

# Virtual Self-Advocacy Training Development for Freshmen Students with a Documented Learning Difference (Practice Brief)

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## Abstract

Using the definition of self-advocacy from M. E. Skinner (1998) as the conceptual framework, and the Self-Advocacy and Conflict Resolution Training developed by Palmer and Roessler (2000) as the foundation, the researchers solicited feedback on the construction of an abbreviated virtual self-advocacy training for traditional freshmen college students with a learning difference with pre- and post-survey data collected at three, four-year public institutions. The purpose of the Keys to Self-Advocacy Training developed for this study was to provide a program to help address the challenges these students encounter while navigating the postsecondary disability accommodation process to gain access to appropriate academic accommodations needed for degree completion. The term “learning difference” was used in the training and this brief as a means to promote positivity around disability terminology. Students participating in this particular training demonstrated improvement in self-advocacy knowledge ( $\Delta=0.33-1.00$ ) after viewing one of the training videos.

*Keywords: learning difference, learning disability, self-advocacy*

Given the importance of academic accommodations in connection to a student’s academic success, self-advocacy training should address how students should discuss their needs concerning the learning difference and what accommodations best suit any deficits associated with the diagnosis of specific learning disorder. While the Palmer and Roessler (2000) study is somewhat dated, it provides a foundation for several trainings on this issue including the Keys to Self-Advocacy training developed for this study. The researchers facilitated an eight-hour in-person training for 24 participants, which included a post-training paper quiz and behavioral rating scale assessing disability accommodation knowledge and understanding of target behaviors exhibited. The treatment group ( $N = 26$ ) received training and then a paper quiz while the control group was not given the opportunity to participate in the training, but given the post-training quiz only. The outcomes showed that students with disabilities improved their knowledge of accommodation rights and responsibilities as a result of the Self-Advocacy and Conflict Resolution Training. Participants also indicated that they believed themselves to be more capable of successfully requesting accommodations and more able to resolve conflict.

In creating a self-advocacy intervention program for postsecondary African-American students, Walker and Test (2000) utilized a mixed media approach with a training video and face-to-face role play for three African-American college males to assess their growth in requesting accommodations. The face-to-face training included a 48-minute training video concerning transitioning for students with ADHD/ADD and learning differences/disabilities as well as a role play workshop utilizing some of the same behaviors from the Palmer and Roessler (2000) study. Results of the student questionnaire indicated that each student felt the self-advocacy intervention had a positive effect on their ability to self-advocate by requesting accommodations in the academic setting. Researchers concluded that each student reached mastery criterion of self-advocacy skills within three days and performed between 73-91% of the target behaviors after the one-week maintenance check-up. In both Walker and Test, and Palmer and Walker’s research, the notion of face-to-face training has been shown to impact students’ knowledge and understanding of self-advocacy and its components.

In a more recent study by White et al. (2014), knowledge-based online and skills-based training

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was also used to see how students' ( $N=52$ ) knowledge of self-advocacy could be improved by participating in a training program. The knowledge-based online training included an electronic pre- and post-test that addressed knowledge of rights, self-assessment of accommodations, and self-assessment of strengths and challenges presented by their learning difference. Scores from the knowledge-based online module rose from 67% to 85% of correct advocacy skills noted after watching the training video. The knowledge-based online training proved to be an effective approach to helping students obtain information on disability-related legislation and types of accommodations students may request.

### Depiction of Problem

Under current transition plans for students with Individual Education Plans (IEP), many students with disabilities leave high school without the self-advocacy skills they need to survive in college (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005). The characteristics of self-advocacy have been known to allow people the ability to assert themselves in a situation of conflict or advocate in a scenario where they may feel disadvantaged or discriminated against. According to Test et al. (2005), knowledge of self and consciousness of rights are viewed as the foundations of self-advocacy because they are necessary for individuals to understand and know themselves before they can tell others what they need. Unfortunately, without participating in training to gain self-advocacy skills, the ability to navigate and fully explain their learning difference and how it affects them in and out of the classroom or in social settings can become problematic and not allow students to have access to accommodations that meet their needs. Lack of self-advocacy skills is linked to low completion rates for any type of college from 41% for a student diagnosed with any disability compared to 52% of all young adults (Horowitz et al., 2017). Considering the extended degree completion time for individuals with learning differences, they have also experienced poorer post-school outcomes than those without disabilities; evidence suggests that despite some improvement, these disparities persist (Haber et al., 2016).

