EMPOWERMENT AND ADVOCACY CULTURE WITHIN HIGHER EDUCATION FOR

ADULTS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

by

Rachel R Kovach

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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APPROVED BY:

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Abstract

The purpose of this case study was to understand the impact that advocacy and empowerment practices have on the intellectual disabilities community in academic and social constructs for students within community colleges and disability programs on the West Coast of California. The theories that served as the foundation of this study are intergroup contact theory and empowerment theory. Intergroup contact theory assures that the acceptance of societal norms and expectations must be agreed upon and embraced by all within a subpopulation for cultures to adapt and advance. Empowerment theory states that a fundamental goal during moments of progress and struggle is to achieve self-actualization and fulfillment by gaining peer, professional, and personal efficacy by developing and sharing one's voice and perspective. With 20 participants, nine partook in individual interviews, and two separate focus groups of five-to-seven per group were formed, with the remaining 11. This allowed participants to communicate their insights and perspectives on their relationships with higher education and their connections to empowerment and advocacy practices within their daily lives. 10 of the 20 participants submitted work samples demonstrating their connections to empowerment and advocacy skills. Based on the data collected, the participants found it more important for their skills to assist in improving the lives and realities of their peers and passionate causes before themselves. Experiences gained within the classroom environment, as well as overcoming social and medical adversity, provided participants the resources necessary to convey the importance and effectiveness of empowerment and advocacy practices for future students as well as their peers and have ultimately offered them opportunities to be more fully developed students, employees, and global citizens.

Keywords: empowerment, advocacy, intellectual disabilities, higher education

Copyright Page

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to God, who has granted me the greatest gift of knowledge, communication, hope, and, most importantly, love.

I dedicate this dissertation to each of my students throughout my career in education. Your lives, your experiences, and your voices matter. Thank you for blessing me with the gift of being a part of your world. I will always love you.

I dedicate this dissertation to my beautiful Familia, living, and those with God who supported me through this exciting, heartbreaking, and beautiful journey. Thank you for loving me.

I dedicate this dissertation to my true match in life, wherever they may be. I love you and am praying for you until I am yours. Forever.

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List of Abbreviations

Academia de Camino (AC)

Adults with Intellectual Disabilities (AWD)

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

California Community Colleges (CCC)

Disability Services and Programs for Students (DSPS)

Individual Education Plan (IEP)

Individual Transition Plan (ITP)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Kindergarten through 12th Grade (K-12)

Resource Support (RSP)

Strix Community of Friends (SCF)

Transition Readiness Preparation (TRP)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The scope and potential for persons with intellectual disabilities within higher education programs have widened exponentially in the most recent decade (Grigal et al., 2022). Social networking and technology advancements have helped foster a societal embrace of empowerment and advocacy culture (Butcher & Rose-Adams, 2022). The products of this culture were trickling into the disability population to higher education platforms. This qualitative case study analyzed the practical and empirical impact of empowerment and advocacy cultural practices within such environments by recognizing the short-term and long-term effects on persons with intellectual disabilities. A platform for adults with intellectual disabilities (AWD) to share their perspectives and goals with academic research communities provided dynamic and lasting impacts on historical, social, and theoretical understandings of this population's needs and changing plans. By understanding the previous obstacles that have befallen this subpopulation, the problem of neglected engagement and representation manifested itself for this population of learners. The potential for increased participation and engagement with intellectually disabled students in higher education settings was possible with the utilization of empowerment and advocacy practices in higher education environments. In this chapter, the current reality for adults with intellectual disabilities will explore the historical, social, and theoretical contexts that have served as a background for the problem and purpose statements as well as the significance of this study, research questions with essential definitions and a summary that launched this study forward.

Background

Empowerment and advocacy are relatively newer concepts adopted into disability rights and programs (Di Maggio et al., 2019). While the world surrounding persons with disabilities tends to go much faster, a heightened sense of urgency was fueled for this population with technological innovations, social media, and digital platform creation (Bonilla-del-Río et al., 2022). Higher-functioning people with disabilities were able to develop personas on relative platforms with minimal support. People with more significant needs navigated unknown waters that could limit their growth and potential. AWD formed a society subgroup often supported by countless third parties, care providers, and advocates. However, as the desires and resources evolve and become more tangible for persons with intellectual disabilities, the roles of these third-party persons begin to grow and minimize as these people hunger and strive toward living lives of independence and accountability. As academic programs work to embrace a culture of empowerment and advocacy within their platforms, it is essential to understand historical achievements and theoretical context and present social obstacles that hinder potential growth and progress.

Historical Context

The lives and expectations of people with disabilities have dramatically changed over the last half-century. Before the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, persons with moderate to severe handicaps lived within institutionalized settings, such as asylums and care homes (Carvalho-Freitas et al., 2023). They were dismissed and forgotten topics of conversation among most groups (Freire, 1970). Through this intentional oppression in normalized society, the disabled population fought against mistreatment, stigmas, and false diagnoses that did irreparable damage to individuals and communities that worked to serve them in their day-to-day lives

(White et al., 2020). However, as more programs were created to provide pathways for disabled persons to gain an education and employment, the need for ostracized institutions became a haunted place for history. Before the efforts made during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, adults with disabilities were not viewed as viable and contributing citizens who could live increasingly independent lives (Miller et al., 2022). The passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) on July 26th, 1990, provided new pathways for equitable accessibility regarding better quality education and employment. However, in the decades since the revision of the ADA, the progress of connection and engagement of persons with disabilities within mainstream environments slowed to a dangerous halt, widening the accessibility gap across multiple areas of living and concentration (Maine et al., 2019).

Progress in mainstreaming within educational systems from kindergarten to adult was slow but effective in transition. When schools and districts have effectively trained and knowledgeable staff that understand the impact of inclusive learning environments, a cultural foundation embracing empowerment and achievement is planted (Gooden et al., 2020). It has proven successful for students of varying abilities. A common frustration among these transitions was the inherited biases from those with limited contact and exposure to persons with intellectual disabilities (Harrison et al., 2019). When their frustrations are verbalized to school and district administrators, one repetitive obstacle to the growth of organizational empowerment is when leaders concede to the opposition's demands rather than providing opportunities to engage and educate all involved in the changing learning community (Rios & Burke, 2020). However, as recent years have increased the embrace of inclusion-centered pedagogical perspectives, more academic institutions have embraced empowerment-focused organizational frameworks than before (Gilson et al., 2020; Gooden et al., 2020). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, academic

environments focused on moving away from the term *mainstream* and on developing

fundamentally inclusive educational learning environments to phase out classrooms such as

Resource Support (RSP) and Study Hall (de Bruin, 2019). However, due to the harsh and sudden

academic shifts with the COVID-19 pandemic, this transition took a sharp slowdown because

students needed to adjust to returning to in-class routines and expectations (Gooden et al., 2020).

As a result, some academic programs became in jeopardy. The primary objective was student

access and dependence on technology to communicate and engage in educational and training

activities. The forced isolation from the COVID-19 pandemic allowed learners to develop self-

sufficient routines and procedures that connected them to learning and work-related tasks (Jones,

2021). However, as many experienced, transitioning back to in-person environments produced

new behaviors and habits of struggle and frustration, including hyper-technology dependence

and limited cohesive verbal communication (Byrne et al., 2021).

The cultural boost of empowerment and community changed the realities of persons with

intellectual disabilities in other pathways of community engagement beyond academia. Within

the most recent 50 years, residential and community programs have increasingly developed a

variety of routes for disabled persons to participate in regularly monitored and structured

activities that promote socialization and personal engagement (Artiles, 2019). The participation

and employment of AWD continued to shift and evolve, leaving much to be explored.

Social Context

Due to the magnetic essence that comes from the development of empowerment and

advocacy discussions, the disabilities community was eager to adopt these concepts within their

frameworks and to create quarterly and annual goals for their population. Research focusing on

the perspectives and objectives of persons with disabilities was new when exploring

employability courses within higher education institutions. When leaders study the potential pros and cons of developing disability-centered programs and policies within their organizations, quantitative studies focus on the role of the program developers and the impacts of program operations through numerical evidence of engagement and participation (Artiles, 2019; Giri et al., 2021). However, because society embraced the sharing of one's dreams and expectations for equitable access and achievement since the success of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, the disabled population was actively seeking opportunities to improve their academic and housing realities (Bhattarai et al., 2020; Gonzálvez & Marhuenda-Fluixá, 2021). An example of such a shift in social concepts was the increase in available training hosted by community programs encouraging people to discover the perspectives, achievements, and goals of persons with disabilities beyond their prior stigmas and assumptions through training and in-person testimonies (Massa et al., 2020). Within the past five years, because of increased exposure and engagement with social media and technology, persons with disabilities have discovered a renewed interest in gaining experiences in higher education and, later, obtaining employment (de Bruin, 2019). The increased interest in developing one's professional and social skills with technology-based individualized pacing opened multiple pathways for persons with disabilities that continue to be observed within academic environments. During this historic time of transition and adaptation, more opportunities for persons with disabilities to achieve more for themselves became a fundamental priority among higher education institutions.

Through the development of social networking through digital interfaces, the voices of disabled persons gained international attention and have begun challenging laws and policies developed by governments at the national and federal levels (Pettinicchio, 2019). As communications among disabled persons have globalized at a rapid rate, people across the world

were more comfortable sharing their experiences living with their disabilities as well as sharing their successes and failures when attempting to integrate into mainstream environments, such as higher education (Bonilla-del-Río et al., 2022; Butcher & Rose-Adams, 2022; Huskin et al., 2022). Furthermore, due to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, persons with disabilities utilized technology more frequently due to necessary engagement and connection while in quarantine protocols (Jones, 2021). Feelings of confidence and successful societal engagement promoted growth and ability for disabled persons, thus fostering growth and potential within this subpopulation. Through the marriage of transparent and frequent opportunities and engagement with academic and advocacy principles in in-person and digital collaborations and experiences, the gains within the disability community became noticeable and desired.

Theoretical Context

There was a clear societal expectation of exploring potential pathways of success for persons with disabilities engaging in healthy and fulfilling lives that include higher education and community engagement. Examining a subpopulation of students, such as persons with disabilities, and their response to new phenomena and norms have been previously observed through social constructionism theory (Wong et al., 2022). The phenomena of empowerment and advocacy practices were not new in mainstream culture, yet their effectiveness and utilization were relatively uncertain for the disabled population (Mays & Brevetti, 2020). These principles were embraced by Julia Rappaport in 1987 and were further connected to societal principles that were found to be tangent with social constructivism theory (Derr & Morrow, 2020). Prior research provided evidence of contained effectiveness and replicable potential of policies and norms in pocket-sized doses for this subgroup (Zingora et al., 2020). However, qualitative

explorations of the mindsets, perspectives, and opinions of participants in these programs shed new light on genuine retention and application of empowerment and advocacy cultures in day-to-day life (White, F.A. et al., 2020). By granting opportunities to make their voices known to the academic and research community, adult learners with intellectual disabilities could individually determine how and if empowerment and advocacy practices impacted their educational experiences. While the struggles and victories within the disability community were vast, researchers have seen growth and adaptation within this population through increased social opportunities and the connections of theoretical foundations (Kruglanski et al., 2018).

Problem Statement

The problem is that adults with intellectual disabilities have struggled to make lasting connections with their learning and progress toward independence within higher education. Adults with intellectual disabilities often found that life beyond the structures of K-12 academic struggles was structurally inefficient in meeting their goals and needs (Bruce, C. & Aylward; M., 2021). Gaps in engagement and participation in higher education programs within the United States have widened for various reasons. Due to reduced employment and high burnout rates for qualified staff in coaching and management roles, disabled persons were not provided with consistent programs and support that produced independent academic engagement (Castaneda et al., 2019). While the most recent decade had started adopting the principles of empowerment and advocacy to promote individual engagement and connection, disability programs struggled to fully embrace these cultural perspectives within their schedules due to historically failing programs and agendas that have left participants lacking in academic and employability endeavors (Giri et al., 2021). Higher education programs have discovered that longer-term retention and proficiency were possible when these principles were built into programs

effectively. However, an obstacle that continued to hinder the spreading effectiveness of empowerment and advocacy culture within higher education programs was a lack of universally accepted practices and terminology that were not taught consistently within programs that participants could adapt and utilize in their supported environments and as they transitioned into more independent academic and professional settings.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this case study was to understand the impact that advocacy and empowerment practices have on the intellectual disabilities community in academic and social constructs for students within community colleges and disability programs on the West Coast of California. At this stage of research, empowerment was defined as the acceptance and distribution of individual abilities, resources, perspectives, and opportunities with the intention of growth and progress (Mays & Brevetti, 2020). The theories guiding this study are intergroup contact theory and empowerment theory.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study can have a lasting theoretical impact on the mindsets and perspectives of those developing research focusing on the growth and potential of the adults with intellectual disability population. This research study also provides a unique opportunity for disabled participants to be actively aware and engaged in the research process. Effects from this qualitative research study will add to the body of knowledge of theoretical, empirical, and practical significance regarding the realities and potential of adults with intellectual disabilities within higher education settings.

Theoretical

As shown by present intergroup contact theory studies, disabled persons have been identified as a specific subgroup that deserves to have their views and positions discovered and shared within mainstream academic practices (Yu et al., 2022). Previous quantitative data explored the effectiveness of program operations through retention and population statistics (Artiles, 2019). This qualitative study provided a unique perspective from the participants' voices that shed light on the effectiveness and struggles placed within present higher education programs, thus validating and potentially challenging and expanding theoretical research.

Empirical

There was an increased foundation of quantitative analysis, which explored the current and changing realities of adults with intellectual disabilities. The empirical significance of this study would not only be offshoots from quantitative studies but also increased understanding of norms and expectations developed by the participants in current higher education programs. Persons with intellectual disabilities and their care providers were often eager to share their perspectives and goals with those who would choose to listen (Rios & Burke, 2020). However, they were previously victimized by officials who taught them that their silence was the only way to get what they needed (Giri et al., 2021). These qualitative case studies not only shed needed light on this subgroup within academic environments but also served as an inclusive invitation for the thoughts and opinions of disabled persons to have a meaningful impact on their realities. Through the voices and perspectives of the participants within these programs, current programs have examined their feedback and numerical evidence of retention to determine if a cultural shift was necessary, which has helped improve their program's longevity and effectiveness.

Practical

The practical challenges from this qualitative research include the untapped potential for increased nonliteral opportunities and the inconsistent development of meaningful and applicable training for program instructors and educators. While higher education and community partnerships have emerged within the disability rights field, gaining authentic data directly from the students has helped develop practical and relevant programs and policies that regularly impact the AWD population's lives and decisions.

Research Questions

This study asked participants with intellectual disabilities to share their perspectives and voices without being solely represented through an advocate or representative to gain meaningful data to improve higher education programs that serve the adult population with intellectual disabilities. Due to the nature of their disabilities, present program developers and academic administrations had not sought their perspective and feedback as often as gaining the data from third-party persons connected to the disabled person. Therefore, this qualitative case study answered the following questions to gain genuine feedback and perspective from adults with disabilities in higher education programs.

Central Research Question

How do adults with disabilities describe the short-term and long-term effects of programs in higher education that implement empowerment and advocacy culture?

Sub-Question One

How do participants define empowerment and advocacy after participating in higher education courses?

Sub-Question Two

How do students with intellectual disabilities connect empowerment and advocacy theory elements into their understood concepts of success and happiness?

Sub-Question Three

How do participants determine their growth and progress within higher education programs when actively utilizing empowerment and advocacy cultural norms?

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Definitions

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1. *Advocacy* – The ability to speak for oneself, one another, or an extrinsic cause that allows others to clearly understand one's intentions and motivations (Trevisan, 2018).

2. *Employability* – The study and practice of researching, obtaining, and maintaining one's work opportunities, as well as regular job skill coaching and training that help to improve one's professional development. Employability courses are hosted at higher education institutions to support student achievement (Castaneda et al., 2019).

3. *Empowerment* – Giving abilities, resources, perspectives, and opportunities to grow, progress, and improve (Mays & Brevetti, 2020).

4. *Higher Education* – Schooling beyond kindergarten through twelfth-grade academic constructs. Higher education is represented in community college, trade school, and university formats and has recently evolved into distance education formats during the COVID-19 pandemic (Giri et al., 2021).

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Summary

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As more persons with disabilities made headway into higher education environments, adopting an empowerment and advocacy culture allowed their voices to be heard on a grander scale through digital platforms. The experiences and perspectives gained from these participants

provided meaningful evidence of effectiveness and strength among presently offered programs. They communicated the participants' goals, views, and visions, which helped in policy and program development and application. This case study shared the words and insights from intellectually disabled participants in higher education programs, which described how these practices have equipped them to be better-skilled learners and employees within mainstream culture.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

A systematic literature review was conducted to understand the role of empowerment and advocacy practices in the long-term success of persons with intellectual disabilities within higher education programs. To address this phenomenon, the study of intergroup contact theory provided a foundation that explains the adoption of this concept through the observation of intergroup collaborations and accepted subcultural norms. Consequently, the historical assessment of empowerment culture and the importance of inclusion within the field of disabilities was also addressed. Recently published literature broke down discoveries into three pathways of interest: defining empowerment and advocacy, their presence within higher education, and their presence within workability programs that support participants with intellectual disabilities (Belmonte et al., 2021; Bruce, A., 2021; Domin et al., 2020; Giri et al., 2021; Grigal et al., 2022). In conclusion, a literature gap has been identified, establishing the urgency of exploring this study.

Theoretical Framework

The field of disability rights was wrapped around a unique balance of old and revolutionary constructs that have assembled a jigsaw foundation of theories and protocols that impact the living experiences of disabled persons worldwide. While many desired to increase the levels of engagement of disabled persons within mainstream culture and society, some proceeded with caution due to the variable nature of one's disability and needed accommodations (Rios & Burke, 2020). Nevertheless, embracing empowerment and advocacy cultures made these subpopulations take meaningful steps toward collaboration, social integration, and significant relationship development (Yu et al., 2022). The analysis of such subpopulations was strongly

connected to the intergroup contact theory studies, which examined how changing phenomena radicalized or halted progress within subcultures and subpopulations in each subgroup (Prati & Loughnan, 2018). Each of these theories was connected to the realities that disabled learners faced as they worked towards their individual academic and employment goals.

