Language Processing	9%	1
Anxiety	9%	1
Learning Disability	9%	1
Dyslexia	9%	1
Depression	9%	1
More Than One Disability Disclosed	45%	5

Table 5

Participants by Disclosed Disability Access Office Status

Status	Percentage (*n*=11)	*n*
Have Not Accessed	0%	0
Registered & Receiving Services	45%	5
Registered & Not Receiving Services	9%	1
Did Not Respond	45%	5

Key Findings

Key findings emerged from the participant interviews and were divided into sub themes based on the appropriate categories that aligned with our research questions: self-advocacy and self-determination, academic skills, and counseling

for college readiness. With regard to self-advocacy, findings included (1) IEP team support, (2) passive participation in the IEP process, and (3) lack of support for college attendance. Academic preparedness yielded the following findings: (1) dissatisfaction with modifications and decreased academic rigor in high school, (2) differing college expectations, and (3) time management. Key findings for counseling for college readiness included (1) receipt of college counseling and (2) a desire for a better understanding of college expectations.

Table 6

Key Findings for Themes and Sub-Themes

Themes Sub-Themes
IEP Team Support
Family Support
High School Support
Passive Participation in the IEP
Did Not Receive Instruction on Self-Advocacy in High School
Lack of Self-Determination
Lack of Support for College Attendance
Focus on Employment
Lack of Information and Instruction Around Postsecondary Opportunities
Dissatisfaction with Modification and Decreased Rigor
Modifications
Rigor
College Expectations
Differing Support
Higher Academic Expectations
Time Management
Management of Free Time
Academics/Social Life Balance
Postsecondary Education Decision Making
Desired Better Understanding of College Expectations
Misconceptions of High School Staff
Inexperience with Increased Responsibility, Accountability, Rigor, and Independence

Self-Advocacy

IEP Team Support.

Family Support. We analyzed the perceptions of students with disabilities regarding their postsecondary education transition experience and participants shared that parent support is one of the crucial factors in the process. When asked about their experiences attending IEP meetings, most participants mentioned that their parents participated in the IEP and played a significant role. Two of 11 participants remembered that their parents did most of the talking and took a leading role in the meeting. "Mugsy" said, "I just kinda allowed my mom to talk most of the time because she knew more than I (...) did. I felt like, for the most part, the only time I would talk is when I eventually was more comfortable." "Epsilon" also stated, "So I largely didn't really have to advocate for myself. My mom just largely handled that on her end."

Participants also mentioned that their parents or other family members greatly influenced their decision to go to college. "Mushroom" described it as a "family tradition" to go: "I guess my parents always just expect me to go to college. They never forced me or anything, but I just kind of assumed." The influence of family to attend college greatly impacted the students' decision, whether or not they realized it at the time. "Fire" also shared, "[My] parents and relatives because (…) they all went to college as well. They all went to college after they graduated. I'd say they encouraged me to do it [attend college]."

All participants had strong family support systems to guide them through the transition process. Students reported that their families provided support

during the postsecondary transition process at varying intervals. Most shared that their parents were more involved than any other family member during the transition process. However, some participants received advice from siblings and relatives. In addition to participation in the IEP meeting, parents also attended college tours, transition fairs, workshops, or meetings with the college access office. Participants depended on their parents to make decisions during the postsecondary transition process rather than to learn how to self-advocate or lead the process themselves. As "Epsilon" said, "I largely didn't really have to advocate for myself. My mom just largely handled that on her end."

High School Support. The participants' responses provided information regarding their high school support experiences. Some acknowledged receiving help from case managers, teachers, and high school staff. During the interviews, six of 11 participants said that school personnel provided great help to them, and "Touchdown" stated that they were "just like friends and family." Mugsy replied that their case managers were "great" and "they tried their best." When participants discussed their future plans during the IEP meeting, participants noted high school personnel provided suggestions, options, and guidance based on their plans. For example, Epsilon had been referred to the A Plus program, which is a Missouri state-sponsored scholarship program that is designed for eligible students to attend public community colleges and/or trade schools (Missouri Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development, n.d.), and they described that this program "has been my entire saving grace." Similarly to Epsilon, Touchdown had been referred to the Succeed Program. When asked if

they felt that their voices had been acknowledged by school personnel, Epsilon replied, "I was aware that they were helpful in that they were not twisting what I wanted. They didn't go in there with red ink and pen and just add in their own remarks to what I wanted." Participants appreciated the efforts of their case managers and valued the support that they received from high school personnel.

Passive Participation in IEP.

Did Not Receive Instruction on Self-Advocacy in High School. In more than one way, participants shared having passive participation during transition IEP meetings. The researchers determined that several participants sat passively because they did not receive instruction on self-advocacy in high school, or they simply sat passively during IEP meetings without an opportunity or understanding that they could and should take that time to communicate their wants and needs toward postsecondary transition planning. Mushroom initially indicated, "I remember getting lessons on that topic," but subsequently stated, "No, I actually don't know. Maybe I probably hadn't gotten as much as [I needed]." "Justin" shared, "I believe so. I just don't think I can remember off the top of my head." Further, "Deadlock" indicated, "[It] could be for different people, but for myself, I didn't experience that in high school."

Lack of Self-Determination. Even for those students who did express that they were provided self-advocacy support, this was not often practiced or required of them during IEP meetings. The participants often cited that they either passively agreed to components of their postsecondary transition plans or declined to participate. Even when students indicated that they attended the IEP meetings

which were focused on postsecondary transition planning, more than one-half of the participants indicated that either their parents or their case manager would provide most of the input for the actual plan. Mushroom indicated, "I was just kind of there, or at least just felt like, you know, I'm here. That's fine." Another participant, Epsilon, indicated, "My mom would usually just do most of the talking on my behalf, and I didn't have much responsibility [for the IEP development]." On certain occasions, it was clear that the parents and the teachers dictated the development of the entire postsecondary plan. When asked about their role on the IEP team in general, Mugsy mentioned, "The IEP team tried to include me" at times, I did know what to say, but for the most part they were very inclusive but most times I didn't understand until maturity."

Lack of Support for College Attendance. One theme that emerged from the study was an overall lack of support by educators for participants who pursued postsecondary education. Based on input from teachers some students perceived that college would not be the right choice for them. The focus of the IEP meetings were often to discuss employment as the next step immediately after high school. Students were not given the option to explore the possibility of postsecondary education as a progression toward employment. Some participants experienced little support related to college consideration. Regardless of the nature of some IEP teams, the following theme was identified: college wasn't an option that was afforded to some students as they explored postsecondary opportunities. Touchdown recalled:

> I've always been big on college. I see people working there. I asked my mom, Is this what people with disabilities do? I don't want that. I want to go to college. If I work at
>
> Schnucks [Grocery Store] they'll pay me, but I won't be OK with $18 or $19, which is, like, fine. But I can't really support a family like that. I want to support a family. If I don't go to college, what else is there for me to do? I can't live off of a part-time job quite as well.

