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Postsecondary Education Students with Disabilities' Perceptions of Occupational Therapy-Led Coaching

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Abstract

Background: Students with disabilities attending postsecondary education (PSE) institutions have poor degree progression, retention, and graduation rates. PSE institutions are addressing these challenges in various ways, including the delivery of occupational therapy (OT)-led coaching. There is emerging evidence that coaching increases academic success and self-determination in PSE. The students' perspectives about the benefits of OT-led coaching intervention has yet to be explored.

Method: A phenomenological study was conducted using transcribed semi-structured interviews with 18 college students with disabilities. Qualitative data analysis was conducted through an immersive inter-coder process that included independent coding, comparison of codes, discrepancy resolution to combine or redefine codes, and theme identification.

Results: Overall, the participants reported perceiving the OT-led coaching intervention as beneficial to them. Specifically, four major themes emerged from the data: the personal and academic growth achieved, the benefits of an open and supportive environment in the coaching program, the participants' perception of self-identified goal achievement, and the importance of accountability and engagement.

Conclusion: The students with disabilities perceived that the OT-led coaching intervention was beneficial and identified aspects of the intervention that were most useful to them, including the emotional and material support.

Comments

The authors report no potential conflicts of interest.

Keywords

coaching, disability, postsecondary education, occupational therapy, higher education

Cover Page Footnote

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Credentials Display

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A postsecondary education (PSE) degree, whether from a college or university, offers many benefits to students, including improved quality of life, increased employment rates, and increased lifetime earnings. Yet, obtaining such a degree has traditionally been inaccessible to many students with disabilities (Lindsay et al., 2018; Office of Postsecondary Education, 2020; Richman et al., 2014; Siew et al., 2017). In recent years, however, the number of individuals with disabilities enrolling in PSE has increased considerably, with 10% of undergraduate students now reporting having a disability of any type (e.g., a physical disability, autism spectrum disorder, anxiety, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder [D'Alessio & Banjerjee, 2016; Francis et al., 2018; Kreider et al., 2015; Siew et al., 2017]). Students with disabilities who attend PSE face unique challenges, including poor degree progression, retention, and graduation rates, compared to their peers without disabilities (D'Alessio & Banjerjee, 2016; Keptner et al., 2016; Keptner & McCarthy, 2020). The causes of these challenges are multiple. In particular, most students entering PSE, regardless of whether they have a disability, are challenged by the decreased external structure in this environment that results in increased demands for student autonomy (Richman et al., 2014).

This need for autonomy especially challenges students with disabilities because many have deficits in the underlying skills needed to be successful in less structured learning environments (Richman et al., 2014). These same students enter PSE without fully understanding the increased workload and organizational demands, which results in poor grades, failure of classes, and dismissal from PSE institutions (D'Alessio & Banjerjee, 2016). Further, many students with disabilities often experience difficulty with the self-advocacy skills needed to succeed (Ankeny & Lehmann, 2011; Francis et al., 2018). Self-advocacy and self-determination have been shown to improve academic outcomes in students with disabilities, as these skills assist with overcoming barriers encountered in PSE environments (Ankeny & Lehmann, 2011; Parker & Boutelle, 2009; Richman et al., 2014). In fact, self-determination skills have been shown to positively correlate with retention rates for college students with disabilities (Richman et al., 2014).

Students with disabilities who meet requirements are eligible for accommodations through the PSE institution's office of accessibility services. In addition, most PSE institutions offer other academic support services, such as tutoring and academic skills workshops, to all students. While students with disabilities use these services, the PSE institution staff are often not fully equipped to address the particular challenges of students with disabilities. Studies have found that the current services offered at most PSE institutions do not fully meet the wide range of these students' needs (Ankeny & Lehmann, 2011; D'Alessio & Banjerjee, 2016).