### Institutional Partnerships and Participant Demographics

The virtual Keys to Self-Advocacy training was conducted at three public, four-year institutions of similar size, generating a 67-person invited population. The three institutional partners were identified

via email recruitment that was sent to over 20 disability services providers at four-year institutions, at which time the three disability directors at their respective institutions agreed to allow their population of students to participate. Target participants for the virtual self-advocacy training was a first-time freshman ages 17-23 and attending college full-time, meaning enrolled in 12 or more credit hours. All the student participants had a formal diagnosis of specific learning disorder, not otherwise specified, and had to be registered to receive accommodations through the institution's office of disability services. There were six student participants (9% of those invited), 50% (3) were Caucasian, 16% (1) was a Pacific Islander, and 33% (2) were mixed race. Concerning gender, 33% (2) identified as female and 66% (4) identified as male.

### Description of Practice

With over six years of experience as a disability services provider both at a small medical school and a traditional four year institution, the decision to utilize action research was deemed the best methodology by one of the researchers to address the problem depicted and understand the continuous sequence of underdeveloped self-advocacy skills. Essential to the cycle of action research and critical to the development of the Keys to Self-Advocacy Training materials, disability services directors for each of the institutions participating in the study were allowed to preview the training and videos prior to launching them to their students, at which time they had given suggestions for improvement to shorten the training time that led to students being able to choose only one part of the training to partake in, as well as the use of more empowering language such as learning difference instead of learning disability. Two students, not enrolled at any of the three institutions, but meeting the participant criteria, also previewed the training materials to offer feedback. These pilot participants mentioned in their feedback that the training was easy to follow and understandable; however, the length of the training may deter participation. The chosen platform for the current study was virtual because it was important to the researcher and disability services directors that the students remain anonymous as well as being afforded the opportunity to have a comfortable, unrestricted space of their choosing to participate in the training. Modules were created to expand on each of the three components of self-advocacy, stemming from M. E. Skinner's (1998) definition of self-advocacy. Skinner posited students achieve self-advocacy when they: "(a) demonstrate an understanding of

their disability, (b) are aware of their legal rights, and, (c) demonstrate competence in communicating rights and needs to those in a position of authority” (p. 278). Utilizing a curriculum and the post-quiz questions modified from the in-person Self-Advocacy and Conflict Resolution Training conducted by Palmer and Roessler (2000), the researchers created the three modules listed below.

- **Module 1: Understanding your Learning Difference** focused on knowing oneself and helping the student become familiar or more familiar with the needs or accommodations associated with the learning difference, thus conveying the importance of understanding the impact it may have on the individual in the classroom while interacting with other students socially.
- **Module 2: Disability Rights in Higher Education** discussed the responsibilities of the student, faculty, and institution in the accommodation process and gave an example of a standard grievance procedure if a student has been discriminated against or excluded from a program because of the presence of a disability, as well as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act.
- **Module 3: Communicating Needs for Accommodations** included role-play where the script covered target behaviors outlined in Palmer & Roessler’s (2000) Self-Advocacy and Conflict Resolution training. Target behaviors include the introduction, disclosure of the disability, solution statements, agreement, conversation recap, and negotiating the appropriate accommodations.

With this being a virtual training, finding the proper platform to create the training videos was an important component of the development process. PowToon, a web-based platform to build animated presentations, was used to generate the Keys to Self-Advocacy Training videos and add voice-over narration as well as closed captioning to enhance accessibility. Having the disability services directors serve as liaisons, students received emails through their student email accounts inviting and reminding them to participate in the training and complete the survey during their first semester of college.

With the goal of offering succinct, student-oriented training, the participation time totaled 15 minutes and included a pre-survey, three five-minute training videos of participant’s choosing, and a post-survey. At the end of the survey students were given the oppor-

tunity to enter a drawing for a \$50 Amazon gift card. To protect anonymity, students were not prompted to enter any identifiable information such as name or student identification number when completing the training and surveys.

### Evaluation of Observed Outcomes

The number of participants for each module reflects each student’s individual selection when asked which topic they would like to learn more about; 50% (3) of students chose **Module 1: Knowledge of Self-Understanding your Learning Difference**, 16% (1) selected **Module 2: Knowledge of Rights-Disability Rights in Higher Education**, and 33% (2) **Module 3: Ability to Communicate-Effective Accommodation Conversation**. For all pre- and post-training survey items, a five-point Likert scale was utilized, from Strongly Agree (weighted as 5) to Strongly Disagree (weighted as 1). The purpose of this study was to determine the ability of freshmen students with a documented learning difference to acquire knowledge of self-advocacy through a virtual training; with only six participants the researcher was unable to truly assess the significance. Most of Modules 1 and 3 statements both yielded a pre-training response Mean above 4.0 meaning that responses before viewing the training video were strongly or somewhat agree showing confidence of the participants in the understanding of their learning difference and effective communication skills prior to encountering the training. All responses for the post-training survey statements were rated more highly than pre-survey statements, with the exception of a statement in Module 3; however, the positive change ( $\Delta$ ) demonstrates that the training provides some ability to educate the participant based on their preliminary understanding of their learning difference, educational rights, and communication skills. In Module 1, all students indicated they strongly agreed ( $M=5.00$ ) they were aware of how their learning difference can affect them in an academic setting in the post-survey. The students’ responses changed most on knowing the name of their learning difference. Although the data for Module 2 is only based on one person, a positive change was reported in the post-survey. Module 3 post-survey responses also showed a positive change reported in all statements except the statement “I can determine if the accommodation arrangements are acceptable”. The act of self-advocating for college students allows the student to access useful and reasonable accommodations both in the academic setting and in their chosen career, possibly closing the gaps in employment and completion rates.