Focus on Employment. Employment is often a goal for people with disabilities. Students, their teachers, and their parents may find that this path holds the best opportunities after high school. But for those who are interested in pursuing postsecondary education, this focus on employment can be an obstacle that the student may encounter during their transition experience. Despite sharing their desire to attend college, some participants were provided little opportunity to explore postsecondary education experiences beyond basic job exploration. "Michael" recalled a conversation during an IEP meeting during their freshman year when they were encouraged by their special education case manager to attend high school until they turned 21 and enter the workforce. Later, Michael was appointed a new case manager. The new case manager listened to the family and the student regarding their interest in college and quickly modified the transition plan to support that goal. Michael shared, "I felt like my voice was finally heard." Touchdown described a scenario following an IEP meeting, in which they discussed the meeting with their parents. Touchdown and other participants experienced bias from IEP teams, resulting in case managers and

other team members who discouraged them in their pursuit of postsecondary education. Participants recalled being told that college wasn't right for them and that they would not be successful. Touchdown described teachers who told them, "I don't think you could go to college. I don't think you'll ever go to college." Even when students tried to advocate, they felt that the team disagreed with their desires. One participant described that they felt they were not being taken seriously. Mushroom noted, "I was worried about not being taken seriously about college. I'm not saying everyone didn't take me seriously; I'm just saying that I had a concern that my thoughts weren't considered by some." While some experiences seemed merely unsupportive, one participant described an instance in which the teacher attempted to dissuade them from choosing postsecondary education by assigning an unrealistic task. Michael recalled a conversation with their first case manager when they described the desire to attendcollege:

> He thought it was a joke because I vividly remember this. He's like, oh, you want to go to college? So, he gave me a packet of college algebra. It's probably about yay thick. He's like, "do this, and get it back to me in a week, and then we'll talk [about college]." I threw the packet away 'cause I'm not doing this.

Lack of Information and Instruction Related to Postsecondary Opportunities. In other instances, educators simply demonstrated a lack of knowledge relative to opportunities and services or support available to students with disabilities in college. Even when a student has a conscientious and supportive IEP team, they are at a disadvantage unless the team educates them on

the process and support available should they choose to transition to college. This was demonstrated with participants who indicated that they had the necessary academic experiences in high school to be eligible for college but may not have had opportunities to develop other soft skills. Justin mentioned a need for more "instruction from, like, teachers and more instruction from, like, I guess parents, and stuff like that. And I'm now having a more clear open mind about, you know, different possibilities [for me]." Other participants shared that they were never afforded an opportunity to learn about the differences between high school and college supports. Touchdown indicated that it was not until college that they really learned about disability services in college, noting disability services was not discussed enough in high school:

> only talking about it a little bit [disability supports], but it's kinda like, very brief, or it wasn't in depth. [...]? Yeah so when I first came to college, I did Succeed. The staff helped me get in contact with disability services and went over everything I needed to be successful in regular classes in college.

"Fish" shared a story about their beginning college experience, only to learn well into the semester from a professor about disability services. "It was kinda of like a rough process because like I didn't know the access office was a thing when college started. My teacher was like, oh, you wrote an essay about disabilities and didn't know I had one. You need to go to the access office."

Academic Skills

Dissatisfaction with Modifications and Decreased Academic Rigor for Students with Disabilities. Reflecting on their academic experiences in high school, participants agreed that they were hindered in college by their high school modifications and experienced decreased academic rigor in classes. Many reported that they were placed in special education classes that were separate from their nondisabled peers. These classes were designed to assist students with their coursework and increase the probability of academic success. According to participants, these classes decreased the rigor of the curriculum and provided them with a false sense of their academic abilities. Mugsy described their placement in classes: "because of my IEP" and being deterred from more difficult classes. Mugsy was told, 'I don't think it's good for you to go straight to Algebra 2 because it's not an IEP class, and it would be much harder." Several other participants agreed that they were not experiencing the same level of rigor as their fellow college-bound peers. Touchdown recalled, "I was always in different classrooms. Yeah, [it was] not the same level of coursework someone else is doing, so it's different." Based on participants' responses, many felt that they were placed in separate classes based on the fact that they had an IEP as opposed to their current level of functioning or postsecondary goals.

Participants reported that general education classes, including co-taught models, were most helpful in their preparation for college. Fish recollected that they were most prepared for college as a result of taking Advanced Placement (AP) classes. In English 101:

My final was like a timed writing. In AP Lang (AP Language and

> Composition), you'll have a timed writing like almost every week. So, it's like AP Lang is almost more intense than English 101. I took AP Government and trigonometry, and those really prepared me as well. Especially the AP Gov because it had a lot of reading, and I wish someone told me.

Unfortunately, other participants did not have the same experiences. Michael was placed in separate math and English classes in high school. They stated:

> I wish in high school I didn't take those low-level math and English classes. Because I feel like now I'm struggling a lot more on trying to keep up. Because, like on those foundation levels, especially in English, we didn't do a lot of writing. And the writing we did do certainly did not compare to a freshman-level English class. I wish I was in a team-taught [class].

The majority of participants felt that by being placed in separate classes, they were not given the opportunity to be challenged and fully experience the possible expectations of college.

Many responses highlighted that involvement in general education classes was most beneficial for college preparation. However, students mentioned that while the curriculum was more challenging, teachers and case managers modified it, creating more disparity between the expectations of students with and without disabilities. Modifications included significant alterations to tests and assignments such as reducing the length or complexity of the response required. Touchdown

remembered, "[I would have] a study guide different from the people like the other kids in the class. I'll have a different study guide with the exact questions on the test." Compared to the standards they experienced in college, Touchdown said:

> [In high school], I'll have maybe two or three assignments per week. To where other people are like three or four. So that was different. In college, it's different, because in college you have three or four across every single week. And then you have like three or four assignments that are due that Sunday. So that was different instead of having like one assignment.

Some participants felt that they were not provided as much instruction as their non-disabled peers. Mugsy remembered, "As a kid (in elementary school), they were trying to tell me how to write, but they would give up on me because I couldn't remember stuff." Like other participants, Mugsy felt that educators did not hold students with disabilities to the same academic standards as others. Students with disabilities would be given work at a lower academic level than other students, but would receive identical grades. Mugsy continued, "You're kind of failing me. I feel like they're looking us over somehow, and not teaching us things and being stricter with us. But it felt like they weren't as hard on us to learn." Students with disabilities that received special education services may require modifications or accommodations to their educational program, which are outlined in the IEP. Those modifications or accommodations are based on the individual student's needs as determined by the IEP team (Rosas & Winterman, 2023). The researchers did not have access to the participants' IEPs. Therefore,

researchers could not conclude why such modifications existed for the students who were interviewed, but there was a clear indicator that some participants felt that the modifications, accommodations, or lower academic standards in high school had left them ill-prepared for college.