Recognizing the unmet needs of their students with disabilities, PSE institutions are beginning to offer additional innovative, non-traditional services to better support students with disabilities in their academic pursuits (Carter et al., 2019; Richman et al., 2014; Siew et al., 2017). Some institutions have tapped into the unique value of occupational therapy (OT) to provide services to students with disabilities (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2013; Boney et al., 2019). It is, in fact, within the OT scope of practice to provide support to such students in PSE settings (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2013). Further, many of these students with disabilities received OT services while in public schools (Crabtree et al., 2015); their needs did not end when they entered PSE institutions. Occupational therapists in PSE institutions have used coaching to support students with disabilities in achieving their academic learning and living goals (Boney et al., 2019).

Coaching is defined as “partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential” (International Coaching Federation, 2020). The different types of coaching include executive coaching, positive psychology coaching, and solutions-focused coaching (Grant, 2012; Seligman, 2007). Some forms of coaching are not to be used with clients who have disabilities, mental illness, or other health conditions. Other forms of coaching are intended specifically to foster changes in habits to promote better health, such as health coaching (Olsen & Nesbitt, 2010). Coaching is, therefore, a versatile umbrella approach that has been used by a variety of professionals, including occupational therapists (Foster et al., 2013; Kessler & Graham, 2015; Prevatt, 2016; Richman et al., 2014).

Coaching, when used in an academic setting, can assist students in addressing educational, vocational, and social aspects of their academic life (Boney et al., 2019; D’Alessio & Banjerjee, 2016; Prevatt, 2016). A university endeavored to expand the services it provided to its students with disabilities through a program that offered coaching sessions performed by occupational therapists and OT students (hereafter referred to as “OT-led coaching”). The program offered by this university employed a strength-based coaching approach that combined the skill set of occupational therapists with the principles of coaching. In this approach, the coach supported students with disabilities in self-identifying goals and self-monitoring progress toward their goals through a three-part collaborative process: connect, brainstorm, and plan (Boney et al., 2019; Potvin et al., 2018). The primary coaches were OT students completing their Level II fieldwork placements under the supervision of registered and licensed occupational therapists. The efficacy of the OT-led coaching used in the program was investigated in a pilot study (n = 10), which found that PSE students with disabilities met over 80% of their self-identified goals in the areas of academic, health and wellness, interpersonal relationships, and time management and organizational goals (Boney et al., 2019).

Quantitative intervention studies, such as the pilot study conducted by Boney and colleagues (2019), provide evidence of the efficacy of an intervention through objective measures (Hissong et al., 2015; Portney & Watkins, 2009). Qualitative studies, on the other hand, enable deep exploration of the lived experience of participants who received an intervention (Hissong et al., 2015; Portney & Watkins, 2009). Qualitative research is especially useful when new interventions are being developed or used in a new context, as it enables the researchers to determine their social validity (Carter, 2010). Social validity is defined as the acceptability of an intervention to stakeholders (Carter, 2010). To fully understand the impact of the OT-led coaching on those receiving the intervention, it is imperative to consider their experience through a qualitative study.

Study Rationale

More students with disabilities than ever are enrolling in PSE institutions, but their poor degree progression, retention, and graduation rates suggest that they may not be adequately prepared for and supported by their academic institutions (D’Alessio & Banjerjee, 2016; Keptner et al., 2016; Keptner & McCarthy, 2020; Kreider et al., 2015). Some PSE institutions are beginning to expand their services beyond the traditional offerings (e.g., disability services, academic success center, counseling) to better promote the success of students with disabilities (Richman et al., 2014; Siew et al., 2017). A handful of PSE institutions now offer OT-led services to students with disabilities (Dirette, 2019). Coaching has emerged in the last 10 years as a relatively new approach in PSE institutions for which emerging literature suggests efficacy (Boney et al., 2019; Capstick et al., 2019; D’Alessio & Banjerjee, 2016; Prevatt, 2016; Richman et al., 2014). The OT-led coaching intervention has been found, in a pilot study,

to be efficacious in terms of goal achievement (Boney et al., 2019). However, qualitative impressions of the impact and social validity of this OT-led coaching intervention on participants are key to fully understanding its value and drawbacks. This information is crucial to fully understand the lived experience of students with disabilities in PSE who received this intervention. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of PSE students with disabilities about the OT-led coaching-based intervention and its perceived impact on PSE experiences. An increased understanding of the value of OT-led coaching in PSE can allow it to become a valuable emerging practice for this profession.

