

The Self-Advocacy Advantage: Equipping First-Year Students With Essential College Navigation Skills

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This article presents a practical framework for teaching all first-year college students self-advocacy skills during orientation programming. Grounded in Schlossberg's Transition Theory and the 2005 framework of self-advocacy by Test and colleagues, the program proposes the universal need for students to navigate college environments effectively. The four-component model—knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership—provides structured yet flexible programming guidelines that support successful college transitions while building lifelong advocacy skills..

Key words: self-advocacy, college readiness, orientation programming

Traditional orientation programs have evolved over the years, and they often prioritize logistics, such as where to find the dining hall or how to register for classes and campus safety procedures. Although this information is important, the programs may overlook a crucial component that could improve student success: teaching students how to advocate for themselves effectively.

Self-Advocacy

Self-advocacy is more commonly known as a skill for students with disabilities, but its core components, including understanding yourself, knowing your rights, communicating effectively, and leading when necessary, are essential for every college student (Vaccaro et al., 2015). When students arrive on campus, they face decisions about their education, living situations, career paths, and personal growth (Conley et al., 2018). Those who can articulate their needs, understand available resources, and navigate institutional systems are more likely to succeed academically and personally (Vaccaro et al., 2015).

Connecting Self-Advocacy to Transition Theory

Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Patton et al., 2016) provides the foundation for understanding why self-advocacy training is crucial during the first year of the experience. According to Schlossberg (Patton et al., 2016), transitions are processes that unfold over time, and successful navigation requires individuals to assess their personal resources while coping with changing circumstances. Individuals' ability to cope with transitions depends on their awareness of four factors: self, situation, support, and strategies, which Schlossberg refers to as the four S's.

Self-advocacy directly addresses each of the four S's. When students develop knowledge of self, they better understand their available resources. Learning about their rights as students helps them assess their situation and identify which aspects they can control. Communication skills enable them to build and

maintain support networks, whereas leadership capabilities provide strategies for managing transition-related stress.

The transition from high school to college represents what Schlossberg would classify as an anticipated transition, which requires significant adjustment in relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles. Students who start college with strong self-advocacy skills are better equipped to navigate this transition successfully because they can proactively address challenges rather than simply react to them.

The Self-Advocacy Conceptual Framework

Effective self-advocacy instruction that is based on Test et al.'s (2005) framework involves four interconnected components that build upon each other.

Knowledge of Self

This foundational component helps students understand their learning preferences, strengths, challenges, goals, and values. In the college context, this means helping students identify how they learn best, what motivates them, and what support they might need to succeed. This process focuses on building self-awareness that enables informed decision making.

Knowledge of Rights

College students have numerous rights that they may not fully understand: academic freedom, due process in disciplinary matters, privacy protections, and access to campus resources and services. This component ensures that students know what they are entitled to as members of the campus community and how to access these rights when needed..

Communication

Effective self-advocacy requires practical communication skills, including the ability to articulate needs clearly, listen actively, negotiate solutions, and maintain professional relationships. These skills are essential for interacting with faculty, staff, peers, and future employers.

Leadership

Although not every student will become a formal leader, all students benefit from understanding group dynamics, recognizing shared concerns, and advocating for collective needs. Understanding leadership helps students see beyond their individual challenges to consider how they can contribute to their community.

Developing Sessions and Activities

When designing your self-advocacy sessions, structure them as four interconnected sessions rather than trying to present everything in a single presentation, which may overwhelm students.

Session 1

Your first session, focused on knowledge of self, serves as a crucial foundation, with an environment where students feel safe to explore and share. You will want to dive into meaningful self-discovery activities. Learning style inventories (Leonard, 2010) work well here. Be sure to give students time to discuss what they discovered with peers and consider how this knowledge might change their approach to studying or

choosing classes.

This discussion leads to the personal profile activity, framed as creating a road map for their college journey. Have students identify their goals, their preferred learning styles, and potential challenges they might face. What made them successful in high school? What strategies did not work? Have students focus on understanding patterns that can inform academic and personal decisions. End this session by having students create a College Readiness Self-Portrait, a living document they will revisit and revise throughout their first year as they learn more about themselves in this new environment.

Session 2

Your second session shifts focus on knowledge of rights, but resist the temptation to read through the student handbook. Instead, present information through scenarios they can relate to. Ask students questions such as the following: What happens if a roommate conflict escalates? How do you handle a grade you believe is unfair? When might you need academic accommodations, even if you have never needed them?

A resource scavenger hunt is one way to implement an engaging exploration. Rather than telling students where the writing center is located, send them to find it and to discover available services or have them access the information online. This hands-on approach helps students build confidence when navigating campus systems. Assess this session through role-playing scenarios, ensuring that they can apply what they have learned when they need it most.

Session 3

Focused on communication, you address the skills with which students most often struggle. Many first-year students have never had to email a professor or navigate office hours. They might feel intimidated by the idea of advocating for themselves with authority figures. Start with the basics, such as how to write a professional email or the difference between being assertive and demanding.

Role-playing is essential here, but it should feel safe and supportive. Pair students with trained peer mentors who can model effective communication and can provide fair, direct feedback. Practice scenarios that students will actually encounter, such as asking for clarification on an assignment, requesting an extension because of illness, or addressing concerns about classmates not contributing to a group project. Also include peer-to-peer communication skills. Many students struggle just as much with having difficult conversations with roommates or study group members as they do with talking to faculty.

Session 4

Your final session, focusing on leadership, helps students consider how they can contribute to solving shared challenges. This does not mean that every student needs to run for student government; rather, they can recognize when problems affect multiple people and work collaboratively toward solutions.

Start by having students brainstorm common first-year challenges, such as difficulty finding study spaces during finals week or a lack of weekend programming. Small groups can then develop realistic action plans for addressing these issues, considering available resources and potential implementation strategies. When they present these solutions to their peers, they are practicing the advocacy skills they will need throughout college and beyond.

With this progression, each session builds on the previous one. Students cannot effectively communicate their needs until they understand what those needs are. They cannot advocate for community changes until they have developed confidence in their own voice. By the end of these four sessions,

your students should know more about campus resources and have the tools and confidence to navigate whatever challenges their college experience brings.

Conclusion

Teaching self-advocacy skills to first-year students helps them succeed in college and prepares them for lifelong success. By grounding this instruction in transition theory (Patton et al., 2016) and using Test et al.'s (2005) research-based framework, orientation programs can provide students with tools that extend into their life beyond college. Every student benefits from understanding themselves better, knowing their rights, communicating effectively, and contributing to their community. When we give students these skills early in their college experience, we empower them to take ownership of their education and become active participants in their own success.

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