Intergroup Contact Theory

The committed embrace of empowerment and advocacy culture was not an impossible pathway for the disabled population to successfully integrate within mainstream culture. As the disabled population gained a stronger and more present voice, the need for genuine insight and strategy became a demand in changing society (Kruglanski et al., 2018). This prediction was founded upon the introduction of intergroup contact theory, which examined the groupthink mentality and cultural adoption of norms and trends through collaborative artistic efforts (Bagci et al. et al., 2018a). Intergroup contact theory examines a group's effectiveness in adopting and retaining societally accepted ideals and standards within their subgroup, as well as explores growth and prosperity in the face of shared opposition and struggle (White et al., 2020). Intergroup contact theory differed from other social psychological theories because the behavior changes observed were a direct indicator of group attitude and perspective. Thus, potential changes and growth areas were foreseen (Pettigrew, 2021). As this social theory continued to advance among experts in advanced sociological circles, there was an increased emphasis on valuing the quality and quantity of contact among intergroup relationships within these subpopulations (Yu et al., 2022). Having a diverse number of subpopulations continued to prove the importance of intergroup contact theory, yet selecting meaningful quality points of contact, interaction, and subcultural changes provided researchers with stronger foundations for later replications of similar studies. This was particularly important among disabled populations

because the analysis of trends could vary depending on the needs and motivations of each subgroup (Yu et al., 2022). Examining the effectiveness of empowerment and advocacy phenomena using the intergroup contact theory lens allowed researchers to see the intimate understanding of groupthink adoptions, mindful caution, and intentional adoption of newly accepted mainstream cultural norms.

While intergroup contact theory possessed multiple lenses of growth within academia and disability rights, it was essential to note some potential obstacles researchers have faced when utilizing this theory. Adopting this theory had the potential for social categorization, otherwise known as intergroup threat bias, which meant that subpopulations developed inherent biases that negatively influenced culture and norms (Oyler et al., 2021). When this occurs, the data collected during the research process could be corrupted, altering the outcomes of research studies. However, as Oyler et al. (2021) suggested, the ability to identify multiple likely subpopulations within a data set helps correct those biases through the data collection process. Understanding the perspectives and norms of each participant within a subpopulation when using intergroup contact theory as a foundation of view allows for potential biases to be addressed, corrected, and appropriately categorized for meaningful research and data synthesis.

Related Literature

Beyond theoretical connections and applications, research about persons with intellectual disabilities from their voices and perspectives has been previously limited (Trevisan, 2018). Due to the nature of some disabilities, previous studies have been quantitative in nature (Matsana et al., 2021). Qualitative studies prioritized the voices of advocates, guardians, and conservators of persons with intellectual disabilities rather than the individuals themselves (Miller et al., 2022; Rios & Burke, 2020). With increased societal interest in embracing empowerment and advocacy

phenomena, the depth of comprehension and meaningful application of these principles left much to be discovered as program developers integrated these concepts into policy creation.

Defining Empowerment and Advocacy

Understanding the historical journey that persons with disabilities have faced was essential in understanding the urgency of embracing positive perspectives and outlooks produced by implementing an empowerment and advocacy culture. As a disenfranchised minority population, disabled persons were typically thrust into the background of planning and policy development on most academic platforms (Artiles, 2019). Paulo Freire (1970) wrote of the painful struggle the oppressed have faced with such senseless exclusion, stating:

> However, the oppressed, who have adapted to and become resigned to the structure of
>
> domination in which they are immersed, are inhibited from waging the struggle for
>
> freedom so long as they cannot take the risks required (Chapter 1, p. 21).

The disabled population has historically accepted their subordinate societal status, which limited their scope of reference for the growth and expansion of their skills and possibilities.

Empowerment and advocacy were each founded on growth, sharing, and expression (Roth et al., 2018). Empowerment has taken multiple forms in recent years, including its essence in the Disabled Manifesto, which emphasized the importance of individualism and equality of opportunities in the face of physical and mental obstacles (Borden, 2008). These dreams and ambitions included excelling in varying academic ventures regardless of disability. However, within the disability community, many people were uneasy about implementing empowerment and advocacy practices within their own educational avenues (Caldwell et al., 2018). Feelings of learned helplessness and fear of rejection limited one's perspective on one's ability to engage and participate in academic and workability pursuits (Belmonte Almagro & Bernárdez-Gómez,

2021). The emerging pathways that helped resolve those prior traumas were supported with advocacy and empowerment-focused strategies and approaches to problem-solving, self-categorization, and social achievement (Dirth & Branscombe, 2018).

      The concept of empowerment became a frequent buzzword in mainstream culture as people of multiple backgrounds and interests strived to amplify their voices with the purpose of change and revolution. Frederick Herzberg further broke down the foundation of empowerment to tie directly toward achieving autonomy and increasing self-determination toward a life of independence, achievement, and continued self-development (GreenElation.org, 2021). When academic environments provided opportunities for empowerment culture to be adopted among their students, students tended to achieve more than programs initially envisioned when they began implementing their programs (Miller et al., 2022). Through their enthusiasm and support of learning journeys, breakthroughs for students and programs were recognized and made more realistic as students transitioned into workability environments. Empowerment practices improved workplace and classroom culture in morale and individual task completion (GreenElation.org, 2021; Wehman et al., 2018). For empowerment to be fully realized among academic communities, program developers understood the power of these principles and integrated them into environments promptly. If not handled with strategic implementations, programs that embraced empowerment principles were viewed as radically optimistic and not lasting, thus being rejected by administrators and program developers (Riesen & Oertle, 2019; Sannicandro et al., 2018). Those who witnessed the effectiveness of empowerment theory often turned to historical achievements to support their movements toward embracing empowerment fundamentals.

To better understand the impact of empowerment principles, it was critical to realize what empowerment was and how it related to the changing field of disabilities. The definition of empowerment centered around increased independence and self-efficacy through heightened accountability of one's rights and actions through social, academic, political, financial, and psychological platforms (Di Maggio et al., 2019; Lafitte et al., 2019). This was particularly impactful for disability rights due to the critical need for their voices and perspectives in our ever-changing world. At the same time, our current society remained an imperfect and unequal playing field for this subpopulation; empowerment practice supported the development of one's comprehension and assessment of one's needs, goals, desires, and essentials, which became more sophisticated with increased integration within mainstream society (Bruce, A. 2021). As disabled persons found their voice, their sense of urgency grew to maintain their standing and presence within their achieved environment and routine (Caldwell et al., 2018). As opportunities to develop a more robust understanding of empowerment increased, disabled persons took more initiative to identify and amplify their voice across the five platforms of empowered presence (Belmonte Almagro & Bernárdez-Gómez, 2021; Bruce, A., 2021). Trends in empowerment practices and perspectives changed with time. Nevertheless, the field of disability rights was only now proactively adopting these principles to ensure increased longevity toward shared goals of independence, equity, and equality.

For disabled populations to gain a more robust understanding of their empowerment and advocacy efforts, connecting with others, sharing their obstacles, and adapting to meet their present needs and goals was essential. By identifying multiple areas of motivation through such platforms as Maslow's hierarchy of needs, people could engage in genuine reflection and reform of personal and group goals that better their academic environments (Ansorger, 2021). When

examining the role empowerment culture and advocacy play in such programs, it was essential to connect those concepts to intergroup contact theory and see if any additional cross-group connections and social views could be made to predict strategized progress for adult learners with disabilities.

A standard liberation method that was associated with empowerment is the concept of advocacy. Advocacy was the ability to speak for yourself or another person and cause to effect change (Fenn & Scior, 2019). Advocacy was often taught in deductive methods to help learners understand multiple forms of advocacy (Mays & Brevetti, 2020). When introduced in a reasoned manner, advocacy could be taught through global community and individual concepts, which allowed learners to understand the importance of voice and action to effect change in multiple communities and causes (Bhattarai et al., 2020). When supporting individuals to speak of their own lives, needs, and experiences, self-advocacy was the most recognized form of advocacy practice among multiple academic platforms (Bhattarai et al., 2020; Bruce, A., 2021). However, academic advocacy research often reported more generalized findings of advocacy-related successes rather than individual growth and achievement (Cluley et al., 2020; Derr & Morrow, 2020). The development of individual-centered advocacy practices continued to support persons with intellectual disabilities in higher education environments to prioritize empowerment and individual needs (Fenn & Scior, 2019; Tilley et al., 2020).

Present Limitations of Empowerment and Advocacy Realities

The marriage of empowerment and advocacy practice produced a new path of livelihood and independence; however, some struggled to fully embrace the confidence in this new pathway due to prior trauma, learned helplessness, and assumed failure in new mindsets and ways of approaching day-to-day problems (Bruce, A., 2021; Lafitte et al., 2019). Examples of such

struggles to embrace empowerment and advocacy potential were within the higher education framework. Transitioning to higher education was only sometimes an immediate choice for students moving away from K-12 academic structures and support services (Aleman-Tovar et al., 2022; Johnson et al., 2020). On a collegiate platform, students could communicate with their disability services offices and professors regarding accommodations they might need to access the curriculum effectively (Rios & Burke, 2020). However, there was an unspoken stigma within the disability community that frowned upon such invitations to advocate for oneself within the collegiate classroom (Roth et al., 2018). A student's desire to be treated fairly and equally within their classroom was decimated if feelings of doubt and pity were developed when building relationships between the participant and their supervisors (Corby et al., 2018). From an organizational standpoint, a visible conflict existed between the ideological foundation of inclusion and the day-to-day relationships and interactions between students and those in their academic learning environment that required more compromises and fewer resources to function (Grigal et al., 2022). Those who could develop more consistent and transparent relationships in their learning environment were more successful in higher education settings (Harrison et al., 2019).

Some of the group-adopted cultural norms within the disability community were ingrained and reinforced by prejudicial limitations set by mainstream society. For example, many assume that those who use a wheelchair suffer from cognitive limitations as well as physical disabilities (Matera et al., 2021). Due to their inability to do everyday activities and tasks as people with regular bodily functions, there was an assumption made by the majority that those in wheelchairs suffer from lesser comprehension and adaptability skills (Matera et al., 2021). This prejudice, in turn, contributed to the creation of a culture of defiant independence and resentment

within wheelchair-bound populations. In this subpopulation, many resented the assistance and condescending undertones from others, thus isolating themselves from community engagements (Willis et al., 2022). On the other hand, intellectual equity could be established when people can share their thoughts and ideas without being physically seen (Tyagi, 2020). Relationships had more substantial growth potential (Zingora et al., 2020). Steps toward correcting these philosophical prejudices were a positive consequence of adopting intergroup contact theory perspectives and insights.

Some members of the disability community struggled to integrate within social, community, workplace, and academic environments. The intergroup contact theory could present an initiative-taking lens of possibility when the positive actions demonstrated by the subgroup create a unified culture of potential and growth (Bagci et al., 2018a). The fundamental demand for connection and acceptance promoted the intergroup contact theory's effect of the dehumanization of their subpopulation and the cultures they live in (Yu et al., 2022). This collaborative and collective acceptance of norms was an essential adoption of societal change and progress to challenge injustices faced by the disabled community (Reimer et al., 2018). With increased social and academic successes observed by the public, the disability subpopulation has actively assessed the impact this wave of change would have on their continued integration into the neuronormative majority (Oyler et al., 2021). The intergroup contact theory strengthened present indirect forms of contact and collaboration for the disability subpopulation as their views and presence were better represented in legislative, media, and political platforms (White et al., 2020).

Other obstacles that limit self-advocacy and empowerment opportunities in higher education settings include a lack of awareness of services, limited to poor communication

systems for students to convey their needs on a professional platform, and a lack of understanding of their disabilities in-class participation and engagement (Mays & Brevetti, 2020). In addition, there are reservations among higher education institutions about sharing alternative pathways in education and training, such as vocational schools and certificate programs, due to the uncertainty of program support needed for disabled students within their courses (Sullivan Sulewski et al., 2021). Disabled students do not only know this hesitancy. Still, it created considerable resentment and frustration with these institutions as students decide if higher education is right for them (Matera et al., 2021). Celebrating empowerment and advocacy principles were powerfully welcomed on a societal front. However, it took balanced precision and understanding to make opportunities tangible and realistic for persons with disabilities (Plotner et al., 2020).

The battle for acceptance, inclusion, and equitable representation has evolved over recent decades since the creation and implementation of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 (King et al., 2018; Lambrecht et al., 2020). This act opened multiple doors and pathways for disabled persons to engage more in education and individual workability (Miller et al., 2022). However, these efforts continued to be thwarted by misconceptions held by academic administrators based on the feedback provided by parents that support adults with disabilities during their transitions beyond secondary education (Agarwal et al., 2020). When working to support persons with disabilities, the standard glaring error seen repeatedly as mind-body dualism blends medical and social disabilities into one category, thus misrepresenting the needs and accommodations needed to effectively serve that population (Willis et al., 2022). While unintentionally separatist, the umbrella of inclusion had been demonstrated to be false as persons with varying disabilities were not supported appropriately to identify their desires and need to

engage effectively in typical academic situations (Chao, 2021). This, in turn, limited one's ability

to embody principles of empowerment and advocacy within their scope of reference.

Empowerment and Advocacy Resurrected

Inviting persons with disabilities to connect and engage with societal affairs existed long

before embracing empowerment and advocacy platforms in higher education programs (de

Bruin, 2019). From the birth of the Civil Rights Movement to the advancement and creation of

digital and social media platforms, disability rights organizations have been challenged to

participate in policy creation for nearly 40 years in the United States (Pettinicchio, 2019). From

such globalized efforts of shared knowledge and excellent access to possibilities, disabled

populations have established their voices on platforms they choose without explicit permission

from advocates and program developers (Butcher & Rose-Adams, 2022; Trevisan, 2018). Voices

from the disability community have been amplified regarding academic, employment, and social

engagement due to increased global and digital engagement (Miller A. et al., 2022). This global

connectivity accelerated due to the adaptations and adjustments needed to survive during the

COVID-19 pandemic (Byrne et al., 2021; Mbazzi et al., 2021; Neece et al., 2020).

In a similar vein of experience as empowerment, the academic sector faced much

pushback when embracing the theory of inclusion within all educational sites. Inclusion theory

prioritized mainstreamed socialization of all learners within classrooms and learning

environments. It encouraged the dissolution of separate classrooms so all students could learn in

a shared classroom and environment (Cluley et al., 2020). Assumptions made by parents and

care providers of people with intellectual disabilities showed that less than 50% participate in

postsecondary education once they complete a diploma or certificate of completion (Domin et

al., 2020). Inclusion practices within higher education shed light upon a college or university's

Department of Disability Services and the methods higher education institutions use to develop

their instructors to best serve learners of all abilities within their courses (Papay et al., 2018).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education institutions worked to develop meaningful

training and support for their instructors to meet the accommodations and needs of students

needing additional help within their courses. However, a common criticism voiced by instructors

participating in these training shared that they wanted to see more student accountability and

responsibility in communicating their needs with the instructor (Ní Bhroin & King, 2019). By

prioritizing student voice from the beginning of one's academic journey, chances for meaningful

relationship development, content retention, and improved communication skills may increase

for both the student and the instructor (Gilson & Biggs, 2023). Other areas of inclusion practices

in higher education environments included presences within student government and leadership,

participation in athletic and artistic clubs and organizations, and on-campus employment and

internships (Gilson C.B. et al., 2020; Gobec et al., 2022; Miller A. et al., 2022).

It was crucial to understanding that accepting highly positive principles, such as

advocacy and empowerment, took time to be introduced and embraced by the subculture, as

demonstrated through the intergroup contact theory lens and its integration into the disability

population (Yu et al., 2022). Those cautiously optimistic about practicing expanding

empowerment and advocacy voices utilized the relationships between caregivers and those they

serve to increase opportunities at their own pace (Shrier, 2020). Giri et al. (2021) noted that this

phased adoption of empowerment and advocacy culture was an example of effective

interdependent relationships that allow persons with disabilities to be appropriately supported as

they digested the impact of these positive cultural norms. Collaborative empowerment practices,

also known as family empowerment, allowed multiple stakeholders to embrace and implement

advocacy and empowerment culture, which promoted long-term application and retention (Caldwell et al., 2018). Cautious optimism was present when those concepts were introduced when looking at the acceptance of empowerment and advocacy culture on a broad scale (Jacques & Abel, 2020; Mays & Brevetti, 2020).

Empowerment and Advocacy Practices within Higher Education

While empowerment and advocacy practices were viewed with cautious optimism among administrators in higher education institutions, the benefits of these principles raised the bar for academic programs to meet the needs of all their students to ensure cultures of equity and achievement (Gobec et al., 2022). Where disability programs were revised and enhanced was the quality of education and resources being offered to adult learners with intellectual disabilities who are enrolled in their programs and colleges (Abbas, 2020; Agarwal et al., 2020). For those invested in the lived college experience, there was an expectation of higher quality learning, resources, and experiences that allowed learners with intellectual disabilities to grow in their academic, social, and behavioral skills while engaged in a college-level environment (Corby et al., 2018; Grigal et al., 2022). The quality of these programs continued to increase with expanded participation and demand for these courses at higher education institutions (Bouck & Bouck, 2022; Georgiadou et al., 2020). The direct feedback from enrolled participants impacted the urgency of program improvement and evolution (Corby et al., 2018; Gobec et al., 2022). Through their input and engagement, the quality of educational experiences and federal resources improved and adapted to meet the needs of disabled learners (Grigal et al., 2018).

As higher education programs worked to meet the demands of disabled persons, they often overlapped with programs within their communities that served their participants with intellectual disabilities (Langørgen & Magnus, 2020). Students seeking job training and

academic skills often find that their day programs and group home services must fulfill their personal goals for independence (Grigal et al., 2022). When existing programs collaborated with postsecondary education, courses prioritized workplace readiness skills and improved self-advocacy and achievement (Domin et al., 2020). By increasing the difficulty of the content with each passing semester, students could determine if their path continued with higher education or if they were prepared to transition to supported employment (Georgiadou et al., 2020; Gobec et al., 2022). Advocacy practices thrived in these higher education courses through role play and supported workplace practice exercises that allowed students to participate in guided training and tasks at their own pace (Domin et al., 2020; Georgiadou et al., 2020; Tenorio et al., 2021). As students gain more confidence through supported practice in higher education classrooms, local community stakeholders can potentially develop opportunities for invitations to policy development and community conversations regarding critical issues (Tenorio et al., 2021).

