

Peer Supports in Inclusive Postsecondary Education for Students with Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities



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Background

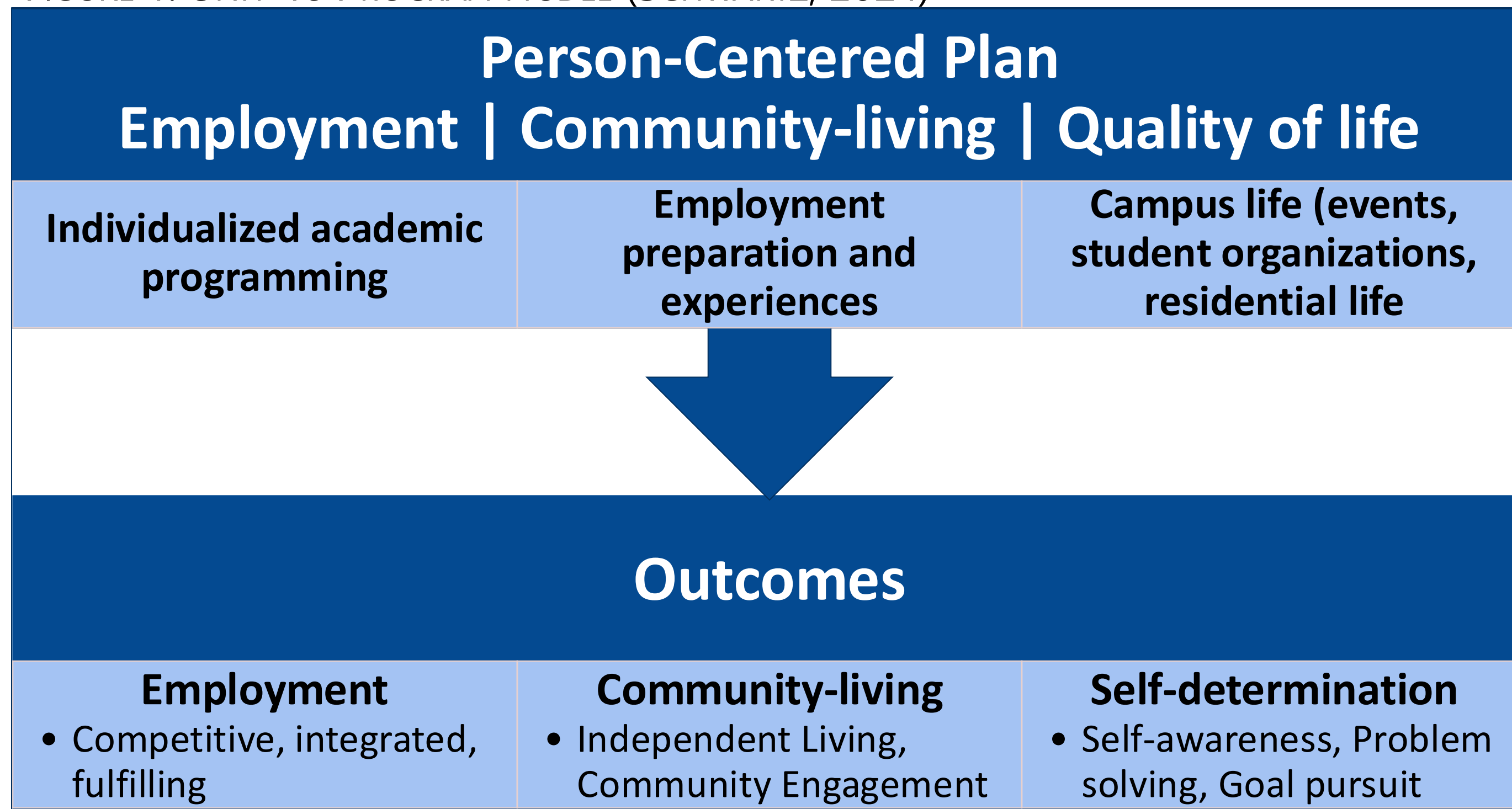
Inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) programs are designed to include and acknowledge youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities as equal members of the campus community through academic engagement, social activities, and career development (Wilt & Morningstar, 2020). Peer mentorship, which is widely known in K-12 research, can be an effective model that encourages inclusive and natural supports for these youth during their time in college; peer support arrangements have been known to show positive outcomes in assisting students with disabilities in social interactions amongst the school environment (Wilt & Morningstar, 2020).