Modifications and leniency in grading practices can also impact GPA and other measures of academic success. Touchdown commented that they were unaware of being given fewer assignments than their peers in high school. When he entered college, "It was kind of a big shock to me. I didn't know what it was going to be like and what the amount of work would look like because it was all modified [in high school]." Touchdown continued that they were hesitant to apply to college, considering their transcripts would show "SSD classes." They felt that they would not be accepted into college because they didn't have "the same GPA as someone else might have because I took a modified curriculum in high school." Many participants were united in the idea that they would have had a better understanding of their preparedness for college if they were graded the same as others.

Overall, students wished they had experienced a higher degree of inclusion in high school. Students collectively described the benefits of being included in general education classrooms, including access to more challenging coursework and reduced stigma associated with a disability. They expressed dissatisfaction with their academic experience in high school in relation to not feeling prepared for college. Touchdown concluded:

I never liked being in different classes. I know I have a disability, but I

> would much rather be in a classroom with people similar to me and not be put in a class that is seen as 'He has a disability. He is in one of those disability rooms and has a separate room from other people.' I don't like that. I like to be inclusive and be in the same room and do the same things everyone is doing.

College Expectations.

Differing Support. Many participants mentioned the different levels of support that they experienced in college as opposed to high school. Most explained that they perceived more independence with their academic endeavors, although not all viewed the changes positively. Fish stated, "So in college, it's like, oh, we'll help you. But you're mainly on your own." Touchdown pointed out that the discrepancy in academic support did give them more independence. However, the comments still highlighted the implication of that difference when they stated, "I am pretty much more on my own. I just have accommodations instead of like modifying stuff. To me, it's absolutely different. It's kind of more independence not having the (teacher's assistant) with me." Each participant commented on the difference in academic support which highlights the importance of the experience for them.

Other participants felt that the college experience provided additional support that was not available to them during high school. Michael notes, "In high school, I feel like I didn't have as much support as I do now in college." Epsilon agreed, stating, "The difference in support is that in college, there are so many supports to choose from. But all of them are optional. You need to choose them

yourself." Participants described that support in college was a choice, which was different from their experience in high school. They described being assigned accommodations in the IEP process rather than getting to choose the supports that best fit their needs. In college, students must advocate to receive accommodations, which may give them the impression of increased support.

Higher Academic Expectations. As students progress through secondary school, classes become more challenging. Thus, expectations should be raised to prepare students for their postsecondary goals. For students with disabilities, this transition from high school to college may be more jarring due to the shift in expectations. As discussed previously, students with disabilities may have a modified curriculum and have different academic expectations than their nondisabled peers while in high school. When students enter college, they are no longer have the protections of IDEA, and instructors are no longer privy to sensitive information associated with disability status. College academic expectations are the same for every student, and accommodations cannot fundamentally alter course components. This transition for students with disabilities can be especially unnerving as academic expectations are raised and levels of support are unfamiliar.

Participants responded that they were most surprised by the level of responsibility thrust upon them when entering college. Students built skills slowly in high school until mastery was achieved, relying on teachers to fill in any gaps in their studies. Fish stated, "The college pace is faster because in high school, you're taking a year-long class, and in college, you're only taking a semester-long

class. I think in college, there's more homework per class." Since college classes are shorter, instructors must move at a faster pace, which places the burden on students to fill in the gaps by themselves. Mugsy agreed:

> In college, you have to teach yourself. In high school, you don't really have to. For most of the class, you go over a subject a lot of times, but in college, they only go over their subject once. And you kind of teach that to yourself, which can be harder for people with disorders. It is definitely harder on me, and it makes us have to work harder than other students.

In college, students have less time to learn more material and often have less in-class support than in high school. Justin compared the new college experience to being "thrown into the fire."

The students who were interviewed became accustomed to leniency in grading and assignment completion. Participants described experiencing the opposite when taking college classes. Touchdown explained:

> It was different because tests were easier for me because they accommodated some stuff like skip this question. In college, I might just have more time than other people would have. In high school, it was 'take all the time you want. If you don't finish, it's fine. We'll figure it out, or you won't be penalized for missing these two questions.' And then, in college if you miss two questions, they penalize you. Those count against you. I think that's the big difference. In high school, I had modified work, and in college, I had no modified work. It's all on me to get it in and get it right.

Time Management Skills.

Management of Free Time. Time management issues were a common theme among study participants' preparation for college. Some students noted that their time management instruction in high school focused on due dates and study skills. However, students wanted a better understanding of how to manage their class schedules and free time rather than an emphasis on due dates and study skills. Deadlock noted, "But I think one thing that I kind of, I think people kind of realize too with colleges, you have a lot of free time." Students felt unprepared for the different class schedules between high school and college. Mugsy noted, "I feel like they could teach more on time management skills when it comes to how college classes work. Because it's totally different than high school class schedules." While participants felt that they could manage their time with many of the strategies they used in high school, such as alarms, planners, and to-do lists, they felt unprepared for the amount of free time that they would have to manage. Touchdown was given advice from high school staff that, "'You guys [will be] very, very, very, busy.'" However, they realized once they entered college that was not their experience and said, "It's not that. It's you have a bunch of downtime." Participants also felt unsure how to use this unexpected free time wisely without the guidance of parents and teachers. Touchdown also felt a major shift in prioritizing their time without their parents' support when they noted:

> In college it is different. You don't have your parents, you don't have anyone like it's on you to sit down and do homework instead of going out

> to some event that you want to go to. It's really different. Like things like time management side of stuff.

As participants frequently referred to the unexpected responsibility of managing free time, this might suggest that little independence was given to students to practice managing their own time during their high school transition years.

Academics/Social Life Balance. When discussing their preparation for college during high school, participants desired more understanding of balancing academics with social life. Touchdown shared, "I feel like that's where I struggle a lot. Just like managing my academics with my social life. I think that's my struggle a bit." Mushroom described the attempts to balance social and academic life as an ongoing struggle:

> You wanna make it. You wanna get a good balance between getting things done, and like taking a bunch of classes, but also trying to not overwhelm yourself-kind of a back-and-forth thing between that. I still haven't really been the best at that.

Participants felt unprepared to prioritize academics over social gatherings and experienced difficulties making decisions that reflected those priorities. "The Toppler" noted that their biggest challenge in college was "balancing when I hang out with my friends and getting my work done." As these skills are undoubtedly hard for students without disabilities, the executive functioning required to balance academics and social gatherings may be more elusive for students with disabilities, especially those students whose disabilities affect their executive functioning (Grinblat & Rosenblum, 2016).

College Counseling

Postsecondary Education Decision Making. One research question focused on college counseling as it relates to meeting with someone to discuss and prepare for college. This includes counseling in college choice, accessing support, and connecting to resources. The majority of students responded that they did meet with someone for a form of college counseling. Some participants vaguely recalled college counseling but did not remember the service as overly helpful in their transition to college. For example, Mushroom stated, "I know I did. Like I just like, but I don't think I did too frequently. And it was more so just like occasional conversations about it." A higher number of participants had a confident recollection of college counseling while in high school, discussing its helpfulness. Epsilon notes:

> Yes. Yes, I did [receive college counseling]. I'd say they absolutely did [help]. They actually gave me some contextualization to what my choices were. I feel like they introduced me to the A plus program. And I'd say that has been my entire saving grace.

