Autism in Higher Education:
What Researchers Know, What Students Say

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Methods: Literature Review

To better understand the literature already in place related to students with Autism Spectrum Disorders pursuing higher education, members of our research team conducted a systematic literature review using an interdisciplinary research approach. Our team defines an interdisciplinary research approach as one in which takes journals from multiple fields, for this particular study we looked at the fields of higher education, speech language pathology, special education, and psychology. This comprehensive review of the literature investigated and evaluated the presence of research on autism in higher education in sixteen journals, leading to over 2,000 articles being identified and collected, with publication dates ranging from 2012 to September 2015.

Using the 2,000 articles, a narrow search was performed to create a more acute list of articles. 50 abstracts were discovered to have references to both autism and higher education. Using the 50 abstracts a more detailed examination was completed to identify 25 articles that were pertinent to the research and content area of autism in higher education. The final 25 items were examined and annotated by an undergraduate and graduate level research team over the course of nine weeks. These annotated articles were then categorized based on primary and secondary focus, more specifically whether the articles’ focus was on: indications of college success, description of population, analysis of college-related experiences, definition of population needs/issuse, proposed intervention, evaluation of current services/policies interventions, theories relevant to population, domains of life/activity for population. In turn, these annotations are currently used to construct, and hopefully publish, a paper that combines essentially all known literature regarding students with ASD in higher education.

• Insight- Description (7 articles)
• Insight- Indications (3 articles)
• Insight- Analysis (5 articles)
• Insight- Definition (7 articles)
• Action- Domains (3 articles)
• Action- Theories/Models (1 article)
• Action- Evaluation (21 articles)
• Action- Intervention (4 articles)

Introduction & Abstract

Research supporting the College Autism Network focuses on the student well-being, educational achievement, and institutional responsiveness. Our project strives to help students with autism to feel confident that they have the personal qualities and institutional support necessary to succeed in college. Over recent years, there has been a noticeable growth in the number of individuals diagnosed with ASD, and with this increase, there has also been a rise in the number of individuals intending to pursue a form of higher education. Our project allows students with autism to voice their struggles and successes throughout the process, thereby guiding researchers and educators toward initiatives that help create an effective higher education experience. We gathered data by conducting interviews with nine students with ASD. Alongside our interviews we conducted a systematic literature review of sixteen different journals, varying in fields of study, in order to broaden our scope of data. We utilized our previous codings to draft propositions which will be the basis of one paper. We hope that our results will help our university, as well as other post secondary educational institutions, benefit students with ASD, and aid them in their pursuit of higher education.

Propositions

1. Students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders prioritize and navigate higher education in a linear fashion beginning with bureaucratic procedures, followed by academic requirements, and ending with social interactions.
2. Students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders benefit from a nurturing mentor who, by helping the student effectively navigate challenges encountered in college, helps the student build the confidence to address future challenges independently.
3. The extent to which a student's ASD diagnosis is a salient piece of their identity directly affects their ability to succeed in a post-secondary environment.
4. Universities are not built for autistic students, when faced with a challenge, autistic students may conceptualize this as a problem with the self rather than a problem with the system, depending on the type of institutional supports available.

Methods: Interview Analyses

To gain a better understanding about the experiences and reactions of Autism Spectrum Disorder individuals in higher education, we analyzed nine interviews conducted with individuals diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders who have attended, are attending, or are eligible for higher education to participate in the study. The Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD) selected the nine interview participants for our study. The interviews focused on the participant’s background, barriers to success, family assistance, teacher relationships, school assistance, and their higher education experience. Dr. Bradley E. Cox conducted the interviews spending an hour to an hour and a half with each participant. The interviews were video taped and transcribed through NVivo.

Two analysts independently coded the responses from the interviews into a database using NVivo. We coded the responses into three nodes: Inputs, Experiences, and Outcomes. Each of the nodes had multiple subcategories for further clarification.

This semester, we revisited the interviews to construct four propositions. After the initial creation of the propositions, we separately used the previous codings to support and refine our propositions so that they encompass all students along the spectrum. We will draft our paper after refining our propositions and hopefully publish a paper of our findings.

Timeline

• Summer 2014: Initialization of Project
• Summer 2014: Initial Literature Review
• Fall 2014: Finalizing Coding of Relevant Literature
• Fall 2015: Finalizing Coding of Relevant Literature
• Summer 2015: Finalizing Coding of Relevant Literature
• Fall 2015: Finalizing Coding of Relevant Literature
• Summer 2016: Finalizing Coding of Relevant Literature
• Fall 2016: Finalizing Coding of Relevant Literature

Supporting Partners of the Project
Jeffrey Edelstein, Amanda Roy, and the CAN Team