



Brown K. R., Coomes M. D. (2016). A spectrum of support: Current and best practices for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) at community colleges. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 40:6, 465-479, DOI: 10.1080/10668926.2015.1067171

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Annotated by Michael Hong and Kara Smith - 12/11/2016

**ABSTRACT** "More than 50% of all college students with a disability enroll in public 2-year institutions. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a type of disability that affects a growing number of students in postsecondary education. Currently, over 70% of 2-year public institutions enroll students with ASD. In spite of increased awareness, the vast majority of existing ASD research focused on primary and secondary education. Research on practices that support students with disabilities in the community college environment is imperative for promoting student success. The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to explore current and best practices that support students with ASD at 2-year public, postsecondary institutions. A web-based tool was used to survey a nationally representative sample of disability service professionals from 367 2-year, public institutions (35.4% response rate). Our results show reasonable accommodations with an academic focus (e.g., extended exam time) were provided more frequently than sensory accommodations. General support services that focused on the transition to college were offered by 42% of the institutions surveyed, and 26% of institutions supplied ASD-specific services. These results indicated that many institutions provide students with a baseline level of academic accommodations; however, accommodations and support services that specifically target the functional limitations of ASD are offered less frequently. Best practices for supporting students with ASD were synthesized and implications for practice were discussed." (pg. 465)

## SUMMARY

**Purpose of Study** The purpose of this study is to investigate the best practices for students with ASD at 2-year public, postsecondary institutions.

## Framework

The institutional policies and practices that affect students with disabilities is leveraged by legislative initiatives.

The conventional model to understanding disabilities was historically based on a functional limitations perspective. A second approach, called social construction, diverges from the previous model by expanding the study to both individuals with and without disabilities

## Population and Sample

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The Director of Disability Services at each nonprofit postsecondary institution was considered in the population, because the ADA mandates a compliance officer (i.e. the Director of Disability Services) and most institutions had no more than one compliance officer. Tribal colleges, branch campuses, for-profit institutions, professional schools, and institutions in Puerto Rico and Guam were excluded to avoid duplicative data, leaving the total sample frame to be 2,629 institutions.

Because there was not a complete list of disability service providers at each institution, the contact information for each Director of Disability Services was collected through the Internet, and provided a sample size for 1,245 institutions for the larger study. Ultimately, 367 2-year institutions represented the sample size for data collection in this article.

### **Overview of Methods**

In this mixed methods study, the data were gathered in one collection phase through open-ended inquiries within a survey. A web-based survey was sent and administered via email to the Director of Student Disabilities at each institution, focusing on interventions for students with ASD. 412 recruitment emails were sent - accounting for school with multiple campuses or different locations, facilities, and policies - and 146 (35.4%) individuals responded.

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected; the quantitative data provided a basic overview of the different outcomes of practices, whereas the latter helped justify these differences. Open-ended questions were analyzed quantitatively through coding. The survey also included characteristics of the respondents as well as the types of accommodations and general support services offered to students with ASD at each 2-year institution.

This survey was designed by the researcher, and the research was approved and evaluated by the Institutional Review Board at Bowling Green State University. Measures of research quality were undertaken through a review of previous surveys as well as an evaluation of survey drafts by a panel of disability experts.

### **Variables or Broad Topics**

The independent variable is the available services that are offered at the particular institution, and the dependent variable was the fit of the practice to the term "best practice" as defined by The Council for Advancement of Standards in Higher Education.

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Operational definitions were considered for the terms “reasonable accommodations”, “general support service”, and “ASD-specific support service”.

### **Findings/Results**

A notable finding was that 95.9% of this sample of institutions enrolled at least one student with ASD, and 2-year public institutions served an average of 16.37 students with ASD. Open enrollment policies seem to allow these 2-year institutions to serve students on a greater range of functional limitations.

11 best practices were identified from the combined quantitative and qualitative data.

- Promote equity
- Customize accommodations or services
- Educate campus constituents
- Create and enforce policies
- Facilitate transition
- Build relationships through advising or counseling meetings
- Cultivate working relationships with faculty and campus constituents
- Use groups intentionally
- Be proactive
- Address functional limitations
- Limit ambiguity in written directions

### **Implications**

The findings indicate that there are direct implications for disability-service professionals including administrators, faculty, and counselors in the greater campus community. This study also confirms that the best practices discussed (such as promotion of equity, appraisal of neurodiversity, and empowerment of the student) are tangible steps for administrators toward supporting students with ASD. A majority of institutions provided academic accommodations on a standardized level, supporting an approach that fit with a medical definition of disability that does not acknowledge social facets of the learning process. In contrast, institutions that have acknowledged the

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constructionist model of disability made provisions for sensory and social accommodations.

## **CRITIQUES & LIMITATIONS**

### **Conceptual**

The researchers say that accommodations call for “equal opportunities” but then they say that this is necessary for an “equitable learning environment” (pg. 466). The terms “equal” and “equitable” are not interchangeable when discussing accommodations because they mean two different things. Equal refers to something being the same and equitable refers to something being fair and in this case, best practices can not always be equal and fair. However, best practice can use equity to become fair for these students. In addition, the authors don’t necessarily ever define “best practices”.

### **Data**

Participation for this study was voluntary, therefore, data for for more directors of institutions that did not volunteer to participate was not included. In addition, there was not specific data provided on each institution regarding if there was a dominant gender or how many students were enrolled at each one, etc. The data size was small and may have underestimated or overestimated the services provided.

### **Analysis**

The qualitative data collected contained open-ended questions that was coded, which could have potentially left room for error. The responses were not straightforward answers that could have been easily coded, therefore, the unique answers are more difficult to code on a similar scale. Could there have been a different measurement tool utilized to measure the qualitative data?

### **Interpretation**

Although the results indicate that two year institutions are able to serve students with a wider range of limitations, there were no specific indications on which practice was “best”.

### **Application**



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The studying of accommodations at only two year institutions undermines the social aspect because most individuals with ASD or any other impairment go to the community college or institution at their hometown, where they have family or other social support that does not require for them to look for accommodations from their institution. In addition, two year institutions are often known for open enrollment policies where no individual is declined admission. By doing this, these institutions are diversifying their student population by accepting these unique individuals and their specific needs which requires these institutions to have to be able to accommodate them as well.

## **FOLLOW-UP**

### **Little Questions**

- i. Were some institutions predominantly male or female and did that affect the data in any way?

### **Big Questions**

- i. Could funding at two year institutions be smaller than that of four-year institutions, thus making accommodations such as general support services and ASD specific services that much harder to be made accessible to individuals that require those services?

### **Next Steps**

- i. Another study is necessary to study the need for accommodations regarding online classes. Online classes are often an option many students with ASD often consider due to the lack of social interaction that online classes require, making them more attractive for that reason. If more ASD students potentially take them, we wonder if there are any accommodations (like longer testing time) for these types of classes. More research is to be done on which practices are best for accommodations for individuals with ASD and other non-ASD disabilities.

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