

# Fostering the Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy Skills of College Students with Disabilities through a College Success Class

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**Abstract:** Students with disabilities are entering postsecondary education in greater numbers; however, they experience great difficulty in completing their programs. One factor contributing to their lack of success is the discrepancy in the laws that govern educational support in secondary and postsecondary education. An additional factor is limited development of self-determination/self-advocacy skills when students exit high school. Bridges, a National Science Foundation three-year transition project, piloted a College Success Class at Lansing [Michigan] Community College with the dual purpose of supporting student transition to college and developing self-determination and self-advocacy skills. Data suggests that through classroom activities and follow-up meetings, students developed a greater understanding of these concepts, more confidence, and the ability to advocate with college instructors for their accommodations.

**Key Words:** self-determination, self-advocacy, postsecondary success

## Introduction

The demands of the twenty-first century workforce include advanced training, technical skills, and high standards of productivity, problem solving, and teamwork. McCabe (2000) found that 80% of the new jobs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will require some postsecondary education and that only 20% will be for unskilled labor. In their Strategic Plan of 1998-2000, the United States Department of Education reported postsecondary education is the entryway to professional and technical training and higher wages. In order for young adults to gain economic independence they must pursue some form of education and training beyond high school to develop the technical skills necessary to enter the workforce of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Furthermore, President Bush's New Freedom Initiative, 2001, declares that all Americans with disabilities must have the opportunity to learn and develop skills and engage in productive work. This means that postsecondary institutions are faced with the challenge of finding ways to successfully educate all youth, including those with special needs.

Many studies report that enrollment rates of students with disabilities in postsecondary education increased from 2.6% in 1978 to nearly 19% in 1996 (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Gajar 1998). According to HEATH Resource Center, between 1988 and 1998 there was an increase of 173% for students with disabilities entering college (Henderson, 1999). In spite of these increasing numbers, students are experiencing limited success and exiting college without completing their programs (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Witte, Philips, & Kakela, 1998). The percentage of students who are successful remains low, with only 25% of students with disabilities awarded an associate degree after five years at a community college (Burgstahler, Crawford, & Acosta, 2001). This is partially due to the number of remedial courses students with disabilities take prior to beginning their college curriculum. Adelman (1998) found that students who

need to take remedial courses reduce their probability of achieving a college degree. Students with zero remedial courses had a 60% graduation rate, those with 2 remedial courses resulted in a 45% completion rate, and students who took 5 or more courses had a 35% completion rate. Several other issues that diminish the probability for success for students with disabilities in postsecondary education include: organizational barriers, pace of instruction, and expectation of independent learning (Vogel, S. & Adelman, P. 1993).

### Statement of the Problem

The transition from high school to college for many students is complicated and challenging. For students with disabilities it is even more demanding, in part because of the dramatic differences in the laws that govern high school and postsecondary settings. In high school, under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1997, students with disabilities are entitled to individualized supports and services provided by an array of special education staff that provide and coordinate specialized instruction and accommodations in both general and special education classes. One result of these services is many students with disabilities exit high school with limited self-determination and self-advocacy skills, because their service providers and parents assume responsibility for advocating for their educational needs rather than fostering the development of these skills (Izzo & Lamb, 2002).

Postsecondary settings are governed by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 that mandate only access to higher education, not a vast array of services and support personnel to meet the students' academic and emotional needs.

Students must present the college with documentation of their disabilities. The college determines if they meet the criteria for educational accommodations. These accommodations must be requested by the students; otherwise the college is under no obligation to provide them. Thus, in order for college students with disabilities to be able to learn successfully in postsecondary settings, they must assume full responsibility, often for the first time, for securing any accommodations necessary for success in their college studies.

Consequently, skills such as self-determination and self-advocacy, or the ability to articulate one's strengths, challenges, and necessary supports, are critical when entering postsecondary settings. Wehmeyer (1998) has written extensively about the need for people with disabilities to become more autonomous, to learn how to make choices, and to advocate for their wishes and needs. Stodden (2000) and Izzo and Lamb (2002) indicate that self-determination/self-advocacy are critical skills for the success of students with disabilities in postsecondary education and employment. However, many college students with disabilities report they are uncomfortable requesting accommodations from faculty (Izzo, Hertzfeld & Aaron, 2002). Often they must advocate for themselves with faculty who have limited knowledge of the ADA, the characteristics of specific disabilities, and appropriate accommodations.