Michael described their research with a counselor as helpful:

> Yeah, probably those two are the main tools. And then, just like doing research on colleges. Like I remember one day I spent like two hours with the college counselor coordinator at the high school, like, to just research colleges. (...) [It] definitely did help me a lot.

In some cases, students reported receiving college counseling, however other students met with their case manager, other special educator, or IEP team member rather than the designated college counselor. For example, Fish notes:

> OK, so I felt like I discussed with my case manager about, like, how to use my IEP for college, but like I didn't necessarily go to the counselor to see which colleges to go to. I just happened to go to STLCC."

Participants also described some of the discussions and experiences related to college counseling activities and engagement. This included college touring, skills and personality assessments, and various forms of higher education institution research like resource fairs. Fish described:

> In high school for college, where basically things like I know there were a bunch of flyers in the counseling office. Uh, for like, college advising. There were, like, career cluster tests and the Missouri connections. They made me take that like, every year. It was so repetitive. And then I know there was like a bunch of Myers Briggs. It was like, oh, if you're extroverted, you should go to this job. If you're introverted, you should go to this job. The problem with that, though, is my personality switched from introvert to extrovert. So then, my entire career path switched.

Touchdown discussed their college counseling with their case manager. As a result, Touchdown was directly connected with the college program they eventually pursued. They stated, "My case manager did [provide college counseling] in high school. She knew someone, I think, who came there [inclusive postsecondary education program at UMSL]." For Michael, a positive outcome

from receiving college counseling was the involvement of families in counseling activities like transition fairs. Michael describes:

> Yeah, so like she [case manager] gave more information. And then what, like, started all of this really, during my junior year, my mom went to one of these transition fairs workshops that, like, I think was at a high school. And the Succeed program was there like tabling. And she went to talk to them. And that from that conversation. Getting all those contacts that's where all of this started.

With regard to the outcome of conversations related to college counseling, advice and guidance on college preparedness related to college counseling activities and engagement emerged. Justin noted that doing independent research is beneficial when stating, "I think I just kind of like one day I was like. Just looking at colleges, just like, you know. Go online and just like, searching out colleges and see what was the best fit for me." Respondent Michael encouraged college counseling: "Yeah, I think that would be good. I think that would be helpful." So, while many respondents reported meetings as a form of college counseling, many inconsistencies existed regarding with whom it took place and the activities and guidance that were provided.

Desired Better Understanding of College Expectations. Another major theme in our data was the participants' desire to have a better understanding of college expectations before enrollment. There are two sub-themes that best summarize the data: (a) misconceptions of high school staff; high school personnel had a misconception of resources, supports, experiences, and programs available in

college for students with disabilities, and (b) inexperience with increased responsibility, accountability, rigor, and independence in college.

Respondents shared a lack of awareness of college supports, experiences, and programs. Touchdown descriptively shared their experience of feeling misguided by their secondary education institution regarding their future college experience. Michael notes, "They always told me, oh, you won't have this in college, you won't have this, you won't have that, and then I come to college and, I do have that, but they would tell me I wouldn't have it." Furthermore, Touchdown describes exploring postsecondary education options with family support and without school support:

> [...] and wish people would have told me the options you have. Instead of in high school saying 'Oh, you can do this' I wish it would inform you, inform me more about Succeed. Told me about Succeed, told me about the stuff they have for kids with disabilities to go to college instead of just telling you what other people had done. I wish they would done the research and tell us instead of it just being all on us to figure out.

Respondents also shared experiences of having an unexpectedly increased level of responsibility, accountability, rigor, and independence in college. Epsilon describes an abrupt gap in expectations for which they were ill-prepared:

> The gap between high school and college. Like not the physical time gap, but just the sudden peak of like just the level of skills necessary to cooperate with that environment. In high school, it just went from like a

> (level) 10 to 100. Having those responsibilities now was not something I was fully prepared for."

Deadlock describes a contrast between high school education and vital college expectations in the educational process:

> And high school, they kind of bring up at first and say, 'Oh, this is my syllabus,' and yet it's like, 'oh, it's not an important paper.' And college, that's basically the Bible, basically, because it kind of tells you your whole class schedule, what topics, what exam dates, because I know from one of my friends, talking about, 'oh yeah, no, you don't know like the exam, they'll tell you, until it's on the syllabus and you are expected to know that. So it's like, man, I think in high school they kind of don't prepare you, kind of.

"Kelce" shares a similar concern related to ill-preparedness, describing, "I wish they would have told me that in college you had to study a lot in order to be ready for assignments and quizzes and tests and when exams come." Respondents also made clear calls for high school educators to better understand and prepare students for college expectations. This can be realized in Mugsy's described experience:

> I think they could explain how things work in college with accommodations. I think they definitely could teach us more about college, about IEPs, when it comes to advocating for yourself for certain things. At some point high schoolers should be trained on the accommodations they might receive in college."

Mugsy says, "I think some, maybe, sometimes the teachers, or something, can maybe when we're talking about college, maybe they can help us understand it a bit more." Mushroom, echoing that shared experience, notes:

> Hmm. I'm sorry. I'm just thinking about this because there are differences. It's just I can't really think of how to structure my words. Like, I guess it's just like classes are less frequent than they are in high school, at least depending on how many classes you take. And also there's more of an obvious, oh you gotta do this, you gotta do that. Compared to college, which is just, you know, it's more free than what you do. And I guess that's both a good and a bad thing.

Finally, Touchdown shares, regarding what college is like and what to expect, "What would it be like? I feel like they never tell you that."

Conclusions

Researchers found participants' perceptions were mixed on the level and amount of participation they encountered during the transition process in high school. Many participants discussed high levels of family and educator influence in transition planning, which often led to situations where participants had limited opportunity to participate or had no voice in the process. Some respondents experienced parents and educators who were supportive of postsecondary education, which led to positive experiences. Others spoke of parents or educators who were unsupportive of college and described a much more negative experience. They either did not receive instruction on how to advocate for themselves or did not practice those skills in the IEP postsecondary transition planning process. In those negative experiences, participants found their voice

was not heard. Despite their desire to attend college, they were directed towards employment right after high school as a life path. Or they were given either no or very little opportunity to explore postsecondary education opportunities during their time in high school.

Overall, students felt unprepared for the changes in academic rigor, differing levels of academic support, and time management needed to balance their academic and social lives. Students repeatedly mentioned time management and procrastination as some of their biggest struggles in college. The lack of time management skills practiced during high school years had left study participants ill-equipped for the task of balancing social time with time to focus on academics. Participants all mentioned that support was different between high school and college, noting that the increased support in high school left them unprepared for the lack of modifications available in college. Participants who received modifications and were encouraged to take less rigorous courses felt that they were academically behind their college peers. This feeling was exemplified when participants related that high school was slower-paced, and they felt unable to keep up with the increased speed of college.