The Role of Digital Media for Empowerment and Advocacy Attainment

Higher education institutions have worked to streamline their academic platforms for in-person and digital interfaces (Miller et al., 2022). The digital era provided numerous opportunities for disabled persons to create and amplify their voices on countless platforms (Alathur & Pai, 2023; Trevisan, 2018). This has challenged higher education institutions to be better versed in digital media offerings and acknowledge potential accommodations and modifications that could be made to ensure accessibility and engagement were possible (Bonilla-del-Río et al., 2022; Roth et al., 2018). Prior researchers had shed light on the lack of research that promotes disability engagement within the higher education sphere due to its historically limited and narrow view of learners (Artiles, 2019).

While it had taken time for the voices of people with disabilities to be grounded in their voice and for consistent exposure to higher education culture, their presence has served as the motivation of many studies that are motivated by inclusion and holistic achievement (Gilson et al., 2020). Empowerment and advocacy were essential in determining student growth and progress within academic institutions, especially as they prepared to exit educational-based programs and explored transition programs (Chandroo et al., 2018; de Bruin, 2019). Higher education institutions were encouraged to explore the rapidly changing field of digital media as students of all abilities created countless digital identities and shared their perspectives and messages on a globalized platform (Massa et al., 2020). Trevisan (2018) communicated an optimistic view of the embrace of digital media for disabled persons when he stated, "One of the cornerstones of inclusive citizenship is participatory parity, which implies that everyone enjoys fair and equal opportunities to participate in public life" (p. 227). The digital element within higher education was powerful for educational systems post-Covid pandemic as students of all abilities transitioned to collaborative in-person environments (Jones, 2021). As students with disabilities integrated into multiple higher education settings, a fundamental understanding of their investment and desire to engage with the higher education community was essential when developing and introducing empowerment and advocacy practices within class culture, curriculum, and student activities (Miller, A. et al., 2022; Riesen & Oertle, 2019).

The practical applications of digital media and technologies could vary per area and region. According to Iliya and Ononiwu's (2020) study, different cell phones, media resources, and social platforms were utilized depending on the phone user's needs and the general needs within a demographic or region. Applications such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and Twitter allowed people with intellectual disabilities to represent themselves on equal footing

with anyone they encountered since they advocated for themselves and communicated through the apps themselves (Marnewick et al., 2022). Depending on the technology's functions, the phone user, family, and caregivers could influence the algorithms and applications used most often on each person's device (Iliya & Ononiwu, 2020). The opportunities and gifts digital media provided users with disabilities went beyond the initial expectations of the program developers. However, it challenged innovators to remain current, relevant, and functional due to intense user dependence (Baumgartner et al., 2021). This type of digital media use could provide presently applicable data for phone companies and social media platforms to represent their users better.

Participant growth and engagement also highlighted the continued failings of several global government and hierarchal interventions, such as the inefficient support of disabled persons in China during the COVID-19 pandemic (Dai & Hu, 2021). As countries and leaders of the COVID-19 pandemic have continued to be critiqued as the years pass on, the lack of consistent and fair representation of minority populations, especially people with disabilities, became an unforgiving blemish that many could not forgive or excuse as freedoms and liberties continued to expand with increased technology and digital media presence (Alathur & Pai, 2023; Dai & Hu, 2021). Disabled influencers were beginning to form relevant and meaningful content that not only opened the doors of awareness and ability for society but also challenged reigning prejudices and injustices within government and policy that limited the contributions and abilities of influencers who actively represented those who share their disability and wanted others to grow with them (Bonilla-del-Río et al., 2022). Increased speculation of current governmental regimes provided opportunities for others to share their voice and perspectives to inspire others and make lasting changes for disabled persons on local, regional, and national levels (Reimer N. et al., 2018; Rustad & Kassah, 2020; Tyagi, 2020).

An area of developing participation in workplace advocacy was the presence of Latinx voices during meetings and events for students with intellectual disabilities (Aleman-Tovar et al., 2022; Bhattarai et al., 2020). While coaching opportunities have been offered to provide resources and tools for parents and guardians of disabled adults, listening to the voices of individuals with disabilities often got missed due to struggles to communicate and advocate for themselves (Aleman-Tovar et al., 2022). Without observing academic or professional discourse in person, there was an assumption by those in academic fields that they prepared for limitations rather than growth (Bruce, A., 2021; Gooden et al., 2020).

Empowerment and Advocacy Practices within Academic Employability Programs

Disabled participants in workability programs within higher education institutions often entered such programs with more specific intentions and goals for community engagement and workplace participation (Castaneda et al., 2019; Chezan et al., 2018). At the same time, academic advocacy and empowerment practices focused on slower. They monitored progressions toward goal completion, and workability programs in a higher education setting utilized exercises that work in real-time to meet the current needs of the participants (Giri et al., 2021). Those participating in such programs understood they were developing skills that provided them with money and supplies to survive (Rustad & Kassah, 2020). Such severity in consequences made the adoption of self-advocacy practices viewed with cautious application (Holzberg et al., 2018). Advocacy practices offered in small doses were scaffolded to address various workplace conflicts and scenarios (Jacques & Abel, 2020). Participants were encouraged to develop a strong voice and presence in the workplace. Still, they were trained to communicate with their supervisors and peers in a manner that secured long-term employment (Rustad & Kassah, 2020). Those communication skills were reinforced by implementing concrete and applicable workplace

standards that encouraged individual growth (Audenaert et al., 2019). Participants were encouraged to verbalize their lessons by coaching other coworkers and restating their experiences in remote coaching sessions (Langørgen & Magnus, 2020). However, an area that continued to be explored was the effectiveness of existing programs ensuring sustainability and not only job identification and placement (Magrin et al., 2019). Developing systems for sustained employment would produce independence and program success.

Another positive of examining and adopting these principles was the ability to analyze community perspectives and opinions through data-driven and supportive construct (Zingora et al., 2020). For example, when reviewing Yu et al.'s latest research study, the definitions of community and normed community contacts and interactions were defined within the study results in a manner that quantified public opinion within a qualitative research platform (2022). The specificity of such data analysis was essential for examining empowerment and advocacy culture's impacts on higher education programs while studying the subpopulation of intellectually disabled participants (Yu et al., 2022). The contributions to disability studies utilizing intergroup contact theory were infinite.

A common goal connecting higher education and community programs was the intention that participants would work to achieve gainful employment to further their vocational objectives (Domin et al., 2020; Qian et al., 2018). For many who participated in these programs, their integration into a regular working role could take months to years of supported experience before conversations of independent tasks were had among the service teams of the individual (Domin et al., 2020; Engeland et al., 2020). While data was relatively new in connecting the relationships between higher education and workability pathways, current statistics showed that participation in these programs did produce a more remarkable change for long-term employment, social

integration, and individual goal achievement among participants with intellectual disabilities (Murray et al., 2021). The characteristics that sparked longevity in workplace skill development included scaffolded support, lesson engagement, and coaching-style conversations focused on the individual and their workplace needs (Gonzálvez & Marhuenda-Fluixá, 2021). In addition, the most successful programs were in conversation with local community needs and developed pathways of growing independence for their program participants (White et al., 2020). What stood out as an area of need among these programs was greater accountability and comprehension of individual employee rights and accessible resources for personal success in the workplace (Sannicandro et al., 2018). In the typical workplace, an employee's bill of rights and contact list of supportive references were often distributed at the time of hiring and were posted for constant connection to promote equity and access in the workplace, yet these resources were not accommodated to meet the processing needs of program participants with intellectual disabilities (Audenaert et al., 2019; Sannicandro et al., 2018).

Workplace rights and protocols were fundamental points of interest during societal upheaval and job uncertainty (Di Bernardo et al., 2021). Employability skill programs taught at the local college level found that educating on the importance of compromise, flexibility, and self-advocacy was essential in helping develop a well-rounded and effective employee with long-term employment goals and scaffold independence (Massa et al., 2020). Some factors that could negatively impact the participation and retention of individuals in such programs included individual ability limitations, the role of the family in the individual's daily life, psychological perspectives and opinions, personal mindset, and job position offerings at the time of program enrollment (Park & Park, 2019; Wehman et al., 2018).

Academic Employability Develops Global Reach

Global factors were potent in determining participant success during societal uncertainty (Jones, D., 2021). The opportunity to grow and develop in these affairs during times of societal crisis seemed minimal (Carvalho-Freitas et al., 2023). However, the boom in at-home jobs changed the realities and expectations of employees working to improve their skills for more prominent, better-known companies (Magrin et al., 2019). For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, major corporations, such as Apple and Amazon, hired employees to handle their customer service lines from home rather than go into an office due to fear of spreading the virus (Byrne et al., 2021). For individuals with disabilities, many were encouraged to train independently to better handle the demands from home (Bonilla-del-Río et al., 2022). As new research becomes more available, employment longevity for persons with disabilities has increased due to the comforts of working from home and resources of independently paced training and routines (Byrne et al., 2021).

As work-from-home and online learning opportunities increased, disability engagement and job skills development impacted the global economy, culture, and political priorities (White et al., 2020). Opportunities to develop and communicate strong positions in policy creation, disability rights, and internships encouraged participants to practice advocating for themselves and desired causes on multiple platforms (Roth et al., 2018; Trevisan, 2018). A job that became more public and sophisticated allowed disabled people a new opportunity to set the name, tone, and expectation for their services among those unfamiliar with whom their policies impact in day-to-day living (Engeland et al., 2020). As these opportunities became more tangible for disabled participants, their desire to share their voices and perspectives became more apparent. As a result, its reach was exponentially more extensive than previously predicted (Matera et al.,

2021). Through guided coaching, community engagement, and investment, higher education employability programs for persons with disabilities continued to increase globally (Domin et al., 2020; Trevisan, 2018).

Participation on a global platform for individuals with disabilities has become more of a reality through the creation of social media platforms, digital interfaces, and the significant increase in dependence on technology during the COVID-19 pandemic (Byrne et al., 2021; Jones, 2021; Mbazzi et al., 2021; Neece et al., 2020; Tyagi, 2020). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, an example of in-person training with global interactions included having participants engage in translation and communication roles between people of different nations (Castaneda et al., 2019). For example, in a study examining the relationship between Mexican and the United States relationship, interpreters with intellectual disabilities were able to speak on behalf of women and children based on non-verbal cues and prior experiences that helped determine the needs of their counterparts (Castaneda et al., 2019). Participants were developing their translation and communication skills and serving a population needing access and support (Aleman-Tovar et al., 2022). This is an example of the potential held within higher education programs that could expand to global communities and causes.

An essential element of success when looking at the success of current higher education programs is the adoption of proactive mindsets from the foundation of each course (Chezan et al., 2018; Gonzálvez & Marhuenda-Fluixá, 2021). Transitioning from inclusion-centered environments could be challenging for new program participants. Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities were more successful when coached through scaffolded exercises and tasks that fostered achievement and ability (Miller et al., 2022). By utilizing proactive behavior therapy methods and supportive motivational techniques, participants could sharpen their focus and

connect their actions to their created workplace and independent living goals (Diallo et al., 2021). Person-centered strategies allow more opportunities for employees to learn and adopt advocacy and empowerment practices in their job and skill training (Murray et al., 2021). These motivational techniques that embraced empowerment and advocacy principles allowed participants to communicate their needs and goals during their engagement at their work site and in their service teams (Langørgen & Magnus, 2020). Programs partnered with academic institutions like community colleges and universities benefitted from enhanced and data-driven resources and third-party coaches that provided a refreshed perspective that helped the individual become a well-rounded and adaptable employee (Gobec et al., 2022). Program participants who demonstrated independent communication, coachable habits, and self-determination were more desirable for employers who partnered with institutions that looked to increase their work with local disability groups (Riesen & Oertle, 2019). Those who could effectively transition into mainstream academic and workplace environments set the standard for future program participants.

Self-Advocacy in Academic Affairs

Narrowing the focus to advocating for one's needs and accommodations was a shared goal for academic environments serving AWD (Tenorio et al., 2021; Tilley et al., 2020). Underneath the umbrella of advocacy practices that have emerged to support persons with disabilities was the structured path that embraced self-advocacy in academic affairs (Mays & Brevetti, 2020). Previously, parents and persons with disabilities relied solely on the words of experts and educational leaders to determine their child's path within the academic system and during their transition into mainstream society (Murray et al., 2021). Developing a strong voice to advocate for oneself requires a strong understanding of one's foundation and accessible

resources for success in school (Miller et al., 2022). The essential foundation necessary for advocacy to be successful for persons with disabilities was that all stakeholders needed to be educated and practice advocacy strategies (Plotner et al., 2020). Students who participated in and led their transition plan meetings developed a more robust understanding of their needs and desires as they transitioned into varying higher education programs beyond the K-12 system (Chandroo et al., 2018). Through the guided practice and coaching offered in transition plan development, higher education program participants developed a stronger sense of self as they worked toward their individualized goals (Matsana et al., 2021).

Other elements that impacted higher education programs included the distinction between learning disabilities and impairments (Sullivan Sulewski et al., 2021). As previously referenced, a societal stigma came from fully embracing a disability on a public platform that could be intimidating for persons with disabilities to embrace (Cluley et al., 2020; Freire, 1970). However, program creators have improved in the way they encourage and support their employees with disabilities by providing opportunities for support on an individualized basis (Miller et al., 2022). Current transition planning meeting standards prioritized the intention for post-secondary employment or academic pathways; however, the execution of such efforts continued to disintegrate due to limited resources and support (Agarwal et al., 2020). This fundamental shift in academic program approaches helped to develop opportunities to engage rather than be limited based on feedback and resources willingly shared by participants and community partners (Yu et al., 2022). Providing coaching to communicate oneself in higher education programs better was a goal for program developers who embrace empowerment and advocacy practices within their environment (Matsana et al., 2021; Ní Bhroin & King, 2019).

Developing voice and presence was an essential milestone toward independence and self-efficacy for adults with disabilities (Kubiak et al., 2021; Massa et al., 2020). The concept of inclusion had been historically limited to primary and secondary education platforms that were often highly supported by individual support teams, parents, and family advocates (Bhattarai et al., 2020; Grigal et al., 2018; Holzberg et al., 2018). However, as universities and community colleges began developing pathways for these students, cultural inclusion has been adopted into campus life (Belmonte Almagro & Bernárdez-Gómez, 2021). What made integration into campus life and work environments the most prominent and successful was when participants could thrive independently and engage in appropriate professional and academic discourse with minimal prompting and support (Tilley et al., 2020). Often categorized and identified as mindfulness, current college and community programs prioritize self-regulation and judgment-free environments and protocols to support individual growth and engagement (Oyler et al., 2021). As empowerment and advocacy teaching practices were broken down into several concepts in the current academic curriculum, students received opportunities to comprehend these phenomena and apply them to their lives and independent development (Fenn & Scior, 2019; Mays & Brevetti, 2020). Program activities that explored role play, collaborative discussion, and partner workshops allowed participants to engage with the content and observe the effects of advocacy and empowerment practices in a guided and structured environment (Derr & Morrow, 2020). Coursework and campus activities that prioritized student engagement have provided students with disabilities opportunities to share their voices in a supported environment, which allowed for more confidence in this student population (Plotner et al., 2020). With increased self-advocacy, individuals with intellectual disabilities had more significant opportunities to integrate effectively into mainstream society, forge relationships outside of

structured groups and environments, and develop the social cues necessary to navigate life without a constant buffer of protection (Gobec et al., 2022). Knowing their worth and strategizing to consistently amplify their voice and presence in the workplace and academic environments was a reborn societal goal of the successes of empowerment and advocacy structures that continued to become more sophisticated over time (Miller et al., 2022).

A Gap in Voices Directly from the Individuals

Prior research provided structured reasoning for developing and integrating endless teaching techniques, pedagogical frameworks, and policy proposals for the disability community (Bruce A., 2021; Cluley et al., 2020; Dawson & Cuevas, 2019). However, the most impactful studies utilized the effectiveness of case studies to create a connection to humanity and lived experience among researchers and academics on a global platform (Corby et al., 2018; Digman, 2021; Kubiak et al., 2021). As society had begun to discover the benefits of empowerment and advocacy studies in academic research, prior studies were more distant, looking at the progress of disabled persons from indirect perspectives (Sannicandro et al., 2018). Often, case study research involving disabled persons was done in the voice of parents and guardians, educators, administrators, and program developers (Chandroo et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2020). Case studies from these mindsets were motivated to present their data and results in a manner that benefits the field of disabilities toward progress. However, it was not in the individual's voice but in those who represented the individual. For example, in Dirth and Branscombe's (2018) study, the evidence gathered about adult participants in education and employability programs grouped all intellectual disability participants into the category of social disability to connect their experiences to their overarching research goal of connecting knowledge to social psychology. As a case study, this form of research utilized disabled persons in a quantitative

format, thus shifting their findings away from the participants' voices and studying the effects of their engagement in multiple social environments (Dirth & Branscombe, 2018). A comparable way disabled students' experiences were not showcased for their voices and perspectives was when it was observed to improve teaching and particular education practices and reforms (Johnson et al., 2020). These case studies examined the growth and achievement of participants with intellectual disabilities from an educator's perspective, thus viewing the contributions from students as a product of teaching practices rather than through individual effort and achievement. Present disability-related case studies focused on the providers' needs to best support the disabled person they represent rather than providing pathways directly to the disabled person (Dirth & Branscombe, 2018).

Other case studies explored the emerging relationships between psychological theories of learning development and disabled students by taking steps away from direct contact with academia (Wong, N. et al., 2022). An area that sparked struggle when analyzing this data was acknowledging the obstacles involved in appropriately identifying persons with intellectual disabilities and communicating their rights throughout the research process (Dirth & Branscombe, 2018). Though the relationships between these studies were helpful, an apparent frustration existed that caused strife in the research process, thus limiting potential future studies. These frustrations manifested in developing and implementing programs that served participants with intellectual disabilities (Park & Park, 2019). Innovative studies prioritized identifying the growth and progress of the participants in higher education programs and shed light on the benefits of fostering these relationships to serve this high-need subpopulation of learners (Matera et al., 2021; Rios & Burke, 2020).