Method

Participants

Students with disabilities who received OT-led coaching services from the Greater Opportunity for Academic Learning and Living Successes (GOALS²) program participated in the study. The GOALS² program provides OT services, free of charge, to students with disabilities on a university campus. The occupational therapists and OT students working with the GOALS² program use a coaching approach in all of their interactions with students.

The students were all enrolled at a comprehensive mid-Atlantic private nonprofit university and recruited to the GOALS² program through either referral from university accessibility services or poster advertisements shared on campus. All of the participants who received services from the GOALS² program across four semesters from fall 2017 to spring 2019 were asked if they wished to participate in the study. Eighteen of the 25 students who received services over the time period elected to participate. The students who chose not to participate in the study continued to receive the GOALS² program services.

Recruitment continued until it was anticipated that a point of saturation in the data had been reached, as it fell within the recommended number of subjects for a phenomenological study (5–25 participants; Creswell, 1998). A phenomenological approach was chosen for this study in order to focus on the commonality of the first-person lived experience of students with disabilities who received OT-led coaching intervention. Ethical approval was received from the university institutional review board and the participants provided written informed consent.

The participants' sociodemographic information, collected by self-report, is summarized in Table 1. Of the 18 participants in the study, six described themselves as male and 11 as female. The participants had a variety of diagnoses, with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder being the most common diagnosis (44.4%). A majority of the participants (61.11%) reported having more than one primary diagnosis. The mean age of the participants was 23.54 years ($SD = 4.52$), and the majority (72.22%) were undergraduate students. A majority of the participants identified as White (66.7%); however, Black or African American, Asian, Caribbean American, and Egyptian were also represented.

Table 1
Participant Characteristics Fall 2017–Spring 2019 (n = 18)

	Frequency	Percentage
Gender *		
Male	6	33.3%
Female	11	61.1%
Not specified	1	5.55%
Ethnicity**		
White	12	66.7%
Black or African American	2	11.1%
Asian	1	5.6%
Hispanic or Latino	0	0%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0	0%
Caribbean American	1	5.6%
Egyptian	1	5.6%
Not specified	1	5.55%
Class		
Freshman	5	27.8%
Sophomore	3	16.7%
Junior	3	16.7%
Senior	2	11.1%
Graduate	4	22.2%
Not specified	1	5.55%
Primary Diagnosis***		
Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder	8	44.4%
Obsessive Compulsive Disorder	1	5.6%
Learning Disability	2	11.1%
Mental Health	3	16.7%
Physical/Mobility Related	2	11.1%
Autism Spectrum Disorder	1	5.6%
Traumatic Brain Injury	1	5.6%
Had an IEP or 504 Plan in High School		
Yes	7	38.9%
No	6	33.3%
Unsure	3	16.7%
Not reported	2	11.1%

Note. *One participant chose not to provide sociodemographic information. ** Participants had the ability to write in their ethnicity.

***Includes both co-occurring and comorbid conditions, as the participants were able to self-report up to four primary diagnoses.

Data Collection

Individual semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted at the end of each academic semester. Eighteen interviews were conducted. Each interview lasted between 15 and 50 min, depending on the depth of information provided by the interviewees. The interviews were conducted by trained graduate research assistants and took place after an average of 10–12 OT-led coaching sessions. The graduate assistants used an interview guide, which consisted of questions such as, “Tell me about the impact the services had, if any, on your learning this semester?” and “Thinking back to the sessions that

you participated in, what would you like to see done differently in the future?” as well as guiding probes. All of the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and then checked for reliability by trained graduate research assistants.