Finding college support was the overarching feeling throughout the respondent's reactions to discussing college counseling in high school. Overall, respondents noted that meeting with someone for college counseling was helpful. A disparity existed when some students did not report impactful or formalized college counseling and did not share the same positive experiences as other respondents. Throughout the positive connections and college counseling

activities students experienced, students desired a better understanding of college expectations. Respondents reported that high schools had misconceptions of resources, supports, experiences, and program availability for college students with disabilities.

These experiences in self-advocacy, academic preparedness, and college counseling are applicable to both secondary and postsecondary contexts. As we further discuss the implications and recommendations in the coming chapter, we are careful to present the students' voice and lived experiences as the foundation for that discussion. While adding to the current literature, our primary emphasis remains on amplifying the voice of the students as they describe their experiences.

CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

Chapter 4 will discuss the findings of this study in relation to high school transition practices. We will share how the findings can be implemented into transition programs to increase college student preparedness. Following the discussion of the implications for practitioners, we will focus on recommendations for secondary educators that are designed to increase student preparedness in regard to self-advocacy, academics, and college counseling.

Implications for Practitioners

Self-Advocacy

Practitioners can gain insight from this work as it relates to self-advocacy. From this research, two self-advocacy implications are evident. The first is that students with disabilities often lack the skills to advocate for themselves during the IEP process, particularly during transition planning. Participants of this study were often present during their IEP meetings but commonly cited a limited understanding of how to self-advocate. Participants also expressed that they rarely spoke during their IEP meetings or passively agreed to what other members, including parents/caregivers or teachers, said. Even if they were provided with learning opportunities related to self-advocacy, it was clear that the transfer of those skills was minimal. There is clear evidence that self-advocacy is a powerful tool for students and leads to increased participation during the IEP and postsecondary transition planning process (Wehmeyer et al., 2000). When self-advocacy is not demonstrated by students, their perceptions of the special education process are negatively impacted. Participants shared feelings of not

being taken seriously. In addition, as students prepared to pursue postsecondary education, they felt less prepared to navigate that system if they weren't provided the opportunity to adequately develop self-advocacy skills during their high school years.

Academic Preparation

Participants who received modifications in high school agreed that the academic curriculum was not rigorous. Modification examples included reducing the number of questions on a test, reducing multiple-choice answer options, shortening essays, and completely eliminating assignments. Respondents recalled doing less work in comparison to other students and experiencing inferior academic expectations. students responded that they were negatively impacted while in college because of the absence of modifications they were accustomed to while in high school. As a result of decreased academic rigor in high school, students stated that they were not prepared for the increased difficulty of college classes, increased workload, and overall higher academic expectations of college.

The significance of perceived support differences between high school and college was unsurprisingly prevalent among the study participants. This idea resonates throughout the literature in the works of Hadley (2007), and Hamblet (2014), and Skinner (2004). This highlighted the importance for high school staff to educate students regarding the differences, to reduce confusion once students enter college. In some cases, students enjoyed the fact that they had more autonomy over the support that they had previously received. It could be helpful to give students choices in regard to the accommodations and other support that

they need (Parsons et al., 2023). Students would benefit from specific institutional support that would be available in college in order to adjust to college.

In conjunction with modifications in high school and differing levels of support in college, students were subjected to higher academic expectations. Participants communicated that they had become accustomed to doing less work in high school. The high school curriculum may be differentiated based on student needs to ensure academic progress. When students experienced college classes, they were ultimately surprised regarding the academic rigor and the decreased amount of teacher support that was provided. At the college level, students are no longer guaranteed success and must rely on skills that they learned in high school.

While many studies focus on time management as it relates to due dates, deadlines, and organization (Canu et al., 2021; Langberg et al., 2013; Maitland & Quinn, 2011), participants in this study felt most unprepared to manage the amount of independence and free time that they have in college. Some mentioned that high school staff even warned them of the lack of free time that they would have. This gave students the impression that every minute would be accounted for with classes, studying, and homework. However, they were unprepared for the lack of guidance regarding how to manage that time. This adds to the literature, specifically the work of Francis et al. (2018c), in which students suggested that more independence should be provided at the secondary level. As their independence and free time increased, participants felt that finding a balance between working on academics and spending time with friends was a challenge. Participants emphasized the importance of becoming involved socially but also

cautioned future first-year college students to find a balance. Students received little instruction regarding time prioritization while in high school, and as parents and teachers were there to help them make those decisions during that time, the increased independence proved to add an extra layer of difficulty for students. This aligns with the recommendations of Canu et al. (2021), who suggest that teachers should allow students more independence in managing their time away from direct instruction.

College Counseling

Several implications related to college preparedness counseling can be drawn from this study. Among these, major themes include (1) college counseling happens in different forms, both formal and informal, (2) college counseling can impact a student's college trajectory both positively and negatively, (3) college counseling practices in high school were more prevalent in this research study for students with disabilities but still do not reflect inclusive practices, and (4) students feel that high school resources are unaware of resources in college for students with disabilities. This study's inclusion of college counseling for students with disabilities serves as a supplement to the limited research related to counseling and providing college readiness to students with disabilities (Lombardi et al.). The inclusion of college counseling for students with disabilities in this study serves as a supplement to the limited research related to counseling and providing college readiness to students with disabilities (Lombardi et al., 2022).

Participants in this study reported receiving college counseling from numerous sources, including school counselors and special education teachers. As

college counseling for students with disabilities increases, it is imperative that educators practice consistency in inclusive support to prepare students with disabilities for college. Participants in this study reported inconsistent practices, describing both formal and informal counseling. Participants described that they did not meet with a school counselor at all. These findings contrast with the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) recommendation that college counselors play an active role in college counseling for students with disabilities (ASCA, 2022).

College counseling can impact a student's college trajectory. Participants reported that a lack of formal and comprehensive college counseling negatively impacted their college trajectory. This is highlighted by participants sharing that they felt unprepared and unaware of their college options or the processes to access college. This supports the literature, Lintangsari et al. (2021), that highlights a connection between college readiness and college engagement.

College counseling was more prevalent in this study but did not reflect inclusivity. The student conducted by Hitchings et al. (2001) noted that 8% of respondents reported receiving college counseling, therefore it is important to note that this study showed an increase in respondents, as more than two-thirds of respondents reported that they received some form of counseling. Most importantly, approximately 40% of participants who received college counseling did not receive it from the school counselor; they received it from their case manager. This supports the research of Milsom and Hartley (2005*)* that highlights

the startling number of counselors who do not support or participate in transition planning for students with disabilities.

Participants in this study shared that high school counselors and case managers had misconceptions of the college experience, resources, and supports for college students with disabilities. Participants felt that counselors and case managers did not have knowledge of college programming for students with disabilities. Additionally, when discussing college experiences and resources with counselors and case managers, there was a stark difference between what high school personnel shared to what students experienced. Students were not given a realistic idea of what to expect from college, which left students feeling negatively prepared.