While the contributions from previous case studies involved with disability rights often came from places of generalized summarizations of the disabled experience, more recent case studies started to explore the impact colleges, universities, and academic institutions have had on the new embrace of students with intellectual disabilities participating in campus life and learning (Auz, 2019; Plotner et al., 2020). There was a clear gap in accessible understanding and cognitive achievements for adults with intellectual disabilities once they completed primary and secondary education (Kubiak et al., 2021; Plotner et al., 2020). To combat the "war against the disabled," Nebraska Wesleyan University started an Art History class for adults with intellectual disabilities to inspire growth and progress in this subpopulation of students (Auz, 2019, p. 325). The course Disability in the Arts not only examined the contributions of disabled artists throughout history but also encouraged discussion and insights from students toward their daily lives and routines (Auz, 2019). This study recognized the achievements and contributions of participants and shared strategies for this platform to propel forward for other students and courses.

Prioritizing student voice and campus engagement was a form of empowerment that is now celebrated on college campuses across the globe (Marnewick et al., 2022; Mbazzi et al., 2021; Plotner et al., 2020). Using co-researching practices allowed students to adopt a restructured role of learner and researcher (Grigal et al., 2022). As a global case study, Kubiak et al.'s (2021) study highlighted the importance of a complete institutional embrace of empowerment and advocacy foundations with the clear objective of helping every learner identify and amplify their voice. However, due to the nature of the case study, the research results prioritized the efficiency of lesson development and integration rather than the content created by the students participating in college programs (Kubiak et al., 2021). While the

findings were necessary for the growth and progress of the disabilities field, there was a lack of direct representation of student voices, which has been a common lacking factor among additional studies (Alathur & Pai, 2023; Bouck, E., & Bouck, M., 2022; Kubiak et al., 2021). This was ironic because these studies aim to empower and increase disabled student voices in all collegiate programs.

As colleges and community programs began to produce pathways toward growing success for disabled individuals, there were case studies that examined the changing role and dynamic of adult-parent relationships and guardianships (Caldwell et al., 2018). Many studies focused on the role advocacy and empowerment had for parents with children with disabilities and the importance their role in education teams had on student achievement (Aleman-Tovar et al., 2022). However, those relationships change as a child becomes an adult, and those responsibilities shift and evolve (Chandroo et al., 2018). Case studies often focused on the needs of the parent and advocate rather than the needs of the person they represented or endorsed (Rios & Burke, 2020). For many parents and conservators, conversations surrounding increasing independence were rooted in prior trauma, fear, and concern for their loved ones (Giri et al., 2021; Shrier, 2020). Often, case studies involving parent involvement looked to their experiences and perspectives to help improve current education and program realities rather than seek to focus on the growth and progress of the child they served (Agarwal et al., 2020). The disconnect between current research focused on the voices and perspectives of the care providers rather than the individuals themselves left a glaring gap in strategies for future research.

There was a push to bring the voices of people with intellectual disabilities to the forefront of advocacy and empowerment research due to their unique and previously shielded perspective in participating in mainstream environments (Marnewick et al., 2022; Matsana et al.,

2021). However, many newly discovered studies were often rooted in tragedy and injustice (Matera et al., 2021). For example, two young adults, James and George, shared their experiences surrounding injustice, inequity, and victimization of sexual abuse by their care providers away at college (Digman, 2021). Their ability to gain support from their families and school officials to properly report their assailants was an act of genuine survival and self-determination, which served as a beacon in the light of empowerment. While their testimony was an act of willful and impactful self-advocacy that should be celebrated, there has not been enough time to determine the impact their participation in this growing field of research had upon their development and livelihood. Another testimony built upon the foundations of pain and strife was that of the advocacy work done by Nadina Laspina, in which Laspina embraced the responsibility and role of a disabled icon to survive and make her way in the world (Houser, 2021). Following her journey led to a wealth of inspiration and data that could further serve those in the disability community who struggled to amplify their voice in workability, academic, and community environments. Much like James and George, Laspina's tragic upbringing not only served to anchor her to her expanding future but also served as an example of achievement and ability for other disabled persons (Houser, 2021).

While rooted in tragedy, there was potential for improvement for future qualitative case studies from empowerment and advocacy practices that highlighted the goals and achievement, which, in turn, produced endless possibilities for adults with intellectual disabilities (Digman, 2021; Houser, 2021; Shrier, 2020). Since the turn of the century, prioritizing student voice and individual achievement has challenged society to make room for adults with intellectual disabilities on all platforms (Matera et al., 2021). Case studies explored the effect of empowerment and advocacy practices on higher education institutions, employability programs,

and community events by recognizing the need to amplify their presence in higher education environments (Sullivan Sulewski et al., 2021). Communicating their hopes, dreams, and goals professionally allowed more voices to be weighted and acknowledged in policy creation and campus living standards (Matera et al., 2021). This was an emergent pathway in disability education as studies worked to identify and celebrate individual voices and achievements (Plotner et al., 2020). With increasing technology and societal shifts that embraced advocacy and empowerment culture across academia and workplace environments, research began to look directly at the mindsets and voices of learners with disabilities so that their findings served to improve the resources and expectations of learned behaviors for all.

<div align="center">**Summary**</div>

While the celebration of empowerment and advocacy culture helped in recent successes for the disability community, there were notable errors in current literature that needed to be addressed to best support this population. Theoretically, there were no universal applications of empowerment or advocacy policies within the field of disabilities in higher education programs (Gonzálvez & Marhuenda-Fluixá, 2021; Murray et al., 2021). Present participants with intellectual disabilities in higher education often engaged in watered-down empowerment and advocacy-building programs without connecting their developing skills to use terminology and principles (Papay et al., 2018; Qian et al., 2018). Current research is needed to identify ranges in abilities and opportunities for disabled persons in academic programs as empowerment and advocacy practices are becoming more mainstream within disability culture.

There was also a gap in program continuity and accessibility for adult learners with disabilities who did not transition immediately into a higher education course right out of high school (Sannicandro et al., 2018). With rapidly increasing opportunities to engage with society

through digital and social media platforms, research exploring advocacy practices is needed to identify areas of strength and potential dangers for disabled persons wanting to develop their voice of empowerment and ability (Audenaert et al., 2019; Huskin et al., 2022). The need to discover a sound and reliable foundation of empowerment and advocacy culture within higher education programs for persons with disabilities was essential in addressing this gap in academic achievement research involving the participation and engagement of disabled persons.

Persons with disabilities were entering a new generation of society that embraced one's differences and intentionally developed pathways for success and engagement in mainstream culture (Wong et al., 2022). This embrace was not quickly adopted among the disability community but instead was weighed and granted appropriate transition for cultural acceptance (Dirth & Branscombe, 2018; Yu et al., 2022). However, when these norms were accepted, opportunities for growth and expansion were possible.

As proven from studies gathered in the past decade, knowing that students could achieve genuine self-determination and empowerment now have exposure to resources that challenge them to be better students eludes that progress is being made, but more is yet to come (Fenn & Scior, 2019; Tilley et al., 2020). The most recent research shows that academics look at how their practices and scaffolds are necessary for determining student growth and progress (Maine et al., 2019). Learners work toward academic achievement through collaboration and shared understanding, and case studies are showcased (Auz, 2019; Domin et al., 2020). However, gaining the voice and perspective directly from the participants with intellectual disabilities remained a gap that needed to be remedied in future research. As opportunities are shaped and formed, foundational research could help address the gap in present findings and provide

practical tools for present and future participants to communicate their goals, concerns, and

expectations with strategic support and engagement.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this case study was to understand the impact that advocacy and empowerment practices have on the intellectual disabilities community in academic and social constructs for students within community colleges and disability programs on the West Coast of California. As these academic pathways began to utilize tools such as empowerment and advocacy practices within their curriculum and program foundations, the impact of those ideological shifts had yet to be measured by asking participants themselves. This qualitative case study series was a unique opportunity for persons with intellectual disabilities to communicate their experiences in higher education programs, discuss empowerment and advocacy within their lives, and present their goals and hopes for their academic futures. This chapter includes an overview of the research design and research questions, the setting and participants for conducting research, as well as researcher positionality by addressing possible biases and roles. Also included are necessary permissions, a data collection plan with three approaches and analysis plans, as well as trustworthiness and credibility, concluding with a summary that connects it.

Research Design

The voices and experiences of persons with intellectual disabilities were not often chronicled directly from that population's mouths and intentions (Murray C. et al., 2021; Willis et al., 2022). Historically, data and feedback gathered from this population had been collected under generalized studies and presentations that promoted an overarching standard of universal needs and expectations from the disability community, thus creating present norms, expectations, and accommodations for this population (Collins et al., 2018; Di Bernardo et al., 2021;

Kruglanski et al., 2018). Those findings were in quantitative studies that utilized numerical data to motivate policy and program adjustments (DeMatthews et al., 2019; Richard & Hennekam, 2020). However, qualitative research could most powerfully collect and share the hunger and desire to learn more from this population directly (Matera et al., 2021). By obtaining the histories, perspectives, hopes, and dreams of adults with disabilities, there could be a greater understanding and motivation to create programs and policies that positively impact their livelihoods, especially in higher education.

Utilizing a qualitative case study was the most appropriate for this research. While exploring phenomenological and grounded theory research pathways could garner a broader understanding of how empowerment and advocacy wove their way throughout subcultural populations, utilizing a case study format provided researchers with specific experiences and perspectives that demonstrated a range of growth and progress while using empowerment and advocacy cultures in their learning and participation (Riesen & Oertle, 2019; Sullivan Sulewski et al., 2021). The analysis and perspectives from students engaged in higher education programs were collected and analyzed to measure growth, retention, and application rates within a collective qualitative case study. The collective case study pathway secured a select population of participants whose experiences directly impacted higher education programs (Dawson & Cuevas, 2019; Rios & Burke, 2020). This unique case shed light on the evolving embrace and adaptation of empowerment and advocacy culture within disabled populations and potentially predicted if adopting these concepts produced long-term success for this subpopulation of learners.

Research Questions

This qualitative case study aimed to gain meaningful insight directly from people with intellectual disabilities regarding the effectiveness of empowerment and advocacy practices within their academic environments. The following research questions answered questions and assumptions about this subpopulation. The study will also determine the effectiveness of embracing and applying these cultural norms within standard mainstream settings.

Central Research Question

How do adults with disabilities describe the short-term and long-term effects of programs in higher education that implement empowerment and advocacy culture?

Sub-Question One

How do adults with intellectual disabilities define empowerment and advocacy after participating in higher education courses?

Sub-Question Two

How do students with intellectual disabilities connect empowerment and advocacy theory elements into their understood concepts of success and happiness?

Sub-Question Three

How do adults with intellectual disabilities determine their growth and progress within higher education programs when actively utilizing empowerment and advocacy cultural norms?

Setting and Participants

For this research study, all interactions with participants and settings would be in person and not limited to digital platforms and social media. Participants were provided with an extensive understanding of the research study before the agreement and had the right to withdraw at any time. It was apparent to all participants that there would be no negative consequences for

not participating in or withdrawing from the study at any time during the research process. See

Appendix B, C, and E for consent forms and site permission requests.

Setting

The setting of this case study followed the experiences of students participating in the

Community Connections Course and Workplace 101 Course within the Extended Education

Courses at Coastal Vineyard College. These courses have been developed in partnership with

Strix Community of Friends (SCF) and Academia de Camino (AC), as well as employability and

achievement programs within San Luis Obispo County that serve adult learners with disabilities.

The association between these agencies has evolved over ten years. However, it was

strengthened tremendously during the COVID-19 pandemic. While other programs at Coastal

Vineyard College were eliminated due to low enrollment and participation, the AWD Extended

Education Courses transitioned to the distance learning environment during the COVID-19

pandemic and produced stable and increased enrollments between terms. Now that programs

have transitioned back to in-person learning environments, the hunger to enroll and participate in

both courses grew beyond anticipated enrollment size, serving a larger population of learners

who wanted to improve their academic, workplace, and community skills. By working with

students in these courses, a broad range of perspectives and abilities helped determine if

increased enrollment was a product of availability versus an innate desire to develop and

improve their empowerment and advocacy skills in higher education and employability program

settings. Based on current program enrollments, there was a pool of 217 students that participate

in the adults with disabilities continuing education courses with Coastal Vineyard College,

serving all three of Coastal Vineyard's campuses as well as specific day program sites within

San Luis Obispo County.

Participants

Participants in this qualitative case study were students enrolled in the Community Connections and Workplace 101 AWD Extending Education courses at Coastal Vineyard College who volunteered in the research study. Fall and spring semesters operate off 18-week terms, while the summer session lasts six weeks. Recruitment was offered to all students enrolled in the Community Connections and Workplace 101 courses offered at all three Coastal Vineyard College campuses.

Based on current program enrollments, there was a pool of 217 students that participated in the adults with disabilities higher education courses with Coastal Vineyard College's Extended Education Program. Twenty participants were selected from a pool of interested volunteers for the research study. Student participants were informed of this research study through engagement in a community information seminar and word of mouth. Selected participants were currently or previously enrolled in the Community Connections Course and Workplace 101 course at the college sites or the disability partnerships. Participants were offered a two-week time window to volunteer for the case study after I provided an overview of the purpose of the research for the enrolled class population. Signed volunteer interest waivers were collected before I randomly selected nine participants for individual interviews and 11 for two focus groups in the case study. Participants in one of two focus groups ensured that there would not be more than ten people in a group. These participants received the same questions in the individual interviews but answered them in a group rather than independently. Due to the needs of the participants, a job coach sat in the room for the individual interviews and focus groups and could only observe the research process. All participants in the personal discussions and focus groups were provided volunteer interest waivers to sign and could withdraw from the study at

any time with no penalties to academic program progress and opportunities. Participants had seven days to decide whether to participate in the research study.

Recruitment Plan

The data sample gathered for this research study came from students enrolled in Coastal Vineyard College's AWD Extended Education courses. Based on current program enrollments, there was a pool of 217 students that participated in the adults with disabilities higher education courses with Coastal Vineyard College. The community college capped enrollment at 45 students per course each semester to fulfill state and COVID-19 population protocols. Students were introduced to the research case study conducted by their instructor outside of their class. They were invited to participate in the research study at a local community event at the community college. Students had seven days from learning of the research opportunity to decide whether to participate. If so, they signed an informed consent and volunteer form for the researcher to categorize and assess for the next steps. Participants with conservatorships and parent guardians provided signatures from their supports as well. Personal interviews were held at Coastal Vineyard College's lecture classroom in Paso Robles, California. Focus groups were not larger than ten people, with one job coach silently observing based on the needs of the participants and the disability partnerships. The first 20 students who submitted interest in participating in the study were placed in the individual or focus group categories. Once the 20 participants were collected, nine will be chosen randomly through a computer-generated system to be placed in the individual interview group. The remaining 11 were placed in the focus group category. This allowed me to communicate regularly with these participants and provided scheduling updates as necessary for information gathering.

Researcher Positionality

In a nonbiased research position, this research study was designed to collect qualitative data directly from persons with intellectual disabilities to enhance the field's understanding of current trends and assumptions from this subpopulation regarding empowerment and advocacy practices. Through extensive reflection, collaboration, and self-analysis, I was aware of my biases, predictions, and assumptions throughout the research collection and analysis experience. I had protocols put into place to maintain objectivity and fidelity. I was allowed at least 60 minutes between interviews and focus groups to remove myself from the research participants and restore my research mindset. I provided recorded time stamps digitally and communicated those with my research team. I wrote my thoughts, concerns, and reflections in a journal that my dissertation chair had full access to ensure objectivity and fidelity. In addition, I preserved structure and neutrality throughout the data collection and categorization processes by communicating weekly with the dissertation chair and setting designated hours for data synthesis and analysis practices.

Interpretive Framework

The research paradigm embraced within this study was founded upon the principles and objectives found within social constructivist and disability theories (Pettigrew, 2021). Higher education fields have changed in the face of technological advancement and the introduction and implementation of digital social media presence (Rustad & Kassah, 2020; Trevisan, 2018). When facing demands for change and reform from political and societal influences, education and workforce environments have historically taken time and intention to address newly accepted concepts and integrate their norms within their protocols. However, there was a gap in research that failed to provide data and strategies to effectively serve and represent adults with disabilities

beyond the conventional research setting (Roth et al., 2018). To bridge the viewpoints between social constructivism and disability theories, research interpreters must adopt a disability interpretive lens when gathering and assessing their research and data (Caldwell et al., 2018). Adopting a disability interpretive lens through this research process allowed for the evolving norms and policies of socially constructive institutions, such as community colleges and disability employability programs, to be assessed with a critical lens that prioritizes the voices and experiences of the participants rather than the program creators and policy implementors.

As a Catholic and Christian researcher, I believe that the prior understanding that God is the creator of our primary reality was essential to the knowledge and urgency of this research. Through the universal opportunity to embrace the Lord as our One God and Father Almighty and Maker of Heaven and Earth in the opening words of the Nicene Creed, there was an expectation established that there is one true and all-powerful God that created our lives and reality (The Bible Translation Committee, 2017). While others may possess oppositional opinions that believed in the presence and existence of multiple realities, the belief that our One God was the creator of everything allowed for their ideas to be recognized and accounted for as their perspectives and opinions were gathered through the data collection and analysis processes. For it was our duty established by Isaiah in 43:10, "You are my witnesses," declares the Lord, "And my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me, there was no God formed, and there will be none after me" (The Bible Translation Committee, 2017). Through the power of God, this research was developed to serve the Lord best. Our ontological assumption was founded on the belief that a singular reality allowed everyone involved in this study to serve the Lord to their best.

Philosophical Assumptions

As a researcher, it was imperative to understand one's potential biases and unintentional assumptions. While eager to gain more from the disabled population in this research study, addressing epistemological and axiological assumptions could help strengthen the researcher's findings. Establishing myself as an educator and researcher was essential when collecting data correctly and ethically during this research process.

Ontological Assumption

I believe in a singular reality created by God, the almighty Father. For our one, God created the heaven and earth, all that is seen and unseen, for he provided me the eyes and ears to identify this gap in research that must be corrected for the future of our society and the protection of all of God's children. As a child of God in this singular reality, I shall serve to share the findings of my research to serve the Lord by being a champion for his historically most vulnerable.

Epistemological Assumption

When approaching the epistemological assumption of this qualitative research study, it was imperative to note that the voices, perspectives, and feedback from the participants were from disabled adults with a wide range of mental, emotional, physical, and developmental challenges (Abbas, 2020; Agarwal et al., 2020). Their knowledge before this study came from completing a high school diploma or certificate of completion from their foundational K-12 learning environments with a wide range of time and experience separating them from higher education programs (Caldwell et al., 2018). However, through their intrinsic desire to seek more for themselves and their day-to-day realities, participants in this research enrolled and participated in courses designed to improve their academic skills with a fostered cultural

foundation of empowerment and advocacy practices built into the curriculum (Bruce, C. & Aylward; M. L., 2021). The knowledge and feedback provided by the research participants were gathered through case study interview formats and work samples, demonstrating their adoption of enhanced academic and community skills. This area of research was not only an area of passion for the researcher but also a culturally desirable goal for the present higher education institutions and programs.