Data Analysis

A multi-step, multi-coder, open-coding approach was used. This approach began with the reading of interview transcripts to identify the meaning of statements labeled as codes. The codes were then organized into categories forming a coding key, and the coding key was refined until no new codes or changes in categorization emerged from reading additional transcripts (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016). The coding key was further refined through the intercoder reliability process.

Three researchers coded the data, establishing intercoder reliability through a multi-step process that involved independent coding, comparison of codes, discrepancy resolution followed by combining codes, adding codes, or redefining codes, as needed. This process was repeated until all of the codes and definitions were applied reliably by all coders. Once the coding key was finalized, all transcripts were re-coded using NVivo qualitative analysis software (version 12.6).

After all of the interviews were coded, two researchers independently engaged in thematic analysis by examining excerpts of transcripts organized by codes to extract the major themes from the data. Then, the researchers compared their independent thematic analysis. Overall, the researchers' thematic analyses were similar; however, differences in interpretation and labeling were discussed until consensus was reached and the final themes emerged. The researchers discussed the thematic analysis with a senior researcher on three occasions for confirmation of thematic interpretation.

To provide rationales for decision-making, improve the study's trustworthiness, and prevent researcher bias, the three researchers maintained an audit trail to track each step and each decision they made throughout the data analysis process (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016). Each researcher also kept a reflective journal in order to reflect on their own bias during coding and to minimize the impact of these biases on data analysis (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016).

Results

Four main themes emerged from the coding and thematic analysis process. These themes were labeled as: academic and personal growth, open and supportive environment, perception of success, and the importance of accountability and engagement. It is clear from the analysis that the students with disabilities felt positive overall about the OT-led coaching intervention. This is illustrated visually in a word cloud of the terms that the students used most frequently during their interviews (see Figure 1). Word clouds have been found to be an effective complement to transitional qualitative analysis as they allow visualization of data (Bletzer, 2015).

Figure 1*Visualization of Interview Data*

The larger words in the word cloud represent the terms used most frequently by the students. Noteworthy are terms such as help, good, great, worked, and successful, which speak to the students' overall positive impressions. For the theme of academic and personal growth, words that stood out were semester, school, writing, time, schedule, successful, trying, better, and life. For the theme of open and supportive environment, noteworthy terms were kind, talk, work, need, help, thank, good, and impact. For the theme of perception of success, important words were different, felt, and alright. Also prominent are terms such as goals, strategies, and think, which reflect the process used with the OT-led coaching intervention. Thus, this word cloud visually represents and confirms the themes identified through the qualitative analysis process.

Academic and Personal Growth

The participants' comments about the OT-led coaching reflected a theme of growth, both academically and personally. Academically, the participants discussed the benefit on their academic learning, specifically in terms of grades. As one participant described, "without this program, I don't think my grades would have improved" (TF1734, 21). The participants reported that the OT-led coaching intervention improved the following academic skills: processing, professional communication, time management, and study habits. One participant explained that "[OT-led coaching] helped me have techniques of processing information better" (TF1734, 21). The participants also described instances where they gained professional communication skills, such as "[OT-led coaching] helped me write out emails in a professional way" (TF1729, 249). Many of the participants described improvements in time management: "this definitely helped me improve time management wise to get my grades where they are" (TS1862, 88). One participant described the improvements in their study habits: "I'm studying a lot better and there are times when I kind of fall back into old habits, but even with those old habits [I still succeed] because everything else is ... planned" (TF1801, 38).

The participants also reported experiencing personal growth through their participation in the OT-led coaching sessions. They described the impact of this personal growth on their academic pursuits.

