Cultivating Self-Advocacy for All Students on College Campuses

By Kathleen A. D'Alessio and Dorothy A. Osterholt

Over the past year, an increasing number of students have come forward to speak out against school violence. And there has been increased attention placed on helping students seeking support if an incident occurs and exercising their right to speak out against those who may perpetuate such behaviors. With high-profile cases of sexual assault, such as Brock Turner from Stanford University in 2015 and Brandon Vandenburg of Vanderbilt University in 2016, students are awakening to the existing inequities. The student response to these cases was swift and loud. Advocating for changes in attitudes and policies, the students invigorated the public to take notice and colleges and universities to institute changes.

The skill of self-advocacy is not only useful for supporting changes that students want to see in their institutions and beyond: It may be the most important foundational skill behind success in college. In
general, students who thrive in college do so as they mature and find their place on campus. It can seem like a natural process for an emerging adult as they grow intellectually. But this is not the experience of all college students. By looking at the experiences of students who are struggling in college, we can have a better understanding of the importance of self-advocacy and its impact on the college experience.

The struggling student

Landmark College is designed for students who learn differently, including students with learning disabilities (such as dyslexia), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and autism spectrum disorder. These students are no strangers to the term “self-advocacy.” From the time they are in high school until they reach college, they have heard the term in various settings. Defining self-advocacy includes getting what one needs in an educational setting, as well as, understanding one’s diagnosis, knowing the legislation surrounding individuals with learning disabilities, requesting appropriate accommodations, providing documentation and knowing how to take effective action if difficulties arise. In other words, it means being able to work within a system, knowing how and when it is necessary to challenge that system, while demonstrating independence. Students with learning disabilities still get derailed by obstacles as a manifestation of their own learning difference, or by commonly perceived opinions of others regarding disabilities.

We assert that students with learning differences need direct instruction individualized to their learning to educate them regarding their strengths, challenges and effective learning strategies. Even when practiced in a postsecondary environment of inclusivity, accessibility, approachability and collaboration, students who learn differently struggle with self-advocacy. Landmark College has designed support that addresses the unique needs of these students through the explicit teaching the skill of self-advocacy and the various settings in which self-advocacy is taught. What we have learned may help other colleges that are grappling with the inherent challenges of their diverse student population.

Success attributes linked to self-advocacy

As any professional would attest, the goal of self-advocacy for students who learn differently is to help them become successful adults and to transition to adulthood with the skills necessary to navigate their chosen career. A firm understanding of success attributes is a starting point for working with students.

In the 1990s, Paul J. Gerber, Henry B. Reiff and Rick Ginsberg conducted interviews with successful high-achieving adults with learning disabilities. Seven attributes for success were gleaned from this study. These seven attributes are interactive in nature; and they work best when they are supported by one another.

1) Desire: having a supportive system to help with motivation.
2) Goal orientation: being able to manage one’s time, to stay organized and to establish study routines.
3) Reframing: changing one’s perception of oneself and emphasizing positive traits.
4) Persistence: coping with failure and starting over in order to succeed.
5) Goodness of fit: maximizing strengths and minimizing weaknesses, and aligning these characteristics with choosing classes, a job or a career.
6) Learned creativity: finding creative ways to overcome challenges.
7) Positive social network: having a support system of family, friends, significant others or coworkers. This foundational work can help inform how colleges provide support for this group of students.
Landmark's approach

Well before self-advocacy became a staple of freshmen orientation programs for students with learning disabilities who are entering into college, Charles Drake, founder of Landmark College in Putney, Vt., framed the concept in 1985 using the simple verbiage: “Don't do for the student what the student can do for him/herself.”

At the core of Landmark's philosophy is the belief that each student will be able to become their own strong self-advocate given the proper tools. Learning how to self-advocate permeates every aspect of the student’s program. It begins with explicit instruction in a student’s first year and is reinforced throughout the student's time at the college.

Beginning with self-understanding, students are given ample time and frequent opportunities to practice self-reflection. The college's student-centered approach to teaching enables students to access professors and advisors. Self-understanding begins with an individual being able to know what their diagnosis is, but more importantly what the implications are for education and career choices. This includes an understanding of one's strengths, the knowledge of accommodations that may be needed, and the ability to self-appraise and adjust one's behavior when necessary.

The college has defined self-advocacy skills as the student’s ability to not only understand general definitions of learning disabilities, but to understand the legislation in order to know one’s rights to request accommodations or services. In addition, self-advocacy includes the ability to provide appropriate documentation for the specific requested accommodations, and to be able to deliver and present this information with strong interpersonal communication skills.

Today's student

This is a tall order for some students given their challenges, lack of experience and, in some cases, the effect of well-meaning parents doing for the student. Jean M. Twenge advances this position in her 2017 book, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—and What That Means for the Rest of Us.* She says that the students of the iGeneration are comfortable having a parent speak for them, rather than taking on this responsibility.