Axiological Assumption

As an educator in higher education, it was an essential tenant of the profession to provide meaningful and equitable education and learning experiences that fostered long-term growth and adaptability within academic operations once students have participated in these programs (Corby et al., 2018; Domin et al., 2020). When focusing on developing and enhancing learning experiences for adult learners with disabilities seeking to improve their academic skills, student successes and progress were assessed and analyzed to determine content retention and unit progression (Georgiadou et al., 2020). The participant feedback allowed improvement to be documented through reflective practices and research analysis (Gilson, C., & Biggs, E., 2023). Adjustments to content delivery were made to best serve the students within the learning community. Concepts were retaught and frequently assessed to determine comprehension and meaningful application of skills and theories. As participants became more confident in the subject matter and course cultural norms and routines, their willingness to answer research questions increased and challenged educators and program developers to secure engagement and progress for all participants.

Researcher's Role

I am the human instrument for this research study. I was the interviewer who provided interview opportunities during the research collection time window with the 20 participants in individual interviews and the two focus group formats. To remain objective and unbiased during the interview and focus group processes, a break time of 60 minutes was allotted to have me leave the interview and focus group location, remove myself from the site, and return with a refreshed mindset. Focus groups were at most 10 per group. Based on present program offerings, these research interview opportunities were completed within a two-week timetable. During these interviews, the activity allowed additional job coaches and behavioral staff to assist participants if they enlisted such support during their research. In this role, questions were not directly tied to the curriculum offered during instruction. Instead, they connected to empowerment and advocacy practices that allowed them to engage with the higher education curriculum. As the interviewer, I was transparent regarding the interview questions, recording devices, and support necessary for the participants to participate comfortably in their interviews and focus groups. From the time of the research introduction, there was a clear understanding that participation in the research study did not affect grades and hours completed for their enrolled courses.

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Procedures

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The following proposed procedures were developed to collect data within a qualitative case study framework while continually connecting to Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols. These steps were scaffolded to prepare potential participants of all abilities for each data collection phase. All steps in these procedures have returned to the IRB framework for ethical foundations and effective data collection and analysis.

Data Collection Plan

Evidence for this research study was collected in three primary data collection paths. Nine participants participated in an interview and answered questions about empowerment, advocacy, and academic development. The other 11 participants joined one of two focus groups that reviewed the same interview question topics in a collaborative discussion setting like a Socratic seminar. Finally, participants could submit work samples from participating in the Community Connections and Workplace 101 courses as optional document samples charting the application of empowerment and advocacy practices. Work submissions were turned in at the close of the interview and focus group activities. By emailing me, participants submitted additional work samples within 48 hours of the interview or focus group. There were no consequences to the participants if they chose not to participate in each part of the research collection process. If participants chose to withdraw from participating in the study, the participant would watch as I deleted their data from my records and deleted their recordings from the voice recorder. Participants who did not provide work samples during their individual interview or focus group discussion received one reminder in a flyer provided after the interview to bring an assignment or photo of a task demonstrating their academic connections to empowerment and advocacy culture within 48 hours of participation.

Individual Interviews

Nine participants in the case study participated in one individual interview scheduled over two weeks. During these interviews, students were asked seven questions regarding the following content areas: empowerment, advocacy, and academic skills. These interviews determined if students have adopted empowerment and advocacy skills as they regularly integrated with their school and work environments while enrolled in the Community

Connections and Workplace 101 AWD Courses. As seen in Table 1, the questions were not directly tied to the classes but addressed the themes and expectations provided by the system and higher education program objectives. In addition, due to policies among the college and disability partnerships, the participants could elect to have a job coach or family support during the interview process. To support their participation process, participants had a copy of the interview questions in front of them during the interview for their own tracking and reference purposes. All interviews were recorded, and transcriptions were developed for further analysis and synthesis.

Participants will be provided a 60-minute window to participate in their individual interviews. Each participant will be provided with the seven interview questions and can take notes on how they would like to answer them. With the presence of a job coach, they can ask for support in this focusing activity. However, they cannot move forward in the individual interview. After the five-minute focus on reviewing the questions, the researcher will ask the participants if they are ready to begin and share a clean copy of the interview questions with the recording device. The researcher will only serve to read the questions aloud and cannot exaggerate or clarify the questions in order to remain neutral to participant responses. At the interview's close, the researcher will thank the participants and offer additional information about how they can retract their participation if they do not feel comfortable after the study is conducted.

Each of the seven questions directly pertained to the topic area addressed by the research questions. Based on participant responses, their answers were categorized based on the research questions and any additional contributions to the study. All interviews were recorded, and transcriptions were analyzed. Participants in the study utilized empowerment and advocacy terminology and demonstrated application and comprehension skills from regular engagement in

their academic skill development. To establish confidentiality, all participants provided aliases they would like to use in the research study. All interview data was uploaded and categorized using the NVivo Qualitative Data software provided by Liberty University Marketplace for further analysis.

Table 1

Individual Interview Questions

1. Please define what empowerment is. CRQ

2. Describe a time when you felt empowered in your life. SQ1

3. Please define what advocacy is. CRQ

4. Describe a time when you needed to advocate for yourself. SQ1

5. Provide an example of how empowerment and advocacy skills help you as a Coastal Vineyard College student. SQ2

6. Where do you demonstrate empowerment and advocacy skills outside the classroom? SQ2

7. What advice or suggestions would you give a friend or classmate about the importance of empowerment and advocacy in their daily lives? SQ3

Questions one and three were designed to allow participants to communicate their definitions of advocacy and empowerment. Their descriptions generated a foundation enabling overlapping themes and connections to be identified during the synthesis process. Questions two and four allowed the participant to share individual references to empowerment and advocacy. These responses enabled stronger links to be recorded and analyzed during synthesis. Questions five and six allowed the answers to connect to academic programs and see if measurable connections could be established based on participant engagement. Question seven responses

pertained to sub-question 3, which focused on the participant's ability to communicate long-term

expectations and goals after defining and applying empowerment and advocacy definitions to

themselves and their environments.

Focus Groups

Participants in the case study participated in a focus group designed in a Socratic seminar

format. During this discussion, five to seven students were asked the same seven questions

offered in the individual interviews regarding the following content areas: empowerment,

advocacy, and academic skills. The researcher is the question facilitator and cannot elaborate

further on the questions to avoid bias or manipulating answer submissions. Participants shared

their connections using the focus group collaborative discussion format. The answers provided in

the focus groups generated growth throughout the session as participants felt more comfortable

sharing throughout the discussion. The questions were not only directly tied to the courses but

instead addressed the themes and expectations provided by the system and higher education

program objectives. Due to their individual needs, the participants utilized one another and

optional job coach support to communicate their answers and findings with the focus group. All

participants consented to the recording of the focus group discussion and have the right to the

transcripts of their group if asked. Researchers must allow 30 – 90 minutes for the groups to

participate and answer all seven questions in depth fully.

Each of the seven questions directly pertained to the topic area addressed by the research

questions. Participants in the study utilized empowerment and advocacy terminology and

demonstrated application and comprehension skills from regular engagement in their academic

skill development. Their responses were categorized into levels of connection, comprehension,

and adoption of empowerment and advocacy cultural norms. The recordings of these focus

groups had transcripts created that were further analyzed to determine if any utterances or

phrases were missed through the initial interview. Participants in the focus group utilized

empowerment and advocacy terminology in a collaborative discussion format and demonstrated

application and comprehension skills from regular engagement in their academic skill

development. All focus group data was uploaded and categorized using the NVivo Qualitative

Data software provided by Liberty University Marketplace for further analysis.

Table 2

Focus Group Questions

1. Please define what empowerment is. CRQ

2. Describe a time when you felt empowered in your life. SQ1

3. Please define what advocacy is. CRQ

4. Describe a time when you needed to advocate for yourself. SQ1

5. Provide an example of how empowerment and advocacy skills help you as a Coastal
   Vineyard College student. SQ2

6. Where do you demonstrate empowerment and advocacy skills outside the classroom?
   SQ2

7. What advice or suggestions would you give a friend or classmate about the importance of
   empowerment and advocacy in their daily lives? SQ3

   Questions 1 and 3 were designed to allow participants in the focus group to share their

definitions of advocacy and empowerment. Their meanings generated a foundation allowing

overlapping themes and connections, thus creating one collaboratively created response per

group. Questions 2 and 4 allowed the participants to share links to empowerment and advocacy

from their classroom environments. Questions 5 and 6 responses allowed the group to connect to

academic programs and to see if measurable connections could be established based on group discussion engagement. The responses to question 7 pertained to sub-question three, which focused on the group's ability to communicate long-term expectations and goals after defining and applying empowerment and advocacy definitions to themselves and their environments.

Work Samples

Participants in this research study have participated in the Community Connections Course and Workplace 101 Courses at Coastal Vineyard College. Students participated in activities in the course that focused on developing empowerment and advocacy skills in higher education environments. In addition, as participants engaged in the interview or focus group process, their choice to provide work samples from their course or program demonstrated their connection to the curriculum and their academic journeys. At the close of their interview or participation in the focus group, participants could submit work samples that connected them to empowerment, advocacy, or academic growth. Work samples include projects, speeches, worksheets, or classroom activities that the participant engaged in as a student with Coastal Vineyard College. If the participant did not have it at their scheduled interview or focus group, they could submit it to the researcher within 48 hours in person or via email. With each submission, the participant would share verbally or in paragraph form why their chosen work sample was an example of academic, empowerment, or advocacy achievement.

As participants provided artifacts on an individual basis, researchers assessed if the work samples could be categorized into the following three content areas: (1) empowerment, (2) advocacy, and (3) academic skills. Each artifact was assessed and categorized and served as chronicled knowledge for short-term and long-term application of skill development. The

participants briefly explained verbally or in writing why they chose their selected work sample for the data collection. Those responses were recorded for further synthesis.

Data Analysis

The evidence gathered through this research process served as the foundation to chronologically determine if empowerment and advocacy culture helped in the short-term and long-term adoption of academic skills for learners with intellectual disabilities. Each participant's identity was protected by creating a pseudonym throughout the synthesis. The transcribed interviews of each participant were organized by the participant and by date to study how they responded to each consultation and identify trends in the data. The answers provided during individual interviews and focus group collaborations were categorized by the four research questions being investigated. Answers regarding empowerment and advocacy were separated based on higher education topics. Additional feedback that the participants provided will be categorized in a miscellaneous category, which provides opportunities for future research.

As the data was synthesized into multiple diverse stories, participants' voices, perceptions, and connections to empowerment and advocacy culture were shared and strengthened by their work samples. Themes of independence, individual autonomy, and community impact were synthesized through participant responses and perspectives. Each participant's experiences were documented and shared for analysis and synthesis.

The interview and focus group data provided significant data to be analyzed. I utilized the NVivo Qualitative Data Software provided by Liberty University to properly upload, categorize, and assess the data from both sources. Through the analysis of their responses, the feedback was examined and organized to determine if empowerment and advocacy practices had a lasting

impact on academic performance and individual understanding. The responses were directly tied to the central research question and the three sub-research questions.

Once these interviews and group discussions were analyzed, the work samples were the final data to be synthesized. Since work samples are chosen by the individual, regardless of their category, they were synthesized to determine if there is evidence of empowerment or advocacy within their work submissions. Suppose the participants found additional examples they want to offer for the research study. In that case, they submitted them to the researcher in physical or email format within 48 hours of their interview or focus group. After the 48-hour window, no additional samples were accepted.

During the data synthesis phase, I determined if data triangulation could be resolved with the data provided amongst the three pathways. Themes of independence, individual autonomy, and community impact were synthesized and could establish data triangulation through the analysis processes. One way to ensure that process happened was through member checking and frequent self-assessment to determine objectivity and mindfulness. Once each piece of data had been uploaded and organized, an assessment of effectiveness and predictions for short-term and long-term adoption was determined.

Trustworthiness

Corbin and Strauss (2015) conceived of the foundational concepts and terms that establish the trustworthiness of a study, precisely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These terms were synonyms for relative quantitative terms, such as internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity. When developing research processes that involved persons with intellectual disabilities, it was essential to note that modern research had embraced the disability interpretive lens perspective, which prioritizes the equality and contribution of data

gathered in this subpopulation with the understanding that persons with disabilities are equally valuable participants that can speak for themselves (Caldwell et al., 2018). This strengthened the foundation of disabled participants' presence and provided a trusted respect for the participants and the data gathered.

Credibility

Credibility is confidence in the truth of a study's findings or the extent to which the results accurately describe reality (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). For an investigation to be credible, it must be able to be replicated in an alternative setting by other researchers. Regarding this qualitative case study, future researchers can replicate procedures, interview questions, and focus group environments in further higher education partnerships that prioritize academic engagement. Credibility can be determined in this case study by accounting for prolonged engagement, data triangulation, and member checking.

Prolonged engagement is when the researcher determines to understand an environment or phenomenon (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Those who have participated in higher education settings for more prolonged periods are more likely to communicate their connections to these phenomena through practice, exposure, and frequently used terminology. I spent at least six hours with each participant to achieve prolonged engagement. The time to build a trustworthy and safe relationship with me as a teacher and researcher gave the participants ample time to become comfortable with me.

Data triangulation uses different sources to confirm the information acquired and provide a better understanding of the phenomenon (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Data from the three data sources (individual interviews, focus group responses, and work samples) will be used in this study to understand each participant's experiences fully. Each data set will support the other.

Interview questions, focus group questions, and work samples allow participants to express themselves in different settings while providing data triangulation to ensure the study's credibility.

Member checking is used as a way for participants to verify the information as it was transcribed and understood by the researcher (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Receiving the transcriptions of interviews and focus group conversations prioritizes independence and engagement for the participants. For many, this case study is the first time they can speak for themselves and share individual answers without coaching or assistance from other resources and advocates. It is a validation of the data collected.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the ability for findings from the context of your study to be applied to another context or within the same context at another time (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The transferability of the study can be similarly applied to other settings. For example, thick description is often seen as a cultural interpretation adapted in writing (Caldwell et al., 2018). The transcripts provided after the interview and focus group experiences and the work samples are evidence of thick descriptions that can be transferred to another context or time with separate researchers.

Dependability

Dependability shows that the findings are consistent and could be repeated (Corbin & Strauss, 2015), which can be demonstrated through an adequate description of the procedures undertaken for the study. Dependability is accomplished through an inquiry audit. At Liberty University, this occurs with a thorough review of the research process and the research products

by the dissertation committee and the Qualitative Research Director. In addition, this study will

conduct an audit to ensure that it can be replicated in future research.

Confirmability

Confirmability is a degree of neutrality or the extent to which the respondents shape the

findings of a study and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This

will be established utilizing reflexivity, a way researchers communicate their expertise to

conduct the research study, which validates their interpretation of impending data and content

(Caldwell et al., 2018). Confirmability can be established with the participants during the

invitations to participate in the study through verbal and written introductions.

Ethical Considerations

Due to the sensitivity of the subpopulation participating in this research study, several

ethical considerations must be made before conducting research. Before any analysis is

completed, the study goes through the IRB process supported by Liberty University. Frequent

communications with administrators and program directors of both the higher education and

community disability programs were encouraged to ensure transparency of the study's vision.

Permissions

Due to the daily realities of the prospective participants, who are persons with potential

physical, intellectual, academic, and emotional disabilities, this qualitative case study required

the commitment of going through the IRB process (Appendix A). I gained written permission

from the community college to obtain permission to interview on the site. Consistent

communication with the college was essential in developing rapport and understanding of the

purpose and intention of the interviews and data collection. Invitations to speak and present on

the proposed study helped foster trust in the community and established a presence that promoted

learning and growth for all partners involved. Participants received invitations, flyers, consents, and opportunities for debriefing during the research and data collection process through paper format directly (see Appendix A).

Other Participant Protections

The research study provided multiple opportunities to invite students to participate, inform parents and care providers of the research study, and go over each consent form in a group overview and individual format to ensure comprehension of each step of the process to participate. Each interview and focus group session was recorded and transcribed for reference and data collection. All received participant work samples were scanned individually, categorized by the participants using their chosen aliases, and coded through comprehensive categorization and organization. All data was stored on external and private Google drives. Physical work samples were held in a locked filing cabinet and organized similarly to the electronic data. Data will be stored for a minimum of three years.

Participants who contributed to this study have zero health or safety risks. Due to the degree of their participation and engagement in the research study, the benefits to participant opportunity, growth, and self-worth are potentially endless. Frequent collaboration with the dissertation chair will be essential if ethical considerations arise.

Summary

This qualitative case study provided a refreshed perspective into the mindset and adaptability of disability rights culture within higher education programs. While higher education environments have openly embraced empowerment and advocacy policies in mainstream culture, adults with disabilities have only recently been exposed to these concepts. To determine the effectiveness of empowerment and advocacy culture in higher education courses that serve adults

with disabilities, participants were invited to participate in a two-week-long research study that ran parallel to courses offered at Coastal Vineyard College in partnership with SCF and AC Community Connections and Workplace 101 Extending Education AWD Courses. Nine participants participated in an individual interview that connects empowerment and advocacy practices. The remaining 11 participants were invited to participate in one of two focus group discussions that provided collaboration and support to be built into the data collection process. Participants could also voluntarily submit work samples from their coursework in the two parallel community college courses that best represented their definitions of empowerment and advocacy. Synthesis of this data collection helps determine if adopting an empowerment and advocacy culture within higher education programs can effectively serve adults with disabilities in short-term and long-term intervals.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this case study was to understand the impact that advocacy and empowerment practices have on the intellectual disabilities community in academic and social constructs for students within community colleges and disability programs on the West Coast of California. This chapter discusses individual interviews, two focus groups, and work sample data. The data allows for themes, trends, and outliers to be established. The data connects to the central research question and three subsequent sub-questions to determine the lasting impacts on AWD after engaging in empowerment and advocacy practices.

