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Accessible, equitable research design: Creating instrumentation inclusive of students with and without intellectual disability

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Issue Brief: Disability in Higher Education

Accessible, equitable research design:

Creating instrumentation inclusive of students with and without intellectual disability.

While people with intellectual disability (ID) are attending post-secondary institutions at an increasing rate, they continue to attend at significantly lower rates than their peers, both with and without disabilities. When we look at the percentage of individuals that have ever enrolled in a post-secondary program (see Figure 1. Postsecondary Enrollment), fewer people with ID attend four-year institutions, vocational, technical and business colleges, or two-year and community colleges, than their peers (Newman et al., 2011).

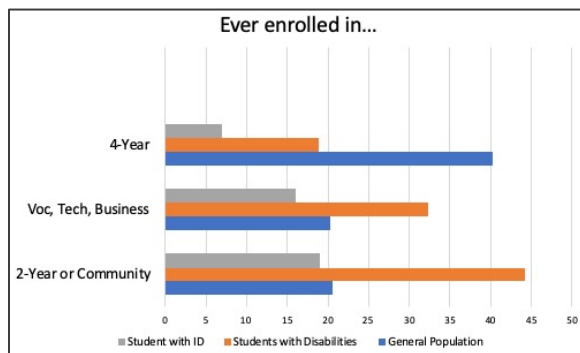


Figure 1: Postsecondary Enrollment

Students with ID, and their parents, desire access to the opportunities and outcomes that post-secondary education offers. These include both peer normative experiences, meaning access to experiences their peers will have, as well as the improved outcomes from which people with a post-secondary education benefit. For example, people who graduate from post-secondary programs see increases in life expectancy and increases in income (Newman et al, 2011). It is essential individuals with ID have access to post-secondary education and experiences that lead to positive outcomes.

What experiences lead to improved outcomes and do students have access to these peer-normative experiences? There's little empirical work on the post-secondary educational experiences of students with ID. Often, students with ID are not included in data collected on students in post-secondary programs, or even in the data on students with disabilities in these settings (Kimball et al., 2016). To include students with ID we need to design research in accessible and equitable ways, creating instrumentation that accommodates students' needs. With the proper support, people with ID can participate fully in the research process (Bigby et al., 2014).

In our recent multi-institutional case study of college-going for students with disabilities in Massachusetts, including students with ID, we created an accessible, equitable research design through instrumentation inclusive of students with and without ID. We provide methodological insights for others interested in this work.

Broader Study

We are administering an online survey that requires participants to respond by indicating the extent to which they agree or disagree with particular statements. For example, "I receive support on personal issues from faculty." We are also interviewing students about their experiences. For example, "If you had to summarize how enjoyable your time at this institution has been, how would you describe it?"

For participants with ID, we developed an adapted protocol that: (a) parallels the online survey and interviews; (b) considers the degree of abstract thinking required by questions; (c) scaffolds questions to support participants; and (d) provides multiple means to engage and respond to questions. Figure 2 provides an example of the adapted protocol.

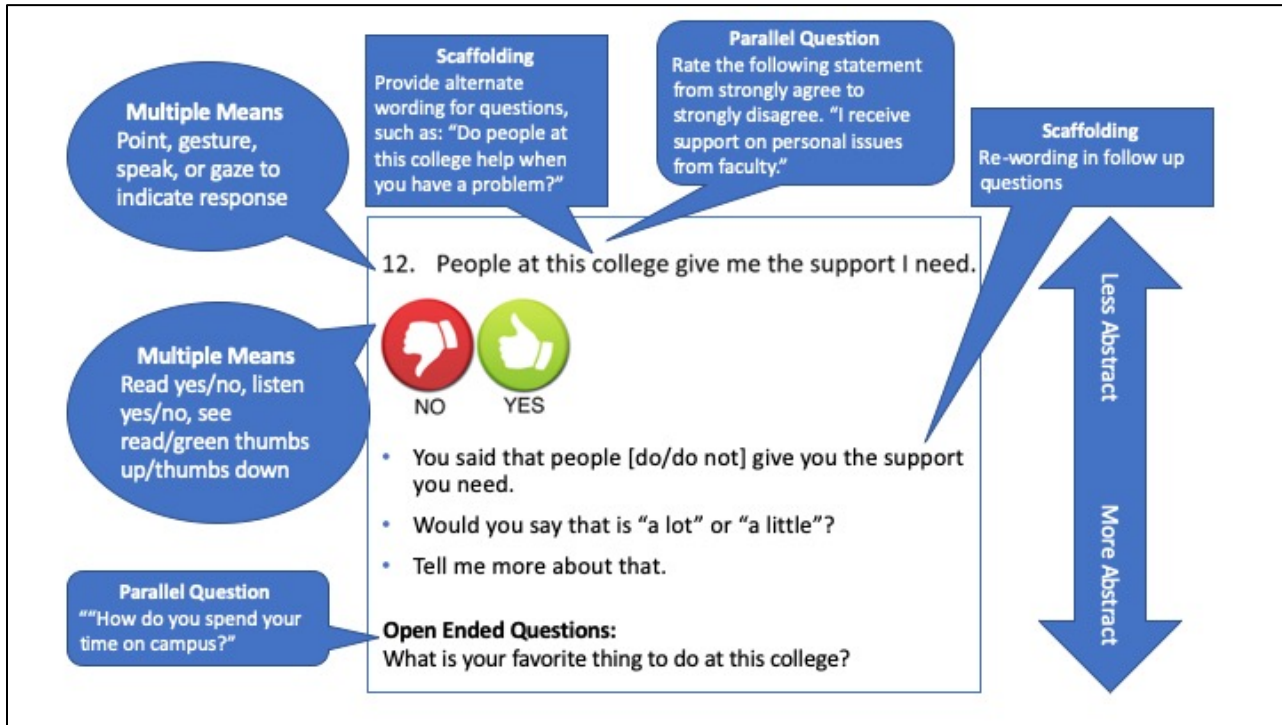


Figure 2: Adapted Protocol

Considerations

Including students with ID in research warrants some important considerations. First, do you have someone on your research team with experience with individuals with ID? A director of a post-secondary program for students with ID provided feedback on our adapted protocol, which was invaluable to the protocol development. Second, do you have someone on your research team with ID or can you pilot your instrumentation with individuals with ID? Third, how are you supporting participants to provide consent? The approach to consent process and implicit assumptions about ID can impact participants’ rights. Thus, it is critical that researchers take these considerations seriously when developing their own accessible research instruments.

References

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