OPT4COLLEGE:

Learning Together to Improve Transition for Youth with Disabilities and Special Health Care Needs

Enrollment in postsecondary education is a primary transition goal of many youth with disabilities, special health care needs, or both (hereafter referred to as YWD and/or SHCN). Unfortunately, research has indicated that these youth remain less likely than those in the general population to enroll in postsecondary education.[1] YWD and/or SHCN from traditionally underserved communities (such as ethnic, racial, and linguistic minorities) experience double jeopardy in their attempts to enter the world of postsecondary education. While there are excellent college preparation programs designed to help youth from ethnic, racial, and linguistic minority and low-income backgrounds enter postsecondary education,[2] few programs make special accommodations for youth who have significant disabilities in addition to these other risk factors.[3] Through funding from the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR), the Opening Doors Project designed OPT4College to address the specific situations of youth with disabilities from traditionally underserved communities.

OPT4College is an online tool that was co-designed by youth with disabilities employed as staff on the project (see Rosen-Reynoso, et al,[4] for a full description of the youth-based participatory approach). This tool assists youth with disabilities from traditionally underserved communities in entering into the educational transition process. It can be used to complement any of the services YWD and/or SHCN may already receive through their schools. The current study was a feasibility assessment of the use of the OPT4College tool. We were interested in knowing the answers to two questions in particular: (1) How would OPT4College work in the real-time real-world context?; and, (2) How would the experience of using the tool be evaluated by the participants? Although full quantitative results generated from this study are beyond the scope of this article, we present a brief description of OPT4College, characteristics of the students engaged in the study, and their assessments of the usefulness of the online curriculum in two specific areas: self-advocacy, and financing of college education.

OPT4COLLEGE

OPT4College consists of six online lessons with topics that include: deciding which college is the best choice for a student; preparing for SATs and ACTs; filling out a financial aid form; and learning how to advocate for accommodations. The lessons are 10 to 20 minutes in length and include four-question quizzes at the end to assess how well the participants have comprehended the material. Students view the lessons at monthly intervals over a six-month period.

Participants in the OPT4College assessment completed surveys at baseline, mid-point, and exit from the study. These surveys included questions about educational attainment goals, steps completed in the process of postsecondary application, and other related topics. However, the focus of this article is on the qualitative data that was also collected via phone interviews upon completion of all six lessons.

PARTICIPANTS

A total of 133 students were enrolled in the study; although high school sophomores and juniors were targeted, the sample also included freshmen and seniors (among the seniors were six students enrolled in programs that allowed credit for concurrent college coursework). Participants in this study were recruited from 30 high schools in the New England area, primarily in urban settings, where a majority of the students are eligible for free or reduced lunches, reflecting lower socioeconomic status . The majority of the participants were either Black (35%) or Latino (22%), with 10% indicating they were biracial and 6% Asian. Across the 30 schools, enrollment in the study ranged from one student to 39 students (M = 4.4). The 39 students that completed all lessons were also interviewed about their experiences using OPT4College.

RESULTS

Paying for College

Student feedback indicates that in addition to raising general awareness about the costs of postsecondary education, OPT4College also provided useful information about financial options available for students. Specifically, students reported learning about sources of aid and about the aid application process. These topics are explicitly covered in OPT4College: the videos inform students that over 70% of undergraduates receive financial aid; the resource pages include links to scholarship search websites; and the activities ask students to complete a Free Application for Federal Student Aid Forecaster (FAFSA4Caster), so that they can estimate the amount of FAFSA aid that they will receive.

The following quotes convey learning about sources of aid: "I really didn't know what a financial aid was. And people explained it to me, but I didn't really get it. I still don't get it when they explain it to me. But when I watched that video it really explained to me what it is." Another student explained that OPT4College, "told me a lot about scholarships and opportunities and places I could go and what I could do to sign up for financial aid and nobody's ever helping me with that." A third student identified the financial aid lesson as being the most helpful. Importantly, at least two students said that increased awareness about sources of financial aid led to their increased belief in the possibility of attending college. One student said, "I really didn't think I was going to go to college because I don't come from wealth." This same student reported feeling differently after completing OPT4College.