Participants

After four days, 20 participants who wanted to participate in the research study came forward. Of the 20 participants, the first nine were randomly chosen for individual interviews. The remaining 11 participants were notified of their focus group status and decided to participate in one of two days of focus groups. The Alpha focus group had six participants, while the Beta focus group had five. Of the 20 participants, 10 submitted work samples from coursework and campus activities that they believed illustrated their understanding of empowerment and advocacy in their learning.

Fancy

Fancy is a 23-year-old student at Coastal Vineyard College. She is on the autism spectrum and has epilepsy. During her interview, she found confidence in her voice after she made connections to her life experience and revisited and refined her definitions of empowerment and advocacy. Fancy is intensely knowledgeable of her experiences as a student and as an advocate for her medical care and shared tremendous vulnerability when sharing the

effects of her engaging back at school after her brain surgery. Fancy shared the importance of asking for help when she did not understand something as an intern and a new retail employee. Once she made connections to her own experience, Fancy was vital in creating definitions that prioritized knowing her own voice, calming down, and knowing when to ask for help. "Don't be upset or embarrassed; it's okay to ask for help," Fancy shared in her closing comments. When asked about a work sample, Fancy explained that her experience as an intern allowed her to grow in knowing that her voice mattered.

When Fancy submitted her work sample, she shared that she could not pick one particular activity as an example of empowerment or advocacy. However, she was most proud of her speech at the Winter Gala hosted by the college in December 2022. Fancy needed to give a speech to over 100 people about her internship. She shared that giving that speech reminded her of the skills she learned through the year, and she had a hard time leaving the internship to try and find a job outside of college. The skills and perspectives she gained during her internship were examples of self-advocacy and self-reflection, critical elements in empowerment and advocacy culture.

Martin

Martin is a 63-year-old retired student who returned to college after completing decades of retail service. He is a high-functioning individual on the autism spectrum and is proud of his independent living skills. During his interview, Martin strongly shared the importance of independence and having a voice in workplace and family matters. The concept of standing up for himself was integral in maintaining his independent living status when working with his disability partnerships and advocates. "I need to stand up for myself and my friends; otherwise, they take over," he said with a chuckle. "I need to show them that I can keep myself on a level

course daily and make the right choices in life," Martin says he can do that with his empowerment and advocacy skills.

For his work sample, Martin submitted a canvas portrait of violent gingerbread people blowing one another up and flipping the middle finger in the middle of the painting. He shared that he had completed that painting as an exercise of voice and control during the pandemic courses. This painting expresses his frustrations with people taking things too seriously and says that they can be answered with a simple lifting of the middle finger, even for gingerbread men. This painting directly connects to his priorities concerning empowerment and advocacy culture. Martin's emphasis on personal responsibility and making independent choices are seen in the defiant actions of his art piece and the explanation he provided.

Quiana

Quiana is a fast-talking 42-year-old participant who was highly motivated to participate in this research study. Quiana has cerebral palsy and has been handling regressions with scoliosis. Quiana is unique in her responses to prioritizing the sharing of problems happening to those she cares about within her community. When asked about where she had to advocate for herself, she shared about a time she had to defend herself and her peers on the bus when a passenger called them "retards." She shared that she had to speak up so it would not happen again. When the advocacy conversation became more personal, she shared that she had to use empowerment skills to advocate for her health. Quiana expressed, "I was close to dying, and I had to stop them from putting a feeding tube in me. I wouldn't do it." Quiana shared a message of hope that her experiences can encourage others to speak up for themselves, even when they are afraid.

Quiana's work sample was a speech she gave during the Spring 2023 semester about role

models that impact her motivation. She shared that it was hard for her to stay motivated after her scoliosis diagnosis; however, giving a motivational speech forced her to find strength in someone else. She chose a friend of hers who died of the same condition because she knew she wanted to follow in her footsteps by standing up for herself when it comes to medical decisions. Being academically and socially aware of the impact role models have on her is an example of Quiana's understanding of advocacy and empowerment principles in her daily life.

Savanah

Savanah is a 33-year-old intern with the Coastal Vineyard College AWD Extending Education Program and a student this recent semester. She is hard of hearing and has had multiple surgical procedures to her head and ears that impact engagement and auditory processing. Working on her American Sign Language skills and wanting to become an embedded tutor, Savanah's hearing impairments do not stop her from being a role model and classroom advocate for her peers. When asked about when she felt empowered, she shared that "… being an intern makes me feel strong. It allows me to work with others." In this role, she has learned to reduce her stress and shift her mindset to a cheerful and polite workplace personality. When offering advice for empowering and advocating for others, Savanah shared, "If I need help, I can ask for help, and I won't be scared to ask for help when I need it."

Savanah shared that she could not select one specific work sample example to demonstrate her connection to empowerment and advocacy, but rather, she selected her entire internship experience. She shared that helping the students every day after class in the cafeteria provides her skills in advocating for her peers in more public areas. From pushing wheelchairs to helping heat lunches, Savanah learns how her peers need to be supported in the community so they can be the most successful, and that experience helps her every day. Savanah's innate

understanding of her role's impact on her peers' academic and behavioral success exemplifies evolving empowerment.

Jake

Jake is a 35-year-old student at Coastal Vineyard College. His attention deficit hyperactivity disorder impacts his attention and engagement with others. His interview was filled with enthusiasm and references to historical and political foundations. When asked about the definitions of empowerment and advocacy, Jake connected to the importance of the Civil Rights Movement and Martin Luther King's *I Have a Dream* speech and the importance of being knowledgeable about political and social issues. When asked how empowerment and advocacy skills help him as a Coastal Vineyard student, Jake shared that he looks out for his peers and helps them in the cafeteria and class. "I sometimes help Debbie and look out for peers in walkers so that they can eat." With a genuine heart, Jake opened himself up as a resource for those struggling to find their voice in class and the community.

Garry

Garry is a 21-year-old student participant who demonstrated humble wisdom and growth in his responses during his interview. His intellectual disability directly connects with his ability to process long-term and short-term information. Due to the nature of his disability, Garry was clear that he struggled to make personal connections to empowerment and advocacy practices but can see that his peers understand what it is all about. When asked about the definition of empowerment, Garry prioritized the importance of uplifting himself and those around him. "When someone is angry, I can help people through it and help them see what's going on," Garry says, his most significant connection to helping those around him understand how to advocate for themselves. While Garry may not have seen his connections to the definitions of

empowerment and advocacy, his peers' actions and responses during such episodes demonstrate his understanding of these concepts.

After his interview, Garry submitted a portrait he drew of a beachscape that featured himself and his peers working out in fitness exercises and selling sunblock and lemonade. When asked why he drew this portrait, Garry said he wanted to be funny and show off some side jobs people can have while working at the beach. He later shared that he would like to pursue summer jobs working at the local pier or beach to enjoy the waves and sun. Garry's sense of humor and ownership of career goals exemplify his understanding of self and ability to advocate and work toward his workplace goals.

Felicia

Felicia is a 22-year-old working student who balances attending college classes in the evening and working in the retail industry. Felicia has high-functioning autism. She could express the importance of asking for help and advocating for herself in her work setting. "You must ask for help because they will not stop helping you. You have to be aware of your accommodations. You have to do it yourself." For Felicia, empowerment and advocacy are interconnected. "You have to stick up for yourself, and if you see someone having a hard time, stick up for them too."

Rebecca Blue

Rebecca Blue is a 37-year-old poet and student who values her faith and has needed to master her empowerment and advocacy skills from a young age. After being diagnosed with a brain tumor as a child, Rebecca watched the importance of developing her own "blunt" voice when battling the medical system. From speaking to doctors about care to battling insurance companies over coverage, Rebecca shares that her life would be much smaller if she did not

learn how to find her voice. Her outspoken nature has found her kicked out of different churches and paths, but it does not stop her. "I feel empowered when I stand up against those who don't see me. It is really important to stand up for yourself, no matter who you are talking to… I am not going to hold it in."

Zeyphr

Zeyphr is an intelligent 22-year-old student on the autism spectrum who shows quiet strength in college. His intellectual disability impacts his auditory processing. When asked when empowerment and advocacy are represented at the college, he shared when students need to declare or change majors. What was unexpected was his burst of negative self-talk after answering that question. In frustration, Zeyphr shared that he did not believe he had ever genuinely advocated for himself. "My environment has never given me any sort of power in my life; I have been a doormat, actually." However, when asked what advice to give to those looking for empowerment and advocacy in their lives, Zeyphr closed his interview with a response of hope. "See value within yourself and to actually stand up for yourself so you don't get told what to do or pushed into something you don't really want to do." With such a solid end to his interview, I am curious to see what connections he made to his own self-worth after this activity, for evident growth and reflection were happening during the interview process.

Zeyphr had also turned in a written work sample for his chosen piece. Zeyphr had expanded beyond classroom requirements for a writing task that allowed himself and his peers to identify career goals using the SMART goal system. For Zeyphr, this exercise had him reflect on his mental health and develop personal and academic goals. According to Zeyphr's work sample, his desire to understand his depression and mood swings will hopefully allow him to gain lasting employment and work on himself. This deep level of self-reflection is an example of self-

reflection effectiveness on an individual with intellectual disabilities who is improving his relationship with his academic skills and developing feelings of self-worth and self-empowerment.

Cain

Cain is a 35-year-old student on the autism spectrum with cerebral palsy. He also serves as a class representative for policy development at SCF. Cain has been a program participant of SCF for over ten years and a student of Coastal Vineyard College for five years. He returned to the school during the pandemic when SCF reopened its doors during the COVID-19 pandemic. "Coming back to Coastal Vineyard means I can do more!" Cain said when discussing his preference for online or in-person learning. He continued saying, "Being with my friends matters more to me. I am glad we are back!" Participating in the AWD Extending education program has provided Cain with communication tools to better engage with policymakers in his local community. He very much enjoyed discussing policy with the representatives of his local area, particularly those from the United Cerebral Palsy Foundation. Cain shared that he hopes to continue discussing politics and community policy at Coastal Vineyard College, even when his teachers prompt him to return to classroom tasks.

Cain's work example focused more on group decision activities in his Community Connections course. He shared that money management exercises helped him control course events like the Halloween Fest and the Winter Gala. By going through budgeting activities as a class, Cain felt responsible for the success of the college events. His choices' impact on the success of his peers and his campus are examples of Cain's understanding of empowerment and advocacy culture.

Cordin

Cordin is a 27-year-old student on the autism spectrum who is an active participant in the Special Olympics organization. Playing basketball for San Luis Obispo County and Santa Barbara County region, Cordin commutes over 90 miles daily to participate in Coastal Vineyard College's Extended Education programs for AWD students. Cordin's motivator is learning and being with his friends. "I like school! My friends matter here!" he said during his focus group. "I am happy here!" Cordin currently lives with his parents, who are also his advocates and coaches for the Special Olympics program in multiple regions. When asking Cordin about his goals, he restated, "I am smart! I want more for myself!" Despite his long roundtrip commute each day, he does not stop planning on building upon his education.

Davis

Davis is a 62-year-old man with intellectual disabilities that impact his memory retention and impulse control. He has been a part of SCF's program for over a decade and has been enrolled in Coastal Vineyard College's AWD Extended Education program since 2019. He and his wife are enrolled in SCF and Coastal Vineyard College's Extended Education program. Bud prioritized his relationships with God, his wife, and his job coaches as to what kept him motivated to continue advocating for himself and others. He said, "If someone is trying to help you, you can't get angry with them… I have to learn how to not get angry at myself." When frustrated, Bud found comfort in faith-based and country music during his breaks and lunch hours. Despite academic and workplace frustrations, Bud shared the importance of trying your best before asking for help. He said, "If someone bothers you, you need to go to staff right away. But if you are bothering you, you need to try and do it yourself first. Staff will be there, but you

need to try yourself." Bud's motivation to improve himself was a strong foundation in Focus Group Alpha's responses and discussion flow.

Bretta

Bretta is a 58-year-old student with intellectual disabilities and an active community member of the county's United Cerebral Palsy Foundation. Bretta has been enrolled in Coastal Vineyard College's AWD program since 2019; however, she has expressed interest in transitioning out of the courses to pursue a career with Taco Bell. Like her peers in Focus Group Alpha, Bretta's passion for seeking independence came directly from her connection to self-advocacy and empowerment. "If you're unhappy with your health and you're not making it right, you need to go the the next person and ask for help. No one will do it for you," Bretta said when sharing her thoughts on personal responsibility. "No one will work for you, so just do it!" Bretta's motivation to work while learning kept her responses focused.

Debbie

Debbie is a 71-year-old woman with several physical and mental disabilities and uses a wheelchair for transportation. She took great pride in being a grandmother figure for the SCF program. Debbie delivered a speech on the impact Coastal Vineyard College's AWD Extended Education program had on her learning and mindset during their premier winter gala in 2022. As a leader in her day program and at Coastal Vineyard College, Debbie's approach to empowerment and advocacy came with heavy amounts of optimism and understanding. She said, "You can try to do the best you can, and you keep trying and keep going, and don't ever give up. Keep going!" Despite her age and physical limitations, Debbie found that the only obstacles keeping her from coming to campus were transportation and living locations determined by her caretakers and program staff. Debbie connected to her own struggles while being optimistic

about her situation when she said, "I am going through a hard time right now. But people are helping me. And I won't stop learning!"

Debbie's work sample was a Polaroid photograph she had received from her former one-to-one job coach after completing a group activity in her Community Connections class. According to Debbie, the class had completed a community circle discussion activity, the topic of which was the meaning of their names and where they came from. While Debbie admitted to having a sad childhood, being orphaned by her mother at a young age due to her disability, she did not want to waste time being angry or hurt. She wanted to share with her friends and coach that she could find happiness despite being abandoned. This level of resilience is a clear example of the impact empowerment and self-advocacy have had on this student. Her ability to share her voice in her peers' safety has allowed Debbie to face tremendous obstacles in her past with more robust tools and resources to overcome them.

Matt

Matt is a 28-year-old participant on the autism spectrum who began their academic journey with Coastal Vineyard College in 2015 before leaving during the COVID-19 pandemic. He had initially enrolled at Coastal Vineyard College in an act of legacy since his father had attended the same school during his youth. However, due to his father's unexpected passing, Matt took steps away from his education and later returned to the Coastal Vineyard AWD program after his day program enrollment with SCF. For Matt, his foundations of empowerment focused on helping others to make his father proud. "My dad, he wanted me to be smart, and he wanted me to go to school and get my education," Matt said in his focus group. "He would want me to help others learn too, just like he did." Matt's participation in the focus group demonstrated great patience while impressing the importance of growing in advocacy skills at

your own pace. "If you ask for help, how can you do it for yourself if you don't ask for help?" His question supported his group's discussion regarding personal responsibility and self-growth when learning and speaking up for others.

Leonard

Leonard is a 34-year-old participant in AC and Coastal Vineyard's Extended Education courses. He has Down syndrome and enjoys volunteering with the community zoo and ranches. Being highly chatty during his time with Focus Group Beta, Leonard found that his connections with empowerment and advocacy were due to the strong relationships in his life. "I like my family, and my brothers, and my coaches, and my friends… they all help me… even my mom's friends… they want me to do good too!" For Leonard, success means that his friends and family are also thriving. "I want to work playing basketball or learn to type so I can talk with my family and my friends! They are awesome." For Leonard, keeping busy with work and school allows his time with the community to grow.

Wendy

Wendy is a 39-year-old female on the autism spectrum who also struggles with verbal communication. She has been enrolled in Coastal Vineyard's Extended Education program since 2015; however, she withdrew from courses during the COVID-19 pandemic and focused on transitioning back to student life with her peers at AC. Since returning to Coastal Vineyard, her language skills have continued to improve. "It feels good, it feels really good," Wendy shared when asked about advocating for herself. She finds strength and comfort in her job coaches and peers as she tackles a demanding curriculum requiring her to speak for herself.

Petra

Petra is a 29-year-old participant with Down syndrome who serves as an active ambassador for the local Explorers Club, which creates adventure opportunities and community service projects for participants with intellectual disabilities. She enjoys visiting the North County Coastal Vineyard Campus rather than attending her programs. When discussing the importance of empowerment and advocacy in Focus Group Beta, Petra found that the skills she improved on campus and within the community gave her a stronger voice. "I like to learn to use my computer to type… play basketball, and learn from my coaches… being with my friends who are like my brothers… we are all stronger together." Her responses encouraged her group mates to continue the conversation and helped Petra discover elements of empowerment and advocacy in her developing skills and community activities.

Petra had submitted a group project she had worked on with her peers that examined the conflict resolution process. According to Petra, she and her friends had a week to draw the six steps of the conflict resolution process on a poster board, and then they would work with a job coach to create a skit and practice going through a fake conflict while finding a solution. Petra enjoyed this activity because she got to work with her friends while sticking up for herself, even if it was pretend. The poster she submitted showed evidence of being drawn on by multiple participants; however, she could identify her specific contributions to her work sample. Petra said that step one was her favorite step, which was cooling off. She said steps are always necessary because people cannot fix things angrily. Petra's desire to develop meaningful and lasting solutions with her peers exemplifies the effectiveness of group advocacy and solution creation.

Sheldon

Sheldon is a 44-year-old student on the autism spectrum who is exceptionally tall compared to his classmates and peers. While Sheldon struggled with impulsively interrupting his peers and job coaches when he was excited to share information, he has been able to participate in multiple community programs, including United Cerebral Palsy, Explorers, and AC. Advocacy for Sheldon meant that his brothers also learned and practiced empowering themselves. He said, "We are like brothers. Always. And we all want to be better." The skills he learned from his wealth of programs and activities motivated Sheldon to celebrate with his peers and job coaches rather than focus on himself. "Forever getting stronger," Sheldon said when asked if he wanted to end his courses at Coastal Vineyard College.

Sheldon chose a work sample from his Community Connections course focused on collaborative discussion and typing practice. According to Sheldon, the class created a fictional story together aloud, then individually typed it using Microsoft Word to practice typing at their own pace. "I like when Lucy and Ethel (the kitties) played in the Christmas tree! They are so funny!" When asked how their story connected to empowerment and advocacy, Sheldon said that he liked that he could create his own story. His ability to work with others to develop a fun holiday story helped to develop his confidence academically and socially, thus improving his self-advocacy skills.

Zuzu

Zuzu is a 30-year-old student with multiple intellectual and verbal disabilities who returned to Coastal Vineyard College's Extended Education Community Connection Course after transitioning post-COVID-19 pandemic. Her enthusiasm for friendship and connection allows Zuzu to make meaningful friendships in her program and her Coastal Vineyard course.