## The Bridges Study

### Overview of the Project

*Bridges*, a three-year transition project funded in 2000 by the National Science Foundation, was a collaborative approach to transition involving college disabilities counselors, vocational rehabilitation counselors, a transition specialist and a group of high school and college mathematics and science teachers. The project was implemented by Holt High School, a large suburban district in a tri-county area of mid-Michigan, in the Great Lakes region of the United States, and Lansing Community College. The major goal of the *Bridges* project was to increase accessibility to a community college for students with disabilities pursuing scientific and technical careers. One feature of the project was a *College Success Class* piloted with the dual purpose of supporting students in the project in their transition from high school to college, and developing their self-determination and self-advocacy skills. Students with disabilities were recruited from Holt High School and twelve other county high schools. Participation in the *Bridges Project* was based on three criteria: A documented disability; Enrollment in the community college, and A career interest in science, technology, engineering or mathematics. High school special education teachers, rehabilitation counselors, and parents referred students to the project. The class was required for the students in the *Bridges Project* and was also open to other community college students with disabilities who had various career interests and who had been recommended by their college disabilities counselor.

The class was a two credit, one-semester course co-taught by a College Disabilities Counselor and the *Bridges Project* Director, a transition specialist. The College Disabilities Counselor is a certified counselor who has worked with college students with disabilities for more than ten years. The transition specialist taught students with disabilities K-12 for twenty-five years and spent the last ten years developing and researching transition programs for high school youth. The state vocational rehabilitation agency, which serves people with all disabilities except for those who are blind or visually impaired, paid tuition for the *College Success Class* for all students as a part of their collaborative partnership in the *Bridges Project*. The class met once a week for a two-hour class period offered in the fall of 2002 and 2003 to two different groups of students. In addition to the semester class, students were required to meet individually with instructors at the midterm and end of the fall semester. During the spring semester they were scheduled to meet twice with the instructors to follow-up on their academic progress, problem solve, and provide encouragement and support for their self-advocacy. At the end of the spring semester, students participated in a final interview to discuss their college success and their thoughts about the impact of the *College Success Class* on their self-determination skills and their ongoing support. Whenever, possible vocational rehabilitation counselors participated in the follow-up conferences with their students.

The curriculum of the *College Success Class* consisted of 10 major components (See Addendum 1). All activities focused on developing one or more aspects of self-determination skills. The instructors utilized the comprehensive definition of self-

determination developed by Martin and Huber Marshall (1995), which consists of seven components; self-awareness, self-advocacy, self-efficacy, decision-making, independent performance, self-evaluation, and adjustment (See Addendum 2 for detailed descriptions developed by Izzo & Lamb, 2002). The class emphasized development of self-awareness, self-advocacy, independent performance, and self-evaluation. In one class session students learned about both internal and external “locus of control” and were asked to provide examples of both from their personal experiences. In another they investigated different learning and teaching styles and developed their personal profile of learning and accommodations. Following these sessions, students were given an outline for developing a written self-advocacy plan. The plan included a description of the student’s learning styles, learning strengths and challenges, accommodations needed, and their responsibility as a student. Students practiced sharing their self-advocacy plans with classmates of their own choosing.

In the next class session, instructors invited college faculty to listen to students present their plans on an individual basis and ask them questions about their needs. Each student was required to share his or her plan with at least two faculty members or more, if time permitted. Following their presentations, faculty members provided students with written feedback on the clarity of their explanations concerning their learning challenges, the accommodations they needed to be successful, their responsibilities as students, and their demeanor throughout the presentation. In the last part of this class session, instructors invited students to discuss their experiences in this process, what they learned, and how they felt the college instructors had responded to their advocacy. As a follow-up activity, students were assigned a reflective journal consisting of four questions concerning their feelings about their preparation to self-advocate, their learning difficulties and accommodations, whether the experience was good preparation for future discussions with instructors, and the helpfulness of faculty feedback.

At mid-semester, the instructors held individual student conferences to encourage students to meet with their own instructors and share the information they had written in their self-advocacy plan. In subsequent student conferences, instructors focused on student self-evaluation, self-awareness, student responsibility, and decision making about academic progress. Instructors assisted students in developing problem solving strategies and making adjustments in their goals as necessary.