Introduction

From 2021-2025, the IOD facilitated an IPSE program, UNH-4U. UNH-4U was a two year, on-campus college program driven by person-centered planning to support students with intellectual disability to achieve academic, life, and career goals. These students received supports from professional staff, peer supports, and other campus services. Peer supports included Academic Coaches and Campus Ambassadors. Academic Coaches assisted students with tutoring in courses where Campus Ambassadors provided support for community living and health and wellness. The aim of this present research is to answer the following question:

What approaches do Campus Ambassadors use to support students in an inclusive postsecondary education program?

FIGURE 1: UNH-4U PROGRAM MODEL (SCHWARTZ, 2024)



Project Context

The University of New Hampshire Institute on Disability (UNH-IOD) "promotes full access, equal opportunities, and participation for all persons by strengthening communities and advancing policy and systems change, promising practices, education, and research. The IOD envisions a future where all people, including individuals living with disabilities, are fully engaged members of communities and where culturally appropriate supports that lead to independence, productivity, and a satisfying quality of life are available to individuals and families across the life span."

UNH IOD MISSION & VISION
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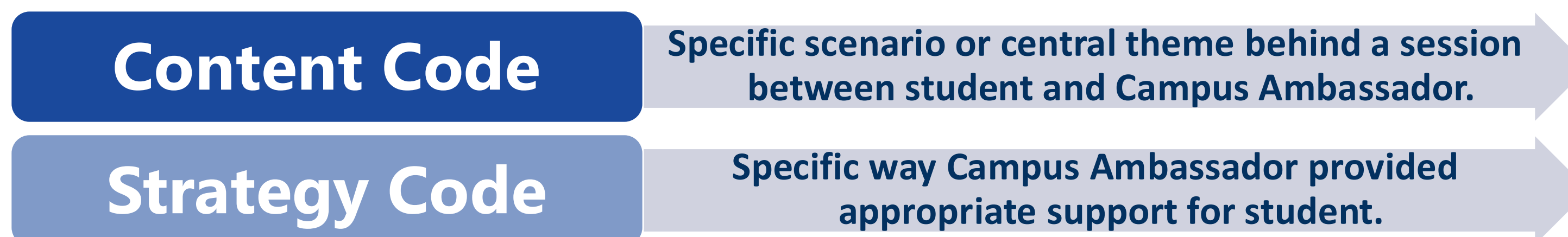
Methods

This research study implemented a qualitative approach to examine the strategies Campus Ambassadors in the UNH-4U program used to support students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. There was a total of ten Campus Ambassadors and four students enrolled in UNH-4U. Campus Ambassadors logged details of each meeting with the students in an Excel Spreadsheet. In three out of four students, there are two years-worth of data entries and one year of entries for the other student. Documentation for these students in their duration of the UNH-4U program were used to identify potential support strategies Campus Ambassadors would use to effectively assist students with navigating campus life and independent living.

Data Analysis

Two coders analyzed the Campus Ambassadors' documentation using content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). First, we familiarized ourselves with the data and developed initial codes. Then, we applied the codes line-by-line in Excel. Next, we reviewed all coded data to identify needed revisions or additions to the codebook. We recoded the data with the revised codes. Finally, we calculated descriptive statistics to describe the most frequently used strategies.

FIGURE 2: CODING PROCESS – CONTENT CODE FOLLOWED BY STRATEGY CODE



Results

The following content and strategies were the most frequently coded from the data analysis:

FIGURE 3: PIE CHART OF TOTAL CONTENT CODES

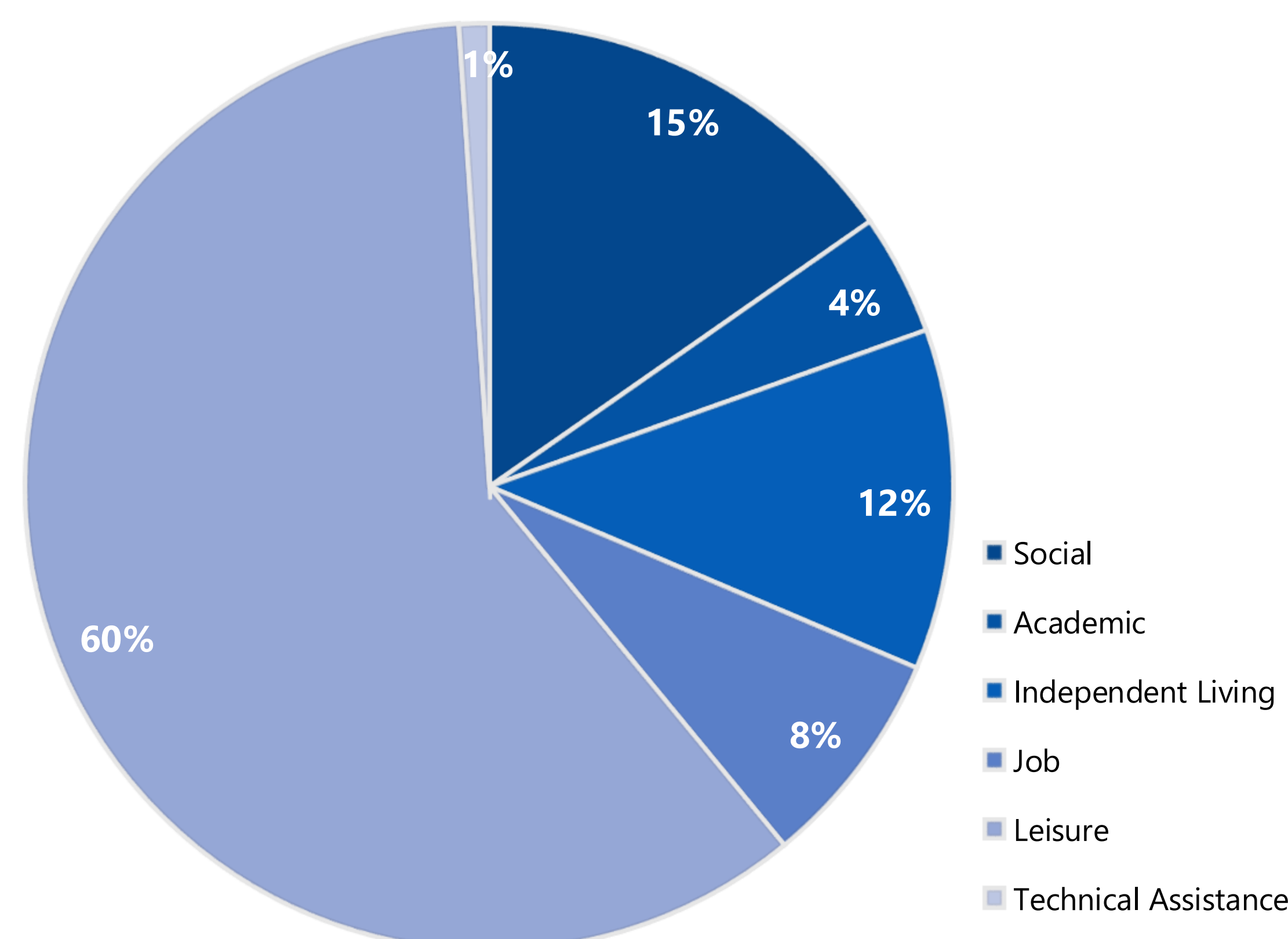
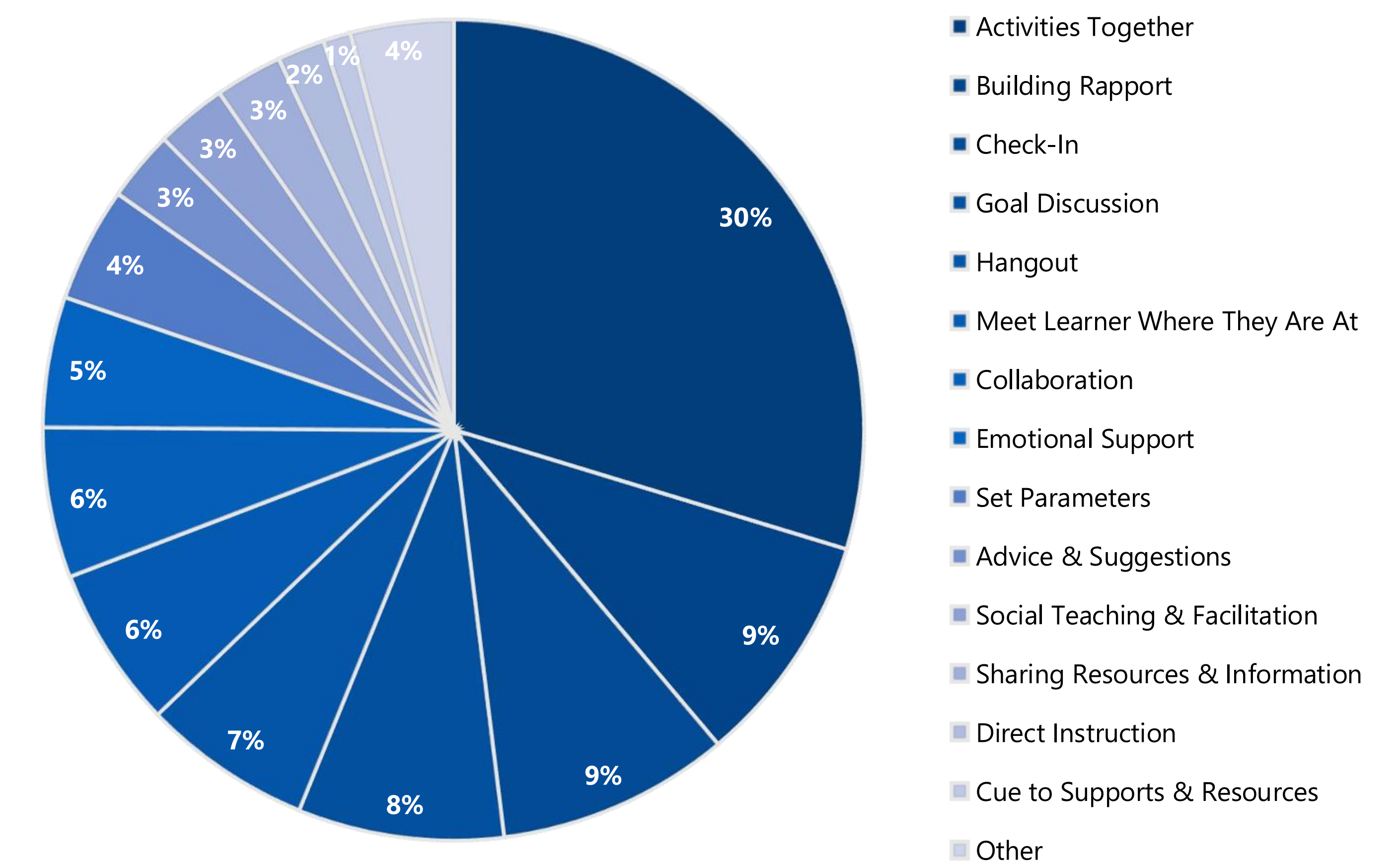


FIGURE 4: PIE CHART OF TOTAL STRATEGY CODES



*Other consisted of the following codes that were each used < 7 times: Reminders, Structure Breaks, Multimodal, Brainstorm, Modify Tasks, Organize Time, Response to Cue, Prompt, and Problem Solve

Conclusions

The preliminary findings of this current research highlight the specific strategies that Campus Ambassadors used most often to support students enrolled in the UNH-4U program. Out of all coded strategies, Activities Together was coded the most (191 out of 650 data points), which is to be expected as togetherness is the program model of UNH-4U. Activities Together consisted of instances where both student and Campus Ambassador would engage in activities for purposes of enjoyment, learning, community living, and health/wellness. Additionally, Activities Together was consistently coded with other strategies, like Building Rapport, Hangout, and others. As a result, this suggests a potential significance that the more Campus Ambassadors would do with the students, the better they could observe and infer how and when to support a student in successful activity completion. This indicates the benefits of having a person-centered program like UNH-4U that facilitates individualized academics, employment preparation, and navigating campus life for students with intellectual disabilities.

References

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