Recommendations

The following comprehensive recommendations are suggested as a result of this study. These recommendations are inclusive of our research question which emphasizes self-advocacy, academic preparedness, and college counseling practices. Self-advocacy recommendations provide guidance to increase student participation in IEP development, to include expansion of resources and family inclusion. Recommendations for academic preparedness provide insight regarding the intersection of accommodations, rigorous coursework, and independent living skills. Recommendations for college counseling speak to a need for inclusive and consistent practices.

Self-Advocacy

Emphasize individualized transition planning process. First, we recommend that policymakers or school districts develop strategies to increase student participation in the transition process. For example, teachers can tailor the transition planning process to meet the needs of students individually. Teachers can introduce the transition process to students earlier to ensure that students have more time to learn and practice advocacy skills. Schools should help students explore the concepts of common themes in transition IEP meetings, such as postsecondary education, college accommodations, and vocation training. We recommend that employment, education, and independent living be required components of the postsecondary transition plan.

Provide resources and supports to teach self-advocacy skills. Schools should emphasize teaching self-advocacy skills to promote student independence. The state education agency can expand resources, technical support, and grant opportunities for districts to explore curriculum designed to teach self-advocacy skills in the school settings. Teachers can utilize strategies such as role-playing to allow students to practice self-advocacy and generalize their skills to real-life situations.

Provide enhanced training to families in the IEP and transition process to promote student voice. Families often desire to support their students through direct advocacy. Schools and districts can provide educational opportunities designed to support caregiver understanding on how to actively support student use of self-advocacy skills during the IEP process and specifically postsecondary planning.

Academic Preparedness

Encourage accommodations to reflect postsecondary goals. High school IEP case managers can increase college preparedness for students by encouraging them to participate in the IEP process and choose accommodations that reflect postsecondary goals. A goal of attending either a community college or a 4-year college or university should reflect the college accommodations that may be available to them. Case managers can inform students and families that certain accommodations and modifications may not be available to them in college, and they should encourage the students to select those that promote access to the curriculum rather than modify their courses (Parsons et al., 2023; Strimel et al., 2023). For example, a popular accommodation in high school may include flexible deadlines or allowing a student to submit an assignment two weeks late. In college, this ability to submit assignments late in all classes, regardless of the reason, is deemed unreasonable (Strimel et al., 2023). The reduction in accommodations and elimination of modifications will better emulate the college experience in order to allow students time to adjust to the change.

Encourage enrollment in general education and rigorous high school coursework. Students should also have access to more general education classes (Baer et al., 2011; Mazzotti et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2015). Case managers can encourage students to take more rigorous courses to parallel the rigor of a college course. Students should be given the opportunity to try courses that mimic a college course to best prepare them for the change in academic expectations.

Provide direct instruction in time management and opportunities for independent time. IEP goals should include opportunities and instruction for students to learn to manage time, including the increased independent time they will have in college. One way to better prepare students is to have them complete mock college schedules that will allow students to plan and set aside time to be sure they are able to complete the expected out-of-class work on their own. Case managers should create a mock college schedule for students to visualize their scheduled time in class and extra-curriculars. This can help increase student awareness of how to schedule their free time to focus on academic work while also allowing time for social activities.

College Counseling

Offer consistent college counseling for students with disabilities. It is our recommendation that high schools strive for inclusive and consistent college counseling practices for all students. College counseling should happen for all students, regardless of disability status, if college is a goal of the student. Inclusive practices and support should be embedded in all college counseling practices to include disability resources and services discussed with all students. Additionally, counselors should be included in college counseling practices and discussions and collaborate with special education practitioners.

Provide college counseling that emphasize available services for students with disabilities. College counseling should not only be inclusive and provided for all students, but it should also encompass knowledge and education about specific programming and opportunities currently available for diverse

students. College counseling could partner with special education practitioners and higher education institutions to be well-informed about postsecondary opportunities for diverse populations, including high school students with disabilities. Furthermore, college counselors and special education practitioners should be aware of current disability support services and practices. They can offer knowledge of current practices and expectations of higher education support and services for students with disabilities. College counselors and special educators should connect with local and national HEIs to understand and be able to communicate current support for students with disabilities, including IPSE programs. College counselors and special education teachers need to inform students of their disability, as well as what accommodations are needed post high school. Information about accommodations should include not only what academic accommodations would be expected in postsecondary education, but also what accommodations would be needed in additional domains of support, like independent living and social inclusion.

Dissemination Plan for Improvement

Dissemination of findings and recommendations is central to researcher efforts to create change within the disability community. Student voice leads researcher motivations and passion for this research, and it is pivotal for researchers to illuminate the voices of students who have participated. On August 29th, 2024, researchers will present this research project and findings to the Office of Inclusive Postsecondary Education (OIPE) staff and faculty, the OIPE Advisory Committee, and the OIPE Employment Council. Audience members

will include up to 20 faculty and staff at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, approximately 50 community members who work directly with transition-aged adults with disabilities and 15 employers from the St. Louis community. Further dissemination efforts include a poster presentation submission to the Division on Career Development and Transition International Conference held in October 2024. Additional dissemination during the Fall 2024 semester will be the distribution of a summary flier using PeachJar mailing, which will be emailed to Missouri schools. The flier would inform transition case managers and policymakers on the recommendations of this study to incorporate into transition planning for students with the goal of postsecondary education. Additional efforts include presenting this study and findings to the Special School District of St. Louis Missouri Transition Department, the University of Missouri Pre Employment Training Skills program for statewide leaders, and finally, the Missouri Interagency Transition Team.

Table 7

Research Dissemination Presentations

Date	Audience	Relevance	Influence
6/6/24	MU Pre-Employment Transition Services Leadership Team	Practitioners, Program development	State-wide
8/29/24	UMSL Office of Inclusive Postsecondary Education Faculty/Staff, Advisory Board	Practitioners, Program development	State-wide
10/24	Division on Career Development and Transition International Conference (proposal submitted)	Research Professionals, Policy-makers, Practitioners	International
TBD	St. Louis Special School District Professional Development	Policymakers, program development, teachers	Local
TBD	Missouri Interagency Transition Team (MITT) State Agency Leaders	Policymakers, State Advisory Team Members	State-wide

Future Research

This study has led to multiple opportunities for future research. Three focus areas were explicitly identified and explored in Kohler's TTP 2.0 (Kohler et al., 2016), resulting in many other areas within the framework on which to focus future research, such as interagency collaboration and family engagement. In addition, research could be conducted which disaggregates the perspectives of participants according to a specific disability category. This would provide greater insight into specific student experiences and may better inform the practice of educators in the field. While this study focused on student perceptions, much could be learned from the perspective of other stakeholders, such as parents, case managers, educators, or related service providers. The TTP 2.0 (Kohler et al., 2016) suggests a need to better understand these points of view. While this study intended to focus on student perceptions of experiences in high school, participant responses began to focus on student perspectives and experiences with disability support in the postsecondary setting. This would be a natural extension of the research to explore participant postsecondary experiences. Furthermore, future research should focus on motivation to pursue postsecondary education, as well as inclusive postsecondary education programs for people with disabilities. Finally, it should investigate the perspectives of college students with disabilities and how the COVID-19 pandemic affected their postsecondary goal process and outcomes.