## Research Questions

The specific questions the study on college success investigated are:

1. What impact, if any, do the class activities have on the students’ ability to define in their own words the concepts of self-determination and self-advocacy?
2. What impact, if any, does the course have on the students’ confidence, ability, and willingness to self-advocate with their college instructors?
3. What class activities, if any, would students identify as most beneficial in assisting them in becoming more self-determined and better advocates?

4. What benefits, if any, would students report from participation in this type of college class?

## Research Method

The qualitative method was used primarily to understand the effect of the intervention, i.e., the *College Success Class*, by listening to the voices of the students over time and analyzing the changes in their thinking and actions related to self-determination and self-advocacy. Qualitative methods are interactive and therefore better able to provide insights into the complexities and processes involved in developing self-determination and self-advocacy skills (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Since the development of these skills is process oriented, a qualitative approach offers an opportunity to examine the context and the players from a holistic perspective and to view them and the process as a whole without reducing them to variables (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). According to Borg & Gall (1989), a qualitative inquiry methodology is appropriate when attempting to understand what is happening in a field, in this case the development of self-determination and self-advocacy skills for college students with disabilities. Some quantitative data was also collected (i.e., student ratings of the value of the class activities and the ways class experiences and interviews assisted them during their first year in college).

Three guidelines that govern the value and usefulness of this type of study include credibility, dependability, and transferability (Guba, 1981). Credibility refers to the congruence between the intended meanings of participants and how those meanings are interpreted and represented by researchers. Having two researchers (the two instructors) read and analyze the data and agree on the interpretations increased study credibility. "Crucial to inter reliability is inter-rater or inter-observer reliability—the extent to which the sets of meanings held by multiple observers are sufficiently congruent so that they describe the phenomena in the same way and arrive at the same conclusions about them" (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982, p. 41).

Dependability involves maintaining stability and consistency while allowing for an emergent study design. This project's dependability was strengthened through the verification of the two researchers in weekly discussions about students' progress in developing self-determination/self-advocacy skills, by reading students' pretests and course evaluations, and by discussing students' conversations and detailed notes of students' responses during the follow-up interviews. A third researcher with knowledge and experience in transition was secured to evaluate and rate the pre/post data on students' definitions of self-determination and self-advocacy for the purposes of inter-rater reliability. Further, Lincoln and Guba (1985) also recommend triangulation of data as a way to build the credibility and validity of data. Triangulation of data involves collecting multiple sets of data to develop accurate representations for corroboration. The college students with disabilities wrote individual pretests and course evaluations and were interviewed separately about their experiences in the *College Success Class*. It is believed these measures to ensure credibility and dependability diminished the drawbacks cited about case study methods (i.e., a perceived lack of rigor because the

researcher may allow “biased views to influence the direction of findings and conclusions”) (Yin, 1994, p. 9).

Transferability refers to the generalizability of results--whether they will apply to another situation. Since the majority of colleges and universities provide support services to students with disabilities, the outcomes of this study may be of interest to support services professionals as they counsel and support students to advocate for themselves. The study may also be of interest to secondary transition specialists who work with students with disabilities to develop these skills and assist them in identifying postsecondary institutions that will provide the support necessary for their college success. The outcomes may be of value to vocational rehabilitation counselors who provide supports and services to youth with disabilities and encourage students' self-advocacy and independence.

### Design of Study and Site Selection

This study investigated the development of the self-determination and self-advocacy skills of college students with disabilities through their participation in a *College Success Class* taught by a college disabilities counselor and a transition specialist.

### Sampling Procedures and Recruitment

Twelve students enrolled in the 2001 *College Success Class*. Nine students completed all course components and participated in second semester follow-up meetings. The instructors believed the follow-up meetings were critical in assisting students to apply the self-determination and self-advocacy skills addressed in the class. Two of the twelve students dropped the class and one student did not participate in the follow-up meetings. In the 2002 course, sixteen students enrolled in the class. Three students dropped the class and two did not participate in the follow-up meetings. In both years, the primary reason that students gave for dropping the class was they felt they did not need further assistance in developing their skills in self-determination and self-advocacy. Thus, a combined total of twenty students with disabilities completed the College Success Class and the follow-up meetings. The results of this study are based on the data from these twenty students. The numbers and types of disabilities or federal/state categorical certifications of the twenty students were as follows; 6 Learning Disabled (LD) and Attention Deficit Disorder, 5 LD, 3 Emotionally Impaired, 2 LD and Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder, 1 Autistically Impaired, 1 Hearing Impaired, 1 Visually Impaired, and 1 Traumatic Brain Injury.