Zuzu said, "Empower me it!" when asked how she would define advocacy. Zuzu presented

synonymous relationships between empowerment and advocacy when asked to define the terms

during the Focus Group Beta discussion.

Table 3

Participants

Participant	Age	Gender	AWD Courses Enrolled	Individual Interview/Focus Group	Quote
Fancy	23	Female	Community Connections	Individual Interview	"You can overcome something you are scared to do."
Martin	63	Male	Community Connections, Workplace 101	Individual Interview	"Make your own choices in life, and gain the respect needed to make your own choices."
Quiana	42	Female	Community Connections, Problem Management	Individual Interview	"[Empowerment] makes me a better person… help people get the voice when they are in trouble, or scared.. or can't."
Savanah	33	Female	Workplace 101, Problem Management, Internship	Individual Interview	"If I need help, I can ask for help and not be scared to ask for help"
Jake	36	Male	Community Connections	Individual Interview	"If they needed help, they can call me or text me, or just if they wanted help"
Garry	21	Male	Workplace 101, Problem Management	Individual Interview	"Speak up against issues in your life"

Felicia	22	Female	Community Connections	Individual Interview	"Working to improve yourself so you can make your life and other lives better"
Rebecca Blue	37	Female	Community Connections	Individual Interview	"It's really important to stand up for yourself, no matter who you are talking to… I am like a child; I am very blunt… it's important to stand up for yourself and say No!... I am not going to hold it in"
Zeyphr	22	Male	Workplace 101	Individual Interview	"See value in yourself, and like, actually stand up for yourself"
Cain	35	Male	Community Connections, Problem Management	Focus Group Alpha	"… not giving up, not letting anyone stop you from trying your hardest."
Cordin	27	Male	Community Connections, Workplace 101	Focus Group Alpha	"You need to calm down, ask for help, and keep coming to class."
Davis	62	Male	Community Connections	Focus Group Alpha	"Life is constantly on a roll, and you must remember who you are and not let yourself doubt who you are."
Bretta	58	Female	Workplace 101	Focus Group Alpha	"If you're unhappy with your health and

					you're not making it right, you need to go the the next person and ask for help. No one will do it for you."
Debbie	71	Female	Community Connections, Problem Management	Focus Group Alpha	"It doesn't matter how slow you are. You're here working on yourself. That's what matters."
Matt	28	Male	Workplace 101	Focus Group Alpha	"You need to try it yourself before you can ask for help."
Leonard	34	Male	Community Connections	Focus Group Beta	"I like my family, and my brothers, and my coaches, and my friends… they all help me… even my mom's friends… they want me to do good too!"
Wendy	39	Female	Community Connections	Focus Group Beta	"It feels good, it feels really good."
Petra	29	Female	Community Connections	Focus Group Beta	"… we are all stronger together."
Sheldon	44	Male	Community Connections	Focus Group Beta	"We are like brothers. Always. And we all want to be better."
Zuzu	30	Female	Community Connections	Focus Group Beta	"Empower me it!"

Table 4

Work Samples

Participant	Work Sample Submission	Empowerment and Advocacy Connection
Martin	Gingerbread Painting	Empowerment
Fancy	Gala 2022 Internship Speech	Verbal Advocacy
Quiana	Spring 2023 Role Models Motivation Speech	Verbal Advocacy
Cain	Money Management Group Activities	Collaborative Empowerment
Savanah	AWD Internship	Empowerment
Garry	Beachscape Humor Portrait	Workplace Skills
Sheldon	Christmas Tree Cat Story	Collaboration and Typing
Zeyphr	SMART Goal Self-Reflection	Self-Reflection
Petra	Conflict Resolution Poster	Group Advocacy and Teamwork
Debbie	Community Circle Polaroid	Empowerment

Results

After thorough analysis and synthesis of the data, the results of this study answer the questions provided at the beginning of this study. The responses from nine individual interviews, two separate focus groups, and ten work sample submissions have provided the necessary data to categorize and connect to the effectiveness of empowerment theory and advocacy culture. While there was a limited return of work sample submissions from all 20 participants, submitted samples included unexpected participants' connections and insights for their connections to empowerment and advocacy within their daily lives.

Advocacy is Identified by Helping Others First Before Self

In nearly all the interviews and focus group data, when participants were asked to give an example of advocacy and empowerment, their priority was to advocate for someone else rather than to advocate for themselves. For Garry, his approach leveraged the effectiveness of utilizing empowerment for others when you cannot help yourself. He said:

… you may not be able to use empowerment to uplift yourself, but you may be able to

look up to strangers and friends… if you are feeling down, they can use empowerment

and advocate to lift you up… an effective kindness…

When reviewing the answers to questions four and five of the interviews and focus

groups, participants prioritized the importance of speaking up for others in the face of bullying or

out in the community. They felt their voice was most powerful through standing up in the face of

injustice. Matt referenced the ability to conquer bullying as his form of advocacy in Focus Group

Alpha when he said, "… if you are in trouble and say like you got to do something for yourself…

how can you advocate for anyone else if you can't advocate for yourself?" That response shifted

the discussion for Focus Group Alpha to examine how empowerment and advocacy impact all of

their perspectives.

When identifying the differences between student-created definitions of empowerment

and advocacy, some participants struggled to make individual connections with the concepts but

were quick to see them in their peers and community. In Focus Group Beta, for example,

Leonard identified advocates through his parents, neighbors, and coaches who have helped him

grow throughout his life. Through his participation in the focus group, Leonard's references to at

least nine positive figures in his life helped develop a group culture of gratitude and generous

feedback during the group discussions.

Empowerment is an Action, Not a Feeling

Unlike the traditional definition of empowerment, the data provided a variation of the

definition closely connected to actions and advocacy rather than feelings of personal growth or

progress. In Focus Group Beta, when asked to define empowerment, the participants focused on

the actions of their peers and job coaches rather than identifying areas of personal growth. In

Zeyphr's interview, he answered that "[Empowerment] is to uplift or to make better," yet when asked when he felt empowered, he could not make an individual connection. When reviewing the painting provided by Martin, his connections toward empowerment focus more on the violent effectiveness of voice through action rather than his role in empowerment. Fancy, Savanah, and Quiana each submitted speeches as their form of work samples that are examples of empowerment and advocacy. By practicing with intention toward messages of self-growth and progress, each participant can refine their voice and make lasting impacts on their academic journey. The data shared shows that empowerment is seen rather than individually manifested.

Medical Traumas Produce Strong Advocates

Participants who have experienced adversities with their disabilities manifesting into needing medical intervention contributed an unforeseen insight into the complexities of advocacy. Three of the individual interviews shared harrowing experiences within the medical environment that required them to share ways they had to speak for themselves in the face of intimidating counterparts, such as doctors, specialists, and insurance agencies. For Quiana, advocating for herself involved matters as serious as life and death. "They wanted me on a feeding tube. I have seen what happens when that happens. It doesn't happen to me," she said during her interview.

Advocacy becomes more than just a skill to learn in class; it is essential for survival. Fancy and Rebecca Blue, each experiencing the effects of Traumatic Brain Injury, shared feedback that prioritized the understanding of their disabilities and knowing the physical manifestations of their procedures. Rebecca Blue said:

> It's important to stand up for yourself, no matter who you are talking to… I am like a
>
> child, and am often blunt... I need to know what is happening to my body, or I'm not

gonna hold it in.

By being aware of the impact of medical procedures and therapies, each has a more intimate knowledge of their needs and how they must be accommodated within their communities, jobs, and academic settings. Table 5 shows the varying themes and subthemes identified through the data collection process, emphasizing the points made by the participants. While the relationship between advocacy and empowerment is seen throughout the interviews and focus groups, trends emerged that differentiated between the action and feeling of empowerment and the differences between supporting oneself and others. Those who had overcome medical adversity were able to share the need to change and evolve in their advocacy and self-advocacy practices to ensure proper and consistent medical care and representation. Those evolutions in skill development are examples of their strong connections to empowerment.

Table 5

Themes & Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme
Advocacy is Identified by Helping Others First Before Self	Believe in Yourself to Help Others
Empowerment is an Action, Not a Feeling	Uplift
Medical Traumas Produce Strong Advocates	Stand Up For Yourself in all Arenas

Outlier Data and Findings

Only a few outliers were identified in the data synthesis process when reviewing the individual interview data. These outliers were identified through the participants' non-traditional associations with empowerment and advocacy and their role in engaging with these concepts. Of

the nine individual interviews and two focus groups, only three participant content findings were outside the normed data set.

Age is a Number

Two of the participants are aged outliers, each in their sixties and seventies. Coastal Vineyard College's Extended Education program is fortunate to offer courses in both Senior Citizen and AWD instruction. While these two participants are in the AWD courses, they would also qualify to enroll in Emeritus instruction through the community college extended education course offerings. The ages of these participants did not impact the synthesis and categorization of the data collection and analysis process.

Political Associations and Impact

When asked to define empowerment and advocacy, one participant connected these concepts to historical representations and definitions rather than definitions of the concepts themselves. Jake defined empowerment by the existence of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and defined advocacy as Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* speech. Rather than providing his definition of these terms, Sully makes societal connections to these terms as his definitions and examples.

"No, Not Me."

Two interviewees could not describe how empowerment and advocacy are used daily. Garry was not able to see empowerment and advocacy for himself, but he has seen the impact of these concepts on his peers and within his community. For Zeyphr, his struggles with his self-identity limit his connection to empowerment and advocacy culture. "I don't think I've ever had any sort of power in my life or courage to stand up for myself at all. I've always just, you know, been just, you know, a doormat for everybody" he says during his interview. When following up

about advice he would offer someone else, Zeyphr quickly shifted his motivation in the hopes that others would have the courage to speak out for themselves.

<div align="center">

Research Question Responses

</div>

This section answers the research questions proposed at the beginning of this study. The experiences and perspectives of the AWD population in higher education settings were discussed to determine if empowerment and advocacy can provide short-term and long-term success for this sub-population of students. Participant engagement and work sample submissions answer one central research question and three sub-questions.

Central Research Question

How do adults with disabilities describe the short-term and long-term effects of programs in higher education that implement empowerment and advocacy culture? Participants shared an optimistically realistic perspective toward the future, prioritizing growth and progress. When defining empowerment, each participant in Focus Group Alpha mentioned the importance of standing up for themselves and treating others respectfully. However, Cain sparked the conversation among the group by stating, "… not giving up, not letting anyone stop you from trying your hardest." For Bud, empowerment changes for him each day. "Life is constantly on a roll, and you must remember who you are and not let yourself doubt who you are," Debbie answered in Focus Group Alpha:

> I told them it doesn't matter how slow you are, you just keep trying, and keep trying, and the more you do, the more you grow; advocate for yourself so that you can improve your spirit… be prepared for work and listen to your peers so that you can be stronger in your own voice.

In the individual interviews, participants identified the lasting relationship between empowerment and advocacy skills that provides the potential for more opportunities in their daily lives. Participants shared a distinct mutual relationship between these concepts when stating, "A way to feel empowered is by standing up for yourself" and "When I advocate for others, I feel empowered." The experiences shared in Fancy and Savanah's work samples of gala speeches and internship participation demonstrate positive outcomes after engaging in higher education courses founded with empowerment and advocacy principles. The shared understanding of slow and intentional progress helps identify short-term and long-term effects empowerment and advocacy culture have within higher education.

Sub-Question One

How do adults with intellectual disabilities define empowerment and advocacy after participating in higher education courses? Through the individual interviews, empowerment shared common terminology such as "the ability to uplift or improve yourself," "stand up for yourself," and "to motivate others." Advocacy did not make any direct connections to empowerment culture. However, it instead prioritized the importance of speaking up for oneself and others. Focus Group Beta defined empowerment as "standing up for yourself." When asked how they would define advocacy, Sheldon said, "Our voices! It's when we are forming our voices!" The speakers who led the focus group were Leonard and Petra, who each shared how job coaches, going to college, and family members help them continue working on themselves and speaking about issues and activities they want to do. Quiana's work sample of her role model speech proves that she can locate advocates in her life and what traits she wants to emulate for herself. Most advocacy definitions included personal connections to role models and figures in the participants' lives that allow them to advocate for themselves.

Sub-Question Two

How do adults with intellectual disabilities connect empowerment and advocacy theory

elements into their definitions of success and happiness? Success, as defined by these

participants, was identified through the importance of standing up for one another and living

lives that worked toward personal goals and achievements. For Leonard, a participant in Focus

Group Beta, his relationships with his family and friends help him better connect to

empowerment and advocacy culture. "They make me better," he shared in his discussion... As

Coastal Vineyard Students, the group shared that they like working on their typing skills and that

those activities make them feel like they have a stronger voice. Outside of class, Focus Group

Beta shared that they utilize empowerment and advocacy skills when working with Special

Olympics and when they work on jobs within the Atascadero community. Their desire to be

together and help one another be happy with their friends is one of the most important reasons

they advocate for the program. "We are like brothers. Always. And we all want to be better,"

Sheldon stated in his group response. Based on his individual interview and work sample,

Martin's vision of success hopes to be seen in positive participant-centered change at his day

program. He says:

> I want to stand up for myself and my friends, even if that means it's against SCF. I know
>
> we have rights… We can make better choices and speak up for ourselves because there
>
> are a lot that don't at SCF and are afraid to say anything.
>
> Though their fight is fresh in their minds at the time of their interviews, these participants

know that they need to keep moving forward to achieve success." This population will want to

move forward together to embrace advocacy and empowerment practices in such a devoted

community.

Sub-Question Three

How do adults with intellectual disabilities determine their growth and progress within higher education programs when actively utilizing empowerment and advocacy cultural norms? Based on interview and focus group responses, participants could identify growth and progress by highlighting tasks or activities they had completed in the classroom. For Focus Group Alpha, speeches within the school and engagement with CNN 10 news provided an in-class example demonstrating how they are growing as students and as a class. Fancy used her cumulative speech at the Winter Gala of 2022 to share how she changed as a student and employee after completing her AWD internship at Coastal Vineyard College. "I worked hard, and I know the students wanted to be like that too," she shared when submitting her speech for her work sample. When asked what advice to give their friends and peers about using advocacy and empowerment in their daily lives, Cordin said, "You need to calm down, ask for help, and keep coming to class." Debbie said, "It doesn't matter how slow you are. You're here working on yourself. That's what matters." Each question had the group eager to answer, and they worked together to share perspectives, even when they disagreed. Ultimately, Focus Group Alpha found an outstanding balance between independence and their fundamental need to stand up for others and ask for help. Having landmark assignments or tasks allows students in higher education to connect with their progress and transition of topics within the higher education framework.

Summary

The effectiveness and impact of empowerment and advocacy practices within higher education as determined by adult students with intellectual disabilities have been assessed through the participation of in-person research practices. Twenty students volunteered to participate in this research study and were randomly assigned to individual interviews or one of

two focus groups. Each of the 20 participants was provided a 48-hour opportunity to submit work samples that they believed connected to empowerment and advocacy culture after participation in their interview or focus group. The findings discovered from this process answered the central research question and the three subsequent research questions that followed.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this case study was to understand the impact that advocacy and empowerment practices have on the intellectual disabilities community in academic and social constructs within community colleges and disability programs on the West Coast of California. Through in-person interviews, focus group discussion data collection, and work samples, the participants identified the positive effects empowerment and advocacy have had within higher education and their daily lives. The concluding chapter includes the interpretation of findings, implications for policy and practice, theoretical and methodological implications, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

Discussion

The wealth of information from the data during this research process has tremendously opened the pathway of possibilities in higher education and disability rights research. Not only are adults with intellectual disabilities able to speak for themselves in critical societal discussions, but the recognition of their eager willingness to participate in these discussions is too important to ignore. Voices of people with disabilities can be shared through multiple forms of expression. Those views need to be recognized for meaningful and relevant policies and practices that serve this population to be developed. This section will explore thematic findings and implications for further policy development and address potential limitations and delimitations from the research.

Summary of Thematic Findings

In this section, the prioritization of participation connection to empowerment and advocacy culture and the differences in insights provided between focus groups and individual

interviews leave much to be explored within this population in higher education environments. Findings from the data demonstrate a significant level of depth in participant responses with room for future research to explore this gap with a newly active sub-population. The awareness and engagement from these participants show that, while there is a great deal to celebrate with current academic and community offerings, there is also room for growth to occur that meets more lasting participant engagement and growth.

Interpretation of Findings

This case study provided multiple unforeseen perspectives in the research synthesis process. Participants shared abundantly more about themselves and their connections to the world they live in beyond the empowerment and advocacy framework being assessed. While prior research has proven that the opportunity to provide this level of higher education research to this population was possible, the contributions from the individual interviews and focus groups opened more doors for a broader future for these participants. This section will explore examples of the depth of the responses provided, the differences between advocacy and self-advocacy in participant engagement, and the critical role job coaches and role models have on this academic community.

Greater Depth Than Initially Expected

The depth of understanding of empowerment and advocacy culture was far greater than initially anticipated. Empowerment theory focuses on developing voice and actions through social engagement and transformation (Chao, 2021). This is seen through each of the individual interviews, focus group discussions, and work samples. The dependent relationship between empowerment and advocacy is seen through student responses and their desire to help improve the realities of their peers before themselves. For example, through the individual interviews, the

ownership of medical limitations and the prioritization of accommodation advocacy were areas I was not prepared to see. Based on prior literature, this population was represented by doctors, advocates, and disability rights groups (Byrne et al., 2021; Engeland et al., 2020; Lafitte et al., 2019). However, participants who were aware of their disabilities and medical needs shared the importance of understanding what was happening in their bodies and how they needed to be able to communicate issues with others if something was wrong. That form of advocacy provided awareness in the focus groups and shifted the tone of the responses. While I was prepared for the overall acceptance of empowerment and advocacy culture, the depth of their understanding and connections to these practices was more profound than I had initially assumed.

Self-Advocates are the Change

The relationships between participants, their care providers, and their schooling became a common theme among answer submissions. Those with positive connections felt freer to share their goals and dreams in the interviews and focus groups. However, those who had seen more adversity and frustration struggled with setting goals for themselves and were quick to share that they wanted to be a part of the policy and rule-making process. Through Martin's submission of the violent gingerbread man and his interview, he does not want to see his desire for radical change ignored or dismissed with sweetness and false promises. Focus Groups Alpha and Beta are aware of their impacts within their community organizations, such as Special Olympics and Explorer Club, and take pride in wanting to create a culture that helps others work toward goals and positive changes. Based on the data, the desire to engage in higher-level discussions is wanting, and their voices will continue to have a lasting impact on policy development for academic and community efforts.