According to the participants, the program led them to develop better health habits, including better sleeping, eating, and exercising habits. One noted that, through the OT-led coaching, she recognized “the sleeping thing and the staying organized are, I feel, the two most important things for me to keep my grades up” (TS1913, 50). Another explained, “I guess it’s just making me aware I need to do more of the things that are healthy for me, eating right, exercising, and maybe talking to [a] therapist” (TF1734, 89). Further, the participants explained that the OT-led coaching intervention positively impacted their personal growth in terms of insight, autonomy, and self-determination. One participant’s statement reflected an increase in their own insight: “not only was it something that was academic help, but they also helped me realize [what were] my dreams and where I want to go and what I’m good at” (TS1935, 60). The participants also described how their increased autonomy allowed them to achieve their goals, saying, “I am more productive, proactive in getting my own things done” (TS1921, 14). A personal growth aim of the intervention is for students to become more self-determined in their academic pursuits broadly and in their use of the process used in the OT-led coaching intervention. According to the participants, this is clearly occurring from the OT-led coaching. One participant explained an improved ability to set their own goals, an integral part of the OT-led coaching intervention. They said, “I think that I have learned more about how I function a little bit better and I think that the process has let me realize that my initial goals were unrealistic, and so that learning how to set better goals is still pretty good” (TF1733, 40). Another described the ability to independently use the coaching process outside of the coaching sessions, “to say hey, I can do this because I know what it is that’s preventing me from being successful and I can work around it” (TF1801, 313).

Open and Supportive Environment

The second primary theme that emerged from the data was the participants’ perception of benefiting from the open and supportive environment. The participants reported that the OT-led coaching intervention created an open and supportive environment that allowed them to feel comfortable in sharing their goals, successes, struggles, and concerns. One participant describes this by stating, “they’re very open-minded people so I think that’s why I was able to feel like it was ... a safe spot. I was able to just go in there and ... say what I needed to say and be honest” (TS1935, 188). The participants clearly “felt comfortable with them [OT coaches], like comfortable to talk with them. Like if I had a problem, I could say, hey, there’s this going on, do you guys have any suggestions, and they were totally open with me” (TF1801, 56). In fact, this comfort and supportiveness was recognized as important even when a participant was hard on him or herself, such as one who stated, “it really just made things awfully easy and bearable for me ... helped me just mellow out and not just ... be completely as hard [on] myself” (TF1732, 219). Further, one participant explained that the support received from the OT-led coaching was the catalyst to seeking other needed services. She stated, “I only went to the counseling center on campus because I had the support of the OT [coaches]” (TF1733, 45). One participant went further in describing the open and supportive environment of the program, as she described the unconditional support that she experienced. She stated,

I came in one day and said ‘I feel like I’m wasting your time because I haven’t met any of my goals and I’ve been having trouble keeping up with these strategies. I don’t want to waste your time.’ She [coaching OT] looked at me and said ‘you’re not wasting my time, we are here for you and I’m not going anywhere.’ Just having someone who is ... not giving up on you ... that’s ... the most important part. (TF1733, 133)

The participants perceived this open and supportive environment to be a key ingredient that fostered both the personal and academic growth noted in the first theme. For example, when speaking about the OT-led coaching process, one participant stated, “the collaboration process, it’s ... beneficial ... it really has an overall positive impact ... academically, personally, and then ... for my future career” (TF1734, 81).

The participants also noted an unexpected benefit from the open and supportive environment. The OT-led coaching approach was provided primarily by OT students (Level II fieldwork) under supervision and in collaboration with licensed occupational therapists. The participants described finding comfort in the therapists being students and relating to their own current experiences in PSE, saying, “I did like that they also brought in students to help ... just ’cause they are just freshly out of the college process so they have a good perspective on different things So, it was nice having their perspective” (TF1788, 122). Many of the participants found it beneficial working with the students, describing, “they just felt like regular people. They acted like regular people ... and it didn’t feel like I was in a formal business meeting” (TF1801, 127). This statement speaks to the social validity of this aspect of the OT-led coaching intervention.