### Data Sources and Collection

Students completed a pretest and a posttest on self-determination and self-advocacy. In these tests students were asked to explain self-determination and self-advocacy, their disability, and accommodations they needed. The tests were read aloud and answers were transcribed as necessary for any of the students. On the last day of

class they completed a course evaluation. They were asked the following: to indicate two things they liked best and least about the class, to evaluate on a scale of 1 (least) to 5 (most) the activities that were of most value in helping them become more self-determined and better at self-advocacy, whether they would recommend the class to other college students with disabilities, and why or why not. At each individual student meeting at midterm and at the end of class, students were asked about their academic progress, their efforts in self-advocacy, accommodations they had requested, their use of assistive technology, their career planning and employment to date. Notes were taken in each of these areas and after each conference the instructors compared notes about student progress.

Two weeks after the semester ended, students were scheduled for a comprehensive interview with the instructors and with their vocational rehabilitation counselor to discuss their freshmen college experience. Students were asked to describe their successes and areas they needed to improve. They were again asked what it means to be self-determined and to self-advocate. Then they were asked to rate their ability to self-advocate, the number of instructors they talked with about their learning styles and accommodations they needed. Finally, they were asked in what ways the College Success Class and the individual meetings had assisted them in college that year. They were read a list of skills related to self-determination and asked to rate the impact of their experience on a scale of zero to two; 0, not at all, 1, somewhat helpful, 2, very helpful. Some of the students responses include, "The class helped me to solve problems," "focus my attentions," "get more organized," "become more responsible," "self-advocate," "meet my goals," or "advocate for myself." The project director wrote the student responses on the interview form. The pre/post tests, course evaluations, interview data, and student journals on self-advocacy were the primary data sources for this study.

### Data Analysis Procedures

Student definitions of self-determination and self-advocacy were copied from their pre/post tests and their final interview for comparative analysis. A rating scale of zero, one, and two was developed to evaluate the quality of their definitions of these concepts. A list was made of phrases used in curriculum materials and by instructors to describe concepts of self-determination and self-advocacy. For example, in materials used on goal setting, students learned about standards, timelines, supports, and motivation. In the unit on locus of control, students learned about taking personal responsibility for their actions and operating independently. In the self-advocacy discussions, students learned about being assertive rather than aggressive, about their legal rights, and about asking for accommodations they needed for academic success. In analyzing their pre/post definitions, evaluators used this list of phrases to rate student answers. A zero rating indicated a vague definition with none of the phrases on the list or their equivalent, a rating of one indicated there was one element from the list, and a rating of two indicated two or more elements from the list of phrases defining these terms. The class instructors and an independent researcher rated student definitions. The inter rater reliability was 95% for definitions about self-determination and 85% for definitions about

self-advocacy. In instances where one evaluator had a different rating, ratings given by both evaluators were used.

In the class evaluation for each student, ratings of class activities were charted and totals tabulated. This same type of analysis was used in the final interview ratings where students indicated which skills in self-determination and self-advocacy were developed through the class and follow-up meetings. Student journals about their experiences in self-advocacy simulation with college instructors were then examined to identify any patterns of feelings regarding preparation, confidence, and instructor responses to their advocacy. On the initial reading, key phrases were noted and formed into groups. On the second reading of journals, student responses were categorized.

## Findings

### *Changes in Description of Self-Determination*

An analysis of student pre/post tests reveal that 11 of 20 student definitions (55%) changed from a level 1 on the pretest to a level 2 on the post test. Level 1 rating indicated that a student had one element describing self-determination in the definition; level 2 rating indicated two or more elements, such as goal setting, taking action, operating independently, or advocating for him or herself.