While taking the position of advocate may not be always necessary for all students, those parents of children with disabilities are often forced into this position in order to ensure their child receives an appropriate education. Advocating for their student can linger through high school and overlooks opportunities to foster the ability in their child before they enter college. Likewise, this makes the job of teaching and fostering self-advocacy sometimes an uphill battle for faculty as parents are reluctant to step aside. Through explicitly designed support embedded within first year seminar courses and advising, students gradually learn about themselves at a deeper educational and emotional level and become more comfortable in getting support. Other colleges may offer similar support through their institution's existing programs for incoming students.

Self-advocacy skills are introduced within the curriculum of the advising program as one of 10 advising student-learning outcomes for first-year students. The value of this specific learning outcome to students is to recognize the benefits of self-advocacy in a college setting. Advisors facilitate knowledge acquisition by: working with the student to define self-advocacy and to differentiate between entitlement and self-advocacy; assessing the student’s knowledge of basic email systems, grading systems and intranet tools; informing students of college policies, such as course drop/add, withdrawal periods; discussing and
sometimes role-playing how to communicate with faculty regarding coursework concerns; fostering student development of effective self-advocacy with parents; and helping students understand the benefits of accessing college resources.

### Addressing the whole student

The work of the advising program is underscored in the student’s first semester particularly in the first year course entitled: Perspectives in Learning. It is within the curriculum of this course that self-advocacy is embedded. The curriculum is holistically presented through Four Domains of Learning: self-regulation, motivation, social/emotional influences and academic skill (https://www.nebhe.org/thejournal/holistic-support-that-promotes-student-learning/).

The four domains offer a simple framework to understand the complexity involved in learning. The fact that the learner must have adequate control over each area in order to perceive, process and express their understanding of new information more effectively is also underscored. The goal is to help students develop a more robust understanding of the interconnectedness of influences that affect learning. The World of Learners Wheel, as shown below, leads students toward self-discovery of their strengths as well as their challenges with specific strategies that encourage movement from areas of challenge toward positive success attributes in order to improve academic success.

![World of Learners Wheel](https://www.nebhe.org/wp-content/uploads/world-of-learners-wheel.png)

### The World of Learners Wheel

Landmark students will first understand the Four Domains as a whole. Having a common language within the classroom when talking about strengths and challenges proves to be useful as they build their self-advocacy skills.

Next, they learn how each domain is interdependent. Having deficits in one area can have a negative impact on another, and building skills in one domain can also have a positive impact on other domains.

Within the first year seminar, it is important to introduce the success attributes (Outer Circle) first to allow students to identify areas of strength that may not have been apparent to them. Then they can see how the positive attributes will appear if they become barriers (Inner Circle). In identifying their challenges, students are asked to focus primarily on those areas that pose a significant negative impact and impede academic success. Lastly, they will come to understand that there are individual strategies (Middle Circle) that will help them strengthen their areas of challenge.

Once students are familiar with the Four Domains framework, they will be asked to set relevant, sustainable and attainable personal goals that are reflected in the wheel. Deepening their understanding of how to develop new habits and break old habits will encourage greater success and a process for assessing their progress. Taking the time to self-reflect on their progress every few weeks is also important so they can make adjustments when necessary.

When students begin discovering and using their own strategies they learn about the distinction between strategies they implement themselves and accommodations provided for them by the teacher or institution. It is important for students to not only understand the distinction between strategies and accommodations, but they must also be able to express their needs to others in a clear and comprehensive way.

At the end of the semester a final advocacy portfolio is comprised of a compilation of documents that display their self-understanding gained through assessing and addressing their own learning processes. The portfolio includes a display of strengths and weaknesses identified, lifestyle habits that impact their
academic performance, personal reflections and how their disabilities impact their academic progress. Students are also asked to compose a written statement disclosing their disability that may be used at their discretion for college or the work place. The Final Advocacy Fair at the end of the semester gives them an opportunity to present their portfolio orally to visitors.

The conceptual framework and direct instruction around self-advocacy are specifically presented in a holistic manner to reflect the link between the academic and the non-academic components of learning.

Challenges remain

Even within a small structured program with a student-to-faculty ratio of 6:1 and direct instruction in self-advocacy skills, some students will struggle to achieve the skill of self-advocacy. Reasons vary as do students, but a general hypothesis may be attributed to a developmental lag in students who learn differently. In addition, faculty and staff are observing some millennial and Igen students who are more underprepared for college than in previous generations and are more dependent on parents and others. We put forth the assertion that students with a learning disability need direct instruction in learning how to self-advocate. We outlined the holistic nature of this approach and the ways in which self-advocacy is integrated into the advising program and into the curriculum of the first year course. We discussed the communication between advisors and professors of first year students, who are the major stakeholders in this process of self-advocacy. The final product produced by the student in their first semester represents an entire semester's worth of learning and self-discovery as it pertains to self-advocacy. Students then have the opportunity to practice self-advocacy, with room to make errors and to learn from those errors.

The population of students who learn differently attend all different kinds of colleges in all states, and while their voices might not be taking center stage with those, for example, addressing violence on campus, this current climate of speaking out can ignite greater support for a sometimes-overlooked group of students. It is through their self-advocacy efforts that they can create greater success for themselves and become the consistent whisper in the background for future students. Providing a supportive and instructive environment that fosters greater self-advocacy is an admirable first step.

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