Conclusions

In conclusion, college students who participated in this study communicated incredible insight regarding transition practices experienced by

high school students with disabilities. Participants shared positive, indifferent, and negative experiences that were invaluable to our search for the student perspective as it related to experiences in transition practices of self-determination, academic preparedness, and college counseling.

Participants who had positive experiences recalled being actively engaged in transition planning, developing their own goals and making their own decisions about their future. Unfortunately, few participants described these positive experiences when compared to those who described a course of study dictated by family or educators. The participants demonstrated higher levels of confidence and satisfaction when they defined their own life path.

One of the main purposes of the research was to give voice to the experiences of the students. In the area of academics, students reported a marked change in the level of academic and time management support in college. Students described a need for more information and instruction during their high school transition to prepare them for the change. Students also reported dissatisfaction with modified high school classes that did not prepare them for academic expectations in college. The voices of the students inspired recommendations that will provide additional instruction and encourage students to enroll in more general education classes with fewer modifications to better prepare them for the academic rigor of college.

Participants reported the presence of college counseling at a higher rate than expected, and it had a direct effect on the student trajectory after high school. Student perspectives offer data that confirms college counseling for high school

students takes many forms and can both include and exclude formal college counseling and counselor involvement. Student interviewees also shared a lack of consistency regarding the type of college counseling received. To this end, it is recommended that college counseling for all students should be comprehensive, consistent, and inclusive. Counselors and special education practitioners should partner to ensure that college counseling practices are inclusive and involve the diverse student body that it supports.

This research provided a platform for students with disabilities to share how their high school experiences prepared them for postsecondary education and how they felt about their transition to college as they navigate higher education. The experiences were as individual as each participant, and yet they aptly demonstrated a continued theme for a need to improve on one of the most important outcomes of education--a successful transition to adulthood. As educators, we recognize the benefits of continued growth and improvement. While we get closer to achieving the goal above, we will be able to offer support to give life to our students' aspirations, assist them to live out their goals, and to share their learning to support the greater community. While its focus is centered on high school experiences and opportunities for change, this research provides a clear path forward in which educators, parents, and students can collaboratively work to improve final outcomes.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Script

Thank you for agreeing to learn more about an upcoming research study that my colleagues and I are leading as we pursue our doctoral degrees. Our research interest is in the transition process in high school for students with disabilities.

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of college students with disabilities on their transition experiences in high school in preparation for college. We hope our research will inform and guide secondary educational institutions to support the successful transition of students with disabilities into college. With this information, students will feel more comfortable and confident in their academic success.

Our research questions are; What are the perspectives of college students with disabilities on high school special education transition practices that promote college preparedness in relation to 1) self-advocacy, 2)academic skills, and 3)counseling? Our research study will include interviews with current college students with disabilities to examine their experiences leading up to and throughout their college transition. Interviews will take place on Zoom and be recorded for transcription purposes. The interview will consist of approximately 30 questions., The themes of the interview will consist of self-determination and advocacy, academic skills, and counseling for college readiness.

At any point during the recruitment process through participation, study participants are free to stop participating without explanation or consequence. Participant information and all related information to this research study will be kept completely confidential. All data will be stored in an encrypted location and conforms to the University of Missouri-St. Louis and St. Louis Community College Internal Review Board standards of practice.

Participation or non-participation in this study will not affect your access to disability support and resources in your current or future college journey. While this study focuses on the St. Louis community, including the Special School District, no identifying information will be used to establish where each participant attended high school or where they are attending college.

Again, we want to remind you that all information will remain confidential, and participation in this study is voluntary. You may stop anytime or skip a question if you feel uncomfortable. This study will involve minimal risk. The probability of harm and discomfort will not exceed your daily encounters.

If you are interested in this study, please sign the following letter of interest that also includes optional demographic information and availability for your interview. Declining participation will not negatively impact your support of us, and participation is strictly voluntary.

Appendix B

Screening for Inclusion Criteria Script

Thank you for agreeing to learn more about an upcoming research study that my colleagues and I are leading as we are in pursuit of our doctoral degrees. Our research interest is on the perspectives of college students with disabilities on their high school transition process.

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of college students with disabilities on their transition experiences in high school in preparation for college. We hope our research will inform and guide middle schools and high schools to support the successful transition of students with disabilities into college. With this information, students will feel more comfortable and confident in their academic success.

By completing this screening, we can obtain the information necessary to determine if you meet the criteria required for our study.

1. Are you your own legal guardian?
2. Are you currently receiving disability-related services at your college or university? (i.e., The Access Office, Succeed, Link)
3. Did you have an individual education program (IEP) or Educational Support Plan while in high school?
4. What year did you graduate from high school? (2020 or after)

Thank you for agreeing to answer these screening questions! Based on your responses,

- You fit the criteria to participate in our study. Are you still interested in participating in a longer interview?
    - If yes, we will send a follow-up email discussing possible interview times to fit your schedule.

- You do not fit the criteria that we need for our study. We appreciate your enthusiasm and willingness to answer our questions.

Appendix C

University of Missouri–St. Louis
Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities

Project Title: Perspectives of College Students With Disabilities on Their High School Transition Experiences; Notes for High School Transition Planning Principal Investigator: Andrew Kliethermes
Department Name: College of Education
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Shawn Woodhouse
IRB Project Number: #2097955

Key Information About the Study
You are being asked to participate in a research study. The purpose of the research study is to examine the perspectives of college students on their high school transition experiences. You are being asked to participate in a recorded interview with questions focusing on your high school transition experiences related to your IEP and related disability services. Possible benefits include the opportunity to examine your transition experiences as they relate to your preparedness for college. Some possible risks may include a minimal risk of loss of confidentiality.
Please read this form carefully and take your time. Let us know if you have any questions before participating. The research team can explain words or information that you do not understand. Research is voluntary, and you can choose not to participate. If you do not want to participate or choose to start, then stop; there will be no penalty or loss of benefits. At any point during the recruitment process through participation, you are free to stop participation by informing the research team. You can terminate participation without explanation or consequence.

Purpose of the Research
You are being asked to participate in this study because you have identified yourself as a college student with disabilities who is their own guardian and a recipient of IEP services while in high school. The purpose of the study is to examine the perspectives of college students on their high school transition experiences and their level of preparedness for college.

What will happen during the study?
You are being asked to:

- participate in a recorded Zoom interview lasting approximately 1 hour
- participate in an optional follow-up to review interview answers and codes to check for accuracy, referred to member checking.