Six of the students (30%) changed from a 0 to a level 2. One student was rated a 2 on both the pre/post tests, one student changed from a 0 to a rating of 1, and another student remained a zero on both the pre and post test. Overall, 18 of 20 student (90%) definitions were rated at level 2. For example, "Lucas" described self-determination before the class as "wanting to push your self" (level 1). After the class he wrote that a self-determined person "doesn't waste a day, sets goals, has time management, assertiveness and asks for help or assistance" (level 2). On his pretest, "Josh" described self-determination as "motivation to want to finish something" (level 1). On the post test, he stated someone who is self-determined has "goals and a plan to meet those goals, is organized, has good time management, doesn't give up, and takes responsibility for himself" (level 2). "Liz" was unable to define self-determination on her pretest, however, on her post test she wrote, "Self-determination is where you advocate for yourself and you have a set plan of action to go by. They are motivated in what they're doing to get things done. They have goals and push towards the goals" (level 2).

### *Changes in Description of Self-Advocacy*

In the analysis of the pre/post test on student definitions of self-advocacy, 8 of 20 students (40%) changed from level 0 to level 2. The same number (40%) changed from level 1 to level 2. Two students (20%) changed from level 0 to 1 and an equivalent number had no change (0 to 0). In all, 16 of the 20 students (80%) were found to be at a level 2 in defining or explaining self-advocacy. Their definitions incorporated two or more phrases, such as "tell people what you need," "speak for yourself," "ask for help," and "accommodations." "Kris" could not define self-advocacy on the pretest but



provided this description on the posttest, "To talk with your instructor for feedback about your work in class, and to ask for assistance when you don't understand, and for accommodations for your disability" (level 2). "Zach" clarified his understanding of self-advocacy between the pre and post test. On the pretest he defined self-advocacy as "making the right decision without help from outsiders" (level 1). On the post test "Zach" reported that, "You talk with the instructors about your disability, about the class style, and the types of homework, and about the accommodations that you need" (level 2). "Nikki" wrote on her pretest, "Self-advocacy is where you do what other people used to do for you" (level 1). On the post test she indicated, "If you need help you ask for it and don't rely on someone else. It is knowing what rights you have, and what helps you learn" (level 2).

In the *College Success Class* students developed a self-advocacy plan describing their abilities, challenges, and accommodations, and then discussed the plan with college instructors who volunteered to attend class, listen to their plans, and provide them with feedback. Only 16 of the 20 students participated in this activity; the other four were absent. In an analysis of their reflective journals on this experience, 12 of the students (75%) reported they felt more confident and better prepared to talk with college instructors after this experience. "Nikki" wrote, "This put my mind at ease and helped me understand the process I will take and what I will need to do." "Jacquee" reported, "I gained in my confidence as I talked to more instructors. I learned teachers really care about students." "Kris" wrote about the value of the activity: "It gave me the confidence to explain my disabilities and my needs to future instructors. I did not feel instructors intimidated me."

Not all students reported feeling this way; 4 of 16 (25%) reported that it did not prepare them for advocating with their instructors. Two of the students reported they were nervous and the experience did not prepare them for doing this in the future because they will still be nervous when they talk with their instructors about their disabilities. "It didn't help prepare me," "Matt" commented, "Since the teachers knew in advance what the purpose the meeting was about. But they won't know that in the future." "Tammy" felt it had not prepared her at all. "When I did my meetings with each instructor," she said, "I was basically reciting what I did whenever I talked to my real instructors."

In the course evaluation, 65% of the students rated this activity as average or above average and ranked it fourth of the six major activities. In the final interview, students were asked how many instructors they talked with about their disabilities and the accommodations they needed. Nearly half of the students (40% or 8 of 20) reported speaking to all their instructors during both semesters. In some cases (35% or 7 of 20) students reported speaking only to those instructors in whose classes they felt they needed assistance. One student reported speaking to one instructor in the first semester and all of them in the second semester. Some students (20% or 4 of 20) did not speak to their instructors at all. In two of these cases, students had emotional rather than learning impairments and reported they did not feel they needed accommodations. "Kris", who did not self-advocate, stated in his interview, "That was my downfall. I would have done

better in physics if I had talked with him about my progress in his class and asked for more time on the tests. I won't make that mistake again."