From Those Who See Them

One perspective not accounted for in the original study was the perspective of the participants' job coaches and support staff. Due to the availability of the participants, the majority of participants were escorted by job coaches from SCF or AC to Coastal Vineyard College due to program policy. Participants who attended their research task had the choice to have the job coach within the room, but the coach had to be silent and not provide any verbal or non-verbal prompting during the interview or focus group process. What was fascinating was the feedback provided by the coaches themselves after they observed the interviews and focus groups. Many coaches were unprepared for the participants' engagement and commitment to the study. During their day-to-day interactions, their conversations do not often become as deep as what the interview questions ask. One coach in particular, who was reasonably new to entering the disabilities field, did not realize the complexity of their client's dreams and conversations because they had not experienced such open discussion with them. Their prior training and experience with their clients did not prepare them for the higher-level advocacy skills they witnessed from their lowest-functioning clients who participated in the higher education partnerships. The perspective gained after observing the interviews and focused groups provided a refreshed perspective to the job coaches and an increased engagement standard for the participants within their day programs. Participants With such tangible feedback, current assumptions and expectations of job coaches, paraeducators, and program developers of disabilities programs should be explored in future research studies to determine how empowerment and advocacy culture can assist in raising and correcting expectations for their clients.

Implications for Policy and Practice

With the passing of the ADA in July of 1990, there have been many successes and obstacles for the disabled community (Lambrecht et al., 2020). Based on the data provided by this research study, the voices and presence of the intellectually disabled community are prepared to be involved in developing policies and practices that directly impact their lives in higher education and community environments when practices are founded on the principles of advocacy and empowerment. As technology and digital presences continue to evolve, colleges and day programs must provide scaffolded support to their participants that encourages independence and functional transitions within their environments. The following section explores this study's potential effects on the implications of policies and practice development in the disabled community.

Implications for Policy

The development and implementation of policies about individuals with disabilities have transformed since the Civil Rights Movement and the consequent creation of the Americans with Disabilities Act. However, as technology, social media, and digital presence continue to outpace the development and implementation of local, federal, and state laws, the lack of representation from the voices of disabled constituents is glaringly apparent. This research study proves that adults with intellectual disabilities know that their voice matters and that standing up for themselves and others is critical to change and progress. College campuses, like Coastal Vineyard College, should provide opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities to have roles in campus leadership and local community advocacy. Depending on the success of these engagements, these participants could hold trainings for teachers, program staff, and other community members to share their perspectives, experiences, and collective objectives for their

own goals and interests. With this case study demonstrating their ability to connect and apply these higher-level concepts to their daily lives, it is clear that lawmakers need to include disabled adults in law and policy creation rather than relying on current representative forms of policy contribution.

Implications for Practice

This research study proves the importance of empowerment and advocacy principles in higher education curricula for students with intellectual disabilities. While the desire to share these practices among vast content areas may be tempting, program developers must regularly assess student engagement and retention to ensure these concepts are being integrated correctly and effectively. Professors, instructors, administrators, job coaches, and disability program directors who actively reflect in their teaching practices can more astutely integrate these phenomena within their curriculum framework. These reflections need to be offered regularly through individual and institutional professional developments to promote the shared values of high expectations and beliefs in student progress each semester. Educators can share successful practices among their peers and collegiate administrators to help reinforce the development of effective and culturally responsive instructors. Employed representatives from disability partnerships, such as job coaches and program managers, should prioritize attending to these professional developments offered by their partnering colleges to secure shared terminology and expectations and help students continue improving academically and behaviorally. Disability partnerships need to prioritize funding consistent and engaging training for their job coaches and program managers to ensure their practices are culturally relevant, technologically up-to-date, and meaningful for their organizations' growth. Prioritizing the goal of student-led practices can ensure that academic programs remain person-centered and grounded in empowerment

principles.

Empirical and Theoretical Implications

The foundations of this study are based on the effectiveness of intergroup contact theory and empowerment theory. Intergroup contact theory is seen through analyzing the data provided by this subpopulation of Coastal Vineyard College's extended education program. Participant data supports the definition of empowerment and advocacy and how their actions and perspectives impact the growth of their entire community. The following section explores the theoretical and empirical implications that this study has on current research and the development of educational and social constructivism,

Empirical Implications

This study shifts the focus from prior research due to the importance of person-centered representation. Efforts made in K-12 schools to develop protocols for student-led IEP meetings have been a good step in this direction (Gilson & Biggs, 2023). However, regarding higher education and community skills, the overwhelming majority of data comes from third-party representation rather than from the participants themselves (Tenorio et al., 2021). Previous studies have examined policies and program developments based on the feedback and perspectives of academic and program administrators, disability advocates, parents and guardians of adults with disabilities, and third-party researchers who have taken quantitative approaches to explain trends in curriculum and participation (Diallo et al., 2021; Gobec et al., 2022). What makes this study critical to the current field of academic research is the content provided directly by the participant rather than a representative data entry point. This research allowed participants to contribute freely to an interview or focus group format with minimal prompting, thus providing authentic answers to questions that directly pertain to their realities and what they want

for the world around them. This study establishes that this subpopulation of students cannot only engage in higher education academic research but also provide a necessary perspective for programs and policies to appropriately reflect the needs and ambitions of this group of students. Allowing these voices to engage in qualitative case study research opens the doors for countless fields of study to assess their policies and program design and their effectiveness in capturing retention and engagement.

Theoretical Implications

Intergroup contact theory is the primary theory that serves as a foundation for this research study. Intergroup contact theory, created by Gordon Allport, prioritizes embracing or rejecting phenomena or community values based on the cultural opinions of the subgroups within a particular population (Bagci et al., 2018a; Di Bernardo et al., 2021). This theory is proven through the evidence provided by Focus Group Alpha and Focus Group Beta. The increased content provided in later questions asked during Focus Group Alpha demonstrates how the subpopulations became more comfortable sharing their connections to empowerment and advocacy culture as their peers shared their perspectives and beliefs among the group. An observed difference between the individual interviews and the focus groups was that the participants fueled one another once they began giving answers to the questions. In the focus groups, the participants' offerings developed a dialogue that often went in a direction beyond what was initially asked from the research questions. The individual interview participants became more forthcoming with information once they got into the rhythm of answering the questions verbally, much like the focus groups. Still, they did not have the presence of their peers to influence their answers since they were one-on-one with the researcher. For Focus Group Beta, the role of their families, teachers, and care providers strongly motivated the comfortability

of information shared within the focus group. The experiences and perspectives gained were strongly reinforced by their community as well as the familiar relationships formed among Focus Group Beta. Community programs such as Explorer Club, Special Olympics, and United Cerebral Palsy Foundation were referenced by the participants as activities where they felt their voice mattered and that they made a difference. Furthermore, both focus groups shared unique perspectives regarding how their family and friends think about empowerment and advocacy and shared more information in the study depending on the feedback provided by the group.

Empowerment theory focuses on the growth and progress of active change for oneself, others, and communities, utilizing advocacy and community engagement practices (Castaneda et al., 2019). The individual interviews deeply explored Connections to this theory as participants reflected on their academic and social histories. The majority of interviewees understood the relationship between empowerment and advocacy. Respondents found it more empowering to stand up for someone else rather than oneself. These responses prove the effectiveness of empowerment theory by demonstrating the level of academic and social growth of disabled persons when they utilize these principles. The data found in this research also addresses a gap in current literature that does not directly represent disabled persons in higher education and community efforts. Similar to Digman's (2021) study, these participants were able to share their experiences from traumatic social and medical events. As more research is developed to improve higher education and community programs, direct data collection from adults with intellectual disabilities can correct the present gap in efficacy. These direct accounts from adults with intellectual disabilities prove the effectiveness of empowerment theory.

Limitations and Delimitations

In the development of this qualitative case study, limitations and delimitations need to be addressed in order to be transparent about research development and data collection practices. With the coastal region of California prioritizing collaborative partnerships between community colleges and disability partnerships, communication and frequent repetition are essential to program development and participant assessment. Future studies will find that environmental analysis is essential to program assessment and data collection. The following section explores the unforeseen limitations and intentionally placed delimitations built into this research study.

Limitations

The participation population was capped at 20 participants among the individual interviews and focus groups. While this helped to provide functional analysis for this study, a few potential participants were not randomly chosen as one of the 20 to participate. Participants also found themselves quiet or withdrawn at the beginning of the interviews but found themselves answering abundantly as they became comfortable with the interview and small group discussion dialogue. It was important for the researcher to return to unanswered questions once the participants became comfortable because participant confidence increased with the time and rhythm of the interview process.

Another limitation manifested through this process was the work samples participants wanted to provide. For example, if they had previously participated in a speech, the participants did not have the speech materials but rather a photograph of the event, video recordings of their speeches, and reflections on that experience. Expanding work sample data would be beneficial in future studies.

Delimitations

The desire to participate in this research study was high. Within four days of sharing this study among all the Adults with Disabilities Continuing Education Classes, all 20 slots were filled and ready for random selection. This capped method allowed for the scheduling and executing interviews and focus group activities. Another structure presented in this data collection process was the five-minute reflection of the interview questions before being recorded in the interview and focus groups. The possession and reflection of the questions before being asked allowed participants to focus on the tasks of being a research participant and think about how they would like to answer the questions. Telling the participants that they had thirty minutes to respond made the participants respond faster rather than slower.

Recommendations for Future Research

Considering the study's findings, many pathways can be explored in future research. One of the most critical aspects discovered from this research is the content directly provided by adults with intellectual disabilities rather than those offered by their parents, advocacy partners, and/or disability organizations. As academic and employability programs work to improve their curriculum and policy development, interview and focus group research that examines the relationships between adults with intellectual disabilities and employability, community engagement, and social wellness can help in the development of courses that ensure participant investment and skill retention. Studies that delve into the role empowerment and advocacy practices have in higher education environments and disability organizations can determine what professional development courses and coaching practices can help improve struggling and stagnant programs, boost enrollments, reduce employee turnover, and expand community outreach. Furthermore, future research should analyze the relationship between person-centered

empowerment and advocacy policies and the increased utilization of technology in learning, social, digital, and employability environments.

Conclusion

This qualitative case study was designed to address the gap in current literature and research that shows the lack of presence of voices and perspectives of adults with intellectual disabilities in higher education settings. Utilizing tools and resources gained from empowerment and advocacy practices, 20 participants engaged in individual interviews, one of two focus groups, and submitted work samples that connected their views of empowerment and advocacy gained from higher education courses. This case study gives perspectives and opinions directly from someone with intellectual disabilities rather than a third-party representative, such as a parent, teacher, or disability rights organization. The breakthroughs gained from their contributions promote an increased understanding of empowerment and advocacy principles and open doors to policy and curriculum design that are culturally relevant to this subpopulation of students in community college settings. Opportunities to expand this research into employability, social wellness, and program partnerships are limitless, thanks to the abundant data provided in this pioneer research study.

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Appendix A

Institutional Review Board Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

October 19, 2023

Rachel Kovach
Christian Raby

Re: IRB Approval - IRB-FY22-23-1065 Empowerment and Advocacy Culture within Higher Education for Adults with Intellectual Disabilities: A Qualitative Case Study

Dear Rachel Kovach, Christian Raby,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB). This approval is extended to you for one year from the following date: October 19, 2023. If you need to make changes to the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit a modification to the IRB. Modifications can be completed through your Cayuse IRB account.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):
7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. (NOTE: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.)

For a PDF of your approval letter, click on your study number in the My Studies card on your Cayuse dashboard. Next, click the Submissions bar beside the Study Details bar on the Study Details page. Finally, click Initial under Submission Type and choose the Letters tab toward the bottom of the Submission Details page. Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found on the same page under the Attachments tab. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration. Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

Appendix B

Site Permission Request

20th October, 2023

████████████████
███████████████████
███████████████
███████████████

Dear ███████,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The title of my research project is Empowerment and Advocacy Culture within Higher Education for Adults with Intellectual Disabilities. My research aims to determine the short-term and long-term impact empowerment, and advocacy practice have on students and employees with intellectual disabilities. In addition, this study will help determine the effectiveness of empowerment and advocacy practices within academic and employability environments that serve persons with intellectual disabilities.

I am requesting your permission to conduct my research at a Coastal Vineyard College Classroom and interview students currently participating in the Coastal Vineyard College Adults with Disabilities Continuing Education program. The data collected from interviews and focus groups will be used to determine the effectiveness empowerment and advocacy have on adults with intellectual disabilities. Participants will be presented with informed consent information before participating. Participating in this study is entirely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, respond by email to ███████████████████. A permission letter document is attached for your convenience.

Sincerely,

Rachel R Kovach
Doctoral Candidate
Liberty University

Appendix C

Site Permission Response

20th October, 2023

Rachel R Kovach
Doctoral Candidate
Liberty University
███████████████

Dear Rachel R Kovach:

After a careful review of your research proposal entitled Empowerment and Advocacy Culture within Higher Education for Adults with Intellectual Disabilities, I have decided to grant you permission to conduct my research in a Coastal Vineyard College Classroom and interview students who currently participate in the Coastal Vineyard College Continuing Education Adults with Disabilities programs.

Check the following boxes, as applicable:

☒ I will provide our membership list to Rachel R Kovach, and Rachel R Kovach may use the list to contact our members to invite them to participate in her research study.

☐ I grant permission for Rachel R Kovach to contact Coastal Vineyard College Participants to invite them to participate in her research study.

☐ I will not provide potential participant information to Rachel R Kovach, but we agree to deliver her study information to potential participant guardians and care providers on her behalf.

☒ I request a copy of the results upon study completion and publication.

Sincerely,

███████

████████████████████████

███████████████

Appendix D

Research Participants Needed

EMPOWERMENT AND ADVOCACY CULTURE WITHIN HIGHER EDUCATION FOR ADULTS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

- Are you 18 years of age or older?
- Do you have an intellectual disability and participate in higher education programs to improve your academic, community, and employability skills?

If you answered **yes** to these questions, you may be eligible to participate in an academic research study.

This research study aims to see how empowerment and advocacy culture impact adult learners with intellectual disabilities in higher education environments through interviews and small-group data collection. The first twenty participants will participate in individual interviews or one of two focus groups to answer seven questions about how empowerment and advocacy practices impact learning skills, community engagement, and relationship development. Interviews and focus groups will be held within two weeks, and participants can submit a work sample created after participation in the higher education program.

The study is being conducted at Coastal Vineyard College North County Campus.

Rachel R Kovach, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.
Please get in touch with Rachel R Kovach **at** █████ **or** █████ **for more information**

Liberty University IRB – █████

Appendix E

Consent

Title of the Project: Empowerment and Advocacy Culture within Higher Education for Adults with Intellectual Disabilities: A Qualitative Case Study

Principal Investigator: Rachel R Kovach, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, Organizational Leadership Department Liberty University

Invitation to be part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 18 years of age or older, a community college student who has completed at least two semesters of adults with disability courses, and a participant in community employability programs. Participants must be on the Autism Spectrum and/or be diagnosed with Down Syndrome, ADHD, Williams Disorder, Cerebral Palsy, Stuttering, Fragile X, Tourettes, Epilepsy, Mild to Moderate Cognitive Impairment, Parkinson's, Multiple Sclerosis or Traumatic Brain Injury?

Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about, and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to determine the impact empowerment and advocacy practice have on students and employees with intellectual disabilities. In addition, this study will help determine the effectiveness of empowerment and advocacy practices within academic and employability environments that serve persons with intellectual disabilities.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Either Participants can elect to engage in an individual seven-question interview regarding their opinions on empowerment, advocacy, and higher education (ex., College and seminars), programs. This interview will be audio- and video-recorded and transcribed for research collection. The discussion should take between 45 and 60 minutes and can conclude whenever the participant needs a break. Participants will have an opportunity to review their interview transcripts for accuracy.
2. Participants can elect to engage in a focus group of 5-7 peers participating in higher education programs serving adults with intellectual disabilities. They will answer seven questions in a circular discussion format that is audio- and video-recorded and transcribed for research collection. The focus group is prepared to take 60 to 90 minutes, depending

on group engagement in the discussion task, and can conclude at any time the participants need a break. All break times will be recorded for research purposes. Participants will have an opportunity to review their focus group transcripts for accuracy.

3. All Participants may share an item, coursework task, or graded activity that they believe illustrates the effects of empowerment and advocacy on their academic practices. This will be submitted within 48 hours of completing your interview or focus group.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect a direct benefit from participating in this study.

Benefits to society include the data-supported evidence demonstrating the powerful effects of empowerment and advocacy culture within higher education programs that directly engage with people with intellectual disabilities. This study will also provide a rare opportunity for people with disabilities to share their voices and experiences without the mandatory participation and presence of advocates and family members to speak for them.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that could identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher and members of the dissertation committee will have access to them.

- Participant responses in individual interviews and focus groups will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. However, while discouraged, other focus group members may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.
- Data collected from you may be used in future research studies or shared with other researchers. If data collected from you is reused or shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed beforehand.
- Transcription Data and work sample submissions will be stored in a locked filing cabinet after being scanned and uploaded to a password-locked computer. After five years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all documentation will be shredded at a professional facility.
- Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer/etc. For five years participants have reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of the transcripts and then erased them. The researcher and dissertation committee members will have access to these recordings.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Is the researcher in a position of authority over participants, or does the researcher have a financial conflict of interest?

The researcher serves as an instructor at Cuesta College. To limit potential or perceived conflicts, a research assistant will ensure that all data is stripped of identifiers before the researcher receives it. This disclosure lets you decide if this relationship will affect your willingness to participate in this study. No action will be taken against an individual based on his or her decision to participate or not participate in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Rachel R Kovach. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at ███████████. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Cristian Raby, at ███████████.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, ███████████████████████████████; our phone number is ████████, and our email address is ██████████.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy of the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record and video-record as part of my participation in this study.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature & Date

Legally Authorized Representative Permission

By signing this document, you agree to the person below participating in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy of the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I agree that the person named below should take part in this study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record, video-record, or photograph the person named below as part of their participation in this study.

_____

Printed Subject Name

_____
Printed LAR Name and Relationship to Subject

_____
LAR Signature   Date