Finally, the participants were asked which aspects of the OT-led coaching intervention should be kept the same moving forward. Their answers mostly aligned with the theme of the value of an open and supportive environment, which included emotional support, material support, and flexible scheduling. One participant described the emotional support received: “I liked how they were open with me, they were able to talk to me without, having any problems [with what was stated]” (TF1801, 118). Another talked about material support, stating, “there would be some side things that we would do ... running some of my game consoles for certain meetings ... they would bring in food ... just to get a comfortable environment. I liked that” (TF1814, 95). The participants found that the therapists’ ability to be flexible was important because schedules often change quickly or unexpected obstacles emerge; the participants appreciated the therapists’ ability to demonstrate this attribute, as one student stated, “the flexibility being able to move to different places if need be and ... it doesn’t feel formal” (TF1801, 133).

Perception of Success

The third primary theme that arose from the data was the participants’ perceptions of successes through participation in the OT-led coaching. One participant captured this concept with their statement, “they really helped me just see things clearer so it was, I guess ... it was, like, a huge success” (TS1935, 128). Another participant also described this, adding the value of the unconditional support described in the second theme. This participant stated, “I’m definitely ... getting better and ... improving. I feel like I’m only ... slightly unsuccessful myself ... but whenever I talk to [OT coach] ... they tell me that ... I am actually ... improving ... a lot” (TS1929, 6).

Diving into the specifics of the program, the participants noted that having to identify their own goals was beneficial to their success. The participants described the goals selection process as supporting them in achieving their self-identified goals, saying, “these goals, like long term and short term goals, helped me strive to meet something” (TS1921, 105), or as another participant described, “I think I was successful ... having [the OT-led coaching] to push me to [accomplish my goals], was helpful” (TS1913, 59). The participants also described being challenged by experiencing a regression in their goals, such as unexpected events preventing use of their strategies: “if something came up that was a really bad experience ... I would just like stop using my calendar” (TS1901, 55). However, one participant explained understanding that regression was sometimes a necessary part of the process,

stating, “it reminds me that this is still a process that I shouldn’t really expect to change a habit overnight so overall [the] regression felt realistic” (TF1732, 108). Even though progress toward goals was elusive to some of the participants, they still valued the knowledge and experience they gained through the OT-led coaching. This is described by one participant who stated, “on paper, it looks like I haven’t made any progress towards [my] goals, let alone achieving them, but I have in the process learned a lot about myself and learned what is ... realistic [for me], ... how I work” (TF1733,12). The student’s improved understanding of themselves demonstrates the first step toward self-determination, which is crucial to achieving academic success in PSE.

The participants were candid in sharing some of the challenges they experienced in reaching their goals and implementing the strategies they had identified through the OT-led coaching process. They noted that unexpected roadblocks, such as lack of time to complete strategies, affected their ability to achieve their self-identified goals. One participant stated, “I realized it too late to revisit and modify the goals so I have not met them” (TF1733, 24), and another explained, “I think it was [that] I ran out of time. If I’m out of time I can’t really do anything about whatever is going on” (TS1834, 13).

Importance of Accountability and Engagement

During the interviews, the participants mentioned suggestions for further improving the OT-led coaching intervention, specifically in areas of client accountability and self-reflection throughout the coaching process. In the area of accountability, one client described, “I think that you should be more accountable for going and ... if you commit to the program ... you have to go every week because I think although everyone is busy ... it really is beneficial in the long run” (TF1729, 66). In this area, the participants reported means for accountability, such as email and text reminders, both of which are readily used in the program and considered advantageous. A few of the participants expressed the need for increased ownership of the process throughout the OT-led coaching process, with one participant saying, “I needed to actively write down the strategies for myself” (TS1901, 265). Other aspects discussed included consistently holding the coaching sessions in the same rooms and making the program more visible on campus. The participants also discussed the likelihood of recommending other students to the program. As one student stated, “it’s great, it’s great. You should do GOALS²” (TS1929, 161) and, “it’s very valuable to know that [the OT coaches] cared about my academic success and ... helped me to do [my] best and grow better as a person” (TS1829, 53).