In addition to acquiring knowledge about sources of financial aid, students reported learning about the process of applying for financial aid. One student reported, "About the stuff that you need to fill out for financial aid, that's what I learned the most about… it was the thing I knew the least about, like about the FAFSA and stuff like that…. It's definitely something I'm going to need to do when applying and that was something that I never heard of before and I had no idea how to go about that." Other students provided similar feedback, including the following comments: "After the lesson I learned about a whole bunch of stuff that I never knew about… like the FAFSA and other forms that I could fill out to get free financial aid"; and, "I think the most important thing that I learned about was financial aid and the FAFSA process. I knew a little bit about it but I didn't know all the details and everything that goes into it when it comes to applying for financial aid."

Importantly, several of these quotes convey an initial lack of knowledge about financial aid, and at least one of these quotes indicates that students were not receiving adequate support with the process ("nobody's ever helping me with that"). This suggests that OPT4College addresses a critical gap in services provided to diverse YWD and/or SHCN.

Self-Advocacy

YWD and/or SHCN are oftentimes accustomed to the manner in which they receive services in high school. They are surprised when they find that receiving accommodations or having an Individualized Education Program (IEP)/504 Plan (for special accommodations) is no longer "automatic" or something that parents take care of for them. Therefore, college students with disabilities and/or SHCN need to be equipped with skills and knowledge that will enable this advocacy; they must be willing to disclose their disabilities to college staff, they must identify the

accommodations that will help them succeed, and they must accept the responsibility to engage in advocacy. OPT-4College videos address these situations by defining advocacy and informing students that they will be responsible for: advocating for accommodations; providing examples of reasonable and unreasonable accommodations according to laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504; and describing the process of documenting disabilities through disability services offices on college campuses. The online activities ask students to describe their disabilities in order to promote thinking about relevant accommodations, and write a script that they can follow when they request accommodations from college professors or disability services officers.

Six students reported that learning about self-advocacy was the most helpful lesson. Student feedback indicates that OPT4College taught them about the importance of self-advocacy, and that it also prepared them to engage in self-advocacy. The following quotes demonstrate gains in knowledge related to the importance of self-advocacy: "It showed me that you need to be self advocating, and taking charge in college. To tell your professors that you have a disability and see what accommodations are for that disability"; and, "It made me realize that I am really going to need these accommodations and that in order to get them, I need to advocate for myself." One student said the following when asked about the most important thing he learned from OPT4College: "How to speak up for yourself… because if you don't communicate and talk to people, how would people ever know what you need and stuff. Your parents are not always going to be there for you. You got to be independent and speak up for yourself."

Participants also demonstrated their ability to identify accommodations that meet their individualized needs. For example, one student reported difficulty taking notes, and reported that she intended to request note-takers.

DISCUSSION

This exploratory study examined the feasibility of developing and implementing an online curriculum to support the transition to postsecondary education of students from historically excluded populations, especially YWD and/or SHCN. As the qualitative results indicated, students reported learning about the availability of financial aid, the process of applying for financial aid, and the importance of developing self-advocacy skills. It is also likely that they developed, at least to some degree, skills that will enable them to be effective self-advocates, as some participants gave us examples of how they had already applied some of the knowledge they gained through the curriculum to advocate for themselves.

The relatively low completion rate of the program (29%) is worth noting. Lacking explicit information about the participants' levels of comfort with, and access to, web-based learning tools, we cannot assess the degree to which the individual students' orientation to technology is a factor. Although grade in school was not related to completion rates of the program, we do not know whether there is a developmental period that is more or less ideal for participation, in relation to successful transition to college. Lon-

gitudinal follow up with participants to document actual post high school educational trajectory is a necessary goal of future study.

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About Opt4College

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