As part of the research study, the researcher will record your image and voice in a video recording via Zoom. After the researcher has taken notes from the recording, it will be destroyed to protect your identity. The recording will include a picture of your face and the sound of your voice, but the researcher will not reveal your name or other identifying information.

_____ Yes, I can be audio/video recorded

_____ No, I don't want to be audio/video recorded.

Your participation is expected to last approximately 1 hour.
There will be approximately 18 subjects participating in this study.

What are the expected benefits of the study?
You may or may not benefit as a result of your participation in the study. Information learned from the study may inform how better to support students in disability support service programs. Further, results may impact high school programming for students with disabilities and support all students with regard to effective transition practices.

What are the possible risks of participating in this study?
There are certain risks and discomforts that may occur if you take part in this research study. Since student names will be used in the first part of the study, but pseudonyms will be used thereafter, there is a minimal possibility of loss of confidentiality.

To help lower these possible risks, we will store student information, including video files, transcripts, and pseudonym keys in a password-protected file. The information will be deleted upon completion of the study.

As this study involves the use of your personal information, there is a chance that a loss of confidentiality will occur. The researchers have procedures in place to lessen the possibility of this happening, as described in the "Will information about me be kept private" section.

We will tell you about any new important information we learn that may affect your decision to continue to participate in this study.

What other choices do I have if I don't want to be in this study?
You are not required to be in this study. You can choose not to participate.

Will I receive compensation for taking part in this study?
You will not be compensated for taking part in this study.

Are there any costs for participating in this study?
You should not expect any additional costs by participating in this study. You should discuss any questions about costs with the researchers before agreeing to participate.

Will information about me be kept private?
The research team is committed to respecting your privacy and keeping your personal information confidential. We will make every effort to protect your

information to the extent allowed by law.

When the results of this research are shared, we will remove all identifying information so it will not be known who provided the information. Your information will be kept as secure as possible to prevent your identity from being disclosed. In order to protect your information, the research team will redact transcripts and insert pseudonyms in place of your name. All transcripts, video recordings, and pseudonym keys will be kept in a password-protected file. All files will be destroyed upon completion of the study.

What we collected from you as part of this research will not be used or shared for future research studies. It will only be used for the purposes of this study.

Who do I contact if I have questions or concerns?

If you have any questions or concerns about this research study, or if you have any problems that occur from taking part in this research study, you may contact Andrew Kliethermes at johnsonandrew@umsl.edu or Kate Sandheinrich at ksandheinrich1@stlcc.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the University of Missouri–St. Louis Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 314-516-5972 or irb@umsl.edu. The IRB is a group of people who review research studies to make sure the rights and welfare of participants are protected.

Do I get a copy of this consent?
You will receive a copy of this consent for your records.
We appreciate your consideration to participate in this study.

Study Participation Criteria:
I certify that I:

1. am my own legal guardian
2. currently receive disability-related services at a college or university
3. had a formal individual education program (IEP) or Educational Support Plan while in high school
4. graduated from high school no more than three years ago

Consent Signatures

Subject's Signature	**Date**

Investigator Authorized to Obtain Consent	**Date**

Appendix D

Interview Protocol

Hello,

Thank you for agreeing to meet with us. This study aims to examine the perceptions of college students with disabilities on their transition experiences of transition services in high school in preparation for college. We hope our research will inform and guide secondary educational institutions to support the successful transition of students with disabilities into college. With this information, students will feel more comfortable and confident in their academic success.

By completing our demographic questionnaire, we have obtained your demographic information necessary to gain basic knowledge of your transition journey to college. We will now complete a more in-depth interview process to better understand exactly which high school transition supports you felt were most beneficial. We will focus on the areas of self-advocacy, academics, and college counseling. We will discuss personal information, including disability status and accommodations you have received.

We want to remind you that all information will remain confidential, and participation in this study is voluntary. You may stop anytime or skip a question if you feel uncomfortable. This study will involve minimal risk. The probability of harm and discomfort will not exceed your daily encounters. If you do not verbally consent to participate, you will not be a part of this study.

As a reminder, we will record this Zoom meeting and transcribe it later. After we finish the transcribing process, we will send it to you for your review within a few weeks. We may directly quote your words in our research, but no personal information will be disclosed, and we will not identify you. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Are you ready to begin?

Interview Questions:

Self Determination & Advocacy- The following questions are going to ask about your IEP meetings in high school. We want to know more about your experience in IEP meetings.

1. Describe your experiences attending IEP meetings in high school.
2. In what ways were your voice, interests, and thoughts considered and heard regarding transition and after-high school goals during the IEP meeting and documents? Were those interests reflected in the IEP goals?
3. What were your goals, and are you still pursuing these goals?
    a. Did your IEP team support these goals?
4. Did you receive instruction or support in self-advocacy in high school?
5. When preparing for life after high school and college, did you receive support from anyone outside school and your family? If so, who?
    a. How did you feel about that (absence of support or presence of support)?
6. How did the skills you used in your IEP meeting help you to advocate/ask for accommodations in college?
7. Are you registered with disability services at your university?
    a. If yes, how did you find out or get connected with the disability services on campus?
    b. If not, are you familiar with accommodations through access services?
8. Describe your experiences and views on college disability services.

Academic Skills- the following questions explore how you feel about your academic preparation, including time management, study, and social skills.

9. What are some similarities between high school and college academic expectations? What are some differences?
10. Describe some of the classes you participated in that you feel prepared you for college.
11. Describe ways your high school support team prepared you for the academic expectations of college.
12. What skills did you learn in high school to help you manage and organize your time?
13. What are some ways that high school prepared you to study and prepare for tests at the college level?
14. What academic experiences in college do you wish you were more prepared for?

Counseling for College Readiness - For the next set of questions, we are going to ask you about the things that you experienced in high school to better prepare you for college.

15. Did you meet with a high school counselor to talk about college options or college readiness?
16. Describe ways you felt prepared for college?
17. What do you wish you had learned in high school to better prepare for college?
18. What made you decide to attend college?

a. Who most encouraged you to go to college?

19. Did you find your transition IEP helpful in your transition to college?
20. What activities or tools helped to guide you in preparation for college? Who provided these tools?
21. Did you receive instruction or information on the difference between high school and college accommodations, services, or supports?
22. Describe what information or guidance you received in high school to connect with disability services in college.
23. What resources do you believe were most beneficial to your college preparation?
    a. What are other resources, services, or instructions that you think would have been helpful to your college preparation?
24. Who do you believe was most helpful in your preparation for college?

Additional Inquiries

25. What advice would you give incoming college freshmen?
26. Did you have a specific experience in high school that prepared you for college?
27. What is one of your biggest accomplishments in college?
28. What is one of your biggest challenges so far in college?
29. What do you wish someone told you about college before you started?

Definitions/Clarifications:

Self-advocacy-The ability to speak up for yourself and communicate your needs.

Academic skills- Skills or strategies you use to study to help you succeed in school.

Management skills- Skills to plan ahead and meet goals, display self-control, stay focused despite distractions.