These areas that the participants identified for potential improvement speak to their acknowledgement that active engagement in the program is beneficial. This was noted by a participant who stated that when she began to participate more actively in the OT-led coaching session, she “really started seeing a ton of improvement” and that “reflecting back more on the beginning and [I can] see just how much improvement I’ve made” (TS1901, 265). Ultimately, the minimal number of suggestions for program improvement supports the social validity of the OT-led coaching approach.

Discussion

Institutions of PSE are addressing the low retention, degree progression, and graduation rates of their students with disabilities by providing innovative programs such as the OT-led coaching intervention described in this study. A prior pilot study exploring the efficacy of using an OT-led coaching intervention with students with disabilities attending PSE concluded that the intervention was beneficial (Boney et al., 2019). Our current study intended to deepen knowledge of the value and social validity of OT-led coaching from the perspective of the clients who participated in the intervention. Specifically, the study was an in-depth exploration of the perceptions of PSE students with disabilities

about the OT-led coaching intervention and its perceived impact on their PSE experiences. The study identified four themes (i.e., academic and personal growth, an open and supportive environment, the perception of success, and the importance of accountability and engagement) that speak to the participants' positive experience with the intervention and the role of the OT-led coaching with their PSE success.

The participants in this study reported growing both academically and personally and attributed this growth to the OT-led coaching intervention. They reported experiencing academic growth in traditional educational areas, including professionalism, time management, and study habits, all critical skills needed in the PSE context. The participants also credited the OT-led coaching intervention with supporting their personal growth in areas that can impact their academic performance and experience, including developing better sleep hygiene and stress management techniques. With this academic and personal growth, the participants also increased insight into their own abilities and strengths, gained a sense of agency, and developed their self-determination, which current research suggests will assist them in reaching their academic and personal goals (Ankeny & Lehmann, 2011; Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Parker & Boutelle, 2009). In addition, the participants' perceived their newfound self-determination as assisting them in overcoming the unique challenges they face in their PSE institution, findings that support the social validity of the OT-led coaching intervention in this context (Ankeny & Lehmann, 2011; Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Parker & Boutelle, 2009).

The open and supportive environment created through OT-led coaching became apparent as a beneficial aspect of the intervention. The participants appeared to appreciate and benefit from having a support system (the coaches) that existed outside of their family and friends and assisted with the academic and personal hurdles of college life. The participants explained that this supportive environment set the stage for open discussions and feeling supported by the OT coaches. In the words of the participants, the coaching process opens the door for discussion and collaboration between the participants and the OT coaches. This is, of course, the intent of coaching. The participants in this study, like in the literature, placed a high value on the occupational therapists' ability to create an open and supportive atmosphere. This atmosphere, in turn, created a safe space for the participants to be vulnerable and discuss their goals (Richman et al., 2014). Creating this safe environment, through being flexible, honest, kind, open-minded, and supportive, encouraged the rapport-building process and resulted in the occupational therapists and participants forming connections that enabled an efficacious coaching relationship and facilitated progress in the program. As in the previous study, the participants in this study identified that support as a key part of the coaching process because it builds a foundation to communicate openly and supports the achievement of goals (Foster et al., 2013). The participants were clear that the open and supportive environment they experienced in the OT-led coaching positively impacted their ability to reach their self-identified goals. Thus, when designing alternative programming in PSE for students with disabilities, building open and supportive environments will likely yield greater impact. It should be noted that the participants also felt comfort in the OT coaches being students and even saw this as beneficial.