Students were also asked in their last interview to rate their self-advocacy skills on a scale of 1-5. The students rated themselves as follows; 6 students, "Excellent", 4 students, "Good", 7 students, "Fair", 2 students, "Poor", and 1 student, "Not At All." In sum, it appears the activities related to development of self-advocacy benefited the majority of students in feeling more confident and better prepared to talk with their instructors about their learning and their accommodations. Further, by the second semester of their freshmen year, 15 of the 20 students spoke either with all of their instructors or with instructors in courses in which they needed accommodations for their learning needs. Ten students rated their self-advocacy skills between excellent and good, and seven more indicated they were fairly good at the process. Further, 75% felt more confident in their abilities to self-advocate, and 80% of them reported speaking to either all of their instructors or to the ones who they felt needed to provide them with accommodations by second semester of their first year.

### *Student Commentary on the Class*

What types of comments did students write in their final evaluation of the class? Students were asked to complete a written evaluation listing things they liked best and least about the class, and the one major thing they learned in the class. They were also asked to rate the value of the major activities of the class on a scale of 1 (least) to 5 (most). Of the 20 students, 8 wrote about the friendly, "laid-back atmosphere of the class" and about the opportunity to meet other students with disabilities. Five of the participants identified the *Faculty Workshop on Teaching College Students with Disabilities* developed by students as the best activity. Five students reported they learned a great deal about their disabilities and accommodations, especially through self-advocacy plans. Four students reported the class gave them the support they needed to be successful in college. Three other students reported they felt this class helped them become more independent, responsible, and in control.

In terms of what students liked least about the class, three students felt the group project to develop a *Faculty Workshop* was "stressful in trying to meet with everyone and getting people to work together." Another three felt the unit on goal setting was overemphasized. One student reported he felt the atmosphere of the class and the curriculum was too much like high school and the students were immature.

When asked in the course evaluation if they would recommend the class to other students with disabilities 15 out of 20 (75%) indicated yes, 2 indicated maybe, and 3 indicated no. "Rick" wrote, "It will teach them what college is all about, and give them a support base." "Joe" felt that "it would help them more getting through the first semester of college." "Ashley" wrote in her evaluation, "You know you're not alone. It's helped to establish a support network and to get focused." "Dale" wrote, "I learned things about advocating, how to manage time, and setting priorities." "Lyle" noted, "Some things can't be taught they have to be experienced, maybe if it were more of a guide." "Kris",

however, felt differently, "I didn't learn much, but some students will find it helpful." However, in the final individual meetings at the end of the spring semester all 20 students said they would recommend the class and the meetings. "Kris" rethought his position and shared in the last meeting, "Having this program has kept my mind on my long term goals and helped me stay focused on school. The encouragement has been very helpful." "Kris" stated the course and supports during his second semester "helped me quite a bit and I would recommend it to other students." Two students in their last interview shared they would have quit college before the end of their second semester had they not had this class and the follow-up support.

### *Student Ratings of the Course Activities*

In their evaluation of the class, students were asked to rate the major activities of the class for their value in helping them to become more self-determined and better at self-advocating. The majority of students rated the course activities between average value (3), to above average (4), or most valuable (5). The student-led *Faculty Workshop on Teaching College Students with Disabilities* was rated the highest by 18 of the 20 (90%) students, even though it was the most complex and challenging. This was the culminating activity of the course. The students were divided into two groups based on student input, and assigned the task of developing an hour-long workshop for college faculty on disabilities. The workshop had to include information on the Americans with Disabilities Act, information on one or more disabilities, accommodations that would assist students in class, and suggestions on how college faculty could help students with disabilities feel more comfortable in class. Students were required to develop a handout and visuals related to their presentations. All students were required to present a part of the workshop. Since they were given only one hour of class time to discuss and plan, student groups were expected to meet outside of class. Fifteen to twenty faculty members attended each session in both years. All workshop participants reported the student presentations were some of the most valuable and meaningful they had attended on the topic.

Two other activities were rated by majority of students as most valuable activities. The unit of *Goal Setting*, in which students learned the elements of a goal, the process for developing goals, and where they developed an academic goal for the semester, was the unit rated most valuable by 85% (17 of 20) of the students. The *Research and Presentations on a Person with Disability Unit* was rated most valuable by 75% of the students (15 of 20). In this project, students had to identify someone with a disability, research that person's life story, and identify which self-determination skills contributed to that person's success. They were required to present their findings to the class and to accommodate student learning styles by including a visual and a hands-on activity. The presentation of their self-advocacy plan to college faculty was rated as a valuable activity by 65% of the students (13 of 20).

