
2. **Abstract** The number of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) pursuing postsecondary education is increasing. A mentorship program was developed to help students with ASD navigate the social and academic framework of postsecondary campus life. The present study (a) provides information about a sample of university students with ASD and (b) evaluates satisfaction with the support provided. This is the first study in Canada to report on the experience of students with ASD and to evaluate this novel approach. Students \((N = 23)\) provided demographic information in the fall and completed surveys evaluating their satisfaction at the end of each academic year. Since beginning the program, the number of students has increased by 200%. High levels of satisfaction were reported. The majority of students reported success in achieving personal goals in part due to their participation in the program. Results better inform the development of supports for students with ASD.

3. **Summary**

a. **Purpose of Study** To evaluate the effectiveness of the ASD Mentorship program implemented at York University in Canada and provide other academic institutions, social workers, counselors, and students with information.

b. **Framework**

- The rates of ASD diagnoses has increased over the last decade in Canada and the number of these individuals who attend college is projected to increase (Fombonne, 2009);
- The existing supports for students with disabilities are not as applicable to those with ASD (Smith, 2007);
- Little is understood about the postsecondary educational part of the development for individuals with ASD (Howlin & Moss, 2012).;
Postsecondary students on the spectrum are more successful if they have social supports tailored to their individual needs (Farley et al., 2009; Howlin & Moss, 2012);

Students are unique individuals who need to be considered holistically (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 2009);

Students with disabilities need to be active in deconstructing the social stigma around “disabilities” (Denhart, 2008)

I think the above is not the framework of the paper. My thought is as follows:

- Brief overview of ASD in Canada.
- Students with ASD and the university setting.
- Service gaps and recommendations
- The ASD Mentorship Program (AMP) and the present study.

c. **Population and Sample**

- 23 participants who are students at York University with self-disclosed diagnoses of an ASD over the course of four years.
- 12 students (out of 15; 9 males) in the most recent year (2011-2012) completed year-end evaluations of the program.
- Of these students, 7 met with their mentor weekly, 4 met biweekly, and 1 met monthly.

d. **Overview of Methods**

- Students were referred to the program through counseling services or contacted the program themselves through advertisements.
- Students paired with a graduate student that served as a mentor; Interview conducted at the beginning with mentor and student to get to know each other; met periodically throughout the year
- Various social events facilitated for group members
- Year-end evaluations were administered to gauge students overall satisfaction of the program, what they enjoyed most about the program, what they would change to help improve the quality of the program, and whether or not the program helped the students reach their goals.
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e. Variables
   i. Control/ Background variables
      • Other support services that the students were receiving that encouraged participation in the mentorship program.
      • The disproportionate gender ratio (males, 5:4:1)
      • Unofficial or official identification of being on the spectrum.
      • Each student was paired with a mentor.
   ii. Independent/ Predictor variables of primary interest
       • Degree of student participation.
   iii. Outcome/Criterion/ Dependent variables
       • Student responses/evaluations of the program.

iv. Findings/ Results
   • Students expressed primary interest in discussing topics such as dating, romantic relationships, social skills, stress and coping, family, and employment individually with their mentor.
   • 91% percent of the students found their conversations with their mentors to be useful; 58% met them on a weekly basis.
   • Students indicated the program could be improved if more group events were facilitated; in group discussions, students primarily endorsed topics on dating and relationships and sexual health.
   • Stress and coping was both a commonly identified goal (50%, third-most common) and the most common topic for individual discussions (75%)

v. Implications
   • Outreach for the program might benefit from high school outreach as to facilitate the transition process.
   • Students who don’t have complex needs for support may self-select out of the program; others may not wish to disclose and, as a result, do not participate.
   • The demand/need for individualized attention is high, as is that for facilitated social setting (i.e. safe spaces).
   • Future research should examine factors that are essential for success both in the university setting and post-graduation.

4. Critiques and Limitations

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a. Conceptual The use of self-identified ASD may make this harder to apply in more strict settings.
b. Data There is lack of empirical data on students who believed they reached their goals; the year-end evaluations may be inflated due to bias and/or difficult to rely on due to their retrospective nature; no data on interactions with non-ASD students; no post-graduation data gathered.
c. Analysis No analysis/evaluation throughout the year.
d. Interpretation No acknowledgement of the small size of the group-based responses;
e. Application If implemented at other institutions, the evaluation of the program should be more rigorous; this study is likely to be most applicable to that of a similar population and setting in Canada.

5. Follow-Up

a. Little Questions What are the qualifications of a mentor? How many graduate students were involved?
b. Big Questions How do we empirically prove an improvement in a student’s interpersonal relationships? How can a program like this collect quality post-graduate data?
c. Next Steps A more stringent assessment that includes in-depth individual interviews and more empirical data collection needs to be formulated to elucidate the advantages and drawbacks of a program like this.
d. Other Resources: See Bebko, Schroeder, & Ames, 2011 for more information on this program; all tables in this study are potentially useful.

6. Summary/ Utility

This article could be very useful for the purposes of our study because it clearly identifies topics that may be lacking in the empirical evidence needed to understand the issues students with ASD experience during their time in university. The evidence of the need for individualized attention and social supports suggest the validity of this kind of program in university setting.