The perception of success through the coaching process was the third theme that arose from the participants' interviews. Specifically, they identified overall success and improvements toward meeting their goals. They explained that identifying their own goals and receiving supports to achieve these goals contributed to their academic success. The participants also expressed experiencing roadblocks to using strategies they had picked and to goal attainment. They identified setting unrealistic goals and running

out of time as contributors to these roadblocks. From a coaching perspective, change is not linear, and these roadblocks are part of the participants' growth process. Occupational therapists using a coaching approach should continue to foster the development of the clients' understanding of the normality of experiencing setbacks and build on the clients' sense of agency and self-determination. The literature supports increased self-determination as a potential outcome of coaching (Foster et al., 2013). This information is crucial for PSE institutions to understand the benefits and potential of OT interventions more broadly, and OT-led coaching specifically. To be successful with coaching, the participants explained that their own engagement with the intervention was critical. This engagement is, in fact, a foundational element of coaching practices. The participants also valued the accountability component of the OT-led coaching and actually asked for more accountability. This was somewhat surprising because accountability to the coach is not traditionally a component of coaching, and, in some forms of coaching, it is viewed as detrimental to the coaching relationship. It may be that the age of the participants and the context in which this study was conducted lent itself to accountability being more important. The overall findings of this study support the OT-led coaching's social validity, as the participants themselves agreed to the acceptability of the intervention in their PSE experiences.

Clinical Implications

Universities and colleges are poised to enhance the services and supports that they offer students with disabilities on their campuses. Coaching has been found to be effective in supporting students with disabilities in reaching their academic goals. Occupational therapists have a role in supporting students with disabilities in PSE, although few occupational therapists currently work in that setting. OT-led coaching has been found to be effective and socially valid. Further, not only did students with disabilities who were coached by their occupational therapists meet their goals, they also expressed noting self-improvement and feeling supported. Using OT fieldwork students to deliver the coaching is a fiscally sensible approach to enhance the supports provided to students with disabilities in PSE. Thus, at minimal cost, OT-led coaching could be offered at many colleges and universities across the country.

Limitations

The limitations of this study include a relatively small sample size ($n = 18$) from one PSE institution. Repeating the study at other institutions would allow the confirmation of findings. Future research should use fidelity measures to ensure the coaching process was implemented as intended. Confirmability in the study was addressed through the use of an intercoder process described in the method's section. The researchers improved the credibility of the study results through the use of an audit trail to record rationales for why codes were merged together and the changes made to the coding key. Like other studies that employ a qualitative approach, this study's results are also subject to the risk of researcher bias. In this study, this risk was minimized through the use of the audit trail and reflective journals. Finally, the results of studies that rely on self-reporting from participants are limited by these individuals' degree of self-awareness and ability or desire to share their insights. This was addressed through the use of a semi-structured interview guide and by using graduate assistants unfamiliar to the participants to conduct the interviews. However, the findings of the study are still, to a degree, limited by the participants' insights.

Conclusion

Students with disabilities in PSE experience difficulties in degree progression, retention, and graduation rates. PSE institutions are identifying approaches to better support these students. OT-led coaching is one of the approaches used at one PSE institution for this purpose. The participants overall

described a positive experience with the OT-led coaching intervention. They described academic and personal growth, as well as the benefits of the program's open and supportive environment. The participants identified aspects of the OT-led coaching intervention that are a must keep, including the emotional support, material support, and flexibility of scheduling. The participants also expressed some of the barriers that they experienced in feeling successful in having achieved their goals and implementing the strategies that they select. The barriers appear to be personal (within themselves) and contextual (academic life), not directly related to the OT-led coaching. From this, it appeared that the students' confidence in their perception of success is lacking. These results add to the current empirical understanding of the efficacy of OT-led coaching intervention in PSE institutions, as it provides the qualitative perspective of the students' perceptions to support the social validity of the intervention. Understanding the perceptions of students with disabilities of this OT-led coaching intervention provides insight for this program and other universities that may wish to use this model to support increasing personal and academic success in the PSE context.

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