Two other activities rated by over half the students (55%, 11 of 20) as important were writing their self-advocacy plans and researching their personal career interests. In this latter activity, students had to find information on education and training required,

future demand for that career, salary, etc., and then had to develop a set of questions, to interview someone in the career, and present their findings to the class.

Based on the outcomes of their evaluations, both groups (Year 1 and Year 2) participating in the *College Success Class* felt core activities of the course contributed to development of their self-determination and self-advocacy skills. Further corroboration of these findings was revealed in their final interviews when students rated the ways the class and follow-up meetings assisted them in their first year of college. Students were asked to rate the helpfulness of the class on developing a series of skills related to self-determination on a scale of 0 (not at all), 1 (somewhat helpful) or 2 (very helpful). The following table lists their ratings:

**Table 1. Student Ratings of Assistance Provided by the College Success Class. N=20**

<b>The class helped me to:</b>	<b>Students rating item 0, Not At All</b>	<b>Students rating item 1, Somewhat Helpful</b>	<b>Students rating item 2, Very Helpful</b>
1. Feel support and encouragement.	0	0	20
2. Self-advocate.	0	12	8
3. Get more organized.	2	10	8
4. Become more responsible.	2	10	8
5. Think about future career.	3	8	9
6. Meet my goals.	3	11	6
7. Focus my attention.	4	7	9
6. Plan my schedule.	4	13	3
9. Become more independent.	5	7	8
10. Understand my disability.	6	10	4
11. Solve problems.	6	13	1

This table reveals that the majority of students felt the *College Success Class*, including follow-up meetings was either somewhat or very helpful in assisting them in the development of the above skills. All 20 students felt the class was very helpful in providing them with a great deal of encouragement and support. In terms of self-advocating all felt the class was somewhat or very helpful in this area. Between 40-45% felt the class was very helpful in assisting them in self-advocating, getting more organized, becoming more responsible, thinking about their futures, focusing their

attention, and becoming more independent. In other skill areas, i.e., meeting their goals, planning their college schedule, understanding their disabilities, and solving problems, 50-65% of the students rated the class as somewhat helpful. When combining the ratings of 1 and 2, the College Success Class was rated as fairly helpful to very helpful in the first nine areas on Table 1 by 75% to 100% of the students. In the last two areas, helping students learn more about their disability and problem solving, 70% rated the class as somewhat to very helpful.

## Discussion

Data from student journals, class evaluations, and final interviews indicated the activities implemented through the *College Success Class* were beneficial in helping all twenty students develop skills in self-determination and self-advocacy. While these findings are limited by the small number of participants and are based on the self-report of students, the findings provide valuable information concerning the types of activities that students find most valuable in assisting them in becoming more independent and responsible learners. First, based on student reports, a *College Success Class* with the types of activities described in this study can increase college students' understanding of the concepts of self-determination and self-advocacy, and it can strengthen the development of these skills. Second, when students are given opportunities to practice self-advocacy with college faculty, the confidence of students with disabilities increases and they are more likely to take the initiative and talk with their own instructors. Third, the opportunity to develop and present their own workshop on disabilities empowers students through the process of providing faculty with information on their learning needs. Also, in many cases, they examine their own personal experiences in trying to learn and discover how teachers could support their efforts. Fourth, in the 11 areas of support, 70% or more of the students in this study rated the class as helpful to very helpful. The fact that all students would recommend this course to other students with disabilities as a means of support to assist them during their first year in college is an indicator that courses like these offered on college campuses may be of value in teaching such students how to self-advocate and become more self-determined. In the long term, courses like this may increase the capacity of students with disabilities to remain in college and to achieve their postsecondary goals. Of the 20 students involved in this project, 16 are still in college, one relocated to another state, one joined the military, and two are working full-time without completing their program.

## Limitations

In spite of the careful design of this study, gathering and analyzing the data resulted in some limitations. First, the study focused on twenty college students with disabilities. Such a small sample raises questions about generalizability, credibility, and dependability of the findings. The intent of the study, however, was less to produce generalizable results and more to learn about the impact of a college class focused on developing student understanding of the concept of self-determination and self-advocacy, and the development and application of these skills. A second purpose was to determine what types of activities students would find most beneficial in developing these skills.

