Integrating Chatbots: Supporting the College Transition for Autistic Students in Texas

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Despite strides in reducing postsecondary enrollment disparities between students with and without disabilities, the transition to postsecondary education remains particularly challenging for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). These students encounter unique barriers that necessitate tailored support during the college application process. Advances in artificial intelligence (AI), particularly personalized assistance, offer promising opportunities for enhancing inclusivity in educational counseling. This study explored the application of AI to assist autistic students in navigating the complexities of the college admissions process by examining ADVi, an AI chatbot that communicates through text messages to provide information, suggest actionable steps, and answer college admission-related inquiries. We used a multilevel negative binomial regression model to examine whether autistic students showed a distinct need for AI-based assistance during their transition to higher education. This analysis was based on data from 115,354 college-aspiring students who graduated from public high schools in Texas in 2021, of whom 807 identified as having ASD. Autistic students utilized ADVi significantly more than their typically developing peers, particularly among those with lower prior test achievement (a composite measure based on five state-mandated tests administered during high school). In the bottom tertile of prior test achievement, autistic students sent 132.2% more messages than their peers; the difference was 78.5% in the middle tertile and 36.2% in the top tertile. These results highlight the increased utilization of ADVi by autistic students and suggest a potential need for additional AI tools to facilitate smoother educational transitions for students requiring specialized assistance.

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