### Training Feedback

After the Keys to Self-Advocacy training, students were asked to provide feedback; 80% of the students “somewhat agreed” that the information provided in the training was useful. Within those six participants, 60% of the participants indicated that they had never participated in a self-advocacy training, and that same percentage stated that the format of the training was easy to follow. One of the key objectives of this training was to empower students to become better self-advocates by providing them with information concerning common effects and accommodations for their learning difference, educational rights, and communication skills to be utilized in future situations. After completing the training, 80% of students “somewhat agreed” that the information in the video would help them in future situations concerning their learning difference and accommodations.

### Implications and Portability

One of the limitations resulting in six participants involved the researcher being unable to have direct contact with the participants, and the initial thought process was to have the students receive the email from someone they were familiar with, such as the disability service director. The goal of this approach was to increase participation drawing from the relationship established between the student and the disability services director on campus. The results, while representing a minimal participant pool, do show promise for the Keys to Self-Advocacy training if it continues to be molded to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Moving forward, the training and content of its modules will continue to be evaluated by the researcher allowing students under the umbrella of disability services to participate to receive training on all three parts of self-advocacy through a virtual platform. The researcher recommended that other institutions implement the training in a controlled computer-based environment through a learning management system that can track student progress and consistently send reminders until the training is completed. With little resources, a disability services office in collaboration with other units on campus could implement this training in a virtual manner, gearing it towards new students registered with the office of disability services. Using the training in a more generalized approach could also help close gaps in self-disclosure, by providing it to all students with or without a disability, helping raise awareness of the disability services office and its available resources. Should a disability services office choose to provide this training to all students regardless of their diagno-

sis, the module content can be modified by including a list of all common accommodations for an array of disabilities, how those disabilities can affect a student in a campus environment, and adding more scenarios where students may have to communicate their need for accommodations to residence hall directors or other faculty. For future research, a comparative analysis of self-advocacy training could be conducted to assess the best method for training facilitation, face-to-face or virtual method. Another research endeavor could be a longitudinal survey created to evaluate the student’s self-advocacy capability through their college journey into employment, after participating in the Keys to Self-Advocacy training in their first year of college and receiving updated training upon degree completion with transition modules to address the process for obtaining accommodations for entrance exams for graduate school such as the GRE, LSAT, and MCAT as well as how to self-disclose for the purpose of workplace accommodations.

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**Table 1***Summary of the Keys to Self-Advocacy Training Pre and Post Survey Responses*

	<b>Pre <i>M</i></b>	<b>Post <i>M</i></b>	<b><i>d</i></b>
<b>Module 1</b>			
I can identify my learning difference in functional terms (i.e., specifically how your disability affects what you do).	4.33	4.67	0.34
I am aware of how my learning difference affects me in a social setting.	4.00	4.33	0.33
I am aware of how my learning difference an affect me in an academic setting.	4.67	5.00	0.33
I know the needs I have in association with my learning difference.	4.33	4.67	0.34
I am aware of the name of my learning difference (i.e., the name of the disability in which I have been diagnosed).	3.33	4.00	0.67
<b>Overall</b>	4.13	4.53	0.40
<b>Module 2</b>			
I am aware that my instructors are obligated by law to provide me with reasonable accommodations.	2.00	3.00	1.00
After receiving my approved accommodation plan with Disability Support Services, I realize the need to meet with my instructors to discuss my accommodations.	2.00	3.00	1.00
I am aware of the process to file a formal grievance on campus if I am denied accommodations.	2.00	3.00	1.00
I am aware of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).	2.00	3.00	1.00
I am aware of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.	2.00	3.00	1.00
<b>Overall</b>	2.00	3.00	1.00
<b>Module 3</b>			
I can present the benefits of accommodations I have used in the past.	4.50	5.00	0.50
I can request a specific accommodation from my instructor.	4.00	5.00	1.00
I can outline each party's responsibilities for implementing my accommodations.	3.00	4.00	1.00
I can determine if the accommodation arrangements are acceptable.	4.50	4.50	0.00
I can discuss issues if accommodations are not being provided.	4.50	5.00	0.50
<b>Overall</b>	4.10	4.70	0.60