A second limitation is that the author of this paper was the major architect of the curriculum and co-taught the class. However, several measures were taken to moderate the bias. The data was analyzed and reviewed by the author and the other co-teacher, a third researcher was secured to rate changes in student definitions of self-determination and self-advocacy, and the inter-rater reliability between the three researchers was 85-90% respectively. In addition, the paper was reviewed by the co-teacher of the course for her input and verification.

## Conclusion

A major purpose of this study was to find out the impact a college class might have on the development of student understanding and development of self-determination and self-advocacy skills. The findings revealed that at the end of the course, 90% of the students were able to describe self-determination in more specific detail and 80% were more explicit in describing self-advocacy. When given the opportunity to practice their self-advocacy skills with college faculty, 75% felt more confident and 80% spoke either to all their instructors, or to faculty of the classes in which the students needed accommodations, by the second semester of their first year. Students found the most beneficial course activities involved their active participation and presentation of information, i.e., the faculty workshop, goal setting, research and presentation on a person with a disability, and practicing self-advocacy with college faculty. These were the most challenging activities to execute, yet in spite of the complexity and risk-taking involved in these activities, students rated them as most beneficial in developing their self-determination and self-advocacy skills. This raises the question for educators as to whether the bar is raised high enough in high school by expecting students to operate more independently in advocating for themselves. All students reported in their final interview that the class was somewhat to very helpful in assisting them in developing their skills in self-determination and self-advocacy, and all of them said that they would recommend it to first year college students with disabilities. The results of this study indicate that it is indeed possible to strengthen the understanding and development of self-determination of college students with disabilities through a class of student-driven activities. Further, the scheduling of follow-up meetings involving the student's college disability counselor and their vocational rehabilitation counselors were critically important in assisting these students in the further development and application of these skills. Providing students with disabilities with a course such as the one described in this study in their first year of college was crucial in helping them become their own advocates and learn how to navigate the rough waters inherent in postsecondary institutions as independent learners. In the words of "Kris," "I learned that I am able to be what I want, but it is my responsibility to make it come to pass."

## Implications for Policy and Practice

### Implications for Policy

1. Policymakers need to require postsecondary institutions to support the continued development of the self-determination/self-advocacy skills of students with disabilities.
2. Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies need to provide tuition for courses offered by colleges to foster student self-determination, self-advocacy, and independent learning skills.

### Implications for Practice

1. Disability professionals in postsecondary settings need to identify ways they can further develop the self-determination and self-advocacy skills of students with disabilities through pre-college workshops or student success classes, incorporating the activities similar to those described in this study.
2. College disabilities professionals and vocational rehabilitation counselors need to work collaboratively to provide supports and services to students with disabilities and to strengthen the development of their skills in self-determination/self-advocacy in postsecondary education.

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### **Addendum 1: Ten Major Activities of College Success Class**

- Write four *Reflective Journals* related to class activities.
- Learn about goal setting and develop personal goals.
- Research and present a biography on a person with a disability.
- Participate in a panel discussion with veteran college students/faculty with disabilities.
- Complete a unit on *Internal and External Locus of Control*.
- Write a *Self-Advocacy Plan* including information about academic strengths, challenges, learning style, and accommodations for success.
- Present *Self-Advocacy Plan* to college faculty.
- Research career interest and interview a person in the career.
- Develop and present a *Workshop on Disabilities, the Law, and Accommodations* to college faculty.
- Participate in scheduled meetings with instructors and rehabilitation counselor during the first semester and follow-up meetings the second semester.

## **Addendum 2. Descriptions of the Seven Components of Self-Determination**

- Self-awareness begins with the ability to identify and understand needs, interest, strengths, limitations, and values.
- Self-advocacy refers to the ability to assertively state wants, needs and rights, determine and pursue needed supports, and conduct your own affairs.
- Self-efficacy often is referred to as self-confidence—the belief that you expect to obtain your goals.
- Decision-making is the complex skill of setting goals and standards, identifying information to make decisions and considering past solutions, generating new solutions if needed, and choosing the best options to develop a plan.
- Independent performance refers to the ability to initiate and complete tasks by using self-management strategies.
- Self-evaluation includes monitoring task performance and determining if the plan has been completed and the goal met.
- Adjustment is the process of changing goals, standards, and plans to improve performance so that the person ultimately develops a better understanding to their needs, strengths, and limitations. Thus, the self-determination process continues to cycle through a self-improvement process.

Source: Izzo & Lamb, 2002 p. 6

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